

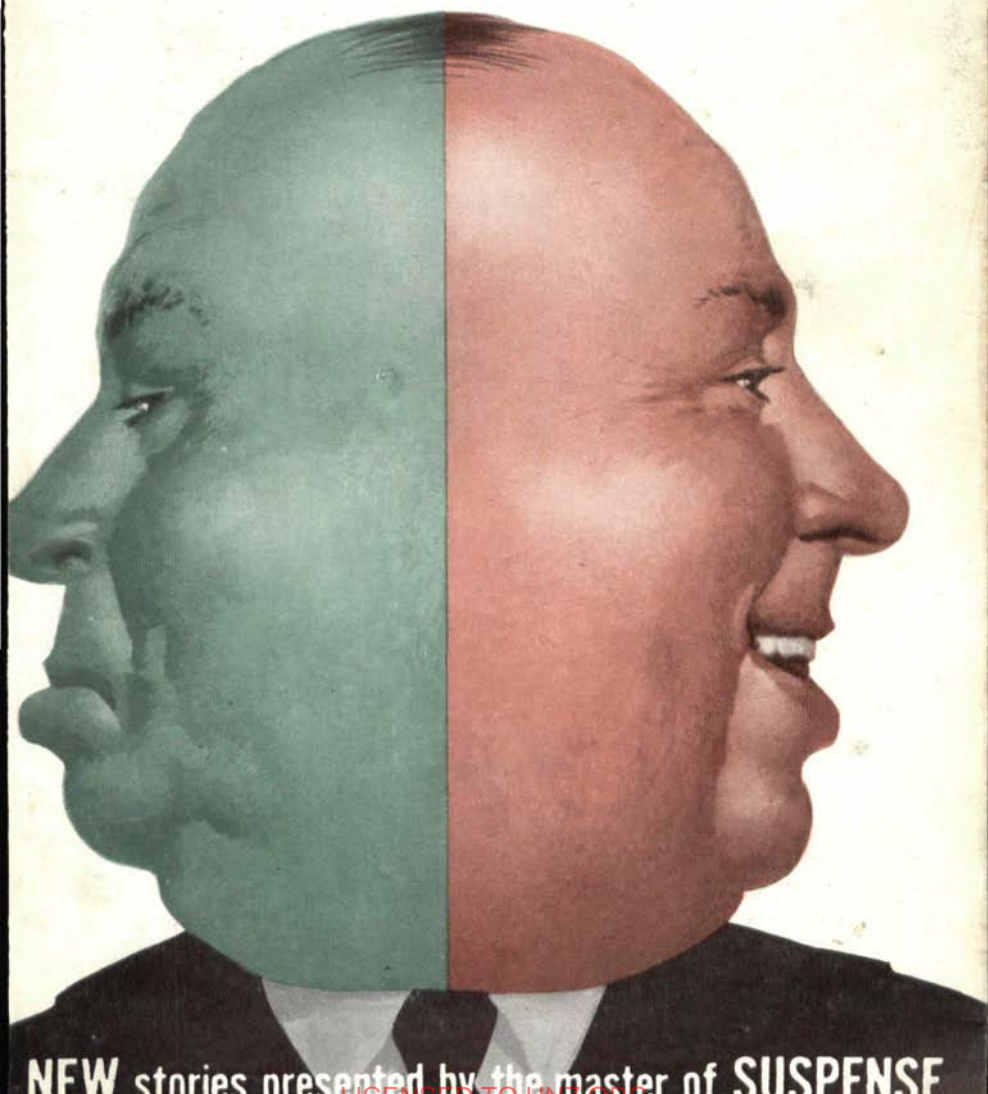
ALFRED

NOVEMBER 35¢

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE



Dear Readers:

At first glance one might think the cover of this issue represents, on the left, a man who has dined not wisely but too well, and is suffering from a surfeit of Thanksgiving turkey, while his opposite number, rosy-faced, wears the smile of a man who wisely refused all second helpings.

This is misleading. The basic idea for this cover comes from ancient Rome, and from one of the deities worshipped there, a two-faced god called Janus. He was said to be the deity of all gates and doors, hence of all beginnings. If this symbolism is obscure to you, please try to relate it to modern times. Most of us wear one face at home and another when abroad. Or, to carry it a bit further, we wear one face for our friends and another for our enemies.

Consider, then, the rosy-faced smile of welcome as directed toward all new readers, and towards the faithful who have not only renewed their own subscriptions, but have purchased others for friends. The opposite side may be considered as viewing with alarm all those who have let their subscriptions lapse, and whose names no longer adorn our subscription list. Remedy this situation, if you please, and you shall once again see my smiling face on the cover.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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THICKER

THAN WATER





by Henry Sesar

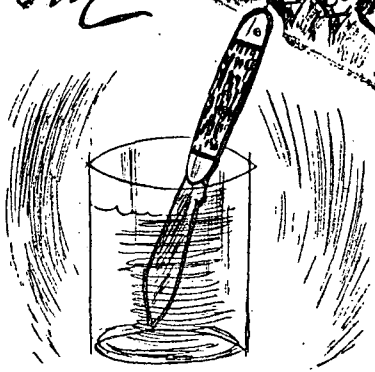


VERNON WEDGE didn't want to see the old man. Olga, his secretary, gave Blesker a sub-zero reception, but he sat on in the attorney's waiting room. His shoulders were rigid, his crooked fingers interlaced, his chalky face a portrait of stubbornness and determination. Finally, Vernon had to yield.

"Sit down, Mr. Blesker," he said wearily, pointing to the leather chair in his office. "I know why you're here; my phone's been ringing all morning. Four newspapers, a youth worker, even a settlement house. What have you got, anyway, an organization?"

The old man looked befuddled. "Please," he said. "I just come about my boy . . ."

"Yes, I read the newspapers. And I suppose you think your kid's innocent?"



"He is!"

"Naturally. You're his father. Have you talked to him since it happened?"

"I came from the prison this morning. They're not treating him good. He looks skinny."

"He's only been in custody a few days, Mr. Blesker, I doubt if they're starving him. Look," Vernon said testily, "your boy is accused of knifing another kid in the street. That's what happened. You

Blood, that vital life-giving fluid, numbers among its peculiar powers the confirmation of innocence and proof of guilt. Handle it with care, therefore, and do not spill.

know how many witnesses there are? You know what kind of evidence the district attorney has?"

"I know he's innocent," the old man said. "That's what I know. Benjy's a good, serious boy."

"Sure," Vernon frowned. "They are all good boys, Mr Blesker, until they start running with a street pack. Then they're something else." He was almost shouting now. "Mr. Blesker, the State will pick an attorney for your son. You don't need me."

"I have money," Blesker whispered. "The family, we all got together. I run a fuel oil business; I'm selling the big truck. I can pay what you ask, Mr. Wedge."

"It's not a question of money—"

"Then, it's a question of what?"

The old man was suddenly truculent. "Whether he's guilty or not? You decided that already, Mr. Wedge? From reading the newspapers?"

Vernon couldn't meet the challenge, it was too close to the truth. He *had* prejudged the case from the newspaper stories, and knew from the accounts that this was one client he could live without. His record was too good. What was worse, he had lost his last client to Ossining. Every criminal lawyer is allowed a few adverse verdicts; but two in a row?

"Mr. Blesker," he said miserably,

"will you tell me why you came here? Why did you pick me?"

"Because I heard you were good."

"Do you know what happened in my last case?"

Obstinate: "I heard you were good, Mr. Wedge."

"You told every reporter in town that you intended to hire me. That puts me in a very compromising position, you know that? And you, too. Know how it'll look if I turn you down? Like I think your boy is guilty, that the case is hopeless."

"I didn't mean any harm," the old man said fumblingly. "I just wanted to get the best for Benjy." He was getting teary. "Don't turn me down, please, Mr. Wedge."

Vernon knew a lost cause when he saw one; perhaps he had known from the start how this interview would end. His voice softened.

"I didn't say your boy is guilty, Mr. Blesker. All I say is that he's got a bad case. A very bad case."

Motionless, the old man waited.

"All right," Vernon sighed. "I'll think it over."

The police blotter had Benjy Blesker's age down as seventeen. He looked younger. The frightened eyes gave him a look of youthful bewilderment. Vernon wasn't tak-

en in by it; he had seen too many innocent, baby-faced, icy-hearted killers.

The boy's cell was clean, and Benjy himself bore no marks of ill-treatment. He sat on the edge of the bunk and kneaded his hands. When Vernon walked in, he asked him for a cigarette.

Vernon hesitated, then shrugged and offered the pack. "Why not?" he said. "If you're old enough to be here . . ."

Benjy lit up and dropped a tough mask over his boyish features. "You the lawyer my old man hired?"

"That's right. My name is Vernon Wedge."

"When do I get out of here?"

"You don't, not until the trial. They've refused bail."

"When's the trial?"

"Don't rush it," Vernon growled. "We need every minute of delay we can get. Don't think this is going to be easy."

Benjy leaned back, casual. "I didn't cut that guy," he said evenly. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

Vernon grunted, and pulled a sheet of handwritten notes out of his pocket.

"You admitted that you knew Kenny Tarcher?"

"Sure I knew him. We went to Manual Trades together."

"They tell me Kenny was a member of a gang called The Aces. You ever run with them?"

"With that bunch?" Benjy sneered, and blew a column of smoke. "I was a Baron. The Barons don't mix with those burns. You know who they take into that gang? A whole lot of—"

"Never mind," Vernon snapped. "We can talk about your social life later. You were a Baron and Kenny was an Ace, so that made you natural enemies. You had a rumble last month, and this Kenny Tarcher beat up on you pretty good. Don't give me any arguments about this, it's ancient history."

Benjy's mouth was quivering. "Look, Mr. Wedge, we don't have that kind of gang. You know Mr. Knapp—"

"The youth worker? I just came from him."

"He'll tell you about the Barons, Mr. Wedge, we're not a bunch of hoods. We got a basketball team and everything."

Vernon smothered a smile. "Why do you carry a knife, Benjy?"

"It's no switchblade, Mr. Wedge. It's more like a boy scout knife; I mean, they sell 'em all over. I use it for whittlin' and stuff like that."

"Whittling?" It was hard to hide the sneer. The end of Benjy's cigarette flared, as did his temper.

"Look, whose side are you on? I didn't stick Kenny, somebody else did! I swear I didn't kill him!"

"Take it easy. I'm not making accusations, kid, that's the court's job. Now sit back and relax. I'm going over the story, from the police side, and then you can tell me where they're wrong. Every little thing, understand?"

Benjy swallowed hard. Then he nodded.

"It was ten minutes to midnight on June 21," Vernon said, watching him. "You and two other guys were walking down Thurmond Street; you came out of a movie house. Kenny Tarcher came out of the corner apartment building on Thurmond and Avenue C. You bumped into each other, and there was some horseplay. The next thing that happens, you and your pals start running down the street. Kenny falls down and tries to crawl to the stoop of his house. There were two people on the steps. They saw you running. They saw Kenny die, right in front of them. He had an eight-inch gash in his stomach . . ."

Benjy looked sick.

"Ten minutes later, the cops caught up with you in your old man's fuel supply store on Chester Street. The knife was still in your pocket." He paused.

"I didn't cut him," the boy said grimly. "All the rest of that stuff, that's true. But I don't know who cut Kenny."

"Who were the other two guys with you?"

"I never saw 'em before. I met 'em in the movies."

"Don't give me that!"

"What the hell do you want from me?" Benjy bellowed. "I tell you I don't know those guys! One of them must have done it, I didn't! When I saw he was hurt, I ran. That's all it was!"

"You had the knife—"

"I didn't use it!"

"That knife is Exhibit A," the lawyer said. "You know that, don't you? The witnesses saw you holding it—"

"Leave me alone! You ain't here to help me!"

Vernon got up.

"I am, Benjy. The only way you can be helped, kid. I want you to cop a plea."

"What?"

"I want you to plead guilty. Believe me, it's the only sensible thing to do. You put this case to a jury, I swear you'll be spending the rest of your life in a cage. Plead guilty, and the worst you'll get is twenty years. That's not as bad as it sounds; you'll be eligible for parole in five."

"I won't do it!" Benjy

screamed. "I'm innocent! I'm not goin' to jail for something I didn't do!"

"I'm talking sense, kid, why won't you listen?"

"I didn't do it! I didn't!"

Vernon sighed. The corners of his mouth softened, and he dropped a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Listen," he said gently. "I really want to help you, son."

For a moment, Benjy was still. Then he threw off the arm of sympathy, and snarled at the attorney.

"I'm not your son! I got a father!"

Like father, like son, Vernon thought wryly, looking at the mulish mouth and marble eyes of the old man. He was sure Blesker had a softer side. Under other circumstances, he would smile and tell jokes and hum old-country tunes. Now, faced with the lawyer's blunt advice, he was hard as a rock.

"You've got to talk some sense into him," Vernon said. "He doesn't know what's good for him. If he pleads guilty to murder in the second degree, the judge will be lenient."

"But he goes to prison? For something he didn't do?"

"You're his father, Mr. Blesker. You're ignoring facts."

"The facts are wrong!" Blesker put his fists on his knees and pounded them once. When he looked up again, there was a new mood in his eyes. "You tell me something, Mr. Wedge—"

"Yes?"

"You don't like to lose cases, am I right? That's what they say about you."

"Is that bad?"

"If my boy pleads guilty, you don't lose nothing. You still got your good record, right?"

"Do you think that's my only reason?"

Blesker shrugged. "I'm only asking, Mr. Wedge. I don't know nothing about the law."

Unable to refute this accurate estimate of his inner thoughts, Vernon tried to summon up an angry denial and failed. He shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said grudgingly. "So we plead Not Guilty. I'll do everything I can to make it stick."

Blesker examined his face for signs of sincerity. He seemed satisfied.

Vernon came to the courtroom on opening day with a heart as heavy as his brief case. Surprisingly, the first day didn't go badly.

Judge Angus Dwight had been assigned to the bench. In spite of his dour look, Vernon knew him to be scrupulously fair and sneakily sentimental. Wickers, the prosecuting attorney, was a golden-haired Adonis with a theatrical delivery, a keen mind, and an appeal for the ladies. Fortunately, the impaneled jurors were men with only two exceptions, and they were women far past the age of coquetry. During the first hour, Wickers' facetiousness in his opening remarks drew a rebuke from the judge concerning the seriousness of the affair; Vernon's hopes lifted a notch.

But it was his only good day. On the second afternoon, Wickers called a man named Sol Dankers to the witness chair.

"Mr. Dankers," he said smoothly, "you were present at the time of Kenneth Tarcher's slaying, isn't that so?"

"That's right," Dankers said heavily. He was a hard-breathing, bespectacled man with a red-veined nose. "I was sittin' on the stoop, when these kids start foolin' around. Next thing I know, one of 'em's stumbling to the stoop, bleedin' like a pig. He drops dead right at the feet of me and my Mrs. I was an hour gettin' the blood-stains off my shoes."

"Is that all you saw?"

"No, sir. I seen that boy, the one over there, runnin' away with a knife in his hand."

Then it was Vernon's turn.

"Mr. Dankers, is it true your eyesight is impaired?"

"True enough. I'm sixty-two, son, wait 'til you're my age."

He drew a laugh and a rap of the gavel.

"It was almost midnight on a street not particularly well lit. Yet you saw a knife—" he pointed to the table where Exhibit A rested —"that knife, in Benjamin Blesker's hand?"

"It was sort of flashin' in the light, if you know what I mean. But to tell you the truth, I wouldn't have noticed if Mrs. Danker hadn't said, 'look at that boy, he's got a knife!'"

The crowd buzzed, and Vernon frowned at the inadvertent hearsay testimony. The damage was done; he didn't even bother to voice a complaint.

Mrs. Danker testified next; there was nothing wrong with *her* eyes, she said stoutly, and she knew a knife when she saw one. It was the third witness who did the most harm. He was Marty Knapp, a dedicated youth worker serving the neighborhood.

"No, Benjy isn't a bad kid," he said thoughtfully. "But he had a temper. And he never forgave

Kenny Tarcher for the beating he gave him."

"Then in your opinion," Wickers said triumphantly, "this *might* have been a grudge killing? Not just a sudden scuffle or unplanned assault, but a deliberate, cold-blooded—"

Vernon was on his feet, shouting objections. Judge Dwight took his side at once, but the impression was indelible in the collective mind of the jury. When Vernon sat down again, he felt as forlorn as Benjy Blesker looked.

On the eve of the fourth day, he went to see him.

"What do you say, Benjy?" he said quietly. "You see the way things are going? I'm pulling out the whole bag of tricks, and I'm not fooling anybody."

"Try harder!" Benjy snapped.

"If I knew how to work miracles, I'd work one. Look, this state doesn't like to hang kids, but it's happened before—"

"Hang?" the boy said incredulously. "You're crazy!"

"Even if you got life, know what that means? Even if you got paroled in twenty years, you'll be thirty-seven years old, almost middle-aged, with a record."

There were tears flooding Benjy's eyes. It was the first sign of a crumpling defense, and the lawyer moved in swiftly.

"Plead guilty," he said earnestly. "Plead guilty, Benjy. It's not too late."

The boy's head snapped up.

"No!" he screamed. "I didn't do it!"

The fourth day was the worst of all. Vernon railed mercilessly at the prosecution witnesses. He called Dankers a weak-eyed, boozing liar. He forced Mrs. Dankers to admit that she hated the neighborhood kids, and the Barons especially. He got Knapp, the youth worker, to recite every detail of Benjy's good record. But through it all, the jury shifted restlessly, bored, irritated, obviously unimpressed by the "character" testimony, eager only for facts, the bloodier the better.

Wickers gave them what they wanted. Wickers treated them to a blow-by-blow reenactment of the stabbing. He bled for them. He clutched his stomach. He put the victim's mother on the stand. He let her cry through ten minutes of pointless testimony, until even Judge Dwight got sick of the spectacle. But it was working. Vernon, jury-smart, knew it was working.

The trial was almost over. Wickers, waving the knife under Benjy Blesker's nose, got him to admit that it was his, admit that

he was never without it, admit that he had it in his pocket—maybe even in his hand—the night of the slaying. It was his curtain-closer. Wickers sat down, the prosecution's case stated.

One more day, and it would be finished.

There was a weekend hiatus before the trial resumed. Vernon Wedge spent the time thinking.

It was the old man's fault, he thought bitterly. It was old man Blesker who was behind all the trouble. His faith in Benjy was the indomitable, obstinate faith of the fanatic. Even if the boy was guilty, concern for his father would prevent him from admitting the truth.

"The funny thing is," he told Olga, his secretary, "if I was on that jury, I wouldn't know how to vote."

Olga clucked.

"You don't look well," she said. "You look anemic. When this is over, you ought to see a doctor."

"A headshrinker, that's what I ought to see."

"I mean a doctor," Olga said firmly.

It was then that the idea was born. Vernon looked at his secretary queerly, and stood up behind the desk.

"You know, it's a thought. Maybe I ought to see one. You remember Doc Hagerty?"

"No."

"Sure you remember! On the Hofstraw case, 1958—"

"But *he's* not the kind of doctor I mean. I mean a good all-around G.P."

"I'm going out," Vernon said suddenly. "I'll be at the Dugan Hospital if you need me. But don't bother me unless it's urgent."

He found Hagerty in the basement laboratory of the Dugan Hospital. Olga was right: Hagerty was no chest-thumping, tongue-depressing practitioner; he was more biochemist than physician. But he was what Vernon needed.

Hagerty was a white-haired man with shoulders rounded from years of bending over microscopes, and he smelt vaguely of sulphur. He turned out to be ignorant of the trial. Vernon summarized the facts briefly, and then talked about blood.

"You mean there were no benzidine tests made?" Hagerty said quickly. "Of the murder weapon?"

"Yes," Vernon admitted, "and the test proved negative. There weren't any bloodstains on the knife, you understand, it was clean. The prosecution claims that all traces were wiped or washed off. It's never been much of an issue up till now. But I

once heard you talk about a more sensitive test than benzidine—”

“There is,” Hagerty grunted. “Benzidine is the standard blood test in this city, but there’s another one. It’s a lot more delicate, in my opinion, and it’s not always employed. It’s called the reduced phenolphthalein test, and depending on a couple of factors, it might be just what you’re looking for.”

“The quality of the blade metal, for one thing. And even if the metal is porous enough to retain microscopic particles of blood, it may be impossible to determine *whose*. If your boy ever cut his finger, or somebody else—”

“What do we have to do?” Vernon said excitedly.

“Get me the knife.”

“That’s impossible. It’s court property at the moment.”

“Then get me half a dozen like it.”

The lawyer spent all of Saturday morning searching for the weapon’s counterpart. His mental picture of it was sharp; he recalled every curlicue on its handle; he even remembered the letters at the base of the blade: B.L. CO. USA.

He finally found one in a dingy variety store four blocks from the scene of the stabbing. The proprietor had exactly five left in stock; he took them all.

There was a two-hour wait that

afternoon before he could see Hagerty again; when the white-haired doctor joined him in the laboratory, he didn’t apologize.

“I have the solution all ready,” he said crisply. “You sure this is the same make of knife?”

“Positive.”

Hagerty sprung the large blade. Then he removed a bottle of whole blood from a cabinet, and dipped it inside. Vernon swallowed in revulsion as Hagerty wiped the blade clean with a soft cloth, and marked the knife with a pencil.

“Any trace?” he said, offering it for examination.

“Clean as a whistle.”

Hagerty brought all five blades to a beaker filled with a murky liquid. Vernon helped him open all the knives, and they were ready for the demonstration.

“Mix ’em up good,” Hagerty said. “It’s like a magic trick; you shuffle ’em up, I’ll find the one.”

Vernon scrambled the knives. Then, one by one, Hagerty dipped them into the solution.

The third one turned the liquid pink. It was the knife that had been marked.

“It works,” Vernon breathed. “It really works.”

“The metal is porous. If there were bloodstains on it from years ago, this test would show it up.”

“Thank you,” Vernon said hum-

bly. "You've saved my life, Doc."

"Your life?" Hagerty said dryly.

When Vernon entered Benjy's cell, the boy was reading a pulp magazine with intense concentration. He seemed detached, disinterested. Vernon understood it; he had seen this before in the condemned.

"Listen to me," he said harshly.

"Listen good. I have an idea that might save you, but I have to know the truth."

"I told you everything—"

"There's a test," the lawyer said. "A test that can determine whether or not there was ever blood on that knife of yours."

"So?"

"I propose to make that test in court on Monday. If it's negative, the jury will know you didn't kill Kenny Tarcher."

"I don't understand that kind of stuff—"

"I'm not asking you to understand," Vernon said tautly. "If you stabbed that boy, a solution is going to turn pink and you can kiss your freedom goodbye. What's more, if you ever cut *anybody* with that knife, even yourself, it'll turn pink. So I want you to tell me now. *Was there ever blood on that knife?*"

"I told you I didn't cut him!"

"You moron!" Vernon shouted. "Do you understand my question? Was there ever blood of *any* kind on that knife?"

"No! It was brand-new. I never cut anybody with it."

"You're sure? Absolutely sure?"

"I told you, didn't I?"

"This is scientific stuff, boy, don't think you can fool a test tube!"

"I said it's clean!"

Vernon Wedge sighed, and stood up.

"Okay, Benjy. We'll see how clean it is. We'll give it a bath. And God help you if you lied to me."

On Monday, Wickers rose to make his final peroration. He was bland-faced, a picture of confidence. Vernon looked at the vacant faces of the jurors, waiting for their emotional rubdown. But he wasn't going to allow it.

He stood up, and addressed Judge Dwight.

"Your Honor, something occurred over the weekend which I consider of paramount importance to this case. I ask the court's permission to introduce new evidence."

"Objection," Wickers said calmly. "The defense has had sufficient time for the introduction of evidence. I suggest this is a delaying tactic."

Vernon looked defeated, but he was only playing possum. Judge Dwight prompted him.

"What sort of evidence, Mr. Wedge?"

"It's a demonstration, Your Honor," he said weakly. "In my opinion, it will clearly establish my client's guilt or innocence. But if the court rules—"

"Very well, Mr. Wedge, you may proceed."

Quickly, Vernon undid the clasps of the black box in front of him. He removed the wide-mouthed beaker, and then the foil lid that covered it. He brought the murky solution to the bench that held the trial exhibits.

"And what is this?" Judge Dwight said.

"This, Your Honor, is a chemical solution specifically formulated for the detection of blood."

The courtroom buzzed; on the prosecution's side of the room, there was a hurried consultation.

Vernon faced the jurors.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Exhibit A in this case is the knife which presumably killed Kenneth Tarcher. This is the knife which was in the possession of Benjamin Blesker the night of the slaying. Yet not one shred of testimony has been heard during this trial concerning the vital factor of *blood*."

He picked up the knife, and

sprung the long, shining blade.

"This knife!" he said, waving it in the air. "Look at it carefully. It has never left the court's possession since my client's arrest. Yet this clean, shiny blade can still tell a story of guilt or innocence. For as every biochemist knows, there is an infallible test which can determine whether an object of such porous metal has *ever* been stained with even one drop of blood!"

He poised the knife over the mouth of the beaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I intend to prove once and for all whether I have been defending a boy falsely accused, or a lying murderer. I intend to dip this blade in the solution. If it turns pink—you must punish him for his guilt. If it remains clear—you must do what is just, and set him free."

Slowly, he brought the knife down.

"Your Honor!"

Wickers was on his feet, and Vernon halted.

"Your Honor, objection! Objection!"

"Yes, Mr. Wickers?"

Wickers' eyes flashed angrily. "Defense counsel is acting improperly. The police laboratory has already made the standard benzidine test of the weapon and found no bloodstains on the blade. We admit that the knife has been cleansed—"

"Your Honor," Vernon said loudly, "the sensitivity of this test far exceeds the benzidine—"

"This performance is irrelevant, immaterial, and completely improper!" Wickers whirled to the jury. "At no time during this trial has the prosecution denied the absence of blood on Benjamin Blesker's knife. Any so-called 'test' that corroborates this is completely gratuitous, and is intended as pure theatrics to mislead and befuddle the jury! I demand this farcial demonstration be stopped!"

There was a moment's silence. Vernon looked up at the judge hopefully, waiting.

Dwight folded his hands.

"Mr. Wedge, I'm afraid you're not in a position to qualify as an expert in forensic chemistry. And, as Mr. Wickers says, mere corroboration of the police laboratory report is gratuitous evidence that cannot be properly admitted. Therefore, the objection is sustained."

"But Your Honor—"

"Sustained," Judge Dwight said gravely. "You cannot make the test, Mr. Wedge."

His summation was the briefest of his career.

"I believe Benjamin Blesker is innocent," he said wearily. "I believe this because of a test I was

not permitted to make. This boy knew that the results of this test might have condemned him, yet he told me to proceed. No guilty man would have allowed it; no innocent man would have had it any other way."

The jury was out less than an hour. When they returned, they declared that Benjamin Blesker was innocent.

Vernon was permitted the use of an adjoining chamber for a meeting with his client. It wasn't a victory celebration. The boy seemed stunned, and the happiness in old man Blesker's face looked more like sorrow. When the lawyer entered the room, he stood up shakily and held out his hand.

"God bless you," he whispered. "Bless you for what you did."

"I didn't come to be congratulated," Vernon said coldly. "I wanted to see you both for another reason."

The bailiff entered, and placed the beaker on the desk. When he left, Vernon took the knife out of his pocket, and put it down beside the beaker. The old man picked it up and looked at the weapon as if he had never seen it before.

"Wickers was right," Vernon said flatly. "What I did out there was theatrics. I didn't want to

make the demonstration; I was counting on the prosecution halting it."

"You didn't want to?" Blesker said blankly. "You didn't want to make the test?"

"I could have gotten an expert, a real one, like Doc Hagerty. But I didn't want to take the chance; if this stuff had turned red . . ." He looked at the beaker and frowned. "No," he said. "The risk was too great. If Wickers had played along, I would have been forced to do it. But I figured they would object, and the jury would be impressed the right way. They were, thank God."

Blesker let out a long sigh.

"But now there's something we have to do," Vernon said. "Something to satisfy us all."

"What do you mean?"

Vernon looked at the boy. Benjy wouldn't meet his eyes.

"I still don't know the truth," the lawyer said. "I don't know it, and neither do you. Only Benjy here knows it."

"You can't mean that! You said yourself—"

"Never mind what I said out there. There's only one way we can really know, Mr. Blesker."

He held out his hand.

"Give me the knife, Mr. Blesker. We're going to make the test the judge wouldn't allow. For our own sakes."

"But why?" the old man cried. "What difference does it make?"

"*Because I want to know!* Even if you don't, Mr. Blesker, I want to know!"

"Give me the knife," Vernon said.

Blesker picked up the knife. He touched its cool blade thoughtfully.

"Of course," he said.

Then, slowly, he drew the blade deliberately across the back of his hand. The sharp edge bit deep. Blood welled like a crimson river in the cut and stained his hand, his cuff, his sleeve, the surface of the desk. He looked at the wound sadly, indifferently, and then handed the dripping weapon to the attorney.

"Make your test," he said dreamily. "Make your test now, Mr. Wedge."

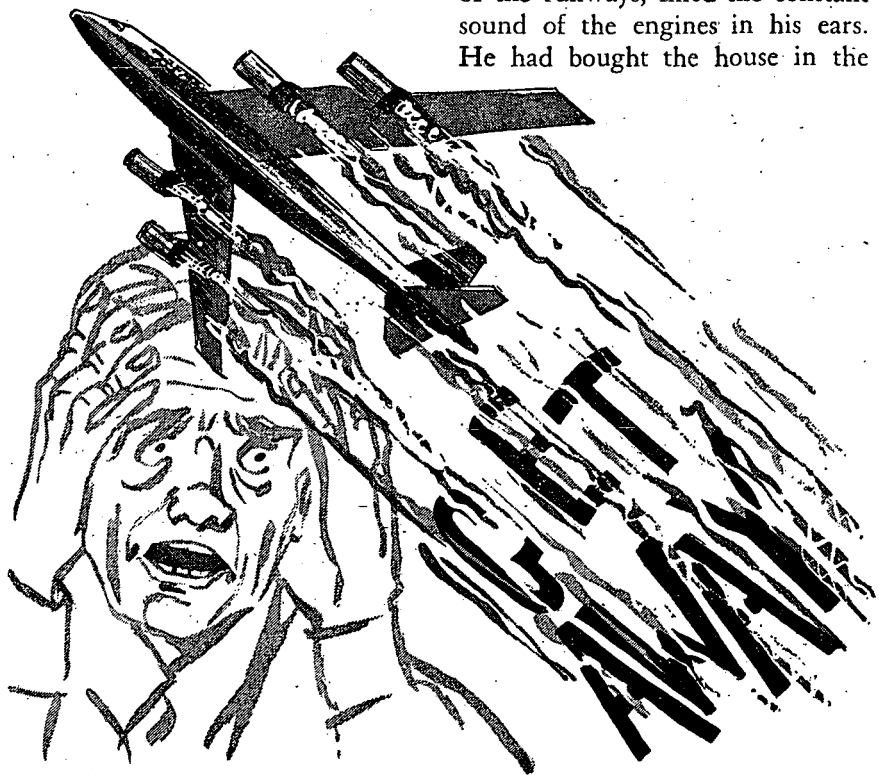
And as Vernon stared at him, he removed a crumpled handkerchief from his pocket and wound it about his injured hand. Then he took his son's arm, and they left the room together.




PAUL WELTON lived at the outskirts of a great city. He lived also within the shadow of a great international airport. An almost constant part of his home life was the sound of the great international jets taking off and landing, the ominous roar of their power beating in palpable waves through the thin walls of the house, beating upon the fabric of his life like a metronome. He went to bed at night with the sound of them in

his ears and they were the first thing he heard when he woke in the morning.

Paul, unlike his neighbors, did not dislike living so near to the noise and the danger. He never signed the petitions that were circulated about the noise of the jets, about the danger of their near approaches, about the desirability of moving the airport away from the neighborhood. The truth was, Paul Welton liked living near the end of the runways, liked the constant sound of the engines in his ears. He had bought the house in the



Making a get-away, as every wrong-doer knows to his sorrow, is easier said than done, for we carry our consciences with us, no matter where we go.



first place only partially because of the extraordinarily low price. He had stood, that day of inspection, in the yard of the house watching a great jet rise slowly off the end of the runway, lofting itself into its incredibly smooth and rapid transit through the atmosphere to another place, a foreign place, and the thrill of it stuck in his throat, speeded his heart, moistened his hands. In that moment he knew that he was going to buy the house.

Perhaps, most of all, it was because it seemed to bring his own dream closer to reality—that dream of being escorted like a VIP to one of those luxurious seats, of himself lofting and speeding to a foreign land with an enormous sum of money in his pocket and an incredibly lovely woman in the seat beside him. Mary, his wife, didn't like the house, didn't like its location. But Mary didn't like much of anything that he did, so he didn't let that bother him. He bought the house anyway.

by Borden Deal

The occasion of the purchase was also the occasion of his promotion in the bank. So perhaps it was the promotion to the position where he had access to the money that started his concrete planning as much as the proximity to the jetport. But it was certainly the jetport that sustained him in the nerve-racking endeavor of stealing enough money to sustain him and Roberta in the style in which he hoped to live in foreign climes. Roberta?—Oh yes, he had the lovely woman, too. He found her soon after moving to his new house and assuming his new duties at the bank. She was just the woman he had wanted, lovely and black-haired, with the added glamour of her work—modeling and bit television parts. It seemed as though it all began to fall into place the moment he commenced spending his nights and his weekends within the sound of the jet engines, as though the rhythms of the engines were at last shaping the rhythms of his life into the pattern he had longed for.

Outwardly, but only outwardly,

this weekend was like any other weekend for Paul Welton. This was the weekend he was going to make the get-away. Only yesterday he had told Roberta of the plan, and she had agreed. He had kept it from her until the last moment, almost afraid that she would not go with him. But when he had told her about the money, she was eager. She, too, lusted in her soul for strange lands and warm suns.

So when Paul came home that day he stood in the yard for a moment, looking up into the sky and listening to the great engines roar overhead, knowing that in a few hours now he would be on one of the planes. It was beginning to snow and the ceiling was very low. The snow blew coldly against his face, numbing his flesh, and because of the ceiling he could not see the planes. But he could hear them.

He went into the house, took off his overcoat and hung it in the closet, and then went on into the living room. Mary was talking on the telephone. She looked over her shoulder at his entrance, and said, "Here he is now."

She motioned to Paul and he took the phone. "Yes?" he said.

"This is the airlines confirming your reservation," the voice said. "Is this Mr. Paul Welton?"

"Yes," Paul said. "Will the flight leave on time? This snow storm won't delay it?"

"Our information is that the flight will depart on time," the voice continued. "Will you please check with the desk on your reservation half an hour before flight time? Thank you."

He turned around. Mary was looking at him. "What's the airline doing calling you?" she said.

Paul, knowing he was going to be free now in an hour or two, looked at her critically. He didn't really know, now, why he had ever married her. They had sat next to each other in Biology at college. That was the only reason he could think of.

She was a small woman. Eight years ago she had been rather pretty. And, he supposed, to another man she might still be pretty though she was just a shade too plump for his taste. Her only touch of culture from her college education was membership in the Alumnae Sorority Chapter and a subscription to the Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club.

"The bank is sending me to Philadelphia again," he said.

He had taken the precaution, on assuming his new job two years ago, of making an occasional weekend trip on presumable bank business to accustom her to his absence.

Actually, of course, he had been with Roberta, having carefully allotted a minimum share of the money for this necessary expense.

"I suppose you'll be gone the whole weekend again," Mary remarked indifferently.

"I'm afraid so," he said. "Dinner ready?"

"You know it's always ready." She went into the kitchen, took the TV dinner from the oven, put it on the table in the kitchen nook. "I've already eaten."

Paul sat down and looked at the dinner. It was turkey this time. She had put it into the stove without love thirty minutes ago, knowing he would arrive just in time to eat it piping hot and without love, also. Looking at the aluminum tray, Paul decided abruptly that tomorrow night he would order lobster with drawn butter. He had never eaten lobster.

Paul ate quickly without tasting anything. Then he went into the bedroom and changed clothes. He packed his suitcase quickly, thoroughly, and came back into the living room, glancing at his watch.

"Well, I'd better get started," he said. "Might take a little time to get to the airport in this weather."

"You sure they'll be flying tonight?" Mary said.

"Sure," Paul answered her. "A little weather like this won't stop

those jets." A plane roared overhead. "Hear?"

"If it wasn't for the fence, you could just walk across the airport to the terminal," she said. "You like to live so close to it, too bad you can't get them to cut you a gate."

"I'll call a taxi," he said. "Wait a minute. I forgot something in the car."

He went out of the house, hurried through the snow to the garage. He opened the trunk of his car and found the zipper bag with the money belt in it. He could put it on now that he was ready to go. He unbuttoned his shirt, feeling the cold air strike against his bare flesh, and put the money belt around his middle. It was solid with the fat of his thieving, plump and comforting, and his fingers shook and knotted with excitement as he tied the belt securely. He tucked in his shirt, fastened his belt, and was ready. He went back into the house for his suitcase, and made the phone call for the taxi.

At the door, with the suitcase in his hand, he hesitated, looking back at Mary. "Well," he said. "I'm off."

She was doing her nails and she did not look up at him. "Be careful," she said.

"You know me," he replied. "I'm always careful."

He opened the door and went out into the yard. It would take a few minutes for the taxi to arrive. But he wanted to wait for it outside the house. He stood on the snowy path, waiting, looking around him. He was leaving nothing here. He knew his neighbors well enough to speak to over the hedge, but that was all. Even in the beginning, between him and Mary, there had never been anything but Biology. He wished that class hadn't been seated alphabetically. No. Nothing there except the sound of the jet engines overhead. And he was going with them. The taxi drew up in front of the house and he got in without a backward glance.

"The airport," he told the driver.

"Looks like quite a night," the driver said, starting the taxi and swinging it around. "You flying tonight?"

"Yes," Paul said with quiet satisfaction. "I'm flying tonight."

"Paper said a big storm front is blowing in," the taxi driver said with relish. "Temperature way down, high winds, a blizzard, the works. Glad I'm going off in an hour."

Paul entered the lighted warmth of the terminal feeling the excitement beginning to build in him. It was really happening; it was really coming true. He had been here

often, though he had never flown in his life. It had been his custom, ever since he had moved to the house, to come here occasionally just to watch the people coming and going on their mysterious journeys, to dream of the day of his own departure on his own mysterious journey.

He knew where the reservation desk was for his airline. He went and stood in the line, waiting his turn. He could see Roberta in the line ahead of him but she did not acknowledge his presence. That was part of the plan; they would travel separately until Mexico City. At last Paul put his suitcase on the scales, presented his ticket.

"There will be a slight delay before takeoff," the reservations clerk told him.

Paul's heart sank. This was the first break in the perfection of the plan. He turned his head, saw Roberta sitting on a bench looking at a magazine.

"The plane will take off, won't it?" he asked the clerk.

The clerk looked at him. "There will be a slight delay," he said. "That is all the information that we have. Your flight will be called at Gate Twelve."

Paul took the ticket, put it into his coat pocket, and walked to the center of the terminal where he bought a paperback book and a

chocolate bar. Then he sat down on a bench and tried to read the book.

At flight time a half-hour delay was announced. Paul fidgeted on the bench. Outside the glass doors he could see snow swirling heavily and when they were opened a gust of cold air bellied into the warmth of the terminal. It had all gone so smoothly up until now.

At the end of the half-hour, another half-hour delay was announced. Paul went to the counter to argue with the clerk but several people were there ahead of him. They got little satisfaction and less information and Paul decided not to say anything. He didn't want to draw attention to himself. He looked at Roberta again and she was looking at him. He had a sudden impulse to join her. They could sit together, have coffee, talk about the delay. It would be comforting. But he restrained himself. Instead, he contented himself with studying her unobtrusively after she had looked back at her magazine, marveling at the knowledge that tomorrow they would be together in Mexico and the day after that in South America and the day after that wherever they wished to go.

The time crept by and then the announcement came to board the plane. Paul hurried to Gate

Twelve, handed in his ticket, and walked out into the open, heading for the plane. The wind was blowing very hard and he had to lean into it, holding his hat. The snow gusted against him and he was chilled to the bone by the time he reached the plane.

The stewardess greeted him and he found a seat next to the window. He was so excited by the imminent departure he was not bothered by the knowledge that for the first time in his life he was actually on an airplane, a jet. He only waited impatiently while the plane loaded and taxied, turned, and stopped, preparing for the takeoff.

As the plane began moving he looked up the aisle to the place where Roberta was seated. He could see the back of her head, her hand gripping the side of the seat. The sound of engines buffeted at him, even louder, it seemed, than when they took off over his house, and the plane began to move. It seemed to move very slowly and to take a long time to get into the air. He gripped his hands together in his lap in a frenzy of excitement. He was gone now. He was going.

There was a change in the sound of the engines. He looked out the window. The runway was slipping by, ghostly white with snow, under the wing. The plane shuddered

and it seemed to him it should have been in the air by now. He wanted to tell someone, but he kept quiet. He didn't want to show his ignorance of airplane travel.

The plane lifted slightly off the ground, bounced back, hard, and veered to one side. Then it was off again and he knew that they were in trouble. He saw car lights under him, on the expressway, and then the plane dipped again. The plane was going down. There was a rending crash and people began to scream inside the plane.

He had been in a mild car crash once on the expressway. This was much worse. The plane seemed to stagger and there was an explosion somewhere. Then the plane tore into the ground again and metal screamed as the people were screaming, and somewhere there was a blossom of flame. Paul thought, *So I'm going to die. I'm going to die now and they'll find the money on my body.*

The plane stopped. Paul saw the big emergency door sign beside him. He didn't know how to open the door, but he clawed at it, and the cold wind rushed in at him. He fell out of the plane onto the ground, pushed by the people behind him, crowding for the revealed exit.

He was on the ground and he was still alive and an engine on

the other side of the plane was burning. People climbed over him, fighting and clawing to get free.

"Robert," Paul called. He did not see her and he started back into the plane. He was flung aside by another rush and then he lifted himself up into the doorway again.

There were bodies still in the plane. A stewardess glared at him with frightened eyes, yelling for him to get out, get out for God's sake. Perhaps Robert was out, too. He hadn't seen her. But she might have made it through another exit.

He went up the twisted aisle toward her seat. She was still there, in the floor under the wrenched-out seat, still buckled into it. He leaned over her, feeling for her, and realized with a shock that she was dead. Then he saw that the whole front of the plane was crumpled and burning. Metal had exploded through her part of the plane.

There was an explosion as Paul jumped free. Then he began running, knowing that the whole plane would explode any moment. He ran straight away from the plane into the snow-filled, wind-filled darkness.

He stopped at last, panting, and looked around. He knew where he was. The plane had crashed into

a swampy area where there were no houses. It was less than a quarter of a mile from Paul's own house and it was the only open ground around. So it had to be the swamp.

Paul stood bewildered, half-insane with the frenzy of his mind. Everything had gone wrong. Roberta dead, the doubled and tripled risk of discovery—the whole scheme had fallen apart under him as the plane had fallen apart. He looked back toward the plane, saw a fire engine or ambulance, something, anyway, with a siren and a red light.

I'll go home, he thought. Nobody will know I was on the plane then. I'll go home.

He began thrashing through the underbrush toward the highway. Fortunately the swamp was frozen hard as a brick. He didn't have his overcoat and he was shaking with cold by the time he reached the highway. He skirted away from the cars that were beginning to stop, and came to the highway farther down. He walked along the side of it, plodding with limbs numbed by the cold.

He turned off the expressway and walked through the development to his house. He stopped in the yard, looking around, thinking he had never expected to see this place again in his life. It had been

a short journey indeed. He walked up on the tiny porch, fumbling in his pocket for the key. Then he stopped. At the edge of the picture window there was a slit in the curtains where he could see into the living room.

They were on the living room couch. Mary—and a man. The sight shocked him more than the airplane crash had. Mary—and a man. He knew instantly that their affair had been going on for a long time. A very long time. On the days he had been in the office, tediously slaving to steal the money. On the weekends he had been away, establishing the pattern of his getaway.

Anger flared in him. He had not loved Mary for a long time. But she was his wife. She had no right to betray him in his own home. There was no reason in the instant flame of jealousy, only an outraged possessive instinct that Paul had not known existed within him.

He stepped back off the porch, ran around the corner of the house. With fumbling hands he opened the garage door, remembering that there was a gun in the glove compartment of the car. He found the gun, holding it cold in his hand as he went back to the front of the house.

He leaned against the front door,

slipped his key into the lock silently, and turned it. The door opened. He stepped into the foyer, lifting the gun as Mary's face turned toward him, her mouth open. The man jerked around and Paul began shooting, walking toward them.

He emptied the gun into their bodies, shooting until they had stopped moving. Then he stood over them, looking down at them, holding the gun in his hand.

"Now I've done it," he told himself aloud. The house was very still around him. "Now I've really done it."

He was cold again, in mind and in body. He turned and saw that the living room door was open. He went and closed the door. He would never get away now, with the money and the girl, to the good times in the tropics. He would never know the great surge and lift of the world-circling jets. His jet had not lifted. He would die instead, executed for murder

He stopped. No. He had the perfect alibi. He had only to get out of here, get back to the plane crash, be discovered there as one of the passengers. He could think of something to tell the bank why he was on the plane, if it was necessary. But it was certainly the perfect alibi for murder.

He went to the door, opened it, looked out. There was nothing, no one, moving in the midst of the storm. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the gun, threw it down on the floor. Then he fled out of the house into the storm once again.

He did not go near the highway this time. He cut through the housing development, moving quickly toward the swamp. Far ahead of him he could see the cars and lights around the plane. Nearer him there were people with flashlights, calling and searching through the swamp. He was shaking all over as he went toward the flashlights.

He stopped before he came to them and sank down on the ground. He let them come to him. They circled around him, holding flashlights on him, staring at his torn clothing and shaking body.

"Here's another one," someone called against the wind and then helping hands were under his arms. He let himself be led toward the highway where they put a blanket around his shoulders and a cup of hot coffee into his hands. He did not have to pretend to be dazed and shaking; he could scarcely hold the coffee.

After a while he was loaded into an ambulance and taken to the airport. On the way, he began to

think again. He could still get away. He had the money belt around his middle, he was uninjured, he could continue his flight. That was all that mattered, to get away from it all.

At the terminal he was examined, questioned, comforted. He let it go on for a while, then he asked about another flight.

"You can't fly now," he was told. "You just . . ."

"I've got to," he said. "It's an emergency. I must get the first flight I can."

They argued with him, but after he had signed a release stating categorically that he was uninjured, unshaken, undisturbed in mind or body, they told him they could book him on the next flight out, which would be in about an hour.

It was a very quick hour and almost before he knew it he was walking through another gate to another jet plane. The wind was just as cold, though the snow had stopped now and the sky was clearing. He walked with his head down, holding his hat, and it felt

exactly like it had the first time.

He stopped. He raised his head, looking toward the plane. It stooped giant and ungainly on the ground. A tremor rippled through his body, shaking him from head to toe.

He knew the truth, then, as the fear gusted through him. Never in his life would he mount into a great jet plane, bound for other climes, another life. He tried to make himself walk to the plane. He could not move a step in the direction of escape.

The stewardess at the foot of the stairway was waving him on, then she was hurrying toward him.

He turned. The moment he turned he began to run, fleeing from the only freedom there could ever be for him. He ran with the deep fear inside him, panicking him, into the warmth and safety of the terminal. A jet took off as he ran and he screamed, putting his hands over his ears to shut out the noise.

They caught him with gentle and forceful hands at the terminal entrance and led him away.



ON MONDAY afternoon during a ten-minute telephone conversation, Lucie decided to murder her husband, Bruno.

"Mrs. Minify?"

"Yes."

"This is Mr. Fry."

Lucie Minify experienced the usual thrilling reaction to the sound or presence of her husband's boss, Mr. Fry, President of the U.S. Trust Bank.

"Just a minute, Mr. Fry. I've something on the stove."

"Of course."

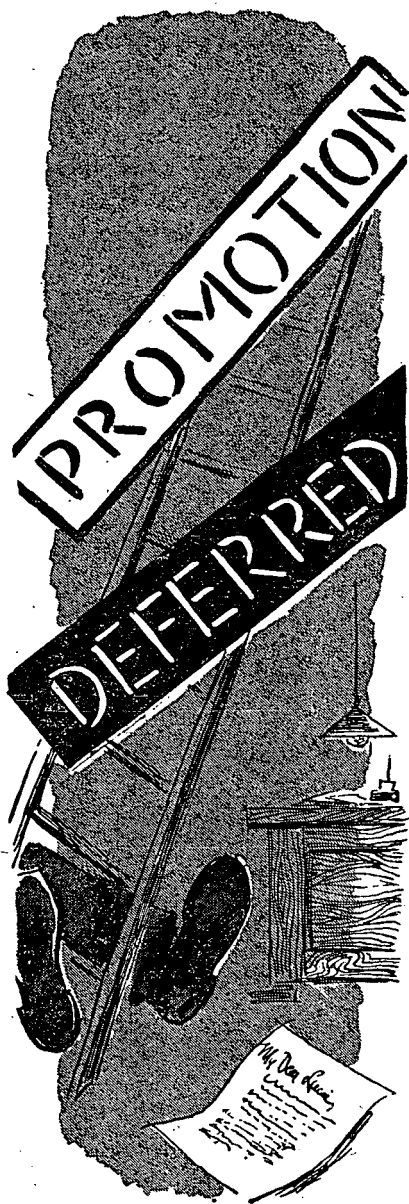
Lucie waddled into the kitchen. Nothing was on the stove. Quickly-heated TV dinners were good enough for Bruno these days, but she needed two quick shots of Bourbon that, as she tossed them off, made her imagine Mr. Fry a figure of ruthless success, impatiently waiting behind his mahogany desk. Ah, there was a real man, that Mr. Fry! Mr. Success, himself, personified.

She ran back to the phone. "Yes, Mr. Fry?"

"I'm sending your husband home early this afternoon, Mrs. Minify. It may do some good if you have one last talk with him, but as for me, I'm afraid my patience is worn out."

Lucie felt cold. "What's the matter, Mr. Fry?"

"He's turned down promotion."



Lucie sucked at her cigarette fiercely, as though it contained vital oxygen. "A—big promotion, Mr. Fry?"

"The U.S. Trust is merging with the Alhambra National Savings. Bruno turned down the chance to be promoted to Vice-president of another bank."

"Vice-president!" Lucie said faintly.

"I've given him until tomorrow to make a final decision, Mrs. Minify. Talk to him. But, frankly, if I may presume to be so personal and

by KENNETH
O'HARA

direct, I don't think your husband is the executive type. He's brilliant, promising. Everyone admires and respects him. He even looks like a leader, but appearances are so deceptive, aren't they, Mrs. Minify?"

"Yes," Lucie said in a hoarse whisper.

"I must judge a man by his self-interest plus ability, Mrs. Minify. A certain ruthless self-interest is a

prime characteristic of an executive. Your husband seems completely lacking in this."

"But—"

"Mrs. Minify, most people are content to breed, vegetate and die, satisfied with what they have, wanting no more. I'm afraid Bruno is really not the exceptional character we both once assumed him to be. I like Bruno. But I want men under my command who will grow and advance under my guidance, become a credit to me and my banks. Mrs. Minify, unless Bruno accepts this promotion, I'll have to release him from any further responsibility—such as it is—to this bank."

"Mr. Fry—"

"Oh, I'll give him good letters of reference, Mrs. Minify. I just don't want him in my bank, understand? Bruno will always find work somewhere—as a cashier."

Mr. Fry severed the connection with sickening finality. Lucie closed her eyes and rested her sagging forearm on the wall, and she kept hitting the wall gently with her fist and waiting.

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, runs an old adage, which applies to the wife rather than the husband in this tale of thwarted ambition.

Waiting for Bruno.

Her housecoat fluttered around her ample figure as she returned to the kitchen and sat drinking alone in the graying afternoon. It was Bruno's fault, of course, that she sat alone more each day, consuming more Bourbon than was good for her figure. She'd had an elegant figure when she married Bruno. But you had to live in hope to keep yourself up, and Bruno's persisting lack of assertiveness, his stubborn refusal to be promoted, had stifled all hope.

She pushed frizzled hair out of the puffed eyes that gazed into the past, destroyed by Bruno, and into the future, also destroyed by Bruno. She had given her prime peak years to Bruno, thrown them away. She couldn't go back and start over. And she could never land anyone now any better than Bruno, she realized, as she shuffled from room to room glaring at all the unpaid-for gadgets. This was the way it was, and would always be. Nothing could ever be any different. She was trapped, trapped in a suburban clap-trap.

But she could make Bruno pay for what he had done to her. There was some insurance. She could sell the house, too. She could get out with something!

What? How? It came to her readily, the solution did, as if she might, subconsciously, have been considering it for some time.

In her despair, she had taken to reading paperback mysteries all day. One absorbs much data from such perusal, more perhaps than one realizes until an emergency calls upon stored information from the memory bank.

Before she realized what she was doing she had run across the backyard to the double garage and brought a ladder back into the living room. Breathing heavily, she unfolded the ladder, set it up against the wall by a dusty picture of the Vanishing American. She tilted the picture, then sat down and nursed another double Bourbon.

It had to look like an accident. Enjoyable though the anticipation of Bruno deceased might be, it wasn't enjoyable enough to justify going to jail or to a gas chamber.

Already she imagined herself explaining to some interesting blond police officer how her dear husband met with his fatal accident. He had climbed the ladder to straighten the picture, had fallen, hit his head on the corner of the coffee table. It was important that it be simple. The wife was always suspected. But suspicion meant very little without proof.

She returned to the garage and brought a two-by-two piece of pine, about a yard long, into the living room. She propped it against the wall, poured more Bourbon and waited for Bruno.

She had always been waiting, she mused sadly, in one way or another, for Bruno. Waiting for Bruno to do something, start somewhere, go ahead, particularly up the ladder of success. Mostly waiting for some indication that he really loved her.

That was what it really came down to after all.

You could not, she thought bitterly, think of love as some kind of mystical nonsense. It wasn't sweet talk or sharing or togetherness or simply coming home faithfully every night. There had to be real concrete ways of measuring love. Like, how much is someone willing to do for you? What would a man do, how far would he go, what risks would he take, to show his love for a girl?

Well, Bruno had never loved her, that was all too obvious. He couldn't have loved her. He had never cared enough to provide for her in the way she deserved and had been led to expect.

She began to sob in a thickening wheeze, a strange sound, punctuated with muttered, broken phrases. Bruno must have really hated

her all these years. He must have hated her to have promised so much and denied her everything.

She would get Bruno fairly well sozzled first, she thought, craftily. She plopped on the floor on her knees and examined the edge of the coffee table. She would smear a bit of blood and hair there for absolute authenticity, in case there was further investigation beyond mere questioning.

Yes, Bruno should be fairly well sozzled first. That would make the accident look authentic to the police. He didn't care much for liquor, but she could easily talk him into it. She had always been able to talk him into any little thing that wasn't really important. But this little thing would be more important than Bruno could ever have imagined, she thought, and burped and chortled delightedly.

Bruno came in a few minutes later and stood in the doorway. He was haggard, a bit wild in appearance as he shuffled in and stood near the television. His dark suit hung limp on his drooping frame as he leaned wearily against the cabinet. He looked as if he had been without sleep for days, and was too exhausted and dazed to realize he was finally home.

But he still had that handsome

outer appearance with which he had misled her, and Mr. Fry, everybody. He was the spitting image of a man who was bound to succeed. That paradoxical thing, that incredible discrepancy between aggressive exterior and shy, timid interior fired the smouldering hatred to an almost uncontrollable pitch in Lucie.

How could any man look so much one way and be completely something else? He just didn't love her. He had pretended, but he was a miserable, hateful phony!

And the way he just stood there silently asking for sympathy infuriated her even more. Why should he feel he deserved sympathy? Didn't he extend it unconditionally to all others? Everyone, that is, but his wife? He was so moral, so righteous, and he expected others to treat him that way in return. He gave loyalty and expected trust. He held an incurable belief in the decency of men, and an incredible capacity to forgive.

Oh, he had explained so many times why he only wanted to remain a stupid little cashier the rest of his life.

"Why, Lucie, I'd have to test people. I'd have to dismiss people, tell them they were incompetent! I couldn't do that, Lucie! But I'd have to if I were in an executive position. I'd have to send people

away who wanted to work and live. I'd have to be ruthless. I'd have to treat people not as human beings, but as things. I'd have to turn people away who wanted to borrow money, maybe to feed and clothe a houseful of hungry kids. And if I took a promotion, don't you realize that it would be at the expense of someone more deserving? There are older workers at the bank who deserve the promotion more than I do."

She glared at Bruno through puffed eyelids. "Mr. Fry just called me."

"Oh," Bruno said with a nervous start.

"He said you turned down the big promotion. The vice-presidency."

"That isn't important anymore," Bruno said.

She almost screamed. "It never was important to you! You never wanted anything. You could be vice-president!"

"I never could be. But nobody understands that."

"You'll be fired!"

He shrugged maddeningly, almost casually. "Yes. It's a pity. All I wanted was to be a cashier."

"But what about what I want? You don't love me! You never did!"

His smile was tired apology. "I do love you, Lucie. I always have."

She waved her pale arms furiously, indicating the cheap unpaid-for rooms and their packaged furnishings. "Oh yes, and here it is, the evidence of your love."

"I've done my best, Lucie. You'll be well provided for the rest of your life."

She snorted derisively and eyed the two-by-two.

"Very well provided for, Lucie. Don't you worry."

"How you must have hated me all these years, Bruno, to make me live this way. When I think of my wasted life!" She began to sob.

"It'll be different now, Lucie. It'll be much better for you. Please believe me. And I want to say that I'm sorry for the way things have been, the way they've turned out. I'm sorry for having disappointed you and the way I've made such a terrible mess of things."

She poured him a double Bourbon. "Drink it," she commanded.

He did. His face was pale. "I'll need it," he said, surprisingly. And even more surprisingly, he requested and tossed off another.

She moved around to the side and slightly behind Bruno, and reached for the two-by-two. She studied Bruno's head and located an ideal section of his blond crew-cut. He sat with his head sagging

forward, not turning or moving at all when she spoke. He was in his self-pitying stage. He was ready.

"I'm leaving you, Bruno. I'm getting a divorce."

He just nodded and slumped deeper into the chair. "I figured you would, Lucie, sometime or other. I've made such a terrible mess of everything. But that won't be necessary, I mean for you to leave. I'll leave, Lucie. In fact, I'm leaving right now."

"Bruno!" she screamed in a fury of frustration and resentment.

He had leaped with sudden resolution into the center of the room and ran out through the kitchen.

"Bruno! You can't do this to me!" She ran to the rear screen door carrying the two-by-two plank and continued to yell out at Bruno. He turned and looked up the steps through a shaft of California sunshine. "You'll be better off, dear. Don't feel too badly. It will work out fine for you, you'll see. You'll be well provided for."

He nodded, waved, ducked into the garage. Lucie peered anxiously through the screen door, waiting for the car to back out of the garage, quivering with frustrated rage. The idea that he should leave her was intolerable enough. But that he should deprive her, at the end, even of revenge, that was too much.

After ten minutes, when the car failed to back from the garage, Lucie ran quickly across the lawn to the side of the garage, hugging the two-by-two against her billowing housecoat, but still thankful for the redwood fence she had insisted that Bruno build around the yard. It now blocked the curious spying of the neighbors on what might, in retrospect, be considered suspicious behavior.

She peered carefully through the small window. Bruno sat hunched over the small writing desk he had rigged up in a corner of the double garage, where he had often done his homework for Mr. Fry. He slumped now, scribbling away with a pencil.

He's acting, Lucie thought, utterly crazy. But then, maybe he had always been a bit crazy. Anybody who would turn down a promotion to a vice-presidency was not, could not possibly be, right in the head.

She crept around and silently into the shadowy interior of the garage. She hesitated only a moment with the two-by-two raised over her head. Then she rushed in with a speed and accuracy amazing in one so new to the work.

"Oooo," Bruno said, the way he always said anything—gently. Then he slid down to the floor and stretched out on it as if he were

still, even while dying, doing Lucie a favor. She dropped the two-by-two, got down on her knees and gripped Bruno's limp wrist until she was positive no one could find any pulse in it. Then, curiously light-headed, airy and light all over, as if she had suddenly lost fifty pounds, she gave an odd little ballet dance around the interior of the garage. After that she looked at the message Bruno had been scribbling.

My darling Lucie:

This must be brief. I might lose my nerve and not be able to go through with it. I'm writing this because I don't have the courage to tell you to your face. I don't want to expose my naked cowardice, confess my miserable failure. I'm so ashamed. By this time you will have gotten curious, and come out here and found me dead. As you read this, I shall have made the final coward's exit, and be beyond censor. I'm going to kill myself, Lucie. It's the only way. I've made such a terrible mess of everything.

You'll be well provided for, but you must be careful and follow directions given below. There's plenty of money, darling Lucie, more than plenty. Soon as you read this, destroy this letter at once.

The money is buried—

But that was when Lucie had dealt a fatal blow to the back of Bruno's head and thereby rendered the remainder of his note an intriguing and even maddening mystery for all time.

At first, Lucie only found it vastly amusing. She laughed and laughed. Money? Plenty of money? From Bruno?

It was really too much, really too funny for words. He had been crazy all right, no doubt about it, really gone. Delusions of money. And then deciding to kill himself.

She had gotten to him first and that was something, at least, to be grateful for. If he had succeeded in suicide it would have canceled out not only the pleasure of her vengeance, but the few crumbs of insurance the miserable penny-pincher had taken out naming her as so-called beneficiary. Not that the insurance had amounted to anything. It had little to do with motive.

But how had he intended to do the deed? She saw the bottle then, on the desk, the top unscrewed. It smelled of almonds and to anyone who read mysteries regularly this could only mean potassium of cyanide. The idiot had intended to poison himself! Well, from what she had read of the agony of it, she had made it easier for him. Even Bruno hadn't deserved to die from the effects of cyanide.

She brought the ladder out and tipped it over across Bruno's fallen figure. He could have a fatal tumble in the garage as well as the living room. She took Bruno's shoes off, implanted his shoeprints halfway up the ladder, then replaced the shoes. She carefully wiped her fingerprints from them with a greasecloth and tossed the two-by-two into the gas incinerator where it immediately began to go up in smoke.

What had Bruno been doing up on a ladder in the garage? Well, he had climbed up to take some boxes down from where that stuff was stored on the boards placed across the rafters. She measured the angles and everything seemed correct. She dabbled a bit of Bruno's hair and blood on a corner of his desk where he had hit his head coming down. Then she ran screaming into the back yard and collapsed there for the benefit of neighbors.

The police came and then the ambulance. Everyone offered condolences, and there seemed no indication that foul play was suspected. The police did not even seem interested in questioning the obviously accidental nature of Bruno's departure. Bruno's body was removed for a brief sojourn with the coroner before going on to the mortuary.

After an evening playing the la-

menting widow, Lucie ate a rare steak and slept peacefully for ten hours. She woke eagerly and ready to put in her claim to the paltry insurance money.

As she shambled toward the telephone, yawning, it rang.

"Hello, Mrs. Minify? This is Mr. Fry."

"Oh," she sobbed. "Mr. Fry."

"My condolences on your husband's unfortunate accident," Mr. Fry said dryly. "Now where in hell did he hide the money?"

"Money?"

"Come, come, don't tell me you know nothing about the money!"

"What money?"

This continued a moment, and then Mr. Fry conceded that she might really know nothing about the money. "Bruno couldn't spend the money without giving himself away. If he told you, you might have gotten impatient and spent some of it anyway. I suppose he planned to take you and neatly disappear one fine day to some country, like Turkey, where there aren't any extradition laws, whenever he decided that the time was ripe. But he waited too long, Mrs. Minify."

"Too long? For what?"

"He certainly fooled everybody about everything, didn't he, Mrs. Minify? Seems he's been pilfering quite heavily from U.S. Trust. Accountants have just set the short-

age in his books at a little over a million in cash."

"Million!" whispered Lucie.

"Been doing it for years. Covering checks with juggled figures. But this bank merger caught him unprepared. Cooked his miserable goose. Made it impossible for him to hide his thefts any longer. But the money's insured, Mrs. Minify. Anyway, we intend to find it. The FBI will certainly locate it. It's probably in a strongbox somewhere and—"

Lucie made continuing strangling noises in her throat.

Mr. Fry gave a prolonged cackling laugh. "That's why Bruno would never take a promotion, you see. Promotion would have made it impossible for him to cover his tracks."

Lucie turned into a lamenting widow. She never discarded her widow's weeds. Poor, dear, misunderstood Bruno. He had done it all for her. He had wanted to kill himself even, because he had failed her, because, as he had said, he had made such a terrible mess of everything. But he had tried. He had wanted so much for her. He had really loved her after all. More than she or anyone could possibly have imagined. He had tried to get the world for her—in the only way he

knew how—and still not be merciless and cruel to others.

She kept thinking of the note.

The money is buried—

Oh, dear Bruno, why did I act so impulsively? Why didn't you tell me about everything?

She began spading up the yard, oblivious to the gaze of neighbors. A week later she was still spading. Neighbors complained when Lucie began working her way into their garden plots and patios with furiously swinging pick and shovel.

But no one, including Lucie, ever found the buried money.

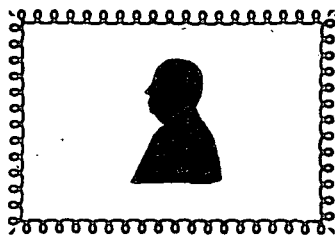
Lucie spent the pittance received from Bruno's insurance going all

over the country, visiting spiritualists and mediums. She left no mystical stone unturned in an effort to contact the departed Bruno. She received the heartiest cooperation of psychic specialists as soon as she mentioned the purpose of her visits. Particularly when she agreed to hire them on a percentage basis.

"Darling Bruno, do you hear me? We can't let your noble sacrifice be in vain. Where is the money?"

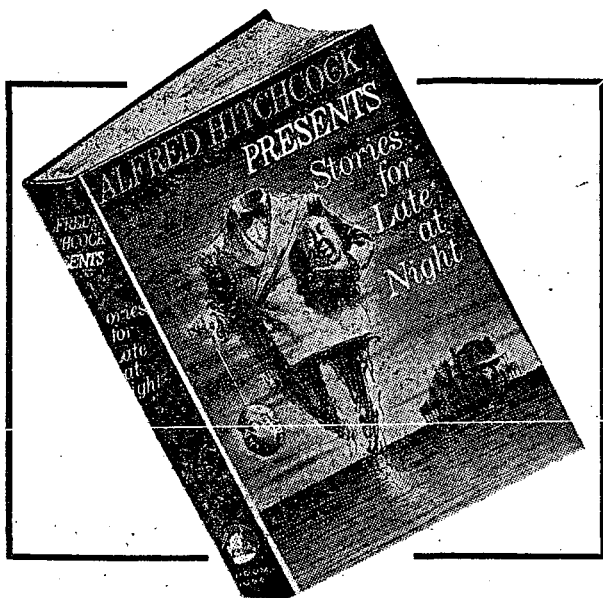
But the only eery answer that was ever apparently elicited from Bruno in the Great Beyond was:

"I do love you, Lucie. I do love you—"



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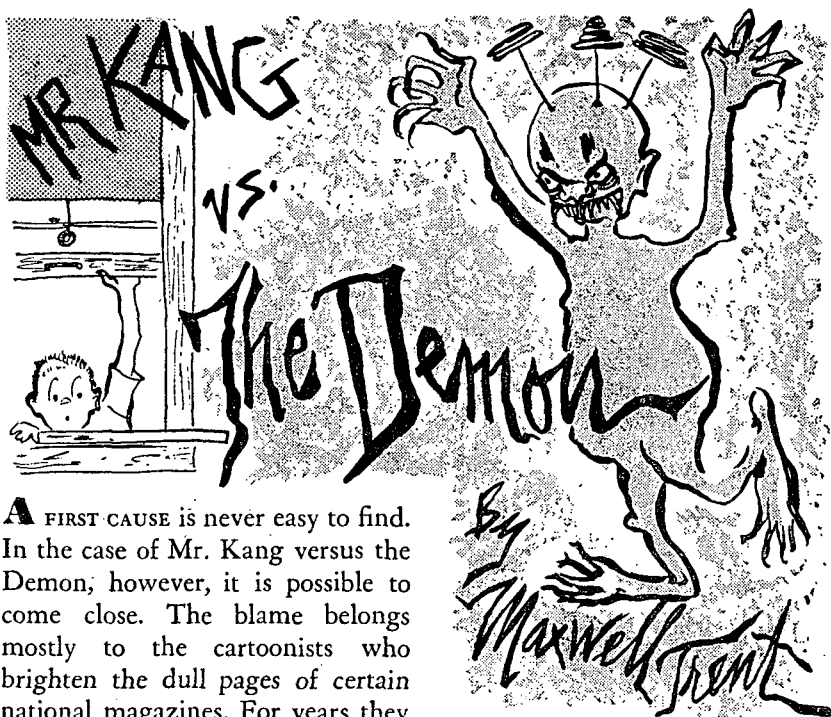
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A FIRST CAUSE is never easy to find. In the case of Mr. Kang versus the Demon, however, it is possible to come close. The blame belongs mostly to the cartoonists who brighten the dull pages of certain national magazines. For years they have been drawing the typical Man from Mars as a plump, big-headed, quasi-human individual with spindly legs and an expression of bland disbelief of what he saw here on earth. To be sure, he was apt to have small antennae on his bald dome, and other minor divergencies from the anatomy of homo sapiens, but often enough he resembled your Uncle Wilbur at the age of sixty—that unmarried, prissy one, who looked just like a neutered cat, so well preserved, sleek, and sterile.

Yes, it was the fault of those car-

toonists, and Mr. Kang's own build, of course, that must have put the Demon on his track. Mr. Kang had a flabby torso shaped like a large fig, pointed end up. On the skinny neck, apparently straining it to the point of causing a permanent oscillation, was a huge head, largely pink scalp. His features were so small and bland that a more literate boy would have thought of Humpty-Dumpty; but the Demon never read anything except comic books of the most lurid type. Finally, Mr. Kang had a wide, froglike mouth which

There are those who feel that we may expect visits from Martians or Venusians any day now. If you met Mr. Kang in full regalia, you might believe it, too.



nobody had ever seen opened in a smile, or indeed at all, since the little man habitually hissed and sputtered his words from between clenched lips.

In some neighborhoods even an eccentric individual may dwell in peace, although frozen out socially. But Mr. Kang had moved to an area of transients and unskilled laborers, many of them the rejected, the futile, the incompetent, and the bitter elements of the community as a whole. They worked irregularly, drank large quantities of cheap liquor, and raised numerous imps which they thought were children. One of these, the Demon, soon became Mr. Kang's scourge.

The boy's real name was Henry Gordon Bates, but at the age of nine, while attempting to capture and torment a cat, he had been ignominiously routed by a dirty old lady who screamed while brandishing a mop: "Get away from Fluffy, you little Demon, or I'll break every bone in your body!" At least, that was the core of her threat; she had embellished it with fifty adjectives learned in as many

dives, most of them having once employed her as a B Girl. None of the words she used was unfamiliar to the child she drove off.

After that, the Demon acquired a small following, and became the official nuisance of the neighborhood. His ingenuity in devising frightfulness was unsurpassed; in addition, he had courage and a forbidding scowl too old and fierce for his ten years. Since he was usually dealing with people as uninhibited as himself, men and women unacquainted with the dicta of Spock and Gesell, there were limits to his unsocial activities. Mrs. O'Hara would not hesitate to break a beer bottle over his young head; and any member of the Pereira clan from their two-year-old to a senile grandmother would carve him up first and worry about the law later.

So when Mr. Kang moved into a small house on the corner of his own street, the Demon was greatly intrigued. Here was a man who plainly didn't belong. He was neat, quiet, left no empty wine bottles in the trash heap, and lived a

sedate life without even one brawl to liven the atmosphere. He was alone, and obviously had few retaliatory powers. It was even possible he might have qualms about clobbering a child.

All of this was gratifying enough, but better yet was the little man's anatomy, which was clearly alien throughout. There could be no mistake about that; the Demon had seen Mr. Kang's likeness in hundreds of cartoons and comic books. The antennae were missing, and the talons, but it was well known that Martians didn't hesitate to remove or cleverly conceal such damning appendages when spying on earth.

Before he had been in the neighborhood a week, Mr. Kang found himself being trailed on the street by gangs of ragamuffins yelling gleefully: "Man from Mars! Martian spy!" or "Venusian, go home!"

Led by the Demon, they destroyed his flower beds, the only ones on the block, and scribbled offensive messages with paint on the side of his house. He seemed quite helpless to deal with them. Once or twice he attempted pursuit, but was ludicrously slow and clumsy. This the Demon promptly ascribed to different gravity, although his explanation was lacking in clarity as far as the gang was concerned.

But the Martian tag finally lost its savor, and their leader came up with something better. It happened on a Spring morning, just after one of the Valdez children vanished. Even though she had nine others, Mrs. Valdez became hysterical. Her grief, instead of being one ninth that of a mother with only one child, paradoxically sounded more like nine-fold despair, and the whole neighborhood was soon aware of her loss.

Shortly after hearing the news, the Demon led a new foray against Mr. Kang, just missing with a decayed tomato when the little man came to his door in defense of some recently planted dahlias.

"Yah! Man from Mars!" the Demon shrieked, dancing nimbly out of his victim's reach. "Where's Jimmy Valdez? Bet he's killed little Jimmy! He's a People Eater! Kang, the People Eater!"

The phrase was irresistible. From then on, Mr. Kang was known to the gang, and in fact to most adults in the neighborhood, as "The People Eater."

In an area favored by transients, where there are many cheap boarding houses as well as flimsy cottages in peeling disrepair, there are frequent disappearances. Families vanish overnight, usually leaving small, unpaid bills, since large ones

aren't permitted by the wary merchants. Boys—and girls, for that matter—from twelve on, finding their homes intolerable, run off to the nearest large city, determined not to grow up like their parents.

Every time anybody left in such a fashion, the Demon came to Mr. Kang's house. "Who ate up the Zimmels?" he would chant; and his followers, well schooled, chorused the answer: "Old Kang, the People Eater—he ate up the Zimmels, and the Reillys, and the Drakes!"

The victim was quite helpless. At first, he made the mistake of going to the parents. They were sullen and uncooperative, obviously resentful of his neatness and careful, if accented, English. Their reply to his charges was either 'Boys will be boys;' or a tacit admission that the children were no longer controllable.

It was equally useless to chase them, since Mr. Kang was no match for youthful agility. He would hiss and sputter angrily through his wide frog-lips, but that only added to their fun. Certainly his enunciation was bad, and what got through the narrow opening was further distorted by a heavy accent, middle European in texture.

"He's talkin' Martian!" the Demon would yell. "Say some more, ol' People Eater! Whyn't yah go

back to Mars so's they kin unnerstand?"

At the end of five weeks, even this was beginning to lose some of its appeal. Then, providentially, little Mary Hogan, aged six, vanished for real. In all the other cases—for example, that of the Valdez family—the lost member turned up sooner or later, or was heard from. But Mary was gone; she was far too young to run away, so there was no doubt a crime had been committed.

The police, even had they been greatly concerned about a slum area, were helpless. There were stories that the child had gone off in a car; others that she had been walking hand-in-hand with a small, dark man; still others that a blonde woman, expensively dressed, had taken the pretty, blue-eyed girl.

None of these accounts satisfied the Demon. He stood in front of Mr. Kang's house and shrilled: "Where's Mary Hogan? Did you eat her all up, you dirty little People Eater?" Then later, inspired by the adulation of his friends, he daringly came to the front door, and left a note which read: "Beware People Eater Im coming in soon to find Mary."

It's doubtful that he meant to be taken seriously; in this he made the mistake of other, more notable dictators who had to implement

boasts they assumed would be passed over as mere pep-talks. To his gang, the Demon had unwittingly committed himself to an act of derring-do. It quickly became clear to him that unless he really faced Kang alone, in his den, the other boys would no longer accept him unquestioningly as their true leader. Instead there would be a struggle for power; and Jesus Martinez, of the smouldering black eyes, was next in the line of succession, and very impatient. It was not certain that the Demon could whip him in a fair fight—or the other kind, either.

So, driven by circumstances, a minor Caesar at his Rubicon, the Demon swore to invade Kang's lair, there either to rescue Mary Hogan, or acquire proof of her foul murder and consumption by the People Eater.

As they congratulated him on his daring, large eyes, more yellow than brown, were watching from inside the house; and on Mr. Kang's bland face was a strange expression, one that made him look sinister . . .

That night, at eight thirty, while the gang waited outside the picket fence, which Kang re-built with antlike persistence every time they tore it down, the Demon recon-

noitered. Inside it was almost dark, with just a faint glow from the second bedroom near the back of the house. No doubt it was there that the Martian lurked, picking the frail bones of Mary Hogan. Well and good. If some window near the front was open, the Demon's chances were excellent. He was quite experienced at such entrances, having helped to rob three small groceries and a liquor store, which he invaded through windows too small for the adults who sponsored these operations.

Now, to his relief, a window in the dining room was half open. He could climb in, a safe distance from Kang, stall for a minute or two, and then retreat, perhaps taking something of value along. More than that he had never intended to accomplish. It was no part of his plan actually to confront the little man on home territory. After all, he was only ten, and while contemptuous of adults in general and this one in particular, the Demon was a realist. A child simply couldn't fight a grownup on his own terms; instead you used agility, guerrilla tactics, and ridicule. No, the Demon would invent some exciting tale about catching the People-Eater at his unnatural feast, outfacing and eluding the monster, and leaving him with empty, blood-stained talons. They would-

n't believe him; but neither would the gang dare give him the lie to his face—not after he actually broke in and robbed Kang. And, in any case, none of the others had the guts to go in and check up—not even Martinez. Sure, they knew old Kang was no Martian, and no cannibal, either, just as the Demon did; but it still took plenty of nerve to break into any house with an adult there.

Now, as he prepared to slip through the window over the low sill, Wally Johnson—stupid, loyal Wally—pressed something thick and cold into his sweaty hand.

"Here, you might need this, Demon," he mumbled.

It was his prize possession, a switchblade knife; the kind that opened to an eight-inch dagger. Pleased, the Demon wordlessly punched his disciple hard on one shoulder. Then he glided into the room, raising the sash all the way, so that he could get out in a hurry if anything went sour—a precaution his adult sponsors had taught him.

The room was dark and still. If Kang was awake in that lighted bedroom, he was awfully quiet. Perhaps one peek would do no harm. It was a cinch to outrun the guy; the window was readily available in any emergency. Besides, Kang was just a fat little odd-ball

who probably couldn't hold the Demon even if he did catch him. More than one angry adult had found it impossible to hang on to a wiry ten year old who used feet, nails, teeth, and a round, hard little head all at once.

Very cautiously, his heart thumping, the boy went down the long, shadowy corridor towards the back bedroom. There were faint sounds inside; Kang was awake all right, and doing something. The Demon crept closer, and was about to put one eye to the keyhole, when the door was flung open, throwing a flood of queer greenish light into the hall. Before he could move, Kang stepped out, facing him squarely. There was something terribly different about the little man. His eyes seemed phosphorescent in their dark sockets; small antennae wriggled springily on his great bald head. He looked at the boy and smiled—a humorless shark-grin full of evil gloating. It was now clear to the Demon why Kang kept his lips together in public; for behind them was a fantastic array of huge fangs like glass splinters, running to the very back of his throat. No human dentition ever took such form.

Frozen in place by the apparition before him, the Demon heard Kang say in a thick, bubbly voice: "You were right all the time, boy.

I am a People Eater." He raised his right hand so that the green light struck it directly; and the Demon saw a human head, one that by its colors had not been buried yesterday. The monster lifted it to his lips, and rasped a mouthful of putrefying flesh from one cheek. Then he dropped the loathsome thing, and with arms outstretched, came towards the boy. The Demon saw glittering talons that worked in and out like a cat's claws . . .

His paralysis broken, the boy whirled to run. Escape seemed certain; even easy; then one toe caught in a torn strand of carpeting, and the Demon tumbled to the floor. The People Eater bent over him, groping, and weird, snarly noises came from the fanged mouth. It was clearly impossible to get away now, so in his terror the Demon did what all his training and experience had prepared him for. He pressed the release button of the knife, and as the gleaming blade snapped free, jabbed upwards with all his strength.

There was a thin, gurgling cry, oddly incongruous for such a fear-

some figure; then Kang crumpled, vainly clutching at his torn flesh. The Demon scrambled to his feet, and whimpering ran for the window . . .

"Make-up," Captain Wallace was saying. "The damndest thing. He worked for Majestic Pictures until they got wise to his outside amusements. And all that stuff—the teeth, claws, and that crazy head with a place on one cheek for chicken meat—just props from some horror picture he made years back: 'The Mad Ghoul Strikes.' Kang was obviously trying to scare the kid; and the boy was scared, all right. That was Kang's mistake—the boy was so damn panicky he felt cornered, and just had to use the knife.

"Well, it's illegal entry; but self-defense or manslaughter, or what, God only knows. Ten years old! We'll let the little devil sweat for a while; it may be good for his soul. No hurry about telling him we found Mary Hogan buried in the basement."





THE THIRD DRINK from my pint bottle made him curious. He indicated the cardboard box between us on the car seat. "Anything special in the box?"

"My arm," I said.

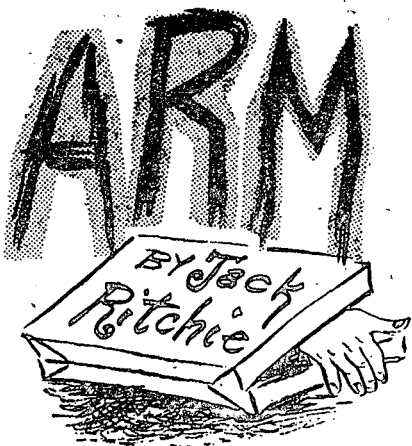
A sharp knife and a hacksaw were also wrapped inside.

He glanced at the sleeve pinned

half-way up the right arm of my suitcoat and then back at the box. "You going to bury it?"

"I'll see that it gets buried."

He chuckled. "Sure. It's not like with appendixes or gallstones. You can't keep it in a jar and look at it every once in a while. How did it happen?"



I guided the car around a curve with my left hand. "Automobile accident. I was going too fast on a strange road and missed a curve."

"Did they cut it off below the elbow or above?"

"Below."

"That's good. I mean, they'll be able to do something for you as long as you got the joint." He watched me take another curve.

"Are you allowed to drive?"

"I didn't ask anybody."

"Well, automatic transmission helps." He tilted the bottle and

then wiped his mouth. "It's pretty rough when something like that happens. But it's not the end of the world. People adjust."

"That's right."

He extended the pint. "Have a drink. It's your bottle."

"Not right now. I'd have to stop the car to handle the bottle."

But I wasn't going to drink from that bottle now or later. There were two dozen sleeping pills dissolved in the whiskey.

"I guess you'll be getting an artificial arm? When you're wearing gloves nobody could tell the difference. When did it happen?"

"Eight days ago."

That surprised him. "They let you out of the hospital that soon?"

"I wanted out."

Yes, I had wanted out. The police had come to see me for their accident report. I'd had some work done on my face in Chicago a month ago and they hadn't recognized me. But I didn't want to lie there and keep counting on that. They might start thinking things over and remember something familiar.

Many and various are the dire prophecies concerning lost limbs rising up to rejoin the original bodies, on the Day of Judgment. This one did not wait for Judgment Day.

I passed a slow-moving truck. Five miles more and then I would turn into the dirt road and stop at the ravine. I'd been over this road a dozen times until I found the right spot—a place where there were no people, a place where there was no traffic.

He yawned. "My name's Witten. Joe Witten."

"Bragg," I said. "Sam." I wondered if he would recognize my real name. But maybe Sam Tyson meant nothing to him.

"What's your line, Sam?"

"Insurance." That was as good an answer as any.

"I suppose you travel a lot?"

"That's right."

Yes, I traveled a lot. Chicago. St. Louis. The Twin cities. But I did most of my work in the smaller places. There was the fourteen thousand from the Savings and Loan in that town just south of Minneapolis. I couldn't even remember the name of the place now. I didn't know the name of the clerk there either. But I remembered that I had made him die.

How much did I have in the safe deposit box in Kansas City now? Two hundred grand? Something like that.

Time to quit.

If you didn't quit, they'd get you sooner or later.

The police knew who they were looking for. There were enough witnesses scattered throughout the Mid-West to agree on my picture in the mug file.

The police would keep looking for me until they found me. They wouldn't stop.

Unless they thought I was dead.

Joe rubbed his eyes tiredly. "Thanks for picking me up."

"No trouble."

I'd waited in the crossroads restaurant and had coffee. Two cups, three, four, while I watched.

The corner was a good place for hitchhikers and I'd let half a dozen try their luck and get picked up by somebody else. I was looking for the right man.

I glanced at Joe. My height, my body size, my weight. He would do.

Joe yawned again. "Getting sleepy."

"Why not take a nap?"

"Might give it a try at that." He leaned back and closed his eyes.

After the doctor had told me the arm had to come off, he'd gotten to the next point. "What would you like us to do with the arm? In some cases, the patient likes to give it a burial himself. Otherwise we . . . dispose of it."

"Throw it in the furnace," I'd snapped.

But the idea came to me just as

he'd put his hand on the doorknob to leave the room.

"Doc," I said. "I changed my mind. Put the arm on ice. No embalming. I'll take it with me when I leave."

Joe was asleep now and breathing gently.

After another mile I slowed the car and turned into the dirt road. A minute later I brought the car to a stop on a slight downhill slope and pulled the emergency brake.

I put my box on the side of the road and removed a two-gallon gasoline can from the trunk of the car. Then I put the car into neutral, turned the wheel to the right slightly, and released the emergency brake.

A little push got the car rolling. It picked up speed, rolled onto the shoulder of the road, and then bounded down the steep slope, turning over and over and crashing through the bushes and small trees. When it finally stopped, it rested on one side at the bottom of the ravine.

I put the box under my arm, picked up the gasoline can, and found the path I'd scouted the day before. I made my way slowly down to the car.

Joe wasn't dead, but he was unconscious and bleeding. His arms were lacerated by the sharp glass and one of his legs was twisted

in a sharp right angle. I used a rock to finish him off.

I opened the box and took out my severed arm. I used the knife to destroy the surgeon's neat cut and then placed the arm in a clear space near the car where it would not be touched even if a brush fire started.

Back at the car I went to work with the knife and the hacksaw again. It took a little time.

When that job was done, I put the gear shift back into Drive and ignition key to On. Then I poured gasoline on the body and the car.

I fixed a stub of candle inside the car where no breeze could bother the flame and lit it. I could have worked something with flashlight batteries and a timer, but they would leave traces. The candle would burn up with Joe and the car just as soon as the flame reached the gasoline-soaked upholstery, in one big blaze.

I climbed back up to the road with the empty gasoline can and the box. Now it held the knife and the hacksaw—and Joe's right arm.

The story of the crash would read simple. The car had gone off the road, down the ravine, and burst into flames. The body had burned beyond recognition, but the crash had severed the right arm and it had been thrown clear.

The fingerprints would show

that the driver of the car had been Sam Tyson.

I walked about three hundred yards before I hid the gasoline can behind some bushes on the opposite side of the road. I kept the box. I would bury that later far away from here.

At the main road I hitched a ride with a truck.

When I looked back a wisp of smoke was rising in the sky and getting blacker.

The knock at my hotel room door came three days later. When I opened it, two men stood in the hall and looked me over.

The taller one made the recognition. "Your face is a little different, Tyson, but it isn't hard to trace a man with one arm."

There were two of them and they had gotten to me when I was not ready. There was nothing to do but let them take me in.

The tall man did the talking for both of them. "We figured that you'd hitch a ride to the nearest town with a bus depot. The man

who sold you the ticket remembered your empty sleeve and the place where you were going. And when we got here, we just checked the hotels for a man with one arm."

He saw the question in my eyes and answered it.

"We found the arm all right. Just the way you planned for us to. And we took the prints and sent them on to Washington. When we got our answer, that should have been enough to convince us that Sam Tyson was dead."

"But what?"

"But we also got your description. It didn't match that of the body."

"The hell it didn't! He was my height, my weight. And he was burned."

"That's right. The whole outside of him. But in cases like this we always do a routine autopsy. When your description came from Washington, it mentioned that you had an appendectomy scar. The body we found in the car still had an appendix." He smiled. "And so we kept looking for Sam Tyson. A one-armed Sam Tyson."



CAROLINE MASON slammed the door shut. She wasn't going and that was that. She was too old, too fragile and too sensible to run screaming through the streets again. If the Hathaways wanted her to babysit, it would have to be in the afternoon and not at night, in the dark, and on Thursday.

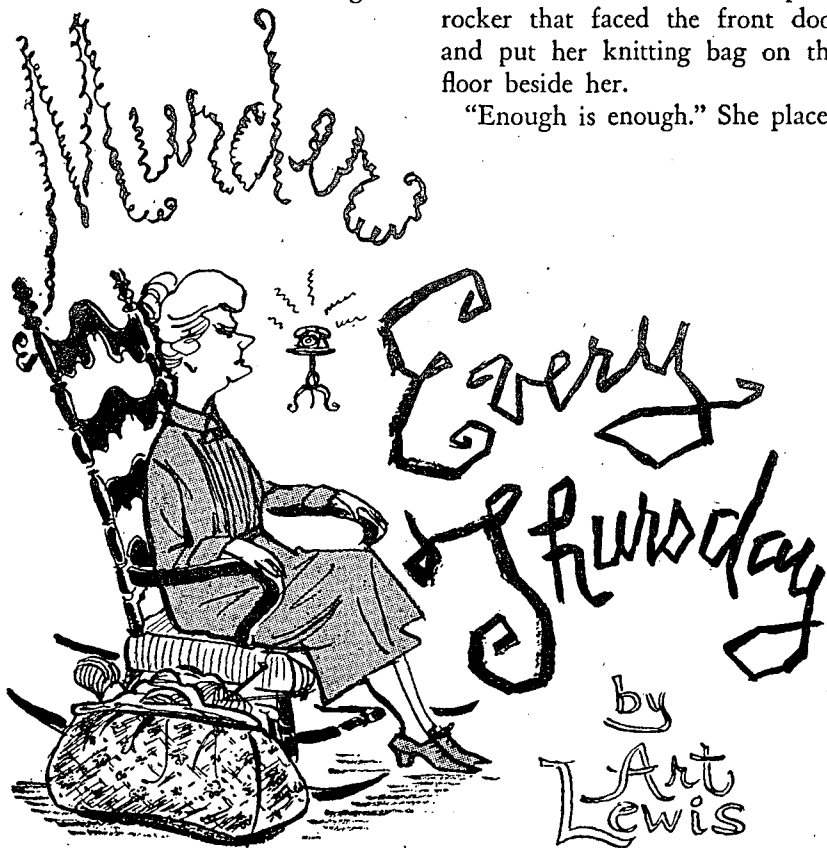
She walked back into the living room of her eight room house. In the middle of the room among the

antimacassars and Queen Anne furniture she reached up and pulled the hatpin out of her hat, yanked the hat off her head and stuck the pin back into the fabric.


"I'm never going out again on Thursday night," she said to the credenza, the baroque mirror, the quartet of Audubon birds near the bay window, and to the painting of Fred on the fireplace wall.

She sat down on the needlepoint rocker that faced the front door and put her knitting bag on the floor beside her.

"Enough is enough." She placed



It would seem that the present-day hunger for excitement knows no bounds. Murder Every Thursday may crowd Bingo Every Wednesday and Fish Fry Every Friday off the boards. Deplorable, is it not?



each of her hands firmly on the rocker arms and rocked vigorously back and forth until she was quite winded. "I sat for them every Thursday for almost a full year, and they can just find someone else."

Last week Lucille Hathaway had had to give her a sedative and put her to bed until she'd recovered enough for Mr. Hathaway to drive her home. And the week before she had cried for half an hour before she'd recovered enough for the Hathaways and the police to leave for the evening. Then after the children had been put to bed she'd cried some more because it was her anniversary and Fred had walked out on her almost a year ago after thirty years of marriage.

The telephone rang.

She let it ring three times and then she got up and went into the hallway and answered it.

"Mrs. Mason, haven't you left yet?" It was Lucille Hathaway.

"No." Caroline hung up and went back to the rocker. Her hand was shaking. She sat down in the rocker, both hands in her lap.

She really didn't have to baby sit. It wasn't that she couldn't use the extra money but she could get along without it. If she managed she could live out the rest of her life on the money Fred had left with her. And it could be a long life if she stayed home at night. She would go without a new hat this year and a new coat next year and a new something or other the year after that, but she didn't have to starve. Nobody could say that Caroline Mason couldn't manage things alone.

To the empty room she said, "Do you hear that, Fred? I can manage very nicely alone."

She walked over to the mirror and looked at herself. Smooth skin. It ran in the family. Her mother's face was round and smooth at ninety.

To the mirror she said, "Caroline, you don't look sixty-three. Fifty, maybe . . . fifty-one at the oldest."

She walked across the room and straightened out an antimacassar on the back of the wingback chair. The grease that Fred used on his

hair stained the backs of all the chairs. He was such a boy in so many ways . . . so many ways . . . leaving her for a forty year old woman.

The telephone rang.

The noise seemed to gather in a knot in the living room and then explode in Caroline's ears. Her hands were shaking now, and she touched them together to quiet them, and then while the phone rang again she went to the front door and checked to see if it was locked. On the next ring she answered the phone.

"Mrs. Mason, you hung up on me the last time."

"You asked me a question and I answered it."

"I have to catch the train in twenty-five minutes. Mr. Hathaway took the car to the city this morning."

"I'm not coming this evening."

"You can't leave me stranded like this!"

"I'm not leaving this house."

"Mrs. Mason, why didn't you tell me earlier? I would have made other arrangements."

"I didn't know earlier. It just hit me as I was ready to leave and I remembered what happened last Thursday and I'm not going through that again."

"But Mrs. Mason, they caught the man last Saturday. You told

the police yourself that he was the man. There's no danger for you any more."

"I'm not coming."

"Look. I'm frantic. My husband will probably be standing on the street corner half the night if I don't show up. I'll tell you what. I'll call around and try to get another baby sitter. I'll call you back."

"It won't do you any good."

"I'll call you back, Mrs. Mason, try to understand. I know you've had a bad fright. But there won't be any more murders."

Caroline went back to the rocker. She picked up the knitting bag and then put it back on the floor again. It was no use. She couldn't hold it. Her eyes kept traveling from the front door to the undraped bay window.

When she had discovered the body, it had been like looking at herself in the mirror. Only the eyes had been wide and staring. And the mouth had hung open in a crazy sort of way. She'd stared at it a full minute before she realized it was more than a dark shadow in the street.

Not much blood. Just a little trickle down the front of the dress and then Caroline had heard the sound behind her and she saw a figure run under the street light, stop for a minute, turn and smile in her direction, and then run off.

The next thing Caroline knew she was screaming on Lucille Hathaway's front porch a block away.

It had been almost like that the week before. The night of her anniversary. She couldn't remember it all now. She had almost stumbled over that body and she had seen that smile under a street lamp. It was too much. Too much. Another old lady. An ex-schoolmate of hers. There had never been a murder in River Rock before and now there had been two in two weeks.

Then it was sharp and clear. It had been in her mind when she slammed the door and wouldn't go out. The murderer was looking for her. The murderer knew she sat for the Hathaways every Thursday night, had staked himself out and then. . . .

When the police had picked up the man, they had called her in to identify him. But in the strong lights in the police station, well it wasn't like a lamplight just after discovering a body and shaking and all that . . .

He was a stranger, a drummer, staying at the hotel. It had to be a stranger. Nobody in River Rock would ever do a thing like that. Why, they'd all known each other practically forever.

He was the same height and about the same build as the figure

she'd seen. And he had the same smile. They'd made him smile just for her. Same smile? Not quite. . . . It was a little forced in the police station. As if he didn't feel the smile inside him. And who could blame him? A man accused of murder.

Caroline told them she wasn't even sure it was a man. But the police said it could be no one else but the stranger. And the police knew their business, so Caroline identified him.

The man's smile bothered Caroline. Caused her not to go to the Hathaways.

But who would want to kill her?

The telephone rang.

She walked right up to it and then stood over it and hugged herself tightly and let it ring six times.

It stopped and then as if it had changed its mind it rang again.

Caroline answered it.

"Mrs. Mason, I can't get any one."

"I'm sorry."

"Please, I won't ask you any more. Just tonight."

Caroline had to stop Mrs. Hathaway. The calls were a nuisance and very disturbing. After all, Lucille Hathaway had been good to her. There was always a pot of hot coffee on the stove and those delicious little cakes from Brennan's

Bake Shop. But why not? Wasn't she good to the Hathaway children? Lucille said the children looked forward to Thursday night as an event in their lives.

Caroline said, "Mrs. Hathaway. I don't feel well. I don't feel well at all. I didn't want to worry you earlier but I've had dizzy spells all day. I just couldn't take a chance and pass out while I was watching the children. I imagine it would frighten them to death."

There was a pause, then, "Mrs. Mason, do you see spots? White spots that seem to dance around in front of your eyes?"

Caroline jumped in with both feet. "Ever since five o'clock this evening."

"You poor dear. You shouldn't be alone."

"I'll have some tea and go to bed."

"There's a new visiting nurse in town. She's been here a month. I'll call her and have her come over right away."

"That isn't necessary. I can manage."

"Now, Mrs. Mason, you've got to accept the fact that there isn't a man around your house any more and there are times when you shouldn't be alone."

"Lucille Hathaway, I can manage alone!"

"I won't hear of it." She hung up.

"I can manage alone!" The line was dead.

Caroline thought, "I'd rather be alone than have some nurse fuss over me. It's not so bad to be alone. I can do as I please. Just as I please." She looked around the room. "Now what would I please to do?" She tapped her fingers against her chin. "Anything, anything my heart desires."

She straightened out an anti-macassar on the chair. There! Now what else? She lined up the four Audubons. There!

There was a spot on the bay window. A big smudge as if someone had pressed his nose against the glass. She lined it up with her nose. It *had* been her nose. Now why would she press her nose against the glass? And when? She was getting forgetful. She went back into the kitchen and got a soft cloth and wiped off the smudge on the bay window.

She was tired, and sat down in the rocker and picked up the knitting bag.

The front doorbell rang.

She wouldn't answer it.

It rang again.

She called out, "Who is it?"

"Mrs. Fisher, the nurse."

Caroline got up and put the knitting bag back on the floor. She opened the door just a little and saw the round matronly face of

Mrs. Fisher, smiling kindly at her.
"Come in."

Mrs. Fisher huffed just inside the door. "At my age I ought to remember not to run any more, but Mrs. Hathaway insisted I get here right away."

Caroline went back to the rocker and sat down. She looked away from Mrs. Fisher to the picture of Fred over the fireplace. She lifted the knitting bag onto her lap again.

Mrs. Fisher moved between Caroline and the picture of Fred. She stood very close. She was still heaving with shortness of breath.

Mrs. Fisher said, "Mrs. Hathaway was worried because you were all alone."

Caroline said, "At our age we have to learn to get along alone. I was married thirty years. It's not so easy at first to be alone, is it?"

"Who's alone? I have all my in-laws living with me."

"I never thought I'd get through my first anniversary without Fred. It would be much easier if they took a gun to you right away. Then who would know?"

Caroline looked at Mrs. Fisher's smile. It was blank and her eyes were puzzled. "Mrs. Fisher, I know how lonely you must be."

"Me?"

Caroline looked beyond Mrs. Fisher to the picture of Fred. Funny, she hadn't noticed until Mrs. Fisher was there that Fred was smiling! And it was like no other smile. It was the same smile he had on his face the day he walked out on her. It was the same smile she had seen under the street lamp. Fred had murdered those women!

Fred had murdered those two women and he was going to murder Mrs. Fisher. Caroline would pull the trigger just as she had done twice before. But it was really Fred and his smile. No woman should be left alone after thirty years of marriage. No woman should be left alone. . . .

She reached into the knitting bag and her hand closed around the gun. She took it out and pointed it at Mrs. Fisher.

Caroline said, "With women like us, this is a blessing."



ANY UNDERTAKER will tell you that the most difficult problem of the profession is the procurement of competent help. Amos Duff, owner and proprietor of the Silver Glen Mortuaries, was no exception to the rule. His latest assistant, a depressingly cheerful young man named Bucky, was not only clumsy, slothful, and disinterested; he had the annoying habit of performing his duties while whistling

pression of pouting indignation. The item was ticketed for what Amos' catalog called the Economy Service. The gentleman who had made the arrangement was the deceased's business partner, and he had flatly declined anything better than a fifth-class burial.

Amos turned, wincing, at the shrill sound of Bucky's whistle. "Hi, Mr. Duff," the boy said cheerily. "What do you think of Mr. Kessler? He's a fatty, ain't he?"




through his teeth. But Amos gritted his own and bore it; the little mortuary, with its dwindling profit pattern, couldn't afford more than Bucky's weekly pittance.

Amos was a small dapper man with sad eyes, and on the Tuesday morning he entered the back room for purposes of inventory, he looked smaller and sadder. There was only one item on display at the moment, a sallow corpse with a protruding stomach and an ex-



Encasement in cement was once the favorite method of disposing of an enemy by those outside the law. Cremation has its drawbacks, though tidier, some feel.



"A little reverence," Amos said gravely. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Say, what happened to the old guy anyway? The head's okay, but the rest of him is smashed up pretty bad."

"It was an auto accident. A very sad business."

"Boy, he's a mess, all right," Bucky said conversationally. "All them busted bones, and that puncture—"

"What puncture?"

"Looks like a bad puncture over the rib cage, but maybe I'm wrong. Say, Mr. Duff, would it be okay if I took half an hour off? I got an errand to do for my mother."

"All right," Amos signed. "But half an hour, remember."

"Sure, Mr. Duff."

Bucky exited, hands in pockets. His whistle seemed to remain behind him, drifting around the room like a lost soul. Only when its echo faded did Amos approach the corpse, pull back the sheet, and explore the damage.

There was a puncture, all right; for all his faults, the boy had sharp

eyes. It could have been caused by a great number of things; an auto smashup was a brutal business. But Amos, for no other reason but idle curiosity, made a closer inspection. Then he decided to probe, to see if any foreign object was still lodged over the rib cage.

After a few moments, he determined that he was right; the object, deep as it was, was definitely there.

He straightened up, the shock of recognition apparent on his face. This was not the first time he had seen this type of wound, and only the multitude of other injuries on Mr. Kessler's battered body had made it seem trivial before. But now he knew it wasn't.

It was a bullet hole.

His first thought was to extract the bullet, but he changed his mind. Poor Mr. Kessler's death certificate had credited the auto injuries for his demise. Obviously, there was more here than had met the eye of the coroner. Shouldn't the police be informed? Or at least Mister—Mister—

He tried to remember the cli-

ent's name. Foley! That was it. He visualized Foley's arid face and thin lips. He hadn't liked the man, even before he knew the small price Foley was willing to pay to give his partner a decent farewell.

"Bucky!" Amos shouted, and then remembered that Bucky was out. He hurried to the front office, and found the Kessler file on his desk. The details were scant, and didn't satisfy him.

He was in an agitated, but pleasantly excited, state when his assistant returned an hour later. Before Bucky had a chance to make his excuses, Amos gave him an assignment.

"I want you to go down to the *Times* building," he said. "Look up the papers, March 9th and 10th, and see if you can find the story on Mr. Kessler. The accident case."

"What for, Mr. Duff?"

"Do I ask what for you're breathing? Get over to the *Times* and find the article. Write down every word and bring it back. And hurry!"

Bucky grinned, and saluted. "*Oui, mon capitaine!*"

"Get out of here!"

Bucky wheeled and went out the door. Amos, alone, slid deeper into his swivel chair and tapped a pencil against his teeth, thinking of possibilities.

It was two hours before Bucky produced what he wanted. It wasn't much of an item, but it was helpful. Kessler had been riding home from a hunting trip with his partner, Marvin Foley; both lived in Scarsdale; Kessler was a widower with no children. Foley claimed he was blinded by a truck's headlights, and went off the road. Luckily, he was thrown clear, but Kessler remained in the car as it swerved off an aqueduct.

A series of delicious speculations crossed Amos' mind. Foley had obviously lied to the authorities. Nobody shoots a dead man. Had the "accident" occurred only after Foley, in a fit of passion, had shot and killed his partner? And then manufactured a convenient auto crash to conceal the true cause of death? Or had it been more carefully premeditated? Yes, Amos thought, remembering the crisp manner, the words falling from the colorless lips like dead leaves from a thin, bare tree. Foley had planned it all beforehand, to enjoy his business success all by himself.

There was no longer any thought in Amos Duff's mind about calling the police. He would rather talk to Mr. Foley first. He searched the telephone directory and came up with the information: KESSLER & FOLEY,

Mfgs. Playtime Equipment. He dialed the number slowly.

There was a clown at the door of Mr. Foley's office. It was made of plastic, and a punch on its bulbous blue nose wouldn't knock it off its weighted base. The secretary who guarded the door giggled when Amos looked at it.

"It's one of our best numbers," she said. "Mr. Foley said to show you right in."

"Thank you," Amos said.

There was less gaiety in Foley's office. It was spartan, wood-paneled, hunting-printed, and uncomfortably overheated. Foley, who didn't rise to greet his visitor, sat in a high-backed leather chair, wearing a woolen scarf around his neck, looking chilled despite the heat.

"Please get to the point," he said. "I explained that Mr. Kessler had no family, so I want nothing elaborate. Just do what you have to do, and be done with it."

"Oh, it's not the funeral I came to talk about, Mr. Foley." Amos seated himself carefully. "Not exactly. It's just that—well, I discovered something unusual."

Foley's eyes were normally narrow. Now they vanished. "What do you mean, unusual?"

"Well, you remember that you

instructed me not to bother about—cosmetic repairs to poor Mr. Kessler. But I found a rather, shall I say, unsightly wound."

"Go on," Foley frowned.

"Perhaps I don't have to be explicit."

"I rather think you do."

Amos had sudden doubts. Was it possible that Foley was ignorant of the bullet in his partner's body? He decided to risk all in a test of truth. He stood up.

"I'm sorry. I suppose I've made a mistake. I'll make the customary police report and—"

"Sit down!" Foley said, his voice like the snap of a swagger stick. "You can't make a statement like that and walk out. Why should a police report be necessary?"

"It's just a formality, Mr. Foley. Besides, I could be mistaken about the wound; the police will perform an autopsy and we'll know for sure."

Foley did the unexpected. He smiled.

"Sit down and have a smoke," he said amiably. "Do you like cigars? I don't smoke myself, but I keep some in the office for my better customers."

"I rather do enjoy a cigar, now and then."

Foley lifted the top of a humidor and passed a corona across the desk. Amos lit it, puffed appre-

ciatively, and said: "It's my guess that it's a rifle bullet, possibly steel-jacketed. I've seen a lot like it, but I *could* be mistaken."

"I can't imagine how it got there," Foley said. "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation."

"Naturally."

"But being in business, I'm rather reluctant to have any sort of fuss. I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Of course."

"Do you like the cigar?"

"Delightful."

"They cost two dollars apiece."

"Really?"

"I'll send you a box," Foley said graciously, and stood up with an extended hand. "Well, it's been a pleasure, Mr. Duff, be sure and let me know when poor George is buried. I won't attend myself—I find funerals morbid—but I would like to send a few flowers."

"Mr. Foley, I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear."

"Haven't you?"

"Oh, it's not that I want to make any kind of *fuss*," Amos blew a smoke ring. "It's just that—well, to be blunt, it seems a shame that a man of Mr. Kessler's standing should be put away with so little fanfare. Rather an insult to his memory, don't you agree?"

Foley sat down and folded his hands. "And just what do you suggest?"

"I would suggest something more—fitting."

"Mr. Kessler was a widower, you know, with no family."

"It's the thought that counts," Amos said.

"And just what is your thought?"

"For something—grand. A full-scale funeral, with nothing but the best. In our catalog, we refer to it as the Class A. I'm sure Mr. Kessler deserves it. Don't you agree?"

"No," Foley said flatly. "He was a bumbler and a bankrupt. If you want the truth. And just what is the difference between a Class A funeral and an ordinary burial?"

"Well, to begin with, the disposition of the remains—"

"I don't mean that. I mean the cost difference."

"Oh."

"The funeral service I specified was three hundred and fifty dollars. Just what will the Class A cost me?"

Amos looked at the glowing ash of his cigar.

"It's eighteen hundred dollars. But that includes—"

"Never mind what it includes."

Foley took a checkbook from the drawer. He began writing with a scratchy fountain pen, in a cramped hand. "This is a deposit," he said, "for six hundred dollars. My previous deposit was a hun-

dred and fifty, so the total is seven hundred and fifty. The rest will be payable to you as soon as Mr. Kessler is comfortably interred. Then I don't want to hear from you again, Mr. Duff."

"Of course," Amos said eagerly.

Foley ripped off the check and handed it over.

"You're doing the right thing," Amos said. "Some things can't be measured in money."

"Really?" Foley said drily. "Such as what?"

Three days later, the service fulfilled, Amos dropped his bill into the mail, listing the balance of One Thousand and Fifty Dollars. When no check was received by the week end, he called Kessler & Foley and learned that Mr. Foley had been called out of town. He waited patiently until Thursday of the following week, but no check arrived. On Friday, he called the office once more. Mr. Foley was present, but in conference. Could he call Mr. Duff back? Yes, said Mr. Duff. But he didn't.

The following week there were no new customers, no Bucky (he had quit the previous Friday upon receipt of his paycheck) and no money from Mr. Foley. Another telephone call produced another excuse, and Mr. Duff began to

worry about the sincerity of Mr. Foley's intentions.

On Tuesday morning, he was allowed to talk to the man himself.

"Thank goodness," he said, with a false laugh. "I'd almost given up hope, Mr. Foley. About your bill, I mean."

"What bill is that?"

"Why, the bill I sent you. For the funeral."

There was a pause. Then Foley said: "I believe you made a mistake. I paid you in full for your services. If you don't believe it, I'd suggest you consult your own catalog."

"But Mr. Foley—"

"I'm well aware of your price lists, Mr. Duff; I checked them carefully. You don't *have* a service that costs more than seven hundred and fifty dollars, and I have the cancelled checks for that amount."

"But these circumstances were different—"

"Were they?"

"Now look," Amos said angrily. "You know damn well they were different. You know what I'll do if I don't get that check—"

"What will you do? Call the police?"

"You think I won't?"

Foley chuckled. "Of course you won't. Remember, *you* put poor

Mr. Kessler underground, Mr. Duff. If you ask the police to disinter him, you'll have to explain why you didn't report this so-called bullet wound before. Do you think you can do that, Mr. Duff?"

Amos sputtered; it was a substitute for an answer.

"I thought as much," Foley said, so sure of himself that Amos would have loved to have him as a customer. "You can't implicate *me*, without implicating yourself. And you have no guarantee that your accusation will be believed. So I think it's best you forget it, Mr. Duff. I know full well that if I pay now, I'll pay forever. I don't intend to start."

Then he hung up.

Somehow, Amos found the police precinct station even more morbid a place than his own funeral parlor. He sat impatiently in Lieutenant Morgan's office, waiting for something to happen. Finally, the police detective entered, with Mr. Foley preceding him. There was tight cold indignation on Foley's face; his cheeks were red, as if the woolen muffler around his throat was choking him.

"I want to know what this is about," he demanded, glaring at

Amos. "You have no right to bring me here—"

"Please sit down," the lieutenant said. "The charge is serious, Mr. Foley, so we felt justified in issuing the warrant."

"What has he been telling you?" Foley said furiously. "The man is a liar. A liar and a thief. If you knew how he tried to overcharge me—"

"Mr. Foley, our officers found a hunting rifle in your apartment, the weapon you had in your car at the time of the accident. We've impounded it as evidence, along with a box of steel-jacketed bullets. Mr. Duff here seems to think you used that rifle to dispose of your late business partner, George Kessler. Now I wouldn't advise you to say anything you don't want to, but on the other hand, you can save a lot of grief by being honest with us."

"Anything he said is a lie! Kessler was killed in the crash. I've got the death certificate—"

"We have a photostat of that, Mr. Foley."

"Then how can you believe this—penny-ante mortician?"

Amos stirred miserably.

The lieutenant said: "Mr. Duff seems to have evidence, Mr. Foley. That's why we brought you in."

"Evidence? What evidence? Kessler's buried! Dead and buried."

You can't dig him up now—"

"We could, if we had to."

Foley jumped to his feet. "Ask him how he knows!" he cried. "Ask him how he knows there was a bullet!"

"We did ask him," the lieutenant said, and looked at Amos.

"Well," the mortician said, clearing his throat, "I actually *didn't* know. Not until *after* the services. Then it was quite obvious, not just to me, but to everyone there. You see, the bullet didn't really melt—"

"Melt?" Foley screamed. "What do you mean, melt?"

"Well, you see," Amos said, "the

Class A funeral includes cremation. It's ideal, we believe, especially in cases where there is no family. However, we do supply a memento to the closest kin or friend, if they so desire."

The lieutenant went to his desk, and slid open the bottom drawer. He withdrew a delicate porcelain urn and placed it on the desk.

"You see?" Amos said gravely. "When they found *it* among the ashes, they included it among the remains. That's why I had to come to the police."

He picked up the urn, and shook it gently from side to side. It went: *tinkle, tinkle, tinkle.*

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A HINT OF Henbane

I USED to think that my wife systematically lied to me about her family, but one by one I met them and found her tales were all true. There was Uncle H—, for one. He earned his unprintable nickname on the day in 1937 when he said to the bank examiner, “Oh, h—!”, walked right down to the depot and got on a westbound train, never to return. He sounded like a wish-fulfillment myth, but two summers ago we drove through Colorado and looked him up. Uncle H—was doing fine; brown as a berry, and gave us bear ham out of his own smokehouse for lunch. And, just the way the story went, his shanty was papered with color comics from the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*.

Uncle Edgar, the salesman, was real too. Sarah claimed that in 1942 he had sold a Wisconsin town the idea of turning over its municipal building to him so he could start a defense plant. Well, last year I visited him in his executive suite,

which used to be the mayor’s office. He had converted to roller skates. Whenever anyone hinted to him that he might start paying rent or taxes or something he would murmur quietly that he was thinking of moving plant and payroll to Puerto Rico, and then there would be no more hinting for a while.

Grandma and Grandpa were right off the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, rocking and dozing on the porch of their big house. Grandpa, if pressed, would modestly display his bullet scars from the Oklahoma land rush, and Sarah assured me that Grandma had some too. Great Grandmother, pushing the century mark a couple miles down the road, gloomily queened it over five hundred central Ohio acres from her dusty plush bedroom. She had decided in ’35 to take to her bed, and there she had stayed while suburban housing developments and shopping centers and drive-in movies encroached on the old farm and



by Frederick Pohl
and C.M. Kornbluth

the money rolled in. Sarah had a grudging respect for her, though she had seen her will and her money was all going to a Baptist mission in Naples, Italy.

There was even, at last, a strained sort of peace between Sarah and her father. He came out of World War One with a D.S.C., a silver plate in his skull and a warped outlook on civilian life. He was a bootlegger throughout most of the 20's. It made for an unpleasant childhood. When it was too late to do the children much good, the V.A. replaced his silver plate with a tantalum plate and he promptly enrolled in a theological seminary and wound up a Lutheran pastor in Southern California.

Sarah's attitude toward all the aforementioned is partly "Judge not lest ye be judged" and partly "So what?" but of her cousin's husband, Bill Oestreicher, she said dogmatically: "He's a lousy so-and-so."

We used to see more of him than the rest of her family, as an unavoidable side-effect of visiting Sarah's Cousin Claire, to whom he was married. Sarah was under some special indebtedness to Cousin Claire. I think Claire used to take her in during the rough spells with Dad.

On the way to meet them for the first time—they lived in Indiana, an easy drive from Detroit—Sarah told me: "Try to enjoy the scenery, because you won't enjoy Bill. Did I warn you not to lend him money or go into any kind of business deal with him?"

"You did."

"And another thing, don't talk to him about your own business. Uncle Edgar let him mail a couple of customers' statements for him, and Bill went to the customers offering to undercut Edgar's prices.

Our modern pharmacopeia rests on a firm foundation of herbs and simples, known to our forefathers, who harvested them from field, forest, and stream. Mere change in name does not affect their powers, as our story proves.

There was great confusion for a month and Edgar lost two customers to the Japs. To this day Bill can't understand why Edgar won't talk to him any more."

"I'll come out fighting and protect my chin at all times."

"You'd better."

Claire was a dark, birdlike little woman with an eager-to-please air, very happy to see Sarah and willing to let some of it splash over onto me. She had just come from work. She was a city visiting nurse and wore a snappy blue cape and hat. Even after eight hours of helping a nineteen-year-old girl fight D.T.s she was neat, every hair in place. I suspected a compulsion. She wore a large, incongruous costume-jewelry sort of ring which I concluded to be a dime-store anniversary present from good old Bill.

Bill's first words to me were: "Glad to meet you, Tommy. Tommy, how much money can you raise in a pinch?" I came out fighting. I've got an automotive upholstery business with a few good accounts. The Ford buyer could ruin me overnight by drawing a line through my name on his list, but until that happens I'm solvent. I concealed this from Bill. It was easy. At fifty-odd he was a fat infant. He was sucking on candy sourballs, and when he had crunched them up he opened a box

of Cracker Jack. I never saw him when he wasn't munching, gulping, sucking. Beer, gum, chocolates, pretzels—he was the only person I ever saw who *lapped* pretzels—pencils, the ear pieces of his horn-rimmed glasses, the ends of his mustache. Slop, slurp, slop. With his mouth open.

Bill maneuvered me into the kitchen, sucked on a quartered orange and told me he was going to let me in on a can't-miss scrap syndicate which would buy Army surplus and sell it right back to the government at full price. I told him no he wasn't.

His surprise was perfectly genuine. "What do you want to be like that for?" he asked, round-eyed, and went over it again with pencil and paper, sucking on the end of the pencil when he wasn't scribbling with it, and when I said no again he got angry.

"Tommy, what're you being so stupid for? Can't you see I'm just trying to give one of Claire's people a helping hand? Now *listen* this time, I haven't got all day." Well, what can you do? I told him I'd think about it.

He shook my hand. Between chomps and slurps he said it was a wise decision; if I could pony up say five thousand we'd get under way with a rush; had I thought of a second mortgage on my house?

"Let's celebrate it," he said. "Claire. Claire, don't you hear me?"

She popped in. "Case of beer," he said. He didn't even look at her. "The beauty of this, Tommy, is it's Air Force money. Who's going to say no when the Air Force wants to buy something? Tommy, what about borrowing on your insurance?"

Cousin Claire came staggering up from the basement with a case of twenty-four bottles of beer. "Nice and cold," she panted. "From the north corner."

He said, "Giddadahere. Now the markup—" She fluttered out. He turned to the case of beer and his eyes popped. "How do you like that?" he asked me incredulously. "She didn't open any. She must have thought I wanted to *look* at beer."

"Well," I said, "you know." Martyred, he got a bottle opener from a drawer.

Driving back to Detroit I was in a state of shock for about twenty miles. Finally I was able to ask Sarah: "Why in God's name did she marry him?"

She said helplessly: "I think it's because they won't let you be an old maid any more. She got middle-aged, then she got panicky, Bill turned up and they were married. He gets a job once in a while. His people are in politics. . . . She's

still got her ring," Sarah said with pride.

"Huh?"

"The Charlier ring. Topaz signet—didn't you see it?"

"What about it?"

"Bill's been trying to get it away from her ever since they were married, but *I'm* going to get it next. It's family. It's a big topaz and it swivels. One side is plain and the other side has the Charlier crest and it's a poison ring."

I honked at a convertible that was about to pull out in front and kill us. "You'll hate me for this," I said, "but there aren't any poison rings. There never were."

"Nuts to you," she said, indignant. "I've opened it with my own little fingers. It comes apart in two little slices of topaz and there's a hollow for the poison."

"Not poison. Maybe a saint's relic, or a ladylike pinch of snuff. In the olden days they didn't have poisons that fitted into little hollows. You had to use *quarts* of what they had. Everything you've heard to the contrary is bunk because everybody used to think everybody else had powerful, subtle poisons. Now, of course, we've got all kinds of—"

She wasn't listening. "Somebody unwisely told Bill that the Ford Museum offered my grandmother a thousand dollars for the ring.

Ever since then he's been after her to sell it so he can 'put the money into a business.' But she won't. ... She doesn't look well, Tommy." I spared a second from the traffic to glance at her. There were tears in her eyes.

A week later began a series of semi-literate, petulant letters from Cousin Bill.

He was, or said he was, under the impression that I had pledged my sacred word of honor to put up \$30,000 and go in with him on the junk deal. I answered the first letter, trying to set him straight, and ignored the rest when I realized he couldn't be set straight. Not by me, not by anybody. The world was what he wanted it to be. If it failed him, he screamed and yelled at the world until it got back into line.

We saw them a couple of months later. He bore me no malice. He tried to get me to back a chain of filling stations whose gimmick would be a special brand of oil—filtered crankcase drainings, picked up for a song, dyed orange and handsomely packaged. He took to using my company name as a credit reference, and I had my lawyer write him a letter, after which he took to using my lawyer's name as a credit reference. We saw him again and he still was not angry. Munching and-slobbering and pry-

ing, he just didn't understand how I could be so stupid as not to realize that he wanted to help me. At every visit he was fatter and Claire was thinner.

He complained about it. Licking the drips off the side of an ice cream cone he said: "You ought to have more meat on your bones, the way the grocery bills run."

"Has it ever occurred to you," Sarah snapped, "that your wife might be a sick woman?"

Cousin Claire made shushing noises. Cousin Bill chewed the cone, looking at her. "No kidding," he said, licking his finger. "For God's sake, Claire. We got Blue Cross, Blue Shield, City Health, we been paying all these years, won't cost a nickel. What's the matter with you? You go get a checkup."

"I'll be all right," said Cousin Claire, buttering a slice of pound cake for her husband.

Afterwards I burst out: "All right, I'm not a doctor, I supply auto upholstery fabrics, but can't you get her to a hospital?"

Sarah was very calm. "I understand now. She knows what she's doing. In Claire's position—what would you do?"

I thought it over and said, "Oh," and after that drove very carefully. It occurred to me that we had something to live for, and that

Cousin Claire obviously had not.

My wife phoned me at the office a few weeks later and she was crying. "The mail's just come. A letter from a nurse, friend of Claire's. Bill's put her in the hospital."

"Well, Sarah, I mean, isn't that where she ought to—"

"No!" So that night we drove to Indiana and went direct to Claire's hospital room—her one-seventh of a room, that is. Bill had put her in a ward. But she was already dead.

We drove to their house, ostensibly to get a burial dress for Cousin Claire, perhaps really to knock Cousin Bill down and jump on his face. Sarah had seen the body. The ring was not on Claire's finger. It was not in the effects I checked out at the desk, either. "He took it," Sarah said. "I know. Because she was three weeks dying, the floor nurse told me. And Claire told me she knew it was coming and she had hyoscine in the ring." So Sarah had her triumph after all and the ring had become a poison ring, for a sick, despairing woman's quick way out of disappointment and pain. "The lousy so-and-

so," Sarah said. "Tommy. I want her buried with the ring."

I felt her trembling. Well, so was I. He had taken the ring from a woman too sick to protect herself and for the sake of a thousand lousy bucks he had cheated her of her exit. I don't mean that. I'm a businessman. There is nothing lousy about a thousand bucks, but . . . I wanted to bury her with the ring too.

No one answered the front door, and when we went around to the pantry and found it open we found out why. Bill was slumped in a kitchen chair facing us, a spilled bottle of beer tacky on the linoleum, a bag of pretzels open in front of him and his finger in his mouth. You know what hyoscine is? They used to get it from henbane before they learned to put it together in a test tube more cheaply. It was a good, well considered substance for a nurse to put in her ring because it kills like *that*. Bill had not been able to resist taking the ring from her. And then he had not been able to resist putting it in his mouth.



WHEN Roger Ross decided to do away with Elliot Lawn, it came almost as a revelation. It wasn't that he didn't like Elliot; on the contrary, he was very fond of him. He had always found him to be gay and amusing and even stimulating; but there were all those negative aspects, too. Roger knew Elliot to be fondly patronizing, effervescently condescending and inherently selfish. Elliot always seemed better informed and yet at the same time intellectually disinclined. He always seemed better dressed and yet well able to counteract this suggestion of superior-

Both of them had gone with the same company soon after graduation and somehow Elliot had contrived to become a vice president while Roger had had to content himself with being merely a lower-echelon executive; and Elliot freely admitted when they were in private that Roger knew twice as much about the business as he did. It was maddening. So after years of being roundly pushed into corners, after years of declination and waste, Roger suddenly realized in a burst of self-analysis that what his life really needed was the exquisite flavor of vengeance. When the decision to kill Elliot was made, Roger suddenly felt ten

RELENTLESS

ity with just the barest whisper of casual mediocrity. In addition, Elliot had usually managed to take away every female that Roger had ever been interested in and this had been going on since they were at college together. It had continued, to Roger's profound distress, up to and including Elliot's marriage three years ago to Madge Temple of Baltimore and Ocean City, Md. And then there was the problem of getting ahead in life.

years younger.

Of course society, in general, frowns upon murder. There are laws which have been designed to make it reasonably unsafe to go around removing anyone who displeases or who doesn't rise to certain desired heights of expectation. Roger was well aware of this and

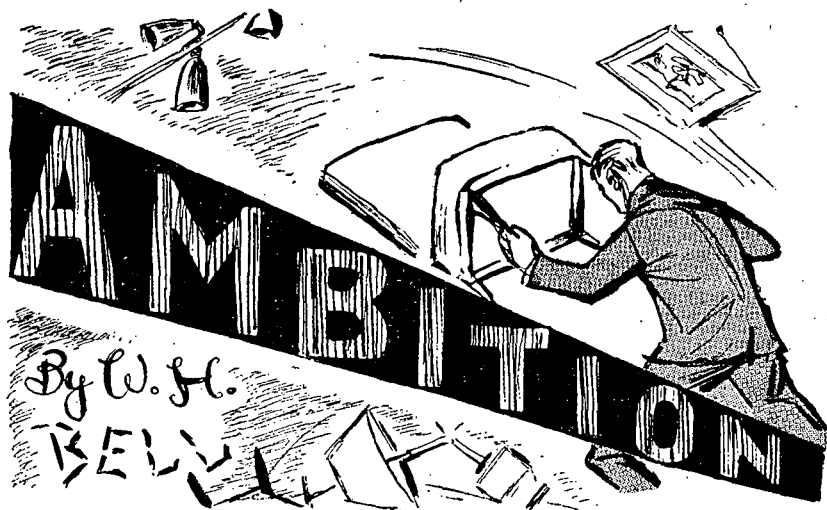
Ambition's drive may carry you to the top, which is presumably where one would wish to be. It may carry you even further, to where no one would wish to be.

he rightly judged that he would have to approach the matter with great deliberation and some degree of skill.

It was then that Roger had still another, somewhat mystical, disclosure. Instead of doing away with Elliot all at once, he would slowly apply a sort of mental tourniquet to confuse and harass his old friend. When the pressure became strong enough, only then would he administer the unpleasant finalities. This plan would not only placate Roger's slender con-

science but it would allow him more time to work out the more mundane and sordid aspects of the inevitable climax.

When Roger returned to his bachelor apartment that evening, he began to devise and draw up extensive charts and graphs showing Elliot's movements and listing his weaknesses. There were lots of little things on which he could begin his campaign. He knew more about Elliot than anyone else alive for it was to Roger that Elliot inevitably turned when he wished to



garner bravados over his numerous questionable peregrinations. For example, Elliot's young and sparkling wife Madge had been devoted, for years before her marriage, to an ordinary tomcat which had been moved to Westport along with Madge over Elliot's too-delicate remonstrations. Taking advantage of his wife's absence last summer, Elliot had packed up the cat's sweater and basket and eating dish and had driven them and the unsuspecting animal far into the night to some nondescript town where he had given them all their walking papers. On Madge's return Elliot had most convincingly invented an imaginary illness for the cat and had garnished the lie with decorations of mock sympathy. Of course Roger couldn't come right out and tell her what had really happened but he could present her with a new cat even bigger than the old one, anonymously. When Elliot appeared at the office the next day with his old familiar allergy: watering eyes and the sniffles, Roger felt that his campaign had gotten off to an auspicious, if humble, beginning.

But Roger Ross wasn't one to rest on his past accomplishments. That evening he returned again to his hidden charts and graphs and began to compile lists of possible devices by which he could

methodically undermine Elliot's subconscious defenses. By midnight he had almost finished a complete filing system with cross-checks and counter-balances. Then to try it out he sat back and triumphantly dialed the letter S. It read: Shaving: (See Razor). And under Razor was a complete plan to embarrass Elliot in front of his business associates. There was only one If (in red). He had to make sure that Elliot had remained in town that evening instead of going home. He reached for the phone, dialed the familiar number in Westport and waited patiently for the electric impulses to come to life. Four rings, five, six. Finally Madge's sleepy voice answered.

"Hullo."

"Hello, Madge?"

"Yes?"

"I hope I didn't wake you."

"Oh, it's you, Roger."

"Yes, it is. Look, will you put Elliot on the phone, please."

There was a suspicious pause.

"I can't. He's not here."

Roger felt elated but he was careful to modulate his voice correctly.

"Then he's staying in town?"

"Obviously. Say, what's going on? Elliot called a little while ago and said he was at your place. Isn't he there?"

This was ultimately better than

he had hoped for. The seeds of Elliot's guilt had only to be dropped into the furrows of Madge's aroused suspicions.

"Oh, that's right, Madge. It must have slipped my mind. I think he did say something earlier about staying here tonight."

"Really?"

Her voice reflected delicious disbelief.

"Shall I ask him to ring you when he gets here?"

"You're very sweet, Roger." She was now using her China accent; cold and damp. "That just might be a good idea."

"Okay, Madge. So long."

He replaced the receiver quickly before she could change her mind. It was inevitable that his last few conscious thoughts before dropping off to sleep would be of Madge. He clucked his tongue gently to himself as he remembered how happy they'd been that first ten days; that is, until he'd made the mistake of introducing her to Elliot. Oh well, perhaps he might even get her back, too. Make it a package deal.

The sky over Madison Avenue early the next morning was a deep Renoir blue and this coupled with the bus being practically empty gave Roger a feeling of good will.

When he saw that even the receptionist was not in yet, he interpreted it as a sign that destiny was at last looking back in his direction. Humming a gay unrecognizable marching song he strode purposefully into Elliot's corner office where he removed two electric razors from the mahogany wall cabinet. Then he carefully unwrapped a package which he had hidden under his overcoat and put the contents underneath the desk where it would be out of Elliot's sight and yet in full view of his secretary. It was a half-empty bottle of whiskey. There would be time later on in the morning to order, in Elliot's name, three cases of inferior whiskey to be delivered personally to him at the office. Before he left, Roger lingered just long enough to glance around Elliot's tastefully-decorated suite and to sigh enviously. When he returned to his own windowless cubicle he didn't seem to mind it as much as usual, because a new nervous tingling of success had already begun to rise up on Roger's normally-frustrated horizon. He asked the firm's operator for an outside line and dialed 411.

The voice on the other end was pleasantly acquiescent.

"Good morning. Information."

"Oh, good morning," Roger replied, somewhat flattered by her

tone. "I'd like a little information."

"Certainly, sir."

"Will you get me the number of the Loomis Fuel Oil Company in Westport, Connecticut and also the number of that town's main telephone office."

"Just a moment, please." There was a clicking pause.

Roger quickly scribbled down the forthcoming telephone numbers.

"Thank you, operator," he said graciously.

He dialed the code and then a number.

"Hello. Loomis Fuel Oil."

"Good morning," Roger said. "This is Elliot Lawn." He hoped his voice sounded authentic. But then he had gone all over this carefully. With all their customers they wouldn't be likely to remember one voice.

"Yes, Mr. Lawn. What can we do for you?"

"Can you tell me when our next delivery of fuel oil is scheduled?"

"I have it right here. You're due for one tomorrow."

"Good. I'm glad I caught you in time. You see, we're closing up the house for the rest of the winter so we won't be needing any more deliveries. I'll let you know when we get back."

"Right, Mr. Lawn. I'll cancel your order right away. Thanks for

calling and checking with us."

Roger was perspiring slightly as he hung up the phone even though it had gone perfectly. He could hear the people outside beginning to straggle in so he decided to put off the second call until later. It was a wise decision. A moment later Elliot appeared in the doorway and Roger was happy to note that Elliot's face boasted a full night's growth of stubble.

"My God, Elliot," he said. "You look terrible."

"Have you a razor I can borrow?"

"Where have you been? I tried to call you at home last night. But don't worry. I straightened everything out."

"Roger," Elliot said patiently. "Someone has walked off with my razors. May I borrow yours?"

"You didn't answer my question," Roger persisted. "Where did you spend the night?"

Elliot winked.

"Out," he said. "Now may I have the razor?"

Roger shrugged.

"You know I don't believe in keeping a razor around the office."

Elliot muttered something under his breath.

"Why don't you go to the barbershop downstairs," Roger suggested pleasantly. "I hear they have an excellent barber there."

Elliot capitulated.

"I guess I'll have to. But do me a favor and let Miss Kearnes know that I'll be a little late for the meeting. You know how Ramsey feels about punctuality."

"What'll I tell her?"

"Tell her my train was delayed. Tell her anything."

Roger straightened his shoulders.

"You can depend on me," he said.

Miss Kearnes, a crisp and brittle woman, was the president's personal secretary. Roger and she had a telephone friendship of sorts although her overly-cultivated voice annoyed him more than usual this morning.

"Hello, Miss Kearnes?"

"This is Miss Kearnes speaking."

"This is Mr. Ross."

"Who?"

"You know, Roger Ross. Down in Accounting."

"Oh, yes. But we're a little busy this morning, Roger. Would you mind calling back later?"

"I'm calling for Mr. Lawn."

"Oh dear, I hope he's not ill. Mr. Ramsey is absolutely depending on his being here. They're making a final sales presentation today but you wouldn't know about that."

Roger ignored this obvious thrust at his ego.

"No, he's not sick. He just want-

ed me to let you know that he'd be a little late for the meeting today."

"Late for the meeting?" Her voice was indignant.

"That's right. His train was delayed. However," his voice became conspiratorial, "if anything really important comes up he can be reached at the barbershop downstairs."

She was almost shouting now.

"At the barbershop downstairs?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have told you that."

"On the contrary, Roger. I'm very glad you did. I've always thought that Mr. Lawn's attitude was just a bit too relaxed. I have a feeling that Mr. Ramsey will find this most interesting."

"Glad to be of service, Miss Kearnes." Roger was grinning broadly as he replaced the receiver. He was fairly sure that in the upper reaches of Miss Kearnes' domain, his name, as the informer, would soon be forgotten in the ecstasy of Miss Kearnes' own sense of importance.

The morning went gliding smoothly by. Roger busied himself having Elliot's phone in Westport disconnected and ordering flowers to be sent to Madge with a note enclosed reading:

To Sonja with love,

Elliot

On his way out for lunch Roger was gratified to see a group of the office girls huddled intently outside of Elliot's office. It was obviously one of those lovely rumor mills. It was all going so beautifully. When he passed the reception desk he paused to light a cigarette.

"Too bad about Mr. Lawn, isn't it?"

The girl glanced up from her magazine.

"What's too bad?"

"His X-rays came back yesterday." Roger shook his head sadly. "Too bad." And then before the inevitable question could come he stepped into the Down elevator.

Poor Elliot. In the next few weeks he became known around the company as 'that poor man who has only six weeks to live'. Half-empty bottles of cheap whiskey kept appearing mysteriously under Elliot's desk and no attempt was made to remove them by his secretary nor were they ever referred to. Indeed, his secretary organized among her friends around the office what became known as 'the ice cube pool' whereby cartons of ice cubes were delivered every morning to Mr. Lawn's office. After all, they couldn't have him drinking his whiskey full strength 'with him being sick and all'.

And things were no easier at

home for Madge. When she returned from shopping one afternoon the lawn was covered with strange objects all ordered from some television show. There, clustered around her little boxwoods, was a freezer, an electric range, a bar-b-cue wagon, an electric typewriter, four sets of unbreakable dishes, three sewing machines and fifteen storm doors. It was a sight and Madge just sat down and cried.

Madge truly loved Elliot but she had had all she could stand. After all, hadn't he humiliated her in front of their neighbors? Hadn't he tried to freeze her out of her own home? Hadn't he tried to keep her incommunicado? And those flowers which had been intended for Sonja? Not to mention that anonymous telegram hinting at Elliot's constant infidelity. It was all too much for her to cope with.

When Elliot arrived home that evening Madge was gone. The note she left was bewilderingly cryptic.

Dear Elliot,

I'm leaving you. Food for the cat is in the pantry.

Your unloving wife,

Madge

As Elliot was reading the note the lights went out. Roger had put a call into the Westport electric company that morning.

Now came the second and more difficult phase of the business. Roger began devoting his Saturday afternoons to the pursuit of violent knowledge in the New York Public Library. It was extremely illuminating. He wandered through *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and *The Gold Bug*. He studied ancient Greek tragedies and leafed through book after book on tribal witchcraft. He considered all the normal, if not generally acceptable, methods of murder: poisoning, knife, gun, push someone off a cliff, make it look like suicide; but none of these at first glance seemed very worthwhile for his own purposes. He was suspicious of guns himself and heights made him feel uneasy. To use poison on such an old and trusting friend was unthinkable. And the dagger? Well, he didn't picture himself as the Elizabethan type. He still hadn't figured out exactly how he was going to do it but from all his thought and research he had discovered that the removal of a friend should always contain three basic elements. It should be quick. It should be decisive. And, whenever possible, it should look accidental.

Time was now an important factor since Elliot was soon to be transferred to one of the branch offices out west. Roger felt that he

had done the preliminary work well. Elliot was extremely depressed about his demotion. He was especially despondent over Madge's leaving. He had never realized before just how important she really was to him. And he was confused and shaken up by all the strange things which had been happening to him lately, things over which he had no control. He dimly realized that there must be more to it than just plain coincidence but he couldn't seem to put his finger on it. If it hadn't been for Roger, Elliot wouldn't have known where to turn. He had taken to sitting around Roger's apartment until all hours of the day and night, just staring into space. And Roger, on his part, knew that it had to be done now. But how? And where?

The final act of creation came to Roger one evening on upper Madison Avenue. He had left his bus several blocks earlier than usual in order to savor the first faint comings of spring weather that had appeared out of context that March evening. It was while he was walking along vaguely gazing into shop windows that the solution literally dropped into his mind: he would make it look like self-defense. Everyone knew that Elliot had been slowly climbing out of a valley of depression up to

the fine edge of hysteria. All Roger had to do was make it look like Elliot had finally gone over the brink. He would even use Elliot's own gun, a service revolver left over from World War II which Madge, not wanting in her own home, had obligingly brought into town. Though it had been safely tucked away between the sheets in a bureau drawer, it had long been at the fingertips of Roger's mind. True, this was the unsettling part, but in the final and irretrievable analysis he could always find the temporary courage in the contents of a bottle of hard liquor. He could prove premeditation on Elliot's part of intent to do bodily harm by sending himself a series of threatening letters. He could easily get Elliot's fingerprints afterwards. And the motive? That was the easiest part of all. That could only be the brilliant plan for reorganization of the company which Roger had been working on for years. The existence of such a document was no secret to either Elliot or Madge. Hadn't they teased him about it many times even though neither had ever actually seen it? In their hearts they knew that he was capable of such an undertaking.

He went over the coming events carefully in his mind as a broad-jumper approaches each hurdle.

Elliot would arrive at the apartment at a prearranged time. Ostensibly they had quarrelled. Elliot had drawn the gun, they had struggled and it had gone off accidentally. All that would be left to do then would be to call the police and the ensuing publicity might even make him something of a hero, a defender of hearth and home. At least the limelight and the sympathy would be his and of course the opportunity to console Madge would be tantalizingly forthcoming.

Now that the last hurdle had been reached and was about to be surmounted; now that all those late nights of planning were nearing fruition, Roger's creative mind relaxed for the first time in weeks and he stepped off the curb against the light. It was something of a test. It was an unnatural thing for him to do but he did it magnificently, crossing the street with the confident stride of another, though somewhat smaller, Paul Bunyon.

The letters were the most fun to do. He did them with his left hand, backwards, making them seem as if they had been printed by a child. But the words themselves were poisonous, and far from innocent. He mailed the letters to himself one at a time. Ev-

ery night that week he would hurry home and approach the mailbox in the vestibule with a curious pang of excitement. It was as if he had never seen them before and as he read each letter, tiny ripples of fear would come swimming up to the surface of his skin.

He was extremely thorough. He destroyed all of the charts and graphs and plans to do away with Elliot by shredding them into little pieces and flushing them away.

And the gun, Elliot's passkey to oblivion, was oiled and cleaned and polished and loaded.

At the end of the week, Roger casually invited Elliot up for cocktails. He instructed Elliot to come at eight and Elliot, having spent almost every evening there for the past few weeks, was momentarily puzzled and partially amused and then fatalistically acquiescent to the odd request.

At seven o'clock that evening Roger gulped half a tumbler of whiskey and began to attend to the final details. He did what he knew must be done. He ripped his clothes and rolled over and over on the floor until they were suitably soiled. He bruised his fists badly by smashing them again and again on the wall, the pain being strangely dulled under the

bright light of the approaching climax. Then he began to break up the furniture. It was the one thing which he thought he would hate doing the most but once he got started he discovered that there was a certain vicarious pleasure in destroying the very things which had unconsciously kept him prisoner for so long. The couch fell meekly under his onslaught. The desk caved in without protest. And he was just about to jump on top of the defenseless coffee table when the doorbell rang. He straightened up guiltily. His breath was uneven and coming with difficulty.

"Just a minute," he called out.

He took several deep breaths and then walked slowly across the room.

"You're a little early," he said as he opened the door.

The two men dressed in dark blue uniforms looked quite formidable and Roger suddenly felt compromised.

"Police. We got a complaint."

"What's the trouble, officer?" Perspiration was beginning to form in neat little rows of beads on his forehead.

"We got a call from one of the neighbors. Said they thought there was a riot going on in here."

"No, it was just me. Rearranging some furniture."

"Mind if we come in?"

"I don't think there's any need for that. I'm all alone here. I'll try and keep the noise down."

"I think we better take a look around."

The policemen edged by Roger and walked into the room. Their raised eyebrows reflected puzzlement at the absurd disorder around them.

"You're all alone here, you say?"

"Absolutely."

"What'd'ya think, Joe?"

"I don't know. Say, Mac, is that blood on your hands?"

Roger acted as if he had never seen his hands before.

"I'll be darned. I must have cut myself."

"And your suit. How did that get torn?"

"Oh that. Why, I did it myself. I've never liked this suit."

The policemen exchanged knowing looks.

"I think you better come along with us."

"Oh I can't do that."

"Is there a phone around here?"

"Yes, over there on the floor. But I can't go anywhere with you. That would spoil everything."

One of the men dialed a number.

"Hey, Ralph, this is Barnes. I think we've got another one. We'll drop him off at the usual place and check in when we get back

uptown. Right." He gently replaced the receiver in its black plastic cradle.

"Look, officer," Roger protested, "you've come too early."

"Yeah, we know. C'mon, Mac, make it easy on yourself."

The hospital room was bare except for the necessities, and anti-septic except for Elliot's cigar. Roger sat on the edge of the bed and nervously pulled his hospital dress down over his knees.

"Now look, Elliot, you've got to get me out of here."

"How can I? Under the law they can keep you here for five days' observation. How the hell did you ever get into this mess anyhow?"

Roger lapsed into a far-off expression.

"Believe me," he said, "you wouldn't like it if I told you."

"Then how can I help you if you won't level with me?"

The dim light of resignation came slowly into Roger's eyes.

"I think there's a way," he said.

"There is?"

"Do you remember that reorganization plan that you and Madge were always teasing me about?"

"Sure I do. But it was just a figment of your imagination, wasn't

it? Tell the truth, Roger."

"No. It's real alright, and whoever presents it to old Ramsey will be able to write his own ticket."

"Is it really that good?" Interest was beginning to curl like smoke around Elliot's words.

"It's better than that. It proves conclusively that the company wastes over a million dollars a year in needless billing."

Elliot whistled softly.

"Suppose there is such a plan," he said after a moment. "What good will it do you in here?"

"It should prove my sanity beyond a doubt."

A suspicious expression moved around Elliot's face.

"Why haven't you done something with it before this?" he asked.

"You know as well as I do that no one in the company takes me seriously. Least of all Ramsey or that mechanical secretary of his."

Elliot stood up.

"Maybe I can do something with it," he agreed. "By the way, where is it?"

"All of the papers are on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet. Under the breadbox."

"One other thing, Roger. Are you sure of your statistics? They can be juggled around sometimes, you know."

"These haven't been."

"Okay, old buddy, your worries are over."

The thin ineffectual wave which Roger bestowed on Elliot was born out of the inevitable and sad acceptance that comes with a measure of defeat.

Elliot followed the nurse to a cubicle just off the main corridor where the doctor was waiting. It was a place of hope and of disappointment and the doctor's expression was pleasantly noncommittal.

"As you know, Mr. Lawn," the doctor began, "we should keep Mr. Ross under observation for five days after which time he either has to be released or definitely committed. You're his best friend and since he has no living relatives I believe we could release him in your care."

"I see." Elliot had one leg carelessly slung over the arm of a chair.

"Mr. Ross spoke of a plan," the doctor went on. "A reorganization plan, I believe, for the company with which you are both employed. If it could be located it would go a long way to definitely establishing his sanity before the hospital board."

"There is such a plan, doctor."

"Well, that's fine."

"Unfortunately," Elliot ex-

plained, "it isn't Roger's plan. It's mine. He only imagines that it's his and I've let him go on thinking so."

"Oh, that's too bad. I was hoping. You see, we try to release as many as possible providing, of course, we think it wise."

"Of course," Elliot agreed.

"However," the doctor reasoned, "we still could release him in your care. Although when he was admitted to the hospital he did have multiple cuts and bruises, evidently self-inflicted, he hasn't shown recent signs of a violent nature."

Elliot yawned slightly.

"I hate to say this, doctor," Elliot hesitated, "but he does get quite violent from time to time. I should know. I've had to replace his furniture several times this year already. It's always embarrassing."

"I should imagine."

"In any case," Elliot continued, "it would be almost impossible for me to take care of him. My wife and I are planning a reconciliation and there will be children. I'm not sure that such an environment

would be good for him or them."

"Yes, I see what you mean."

"But very soon now I should be able to afford to place him in a very good private institution. And, of course, I'll visit him whenever you think it wise."

The doctor stood up and held out his hand.

"Mr. Ross," he said, "is awfully lucky to have a friend like you."

"It's the least I can do," Elliot said. "The very least."

As Elliot walked out of the quiet gray building his step was a little jauntier than it had been lately; his spirits were a little lighter than they had been lately; even the sky over First Avenue was a little clearer than usual. He hadn't liked telling all those lies to the doctor but what else could he do? That reorganization plan was the key to all his problems. It was either he or Roger and for once he thought it would be nice to let it be Roger. After all, what are old friends for?



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SHERIFF HOLT eased himself lower in his chair and a third chin popped into view above the collar of his shirt.

"The trouble with this case," he said, plucking idly at his badge, "is that there are too blame many suspects." He spoke with the same aggrieved air he used when there were no suspects at all.

I nodded sympathetically and helpfully moved a stack of papers

six months in Hillsdale, Zeke War-ton was probably the most likely candidate for foul play in a fifty mile area.

Bill Altman, my handyman, summed it up neatly when he said that Zeke's idea of a good day was to start out by drowning a litter of pups, give his elderly sister, Sarah, a few lumps, and then foreclose on a round dozen of the fifty or sixty mortgages he held.

CASE

FORECLOSED

over when he decided to put his feet up on his desk. I needed all the information I could get from the sheriff.

Court Records show that murder is committed in Hillsdale only about once every fifty years. So I have to pick the day on which the last one of the twentieth century was committed, to be over at Forrest City on a piddling little court case involving a Hillsdale citizen. That's me, Sam Caldwell, owner, editor, and reporter of the Hillsdale Weekly Gazette.


What the sheriff said about suspects made a certain amount of sense. From all I could gather after

*by Harold
Rolseth*

There seemed little doubt that Zeke had asked for it, and absolutely no doubt that he had got it, since he now lay in the back room of the jail with the top of his bald head crushed in.

I had to be patient with Sheriff Holt. I already knew but had to hear again that Zeke was a bachelor, age 65; that he lived with his sister, Sarah, age 70, who kept house for him and who reputedly got the same deal he gave everyone else; that Sarah had arthritis and could not raise her hands more

Foreclosing on mortgages is generally thought to be the favorite sport of bankers. They win no popularity contests, and their departures from this life are unmourned, as a rule.



than shoulder high; that Zeke's huge old-fashioned house stood well back on a five acre plot on the west edge of Hillsdale.

The sheriff finally got around to facts that were new to me. Zeke's body had been found at five o'clock the afternoon before by Jim Carter's boy when he delivered a 5 gallon can of fly spray which Zeke had purchased in the morning at Carter's Hardware Store. The boy had found the body at the edge of the walk on the west side of the house. Curtains on that side had been drawn to keep out the afternoon sun, so Sarah's statement that she had seen no one about seemed plausible.

All during the time the sheriff was giving me these facts a crazy feeling kept pushing into my mind that he didn't want to find the murderer. This feeling didn't make sense until a couple of old timers drifted in during our interview and earnestly assured the sheriff that should he perform such a public service as to solve the murder he would unquestionably lose the next election.

The sheriff sat for a time contemplating his possible fate. Then he said, again, "Just too blame many suspects."

The thought must have cheered him for he settled himself more comfortably in his swivel chair and added, "Don't seem to be no starting place."

But there had to be a starting place if I was going to get a good story for the Gazette. And I had to have a good story if there was going to be any Gazette much longer.

"How about Sarah? Any motive there?" I asked.

"'Bout forty years accumulation, I figure. But Sarah couldn't raise a flyswatter let alone a weapon heavy enough to dent Zeke's skull. Besides, she'd have had to stood on a ladder to do it. Zeke is well over six feet, and Sarah can't be more'n five or so."

I was sorry Sarah wasn't a six footer too. It would have made things so much easier.

"How about the murder weapon?" I asked. "Any sign of it?"

"Nope . . . only it was some-

thing heavy and used with plenty of force."

I pondered over this for a while. Then I said with slow forcefulness, "Sheriff, the man we want is . . ."

The sheriff got to his feet surprisingly fast for a big man, shock written clearly on his round face. "You know who done it?" he demanded.

"Not the individual," I said, "but it's got to be a tall, powerful man with a strong motive."

The sheriff eased himself back into his chair, did some mental tabulating and was visibly cheered by the results. "That being the case," he said, "we can cut our suspects down to about two hundred or so."

"But most of them would have alibis," I protested. "That would reduce . . ."

"All of them would," the sheriff cut in agreeably. "Like I said, there's just too blame many to know where to start. Men like Zeke oughtn't to get themselves killed."

I lit a cigarette and adjusted my hat from back-tilted reporter position to snap-down private eye. "Mind if I go over and talk to Sarah?" I asked.

The sheriff studied me for latent powers of detecting, found me satisfactorily wanting, and said, "Nope, go right ahead."

The grounds on the west side of Zeke's house looked as though Ringlings had been there for a three day stand. If any clues had existed, they were gone forever.

I had never seen Sarah Warton, nor, I gathered, had many other people in Hillsdale. In my mind I had pictured her as a dull, brow-beaten old woman probably covered with scars and bruises.

But the Sarah Warton who answered my knock was anything but that. Old she was, but with a birdlike perkiness that canceled years from her age. She bore no outward evidence of Zeke's maltreatment, and I decided her scars must be the mental type. Tiny little eyes like jet beads darted over me as she studied me from the doorway.

I introduced myself.

"How nice . . . how very nice," she trilled. "Please come in."

I seated myself in a massive oak chair and Sarah sat down in a rocker across from me.

"A terrible thing, Miss Sarah," I said as a starter and in a tone I worked hard to make sorrowful.

"Poor Zeke," Sarah chirped merrily, "what a surprise it must have been to him."

While I gulped over this, she went on, "I warned Zeke what would happen but he never would listen to me."

Fumbling for my notebook, I said, "You mean, Miss Sarah, you knew Zeke was going to be killed?"

Sarah chuckled delightedly, "Why, of course I knew. How could I help it?"

I counted ten before I opened my mouth. Then I asked, "Who did kill Zeke, Miss Sarah?"

Sarah's eyes paused in momentary surprise at my density. "Why, I killed him," she said. Then her eyes resumed their restless chase and she added as an afterthought, "He must have been awfully surprised. He never would believe a word I said."

I relaxed in my chair. "Miss Sarah," I said gently, "Zeke was killed by a powerful blow on the top of his head. It took a strong man. You couldn't possibly . . ."

"Laws," Sarah interrupted, "it wasn't a blow that killed Zeke."

"It wasn't?" I said weakly.

"Land, no. It was a flat iron I dropped on his head from my bedroom window. But I warned him. I just couldn't put up with his meanness no longer." She shook her head over Zeke's brutalities.

"But didn't Sheriff Holt ask you if you knew who killed Zeke?" I asked.

"That man," Sarah sighed, "nothing but questions about suspicious characters. Land, there ain't

been nobody suspicious around here. I told him so."

I sat there wondering who would be the next sheriff, also who would be the next owner of the Gazette when my story broke.

Sarah pulled me out of my trance. "Let me fix you a cup of tea," she said, her eyes darting six places at once.

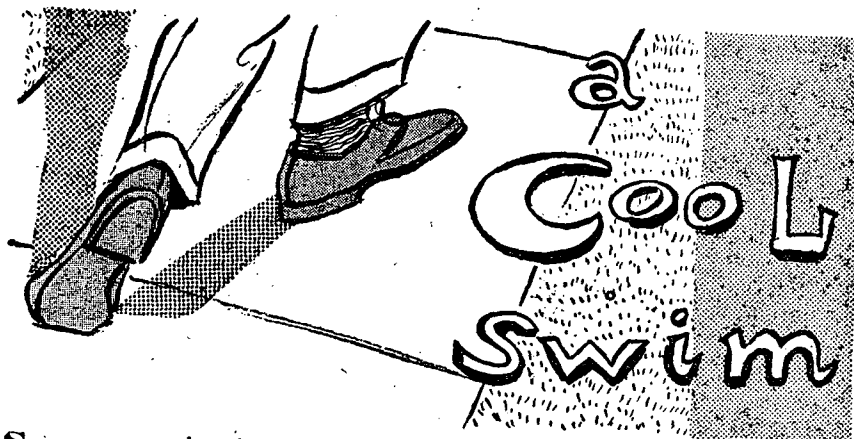
"No," I said hastily, the hair on my neck prickling. "Some other time," I said more quietly. "Only one thing more, Miss Sarah . . . tell me, why did you kill Zeke?"

Sarah lowered her eyes and smoothed her dress with a childish motion. She raised her head slowly and flashed me a look of sad reproach. "What else could I do?" she asked. "He was getting meaner and meaner all the time."

She leaned forward and steadied her eyes momentarily in a last effort to make me understand. "I've always had a time with Zeke. Orner as a polecat he was, but I was always able to bring him around and make him do what was right. But yesterday . . . do you know what?"

"What?" I whispered back.

"Yesterday . . ." she paused to shudder at the awfulness of it, "yesterday three mortgages fell due and Zeke wasn't aiming to foreclose on a single one of them!"




SUDDENLY awake, he opened his eyes in a glare of morning sun. The glare was blinding and painful, and so he closed his eyes again quickly and lay without moving in the soft shadows behind his lids. He could hear a clock ticking in the room. He could hear a cardinal singing in the white light outside. Something seemed to be scratching at his brain. The remembrance of something.

And then he remembered. He remembered the night and the night's shame. The focus of the night was Ellen's face. The sound of the night was Ellen's voice. The face was cold and scornful, remote and strange. The clear and precise articulation of the voice was more appropriate to proud defiance than to a confession. Lying and remem-

by Fletcher Glor



Regression is the term employed by psychiatrists when a mind unhinged projects itself backward in time, rather than face painful reality. Temporary regression may become permanent.



bering, fixed in despair, he held to the slender hope that he remembered a dream.

After a few minutes, needing to know, he got up and walked across the room and into a bathroom and through the bathroom into a room beyond. Ellen was lying on her bed in a gold sheath. He had put her there himself, he remembered, after shooting her. Ankles neatly together and one hand folded upon the other below her breasts. The hands covered with a definitive gesture of modesty, as if it were something intimate or obscene, the small hole through which her life had slipped out and away between her fingers. He had removed her shoes.

So it was not a dream. He had killed her indeed in the shameful night, and there on the floor where he had dropped it was the gun he had killed her with. He looked at the gun and back at her. *Oh, golden wanton. Oh, sweet and tender harlot wife.* Having killed her, having laid her out neatly on a quilted satin cover, he had gone to sleep in his clothes in his own

room. But this was an oversimplification and therefore a distortion. He had not merely gone to sleep. He had withdrawn, rather, into a deep and comforting darkness in which, if nothing was solved or made better, everything was at least suspended and grew no worse. He had slept soundly.

Now, of course, he was awake and faced with the necessity of doing something, and what he must do was perfectly apparent. The loaded gun was there, and he was there, and he had now, since last night, not only the negative motivation of not wanting particularly to live, but also the positive one of wanting and needing to die. But there was no urgency in it. He felt a kind of indolence in his bones, a remarkable lassitude. Walking over to the gun on the floor, he bent and picked it up and put it in a side pocket of his jacket, in which he had slept. He stood quietly, with an air of abstraction, watching Ellen on the bed. In his heart was a movement of pain which he fancied for a moment that he could hear faint-

ly, like the dry rustle of cicada wings. Turning away, the gun in his pocket, he went out of the room and out of the house and began walking down the street in a tunnel of shade that breached the bright day.

He had no destination. He did not even have a particular purpose in leaving the house, except that he was not quite ready to die and felt compelled to do something, almost anything, until he was. He had a vague notion that he might walk into the country and kill himself there in some quiet spot, or perhaps, after a while, he might return to the house and kill himself in the room with Ellen, so that they might later be found together. This was an enormous problem, where finally to kill himself, and at the moment he felt in no way capable of coping with it. His mind was sluggish, still fixed in the gray despair to which he had wakened, and now, besides, his head was beginning to throb like a giant pulse, measuring the cadence of his heart.

It was a very hot day. A bright, white, hot day. Heat shimmered on the surface of the street in an illusion of water. The sun was approaching the meridian in the luminous sky. The shimmering heat had somehow entered his skull, and all at once he was very

faint, hovering precariously on the verge of consciousness while the gaseous world shifted and wavered and threatened to fade away. He had left the tunnel of shade and was now hatless in white light, the sun beating down directly upon his head.

Still walking, he pressed a hand across his eyes, recovering in darkness, and when he removed his hand at last, looking down at his feet, he was filled with wonder to see that his feet were bare. On the tip of the big toe of the left foot was a small plastic bandage, signifying that the toe had been lately stubbed. The bare feet were making their way on a gray dirt road. The dirt was hot and dry and powdery, rising in little puffs of dust at every step and forming a kind of thin, gray scum on faded blue denim.

For a second or two he could not for the life of him remember where he was or where he was going or how he had got there, but then it all came back clearly—how he had been sitting under the big cottonwood in the side yard at home, and how he had been thinking how good a swim in the creek would feel on such a hot day, and how at last he had decided to walk out and have the swim. So here he was, on the way, and everything was familiar again after being mo-

mentarily strange. He had just crossed Chaffee's pasture to reach the dirt road where it junctioned with another road at the northeast corner of Mosher's old dairy, and there ahead was the stand of scrub timber along the creek in which the swimming hole was.

With an odd feeling of comfort and assurance, he said softly to himself, "I am Dewey Martin, and I'm going to have a cool swim in the creek on a hot day."

It appeared to be only a short distance on to the creek, but it was farther than it looked, nearly half a mile, beyond a corn field and a pasture which were part of Dugan's farm. Dewey left the road and crawled between two strands of a barbed wire fence into the field. He walked around the edge of the field to the other side, around the standing corn, and stopped there by the fence and surveyed the pasture to see where Jupiter was. Jupiter was Dugan's bull, and he was dangerous.

There he was, sure enough, down at one end of the pasture, a safe distance away, and Dewey slipped through the fence and hurried across before old Jupiter could make up his mind whether to chase him or not. The creek was quite near now, no more than twenty yards away, but Dewey sat down in the shade of a hickory

tree to rest before going on. He was curiously tired and still a little light-headed, and he was slightly disturbed by being unable to recall anything between the time of leaving home and the time of suddenly seeing his bare feet on the dusty road by Mosher's dairy. He had a feeling of having come a long way from a strange place, but this was surely nothing but a trick of the heat, the bright white light of the summer sun. After a few minutes he quit thinking about it and went on to the creek and stripped off naked and dived into the dark green water.

It was wonderfully cool in the water, and he stayed in it for about an hour without getting out once, but then he got out and lay for quite a long time on the bank in a patch of sunlight, his bare brown body shining like an acorn. After that, when his flesh was full of clean white heat, he dived back into the water, and it was cooler than ever by contrast, the purest and most sensual pleasure that anyone could hope to have on earth. Altogether, he spent almost all the afternoon by himself at the creek, and he could tell by the position of the sun when he left that it was getting late, and that he would have to hurry on the long walk home.

It was not quite so hot going

back. A light breeze came up, which helped, and he made it all the way to town without stopping to rest or feeling light in the head a single time. Cutting across several blocks to the street on which he lived, he started down this street in the direction of home, hearing as he walked the good and comforting sounds of mowers and sprinklers and the first cicadas, and smelling a supper now and then among flowers and cut grass.

Ahead of him, standing beside the walk, was a girl about his own age in a pink dress. It looked like a party dress, with a blue sash at the waist and a bit of lace at the throat. The girl had golden hair woven into two braids, and she was far and away the prettiest girl he had ever seen. As a matter of fact, he had instantly a notion that he had seen her before, although he couldn't remember where or when. This could not be true, however, for if he had seen her, pretty as she was, he would not have forgotten.

As he came abreast of her, she smiled and spoke.

"Hello," she said.

He stopped, watching her, and said hello.

"Do you live in this neighborhood?" she said.

"Down the street a few blocks."

"I live here. In this house. We just moved here yesterday."

"That's nice. I hope you like it."

"I don't know anyone yet. I'm a stranger. I may like it when I get to know someone. Would you come and talk with me sometime?"

"Sure. Maybe tomorrow."

He was painfully conscious of his dusty jeans and bare feet with the plastic bandage, somehow a survivor of the swimming and walking, still stuck on the one big toe. He edged away and began to turn, lifting a hand in a brief, shy gesture of good-bye.

"What's your name?" she said.

"Dewey. Dewey Martin. What's yours?"

"My name is Ellen," she said.

The sound of it was like an echo in the fading afternoon as he hurried on his way, but he did not recognize it as a name that he had known in the future.



A grieving spouse, one would think, would gladly pay any price for the return of a loved one. Yet the bargaining habit is too strongly ingrained in some to yield, even in a crisis.



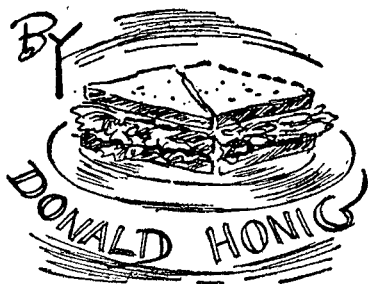
money, fishermen lead one another to secret streams, undertakers recommend certain doctors, and so on.

This intimate communications system is no different in my profession, which is quite highly spe-

THERE are people who receive tips on the stock market, others who are recipients of information on horse races. In fact I would say that in every commercial or intellectual enterprise there is a certain amount of insulated knowledge that is passed from lip to ear. One street cleaner will tell another of the street where the leaves fall lightly, artists pass the word about soft-headed patrons who have nothing to spend but time and

cialized (there is no room in the scoop-'em-up business for amateurs or sentimentalists). Once you select your subject you have to devise a way to lift him and then to salt him away, and after you've done that, to keep a cold grip on your emotions until after you've held all the ransom money up to a strong light.

It was through the tip system that we learned of Anton Kopeck. The tip came from an old friend, Henry Stumm, who was an employee of Kopeck's doll manufacturing firm in midtown Manhattan. Henry told us that Kopeck was gloriously wealthy—an essential thing. (If there's one advantage the poor have, it's an immunity from being scooped up). But two other bits of information were also taken into consideration. (Our subjects have to be thoroughly re-



searched; not everyone is available for scooping up). One was that Kopeck was not a very formidable person; in fact he was quite timid, and therefore easy to handle. The second vital factor was that he didn't get along so well with his wife. This seems to produce a subconscious desire to cooperate in our subjects, reducing hysteria and suppressing the natural impulse to resist.

Anton Kopeck lived in a rather modest house just outside of the city. My preliminary investigation



revealed that Kopeck had a rather austere fixed routine and so would not be a difficult subject to lift. We could, of course, have gone right into his house and bundled him up and hustled him away. But that would have been an unpardonable invasion of privacy, and I don't believe in that. There is a sanctity about a man's home that should be respected.

So, with my capable associates, Buck and Jack, I began an around-the-clock reconnaissance of the Kopeck house, from all sides. We discovered that every Saturday morning, weather permitting, thin, pallid Mr. Kopeck napped in his hammock in the back yard while Mrs. Kopeck, a terse, determined looking woman, took the family car to the nearby center and did her shopping. Once the regularity of this routine had been satisfactorily established, we devised quite a simple plan.

Kopeck's back yard was closed in on all sides by trees and shrubbery. You could have had everything from barbaric charades to Bacchanalian pleasures in there safe from the eyes of the most inquisitive Puritan.

So one Saturday morning, after Mrs. Kopeck had driven off, we parked in front of the house and while Jack sat at the wheel with the motor running, Buck and I

dressed in gray coveralls like the most legitimate representatives of American labor, strode into Kopeck's driveway and swung noiselessly into the yard. There we saw the blissfully reposing figure of Anton Kopeck in the hammock in one corner of the yard, eyes shut to the affable sunlight.

Working with the swift efficiency that is our hallmark, we unhooked the hammock from its poles without disturbing its suspended occupant, laid it gently on the grass and proceeded to wrap him up like a Christmas gift. A muffled cry of protest started to rise from the suddenly wakening Mr. Kopeck, but I told him to be still.

"We're desperate men," I growled. "Don't make us have to prove it. Lie still and keep calm." Then I winked at Buck and we closed the hammock round Kopeck as best we could and hauled him up by both ends like a catch of fish and began carrying him back down the driveway. He struggled briefly once, and I gave him a subtle tap with my knuckle to remind him of our ruthless resolution, and he desisted.

Jack leaned over from behind the wheel and threw open the rear door and we slid the bulky hammock onto the floor. Then Buck and I got in and shut the door and Jack got the car moving.

We released the sides of the hammock and Mr. Kopeck looked up at us. He began to pant.

"My pills," he gasped.

"What pills?" I asked.

"I've been dreadfully ill these past weeks," he said. "I've got to take care of myself. The certain pills I ought to have now are in my breast pocket."

I reached in there and lifted out a little plastic container. I shook out a pill and Kopeck opened his mouth like a babe to be fed and I popped the pill right in. The pill did its job fine, for as soon as it had had time to bounce through his ribs he seemed to compose himself. He closed his eyes peacefully for a few minutes. Then something seemed to occur to him. His eyes opened and regarded me with sly suspicion.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"Up to the country," I said. "To a fine place where the robins sing by day and the owls hoot by night. You'll have lots of fresh air and cow's milk and good cooking."

"Good cooking? My stomach can't stand it," he moaned.

"Well, when I say good cooking I'm flattering the cook."

"I've got to have my wife's touch on all my meals or else I'll die," he said. "She understands my stomach."

"There, there, you just relax, Mr. Kopeck," I said. "We intend to give careful attention to your stomach."

"You're abducting me, aren't you?" he asked with touching realism.

"In a way. You might say that we're taking you to the most exclusive vacation place in the world. You'll be treated with the utmost courtesy. Your every whim will be received like a king's command. And no tipping allowed. We do charge exorbitant rates, however."

He groaned. I wondered which pill would pacify this sound, but apparently it was only distress.

"How long will this last?" he asked.

"Until Mrs. Kopeck gets up the money."

He groaned again. "I wish there was some other solution," he said. "She nurses every nickel like a hen sits on an egg."

"But you're her husband."

"My money is my greatest rival for her affections." He groaned once more. "Well, at least I have my pills."

It was then that I noticed the pills. His belt was a veritable bandolier of pillboxes, each tucked into a loop the same way Mexican bandits wear their cartridges. Each container, we soon learned, represented a different ailment—and Kopeck seemed to have them all,

from short breath to stomach cramps to curling toes.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked, trying to take an interest.

"I told you, for the past few weeks. You realize, of course," he said, "the responsibility you're taking? I'm not a well man."

"Don't you worry," I said. "Jack here, in front, is a pseudo-doctor of the first order. He'll be able to administer to any ailment you might possess."

Jack half turned and gave me a wary look. When I asked him if that wasn't right he nodded his head vigorously, but I could see him thinking *I have to be a cook and now doctor too.*

"Well," said Kopeck from the floor, "I'm quite a special case." It makes an ailing man feel a bit more content if he believes he's a special case.

"We specialize in special cases," I said.

"It's my stomach, primarily."

"I used to have the same thing."

"You did?"

"Why sure. Feeling like a young mule kicking about in there, right?"

"Why, that's it exactly," Kopeck said, smiling with delight.

"Jack's most successful doctoring comes through his mysterious cooking powers. He makes the

damndest beef broth you ever ate."

"Broth you say?"

"I said broth."

"Can't stand it," Kopeck said. "I love tuna salads and sandwiches. I almost exist on them."

"You hear that, Jack?" I called up front.

"I hear," said Jack.

"We'll lay in a goodly supply," I said to Kopeck.

When we arrived at the cottage I had rented for this job, in a quiet and scenic part of the Catskill foothills, Kopeck looked around critically.

"There won't be enough ventilation, I can tell," he said. "I've got to have lots of fresh air, otherwise my stomach tightens up."

"We'll see that every window is open at all times," I said.

"But that will let in mosquitoes," he said. "I can't afford to lose any blood to those vampires."

"Then we'll put in screens."

"I have a theory that screens filter the vitamins out of the summer air," said Kopeck. "I once wrote an article on the subject."

So you can see what sort of man we had scooped up. He believed that the whole world was in a conspiracy to undermine his health. He was constantly being beset with some pain—real or imaginary, I couldn't tell—and each time he'd reach unerringly for one of the

pillboxes in his belt and shake loose a few pills and drop them into his mouth. Then he'd sit down and Jack or Buck would have to fan his brow with their handkerchiefs because Kopeck believed that the pills raised his temperature and caused a resultant rise in blood pressure.

That first night Kopeck retired early, and soon after there began to emit from his room a series of moans and groans that sounded like a man filling out his income tax form. We rushed in and found him writhing on the bed.

"Here, let me have a look," said Jack (after I'd pushed him forward to become the doctor). He peered with professional impudence at the grimacing Kopeck.

"Looks to me like an acute scherzo of the obligato," he announced after a peek into Kopeck's throat.

"What's that?" Kopeck asked with alarm. He stopped writhing.

"It has to do with the stomach," said Jack. "Do you have a strange dancing pain?"

"Yes, yes, that's it," Kopeck cried exultantly.

"Do you have a pill for it?"

"No."

Jack made him drink a quart of warm water, after which Kopeck relaxed soddently.

"It drowns the germs," Jack

said gravely, and with authority.

"That makes sense," Kopeck said. Then he fell asleep.

The following morning I drove into town to make the phone call to Mrs. Kopeck. She answered rather anxiously.

"Mrs. Kopeck?" I asked.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Never mind that. We have your husband."

"Where is he?"

"That information is at present classified."

"Is he all right?"

"He's doing quite well. He has his pills with him, and we have a doctor among us. Now, I advise you to say nothing of this to the police, if you want to see your husband again."

"Have you abducted him?" she asked. It was a rather direct question, put forward in a voice impressively calm and unexcited, a voice almost cold, disapproving, as if I were a juvenile delinquent who had squirted a policeman with seltzer.

"Yes, we have," I said. "But very professionally, I can assure you. He's quite comfortable."

"You sound like a civilized person," she said. "What do you want?"

"Thirty-five thousand, in small bills, and absolute secrecy. We're vain but shun the spotlight."

"That's understandable. Well, Anton is no bargain, but I guess I'm obligated to get him back. How much did you say?"

"Thirty-five thousand."

"That's ridiculous. We're not millionaires," she said. "Fifteen," she said.

"Thirty," I said.

"Fifteen."

"Twenty-five then."

"Fifteen."

"You're blackjacking us," I said.

"Fifteen," she said. When I demurred she repeated the figure, adamantly. It was the first time one of these conversations had ever taken such an unpleasant turn. The precedent disarmed and conquered me.

"All right," I said. "Fifteen."

"It will take me two or three days to put that much money together," said Mrs. Kopeck. "I'm afraid you'll have to keep Anton a few days longer."

"That's quite all right," I said. "He's been no trouble at all. I'll call you back in a couple of days," I said and put up the phone.

When I returned to the cottage Kopeck was just finishing off his second tuna fish salad. I had never seen a man eat with more zest.

"Delicious, Mr. Bushel," he called to me, waving a piece of bread and then sweeping it into his mouth.

"Glad to hear it," I said. "How

are you feeling? Digestion O.K.?"

"Splendid," Kopeck said loudly as if impressed with the new bold sound of his voice.

Kopeck told us later that evening that this was the first day in weeks it hadn't been necessary for him to take any of his pills. He was feeling perfectly wonderful. I couldn't have been more pleased. I always want our guests to be happy.

He was up at five-thirty the next morning. We found him in the living room doing knee bends. I was amazed. The exhilaration in his face was something to see; it was like a fanatic's, wild and fierce. When he was through with the knee bends—and he wasn't through until I'd heard him count to a hundred—instead of collapsing and reaching for his pills as I expected, he asked if he might be permitted to do a little roadwork.

"Roadwork?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, dancing his knees vigorously up and down and pumping his arms in simulation of great running. "I used to be quite an amateur athlete before I was married. I haven't felt like doing roadwork for a long, long time."

"It's most irregular, Mr. Kopeck."

"You can send one of your boys along with me. I'm not trying to run away, I can assure you, but send someone along if it will make

you feel any better, I won't object."

I picked Jack. He was the youngest and had the most vigor. He protested but I winked and told him to go out and humor Kopeck.

"And make sure he doesn't overdo it," I whispered. "Remember, he's not a well man."

"Amazing transition," I said to Buck. "Two days ago I thought we might have to bring in some oxygen for him. Now he's running as though he's training for the olympics."

"I wish it could happen to me," Buck said morosely.

"Well, why don't you go on a tuna fish diet like him?"

They came back two hours later. They weren't running. My first glance made me think that Kopeck had had his fill of running; but then I saw that it was Jack who was being helped up the path to the house.

"Here," Kopeck called, "give me a hand with him."

"What happened?" I asked as I hurried out and helped him support Jack's slumped, gasping body.

"Couldn't take it," Kopeck said brightly. "We ran up the road and down the road and through the woods," he said through hard and hearty breaths. "He just couldn't take it. I'm surprised that a man of your foresight lets his men get so badly out of shape, Mr. Bushel."

We took Jack inside and stretched him out on his bed. Kopeck insisted Jack take some pills and while Jack held his mouth feebly open Kopeck popped several pills in.

"That'll make him feel better," Kopeck said, standing up and flexing his muscles. "Now, how about some grub? I've worked up *quite* an appetite."

That's how it started. Kopeck became acrobat, gymnast, and health-faddist rolled into one. Just the sight of him whirling through his exercises was enough to debilitate me. He would bounce up suddenly and climb the maple next to the house with the frenzied agility of a young monkey. Or he would insist on doing some more road work and I had to send Buck out with him. Kopeck was back in a half hour, Buck in an hour and a half, worn out, gasping, through for the day.

I was at a loss to explain this sudden transition from timid, nervous hypochondriac (for I believed that was what he was) to energy-burning wild man. My penchant for cynicism led me to believe that it was the exhilaration of a man released from an unpleasant wife. In a way I was pleased, for we seemed to be making a man of Kopeck; I assumed that when he went home he would pop his wife

on the nose and proclaim a new regime under his roof.

The next morning Kopeck again leaped from bed at five o'clock. This time he roused us from bed and insisted on a sparring session on the front lawn. Jack emerged from this with a cut lip and black eye. Then Kopeck raced outside and began doing sit-ups and push-ups and all sorts of contortions, chanting one-two-three over and over until we had to close the door and windows to drive away the buoyant sound of his voice. I didn't know sheer joy could be so depressing.

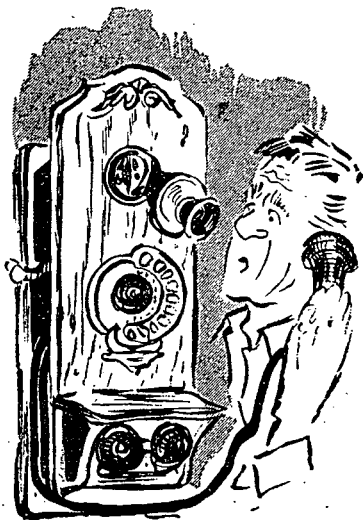
Then he insisted upon a game of leap frog, after which I was unable to straighten up for two hours. To save the lives of my men I had to rule out road work, sparring sessions and leap frog, but compromised on hikes. Kopeck took Jack on a hike through the woods that lasted until two o'clock in the morning. This time he came home with Jack on his back. And then ate three mountainous tuna fish sandwiches.

The next day I called Mrs. Kopeck again. This time my voice was more anxious than hers.

"Do you have the money?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"And have you maintained secrecy?"



"Yes," she said.

I then proceeded to tell her when and where to leave the money, assuring her that as soon as I returned I would see that her husband was released and sent back to her.

Well, Mrs. Kopeck was as good as her word. The money—\$15,000 worth—was delivered to the place specified. When I returned to the cottage, however, I found a new problem awaiting me.

"I'm not leaving," Kopeck said. "I want to stay here."

"You can't do that," I said.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Because I agreed to a business transaction with your wife. She's kept her end of the bargain and now I must do likewise. You have to go back."

"I'll never go back," Kopeck said stubbornly. "I've never felt so boorishly healthy in my life. Why, do you know what I did this morning?"

"He swung from tree to tree," Buck said.

"When could I ever have done that before?" Kopeck asked. "I've regained my health here, with you fellows. I refuse to leave."

"But, Mr. Kopeck," I said, "it isn't ethical. You've got to go back. My professional reputation is at stake."

"That's your problem."

"But I've made a deal with your wife."

"Aha, but I was not consulted," said Kopeck, folding his arms, drawing himself up like a waiter who has been insulted. "I was not a party to it so I don't have to abide by it."

"But the money . . ." I said helplessly.

"Give it back," said Kopeck. And with that he left the house and began tearing through the woods. Jack told me that Kopeck looked for stone walls to jump over or tall trees to climb. Jack was very tired. He was taking Kopeck's pills these

days. He was wearing the pill belt, too.

"What are we going to do, Bush?" he asked as Kopeck's Tarzan cry came flying back through the window. "I can't stand it any longer. Every time I look at him bouncing around I age ten years."

"I can't take it anymore either, Bush," said Buck. He had to sleep with a heating pad, his back was so bad.

"All right, boys, don't panic," I said. "There's a solution to this. There's always a solution." One solution could have been to turn the place into a health farm, using Kopeck as Exhibit A.

"We've got the money," said Jack. "Why don't we just leave him here? He'll get tired of running around and go back home."

"It wouldn't be ethical," I said sternly. "And besides, his wife is expecting him now. She's paid the tab and expects him home. If he doesn't show up she might just get perturbed enough to call the police—she'd be within her rights, you know. And while I'm sociable and friendly and like to be wanted, I don't want it to be by the law."

"Well, I don't see any way out of it," Jack said.

"Let's try and analyze it," I said, sitting down. "What do you think has caused this absurd rejuvenation in him?"

"He claims it's my cooking," said Jack. "But all I give him is tuna fish salads and sandwiches and not much else. He says it's the same stuff he ate at home."

After some deliberation I had an idea.

"Boys," I said, "I'll be back later."

Later that evening I was sitting with Jack and Buck at the dinner table. Kopeck had just finished his pile of tuna sandwiches and retired to his room.

"You look confident, Bush," said Jack. "Tell us what it is."

"It's this," I said. "When I left here this morning I went to town and called up Mrs. Kopeck and quite frankly informed her of the situation. She said she wasn't surprised, that in fact she had found out what had been making him sick. It seems she's been mixing his salads with mayonnaise out of a half gallon jar she bought some time ago and that she discovered last night that the mayonnaise was spoiled, so that's what has been making him sick. Our mistake was giving Kopeck fresh mayonnaise."

"What a blunder," said Jack.

"But I've seen fit to rectify it," I said. "I asked Mrs. Kopeck if she still had the jar on hand and she was able to retrieve it for me. I took it from her and it was that mayonnaise which you mixed into his salad tonight, Jack old boy," I said proudly.

There were bright smiles all around the table. And at that moment Kopeck's door opened and he stood there. Gone was his bounce and buoyancy. He looked quite ill.

"I want to go home," he said weakly. "Give me my pills and take me home. I don't want to die in a strange bed."

Well, we honored that melancholy request posthaste. And that ended the job. I read once, a few months after, that Anton Kopeck became the oldest man in history to run the four-minute mile, so I guess his wife was seeing to it that he was getting fresh mayonnaise in his salads. I wish she would have done it sooner though, for she would have saved us a lot of money, because, shrewd woman and hard-headed bargainer that she was, she held out for half the ransom money back as payment for the half jar of spoiled mayonnaise.



HOME

A NOVELETTE BY ED LACY

FREE

I AWOKE feeling crummy. I'd been feeling "wrong" for a brace of weeks now; a sense of restless depression I couldn't understand. I had a few bucks, some good story ideas cooking, and I also had Sydney. But I was so jumpy I couldn't work.

Of course right now it wasn't just a mood—I was badly hung-over from a real binge—getting stupid drunk, and smoking reefers. I had a foggy idea I'd even tried skin-popping with the real thing.

But in my condition I wasn't sure.

I was not sure of anything except that it was a sunny Tuesday morning. I could see the blue Mediterranean through the window and from the angle of the sun the hour was around 9 A.M. On a chair before the open window, shorts, socks, and a sport shirt were drying. It suddenly hit me that somewhere along the line I'd lost Sydney last night.

Sydney is a young and rather scrawny Australian gal and not

In this tangled tale of switched passports, drugs, and the dubious joys of carefree Bohemian life, the word "home" takes on a new meaning for an expatriate.



bad fun. I could recall playing *boule* with her at the Casino and getting bored with the characters who were making like bit roles from a bad movie as they worked out 'systems' of beating the wheel on paper, and/or nervously sucking on long cigarette holders . . . and most of them were taking it so big with 20 franc chips, or a fat 5¢! Syd had won several chips betting on red and black and was rather pleased with herself. Because it had been my 39th birthday the day before—an historic event known only to myself; I hadn't even received a card from my ex-wife, or anybody else—I took one of Syd's chips and played 3. We won and now had 160 francs. To her horror I let the chips ride. 3 won again. When I still let the pile remain on 3, Syd said, "I say, so much money . . . Are you mad?"

"Stop it, all we can lose is our original 20 francs."

3 turned up again, then following my hunch, I shifted it all to 9—something over 10,000 francs. 9 came up, on time, and we walked out with about \$165.

Rolling over on my hot bed I stared out at the sea and remembered a wild ride on Sydney's scooter. I sat behind her, my hands clasping her waist as I held on to her. We decided it would be bad luck *not* to blow every franc we'd won, and stopped at many bars. We had raced down a number of narrow steep streets—probably Villefranche—for I could dimly recall U.S. sailors on the sidewalk wise-cracking at us.

But now on closing my eyes, Syd vanished from the picture, and there was this big blonde—really big—with-shoulders and thighs like those of a huge tackle I once knew, who later became a TV wrestling clown. The fact is, the blonde had a tough, craggy face like his, too. A fantastic blonde: fantastically large, ugly, and with out-size measurements.

I sat up and yawned—the picture vanished. I didn't feel too rough. I glanced at my wrist watch on the table—9:17 A.M. It seemed odd I could feel this rested after less than four hours' shut-eye. Moving to a cool part of the bed, I debated get-

ting up and stretched out again, watching some flies buzzing the high ceiling of the ancient room. I'd slept in cheap hotel rooms all over Europe . . . coarse linens, dim bulbs, and inadequate plumbing. Still, I'd come over under my own steam and free-will.

Was that 15 or 16 months ago? Anyway, it had been long enough to raise and shave off two full beards. I'd come to do a "bit of writing," as my fellow bull artists back on 8th Street would say. I had worked hard without writing any better or worse than I had in the States, nor selling any less or more—but the money stretched farther here. I glanced at my laundry drying on the chair. Yeah, it lasted longer if you went in for franc pinching . . . and when you start scrimping on a $\frac{1}{8}\text{¢}$ you're really living low on any hog.

I closed my eyes to try for more sleep. What had become of Sydney last night? You find quite a few lonely American and English gals floating around Europe. About 30 years old, they saved like crazy for this great "adventure"—dreaming they'll find romance, marriage, a Prince Charming with a villa, and whatever else girls of 30 dream about. The American gals very soon find it ain't so, the USA buck is no longer a big deal. I don't know what the British gals find.

But after the first few disillusioned and lonely weeks, they're all willing to go Dutch with any guy who befriends them—in a pitiful, last ditch effort to save the whole trip from being a dud. Which is where guys on the mild prow, like me, enter the picture.

I turned over and slept for a few minutes, dreamt of the great blonde again, seeing her coarse face and gross body. When I awoke it was still minutes before ten and the clear dream of her body puzzled me. I'm fussy about picking up strays.

Finally, getting out of bed, I was astonished to find my 'wash' completely dry. On the street under my window I saw two cripples peddling lottery tickets—and it came to me that this had to be Wednesday, the day of the weekly lottery drawing. For some reason, French people thought it lucky to purchase chances from the mutilated, and on the last days before the drawing the maimed were out in numbers hawking tickets. No wonder I felt rested—I'd slept around the clock!

Dressing, I found I had less than 500 francs on me. But I still had travelers checks from my last sale to a magazine. I dug my passport from the pocket of my old suitcase and took off. The old babe at the hotel desk gave me a nasty hello and mumbled something about us-

ing her hot water for laundry. So she had come into my room while I was out cold, seen my things drying on the chair.

It was a real hot day, the sort of weather which used to excite me when I first came to Nice from the raw cold of Paris. I stopped for coffee, and as an afterthought laced it with *rhum*. I bought a hunk of bread and ate it as I walked to the nearest *cambio*. I'd changed checks into money here once before and the guy nodded to me as I signed a \$20 American Express check, then took my passport out of its plastic bag. The man counted out 9,700 francs and opened my passport.

We both reached for the money but his thin mitt got there first. Jerking the francs away, he pointed at my passport—his sharp face full of suspicion. He said in French, "This is not yours."

"What?" I pulled the thin green booklet to me. Okay, it was impossible but the picture in the passport was of a young guy with a crewcut topping a silly, weak face. I'd never seen the face before, either. The name was Robert Parks, and he had been born 23 years ago in California. Turning the page I saw he had entered France exactly nine weeks ago.

I blinked my eyes. I tried to think. I stared at the plastic bag—

it was the same bag I carried my passport in: had this cake ad on it. When I'd first landed at Le Havre I'd bought a bag of cookies, kept the bag to protect my passport. What was I doing with another man's passport? Far more important—*where was mine?* Being without a passport gave me a sickening, naked, feeling.

The change man said in French, "I will call the police."

"No, no. There's some . . . kind of mix-up. I'll take care of it." I yanked my check from his counter, and stepped outside. I could walk into town, cash the check at the American Express, without a passport. I generally went there every few days to see if I had any mail.

I went over the passport again, studying the signature, the photo, all the details. I'd heard there once was a market for stolen USA passports, but that had vanished long years ago with most of the other post-war rackets. This one had only been issued three months before; it was still good. If this was a passport theft, what was the point of leaving a good one with me?

While I was trying to make my sleepy brains come awake, a *flic* in a white pith helmet, blue uniform, with his little toy white nightstick hanging from his belt, came up—walking fast. He was a short cop with a belly. So the *cambio* guy

had phoned. I was too confused to be tangled in red tape with the French police.

Now the *cambio* joker was outside, saying something in rapid French to the cop, who motioned for us to step back into the change shop. I hesitated and the cop said, "Inside!"

Walking in, I told him in my best French, "Really, this is nothing but a mix-up. I have a friend's passport. That's all."

The cop examined the passport for a few seconds and then said I would have to go with him. "Why?" I asked. "I took a pal's passport by mistake. Is that a crime?"



The cop grabbed my shoulder. I hate to be touched. When I pulled away he raised his toy nightstick and I started to boil. "What is this? Are you crazy?"

"We are looking for Monsieur Robert Parks. Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"So! You said he was your friend . . . Come along!" He pushed me toward the door. Or maybe he punched me on the shoulder.

I side-stepped. There was this arc of white as the nightstick cracked the side of my noggin. It sure wasn't any toy. I staggered a few steps, seeing all kinds of bright colors exploding before my eyes. But I wasn't hurt, I'd been groggier than this when I'd played football. I haven't been in even a bar fight in the last dozen years but when the cop raised his club again, I stepped inside his swing and belted him on the jaw. I felt the shock up to my elbow. It felt fine. As the *flic* crumpled to the floor, the change man started to yell. I quieted him with a clean poke on his pointed chin. I felt much better than I had in many months.

Picking up the passport, I walked out. The hot sun really awoke me—the fine feeling fled. I was in great shape—carrying the passport of a wanted man and socking a French cop!

Two things had to be done fast: I needed money and I had to find my passport. The puzzling bit was the theft—if that's what it was—of my passport. It didn't make any sense. What good would my passport do the wanted Mr. Parks, unless he changed my photo to his? Not only was it a job calling for great skill, but since I had his passport, he couldn't even do that. Even more puzzling—how did I get his passport?

Although our State Department solemnly advises you to carry your passport around at all times, it's far too big for a hip pocket, and who wears a coat in the summer? I always kept mine in my suitcase, except when traveling.

I was walking back toward the hotel. It seemed like a safe idea—there was little chance of the exchange man remembering my hotel. I figured I had at least five minutes before the cop could get himself together, and checking my name against the hotel registrations at the police station would take hours.

When I reached the joint, madame was still in her surly mood and mumbling about my washing clothes, and all that. I went to my room and carefully went through my bag—not much of a job as I make a point of traveling light. My passport wasn't there. I went out

into the shabby lobby and cut madame's jabbering off by showing her Parks' photo on his passport, asking in French, "Have you ever seen this man here?"

She said no and how about the cost of coal for the hot water I'd used? Didn't I know about the sign in the room, strictly forbidding washing?

"Was anybody in my room yesterday while I was sleeping?"

Madame snickered, giving me a full view of her mossy teeth. "Only you and the big sewer. The wine stain on her dress she has to wash with my hot water. Bring a girl to your room, even a sewer, is your business. But when right in my kitchen she stirs up the stove and dries her dress. . . !"

"Wait a minute," I managed to cut in. "What girl?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders, glanced at me with cunning eyes. "I do not ask such trash to give me her name. Some blonde, big as a cow . . . two cows."

"I brought this blonde to my room yesterday?" I couldn't believe it since I didn't remember a thing about bringing *any* gal to my room. I'd be ashamed for a girl to see the dump.

Madame told me, "About six in the morning, yesterday, you come in, badly drunk. The blonde trash is almost carrying you. Like all

cheap girls, she is making much noise. She put you to bed, and in your basin washed the spot on her dress. In the nude this sewer then marched, without shame, into my kitchen and dried the dress over the stove. She was so powerfully built I was afraid to tell her about the rules, the use of my hot water."

"She mention her name?" Soon as I said it I realized how silly it sounded.

Madame drew herself up. "To me? I told you, I do not talk to such a sewer!"

I nodded. "Listen, can you cash a travelers check for me?"

"Tonight, perhaps. Now I have but a few francs on me. The thieves around here would steal a poor honest woman's . . ."

I walked out and over to the Promenade. No wonder my dream of the big blonde had been so realistic! But who the devil was she? Had she taken my passport? I certainly wasn't carrying it on me and if she'd noticed it in the room, why . . . ? Noticed? She had to dig into my bag to find it! So now the first order of business was to find a giant and nameless blonde. Sydney would know where we'd been Monday night, possibly even know the blonde . . . or at least know her name.

Actually the blonde wasn't the

first order of business—avoiding the cops had top priority. It was risky walking the Promenade—by now the police would have an alarm out for me, or however they worked such things in France. For all I knew Sydney's hotel might be staked out . . . But on a hot morning like this she would be sunning herself at the *plage* near the port. I went down to the rocky beach and stripped to my shorts. Folding my slacks and shirt into a neat bundle, I walked along the edge of the water—trusting I looked like one of the hundreds of bathers.

It was a long walk and I tried to think, but my mind seemed a spinning blank. I finally had one piece of good luck—Sydney's slender figure could be seen on her long green beach mat. For a moment I "cased" the beach—in my best amateur manner, not sure what I was looking for. Then I walked over and casually sat beside her. Opening her eyes—which were too large for her small face, Sydney said, "Well, well, if it isn't the baggy American! I must say you have your bloody nerve—talking to me again!"

"Syd, skip the small talk. I'm in a king-size jam and . . ."

"So, it's small talk I am for you! I can assure you you're in a ruddy jam with me! Getting falling

down drunk and leaving me in Villefranche to . . . God knows what, while you went off with that blonde beast. Then you add insult to possible injury by not even seeing or phoning me all day yesterday. I could have been killed in an accident, assaulted, or . . . for all you cared!" Her words broke off as her thin pale lips began to tremble.

"Syd, I was out cold all day yesterday—never left my bed or . . ."

"I bet!"

"Listen to me, Sydney, I'm in a rush and it's damn important I find this blonde Amazon to . . ."

"Why? Are you having an affair with her?"

"Look, Syd, I . . ." I stiffened as a policeman walked by on the boardwalk in back of us. He didn't seem to be looking for anybody—or did they already have me spotted, waiting to close in? I shook myself—I sounded like a character in one of my worst books. I was about to tell Sydney about the passport but didn't—she was a nice girl and there was no point involving her in my mess.

She sat up, adjusting the bra strap on her modest bikini. "What's wrong with you? I say, you look ill."

"Syd, without asking questions, tell me—what's the blonde's name and where did I meet her?"

"You have your cheek! Come off it—what kind of a line are you handing me?"

I glanced about impatiently. I was wasting time with Syd and time was something I had little of. "Have you any money? Can you cash a check for me?"

"Hear the man, and the way you were throwing money around the other night! Didn't you pass your beloved American Express shrine on your way here? Ditch me and then come begging for. . . ."

I jumped to my feet. "Damn it, have you any money or not?"

"No! Ask your blonde, Noel, in that strip-tease joint where she labors!"

So the blonde finally had a name—Noel. I squatted beside Syd once more. "Listen, this isn't what you imagine . . . at least I don't think it is, or was. Some day I'll explain it all." This trite line sounded even sillier than asking my landlady the blonde's name. "Look, where does Noel work?"

"You dare ask me that? Leaving me alone in that filthy bar, half-stoned, while you took off for Monte Carlo in her car. True, I have only a scooter but . . ." The tears came, spilling out and running down her cheeks.

The dialogue was getting me down. I asked, "Do you know an American named Robert Parks?"

She kept bawling into her beach mat.

I patted her brown hair, but that only seemed to increase the waterworks. I strolled on down the beach, wondering how I could reach Villefranche. Of course I could walk, but an American walking the road would arouse curiosity. Certainly the train and bus stations would be watched . . . A couple pedaled by in a boat, working their legs lazily as they leaned back on the canvas seats and held hands, the pontooned little craft riding the mild swell.

I could take out a *pedalo* too: Villefranche was but around the next cape—about two miles by sea. But I'd need at least 400 francs for that, which I didn't have. Also, out there I'd be a sitting fool if the cops ever came after me in a motor boat.

I kept on walking. As the Promenade turned and went down hill toward the port, the beach ended. I jumped up on the sidewalk—keeping an eye out for police vans and motorcycle cops. A flashy new green Chevvy—looking as large as a Caddy among the little European cars—whizzed by. I walked to the next traffic light, bought a French paper, and sat on a bench. I held the paper close up to my face, as if I was near-sighted. It really wasn't much of a disguise and it took a good 15 long minutes before

what I wanted came by: my nerves were dancing by then.

A low-slung new Jag roadster with U.S. Armed Forces In Germany license plates stopped for the red light. The man behind the wheel was slight and wearing a white silk shirt—an officer type. More important, he was alone. Walking off the curb I asked, "Mac, any chance of a lift to Villefranche?"

"Why, sure," he answered in a voice which hadn't left the mid-West many months before. "Hop in. Going to San Remo, myself."

As he gave her the gas, the leather seat warm against my worn slacks, he asked, "You a G.I.?"

"I was—during the war. Are you an officer?"

"Heck no, just a sergeant stationed in Berlin. Got me another year to go over here." He laughed. "It ain't too hard to take."

When he laughed I realized he was only a big kid, about 20. "You must be the world's best crap-shooter," I told him, wondering if I should ask him to cash a check.

"What?" The puzzled look fled from his long face and he laughed again. "You mean this sharp heap—nope, I'm paying for it out of my salary. Hell, ain't nothing else to do with the dough. Figure Jaguar will always be a ritzy car. I got a good buy on this and before I re-

turn stateside I'll sell it. Like money in the bank. You say you were a G.I. during the war? The war here?"

I nodded.

"Heck, didn't think you were that old."

"Old? I'm not talking about World War 1."

"Neither am I. Probably no vets still living from that war," the fresh punk said. That also ended any chance of asking him to cash a check as I kept my mouth shut—I'm kind of touchy about my age—except when he slowed up at Villefranche and I thanked him as I jumped out:

He called back, "Glad to oblige, Pops," as he gave the Jag the gas and sped away.

Being a regular port of call for the U.S. Navy, Villefranche has a number of bars and clubs. I walked by several joints proudly advertising "strip tease." In a country where stage nudity has long been a common practice, I could never see the popularity of the strip here, but every club had one or more.

Finding Noel was almost too simple: Outside a basement dive called *Jazz Shocker* there were the usual photos of a number of bare babes and seeing Noel's picture was like reliving my dream. Her homely face and exaggerated curves served as a sort of comic relief for

the slim figures of the other tease artists. Walking down a few steps, I rattled a gate closing off the staircase. The inside of the club seemed small, with chairs upside down on the tables, the walls painted gaudy colors. The bartender was watering the bottles. Not a thing about the place rang any memory bells. The barkeep called out in bad French that I must see the place was closed. I said I wanted to find Noel. Coming over to his side of the gate, he handed me some nonsense about the *Jazz-Shocker* having a policy of never giving the home addresses of their entertainers.

The lids above his beady eyes seemed permanently puffed. As he chattered, the eyes took stock of me like two cash registers—taking in my cheap clothes, the fact I was an American, and finally speculating on if, and how much, I might pay for Noel's address. I'd have gladly offered him every franc on me—which wouldn't have made him yawn.

I went off into a song-and-dance about the blonde being a buddy of mine—and the bartender couldn't have cared less. On the spur of the moment, I gave him the change-up pitch: "Noel will want to see me. Phone her and say Robert Parks is here."

He tried not to show any reaction but the new alertness in his

little eyes was a dead giveaway. He said, "I was about to go for lunch, anyway, and as a friend I shall take you to Noel. Of course I can not say if she is at home, or will wish to see you. But we see."

In less than a minute we were walking down the narrow, twisting stairs, which pass for streets in Villefranche, toward the port. I could see a sleek American destroyer anchored out in the harbor. I was also aware my newly found 'friend' was careful to walk at my side and never in front of me—or was that my imagination? In the sunlight he seemed far more muscular than I'd supposed. He was wearing shorts and his legs were powerful . . . the slight flattening of his nose, and the scar tissue above his eyes, hinted he could have been a pug not many years ago.

Sydney had mentioned Monte Carlo and somehow I thought we were heading for a garage and a car, but we turned into a deadend street of ancient houses, and then into the oldest of these. The street was strangely empty—at noon people are usually out buying a snack for lunch. We marched up four flights of worn stone steps with him behind me. An uneasy feeling was building up inside me. Still, he looked about 40 and for all his muscles I had a good 60 pounds

plus a foot in height on him—60 slightly flabby pounds, it was true.

We reached the top floor and he knocked at the lone door, then abruptly turned and came at me, his hands set for a Judo chop.

I've written a dozen times exactly how my characters used the Judo chop. I have read Judo books as part of my research. My bartender buddy had probably never read a single such book—he was a pro. I blocked his left, threw a right hand myself . . . and felt as if the back of my head had jumped into orbit.

I came to inside the apartment, in a room full of ridiculous old-fashioned plush furniture. The ridiculous angle was—the junk looked new. My head was still soaring—this was my day to get my noggin whipped—and when it settled back on my sore neck, I was able to get the two men into focus. One was my "friend," the other looked so much like the stock movie conception of a gangster I could have laughed—under other circumstances. He was also short, but with a bull neck and barrel chest. He had the swarthy, over-handsome face, the brittle eyes, and gold teeth in his large mouth. His very black hair—except for the right touch of grey at the sides—was well acquainted with a brush and oil. There was a thin gold chain

around his heavy neck, a thicker gold chain about his powerful wrist . . . his neat slacks, white sport shirt, and elevator shoes were both casual and very expensive. There was a small automatic in a hip pocket holster that completed the picture—even if *that* wasn't casual.

They were going over my wallet, my thin book of travelers checks, and Robert Parks' passport. I shook my head. "Get up," the gangster said—in English—and there was the "proper" throaty growl to his husky voice. "Where did you get this passport?"

"Why? Your picture isn't in there, nor your . . ." The gangster sent a vicious kick at my side. I rolled out of the way, trying not to shout, "I found it in my bags!"

I stood up, feeling pretty steady. The two of them were in a whispered-French conference. I managed to catch the name of the big blonde—Noel—several times.

Gangster-type stepped toward me. "Listen you, I want some level talk from you! Who are you? Where did you get this passport? You a friend of Parks'?"

I rubbed the back of my neck to give me thinking time—a foolish gesture: I nearly screamed with pain. Perhaps it was the pain, for I became brave, decided to stop being the frightened cluck and do

some shoulder-talking myself. I asked, "I don't like being pushed around. What's this all about? What do you slobs think you're . . .?"

Handsome started for me, so did the bartender—his chopping hands spread out like a crab's. I kept my back to a wall. Now the big deal in Judo is the surprise element—I'd already had my share of surprises for the day. I suddenly spun on the bartender, feinted with my left hand as I kicked him on the knee. He yelled and sat down hard as I caught the 'gangster' with what I thought was a nifty right to the side of his face. I expected him to go down. He merely grunted and crossed a left F. Patterson would have been proud of.

Floating away on a sea of whiteness, I thought: this is also my day to tangle with pros. For quite a time I seemed to be swimming in thick brightness, sort of a vast ocean of smooth cream; then night came on fast. When I opened my eyes I was in a cell-like room, the only light coming from the sun streaming through a small opening high up on one wall. I had to close my eyes again to stop the throbbing in my head and jaw—when I opened them seconds later I was able to see some dirty clothes piled on a chair, copies of *Life* and the Paris edition of the *NY*

Herald Tribune on the stone floor next to the cot.

Mr. Robert Parks was sitting on the cot, wearing only torn dirty shorts, pimples all over his skinny arms. He looked terribly pale and sickly, his eyes were watering and his nose was running. He looked worse than his passport photo. For a moment we stared at each other. Suddenly he dug under the lumpy cot mattress, pulled out my passport, opened it and cackled in a shrill voice, "Why, of course, it's *you!* You must be . . ." He waved the passport at me. "You didn't come alone?"

I tried to talk but my lips were numb. The gangster-type sure could wallop.

Robert Parks rubbed the slight blonde fuzz on his chin, went on in the same shrill voice, "Dear, dear, my, my, I thought . . . Oh, I was so certain you'd bring the police and . . . instead, here you are . . . *like me.*" His eyes began leaking tears and he rocked back and forth on the smelly cot, giggling insanely.

After several false starts I managed to stand and then I jerked him to his feet—he didn't weigh in at much over 115 pounds, every bone and muscle of his chest and scrawny neck showing, as in a

medical drawing. "What's the big joke?" I asked. "What are you doing with my passport?"

His watery eyes didn't even see me as I pulled the green booklet out of his thin hand, feeling a quick sense of relief at having *my* passport back. I even thumbed through it with my free hand—everything was in order including my old fat-faced evil-looking passport photo.

"Come on, what's this all about?" I snapped, shaking him again. I was holding Parks by one bony shoulder and he waved a hand at the sunlight coming down from the opening in the wall like a stage spotlight.

Flinging his arm at the light he asked in the same shrill voice, "What is this all about? Why not go for the larger question—what is life all about? Gaze at the sun's golden staircase! You know something? Often I actually crawl up that golden gangplank, away from this filth. Then I fly out of here into a world of dazzling colors. Shades no man ever saw before, fantastic reds and greens and . . . Oh, if only I could put those colors on paper. . . ."

I shook him hard. "Come on, cut the silly chatter! I've been sluggish and . . . and I want to know what's going on! What's your story, Parks?"

He blinked and tears started down his gaunt cheeks. "My story? Haven't you heard? I'm Robert Parks, the junkie artist. Utrillo . . . others, turned to drugs for inspiration and . . . My story is I came to Europe to study that elusive passion called art . . . and now I'm carrying the world's biggest monkey on my back . . . Oh God, what a lousy term; monkey-on-your-back. I have the whole darn zoo. . . ."

"Will you talk sense!" I slapped him. It wasn't much of a slap but his nose began to bleed and he crumpled in my arms. I let him fall on the cot. The watery eyes, the pale skin, all the sores and pinholes on his arms—he wasn't kidding about being on dope. Okay, that was his own private little red wagon and he had to pull it . . . but how did my passport fold into this mess? Far more important, how was I going to get past the goons outside and out of this dump?

I tried the door, as if doubting it would be locked. One of these heavy, old doors, real solid. I couldn't even shake it. Pulling the cot and Parks out of the way, I stood on the chair. The opening was about a foot square in a thick wall—far as I could see, which wasn't very far—we faced the sea. Squinting at the sun, I could see

part of the destroyer out in the harbor. Getting up on my toes for a moment, I had a slightly better view—of nothing. The room was on the top floor of one of these balconyless ancient buildings. Even if it was possible to climb out—and I couldn't even get my head through the opening—I'd be facing a sheer drop of several hundred feet.

I came down off my toes and rested. A cool sea breeze swept through the opening and the coolness calmed me down. One thing was for certain, I'd never be missed, there was no one to bother looking for me, even if they knew where I was. The only way out was to tangle with gangster-boy and the Judo-bartender. Perhaps if I could just talk to them, explain I didn't know which end was up in this deal, that I was the innocent by . . .

There were dragging sounds outside the room. The heavy door swung open for a second—the big blonde was flung into the room, landing hard on the stone floor as the door slammed shut again. She was a rough sight—they'd worked her over. The fleshy face, never pretty, was bruised, one eye already puffed shut and turning a deep purple.

Noel lay on the floor, whimpering and moaning. I glanced at

Parks—still out cold on the cot—then crossed the room to an old pipe and faucet sticking out of the floor in one corner. Noel was wearing a flair-skirt and thin-blouse. I tore off a hunk of the ripped skirt, seeing a lot of heavy thigh, wet it and ran the damp rag over her face. Her good eye finally came open, blinked up at me. She said in hysterical French, "We thought you would come with the police! Now we all die!"

"Take it slow. What do you mean you thought I'd bring the police?"

"They are going to kill him." She nodded toward Parks. "He's a childish fool but I want no part of murder. When he is not high with the drug, he understands his situation. He offered me \$5000 to help him escape. I thought a good plan would be to switch passports with another American—you came along. We thought you would go to your Consulate, remember the club, and bring the police. But you *had* to come alone."

"Why didn't you go directly to the police? Why bring me in?"

Noel sat up and felt of herself as if taking inventory, then waved her fingers. "And end up in jail? Or be dead, if any of the gang escaped the police. This way, no one would know it was me, and Robert agreed that once the police

came, in private, he would urge them to let me off. Then with the money I could return to my home in Corsica. Now all is lost. You don't know these swine, they'll kill us without a second's hesitation . . ."

"I think I got all your French, Noel, but let's do it once more, from the start. What gang, and why do they want to kill Parks?"

"They used to deal in the black-market, run a brothel. Now all that is done. This fool, an artist he says, came in drunk some two months ago. He tried a shot of heroin—for what you call kicks. Then he returned for another shot. But made the mistake—boasting of his wealth—he had over \$6000 in travelers checks and a letter of credit for another \$10,000. They kept him drunk and in a few days forced the habit on him—strong. Then they keep him prisoner and sell him the junk, cashing his checks after he signs them, someplace in Tangier. He has about \$500 in checks left—when that is finished they plan to give him a big overdose, which will kill him. I do not know if they can use the letter of credit, even in Tangier, but \$6000 is a good haul. My job was to . . . take care of his . . . other wants." The good eye in her large face grew misty. "That I didn't mind . . . nor did I have

any choice. I must do anything they say, this is the kind of pigmen they are. To them I am not even a woman but only for laughs, a big clown. But when I knew of the murder they have in mind . . . well, Roberto and I figured out this plan. It didn't work."

"Some plan!" I muttered, trying to think. With a "plan" like that . . . I wondered if she was on the stuff, too. "Noel, if we get the gangster . . .?"

"Henri?"

"Yeah, Henri, if that's the handsome one. Suppose you start hollering and when he comes in I'll jump him, try for his gun? Maybe we can then force him to let us go." As I mouthed the words I realized that wasn't much of a plan either.

She shook her pumpkin head, all the bright dyed-blond hair. "There are others—we would never leave the building alive. No, we three are done. Let us pray they at least will have the decency to kill us without torture . . . you have no idea of the beasts these swine are."

"I don't intend to find out," I said, mostly to myself. For a long time I sat there on the cold floor beside her, trying to force my alleged brains to come up with something. Noel pulled a compact out of her pocket, saw her bruised

face, and started to weep once more.

Perhaps a half hour passed—it seemed like a day—before Parks came around. He ran a hand over his nose, stared at the dried blood which came away in crumbs of red on his palm. His eyes seemed almost normal now, sunk deep into his head.

When he finally saw us he said, "I thought . . . I mean, I dreamt you were here. Really, I know it sounds asinine to say, but I am sorry to involve you in all this."

"Write it on a postal card to Henri—maybe he'll believe you! Parks, what do the French cops want you for?"

"Want me?"

I told him what the cop had said upon seeing his passport in the *cambio*. Parks scratched his ragged blonde hair as he said, "I imagine my lawyer—the executor of Dad's estate—not having heard from me in months, looked into the matter and found I was cashing travelers checks like crazy, probably suspects I'm in trouble—again. He might have asked the French authorities to look for me. Any chance this cop you hit will find us?"

"Nobody knows where I am. Have you ever tried to escape?"

He grinned, showing neat white teeth. "Naturally. For a few hours

now—between shots—I'll be okay. Not soaring, that wears off within fifteen minutes. But in two hours from now I'll need a fix . . . oh, my God, how I shall need one! But in my few normal hours I think only of escape. It's hopeless."

"What's below the little window?"

"Waterfront street. I know what you're thinking—I've tried standing on the chair and waving my arm, or waving part of my shirt. Nobody noticed. I once wrote FREE ALGERIA on a rag with Noel's eyebrow pencil—thinking that would bring the police. But the wind carried it away. You see, the damn wind is always blowing *in* from the sea. Why once I tried waving my pants out the window—first lighting the cuffs. The only result was filling this lousy room with smoke until I choked, and then a beating from Henri."

"How about throwing books, or something, out?"

"No, no. I've tried everything. Directly below there's only rocks and rubbish. You'd have to throw an object at least 200 feet or more straight out, for it to fall on the street. The main difficulty is you can't put your head through the opening, to see what you're doing. I suppose you realize what they have in store for all of us now?"

I nodded. Noel was still on the

floor, powdering the bruises on her big face. This was an odd time for vanity to . . . I suddenly grabbed the compact mirror from her thick hands. Standing on the chair again, I held the mirror at an angle *outside* the opening.

Parks got off the cot. "Say, do you think you can signal the warship in the harbor?"

I shook my head. But via the mirror I at least had a view of the area below. Directly back of the house were the rocks and garbage, then a narrow cobblestone street with a few push carts and passing cars. On the other side of the street more rocks and the sea. Two men were fishing from the rocks. I shouted at them.

Parks called up, "It's no use. I've stood up there and screamed myself hoarse—as the wind blew the words back down my throat and . . ."

I jumped down off the chair, holding the mirror carefully. "Listen, can you get this Henri in here? If he thought I was killing you would he come in?"

"I imagine so. I'm still worth \$550 to him—the last of my checks. That's a daily tug of war we play; he knows I need a fix and I know if I signed all my checks at one time, I'd be signing my death warrant. So we haggle over the price each day. Don't say it—I tried

signing my name and making a mistake in the spelling. Got me a beating. Henri is rough with his fists."

"Why do you sign *any* of the checks?"

Parks gave me a sad smile before he said, "Man, when that time comes— *I have to have a shot!* You don't know what urgent need and pain are until you're wanting a fix. Sometimes . . . I try to enjoy it . . . I mean, pure pain can be the most exquisite of sensations. But then, nothing remains in this world, no 'if' or 'buts,'—the sum of the entire world is simply getting *that* shot. If I can only get into a drug hospital, I have a good chance of kicking the habit. I haven't had the habit long, you see, or . . ."

I had no time for a narcotics lecture from this silly slob. Going over to the water pipe as Parks kept on talking—impressed by his own conversation—I tried to bend the pipe loose. Nothing gave. Noel stood up and put her 200 odd girlish pounds to it; together we broke off a wicked hunk of pipe. A small gusher came out of the broken end in the floor.

I told Parks, "Listen, here's the play: you start screaming and carrying on, yelling for help. When Henri comes in, I'm going to stiffen him with this pipe, take his

gun. Using Noel's mirror to see where I'm aiming, I think I can shoot from the window, attract the fisherman's attention."

"You mean shoot them?"

"Shoot around them. Anyway, at this distance a small automatic slug won't have power to more than nick 'em. Besides, I'm not that good a marksman. The idea is, they may get mad enough to call the cops."

We'd been talking in English but Noel understood enough to add in French, "But once the others hear the sound of scuffling, they will come in here and finish us."

I nodded. "That's your job, big honey. The second I clout Henri, you slam the door and lock it. These old doors are rugged, so let's pray they can't bust in here until the cops come . . . if they come."

Parks shook his head. "A far fetched plan which will . . ."

"When it comes to dizzy plans, your idea of having Noel exchange passports wins the silver bed pot! We haven't got much time—they may not bother with your last few checks, may knock us off any minute—either you start yelling . . . Or I'll give you something to really scream about!"

"I suppose it is better than having no plan," Parks said as he

crossed the wet floor to the door. "The water is delightfully cool. Lord, you know I haven't had a bath in weeks. I . . ."

"Come on, start yelling! Noel, you stay against that wall, ready to pull the key out, slam and lock the door," I told them, getting a good grip on the lead pipe, sweating at the thought I might be about to kill somebody.

Robert Parks started calling for help, crying he was being killed—his shrill voice carrying through the house. After awhile we heard steps rushing up the hallway outside. I motioned for Parks to get out of the way, back on his cot, as I suddenly wondered what I'd do if two of the goons showed.

A man's voice asked in English, "What is going on in there?"

"He's choking me," Parks wailed.

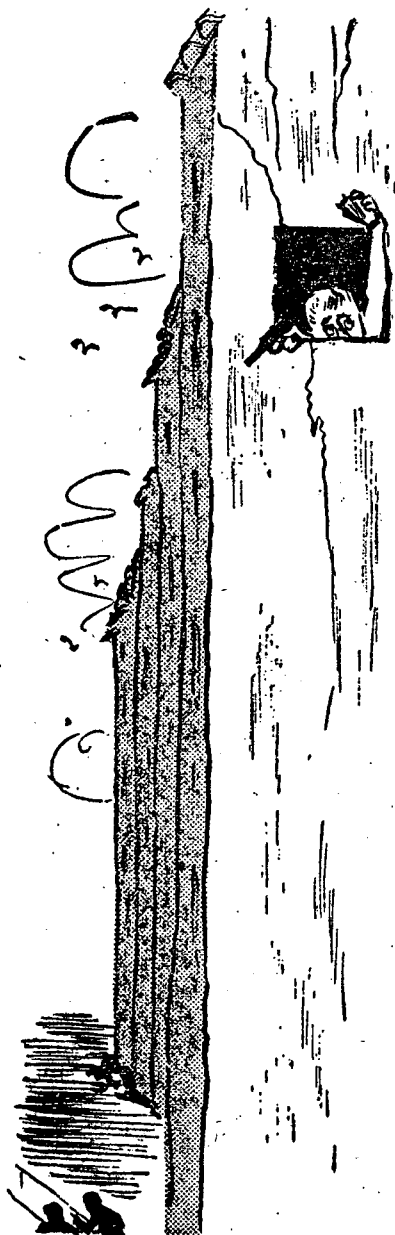
The door opened and Henri came dashing in, his little automatic out. Things happened fast, almost as in an old time slapstick movie—if I'd been in the mood for comedy. I stepped toward Henri, swinging the pipe like a baseball bat . . . I skidded on the watery floor and missed. He fired at me, the bark of the gun thundering in the tiny room, the bullet ricocheting from wall to wall like a crazed bee. Still skidding, my feet went out from under me and

I sat on the floor with a thud which forced me to let go of the pipe. Parks started toward Henri as he stopped to take careful aim at my head, but Noel suddenly hurled herself at the thug, flattening him. In the flash of a split second I saw she was bleeding badly at the shoulder as skinny Parks reached the door, got the key out, then strained to shut and lock it.

Rolling over in the water I grabbed Henri's wrist, trying not only for the gun but also to keep it from getting wet. He was groggy from the blonde's body-slam, and we wrestled for a moment. Just as I realized he was probably a pro as a wrestler too, and getting better as his head cleared—Noel found the pipe in the water and gave Henri a terrible whack across the side of his face. She started to tee off for another swing when Parks grabbed her hand, hanging on like a terrier.

Holding the gun, I stood up, told her to stop it. Henri's face seemed out of shape and before I could wonder if he was dead, Noel let out a small scream and sat in the water, holding her bloody shoulder, where the slug had hit her.

Parks and I helped her to the cot. It was a nasty wound, but still only a flesh cut. Tearing off more



of Noel's skirt, I asked Parks, "Can you make one of those Boy Scout things—a tourniquet?"

"I can try, using the key. You're bleeding, too."

Following his thin pointing finger, I saw blood on one side of my wet blue slacks—a pinkish spot slowly spreading like a faint water color wash. I picked parts of the broken compact mirror from my back pocket as I cursed my stupidity. But half of the mirror, a piece a few ragged inches long, was still intact.

Standing on the chair, I stuck my gun hand out the opening and held the mirror above my head with my left—like a trick shot in the circus. Henri had fired once, there probably were five shots left. In the mirror I studied the view below: a kid with a large plastic float was watching the fishermen as his mother motioned for him to walk on.

I waited for the boy to move. There were sounds in the hallway now, blows on the door. I didn't even turn to look. The little boy still stood next to one of the fishermen. Mama came over and slapped the kid's rear. He dropped the plastic float and jumped up and down, yelling—I guess. The fisherman touched his ear and said something to the woman.

The kid and mama disappeared

from my mirror view, leaving the brightly colored float. I aimed at the water directly in front of the nearest fisherman and fired. The bark of the gun was loud—in the opening in the wall—the breeze blowing a strong stench of acrid gun powder back at me. But nothing happened down below.

Parks called out, "Any luck?"

"No." I tried aiming again, not sure what I was doing. Vague fire pattern diagrams from army days flashed through my mind. I fired the next shot far over the fisherman's head, figuring I had to allow for the trajectory arc the slug made as it fell.

I thought I saw a splash in the sea but was too far away to be certain. Anyway, my fisherman didn't notice anything. With three bullets left, I had a foolish feeling I was merely wasting the precious shells. I lowered my arm, took a fast breath, and fired directly at the fisherman's back. The plastic float near him suddenly exploded. The fisherman jumped and looked around, even up toward me. The yelling kid appeared in my busted mirror again, along with mama who was waving her fist at the fishermen.

I called back into the room, "Get me some matches and a hunk of paper, or a rag—*toute suite!*"

Noel said there was a lighter in her pocket and Parks handed it up to me, along with more of her dress. Once a stripper always a stripper—it seemed. Carefully laying the gun on the bottom of the opening, I lit the cloth and hung it out the window. For a second the fisherman, now joined by his pal, kept staring down at the busted plastic float, arguing with mama. There was a great deal of hand-waving going on. As the flames started to lick my fingers, one of them looked up. Then they all were pointing up at our opening. Dropping the flaming cloth, I stuck the gun out, waved it. They probably couldn't tell it was a gun from down there. I fired a shot in the air. They were still looking our way, but no reaction. I fired the last shot at the legs of one of the fishermen.

I didn't hit him but they saw the orange fire of the shot. Mama hugged the still-crying kid to her as both men shook their fists at me. I kept waving the small automatic around, holding it by the trigger guard so more of the gun was visible. A small crowd gathered.

Shoving my arm out as far as possible, I heaved the gun at them, kept waving my hand in a come-on-gesture. A man left the crowd for the junkyard back of the

house, but I couldn't see if he found the gun. My arm weighed a ton. I climbed down off the chair.

Half-naked Noel was on the cot, reminding me of a beaten pug gone to lard, holding the tourniquet around her thick left shoulder. Parks stood in the water on the floor, ridiculously thin and pale in his soiled shorts as he concentrated on wiggling his toes. Henri was on his back and alive, tiny bubbles of light red foam breaking over his lips. The racket out in the hall was going full blast—it seemed to me at least three guys were trying to break down the door, calling Henri's name in French, English, and Spanish.

Parks gave me a sickly grin. "How's our chances?"

"Nobody would give odds on us."

The door shuddered as they began banging against it with some heavy object. Then they fired a couple of shots, but despite movies to the contrary, it's difficult to shoot out a lock. I stood on the chair again, held up my busted mirror for an outside view—the road and rocks were completely empty of people now!

Parks must have read what I was thinking on my face, for he shrugged as he said, "Oh well, I doubt if I would have made the grade as a true artist, anyhow."

"Who cares what you . . .!" The rest of the angry words died in my sore mouth. There was a sudden and heavy silence outside our door—I had a feeling of men crouching out there—followed by a volley of shots farther down the hallway; a short scream outside the door, footsteps in flight, more thick silence . . . then the sound of many and new steps.

Noel touched Parks with a wide foot. "The *flics*! Do not fail me, keep your promise!"

Parks nodded, pale eyes on the door.

In the hallway a man shouted in French, "We are the police—open at once!"

I glanced at Noel and Parks: all had the same thought—this could be a trick. We didn't move or make a sound. Minutes later came this crash and the old door burst open: four sweaty cops in their odd blue shirts and white helmets, stood there; guns drawn. They were indeed a lovely sight. . . . I blew a kiss at them.

Parks let out a shrill, childish, giggle.

The rest was one crazy blur. There were patient explanations on our part to the four cops, then to some police sergeant, then once more to a higher police official,

and again to a doctor. Finally the three of us were taken downstairs and through the crowd outside to a police station. Noel and Parks were taken from there in an ambulance while I told our story again. About this time a clean-cut type with brushed grey hair, from the American consulate, appeared and I had to tell him my tale. Then for a short time I was left alone and I think I dozed off, only to be shaken awake by a huffy French police bigwig who told me I could get some clean clothes, as I had requested.

While I couldn't recall requesting anything, I was driven back to my hotel in what passed for a French squad car, with its sing-song horn working as a siren. I had two burly cops with me at all times.

On the way back to the police station I felt a little better wearing my "other" suit—another sport shirt and old slacks. As we passed the American Express office on the Promenade, I asked my beefy guards if I could stop—I still wanted to cash my damp checks. To my surprise they said okay. We marched in, making a scene for the tourists to write about on their postal cards. I explained why the checks were damp and at long last cashed all of them. I also picked up my mail—there was an

airmail from my agent—I'd sold a book and would get a two grand advance in a few weeks. The good news didn't start any bells of joy ringing in my aching head, although it meant I could stay over for another year, perhaps longer.

At the police station they left me in the bare room again, but I was too jumpy for sleep. Robert Parks came in. Dressed and shaved he didn't look too bad, although his eyes had that mixed-up watery look again. He said, "I have to ask you for one last favor. Do you know the American colony here?"

"After a fashion. Why?"

"I've chartered a plane. In two hours I'm taking off from the Nice airport, flying directly to the big drug hospital in Lexington, Ky. I'll be there early tomorrow morning. They've given me a small shot, but in about five or six hours I'll need a fix and . . . Hiring a French male nurse means red-tape, perhaps another day. But I must have somebody with me. I'll pay . . ."

"What happened to Noel?"

"She's off the hook. I gave her the money I promised and she's probably already on her way home. The point is, do you know any American—man—who wants to go back to the States? I'll make it worth his while."

"I'll go."

"Oh no, no. Please, you've done enough. I've put you to so much trouble I can't possibly ever repay you or . . ."

"Shut up; I'm not thinking of you. I want to go home." As soon as I said the last five words, the fog I'd been in for weeks lifted. I felt relaxed. Then I knew what had been wrong with me—when I could call a lovely country like France moth-eaten, I'd had it. *It was time I went home.*

"I've already caused you . . ."

"I'm going with you. That's settled! I can pick up my few things on the way to the airport."

"But are you sure you want to go?" A slightly puzzled look came over the blank eyes.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

When he left I was alone for another few minutes, then clean-cut came in, scowling a bit. He told me, "Quite rightly, the French take a very dim view of your striking one of their police officers. They in-

sist that if you hadn't bolted, they would have found Parks without all the shooting. I did my best, tried to explain the circumstances under which you took a . . . eh . . . poke at the officer, but . . . There's nothing more I can do at the moment. They've given you 48 hours in which to leave France. I'm sorry. Go to Italy and I shall try my best to . . . What are you smiling at? This is hardly a joke, or the time for . . ."

Suddenly I was laughing, real solid, old-fashioned laughter. When I was able to talk, I told him, "Thanks for trying, but they're 46 hours late. I'm flying back with Parks in a few hours."

"Go to Italy, or Spain. I mean you understand the French only have authority to make you leave here, but that you don't have to return to the States?"

I merely nodded. I could never make him know how much I *had* to go back to the States . . . home:



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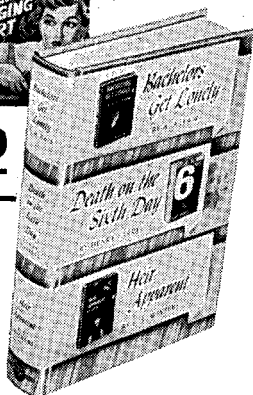
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