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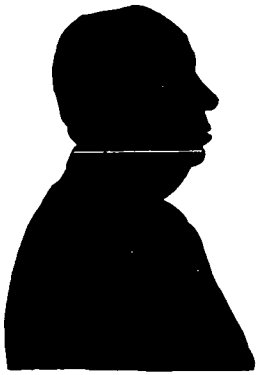
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE



Dear Readers:

As you know, I was born and raised in England . . . where the national sport is cricket. During the years I have spent in the United States, I have transferred my allegiance, and affections to your national sport, baseball.

I must admit to some confusion about home bases, however, for I find it difficult to follow the Major League shifts; the St. Louis Browns to Baltimore; and the Boston Braves to Milwaukee; not to mention the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles, and the Giants to San Francisco! The Senators have deserted Washington for the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Los Angeles has welcomed The Angels, and the National League started the 1962 season with the new Mets, who have taken over the Giants' old home base on Coogans Bluff, while the Colts have settled in Texas. To add to my confusion, there are all those minor leagues, semi-pros, for the most part, Little Leagues, Pony Leagues, Midget Leagues, not to mention the sand-lot ball played on vacant lots.

One big question which bothers me, I put to you, dear readers, for answer. As I understand it, baseballs are covered with horsehide. I so seldom see a horse nowadays, that I wonder WHERE OH WHERE does the horsehide come from, to cover all those baseballs?

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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MARGUERITE BLAIR DEACON, *Art Director*

DEAR MARSHALL:

Enjoyed the visit. Glad your trip coincided with my vacation. But you should have stayed over another day. Pete Gonzales pulled a 146-pound tarpon out of the Gulf where we spent that last day fishing. Anyway, your faith in the location, barely out of sight of the Coast Guard light on Panama Key, was justified.

The Langborn murder broke the day after I reported back to work. Knowing that your interest in police work has been more than academic since your days as a crime reporter (and as comfort when you think of that 146-pounder) I'm going to tell you about the Langborn case. Because one detail in it is unique, and I don't use the word lightly. Nothing like it has ever turned up in the history of police work and I doubt that it will ever happen again.

The Langborn of whom I speak was the crotchety old cuss, Carson Langborn. Just in case the name isn't familiar to you, he was a West Virginia coal mine operator who retired and came here about six years ago. A cantankerous citizen, he was forever pestering the city manager. Too many street lights were wasting electricity, or there was too much horn-blowing on our downtown streets. Nothing was done in City Hall without his vociferous opposition. His disposition was as gloomy as the damp burrows he caused to be made in the earth.

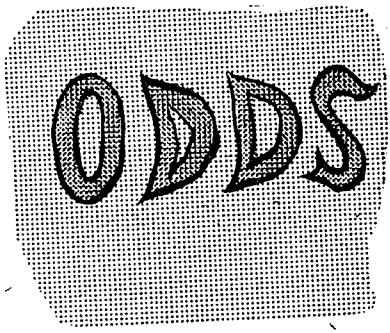
He was married six times, and even the best of his wives was unable to stay with him. The sixth, a Mary Scorbin, died of a sudden illness, making a dramatic escape from his tyranny.

All of his marriages were childless, although Mary Scorbin Langborn had a son by a previous marriage. His name was Gary. He

By some diabolical scheme of higher mathematical calculation, the odds against a certain variation are said to be two billion against one! Don't wager on it, is my advice.

was a good-looking youth, dark, slender, rangy, with a suggestion of whip-like strength in his sinews.

Conditioned by twenty years of police work, my instincts didn't react favorably to Gary. There was a brooding in his face, a coldness



in his eyes. He struck me as having more sneering contempt than conscience for the unimportant nonenities comprising the remainder of the human race.

I recognized the material groundlessness of my aversion to the twenty-year-old Gary, and I determined not to let it color my actions. As a police officer, it was my job to remain objective and impartial.

The old man and Gary were living alone on the Langborn estate prior to the murder. Gary discovered the body, called us, and was waiting quietly and unemotionally when we arrived.

A squad car, radioed out, was the first to reach the Langborn home. Following the two uniformed cruiser men were Marty Sims and myself in a black sedan assigned to the detective division. Close on our exhaust fumes were Rynold from the lab and Doc Jenkins, elected coroner just this year.

The house was an ugly, sterile, two-story wooden structure reminiscent of a large Georgia or South Carolina farm. The dormer windows stared bleakly at us. I

wouldn't have been surprised if Langborn had added lightning rods at the ends of the gable.

On the long front porch, leaning idly against a wooden post, stood Gary Scorbin. He took his cigarette from his lips and flicked it in the yard.

"The old man's in there."

Gary followed as Marty and I went inside. Langborn had seemingly transported his parlor from a much earlier West Virginia home. The furnishings were heavy and dark, out of keeping with our sunny clime.

"This way," Gary said in the manner of an impersonal guide.

Langborn had met his end in a room off the parlor. I suppose it was his study. There was a desk, leather couch and chairs, bookcase, a low chest—and a wall safe. I saw the safe before I saw Langborn. The safe had been ripped open.

"He kept three or four thousand in there," Gary said. "I warned him."

As I moved deeper in the room, I saw Langborn. The desk had obscured him. An old, dried-up hank of bones in his clothes, he lay as if he had pitched face forward. The side of his cheek touched the carpet. All the gray, brown-blotched skin of his face had collapsed against his skull. A single bullet had entered the back of his head. It remained in his brain.

The room remained very quiet as Rynold and Doc Jenkins came in. The two uniformed officers remained on guard, one at the door of the room, one on the porch.

Rynold marked the position of the cadaver (a very apt word, in its connotations, for this particular corpse) and started taking pictures. Doc chewed on his cigar and went to one knee beside the corpse.

As you know, there are few outward dramatics at such a scene. On the surface, it's a cut-and-dried job. Details are recorded, in brains and on paper. Each man knows his job and wastes few motions. The inner meaning of the scene depends on a man's individual reaction to death. There is no better reminder that you are mortal, and there is violence in the world.

"Been dead three, four hours is my preliminary estimate," Doc said. "No doubt the bullet killed him."

Marty had searched for the gun. "No murder weapon in here."

Rynold went over the empty safe for fingerprints. I motioned Gary Scorbin to the parlor. He obeyed quickly enough, but he was able to impart in his action a suggestion of insolence.

"Is everything in there just as you found it?"

"Yeah, I guess it is."

"You touch anything?"

He shrugged. "The old man. I half turned him, saw he was dead, let him fall back. Started to look in the safe, but didn't touch it. Thought you'd want to look for fingerprints."

"Any servants here?"

"Nope, just the old skinflint. Woman comes in three times a week to clean. Today wasn't one of her days."

"Better fill me in on your movements today."

Again he shrugged. I was to learn that he used the gesture habitually. He managed to make it irritating. "I got up. The old man hit the deck couple hours before, about eight. We squabbled, as usual. I told him to go to hell and went down the beach."

"Spend the whole day there?"

"The afternoon," he said.

"See anyone you know?"

That shrug. "Why should I? I didn't know he was going to get bumped off. I got no alibi, if that's what you mean. I guess people saw me here and there."

"I suggest you turn a couple of them up."

He looked at me levelly. He had heavy brows and thick, dark lashes a woman would have envied. "You want 'em, you turn 'em up. I don't have to prove anything, now do I?"

I endured the urge to give him the back of my hand across the petulant lips.

"What did you do all afternoon?"

"Drank beer. Watched some guys fish off the causeway. Swam at the public beach. Came home. Found the old twister and hollered for the law." His tone was flat, telling me I could like it or lump it. In either event I was going to have to swallow it.

"You and Mr. Langborn argue often?"

His shoulders rose and fell. "All the time."

"What about?"

"Money. Me getting a job."

"You don't work?"

"Why should I? He's got . . . He had plenty."

"You know," I said. "It's a wonder he didn't throw you out."

His laugh revealed complete lack of fear of me and total disregard for my opinion. "When you got right down to it, he was scared. I could see right through him. I was the only one who ever stood up to him. He'd disposed of everybody he'd ever had. I was all he had left."

Gary stretched and yawned, the back of his hand against his mouth. "You all finished?"

"For now, maybe. You see any strangers around, any suspicious characters?"

"Nope."

"No one leaving the house as you approached?"

"Nope."

"Any idea who might have done this?"

"Nope."

"Who knew about the safe, beside you and Mr. Langborn?"

"How should I know? People up and down the beach, I guess. You know word of a miser gets around."

"A miser doesn't usually broadcast the location of his strongbox," I said.

My meaning was clear, and he got it. "Look, pal, the secret wasn't so sacred with me."

In satisfied repose, his face was clean-cut, boyish. Those lashes gave it innocence. I'll admit I was frightened, in a strange, chilling way. More frightened by this boy than by a professional criminal.

Up and down the beach he'd gone, telling of the safe and its contents, hoping the fact would eventually fall on sufficiently greedy and unprincipled ears . . .

I'm not easily shocked, but this shocked me, this invitation for some hoodlum or narcotics addict to rob and kill a hated and rich stepfather. It was as clever as it was cowardly and mean, and the boy was legally in the clear.

"You want me," he said, "I'll be at the Pelican Motel on the beach."

Rynold reported there were no fingerprints on the safe. It had been wiped clean. But we found the murder weapon a short while later, in a storm drain two dozen yards from the house where the murderer had tossed it.

It was a .32 caliber revolver, one shot fired, loaded with jacketed slugs. Our later checkup showed the gun was unregistered, bought in a pawn shop or back booth of a dingy bar somewhere. Which made it untraceable.

Sims and I stayed close to Rynold as he went over the gun for fingerprints. As on the Langborn safe—none. Wiped clean.

Then Rynold, rating A-plus, carefully ejected the unfired bullets. On one of them we found a single print, put there when the gun had been loaded, perhaps days before the opportunity came to use it.

Rynold methodically ran a ballistics, and clinched it. The gun had killed Carson Langborn.

While I attempted a fingerprint identification, Sims and a small crew of men fine-combed the Langborn neighborhood.

Our first findings were negative. I was unable to match the

print with any on file here, in Tampa, Miami, or Tallahassee.

Sims was unable to find any evidence of strangers or suspicious characters in the neighborhood the day of the murder. His search extended to the bars and joints on the beach, to the questioning of every known hoodlum he laid hands on. He got nowhere. No thug was spending beyond his means. No hoodlum had boasted drunkenly in his cups. Stool pigeons were all as helpful as blank paper.

Meanwhile, the youth drank beer and swam at the Pelican's private strip of Gulf beach.

And I, as officer in charge of the investigation, was faced by the absolute paradox. For when I sent that print to Washington, it was readily identified.

It belonged to a man named Clement J. Smith.

He lived in Napa, Idaho.

During World War II he had worked at White Sands, New Mexico where the FBI had fingerprinted him and given him top clearance.

He was a leading citizen in his community.

He had never heard of Carson Langborn. He had never been in West Virginia or in Florida.

He was beyond suspicion. Everything about him was known and could be proven. He'd been busy conducting his own affairs at the moment Langborn, a stranger among millions, was murdered.

In short, a fingerprint (which doesn't lie) had turned up in an utterly impossible time and place.

Surely, someone had made a mistake. I accused Rynold, and in our frustration, we almost argued. Then I double-checked with Washington.

The possibility of mistake was eliminated. The final conference between Rynold, Sims, and myself lasted nearly two hours in my office. We dredged up every explanation our minds could devise.

Finally, Sims said haggardly, "We're losing sight on the case. I think we better back out of this hole and take a fresh start on solving Langborn's murder."

"How about the fingerprint?" Rynold persisted.

"Relegate it to the Fortian heap of facts science can't explain," Sims said.

"Science can explain any material fact with sufficient data," Rynold said. "If an explanation fails, it's because the data . . ."

"Trouble with you microscope-lookers," Sims said, "is that you trot out your good guesses, then cover your ignorance with excuses."

I cut in: "You've given me an

idea, Marty, and a good one, too."

"Yeah?"

"Well, both of you. You with your talk about getting on with the Langborn case, and Rynold with his talk of data."

Both of them gave me their attention.

"That boy killed his stepfather," I said. "Everything so far makes it more glaringly apparent. If it had been simple robbery and murder, we'd have heard some whisper, however faint, as thoroughly as we've covered this thing.

"We know what happened. He scattered the tale of the secret hoard in the old man's safe to give him the subtlest of alibis. He slipped unseen to the house, killed the old man, ripped the safe open —wearing gloves—and slipped back to the beach. Later, he returned, supposedly discovered Langborn, and called us. He probably destroyed the money in the safe. The amount was of no moment, compared to what he would inherit.

"And here we were, helpless. He's as cunning as any man we've ever faced. If he'd tried to set up an alibi for the exact time of the old man's death, all we'd have to do is crack it and we'd have him cold. As it is, he's dependent on nothing and no one but himself. No alibi witnesses for us to work on, no secrets about his relations between him and Langborn for us to turn up. He swims and enjoys his beer while we beat ourselves to a frazzle trying to find proof that'll stand up in court."

I started toward the door. "Come on, Marty. Let's see if we can't crack this young tiger."

"How about the fingerprint?" Rynold said, unable to get it off his mind.

"I hope," I said, "we can make it work for us."

The boy was rolling with a grace of a porpoise a quarter-mile offshore when Marty and I reached the water's edge.

I cupped my hands and yelled Gary's name. He swam in and stood up in shallow water, his hide sleek and burnished.

He came out and walked to the spot where he'd spread a large beach towel on the sand. He picked up a smaller towel, dried his hands, and stooped to get cigarettes and matches.

"Have you made any arrangements about your stepfather, Gary?" I asked.

"Going to plant him tomorrow, if you release the body. I called the undertaker and told him to attend to it."

"Aren't you going to ask why we're here, if we've arrested someone?"

"I really don't care, flatfoot. Your arrests don't interest me."

"This one will."

"Yeah?"

"We're going to arrest you, Gary, and take you to headquarters and have a look at your fingerprints."

He looked from Marty to me.

"If you're trying to scare me, forget it."

"I'd know better than to try and scare you, Gary. Anyway, you wiped the fingerprints off the gun."

"What's fingerprints got to do with it?"

"Well, somebody loaded the gun and then some time passed. And then he used the gun. He remembered to wipe it clean—but in the stress of the moment, he forgot that there might have been a print on one of the bullets."

Marty and I moved on him from different angles. He backed a step. He dropped his cigarette. "What kind of bluff . . ."

"No bluff, Gary," I said. "Just a single fingerprint on a bullet. If you're innocent . . ."

He kicked sand in my face, ducked past Marty, and ran down the beach. The bright sun shone on his fleeing figure, the pastel pink of the Pelican, and the pastel aqua of a convertible on the edge of the motel's parking lot. He was angling toward the convertible, a track man neither Marty nor I could come anywhere matching.

Marty dropped to one knee, pulled his revolver and fired over the boy's head.

The bullet gave Gary fresh speed.

Marty took careful aim. His second shot tore a piece of flesh from

Gary's thigh. The boy pitched forward and went rolling.

Later, in a cell, Gary decided to trade a signed confession for a chance of escaping the chair. We still use the electric chair in our state, and the thought of it filled him with a particular horror. His story pretty well coincided with our conclusions.

I'm not at all sure we needed the confession. The fingerprint nailed it down for us. That's right. His print was a perfect match for the one Rynold discovered on the bullet.

And what of Clement J. Smith, a stranger nearly a continent away, an unknown among millions?

The explanation is simple. His print matched also.

You may recall that Bertillon himself, the great French anthropologist who laid the groundwork for the system, recognized the mathematical possibility of duplicate fingerprints. The odds against it are about two billion to one.

But the laws of chance are undeniable, and in a way, I suppose, what happened here was inevitable, somewhere, sometime.

So perhaps it isn't as unique as I'd like to think. I've no way of knowing how many millions upon millions of fingerprints have been taken throughout the world in all the long decades during which the science has been in use.

I only know that Clement Smith and Gary Scorbin possessed the first known two-billionth digits in common.

I'll give Pete Gonzales your compliments on the 146-pounder.

Your friend,

R. D. Singer—Captain
Detective Division

P. S. Maybe the Langborn case will suggest a story to you. Not being a writer, I wouldn't know how to work it up. I imagine you'll think of the Clement J. Smith angle. He was lucky. But what if, tomorrow or two hundred years from now, another two-billionth print led to an accusation against a guy who wasn't so clearly innocent as Smith? Now wouldn't he be in a mess?

SIR, you appear to be a gentleman of taste and discrimination, such a man as I believe myself to be. I am informed that you are a psychiatrist and this training should add to your insight and wisdom. I have refused to make my confession in the presence of the police. They are dull, unimaginative clods, quite incapable of understanding the sensitivities that come with refinement and breeding. Sir, I am a

In these days of weight-control by wafer or flavored beverage, some of you will no doubt find this story far-fetched. But those among you who, like myself, are gourmets, will be completely in sympathy with the narrator.

murderer. I admit the fact. But many fastidious men have been preoccupied with violent death. I consider it no disgrace to be a member of their ranks. Nor do I hope to escape the penalty involved. However, I see no reason to invite the mockery, the crude guffaws, perhaps the disbelief of the uncouth minions of the law who until your arrival were my inquisitors.

I must tell you about Yvette, but first it becomes necessary to speak a few words about myself. My lineage is one of distinction and I am naturally aware of the social prestige attached to my family name. The question therefore arises why I should have married Yvette who was not only nine years my senior but also a woman whose rather coarse appearance indicated, with accuracy, her French peasant stock.

But I am getting ahead of my story. Of my youth, let it suffice to say that it was spent in luxurious loneliness. My father was too preoccupied with his business interests to give me more than a passing thought. My mother was a woman of artistic temperament who attempted to instill in me her love of art, music and poetry. In retrospect it seems as though my entire boyhood was spent in museums, literary salons and art galleries. Mother virtually commuted from Boston to Europe and I invariably accompanied her. True, there were a few brief intervals in private schools but these interludes are filled with painful memories. Grubby dormitories, the juvenile atrocities of the playing fields and the public humiliation of the classroom were not for me. Worst of all was the tasteless refectory food. Before long I would fall ill and mother, taking pity on my misery, would swoop down and remove me from my sordid surroundings.

By and large, my education was supervised by a series of tutors who coached me in languages, art and music. Not altogether successfully, I must admit. My talents are limited. I am a connoisseur rather than a creative artist. Nevertheless, under this irregular tutelage, I did gain an admission to one of our better universities. I was not happy there. The conditions that prevail at such institutions are deplorably primitive, especially in the matter of food. I withdrew in my sophomore year.

My mother and I resumed our travels. Although I may be considered a failure, there was one area in which I had become an expert. My judgment in the culinary arts was impeccable. Wherever mother and I went, be it Paris, Rome or Vienna, I was able to ferret out little out-of-the-way restaurants

where the cuisine was superb. Mother and her friends always deferred to my judgment and I never led them astray.

My father's demise passed almost unnoticed but mother's death six years ago came as a severe blow, especially as it was accompanied by the shocking knowledge that the family fortune had dwindled to a point of almost non-existence. Through a series of circumstances too elaborate to recount, I found myself stranded in New York, saddled with an unpleasant job that paid me a mere pittance. New York has always seemed to me a coldly hostile city. Certainly it was not designed for a man of my sensibilities.

I had never possessed the knack of easy friendships and now I was quite alone. Night after night I wandered about the city, seeking the side streets in the hope of finding cosy little restaurants where fine foods would be served. Invariably I was disappointed. Time and again I would rush out of restaurants in a rage, the food barely tasted. Everything was wrong, the sauces abominable, the legumes overcooked, bread and pastries either a puffy mess or hard as shoe leather.

Life was intolerable until one night I stumbled by chance on a winding side street in Greenwich Village and a wooden sign that read Chez Yvette. I wandered in without hope. The place was dark and dreary with small tables lit only by candles thrust into the necks of Chianti bottles. The menu was in French but I had been fooled too often for this to arouse my expectations. My spirits were dampened further by the drab slattern of a waitress who took my order.

I selected fillets of sole au gratin. It is a simple dish which even the inexpert cook should be able to prepare tolerably well. The restaurant was almost empty and I tapped my foot with impatience over the long delay. At length the waitress returned with a covered tray. As soon as the lid was lifted I knew that I found what I had sought for so long, a cook who was absolute mistress of her craft. The sole could not have been better. The sauce Provencale was exquisite, the forcemeat stuffing a dream. The vintage wine which accompanied the meal was perfection.

I could scarcely believe my good fortune and I demanded to be taken to the kitchen to present my compliments to the cook. Yvette was standing by the stove, her black hair straggly, her swarthy face beaded with sweat. She was an enormous woman, her shapeless figure encased in a rusty black dress, her thick legs covered with

black cotton stockings. But to me she was beautiful. I kissed her on both cheeks and hugged her.

Yvette was delighted to find an appreciative customer. Soon we were talking a mile a minute, both ecstatic in our discoveries. From then on I rarely missed a night at Chez Yvette. She prepared all sorts of delicacies for me, sweetbreads à la Brunilesco, lobster à la Borgia, galantine of capon à la Persano. She would hover over me while I dined and often, after the front lights had been dimmed, she would join me over a glass of wine or black coffee served with the most delectable of French pastries.

She was a treasure and I could not let her go but unfortunately my reserve of cash was running low. Yvette's flair for cookery did not dim the shrewd financial calculations which were an essential characteristic of her French peasant ancestry. I was well fed but I paid through the nose, and I could not afford to pay much longer. Yvette sensed my dilemma and it was she who struck the bargain. One evening after we had dined, she suggested that I stay the night. I was already in her debt and I could scarcely refuse. When the restaurant was closed, I followed her to her room above the kitchen with considerable reluctance.

We undressed in the dark and I slipped into the oldfashioned, four-poster bed beside her. My misgivings were groundless. Yvette's approach to love was direct and forthright. My previous experience with fashionably slender young women of my acquaintance seemed, by comparison, shallow, bloodless, pale carbon copies of passion.

The next week we were married. At first the marriage was a happy one. Shortly afterward I came into a small legacy which I invested in enlarging the restaurant and in advertising. Soon we were doing a thriving business. The discriminating, with a few paid plugs from columnists, found their way to our door. Yvette continued to cook. I

decorated an upper room and held a sort of informal court here. The room was open only to gourmets who sought my advice in the selection of their dishes. Yvette and I planned the meals together. Often I spent the mornings scouring the markets for the necessary ingredients for the day's bill of fare.

The restaurant became the very core of my existence. It gave me dignity and stature as a man. I loved it and I loved Yvette because she was an integral part of it. I was happier than I had ever been.

Then tragedy struck without warning. Yvette had complained of aches and pains, of exhaustion at night. I advised a medical check-up but Yvette's reluctance to pay a doctor's fee restrained her from following my advice until she actually collapsed in the kitchen.

Yvette returned from the clinic gray-faced and shaken. Her excessive weight had brought on a coronary condition complicated by incipient diabetes. The doctor had prescribed a rigorous diet. Yvette had protested.

"You have no choice," he told her. "Either diet or die."

Yvette was a determined woman. Once convinced that dieting was a necessity, she approached her problem with rock-like fortitude. No longer did she sip the vichyssoise which she prepared, or slip a strawberry tart from the tray into her mouth.

Yvette's reduction in weight was phenomenal. Within a few months she was scarcely recognizable as the fat, jolly, easy-going woman I had married. Her figure became slim and solid; her face, planed down, showed a fine bold bone structure. I would not say that she was beautiful. The descriptive word handsome might apply better. Certainly she was striking. Deprived of her interest in food, she became impassioned with her appearance which she had previously neglected. She was rigorously corseted, her hair coiffed with painstaking care and she became adept in the use of make-up.

My coterie of friends congratulated me on the change but soon they began to drift away from Chez Yvette. More and more my wife became indifferent to the preparation of those dishes which had given a certain fame to the restaurant. She hired a chef of mediocre talents and her supervision was limited to seeing that he prepared the day's menu with the maximum of economy.

With the change in her appearance came a complete alteration of her personality. She had always been thrifty but now she developed a mean, niggardly streak. She substituted dried mushrooms for the

fresh ones required in Allemande sauce. She even mixed pig's liver in the pate de foie gras and, most frightful of all, employed margarine in the preparation of vegetables. My protests were without avail. Soon she was serving smaller portions and, one by one, she eliminated the dishes requiring long preparation and expensive ingredients.

Our exclusive clientele dropped off but Yvette was not disturbed. The restaurant was being filled by a new type of customer, tourists with barbarian tastes, clerks and typists from nearby office buildings, hoi-polloi from the housing development in the next block. Yvette moved from the kitchen to the cashier's desk. She made a careful survey of the neighborhood's desires and came up with a menu of salads, sandwiches and business men's special blue plates.

Our personal relations deteriorated rapidly. Previously she had deferred to my judgments and I had believed that she considered herself fortunate indeed in finding a husband of refined tastes and superior social position. But now I was a supernumerary. She did not trust me with the marketing but attended to all purchases herself. Our marriage was disintegrating. Her pliancy and docility disappeared. By bedtime she was usually too exhausted by the day's labor and her rigorous diet to respond to my overtures and on such occasions as she did, she tended to be harsh, demanding, and even critical of my male prowess.

Before long my affection for her changed to hate. I could not stand the sight of her bold, hawk-like features. Her eyes which had seemed jolly in their casements of flesh, now had a predatory gleam. But all these shortcomings might have been tolerable were it not for the fact that the food became increasingly execrable. Yvette had developed into a fanatic in the matter of diet. Like the reformed drunkard, she sought converts with a crusader's zeal. The room which had once been reserved exclusively for myself and my friends was changed into a health bar.

It was bad enough not to be able to get a proper meal in my own home but Yvette did not stop at that. She constantly nagged at me for what she termed an excessive interest in food. She plied me with carrot juice, cottage cheese and rye crisp and, when I spurned them, made derogatory remarks concerning my expanding waistline.

My quest for gastronomic pleasure led me far afield but with only the most miniscule success until I discovered the Golden

Cock and Germaine Duval. The Golden Cock was on the East Side in the upper Seventies, a shabby basement affair which one could pass a thousand times and hardly notice. But where else in the city could one secure such exquisitely prepared tomato and shrimp soup or cabbage à la petite russienne?

Germaine was even larger than Yvette when I had first known her, and, I should judge, a few years older. Her hair was peroxided an incredible yellow but her cheeks were smooth and pink, her eyes a pale blue. I will not say that it was love at first sight but there was a reciprocated attraction born of a common interest. In the realm of gastronomy, Germaine was a prima donna who craved the applause of a virtuoso to exploit her talents. As such we complemented each other perfectly. Happiness once more seemed within my reach.

Yvette, however, proved difficult. She bitterly resented my evenings out. She controlled the purse strings and drew them tight. Willy-nilly, I must be satisfied with the insipid fare of the Chez Yvette and my wife's dwindling charms. Yvette was a good Catholic and divorce was out of the question. On occasion I pilfered the cash box and spent a night with Germaine but Yvette developed a positive genius in thwarting these excursions. Without a penny in my pocket, I would be forced to take the table reserved for me in the health bar where Yvette would serve me a tomato surprise, wheat germ bread and a serving of artificially flavored gelatine.

Is it any wonder that my thoughts turned to murder? As you can readily see, I am not a man to whom violence comes naturally. I have never discharged a firearm and the thought of using a knife or the proverbial blunt instrument was enough to set my teeth on edge. Poison was the only conceivable means of ridding myself of Yvette's unwanted ministrations. I considered the possibilities. Arsenic. Cyanide. Both were too obvious. Besides, how could I secure them without leaving a trail or administer them without arousing suspicion? I brooded over my problem but could find no answers until Yvette herself provided the perfect solution.

Our bedroom had taken on much the appearance of an apothecary shop. The tops of Yvette's bureau and dresser were crammed with boxes and bottles of pills and capsules. Yvette subscribed to various papers and magazines, cutting out all articles relating to drugs used in reducing and dietary aids. A number of patrons of the restau-

rant were on diets and Yvette held long discussions with them, comparing the efficacy of the methods which they employed.

Among the new drugs appearing on the market was one which was sold under the trade name of Yarubex. It could not be purchased in America but was widely advertised in Mexico. One of Yvette's friends who had made a trip south of the border brought her back a bottle. The tiny pellets were white and looked completely harmless. Yvette might have dosed herself with them but, on the same day that they were given to her, THE NEW YORK TIMES printed a condensation of a bulletin released by the United States Department of Health. The article issued a sharp warning against Yarubex. The little pellets could be lethal when taken in excessive quantities. Diabetics were in particular danger. A score of deaths had already been reported.

Yvette sputtered and fumed over her narrow escape. However her ingrained parsimony forbade her to dispose of the pills. Instead, she thrust them in the back of the medicine closet where I discovered them a few days later. I examined them with interest. They were almost exact replicas of the saccharin tablets which Yvette used daily. I poured out a few of them and mixed them in with the saccharin already in Yvette's gold-encrusted miniature pill-box. The substitution was made almost automatically, without any real hope or any feeling of guilt. I could not believe that my problem would be solved with such ease.

Two days later Yvette was dead. I came home in the afternoon and found her sprawled across the bed, fully clothed. I made certain of her death by checking her pulse and heart beat, then I went through her purse for the pill-box. I dumped its contents into the toilet and refilled it with saccharin. I removed the bottle of Yarubex from the medicine cabinet and placed it on her bedside table. Then I called the police.

A Lieutenant Stevens was in charge of the investigation that followed. He is a bluff, crude man and at first he appeared mildly suspicious. But there was not and could not be any proof of malfeasance on my part. Soon the matter was dropped and Yvette was listed officially as another victim of unscrupulous racketeers in the drug business.

The next few months were very busy ones. I sold Chez Yvette at a handsome profit. My evenings were spent at the Golden Cock. I looked up some of my old cronies and soon the word was spread

that meals to fit the tastes of an epicure were available again. As soon as a reasonable time had elapsed, Germaine and I were married. Life reassumed the same happy glow of the early days of my marriage with Yvette. I was a contented man.

I should have known it was too good to last. One day Germaine came to me with tears in her eyes. "Darling," she cried, "the doctor says I have to go on a diet."

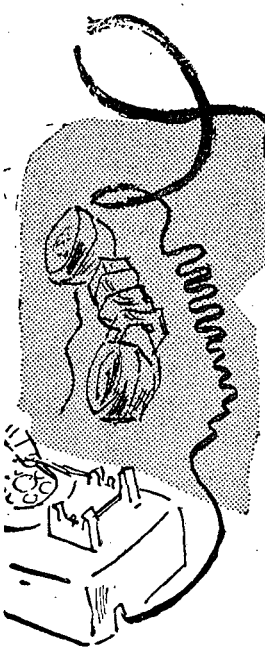
Sir, you are a man of imagination. I will not bore you with repetitious details. It would be like the re-run of a film or watching a play for the second time, with only minor variations. Germaine and Yvette were so much alike in their reactions. And then, of course, I met Suzanne. I realize it was incredibly stupid of me to use the same murder method twice. I can only excuse myself on the basis that the temptation to repeat a perfect crime is almost compulsive. Besides how could I foresee that Lieutenant Stevens would have been transferred from Greenwich Village to the district in which I was now living?

However, I comfort myself that in the annals of crime my case will remain unique. I should imagine that many a murderer has killed his victim for the price of a square meal. But is there another instance of a man who has risked the death penalty twice to secure dishes that are exquisitely prepared, superbly served?

At least I can look forward to one more such dinner. Does not the condemned man have the privilege of selecting his final meal? There is a dish which is described by Alexandre Dumas which I have never tried. Hare chops à la Melville. But perhaps that is expecting too much of prison cuisine. Something more simple must do. A Kirsch omelet, I should think. Preparation is not difficult. I can supply the recipe myself. Six eggs, a pinch of salt, three tablespoons of sugar—

Ah, but I can see your interest is lagging. Quite correctly so. These details can be discussed later.

Innocent



by Irving

THE DETECTIVE was waiting for her as she emerged from the office building at five o'clock. Suddenly in the midst of the homegoers he was standing before her, very tall, a young man with a surprisingly gentle voice and considerate manner.

"Hello, Julie . . ." he said.

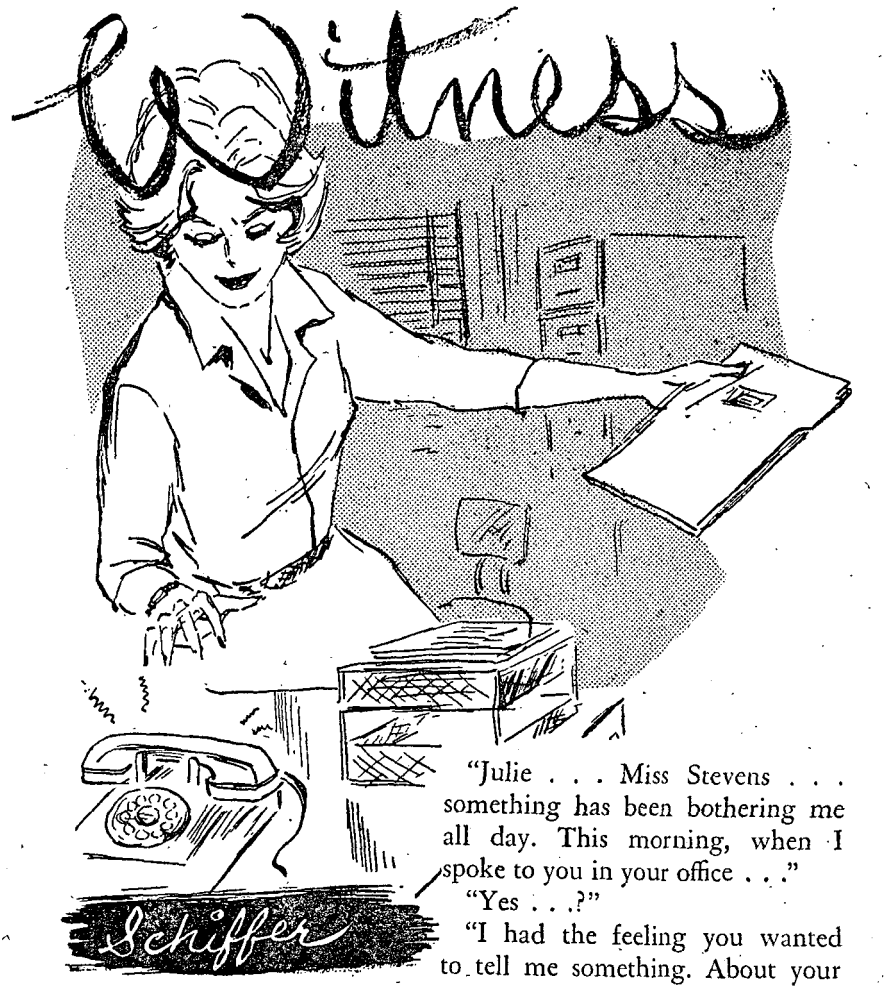
She was twenty, a dark-haired girl who worked as a secretary in the financial district of New York. She was one of many, not much different at first glance than the girls who sat at the desks around her, pretty enough, not very sophisticated, a girl everyone liked, accustomed to anonymity. She was, above all things, not used to being singled out by detectives; and she looked about self-consciously as the other girls passed, certain that some of them recognized Sergeant Ruderman from his visit to the office that morning.

"I wonder . . ." he said, as if sensing her thoughts, "is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

She nodded gratefully. "Yes, there's a diner next door."

Bill's Diner was one of those trolley-shaped affairs with a long counter, a few booths and very good food. They sat in a booth, Julie facing the rear, and he signalled for two coffees. She looked at the telephone booths and thought that perhaps, if she were going to be late for dinner, she ought to call her mother. He said nothing until after coffee had arrived.

witness



"Julie . . . Miss Stevens . . . something has been bothering me all day. This morning, when I spoke to you in your office . . ."

"Yes . . .?"

"I had the feeling you wanted to tell me something. About your

The role of innocent bystander, or witness, if you prefer the term, is one which is usually played involuntarily . . . yet sometimes most effectively.

boss, Mr. Turner, and his wife."

She shook her head. She sipped at the coffee so that she could look away from him. "I told you everything, Sergeant Ruderman."

"Did you?" If he weren't a policeman, his easy tone of voice could be considered that of a friend, even a lover. He was a nice man, she thought, and he was probably very good at his job. "You know what I think," he said, smiling faintly over his steaming coffee mug. "I think you're a very confused girl. Maybe you've got a misdirected sense of loyalty. Come to think of it, I like a person who's loyal."

She didn't fall into that trap. "I really can't think of anything I haven't told you," she insisted.

"About the Turners . . . they weren't getting along too well. Some of their friends have told us that. Did they have a blowup or a serious argument in the last few days?"

Julie shrugged. She could tell he didn't believe her, but he wasn't angry. He was an even-tempered man, and he was calm as he finished his coffee, looking at her all the while. Then suddenly he glanced at his watch and placed some change on the table for the waiter. He handed her a card.

"That's my number at the station. You can call at any hour." His grin was a pleasant surprise. "Just in case you find you have something to tell me, I mean. Now, will you kindly write *your* name and address on this other card?"

"My address . . .?" she said warily.

"Sure. Have you ever had a date with a detective?"

She thought of his motives, of his job.

"Don't worry," he said. "You won't hear from me until *after* the case is closed. I don't mix business with pleasure. And I don't meet girls like you every day."

She liked him, there was no getting away from that. And the straightforward, almost vulnerable way he looked at her was convincing enough for any girl. She filled in the back of the card and handed it to him.

"You'll hear from me," he said. "Or maybe . . . who can tell? . . . maybe I'll hear from you first. Goodnight, Julie . . ."

After he left, she barely moved. A woman walked past to enter one of the phone booths. Abstractedly, Julie watched the stranger's lips through the glass door and thought again that she ought to call her mother; but she couldn't move.

Yes, there was something. The detective was right. It was not only the problem between Mr. Turner and his wife. About that she had

lied. It was something else. But *what?*

She sighed. It occurred to her that Sergeant Ruderman might even believe there had been something between *her* and Mr. Turner. Well, there hadn't been. Not really. Mary kept hinting that there was, but Mary was always carrying on . . . Like yesterday morning at the office . . . Wednesday . . . just before Mrs. Turner called . . .

Mary was Mr. Cassidy's secretary. He was one of several vice presidents at Empire Investment, married; an outrageous wolf. Sometimes it seemed as though Mary . . . blond and vivacious, led him on, just a little. On Wednesday morning, there was a lot of flirtatious patter before Mr. Cassidy got past Julie's and Mary's adjacent desks to enter his own office.

"Sometimes I'm inclined to forget that he's married," Mary remarked, once his door had closed behind him.

"You're just a lot of big talk," said Julie.

"Oh, I don't know. Married men are just men who happen to be married. Don't be so naïve, Julie. All these vice-presidents with their private telephone lines . . . I'll bet it isn't all business they talk about behind those closed doors. And I'll bet if your Mr. Turner gave you a tumble, you wouldn't exactly fight him off. I can tell when a girl has a crush . . . Oops, get to work, here's your boss now . . ."

Mr. Turner was as unlike Mr. Cassidy as a man could be. In his middle thirties, the company's youngest vice-president, he was clean cut, methodical and one hundred percent business. He walked by the girls' desks quickly, offered a brusque good morning, then disappeared into his office.

"Well, I have to admit he's good looking," Mary sighed. "But did you ever see his wife? Ten years older if she's a day. And she looks like something the cat dragged in."

"No, she doesn't . . ." Julie objected.

"Yes, she does. And everyone here knows he married her strictly for her money. I remember when she was just another rich client . . . only six months ago . . . a born old maid if ever I saw one."

"I remember her very well," said Julie. "She was just an unhappy, lonely woman . . ."

"Sure. But then handsome boy took over the account and . . . wham! . . . they get married. One of these days, you'll see, he'll quit working, retire for life . . . on her money, of course."

Julie's telephone rang. Saved by the bell, she thought, reaching for it. But it was quite a shock . . .

speak of the devil . . . to learn who was calling.

"Julie, this is Mrs. Turner."

"Oh, good morning. Just one moment, I'll tell Mr. Turner you're calling . . ."

"No, no, no, Julie. I don't even want him to *know* I've called. I want to speak to *you*. Can we meet for lunch? I must have a talk with you . . ."

"With me?" There was no mistaking the urgency in the woman's voice, Julie reflected. "Well, yes, of course, Mrs. Turner. What is it you want to speak to me a—?"

A burst of static interrupted the girl as the intercom box on her desk came to life. The signal light was on.

"Julie . . ." Mr. Turner's voice crackled.

For one eerie moment, Julie experienced an inexplicable panic. She stared at the intercom box and then at the telephone receiver in her hand, realizing that if Mrs. Turner spoke again, her husband would hear. Quickly, Julie clamped her hand over the telephone mouthpiece. Then just as quickly she realized she had covered the wrong end to shut off Mrs. Turner's voice, and switched to cover the earpiece.

"Julie, will you bring me the file on Sloban Company . . ." Richard Turner's voice directed.

"Yes, right away," said the girl. She waited until he turned off the intercom, then spoke hurriedly into the telephone. "I have to go now . . ."

"Yes, I heard," said the woman.

"I'll call you back in a few minutes," Julie promised. "I'd better use a telephone outside. Are you home, Mrs. Turner?"

"Yes. Please don't forget. I'll be waiting . . ."

Mary's eyebrows were two question marks, but Julie had no time to explain. She moved to the filing cabinets behind the long line of typists' desks and quickly located the Sloban file. Feeling strangely conspiratorial, she pictured Mrs. Turner in her Washington Square apartment, an overweight, somehow pitiful woman, waiting for the return call. Her expression revealing none of these thoughts, Julie knocked on Mr. Turner's door.

As she came into his room, Richard Turner was speaking on his private telephone. His grey eyes barely flicked in his secretary's direction while he continued to charm his widowed client, Mrs. Sloban.

". . . Yes, Vera . . . I realize you don't want to take risks with the principal. Empire Investment wouldn't allow such recklessness. I mean, we'd certainly advise against it . . ."

Julie gazed at the sharp, handsome profile. As always, it did something to her equilibrium she preferred not to acknowledge. There were two telephones on his desk, one an extension of the phone on her desk, the other for "confidential" contact with clients. Julie could remember when Mrs. Turner was one of those clients, a lonely heiress, who rated long conversations as he was now indulging Mrs. Sloban. Marriage, thought Julie, as she placed the Sloban folder on his desk, can certainly cool a man's ardor . . . if there had been any ardor in the first place . . .

"Are you waiting for something?" He had broken off his conversation and was frowning at her irritably. "Well, as long as you're here—" He fingered the folder. "Are the reports in here up to date? I'm speaking to Mrs. Sloban now and I may have to prepare a detailed report tomorrow—"

Julie explained that there was some tallying of latest dividends to complete but she could bring the folder up to date by tomorrow morning. He interrupted with a weary gesture.

"Instead of daydreaming at my desk, Julie, if you paid more attention to your work . . ."

He tossed the folder on his desk, dismissing her.

A moment later, Julie emerged fuming from the inner office. Mary's gaze followed her to her desk. "Obviously he didn't offer you a raise in salary," she quipped.

"Mary, tell me, do I ever daydream on the job?"

"Is that what lover boy said?"

Julie opened her desk drawer and yanked out her handbag. "I must be a masochist to find something appealing in a man like that! If he asks for me, say I'm off daydreaming somewhere."

"You going down to call Mrs. Turner?"

Julie nodded. "I promised. She wants to meet me for lunch. Wouldn't you just bet she'll ask me to help her pick out a lovely surprise gift for her dear, dear husband? Arsenic—that's what I'll recommend!"

The elevator man was chatty and helped to cool Julie's temper as he brought her down five flights to the lobby. The counterman at Bill's Diner next door waved to her familiarly. Faith in human nature was momentarily restored. Julie slipped into one of the telephone booths in the rear of the diner and dialed Mrs. Turner's number.

They arranged to meet for lunch at 12:30, at a restaurant Julie was reasonably sure her employer was not likely to patronize . . . he was

expected at a business lunch today anyway. When Julie arrived at the meeting place, Mrs. Turner was already sipping a drink at the table, her gross features a portrait of determination and bitterness.

It was not long before Julie understood the reason for this grim countenance. No sooner had the waitress brought their order when Mrs. Turner clutched her companion's hands across the table.

"Julie, I want you to be honest with me. Don't be afraid of hurting me with the truth—"

"I'll try, Mrs. Turner, but what . . . ?"

"Tell me, is my husband carrying on with another woman?"

The girl was too surprised even to deny having such knowledge. Mrs. Turner leaned forward tensely.

"Julie, I *must* know. I'm leaving him anyway, don't you understand? But I must know who she is."

"Mrs. Turner, I really don't know anything about—"

"Yes, you do. You're his secretary. All of you at the office know who she is. Julie, I want to strike back. You can understand that. I want to disgrace both of them!"

"Did he tell you he was in love with some other woman?" Julie asked, aware of a guilty flush on her cheeks.

"*Love?* Richard doesn't love anybody. He uses people. He married me only for my money." The ugly woman smiled thinly. "But now he's angry at me . . . oh, how he raged last night . . . because I won't transfer any of my money into his account. Transfer my money? What kind of fool does he think I am? Do you know what he said when I refused? He taunted me. He said he was going to find other women . . . beautiful women . . . to take his mind off his money troubles—"

"But, Mrs. Turner, he didn't say there already *was* another woman, did he? He only threatened . . ."

The older woman shook her head sagely. "You don't know Richard. He never threatens until he's sure of what he has. The bird in the hand philosophy. But I want to ruin it for both of them. I want to leave *him* before he's ready to leave *me*. Then he'll have nothing. And at the same time I want to create such a scandal that I'll ruin all his chances of marrying someone else. They won't even dare speak to each other after I'm through. Julie, who are his clients? The unattached women?"

She was quite alarmed. "I couldn't give you the names of clients."

Mrs. Turner leaned back with an appearance of defeat. She could

sense Julie's determination, and her own wilted. "Oh well, I understand. Of course you can't. I suppose you've been as helpful as you can, and, don't worry, Julie, I won't tell him about our meeting. But tonight I'll tell him I'm through with him . . ." Again she smiled. "I'll *enjoy* telling him. It'll be interesting to see how he tries to convince me he didn't mean to threaten me, that he really loves me . . . Yes, it'll be quite a night . . ."

At the office again, it was impossible to get any work done. Mr. Turner was still out with a client most of the afternoon, but Mary gave her no peace until she had told her everything that happened; and it was a relief to share the incident with someone. It was an even greater relief when five o'clock came and she left the office to board the subway to the Bronx.

Not until she was at the dinner table that evening did Julie remember the Sloban account. Her mother was berating her kid sister for not doing her homework, for daydreaming . . . and Julie suddenly realized that in her distress this afternoon, she had forgotten to bring the Sloban folder up to date. The idea of facing Mr. Turner the next day with this oversight was a dreaded one, especially after his criticism this morning and considering the mood he would be in after tonight, after his wife . . .

It was barely seven o'clock, she noted. She could return to the office, bring home the folder to work on it, and have it finished before bedtime. Despite her mother's objections to her going out again, Julie slipped into her coat and dashed out of the house.

The night elevator man at her office building was almost asleep behind his desk. He recognized her and smiled sheepishly.

"Can you take me up and wait for me?" Julie asked, as she signed the register book. He shook his head and reached for his keys. "No, I have to be on duty down here. Just buzz the elevator when you're ready to come down."

He brought her up . . . the elevator seemed so noisy when the building was empty . . . and opened the office door with a master key, then returned to his post. Julie felt deserted. Whistling, she snapped on a central overhead light and walked across the empty floor to Mr. Turner's unlighted office. The Sloban folder was still on his desk. The moment she reached for it, his telephone rang. Her hand jumped back.

The effect of the second loud ring in the darkened office was no less startling. Who could be calling

on Mr. Turner's private telephone at this hour? On the third ring she collected her wits and picked up the receiver.

"Hello . . ." she said.

"What? Who—who is this?"

It was Mr. Turner's voice.

Quickly overcoming her surprise, Julie identified herself. She explained her presence at the office. "Is it all right if I take the folder home to work on it?"

"Yes—yes—certainly. Are you leaving now?"

"Right away, Mr. Turner." She could picture his intense face and she had never before known such a sense of intimacy and aloneness with this man. Perhaps it was simply the fact that it was night. More than anything else, she wanted to prolong the conversation. "Was there anything you wanted, Mr. Turner? Was there anyone—"

"No, of course not." His laugh was short, forced. *"I just dialed the wrong number. I was having a few drinks at a bar and I got mixed up. Good night."*

"Good night, Mr. Turner."

She hung up and stared at the telephone. It occurred to her to wonder if Mrs. Turner had already told her husband she was leaving him, disinheriting him, and the rest of what she had threatened. If so, she could understand very well why he was drinking. But why had he called the office—at this hour? Was someone supposed to be here? Had her own presence frightened that other person away? She could not really believe that he had dialed the wrong number.

Julie picked up the Sloban folder and walked out to the center of the floor. She half expected to find some person lurking behind one of the typists' desks. Whatever the explanation, her curiosity had to be satisfied. Why should she let him chase her home? She could do her work here, couldn't she? She sat at her own desk and opened the folder. She could finish posting the dividends in less than an hour . . .

Slightly more than an hour was required. With a sense of accomplishment she closed the folder and returned it to Mr. Turner's desk. At her own desk, she picked up her handbag and topcoat. Then she froze.

Like a shriek in the night, the telephone on Mr. Turner's desk rang . . . first once, then again and again . . .

She swung about to look at the frosted glass entrance door. At any moment, she knew, someone would come bursting through that door in answer to the imperative ringing. But no silhouette approached the glass. Stiffly, resisting the magnetism of the unan-

swered ringing, Julie made her way across the office floor. Looking back, she flicked off the lights, opened the door, then closed it behind her. Standing at the elevator, she heard the telephone ringing still, like a petulant child, calling her . . . calling someone. Finally, just before the elevator arrived, the ringing stopped.

In the morning, Mary listened to the previous night's events with wide-eyed astonishment. "You mean he called the office? Yipes, he sure *must* have been plastered! But, you know, I can't imagine that man getting so plastered . . ."

Mr. Turner arrived only minutes late and seemed as self-possessed as ever. He appeared to have forgotten that yesterday existed. After a sharp "Good morning," he entered his office and closed the door behind him. At about 9:20, the intercom came to life on Julie's desk.

"Julie," he said, *"will you get Mrs. Turner on the phone for me?"*

"Mrs. Turner?" Somehow she was startled to find that he could still be on speaking terms with his wife.

"Yes, Mrs. Turner. Didn't you hear me?"

What she did hear, just before he broke the connection, was a puzzling undercurrent of sound.

"That's strange . . ." she mused, turning to Mary.

"What is?"

Julie nodded toward the closed office. "He's calling somebody on his private phone. I could hear him dialing . . ."

"The other woman," said the blond girl, snapping her fingers. "He wants her to listen while he talks to his wife, don't you see? Or maybe it's his lawyer. Maybe they'll make a tape recording . . . evidence for the divorce . . ."

Julie was disgusted with herself for believing Mary even for a second. She picked up the telephone, asked the switchboard girl for an outside line, then dialed. Mrs. Turner's line was busy.

"Well, what did you expect?" Mary said. "She's busy talking to *her* lawyer."

Julie pressed the intercom buzzer and waited for him to switch it on.

"Yes, Julie . . ."

"Your wife's line is busy, Mr. Turner."

"Oh? All right, thank you."

"Shall I try her again in a few minutes?"

"No, don't bother. It's not very important . . ."

Julie was thoughtful as she slipped paper into her typewriter and began almost automatically to compose a monthly statement to

a client. She wondered, as she often did when life gave her a glimpse of private lives, what her own future would be. Would she marry someone in all good faith only to learn one day that she hardly knew him at all? Could one trust one's feelings . . .?

Absorbed, Julie did not even notice the two strangers approaching her desk. It was shortly before lunch time. She was typing, and then there was a man's overcoat sleeve and an open hand showing her a wallet with a police badge.

That was the first time she saw Sergeant Ruderman.

"I'm very sorry I startled you. I guess you didn't hear me over your typing. I asked if I could speak to Mr. Turner, please."

There was another detective with him, somewhat shorter, older. She looked from one to the other. Then she nodded decisively. "Will you come this way please?"

She led them to Mr. Turner's office. She did not follow them inside. Somehow she knew why they were here.

When they emerged with Mr. Turner, she could almost feel what he was feeling. She had never seen him so pale.

"Julie, Mrs. Turner has had an accident. I'll be out—" He looked questioningly at the detectives. "I'll be out the rest of the day."

"An accident? Is it very serious?"

He nodded briefly. "The maid found her—"

Sergeant Ruderman stepped closer. "I'll explain it to your secretary, Mr. Turner. You'd better go with Detective Wilson. I'll be along later."

When they had gone, he asked Julie to step into Mr. Turner's office. He closed the door and offered her a chair. She knew by the slight narrowing of his hazel eyes that he had somehow read her involuntary feeling of resentment when he, in turn, chose the chair behind the desk.

"Mrs. Turner is dead, isn't she?" Julie asked.

He merely inclined his head, watching her.

"How did it happen? When?"

He showed little expression. "The maid let herself in around ten o'clock this morning. That's the time she comes in every day. She found Mrs. Turner in the bathtub. Evidently, she had struck her head and . . . You don't really want to hear the details, do you?"

Julie turned away. "No . . . Of course it *was* an accident, wasn't it?"

"That's the way it appears. Julie, you spoke to Mrs. Turner on the

phone this morning, is that right?"

"I did not. Who told you that?"

"Mr. Turner did. He said you called her this morning."

"Yes, he asked me to. But I didn't speak to her. The line was busy at the time."

"I see. Yes—" The detective's lips quirked with spontaneous humor. "That is what he told us. What time did Mr. Turner arrive at the office, by the way?"

"Nine o'clock. A few minutes after nine perhaps."

"And what time did you call Mrs. Turner?"

"Nine-twenty, I think."

"And Mr. Turner did not leave the office since he arrived this morning?"

She was pleased at having stumped the interrogator. "He was here all morning," she said loyally.

"Well, that's good." He, too, seemed pleased. "We've determined that she died somewhere around nine o'clock. Whether it was before nine or after nine . . . that's in question. However, none of the phones in her apartment were off the hook when we got there, or when the maid got there. And you say her line was busy at nine-twenty. So the probability is that she was alive at that time and had an accident a short while afterward."

He smiled as he walked Julie to the door. "I don't exactly apologize for taking you away from your work. It was a pleasure, I assure you." His expression became earnest. "I admit I did have a kind of feeling . . . Julie, what was their relationship? Were they getting along?"

She almost said it then, all that had happened. He seemed such an easy and trustworthy man to talk to. But she stopped herself. He noticed all of these transitions, she was sure. As he held open the door, his expression was one of doubt and puzzlement. She knew he did not believe her murmured answer that she knew nothing about the Turners . . .

That was why tonight he had waited for her outside the building and then brought her to Bill's Diner. Yet even he could not fathom how much she had learned in the last two days about that unhappy marriage. Mr. Turner, himself, was totally unaware that she had spoken to his wife and knew so much. Would anything be gained by offering this information? It would only hurt Mr. Turner.

Then why, she wondered, did she have this feeling of wanting to speak to Sergeant Ruderman again, to tell him . . .

"Julie . . ."

It was Mary. She had slipped

into the very seat the detective had just vacated.

"Well, don't look so surprised," she said, pouting. "I saw him meet you outside the building, so I waited. You know I can't resist the latest gossip. What did he tell you? What happened?"

"Nothing happened. He asked me again about the Turners and I still didn't tell him."

"Good!"

Julie stared at her. "Good? Why do you say that?"

"Because what's the point of making extra trouble for poor Mr. Turner?" She leaned forward confidentially. "Now, what about that detective? Did he ask you for a date?"

Julie's change in coloration answered her.

"I knew it . . . even by the way he looked at you in the office this morning. Much to my surprise, I envied you that look, gal. And the next time I try to tell you I'm not interested in that sentimental gush, and the next time I say that only money counts, and it makes no difference if your boyfriend is married—well, if I ever say those things again after all that's happened, please don't believe me, will you . . ."

Julie put her hand over Mary's. "I never believed you. One thing I almost believed, though, was that you and Mr. Turner . . . that you —"

"Mr. Turner? Are you serious?"

Julie shrugged. "It would have explained so many things. But I know it's not true. Still, something —" She frowned as she stared beyond Mary at the empty telephone booths. Suddenly she snapped her fingers. "Mary, suppose he wasn't calling his lawyer, or some other woman?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Turner. Remember this morning, when I said he was calling somebody on his other telephone? Well, suppose he was ringing his *wife's* number? I'd get a busy signal if I tried to call it at the same time, wouldn't I?"

Mary was unsure. Julie walked to the counter and asked for change for a dollar bill, then entered one of the booths. "I have to find out if it works," she said. "Who are you going to call?" Mary wanted to know.

"I'll call Mr. Turner's house on this phone and let it ring," Julie explained. "Then I'll call the same number from the other booth and see if I get a busy signal."

She started to put a dime in the slot, then pulled her hand away.

"No, I can't call his house. He might answer. Or the police might still be there. Is anyone at your place, Mary?"

Her friend winced. "The whole family."

"They're at my house, too. We need a phone that won't answer. How about the office?"

Mary frowned. "That's true . . . but I think the switchboard automatically shifts a second call to another line. So that wouldn't be a good test. Why don't you call one of the private phones? Mr. Turner's phone doesn't go through the switchboard . . ."

Julie had already dropped the dime in the slot. She dialed carefully. They could hear the buzz-click as the telephone rang at the other end. Suddenly Julie gasped. With a stunned expression, she slowly hung up the receiver.

"What's the matter?" Mary stepped into the booth. "Why did you hang up? I thought you were going to let it ring and then try calling the number on the other—"

Julie was shaking her head. "No, Mr. Turner already made the test . . . last night. That was why he called the office. Now I can understand why he was so shocked when I answered . . ."

"Then he *did* it? He *murdered* her? You mean, she was probably dead before he even came to work this morning?"

Julie shuddered. "It's unbelievable . . . that it could happen with people in your own office, people you see every day. Do you know what gives me the creeps, Mary? It's knowing that I saw *everything*. I was part of everything that happened. I was a witness to every part of it . . . but I didn't realize it at the time."

She reached into her handbag for the detective's card.

"He said I had a misdirected sense of loyalty. Sergeant Ruderman, I mean. I guess he was right." Julie dialed the number from the card. "Hello," she said into the mouthpiece, "is this the police station? Has Sergeant Ruderman arrived? He has? Yes, I'd like to speak to him . . ."

the Rich get Rich

$ by $ Ed Lacy $$

Some years back, there was a popular song in which one of the lines ran . . . "Oh, the rich get rich and the poor get . . . " you can take it from there, if memory serves you.

THIS mild-looking, little, middle-aged man wearing expensive—but not flashy—clothes, came up to the detective squad room, said, "My name is Brooks. One night I . . . eh . . . had a few too many, I'm afraid. The point is, on my way home I was robbed, my wallet taken."

"Okay, take a seat, Mr. Brooks," I told him, getting out the usual forms, asking his full name and address. The address, like his clothes, was expensive, one of those apartment houses that don't look like much on the outside. Then I asked, "Where did this robbery take place?"

"On 63rd Street and Park Avenue. At about 2 a.m."

"And that was last night?"

"No sir, last November."

"November? Mr. Brooks, this is May 5th, why did you wait so long to report the robbery?"

"I realize I was amiss in waiting,

but you understand I . . . well, I didn't want my wife to know I was slightly stoned. Nothing much actually happened, a thug pushed me to the ground, took my wallet. I rarely carry more than a few dollars on me; the truth is I didn't have any money in the wallet. Some bills in another pocket, my watch, and ring—but he didn't touch any of those. All the wallet contained was some credit cards, my driver's license."

"I see—whoever took the wallet started using the credit cards and now has run up a big . . ."

Shaking his head, blinking slightly, Mr. Brooks said, "No, sir. I notified the credit companies the next day—haven't had any trouble about the lost cards. Truth is, I had quite forgotten the incident until I received this in the mail—this morning."

He handed me a letter from the U.S. Internal Revenue Department asking him to come down to discuss his tax returns. I must have looked blank, for Mr. Brooks added, "Of course, I had my accountant look into the matter at once. It seems the tax people claim a man identifying himself as me, won $92,000 at a California race track this January. Now the government wants me to pay tax on the winnings—nearly $50,000. Of course I wasn't at the track, nor did I win the money. You understand my problem, now, sir?"

I nodded. "Some goons knew there was a sure thing going at the track, needed identification to give the tax people—you must show identification on any win over $600. Carefully thought-out plan, even picked up their identification months ahead of time. Mr. Brooks, it's almost impossible for me to locate a joker who mugged you 7 months ago. If you had reported this immediately, we . . ."

He blinked again. "I fully realize that, sir. It happened that even in my drunken state, I recognized my assailant—he had an odd nose—crooked—probably broken years ago. There once was a handy man in the apartment house who looked like that. At the time I figured the poor fellow was desperate, and since I hadn't actually lost anything . . . why, I didn't want to get him in trouble. Of course now, well."

The rest was routine and hard work. My partner and I checked with the owners of the apartment house for a list of their former employees. Crooked nose was an ex-pug named Frankie Johns, a punk with a record of petty strong arm stuff. It took us less than two hours to pick up Frankie. An hour's grilling and he told us he'd done the job for a syndicate guy named Archie, a big time hood. Archie had bodyguards and I took one on the eye while my partner lost a few teeth before we got them under control, cuffed Archie. We booked him for assault, fraud, evading taxes—and a dozen other charges. It turned into an important collar—before morning we had exposed an entire crooked racing ring, arrested seven guys.

Maybe you've read about the case in the papers. I got a commendation for the fast arrest, and I suppose it might help me get a promotion—some day; although I'm a detective first class now and only a brace of years away from retirement.

Meantime, while waiting trial, Archie confessed and the tax eagles swooped down on his safe deposit box, took $52,000 in taxes on that $92,000 hit. Mr. Brooks was not only cleared, but for his part in "informing on a tax delinquent"—or whatever the exact term is—the tax people gave him 10% of the tax as a reward, or about five grand—which he needs like a hole in the head.

Oh, I'm not kicking . . . it was all part of my job, and there's no way me and my partner could have ever got that reward. Still, it reminds me sometimes of that old popular song, you remember it? "Oh, the rich get rich and the poor get . . ." you take it from there.

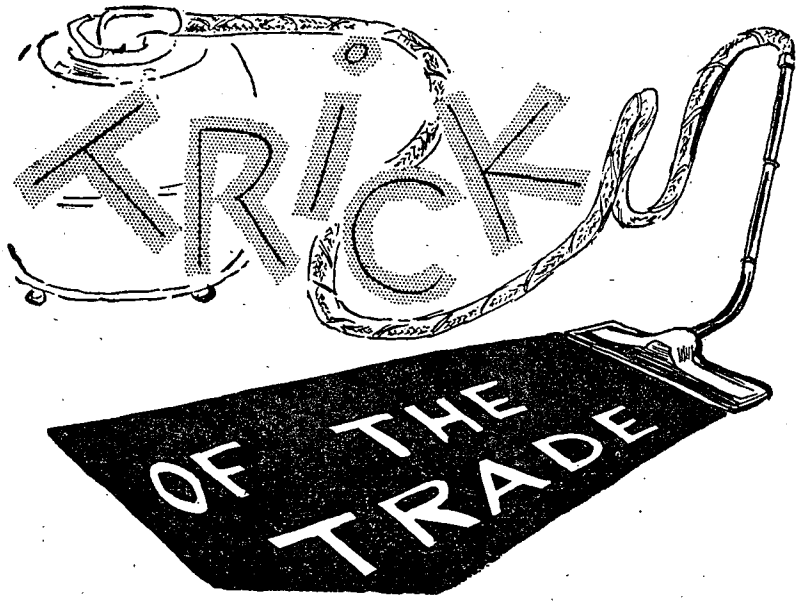
It is a source of amazement to sociologists and other observers of the human scene . . . how hard people will work in order to avoid having to work. If this seems contradictory, read this little story for clarification.

BY LEO R. ELLIS

No matter how far back I pressed against the locked door of Benny's Bar and Grill, the rain still got to me. It was a cold, early morning drizzle that went through my flesh and turned my bones into icicles. A dismal day on which to get murdered, I thought, and the rain wasn't the only thing that made me shiver. My nerves were jumpin'.

I weigh around a hundred and thirty pounds wringing wet—which I was now—and my cheap suit was trying to squeeze me up smaller. It had shrunk so I was numb. It was trying to choke me to death, which in a way would have been a blessing; Big Lou Costello would be cheated out of the chance to make an example out of me.

At eight Benny arrived wrapped to the ears in a slicker. "Della



kicked you out earlier than usual this morning," he said as he unlocked the door.

"Della didn't kick me out," I said through chattering teeth. "I left before she got home." I bolted through the door and headed for my favorite stool at the end of the bar.

"She still after you to get a job?" Benny asked.

"That and other things," I admitted. My wife, Della, works all night. When she gets in at seven, she usually stops by the couch in the living room and wakes me up. But this morning, with all my other troubles, I didn't think I could take the lecture. Still shivering, I watched Benny wrap yesterday's apron around his fat paunch, then fill the coffee maker. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to cuff my java this morning, Benny," I said.

Benny wiggled a finger down the neck of the coffee maker while he waited. "For a guy who has to cover a fifty dollar bet by noon or get clobbered, you ain't in very good financial shape, Milo."

"That I am not," I admitted. "I am stony flat broke."

Benny shook his head. "Lou is going to save money on this deal," he said cheerfully. "He won't have to use his goons on a shrimp like you, he can easily pulverize you personally." The water was too hot for his finger, so he withdrew it and wiped it down his apron. "How come you was so stupid as to call in a fifty dollar bet yesterday with no cash to cover?" he said. "And especially to Big Lou, who you know loves to make an example of horse players who practice that dodge on him?"

"Big Lou is the only bookie who will take my bets anymore," I said sadly. "If I lose him, I got nothing."

"After noon today you ain't liable to need nothing but a shroud," Benny said as he watched the water go up into the top of the coffee maker. When it came down again, he brought a steaming mug of coffee over and set it in front of me. "You was a dope to let that drifter tout you on that horse. You know that, don't you, Milo?"

I hugged the mug in my hands to warm them. "He claimed he was the jockey's brother," I said. "He said the race was in the bag."

"That guy weighed over two hundred and eighty pounds," Benny said. "He was bigger than I am."

"Was he?" I said, "I didn't notice. I must have been stoned."

"You should also have figured out that if the guy was such pals with the Whitneys and Vanderbilts, he would have been out in the clubhouse caging champagne, not down here putting the bite on you for beers."

"I guess so," I said miserably, "maybe that tout put a hex on me. Anyhow, I call in the bet and I lose."

With my hands warm, I started to sip the coffee to thaw out my insides as I desperately try to figure how I am to raise fifty clams by noon. I can't run, because here I can eat and sleep on a couch in the living room. If I hide, Big Lou will get me sooner or later and be all the madder because he had to look for me.

Della is the only moneyed person I am personally acquainted with, and she is of no practical value to me now. Della has a good job as combination cashier and bouncer in an all-night dairy lunch, but Della is a miser. I don't think she would put out any money to keep me from getting killed, and when I think of the insurance policy she took out, I'm convinced. Della buys things for herself, like that little doodlebug car she drives. I am also sure that she has a cash hoard in the cupboard under the sink, but I have been afraid to look; it would be characteristic of Della to have it boobytrapped to blow my arm off. Also, if any of that money was ever missing, I would fare better facing Big Lou and all his goons at once.

Only a few regulars drifted in and out of Benny's that morning and I only give them a nod. I am so sunk in gloom I haven't even looked at a racing form.

"It's ten thirty," Benny said, then came over and stood in front of me. "Now there's nothing personal in this, Milo," he said, "but I'm going to have to ask you to leave here before noon. I mopped this floor yesterday and—"

"Sure, Benny," I said dully, "I'll take my lumps out in the alley."

"Thanks," Benny said and poured me another cup of coffee.

I was about to drink it when the front door opened and a skinny stranger came in lugging something under his coat. At first I thought it was a bagpipe and groaned. When he got to the bar, the guy dumped it on the floor and I saw that it was a vacuum cleaner. He piled the hose, pipe and attachments on the tank, slapped his hat against his leg and said, "Give me a beer, Mac."

"Vacuum cleaner business not so hot this morning, eh?" Benny said.

"Who's going to let a guy with wet feet into her house?" the guy said. "I sold one yesterday, but I had to take this as a trade-in." He kicked the cleaner on the floor.

Benny shoved the beer across the bar. "You mean you salesmen get stuck with the trade-ins?" he asked.

The skinny guy nodded. "I unload mine on a secondhand dealer across town. I'll only get about ten

bucks for this dog." He kicked the cleaner again.

"I guess there's tricks to all trades," Benny said, wiggling his finger down the sink drain.

I have listened to the conversation with only one ear, but it has caused me to grab on to the glimmer of an idea. Della has been bellyaching because she doesn't have a vacuum cleaner—that means she is thinking of buying one. If I steer this guy onto a sale, I could cut in on the commission—then I reject the idea as fast as it came. If he wakes Della up, she will kill the guy and I can't see where that will benefit me. As I stare at the cleaner on the floor, I get another idea and sidle down the bar. "Look, mister," I said, "maybe I could get you ten bucks for that dog."

The guy turned and gave me the kind of a stare I get from a floorwalker when I ask for the gent's room. "My good man," he said down his nose at me, "any quotation of price you might have overheard was strictly hypothetical. The actual, rock-bottom, wholesale price on this unparalleled marvel of the appliance field is twenty dollars."

"Come off it, mister," I snapped. "I ain't got time to kid. I'm trying to save you a trip across town."

The guy looked out of the window at the rain, then back again. "It's yours, Mac," he said, then when I reached down to take the cleaner, he clamped a big foot on my hand. "We do not permit merchandise to leave the premises without proper defrayment," he said.

I sucked on my knuckles. "You mean the ten?" I said.

"Precisely."

"Don't look at me, Milo," Benny said quickly. "I know you for an honest citizen, but I wouldn't invest two-bits in any merchandise a horseplayer could hock."

"So you ain't got the ten," the guy said sadly. "Have you anything of value you could leave as security—a wristwatch, perhaps?"

"Not on me," I said, then I snapped my fingers. "Don't go away." I dashed back to the rest room, took out my dentures and rinsed them off. I folded them in a paper towel and ran back. "There," I said, slapping them down in front of the guy, "two hundred bucks worth of grade A crockery."

The guy frowned. "What am I supposed to do with those? I can't even keep the set I own busy."

While he was staring at the teeth, I grabbed the cleaner and ran out of the front door. It was only a block and a half to my place and as I hurried through the drizzle, I worked up my sales pitch. When I laid it out in the living room I saw I didn't have much, but I put it

together, plugged it in and pulled down the shades. I hoped that Della would be so bleary-eyed from sleep, she wouldn't notice how beat up it was.

I tip-toed to the bedroom door, knocked and jumped back. There was a rumbling noise inside, then the door flew open and Della stood there in her flannel nightgown. It was like in an African picture—where a female rhino comes out of the brush and swings her head, looking for something to charge.

"Look, sweets," I said, pointing at the cleaner, "just look at that."

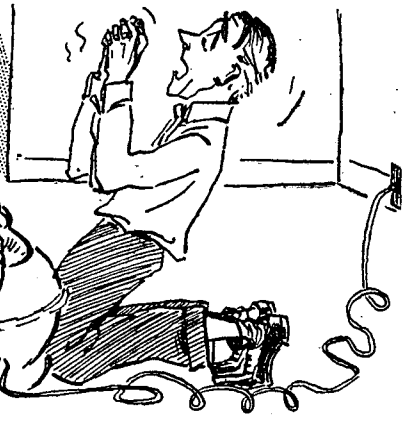
Della looked down, but she must have been still half asleep. "For me?" she said.

"No-no!" I said before she could get the wrong idea. "A fellow I met is forced to sell it. It is such a priceless bargain, I thought—" I was having trouble without my teeth "—I thought you would want to snap it up."

Della advanced on the cleaner as if she expected it to blow up. "How much?" she growled.

"Six—sixty dollars, and it's a real bargain." At my words, Della raised her foot as though she was going to stomp the thing through the floor. I dropped to my knees in front of her. "Don't, sweets," I begged, "let me show you how it works first."

I flipped the switch. I grabbed the tube with the attachment on



the end and pushed it across the carpet. Nothing happened—then I remembered how the salesman had demonstrated a vacuum cleaner in the department store. There was an ash tray full of butts from my sleepless night and I dumped these on the floor. Still nothing happened. The more I scrubbed the attachment, the more it broke up the butts and strung them around.

"You idiot!" Della yelled.

I grabbed up the tank to keep it from being smashed and backed away. Della stopped when she got to the butts and with her hands on her hips, she leaned over to glare at the mess.

My last hope was gone. I had lucked out completely. The whole world had turned against me. Hate and resentment welled up inside of me—hate against the fat tout who had tricked me into betting on a goat—against Benny, who wouldn't help me—against Big Lou, who would half-kill me for a few lousy bucks—against the skinny guy for giving me a bum cleaner, and against Della.

I realized that I was holding the tank high over me. It wasn't just Della's head I brought the tank down on, it was the whole stinking world's. She went down slow, with a whoosh, her nightgown ballooning out like a falling circus tent.

I stared stupidly at the dent in the tank, then shut the thing off and carefully put it down on the floor. I hadn't hit Della to get her money, but now that she was helpless, it was the first thing I thought of.

The money was there, a hundred and twenty bucks worth, and the feel of it in my hand made a new man of me. I was going to keep that money—and I wasn't going to take a beating. I looked down at Della and had an inspiration—I'd be able to use that vacuum cleaner after all.

They say that at a time like that a man has superhuman strength—I believe that, for I dragged Della out the back way and propped her up behind the wheel of her dinky little car. After starting the motor, I jammed the vacuum cleaner hose over the tail pipe and pushed the other end through the window; then I rolled the window up. I stuffed rags in the crack and checked the gas gauge. The car was so tiny it wouldn't take long. Della hadn't moved, so I closed the garage door and legged it back to Benny's.

Big Lou was waiting, tough and ready, but when he saw the pile of bills I shoved into his hand his mouth dropped open. "There's a hundred bucks here, Milo," he said after he had counted it. "You only owe me fifty."

I waved my hand carelessly. "The rest is a backlog," I said, "I wish to establish good credit with you, Lou." I also had other reasons; if the cops should pick me up and find that kind of dough on me, they'd know something was screwy. I looked up at the clock. "If you'll hold it a few minutes, Lou, I'll have my picks for the day."

I knew I had to work fast. Besides selecting my horses, I would have to rush home and type out a suicide note before somebody found Della. I started around the bar to get Benny's scratch sheet.

"Hey, fellow," the skinny guy said, "I've still got your teeth. Where's my ten?"

In my affluence I had forgotten him. "You crook!" I yelled, charging him, "you gyp artist, you handed me a ringer. That cleaner wouldn't pick up nothing."

"I know," the guy said blandly. He pulled out a short string with a felt plug on the end. "When I get into a house," he said, dangling the plug in front of me, "I ask the woman for her old vacuum cleaner so we can compare the two. To make sure my new cleaner looks good, I shove one of these in the hose of the old cleaner when she ain't looking."

"A trick of the trade," Benny said admiringly, "pretty neat."

I stared at the guy. "You mean that hose had a plug in it?"

The guy nodded. "You grabbed it and ran before I could explain. No harm done," the guy said, "all you have to do is to grab the end of this string and—"

Big Lou heard the siren first and bolted out the back door. I stood rooted at the bar as it screamed closer, then moaned to a stop at the curb. A couple of bright, young cops bounced out of the front of the police car, then Della lumbered out of the back. She had a kimona over her nightgown—and with her head wrapped in a turkish towel, she looked like a fortune teller. Her splayed bedroom slippers splashed water out of the puddles as she crossed to the front door.

I dropped my head into my arms on the bar. "She ain't dead," I sobbed, "thank God—thank God, I got police protection."

ANN WAITED eagerly for her husband's response, but he said nothing for a long while. He remained standing, his face speculative as he looked down at the large doll house in the basement closet. It was pure Victorian . . . a three-storied wooden structure painted dark green with a mansard roof centered by a cupola and white gingerbread scrollwork ornamenting the front porch. Finally he commented, "I thought you said Holly wanted a microscope for her birthday."

"Oh, Phil." Both annoyance and amusement were in her voice. "A microscope for an eight-year-old girl? *This* is what she needs. Have you ever seen anything like it?" Ann's delight was obvious as she pointed out the rooms, furnished to the last detail in authentic period pieces. "And when I saw the dolls . . . look, there's even a maid." She sighed, "Well, I couldn't resist it."

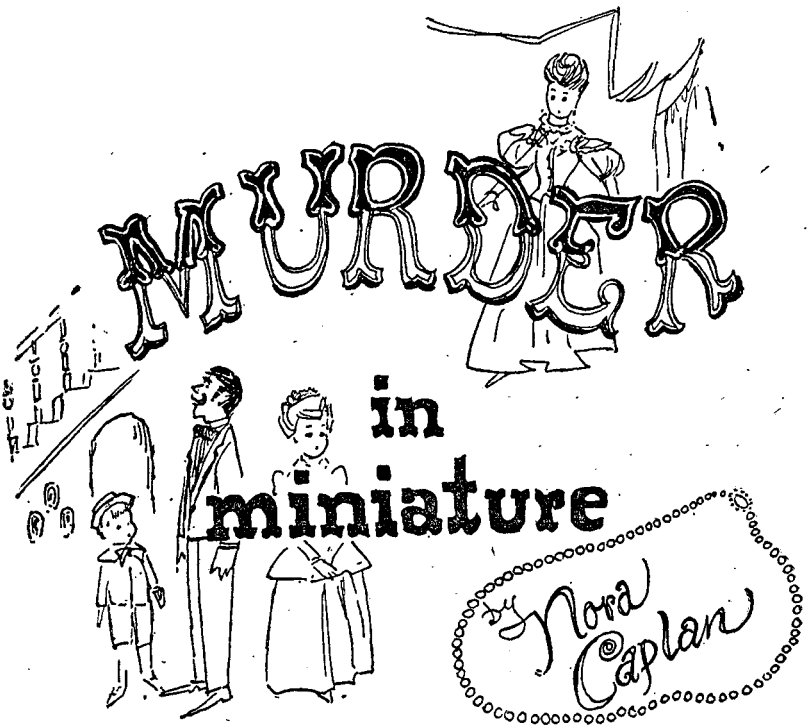
Phil shrugged. "Maybe she'll like it. You know more about that than I do. I just don't want her to be disappointed, that's all. She's never cared much about dolls before, has she?"

"This is different," his wife said defensively. "Besides, Holly needs something unusual like this to stimulate her imagination. That's the whole trouble, Phil. She's never been given a chance to pretend anything. We've just always gone along with that matter-of-fact side of her."

"But that *is* Holly." As if to end the discussion, Phil walked over to the hot water heater. "This thing's leaking again. You'd better give the company a call before long. The warranty's up in a couple of months."

Ann was determined to justify her reason for buying the doll house, so disregarding his last remarks, she said, "I've never been able to share anything much with Holly. She's not the way I was at her age or like any other child I grew up with. She's never known the fun of pretending the way we did, and she's growing up so fast." Ann bent over the doll house and very gently fingered a miniature steamer trunk in the attic. "I've

The world of make-believe is a fascinating one, to adults as well as to children, hence the popularity of puppets, films, and theatre. There are those who think the spectators identify with the characters, acting out their own aggressions.



been looking for something the two of us could enjoy together. I knew this was it the minute I saw it."

Phil returned to her, and patted her on the shoulder. "Okay, if you think it'll make her happy. Come on upstairs now, honey. It's cold down here."

With his saying it, she shivered. Suddenly she felt depressed. Tomorrow was Holly's birthday. It was too late to get her anything else. She wondered if Phil could be right in doubting that Holly would like the doll house. No, Ann concluded shortly. It must appeal to her. It simply wasn't possible for a daughter of hers to be totally lacking a sense of imagination.

The next morning after Holly left for school, Phil and Ann moved the doll house upstairs to their daughter's room. "Should I try to keep her downstairs until you get home?" Ann asked her husband.

"The suspense would kill you,"

Phil grinned. He kissed the tip of her nose. "Don't wait for me. Go ahead and show it to her the minute she gets home."

Holly looked exactly like Phil, Ann thought that afternoon as she watched her daughter scrutinize the doll house for the first time. She had the same even expression in her deep-set brown eyes, the identical composed shape of her mouth. And as her mother had expected, Holly made a thorough inspection of each room before she stated an opinion. "This is different from Sara's. It's supposed to be in the olden days, isn't it?"

Ann smiled, and stooped beside her. "The style of it is called Victorian. It's about eighty or ninety years old. Things were very different then. Look at the kitchen pump. It really works, too." She showed Holly how the handle moved up and down.

"I see," Holly nodded.

Ann couldn't wait any longer. "Do you like it, darling? Isn't it lots better than a microscope?"

Holly noted the elation in her mother's vivid blue eyes. "Well," she answered carefully, "it'll give me lots to learn about."

Some hours later when Ann went into Holly's room to see if she was reading in semi-darkness as usual, she found Holly lying on her side, staring at the doll house. The small tole lamp shining opposite it almost spotlighted the rooms so that they gave the impression of stage settings for an Ibsen play. Ann reached to turn off the light.

"Please leave it on," Holly said without turning her head.

Ann smiled, and answered lightly but with purpose, "You know, you're keeping the Joneses from retiring."

Holly looked up at her mother. A puzzled frown wrinkled her forehead at first, then it disappeared. "Oh, you mean *them*." She faced the doll house again. "Their name is Pettingill." She yawned. "The Bartholomew J. Pettingills. And the maid's name is Clara Fischer."

Though the following day was Saturday, Phil went to his office at the Bureau of Standards. Before he left, he murmured something about having to get the notes for his next lecture, but Ann was too preoccupied to pay much attention. Holly had already finished breakfast, and had gone back up to her room. On a pretext of starting the upstairs cleaning, Ann took a dust cloth to Holly's bedroom. Her daughter was sitting quietly in a rocker before the doll house. "Do you suppose," she asked her mother, "you could make them some new clothes?"

"I'd love to." Ann bent down and started to pick up Mrs. Pettingill.

"Don't, Mommy!" Holly's voice was sharp. "She hates to be touched."

Ann hastily withdrew her hand. "Oh, really?" The tiny figure's china face was rather proud and stern. Then Ann studied the father doll. "Mr. Pettingill seems pleasant enough."

"He is." Holly removed him from a Lincoln rocker in the parlor. She rubbed her finger over his black painted moustache. "That's the trouble."

"What do you mean . . . trouble?" Ann sat down on the floor, completely enthralled.

"Well, you see," Holly explained very seriously, "she thinks he's not strict enough with Charlie, for one thing."

"Their little boy?" Ann pointed to the doll in a sailor suit astride a hobby horse in the second-floor nursery.

"Mm-hm," Holly nodded. "He's really a nice little boy, but he does things that make his mother mad."

"For instance?"

"Oh, just little things. Getting his shoes muddy and forgetting to put his things away."

Ann's eyes twinkled. "What's so wrong with that? As a matter of fact, she doesn't sound very different from me, or any other mother."

Holly continued in the same earnest manner, "But she won't let him alone. She always wants him to do what she thinks is best for him and not what he'd really like to do at all. And another thing, she can't stand a bit of dust anywhere. She really works poor Clara . . . the maid . . . terribly hard. I think Clara would've left a long time ago if it hadn't been for Mr. Pettingill and Charlie." She stroked Clara's blond pompadour. "I want you to make Clara a beautiful dress with a parasol to match."

Ann's mouth turned up. "But, darling, she's the maid."

Holly said stubbornly, "I don't care. Besides, she doesn't have to work on Sundays, and she always takes Charlie for a walk in the park after church. Sometimes Mr. Pettingill goes along with them, too. So she needs a pretty dress."

"And what about the new clothes for Mrs. Pettingill?"

Holly was indifferent. "Oh, you don't have to bother with her. What she has on is all right."

Ann felt curiously defensive about the mother doll. She couldn't understand Holly's hostile attitude toward Mrs. Pettingill. More to herself than to her daughter, Ann replied, "The mother's dress could be dark blue . . . taffeta, I think. With a white lace collar."

"I think I'll read for a while." Holly rose, and went over to the bookcase under the dormer window.

Ann knew that she was being dismissed. She got to her feet and started to leave when Holly added, "I'd like Clara's dress to be pink with a real full skirt and ruffles around the bottom. Charlie and Mr. Pettingill would like that, too."

As Ann changed the linens on the bed in Phil's and her room she kept thinking about her conversation with Holly. She was pleased, naturally, that her daughter's imagination had apparently begun to emerge. And yet, it had taken such a strange turn. There was something so . . . real about the Pettingills. They weren't at all like the improbably good, pretend families she remembered from her own childhood. Still, they were far more intriguing, and evidently real to Holly.

She went over to a chest, and pulled out the bottom drawer. She rummaged through it, and finally came up with a scrap of Alençon lace. There was more than enough of it for a collar, but the taffeta . . . She found a piece of dark blue satin. That would do even better. Mrs. Pettingill would be a model of good taste compared with the frilled pink organdy flounces of Clara, with matching parasol.

The following Monday afternoon Ann was in the kitchen making seven-minute frosting when she heard Holly come home from school. Her daughter called from the living room, "Mommy, Sara's here. Her mother said she could stay 'til five o'clock."

Ann raised her voice over the clatter of the beater. "Hang up your things in the hall closet." She expected the girls to come into the kitchen, but shortly she heard them run upstairs. Abruptly she turned off the mixer. Sara was such a helter-skelter sort of child, there was no telling what she might do to the doll house. And there were the new clothes on the Pettingills and Clara. She'd planned to surprise Holly with them, but it wouldn't be the same now with Sara around. Her face hardened. She would go upstairs anyway.

The two girls didn't notice her when she came to the doorway. "It's sort of funny looking," Sara was saying. "I like my doll house better. Mine's got electric lights, too." She seized Mrs. Pettingill by one arm, crushing the leg o'mutton sleeve that Ann had struggled over.

"Put her down," Ann commanded. The girls started. Ann removed the doll from Sara's sticky fingers, and as she tried to fluff the sleeve into fullness again, she said coldly,

"You'd better play down in the recreation room."

"But, Mommy," Holly protested.

"Go ahead. Do as I say." They left, subdued and silent, but she stayed by the doll house for a time. Finally she returned to the kitchen. Thanks to Sara, the frosting was ruined. She dumped it into the sink, and turned on the water with such force that it soaked her apron.

Holly was so constrained at dinner that night that Phil asked her, "What's the matter? Something happen at school today?"

"No." She avoided looking at her mother and addressed Phil, "Can I be excused now?"

He glanced at her plate. She'd hardly touched her food.

"It's all right." Ann made the decision for him. As soon as Holly slipped from the dining room, Ann explained, "Sara was over this afternoon. She always overstimulates Holly."

"I've never noticed it before," he said.

"Well, she does." Ann pushed back her chair, and began stacking the plates.

"You think Holly might be coming down with something? She's seemed pretty quiet the last couple of days."

"I don't think so. She's just tired, that's all."

After she'd finished the dishes, Ann carried a cup of coffee into the living room. Phil was watching a news report on TV. She drank the coffee thoughtfully. Maybe she had been a little too sharp with Holly this afternoon, but Sara had grated on her nerves so. She didn't see what there was about the child that attracted Holly to her. Then Ann remembered that she hadn't had a chance to discuss the new doll clothes with Holly. By now she'd probably got over her moodiness.

She found Holly stretched out on her bed, face-down. Ann smoothed the child's hair. "You're not asleep, are you, baby?"

"No."

Ann sat down beside her. "I forgot to ask you what you think of the Pettingills' and Clara's new outfits."

"They're okay," Holly replied in a monotone.

"I had a terrible time with Mrs. Pettingill's dress. The sleeves still don't fit quite right below the elbows, but it's so hard to work on anything that small." Ann questioned gently, "Do you suppose she'll *mind*?" Holly didn't answer. Ann supposed that she was still resentful about not being allowed to play in her room. "I've been thinking that maybe we should fix up Mr. and Mrs. Pettingill's room.

It's so drab compared with the rest of the house. I have some lovely pale green silk that I could make into draperies and a bedspread, and . . ."

"I don't want you to," Holly interrupted shrilly, and sat up on the edge of the bed. Her shoulders were rigid.

"But why not, sweetie?" There was a soft insistence in Ann's voice.

Holly repeated uneasily, "I don't want you . . ." She swallowed. "I mean, I don't think Mrs. Pettingill would like that."

"Of course she would," Ann argued more firmly. "Pastel green was just the sort of color that was fashionable in those days, and it would do a lot more for that dark walnut bed and highboy than that dingy lace."

Holly picked at one of the yarn ties on her comforter. "But it would make Clara feel bad."

"What's she got to do with it? She's only the maid." Ann glanced with annoyance at the uniformed figure in the kitchen. Clara's blue eyes stared back at her. At that moment there seemed to be something challenging about her vapid smile.

Holly misinterpreted her mother's silence as interest. "Clara's so much nicer than Mrs. Pettingill. She understands Charlie and Mr. Pettingill. I think they really like her better."

Ann was rather shocked. "But, Holly, that's not natural."

"I want to go to bed now." Holly untied one shoe slowly, then placed it on the floor beside her bed.

"All right, chicken." Ann kissed her daughter's cheek.

Holly kept her eyes on the floor. "Don't do anything more to the doll house. Please, Mother."

"We'll talk about it later, dear. You're tired now. Go to sleep."

For the next week the Pettingills weren't mentioned. Holly played at Sara's house every afternoon until dinnertime. Afterwards, she did her homework, read, or watched TV until bedtime. Phil was having Ann type a draft of his lecture, and she didn't have time to talk much to her daughter. She grew increasingly keyed-up, with Phil's demands that the copy be absolutely accurate, in spite of her having to decipher his illegible handwriting. And all the time she was bothered by Holly's strange reaction that last particular night.

She finished Phil's report Friday morning. At lunch she said to Holly, "I'm all through with Daddy's work now. Let's do something special this afternoon."

Holly captured a bit of carrot

from her spoonful of vegetable soup, and put it aside on a plate. "I promised Sara I'd go over to her house. She told me she has a surprise for me."

Ann felt that she had to make a compromise in order not to estrange her daughter further. With resignation she said, "Well, bring Sara here then." When Holly hesitated, Ann added, "You've been at her place so much lately, I'm sure her mother needs a rest by now."

"Okay," Holly agreed. She glanced at the clock over the refrigerator. "I'd better go now. Sara said she'd meet me at the corner at 12:30."

Ann resolved to be as pleasant as possible to Sara that afternoon. She baked some brownies, and made a pitcher of lemonade. She set the kitchen table for a tea party. Holly would like this. Ann went upstairs to the spare bedroom, took from the closet a box of clothes to be mended, and sat down at the sewing machine.

"Mommy," Holly called from the foyer an hour or so later, "we're here. Come and see what Sara gave me."

Ann smiled at the two of them as she came down the stairs. Holly held out her hand. In it was a tiny circlet of white fur.

Sara's freckled face was exuberant. "It's a muff for Clara. I made it all by myself." She stopped abruptly as she saw the change of expression in Anne's eyes. She looked down. "Well, my mother did help a little. She showed me . . ."

"Why did you do it?" Ann's smile was fixed.

"Well, I . . ." Sara stammered.

"She wanted to, Mommy," Holly spoke up. "What's wrong?"

Ann was gripping the newel post so hard that her knuckles had turned white. "But why *Clara?*" The two girls registered nothing but bewilderment, and soon Ann said tonelessly, "There's a snack for you in the kitchen. I have to finish the mending."

But when she returned to the spare bedroom, she replaced the box of clothes in the closet. She went to her own room to get the remnant of pale green silk.

Ann timed the surprise perfectly. While Holly was taking her bath that night, Ann tiptoed into her room and knelt beside the doll house. What a difference the new curtains and bedspread made in Mrs. Pettingill's room. And the moss-green velvet pillow on the slipper chair was an inspiration. As her final touch, Ann slipped a minute string of pearls around Mrs. Pettingill's throat.

"What're you doing?" Holly had entered with a towel draped around her shoulders, and water was still trickling down her legs.

Ann stood up. "Oh, I just made a little surprise for the doll house." She saw her daughter was trembling. "Dry yourself off first, dear. You can see it after you've put on your pajamas."

Holly remained near the door, shivering. "But I didn't want you to, Mommy," she said tearfully. "I told you not to do anything more to the doll house."

"You'll catch cold like that. Here, let me help you." Ann began rubbing Holly down briskly with the towel. "Now put on your pajamas quick." Holly was so slow about it that Ann finished buttoning the top herself. "There, now," her mother said. "Let's go see the surprise."

"No," Holly shuddered. "I'm still cold. I just want to go to bed and get warm."

Ann's disappointment changed to concern. "Do you feel sick, darling?"

Holly hunched herself under the covers. "My stomach feels funny."

"It's from all those brownies and lemonade this afternoon. I know Sara makes a habit of stuffing herself, but you should know better." Ann frowned. "Maybe some milk of magnesia . . ."

"I'll be all right."

"You're sure?"

Holly nodded.

Ann kissed her. "Call me if you should start to feel sick." she turned to look at Holly once more before she went downstairs. The child lay absolutely still, her eyes fixed on the doll house.

The cry in the middle of the night was unrecognizable at first, but Phil and Ann instantly awoke to full consciousness. Then from Holly's room came a terrified, "Daddy . . . Daddy."

Ann flung back the sheet and blanket. "Stay here," she said tersely to her husband. "I'll go to her."

Holly was huddled against her pillow. She wouldn't look up when Ann bent over her, murmuring, "What's wrong, baby?"

"Take it away," Holly gasped.

"Take what away?"

"The doll house. Take it away . . . now," Holly pleaded.

"In the middle of the night. But why, darling? Did you have a bad dream?"

"Just take it away . . . please. Right now." Holly's voice rose, shrill to the verge of hysteria.

Phil appeared in the doorway. He'd apparently heard what she'd said, for he commented smoothly, reasonably, "But we can't move it

out at this hour, honey. All the stuff inside has to be taken out so nothing will get broken. We'll take care of it the first thing in the morning."

But Holly was unassuaged. She kept crying, "No . . . take it away . . . now."

"Tell you what," Phil said after a moment of deliberation. "Suppose we put something over the doll house so you can't see it." He motioned to Ann to get the extra blanket at the foot of Holly's bed.

"What do you suppose frightened her so." Ann whispered to Phil as he stepped over to her.

"Never mind that now," he muttered. "The poor kid's upset enough already." Then he raised his voice to the same unruffled tone as before. "Holly, remember that time when you were about four or five, and you kept seeing those shadows from your tree swing on this wall . . ."

Ann unfolded the blanket. She was about to drape it over the doll house. But she sensed that something was terribly wrong. *Mrs. Pettingill. Where was she?* Ann searched every room in the doll house with mounting tension. Clara and Charlie and Mr. Pettingill were seated in the parlor, their china faces placid and content. The scene was entirely too innocent.

Ann found the clue she was looking for. The pearl necklace. *Clara was wearing Mrs. Pettingill's pearl necklace.*

Almost instinctively now Ann knew where she would find Mrs. Pettingill. She reached up to the storage room in the attic. Her fingers felt numb as she unlocked and opened the steamer trunk. Mrs. Pettingill was inside . . . *crushed* . . . her neck broken.

Ann slowly turned around. With the trunk between her thumb and forefinger, she held it up for Holly to see. "Why did you let them do it?"

Holly leaned toward her father. "It . . . it was an accident." She pressed closer against Phil. "I didn't mean to. Honest."

Phil tightened his arm around the child. "For God's sake, Ann," he began angrily. Then he stopped. He'd never before seen the kind of emotion that was now darkening his wife's eyes.

Deadly calm, Ann said, "No, Holly. It wasn't an accident." She replaced the trunk in the attic, with poor Mrs. Pettingill still inside. "It was no accident," she confronted Clara and Mr. Pettingill. "*You* murdered her."

IT HAD been snowing for two hours when Phil Madigan woke up at eight o'clock and looked out his hotel room window. The sight of the grey overcast morning filled with calmly falling snow petrified him for a moment so that he could only stare at it dumbly, hardly believing it to be real. But it was real, all right; great big white snowflakes drifting down so serenely, already covering the sidewalks and street and parked cars below. Yes, it's real, all right, Madigan thought, a wide smile breaking across his face.

He turned from the window and hurried through the connecting bath into Sam's room. He had to tell Sam right away!

Sam Hooper was sound asleep when Madigan rushed in and shook him roughly by the shoulder. "Sam!" Madigan said urgently, "get up! It's snowing, Sam! It's here; the snow's here!"

Hooper, the older of the two by

twenty years, did not have Madigan's capacity for coming fully awake the first thing in the morning. He had to prepare himself to face the world, and he did so now, twisting and grunting and yawning while his sleepy senses returned.

"What? What's here?" he said sourly.

"The snow, Sam!" Madigan repeated excitedly. "It's here! It's here!"

What Madigan was saying got through to Sam Hooper then and he forced himself awake, jumping out of bed and stumbling along with Madigan to the nearest window. Together they stared down at the main street of the little town, freshly whitened by the snow. They stared with eyes wide and mouths slightly agape, as if they had never before seen such a phenomenon. Then they looked at each other and smiled happily. It was here, they were thinking. The snow was here at last.

They had been waiting for this, the first snowfall, for more than three weeks. It usually came not later than the middle of October but this year it was way overdue, for

When thieves fall out . . . and so on and so forth, a familiar proverb so well-known that it hardly bears repetition. Faced with a choice of freezing to death or keeping warm by burning money, what would you do?

today was the twenty-third. Hooper had been complaining for the last seven days, since the fifteenth came and went and no snow appeared, that he would wait only one more day and then ditch the job; but each day he decided to wait another, until now, finally, his patience had been rewarded. His eyes shone with an eagerness to get on with the work at hand.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Ten past eight," said Madigan.

"Okay, let's get things moving. You check with the weather bureau while I get dressed; then I'll get everything together while you get ready."

"Right." Madigan hurried back into his own room.

Hooper went into the bathroom, washed, and began a fast shave. He could hear Madigan on the phone getting the weather report. Their plans depended on the forecast. Madigan had assured him a hundred times that it would be favourable, that the first snowfall of the season was always a heavy one. It had better be, thought Hooper now, or we'll get caught just as sure as hell is hot.

He finished up and went back into his room and started dressing. Madigan came in a minute later, grinning like a cat with a mouse under its paw.

"We're set, Sam! Weather bureau says the snow is expected to continue for at least six more hours. I told you, didn't I, Sam? Didn't I tell you?"

"Yeah, you told me, kid."

"Hot dog! We're gonna pull it off, Sam. In a couple more hours we're gonna have money to burn!"

"Well, we ain't got it yet," said Hooper calmly, "and we won't have it if you don't get cleaned up so we can hightail it out of here."

"Sure, Sam, sure." Madigan hurried into the bathroom, humming to himself.

Crazy kid, thought Hooper. Acting like some college punk that just made the team. He'd better settle down or he's liable to get a bullet in his gut. Sticking up a bank is serious business.

Sam Hooper was the man to know, if anyone did, just how serious the robbing of a bank could be. This would be his seventh bank. He had made it away clean on four of them, had been caught on the other two. For the two on which he had been caught, he had spent a total of fourteen years in Federal penitentiaries; five on the first, nine on the second. He was now forty-four years old and had thought he was finished with this strongarm stuff.

For the past year, since getting out of Leavenworth, Hooper had led a quiet, law-abiding existence;

he had a rented room, ate in cafes, and worked nine hours a day as a leather tanner, a trade he had picked up by courtesy of the U. S. Bureau of Prisons. It wasn't much of a life for a guy like Sam, a guy who had lived it up in Miami and Mexico City, been used to fancy cars, fancy clothes, and fancy dames; but at least he was able to look a cop in the eye and not always have to be thinking about some job he could get busted for; at least he could lay down a twenty for change without worrying about the bill being marked; at least he could sleep nights. He hadn't been setting the world on fire, not by a long shot, but he had been doing all right.

And then the kid came along. Phil Madigan, his name was. A small-timer, a candy store burglar. Madigan was a real sports enthusiast; skin diving, ice skating, skiing, the works. That was how he happened to run up on this job they were getting ready to pull. He had been up in the mountains for some winter sports the previous season and had come across a cabin high up toward the peaks. It was a little place, just one average sized room, Madigan had told him, and it was so far up that it was isolated from the time the first snow fell until the spring thaw about four or five months later. It was owned by a real estate company down in the town of Preston where Hooper and Madigan were now, and was rented out to fishermen during the trout season. A perfect place to hide out, Madigan had said that first time he and Hooper met.

The kid had been referred to Hooper by one of the few contacts Sam still retained in the underworld. Hooper had passed the word around that he was out of business, that he intended to make it as a square after his last bit in prison; but apparently he wasn't taken too seriously because Phil Madigan turned up at his room one night saying he had a hot bank job on the line and had been told to look up Sam Hooper.

Sam listened to the plan out of a mixture of professional curiosity and sheer boredom, after first making it plain that he had 'retired'. But the more he listened, the more interested he became. It began to sound as if the kid really did have a sweet one waiting to be picked. So he took down all the particulars of the job and told Madigan he would look it over and let him know in a few days.

For the next two nights he worked the plan over and over in his mind and on paper, trying to find some weakness in it, some flaw which would give him an excuse to dump it; but each time he went

over it, he came to the same conclusion: it was a good, sound bank job that looked like it could be pulled off very nicely if handled properly. And even though it was a small town bank, the take would probably be well worth the effort and risk involved.

Sam tried to think over the deal rationally. He knew if he got caught on another bank job he'd be in prison until he was an old, old man. But the temptation was just too much for him. He kept thinking how nice it would be to have a briefcase full of money in his hand and step on a plane for Acapulco again. In his mind danced pictures of new clothes, a shiny convertible, and blondes—great big blondes.

The great big blondes did it. Sam Hooper decided to go the route one more time.

He and Madigan began polishing up the plan. The most important detail—the getaway and hideout—had already been taken care of with the little cabin high up the mountain. The one big obstacle in hitting a bank in that area was getting down the winding mountain highway before a roadblock could be set up at the bottom. This was virtually impossible to do; that was why there had never been a stickup in any of the resort towns that circled the mountain. But Hooper and Madigan would eliminate that problem by going up instead of down. It's a perfect set-up, Madigan had said. We pull the job on the day of the first snowfall, then beat it up to this cabin. Nobody'll ever think we'd do that. The place is snowed in for at least four months. All we have to do is sit it out until spring and then just kind of drift down through town one day like we were early fishermen. Before anybody can notice us, we'll be gone. Sure, it'll be dull and monotonous up there all alone for four months, but we can hold out. And in the spring, we'll have money to burn!

Hooper finished dressing and threw his extra clothes in a suitcase. Then he sat down on the bed and gave their guns a final check. They had a .410 gauge shotgun with a sawed-off barrel and two .38 revolvers. Each would carry a revolver; in addition Madigan would handle the shotgun while Hooper collected the money in the bank. Hooper also had a little .25 automatic he carried in his hip pocket as an extra precaution. That was his hole card, his kicker, in case somebody got the drop on them; not even Madigan knew he had it.

"Hey, snap it up!" he yelled to Madigan in the bathroom.

The younger man came in, drying his face with a hotel towel. "All

set and ready to get going," he said.

"There's your artillery," Hooper told him, strapping his own shoulder holster in place. "Are you sure everything's set in the cabin?"

"I told you, Sam, it's all ready. I made a final check last week. There's five hundred bucks worth of food laid in; a six-hundred gallon tank of fuel oil; a radio, four decks of cards, about a thousand magazines I got secondhand in the city; and we got checkers, dominos, parchesi—everything but a broad, an' I could have arranged that, too, if you'd let me."

"Sure, sure," said Hooper, "that's all we'd need. We'll be at each other's throats soon enough without having a dame to fight over. You don't know how it is being cooped up with the same guy day after day."

Madigan smiled. "We'll make it, Sam. I know we will. And when it's all over we'll have—"

"I know, I know," Hooper interrupted, "we'll have money to burn. Come on, let's get going or spring'll be here before we even get started."

Madigan got into his holster and rolled the shotgun up in newspaper. They both put on heavy Mackinaws, fur caps and rubber overshoes. Then they got their luggage and went downstairs to check out.

The bank opened at ten. Five minutes later Hooper and Madigan pulled up outside and parked. They were driving a four-year-old coupe with heavy-duty snow chains on the rear tires. Getting out, they ducked their heads against the windblown snow and crossed the sidewalk to the bank entrance.

There were six people inside; three tellers, the manager, his secretary and one customer. Madigan remained just inside the door, folding the paper back from the barrel of the shotgun so they could all see what it was.

"Don't anybody move!" Hooper ordered, leveling his .38. "This is a holdup!" His gaze swept across the three men in the teller cages. "If an alarm goes off, so does that shotgun, understand? Everybody just stand or sit right where you are and look down at the floor!"

When they were all very still, with Madigan moving the shotgun slowly back and forth in an arc that covered the whole room, Hooper slipped the .38 into his pocket and from under his coat drew out a large canvas bag which he quickly unfolded. He hurried behind the railing and methodically emptied the tellers' cages of all currency. Then he stepped over to the bank manager's desk and pulled the man to his feet roughly. "Get that vault open!" he ordered coldly.

The big thick outer door of the

vault was already standing open. The manager fumbled with a ring of keys to open the barred inner door. When he finally got it unlocked, Hooper pushed him inside and made him sit in a corner while he systematically looted the bank's reserve safe. Looks pretty good, he thought, as he stuffed the sack with bundles of tens and twenties and a few stacks of fifties and hundreds.

Finished, he stepped back out and snapped, "All right, everybody into the vault! Come on, move!" He glanced at the big clock on the wall as the other five people filed into the vault. They had been in the bank about seven or eight minutes. Pretty good time, he thought.

Hooper slammed the barred door and locked everyone in the vault. "Take a look," he said to Madigan, hurrying toward the front door. Madigan peered out at the street; he saw nothing but swirling snow. "Looks okay," he told Hooper.

"All right, let's go!"

Madigan folded the newspaper back over the shotgun barrel, tucked it under his arm and opened the front door. Hooper stepped past him out of the bank and went directly to the car; Madigan followed him, closing the door gently behind him.

In the car, Madigan tossed the shotgun on the rear seat and started the motor. Hooper kept the sack of money between his knees, his revolver ready on top of it. The windshield wipers threw the loose snow away, giving them each a picture of the street up ahead. It was nearly deserted. Madigan guided the car slowly away from the curb and down the street.

Five minutes later they were out of town and approaching the curve where the highway began its winding descent to the lowlands.

"How's it look?" Madigan asked excitedly, nodding toward the sack of money.

"Pretty good, I think," said Hooper. "Looked like maybe fifty or sixty grand."

Madigan grinned and went back to concentrating on the road. Where the highway curved downward, they turned off into a gravel road almost hidden by the snow. Their chains crunched noisily and caught and the car lumbered up a slight incline. As they gradually moved upward from the highway, Hooper looked back and saw fresh snow already beginning to fill their tracks.

Fifteen minutes later they reached a ridge where the road leveled off momentarily. Madigan shifted to neutral and pulled on the brake. Hooper took a pair of binoculars from the glove compartment and they got out. Taking turns with the glasses, they looked back down the mountain. The first sec-

tion of their tracks leading off the highway were now completely covered and there was a fresh layer of unmarked snow on the highway itself.

"Perfect," said Madigan. "Just like I told you, huh, Sam? First snowfall is always heavy."

"Just like you told me, kid," Hooper admitted. He turned his gaze upward. "How long will it take us to get to the cabin?"

"About three hours, from the looks of the snow."

Hooper turned back to the car. "Well, let's get going."

It was nearly two in the afternoon when the car pulled the last steep grade and made the top ridge. They were high up now, in a primitive part of the great mountain range where the sky looked strangely close to them, where there was nothing visible except snow-covered pine trees, where the air was exhaustingly thin, the cold sharp and painful.

Hooper looked back down the road. "Are you sure nobody can follow us up here?"

Madigan shook his head emphatically. "By the time the snow stops, this road and everything around it will be in drifts up to eight feet deep. And it'll stay like that until the spring thaw. It would be impossible for a car to even go down, much less come up."

Hooper looked around at the white wasteland on all sides of them. "Where's the cabin?" he asked.

"Just up ahead."

The car moved through snow already deep across the rutted, narrow little road, and crawled slowly around a thick group of trees into a small clearing. There, with three feet of snow drifted up against it, sat the little cabin.

"Home sweet home," said Madigan as he drove up as close as he could and cut the motor. They got out of the car.

"We'll have to dig our way in, looks like," said Hooper.

"Yeah." Madigan opened the trunk and took out two hand shovels.

"How's that work?" Hooper asked, indicating the large fuel storage tank mounted on a raised wooden platform next to the cabin.

"There's a line running into the cabin," Madigan explained. "It's got a regular tap like a water faucet. We use the fuel oil for our lanterns, for the stove and for the heater."

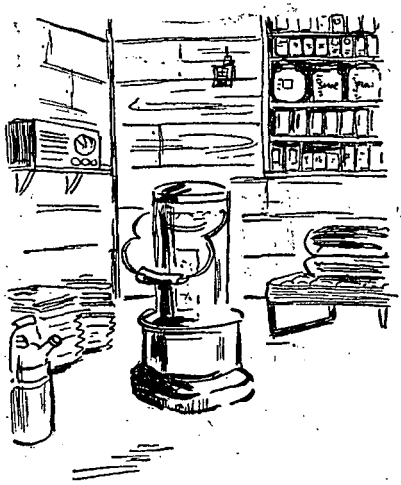
"Sure there's enough to last?"

"Plenty," Madigan assured him. "Probably be a hundred gallons left in the spring."

The two men went to work

clearing the snow away. When they got the door open, Madigan took the shovels and put them back in the trunk. "You grab the money," he said easily, "I'll unload the suitcases."

Hooper nodded and got the sack of money from the front seat. He went on inside and looked around. One corner was piled high with magazines. A table in the middle of the room had decks of cards and



other games of amusement on it. There was a radio on a shelf on the wall. In a little alcove Hooper saw cases of canned goods and other supplies. There were two folding cots, each with three new blankets stacked on it. Between them was a large kerosene stove.

Not bad, thought Hooper, considering that it's only a four-month stretch that we must hibernate.

The door slammed behind him and he turned to see Madigan putting their luggage on the floor. "Get the binoculars out of the glove compartment, will you, Sam," the younger man said. "If we leave them out there the lenses will freeze."

"Sure, kid. Then let's get a fire going and warm the place up, what say?"

Madigan smiled. "Good deal."

Hooper went back outside and waded the snow over to the car. Opening the door, he reached inside and got the glasses. Have to get this car around back and get it up on blocks someway, he thought. Got to be sure and start it every day, too, so it won't freeze up. He closed the car door and made his way back to the cabin. There was a thermometer nailed to the wall just outside the door. Hooper saw it was only fifteen above zero. He shivered and pushed through the door.

Just as he stepped inside, Hooper felt the muzzle of the shotgun jab into his back. He stiffened and held his hands very still.

"That's the ticket, Sam," said Madigan evenly. "Don't even think about moving." He reached around under Hooper's coat and lifted the .38 from Sam's shoulder holster. "Okay, Sam," he said, pushing him

away, "go on over there and sit down at the table and keep still so I don't have to blast you."

Hooper sat down, feeling the hardness of the little automatic in his hip pocket, very glad now that he had never mentioned to Madigan that he carried his 'kicker', his 'hole card'. He stared coldly across the room at Madigan. "Double-crossing me, kid?" he asked in a measured tone.

"That's it, Sam," Madigan said, smiling.

"So you lied to me," Hooper accused quietly. "You said there was no way out of here until spring."

"I said there was no way with the car, Sam," Madigan corrected. The younger man picked up the sack of money and emptied it on the floor. Kneeling down, watching Hooper closely, he used one hand to stuff the currency into a knapsack. When it was packed, he slipped his arms through the shoulder straps, switching the shotgun from one hand to the other as he did so.

"What are you gonna do, hike down?" Hooper asked sarcastically.

"Little too cold for that, Sam," said Madigan lightly. He backed over to one of the cots and pushed the blankets off onto the floor. Beneath them lay a pair of shiny skis and matching ski poles.

"So that's it," said Hooper. "You're gonna ski down. A regular all-American boy, aren't you? Don't you think the law will be waiting for you when you get back down there?"

Madigan was kneeling on the other side of the cabin again, lacing on heavy ski shoes. He continued to watch Hooper closely, the shotgun lying only inches from his hands.

"I'm not going that way," he told Hooper. "I'm going down the other side. There's a ski lodge down there. By tonight there'll be busloads of skiers up here. Nobody'll notice one more." He stood up, gathered his skis and poles under one arm and leveled the shotgun on Hooper. "Outside, Sam," he ordered.

Hooper went back out into the cold, Madigan following him.

"Just stand over there by the door where I can keep an eye on you," said Madigan as he moved a few yards away from the cabin. Hooper watched while the younger man laid his skis in position on the level snow and knelt between them, cradling the shotgun first on one knee, then the other, while he fitted the skis onto his shoes. Then he stood up and held the shotgun loosely under one arm.

"You gonna kill me, kid?" Hooper asked, tensing himself for a drop to the ground to try and get the .25

out before Madigan could get him with a load of buckshot.

"What for, Sam?" Madigan said easily. "You never did anything to me."

"Aren't you afraid I'll come after you in the spring, when I get out of here?"

Madigan laughed. "Go ahead, Sam," he said simply.

Hooper frowned as suspicion flooded his mind. It doesn't figure, he told himself. The first rule in pulling a double-cross is to make sure the guy you cross won't ever be able to get even. It's a trick, he decided. He's trying to get me off guard for some reason.

"I've got to cut out if I'm gonna make the ski lodge by dark," Madigan said. "You just go on back in the cabin, Sam, and stay put until I get gone. And don't try following me if you've got any sense; you'd never make it on foot. Understand?"

Hooper nodded.

"So long, Sam."

Hooper backed slowly toward the door, still expecting Madigan to raise the shotgun at any second. But the younger man made no attempt to fire; he just stood waiting while Hooper backed all the way into the cabin and quickly shut the door.

Watching through the window, Hooper saw Madigan swing first one, then the other ski around and move off slowly toward the first slope that would take him down the other side of the mountain. Hooper wet his lips and took out the little .25 automatic, snapping the safety off. He looked back out and decided that Madigan was now about a hundred yards away; too far to chance accuracy with the small bore weapon he had. Got to get closer to him, he thought anxiously.

He hurried to the rear of the cabin and climbed out the back window, dropping nearly waist-deep into a drift. Moving through the snow to the corner, he peered around and saw Madigan still moving smartly along on his skis, now about two hundred yards away. Hooper thought quickly and bolted from behind the cabin, running in a crouch until he reached the line of trees edging the clearing. The snow was not so deep under the trees and Hooper was able to move faster. He began to run through the trees, staying back under their protective covering. He ran until his chest was heaving from the thin air that failed to satisfy his lungs; then he had to rest. He slowed to a walk and moved back toward the clearing. Looking out from behind a tree, he saw Madigan still about fifty yards ahead of him. He leaned up against the tree and counted

slowly to thirty, then moved back under cover and started running again.

He ran until he judged himself to be ahead of Madigan, then slowed down and crept quietly back to the edge of the clearing. Madigan was just approaching the place where Hooper stood concealed. They were both almost to the edge of the slope now.

Hooper waited until Madigan went by, then stepped out behind him, the gun leveled. "Hold it, kid!" he said sharply.

Madigan tried to whirl around and raise the shotgun but he got his legs tangled in the skis and his arms in the ski poles, and he dropped the weapon and stumbled into a snowdrift helplessly.

Hooper stood over him laughing, the .25 aimed at his chest. "Outsmarted yourself, didn't you, punk?"

"Don't shoot me, Sam!" Madigan begged.

"I'm not," Hooper told him. "I don't want somebody finding you with a bullet in you and wondering how you got it. No, I'm going to take care of you in a different way, punk."

"Give me a break, Sam," Madigan pleaded.

"Sure, I'll give you a break," Hooper said coldly. He reached down and picked up the fallen shotgun by its barrel. Using it as a club, he smashed the stock against Madigan's skull. The younger man fell over unconscious.

"There's your break," Hooper snarled. "A break in the head."

He put the shotgun down and rolled Madigan over, pulling the money-filled knapsack from his back and removing the unconscious man's coat to take off the shoulder holster he wore. When it was off, Hooper took the other .38 from the pocket and worked the heavy Mackinaw back onto Madigan's limp form. Then he grabbed the collar of the coat and began to pull Madigan through the drifted snow, the skis and poles dragging behind him.

Stopping near the edge, Hooper surveyed the slope carefully. It fell in a gentle curving grade that angled off to the right and seemed to wind gradually down-mountain as far as he could see. That was the ski trail Madigan had meant to follow down to the lodge, he decided. But off to the left there was no gentle curve, no slope at all; there was only a steep incline that stretched about thirty feet to a sheer drop down into a deep gorge.

That looks okay, Hooper thought dispassionately. He dragged the unconscious man farther along the edge until he had him right above the incline leading

to the drop. There he laid Madigan out on his side, skis straight, poles still attached to his wrists with thongs.

"So long, double-crosser," he said softly, and with the toe of his overshoe started Madigan down the slope.

Madigan's unconscious form slid downward, the drag of his skis slowing but not stopping him. He moved jerkily, his body weaving and leaving an odd trail in the snow. Seconds later he went over the edge and dropped from sight.

Hooper waited perhaps two minutes but he never did hear Madigan hit bottom. Either it's pretty damned deep, he decided, or else there's a lot of snow at the bottom. Either way it didn't really matter. If the fall didn't finish Madigan, he'd freeze to death before he woke up.

Hooper went back and got the shotgun and Madigan's shoulder holster and the packful of money, and trudged back toward the cabin. It was getting colder now and the light was beginning to fade. The evening air seemed even thinner than it had been earlier and Hooper had to stop twice to rest and catch his breath. When he finally reached the cabin, he saw on the thermometer that the temperature had dropped to two degrees below zero. He hurried on inside.

The cabin was as cold as the outdoors. Hooper was shivering as he put the guns and knapsack on the table and pulled off his gloves. His fingers were numb with cold. He blew into his cupped palms a few times and rubbed his hands briskly. *Got to get a fire going,* he thought. *Got to warm this place up.*

He lifted the lid of the stove and saw that it was dry inside. Picking up the kerosene can, he found it empty. He went over to the tap running in from the fuel tank outside and put the lip of the can under it. He turned the tap—and nothing came out.

Hooper stared at the dry nozzle, the empty can, the cold stove. No fuel, he thought dumbly. Then the panic began to rise in him. *No fuel—!*

Outside, the temperature was down another degree and dropping steadily.

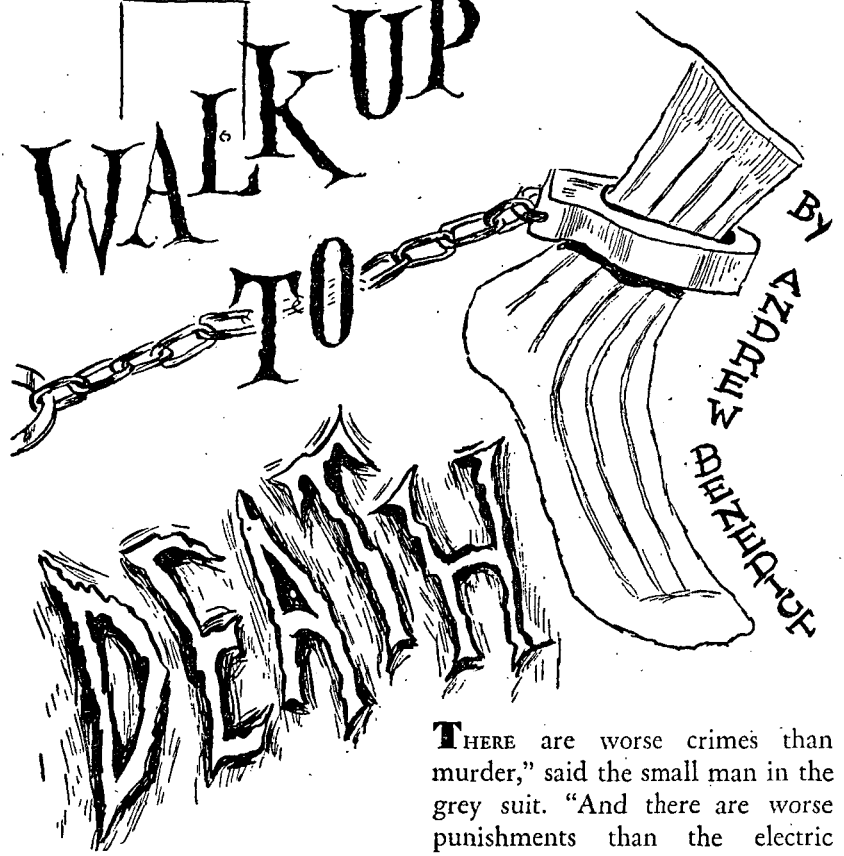
BIG BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER

• 469 Pages

For details please see other side

WALK UP TO DEATH



BY ANTHONY AWARD

THERE are worse crimes than murder," said the small man in the grey suit. "And there are worse punishments than the electric chair."

I don't know why people tell me stories but they do—in bars,

It is always wise to check one's means of egress as well as ingress when visiting strangers, otherwise a casual social visit may become a permanent change of residence.

on trains, in restaurants. This little man seemed withdrawn rather than outgoing, hardly the kind who starts conversations with strangers. His gray moustache hid a weak mouth and his eyes were slightly myopic behind thick glasses. He was standing at the bar and I hadn't said a word, to anybody. All I'd done was order another beer, when the panel discussion on the television had turned to capital punishment, and somebody had said that capital punishment was unworthy of our civilization.

"Civilization?" the little man questioned, as the bartender drew my beer. "What is it, anyway?" It's a carefully cultivated myth. We are just savages living in upholstered caves. Give any man sufficient provocation and the barbarian will emerge."

He took a sip of his Scotch-on-the-rocks.

Take Morton (he said) as an example. You understand—that's not his real name. If anybody could be considered civilized, it was Morton. He liked music and art, he gave generously to charity, he was law-abiding, and had never knowingly injured anyone in his life. He was Anglo-Saxon and not very emotional, but he loved justice—or thought he did—and he certainly loved his daughter Lucy. Then one day Lucy drowned herself.

At first Morton was stricken with grief. Then he learned that a man was responsible for Lucy's suicide. And his grief turned into a hatred he'd never thought he could feel.

The man Morton hated was named Davis. He was an athlete, a football player, a track man and swimmer. Six feet tall, he was as full of vitality as a great cat. It was hardly surprising that Lucy fell in love with him. She met him at college, when she was a freshman and he was a senior. But he killed her and she killed herself.

Morton's first grief turned to a hatred that would give him no peace. He tried to tell himself that he must be civilized, that what Davis had done was no worse than other men have done. When he discovered that Lucy was by no means the first girl Davis had treated so—indeed, one of her classmates had died too, though in her case it was the result of blood-poisoning—he decided he would take the law into his own hands and punish Davis.

If Morton had been of a Latin temperament, he might have shot Davis himself. But Morton was Anglo-Saxon, and his hatred, slow to grow, became a cold flame which could not be so easily satisfied.

Morton therefore spent some time in planning how he would punish Davis, and in searching out the

spot that would be exactly right for it. He traveled to a number of different cities before he found what he was looking for—a suitable penthouse apartment formerly occupied by an artist.

It was at the top of a large building, and he rented it under an assumed name. He posed as an importer with frequent business abroad, and came and went at odd intervals, sometimes being absent for months. During these periods, of course, he was simply back at home carrying on his real business. He took care to lock up the apartment, telling the superintendent and the rental agent that there were many rare and valuable objects in it, and under no circumstances was it to be entered, no matter how long he was away.

During the first year, whenever Morton was away he left little seals on all the doors so he could tell if his instructions were disobeyed and the apartment entered in his absence. It never was. In an expensive apartment building, a promptly paying tenant can get any degree of privacy and respect for his wishes that he desires, barring some drastic emergency such as fire or an explosion. So Morton now felt safe in taking the next step.

He had some false letterheads printed and wrote on one of them to Davis, offering him a very good job at a high salary in a non-existent firm. He gave Davis a post office box for his reply.

Davis wrote back saying he was interested in the offer, and now Morton phoned him. He suggested Davis drive down—it was a distance of a hundred miles or more—and meet him the following evening at a well-known restaurant just outside the city where he had rented the penthouse apartment. He pledged Davis to secrecy about the meeting as well as about the job offer, asking him to bring the original letter with him—he gave Davis a story about some of the other officers of the company being opposed to him so that he had to exercise discretion until everything was set. There's an amazing amount of this hush-hush, cloak-and-dagger sort of thing actually going on in big business.

Of course if Davis had balked, Morton would have had to think of something else. But what man is going to balk at the prospect of a well-paid job? Davis arrived at the restaurant on schedule, big and blonde and radiating animal energy and high spirits. Sitting inconspicuously at his table, Morton could see the women's heads turn to watch Davis as he sauntered through the restaurant.

Morton knew him of course—he'd seen Lucy's pathetic little

hoard of pictures of the man. But Davis had no idea what Lucy's father looked like. Morton introduced himself, they had a drink together, and fifteen minutes later were driving into the city in Davis' car. They parked a couple of blocks from the building that held the penthouse and strolled over. It was quite late, and the lobby was deserted. Even luxury apartment buildings these days use automatic elevators.

Morton led the younger man in through a side entrance and they went directly up to the penthouse without encountering anyone. Once there Morton, who had been rather tense until now, relaxed. He cracked a few jokes and mixed drinks. Davis, who was really a magnificent animal, absorbed three of them before the drugs in the Scotch took effect. Just at the last when Davis began to be aware that something was wrong, things got a bit ticklish. But unconsciousness overcame him before his suspicions became acute. It's amazing how harmless a well-dressed, pleasant-spoken man can appear, especially when he is promising you a good job.

When Davis sprawled back in a big chair, in a drugged sleep, his head lolling, Morton took time out to study him. There was an appealing charm about the young man in his unconsciousness, and for a moment Morton felt his resolve weakening. Then he remembered the file of data a firm of private detectives had compiled about Davis, and he took out of his wallet a snapshot of Lucy on her sixteenth birthday and looked at it. His resolve became firm again.

Davis was big and heavy, but Morton was able to drag him up the narrow stairs that led to a studio room above the penthouse. This was an unusual room. In the first place, it was circular. It had once been a water tank on top of the building. When a larger tank had been built, this one was converted into a room.

It was also soundproofed. Morton had intended to have this done, but the previous artist tenant had already taken care of it.

There were no windows—only a skylight. The skylight was of opaque glass and was open only an inch or two. An air-conditioner set into the wall brought in cool air and a ventilating hood in the ceiling carried stale air out.

Here Morton removed Davis' shoes and his belt and emptied his pockets. He did a few other things, including the burning of the original letter to Davis, which the young man had obligingly brought with him. Then he went back down the narrow stairs, locking behind him

the heavy door which was the only entrance into the studio.

There now remained Davis' car. If found, it would certainly draw attention to Davis' absence and point to his having been in that particular city. Morton had no facilities for hiding a car, but he was not worried. He had the keys, so he drove it to a notorious gambling establishment and parked it in the lot behind the place. He suspected that if he left the keys in the car it would disappear in a day or two, and he was right. You see, he had imagination and he simply worked with the tools at hand. In a big city there are an amazing number of tools that can be turned to usefulness by a determined man, such as car thieves. But to get back to Davis—

Eventually, Davis woke up. His clothes were crumpled, his head hurt dismally, and his left ankle ached. Groggy, he sat up and looked around. He was in a circular room about twenty feet across, pleasantly decorated. An air conditioner hummed. A television set facing the couch on which Davis had awakened was turned on—a cooking program was under way. The door was shut and he was alone in the room.

Davis tried to stand. Then for the first time he realized why his ankle hurt. There was a tight metal cuff around it, and a thin chain connected this to a ringbolt set into the wall at the foot of the couch.

When he realized that he was chained to the wall, Davis sat for several minutes trying to think. He was terribly thirsty, and as his head cleared a little he saw a plastic pitcher of water standing on a table about six feet away. He hobbled toward it and was just able to reach it by extending himself and stretching. He drank the water, a quart, in several long gulps and tossed the pitcher back on the table. He saw that a number of loaves of bread were stacked on the table too, but he wasn't hungry. With his thirst quenched, he sat back on the couch and tried to understand his situation.

He remembered the previous night clearly, and surmised that he was still in Morton's apartment. It was clear enough that Morton must have drugged him, and then chained him in this manner to the wall. What Morton's reason was he had no notion, and so he decided it must be some kind of ridiculous practical joke.

If it was a practical joke, probably the chain wasn't really meant to hold him. He tried jerking it a few times. It seemed as solid as an anchor chain. He studied the way the cuff was locked around his

ankle. The lock that held it was small, but seemed very solid and quite unpickable.

Davis stood up and followed the chain to the wall. The other end was fastened to a ringbolt set into the wall, and when Davis jerked it by hand he got a metallic sound which suggested to him that the bolt was fastened, through the plaster, to metal.

Since the chain could not be pulled loose, and was much too tight to slip out of, he studied the links themselves. They were not massive, but they were welded shut and seemed to be made of some special steel, which they were—a specially alloyed Swedish steel that would resist even a good file.

Davis, his fingers clumsy because of the hangover effect of the drugs, searched his pockets for a cigarette. He had no cigarettes, matches, coins, billfold, pen or pencil or pocket knife. He had thought that with a knife he might be able to cut one of the links, but now he realized that even if he had had his knife it probably would not even have nicked the chain.

Davis raised his voice. "Morton!" he called. "Morton!"

He waited. On the television, an attractive girl in a white nylon dress said, "And then add three eggs, well beaten." The air-conditioner hummed. There was no answer to his shouts, repeated several times.

Davis was not imaginative, but now for the first time he began to feel panicky. Was Morton crazy, to do this to him? Morton certainly hadn't seemed crazy. He tried to think back. He recalled how the first letter had come to him, and how Morton had asked him not to discuss the offer. He remembered the phone call, the meeting at the restaurant, Morton's request that he tell no one of the visit, and bring the original letter with him.

Davis had followed instructions. Outside of some vague hints to a couple of his current girls, he had told no one. No one knew where he had gone. Back home his bachelor apartment was simply locked, with no trace of his whereabouts in it. Now he realized that he knew nothing about Morton, didn't even know if that was his real name, had no real proof the business Morton claimed to be part owner of actually existed. It began to add up in his mind to the fact that Morton had carefully lured him there in such a way that no one had any clue as to where he had gone, or why.

He jumped to his feet and jerked on the chain a dozen times. The only result was to give his ankle a great deal of pain. He began to shout. He raised his voice to a bull bellow and yelled for help until he

was hoarse, until he staggered back onto the upholstered couch in exhaustion.

There was no reply.

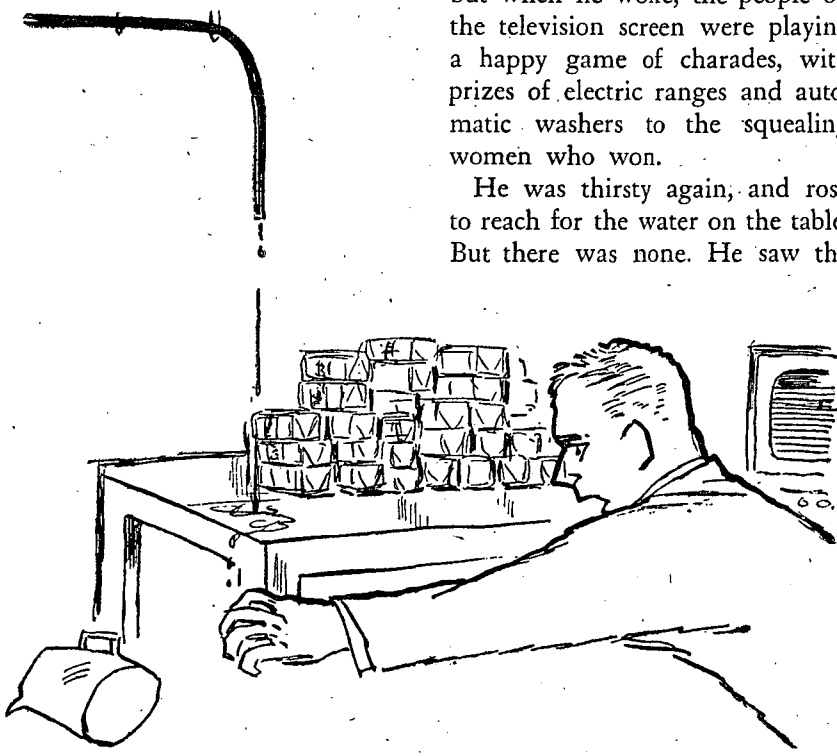
Dazedly, he reminded himself that he was in a building where there must be hundreds of others. On the floor below, or at most two floors down—which is to say, within thirty feet of him—there must be human beings who would come to his rescue. But he could not make them hear him.

Except for himself, the only life that manifested itself was in the shadow world of the television, on which now a smiling man with fine white teeth was saying, *Ladies, if you want your husband to sit down to your meals with a sigh of happy contentment . . .*

Otherwise, Davis might have been on the moon.

His mind refused to accept the situation more fully yet. Exhausted by his yelling, he even slept for a while—he didn't know how long, but when he woke, the people on the television screen were playing a happy game of charades, with prizes of electric ranges and automatic washers to the squealing women who won.

He was thirsty again, and rose to reach for the water on the table. But there was none. He saw the



plastic pitcher he had tossed down, and then saw that above the table was a rubber tube, leading to a large tank against the wall some feet away. By some device the tube was arranged so that one or two drops a minute came through it. The drops had fallen on the table, as he had not replaced the plastic pitcher under them.

Now he could not reach the pitcher. He had tossed it too far. As soon as he realized that, his thirst became raging. He panicked, and lunged for it, stretching his body and arms to the utmost. He managed only to brush the pitcher with his fingertips and knock it further away.

When he realized the futility of what he was doing, he fought for calm. He had to reach the pitcher somehow. He tried leaning forward, letting the chain around his ankle hold him from falling, and stretching his arms. This enabled him to touch the smooth plastic side of the pitcher, but nothing more. Breathing hard, watching the drops of water go to waste on the polished surface of the table, he licked dry lips and tried to keep from screaming and lunging.

At last he realized that he could capture the pitcher again. Slipping off his jacket, he held it by a sleeve and tossed it so that the jacket fell over the pitcher. Then, using the jacket as a net, he pulled the pitcher within reach and set it carefully under the dripping water. In time it would fill. He could only wait.

When he tossed the jacket, a slip of paper he had not noticed, or at least had overlooked when he searched his pockets, fell out of the breast pocket. He picked it off the floor and saw that it was a typewritten note.

It said simply:

Sorry I had to run off, old man, but please be my guest until I return. I've given you the best room, and left food and water that should last for quite awhile. I may be gone several days—possibly even more. Make yourself comfortable until I get back.

Morton

It took several minutes for the meaning of the note to sink in. Morton might be gone several days. This crazy joke would continue at least that long. For a minimum of several days, Davis would have to stay chained up like an animal, waiting for Morton to return and release him.

The realization sent him into a frenzy of shouting again.

This time he tired more quickly. He decided that possibly no one was near enough in the apartments below to hear him because it was daytime, and the occupants were at work. He would try again at night

when someone was bound to be home. Then he would certainly be heard.

The thought calmed him somewhat. Finally he began to take full, deliberate stock of his situation.

The chain was unbreakable. He had already decided that, though he would keep trying. The drip of water was agonizingly slow, but steady. On the table, within reach, were stacked loaves of bread wrapped in waxed paper. He counted them. Thirty loaves.

Unbidden the thought came to him. Bread and water. A loaf a day . . . God in heaven, did Morton plan to keep him chained up for thirty days? For a month! Living on bread and water? No, that couldn't be; it was only part of the joke—to frighten him. Soon Morton would come in and unchain him and they would have a drink and a good laugh together. This was all part of some fantastic test Morton had devised, some test of his ability to stay calm, to accept an uncomfortable situation. . . .

This reasoning sustained him for a time—perhaps an hour, though the only way he could tell time was to watch the changing programs on the television. Now another game was being played. In this one women contestants were faced by a row of boxes, and invited to select one. One woman found a head of cabbage in her box, and squealed in dismay. Another found a check for a thousand dollars and a certificate entitling her to select a fur coat at a department store, and squealed in delight. One woman found a check for five thousand dollars and fainted from excitement.

Davis turned his eyes to the plastic pitcher. A tiny amount of water had gathered in it. Perhaps enough for one swallow. He could not resist. He stretched for the pitcher, gulped the water, and replaced the pitcher with great care.

Later he would try one of the loaves of bread. But his mouth was dry and cottony now and he was not hungry.

So for a time he just sat. The air-conditioner hummed, the television cooed and cackled and exhorted, and the water dripped, one drop at a time, slowly, ever so slowly.

By evening Davis had recovered from the effects of the drugs. His head throbbed, but was reasonably clear. His thirst was great, but only a little over half a pint of water had accumulated in the pitcher. He opened one of the loaves of bread and tried to eat, but after forcing down two slices, gave up and drank what water there was. Then he had to wait again for more.

He knew the time—seven o'clock,

for a seven o'clock news program had come over the television. He paid no attention to the news, but waited until it ended and a bland, smiling man was talking about the merits of a new cigarette with a double filter. Then, judging that now if ever, people would be at home in the apartments below him, somewhere in the building, he began to shout.

"Help!" he cried. "Help! I need help!"

He waited a minute, then repeated. He shouted at one minute intervals for a full fifteen minutes. Then, panting and hoarse, he lay back on the couch to wait.

No one came. There was no sound, except the inane patter of the television, on which a violent Western program had commenced. Through the skylight, open perhaps two inches, he could hear the subdued murmur of a great city. And that was all.

But he was more rested now and he did not give up hope, though he was sure that the room he was in must be soundproofed. There had to be some living human being within thirty feet of him—fifty at the very most. Surely he could make some sound carry that distance, even through two floors and ceilings, in spite of the soundproofing.

He looked for something to make a noise with. His shoes were gone, or he would have pounded on the wall with them. He tried pounding with his fists, but could make only a soft thudding sound.

Now he turned his attention to the couch. Perhaps he could tear it apart and use pieces of it to hammer on the walls and floor. But the couch was a simple wooden platform, bolted together, the legs screwed tightly to the floor, the whole covered with a foam rubber cushion. With all his strength he could not budge the frame. And there was nothing else within reach. . . .

Abruptly, with a leap of the heart, he realized that the wooden table which held the water pitcher was within his reach. Swiftly he took the pitcher, drank the few drops in it, and set it on the floor. Then he tried to draw the table to him.

Disappointment so bitter that it was sour in his mouth overwhelmed him and he dropped back on the couch numbly. The table, too, was bolted down. It was an hour before he remembered the water pitcher, and then he had lost an hour's worth of the water.

He had nothing to make a noise with. Nothing to use as a tool. The skylight was many feet above his head, and just barely open, even if he had anything to throw through it. He checked it off, mentally.

Slowly it became apparent to him that Morton had thought of every action he might try.

Then he really began to feel frightened. Until now he had felt chiefly bewilderment and anger. Now fear replaced these emotions.

What was Morton up to?

When would Morton come back?

In an effort to quiet his fears he stared at the television set. Program gave way to program, all of them peopled by clean, smiling people who looked well groomed even when they wore Western clothes and shot at each other. When a program ended he could not remember what it had been about.

At last even the television ceased to live. The screen became a flickering white blank. The room was lit only by the glow from the picture tube. Then at last Davis slept. While he slept, a concealed peephole in the door slid silently back and Morton looked at him and then silently withdrew.

He slept late the next morning and woke hungry and thirsty. His leg hurt. For a moment he lay half asleep, half awake, wondering where he was. Then recollection returned and he sat up.

Nothing had changed. A pint of water had accumulated in the plastic pitcher. The television set was presenting an interview between a chatty woman with prominent teeth and a tweedy man who had written a novel.

Davis reached for the water, then stopped. Instead he ate some bread. Five or six slices. Then he drank, letting himself swallow only half the pint.

He judged that the dripping of the water was timed so that about a quart a day accumulated.

He studied the tank from which the rubber tube ran. It held perhaps seven or eight gallons. Did it hold —thirty quarts? Thirty quarts of water—thirty loaves of bread. Thirty days!

Dear God, did that mean Morton would not return for thirty days? Or did it mean—

Davis started to scream, and shouted and yelled for half an hour before he collapsed, exhausted.

But no one came. He tried shouting for help again that evening. Still no one came.

No one came the next day.

Nor the day after. Nor the day after that did anyone come to the air-conditioned dungeon at the top of a luxury apartment building in a great modern city, where Davis was chained to the wall by his ankle. . . .

The small man in the gray suit glanced at his watch and stood up.

"I have to catch a plane," he said. "Hope I haven't bored you."

"Wait!" I said. "What hap-

pened?" He shook his head slowly.

"I really can't say. I suppose after thirty days the water stopped. And of course the bread must have been gone. Then—" He shrugged.

"But—" I began, and stopped.

"No one has entered that room for two years," the grey man said. "The bills are all paid promptly by a lawyer and the superintendent and the rental agent get annual Christmas remembrances from the same source. They understand that Morton is in Europe and may be gone several years more. They don't mind, as long as the rent is paid. Of course, some day the apartment will be entered. It may be years, however, unless Morton decides to stop paying the rent."

He glanced at me from the corners of his eyes.

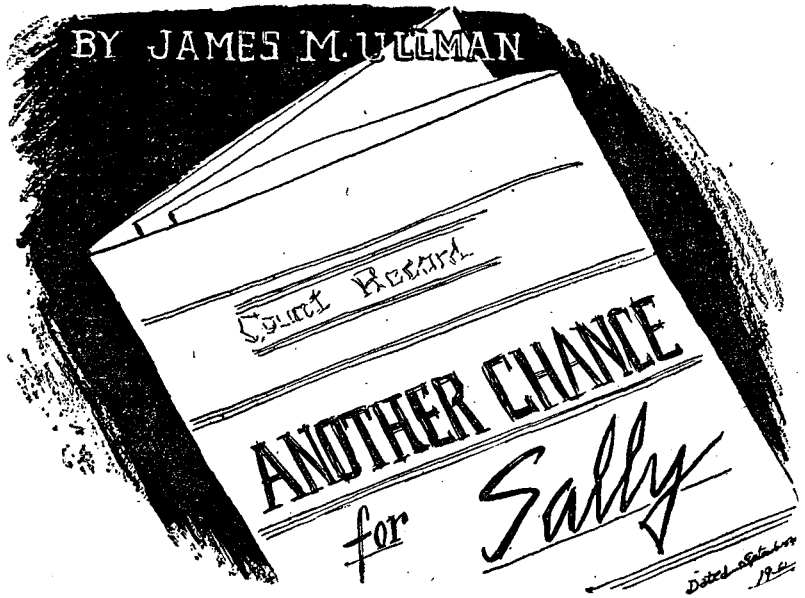
"It would be interesting to know what the men who finally enter that studio room make of what they find," he said, and turned toward the door. "I don't imagine they will find any clews to Morton's true identity, nor to Davis' either."

Then he smiled and went out. I stared after him stupidly for a moment, then ran out to the street after him. But he was gone, lost in the crowd of passersby.

I stood for a moment looking up. For blocks in all directions tall buildings loomed around me, many of them with penthouses. And this was only one of at least eight large cities within a two-hour plane ride.

I went back into the bar and asked the bartender if he knew the man I had been talking to. But the small man was a stranger who had never been in there before.

BY JAMES M. ULLMAN



JUVENILE Officer McMahon telephoned me at the recreation center.

"Pat," he said glumly, "it's Sally again."

"What's she done this time?"

"She was with three boys who roughed up the manager of a ten-cent store. He caught them shoplifting. We've got her at the precinct."

"Thanks, Dan."

"We can't keep her out of court for this sort of thing forever, you know," he added wearily, hanging up.

I waited a moment and then called my wife.

"Hello, hon. Listen, Sally's in jail."

"What for?"

"Same as last time. Hanging around with the wrong friends."

"Oh, Pat. I think it's hopeless. That makes four times in the last year. She's absolutely unmanageable."

The term juvenile delinquent is a general one, applied to those whose behavior troubles their elders . . . yet for misbehaving adults no such all-embracing phrase has yet been coined.

"We've got to give her another chance," I argued. "Any kid who went through what Sally did is bound to be a little haywire. If people like us aren't willing to help her, she's lost."

"All right," my wife said slowly. "If you say so."

"Just remember," I went on. "It isn't every child that's orphaned by an axe murderer."

I left Bill Barlow in charge of the Center. The Welfare Agency had hired him right out of college the year before. Like me, Bill came from this neighborhood, a near-slum inhabited mostly by families of very modest means. That's the way our agency operates. We want workers who are known and respected by the kids we're trying to help. Bill had been an all-city halfback, a neighborhood hero, while in high school, and he could get tough kids to confide in him in a way no outsider ever could. I had pitched for the Dodgers once, and that didn't hurt my standing any either.

I walked the six blocks to the police precinct. It was a hot, humid day, with a layer of muggy clouds throttling the city. On a day much like the one, two years earlier, Sally's father and stepmother had been hacked to death, when the thick, stifling air could fray even a placid man's temper and turn anger into blind rage.

Dan McMahon, burly and stoop-shouldered and wearing civilian clothes, lounged beside the Sergeant's desk, his lined face reflecting years of disillusionment in trying to keep kids out of trouble. But for my benefit, he managed a kindly smile.

"Hello, Pat. She's in the conference room."

I started toward the back of the station. Then McMahon put a hand on my arm.

"Just a minute. She's not alone."

"Who's with her?"

"That newspaper reporter. Jake Greb. He was here when we brought her in."

"Great," I snapped. "That's all she needs. Somebody trying to get her to talk about the murders at a time like this."

I brushed by McMahon and strode to the conference room. Greb was there, all right. A pot-bellied little man wearing an ancient Palm Beach suit. The suit didn't fit him very well and was unpressed and spotted. He looked up and frowned.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said brusquely, "but the interview is over."

"Hi, Pat," Sally said, looking down at the table. "I guess I loused

us up again, didn't I?" As usual, her pink sixteen-year-old face was a mask of innocence. Her blonde hair was piled high on her head and in these surroundings she looked frail and out-of-place.

"We'll get to your current troubles later," I said. "Right now, Mister Greb is going to leave us."

"Look, buddy," Greb began, "you tangle with me ... ."

"I know. I tangle with you and I tangle with your paper. But this time you're bluffing. I don't think your editor will back you up for harassing this girl. I've met your editor, at fund-raising dinners for the agency I work for, and he's not that kind of a man."

Greb's manner changed. He tried to smile. "All right. So I asked a few questions. It's still an unsolved double homicide, you know. Sally was the only person to see the murderer. People are always going to be asking her questions, until the axe maniac is found."

"Get out," I snapped.

Greb rose. "I'll drop over to the Recreation Center," he said. "I want to talk to you about a story." He closed the door behind him.

I sat down and took Sally's hand. "Did he upset you much?"

She shook her head. "I'm used to it," she said quietly. "Mostly he asked what the others always ask. Did I remember the face? And he wanted to know if I dream about it at night. If I could see the face in my dreams, even though I couldn't remember it when I was awake."

"He's a maniac himself, to badger a child that way."

"He's not so bad," Sally said. "Don't be mad at him. He was very polite. He called me 'Miss'. None of the policemen ever do that."

"What about the policemen? McMahon tells me you're in here because some friends of yours beat up a dime store manager."

"They wouldn't have done it," Sally replied defensively, "if the man hadn't tried to push them around."

"They were stealing merchandise."

"I didn't know anything about that," Sally said, wide-eyed. "Honest. Ziggy said, 'Let's go in the dime store, I want to buy something for Ma'. I didn't know those boys were stealing things."

She was lying. I was well aware of that. But I also knew she would stick to her story no matter what. And that the boys, true to the juvenile sneak-thief's code, would back her up.

"Ziggy," I sighed, "is the boy you got in trouble with the last time. When he broke into the empty house."

"I just ran into him today by accident. In front of the dime store. I was on my way to the Recreation Center."

"Well, I'll do the best I can. McMahon and all the other men in the precinct houses are on your side, Sally. They know what happened to your folks and what you went through, and they'll give you another pass. But sooner or later, if you're not careful, you'll go too far. You're still a ward of the court. If the judge ever learns about the scrapes you've been getting into, he'll take you out of your foster home with me and lock you up in a reform school."

McMahon agreed, as I knew he would, not to book Sally. He lectured her for a few minutes and then sent her home in a squad car. I went back to the Recreation Center and found Jake Greb there, watching Bill Barlow referee a basketball game.

I nodded and showed Greb to my office. I wasn't angry with him any more. After all, he was only doing his job. Any newspaperman in town would be in line for a fat bonus for turning up new evidence in the Smallwood murders.

Greb settled in a chair. "First," he said, "I want to apologize. I got a little arrogant with you earlier today. I guess it's this miserable heat. That and the fact I don't really enjoy reminding the little blonde about . . . you know."

"That's all right. I was on edge myself."

Greb lit a cigar. He leaned back, blowing smoke, and his eyes narrowed. "She's been living with you and your wife almost all the time since the murders, hasn't she?"

"We applied to give her a foster home as soon as it was learned the grandparents wanted no part of her. With my record as a social worker, we had no trouble getting her. She used to hang around the Recreation Center before her parents were murdered, and we already knew her well. She was a pitiful little thing even then. Her father had absolutely no love for her. He'd get drunk and throw things at her. And the stepmother . . . well, everyone in the neighborhood knew how she mistreated the girl. She ruled Sally with an iron hand."

"Sally ever say anything to you? About that day?"

"Not very often. My wife and I never ask."

Greb shook his head. "I dunno. There's something about Sally. I got a feeling for these things. Her story was that she came home from a movie and saw a bloody man run

out of the shack carrying an axe. That she never got a look at his face. That she went inside and found the bodies . . . what was left of them . . . and sat down on the floor, paralyzed, too shocked to move or anything. That's how the cops found her. I was the first reporter there and I saw her then too. 'A bloody man with an axe'. That's all she ever said. Then or since. But somehow I always figured she knew more than she was saying."

"I don't think so," I replied slowly. "That experience, plus the miserable life she was living while the Smallwoods were still alive . . . it's made her kind of a wild girl, I'm afraid, and she does tell lies. But I don't think she was lying about that."

"Maybe not consciously lying. But look at it this way. As you pointed out, Smallwood didn't love her and her stepmother was abusive. So I don't imagine she liked the Smallwoods either. Subconsciously, she was probably glad to see them dead."

"Just a minute . . ."

"Hold on. I'm not leveling any accusations against Sally. Anyhow, it took a strong man to wield that axe. But there are plenty of kids, who, if their parents neglect and abuse them, would be glad to see their parents dead. This could be true of Sally. Despite the horror of the situation, maybe she was glad, inside, that the Smallwoods were no more. And maybe, subconsciously, she refuses to admit to herself that she knows who killed them, because she's grateful to the killer. Maybe she even got to the shack earlier than she said . . . early enough to see both murders."

"It's kind of a crazy theory," I said.

Greb shrugged. "All murder is crazy. The police don't even know why the Smallwoods were killed. They've got two theories about that, each as good as the other. One, that the murderer was after the money Smallwood kept in a strongbox under his bed. He bragged about the money every time he got drunk in a tavern . . . the insurance money he received when his first wife, Sally's mother, was struck and killed by a truck. The whole neighborhood knew where he kept the money. The other theory involved the stepmother . . . what was her name?"

"Amy."

"Yeah, Amy. The only reason she married Smallwood was for that insurance money. She figured when he got it he'd move out of that miserable shack on the alley and into a decent place, and spend some of it. But not Smallwood.

He was tight as a drum. Too bad for Amy. She was a good-looking woman, too. Still young. While Smallwood was away she was having affairs with half the men in the neighborhood. And the police think one of those affairs could have gone sour. The man could have gone into the shack that hot, humid day and had a fight with Amy and killed her with an axe. If he was a married man, maybe she wanted blackmail and he lost his head. Amy died first, the medicos said. And then Smallwood walked in, surprised the killer and got it too. I like that theory best myself. Sure, the money was missing from the strongbox. But the killer took it to hide his real motive. He did the job with an axe Smallwood always left near the door. An axe that's never been found. If the killer had planned to rob the strongbox, he'd have brought a weapon of his own, instead of using Smallwood's axe . . . the weapon of an enraged man."

"The way you put it," I said, "it's reasonable enough. But what are you getting at?"

Greb straightened and stubbed his cigar out. "Simply this. One way or another, Sally will never be able to lead a normal life until the killer is behind bars. There'll always be people like me asking questions. She'll never be able to forget."

"That makes sense."

"So, let's try to smoke the killer out."

I didn't like Greb's plan one bit and said so. But Greb is a persuasive man. I guess that's one reason he's such a good police reporter. He talked me into agreeing to let him go ahead with his plan, provided Sally agreed to it too. He argued that Sally would never be safe, or at peace, as long as the killer remained at large; that if I didn't go along with him, I'd be derelict in my responsibility as a foster parent.

I told Sally about the plan after supper that night. Sally and my wife and I ringed the dining room table.

"Sally," I began, "you remember that reporter, Mister Greb?"

"The nice little man?"

"That's right. He wants to write a story about you in the newspaper."

"What kind of a story?"

"Well, you know we don't like to talk about this. But it's about the murders. It will be two years next Friday that it happened. And Greb wants to write a story reminding people that the murders are just two years old, and are still un-

solved. Newspapers do that sort of thing on the anniversaries of unsolved crimes, you know."

"I understand."

"In his story, Sally, he's going to mention that he interviewed you today. He won't say he talked to you in jail, of course. He's going to say that you dream about the murders."

"But I don't," Sally replied matter-of-factly. "I told Mister Greb that too. I never dream about the murders."

"I know. But he's going to say you do anyway. And he's going to say that in your dreams, the face of the man who walked out of the shack with the axe is getting clearer . . ."

My wife slammed the table. "Now Pat, that's absolutely the most insane thing I ever heard."

"Wait a minute . . ."

"Why, it's not only a lie, it's dangerous. It's positively an invitation for whoever killed the Smallwoods to try to kill Sally . . ."

"Exactly. That's the idea. And there'll be so many policemen around Sally every minute that if he makes a move we'll get him."

"I won't allow that."

I looked at Sally. "Sally, it's up to you. If you're afraid, we won't do it."

"I'm not afraid," Sally announced, her blue eyes clear and unwavering. "Not at all. You tell Mister Greb to go ahead and write anything he wants to write. Things are kind of dull anyway. It will be fun having policemen around."

Another heat wave blistered the city in late August. And then it rained. For three days steady. And after that it was hot again, only moister than ever, with puddles in the gutter and drops of water on windows.

As I walked home from the Recreation Center I stopped for a word with two plainclothes detectives. They were in a car parked down the street from my apartment building.

"How's it going?"

"Nothing," the man behind the wheel said. "Like always."

"It's been a month, Pat," the other man said apologetically. "The Lieutenant told us to pull off the detail as soon as you got upstairs."

"Well, thanks anyhow," I said. I walked to the building and went inside. Greb waited in the apartment with Sally.

"Your wife's at the store," Greb said moodily. He sat in my easy chair smoking a cigar. Sally reclined on the sofa watching a set of teen-aged dancers on the television screen.

"The cops downstairs said they're

pulling the detail off today," I reported.

"The Lieutenant was up here earlier. He told me."

"It was a good try."

"Sure." Greb got up and walked to the window, peering out. "I was positive this would get a rise out of the killer. Two murders. With an axe. It's something *he'll* never be able to forget. And if he thought Sally were going to identify him . . ."

"Greb, maybe the police were right. In theorizing that the killer was just after the money in the strongbox. A transient, maybe, who'd heard Smallwood bragging. And when he got the money he skipped town. Probably, he's a thousand miles away now and never even saw your story."

"I guess so. There go the cops. I guess they couldn't keep the guard on Sally forever." Greb turned and flashed me a rueful grin. He mopped his brow. "Well, it was a long shot. You can't win 'em all. I'm sorry for the inconvenience I've caused. Next time I'll mind my own business."

"Don't apologize."

He walked over and patted Sally's head. Sally smiled up at him. "And Sally, here, is the bravest little girl I've ever met. Wasn't scared a bit."

"Thanks, Mister Greb. You're nice, and good company too."

"See you in the papers."

Greb left us. I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of milk. When I returned to the living room Sally had turned the television set off. She was standing in front of a mirror in the hall, patting her hair.

"They're all gone, aren't they," she said.

"Yes. All the policemen have been reassigned."

"I liked having them around. That rookie patrolman with the Italian name. He was cute." She reached for the doorknob.

I looked up. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Now, Sally, I don't think that's a very good idea. Remember . . ."

"Aw, it's no fun here when the policemen and Mister Greb aren't around. I'm going to see if I can find Ziggy. He got probation yesterday."

"Ziggy! Why, that boy . . ."

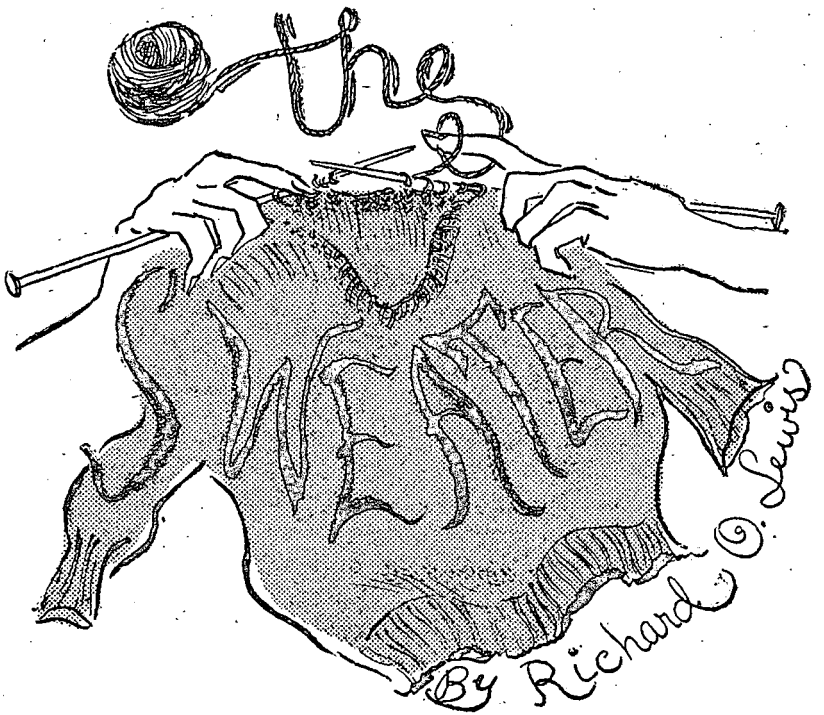
She turned and fixed me with an unblinking stare. "Look. Nothing's changed. It's still like you said *that* day. You're going to take care of me, and *never* give me orders. And I won't tell them how you killed my stepmother when she wanted money from you. And killed my father when he walked in . . . and where you hid the axe!"

What with all the current hue and cry, both pro and con bomb shelters, it almost seems as though one is as safe without as within.

THE SLIGHT, steady clicking of the knitting needles grew ever louder. The noise of them began crashing against the walls of the tiny room and bouncing back again in nerve-wracking echoes.

"Strange," thought Halsey, eyeing their silvery speed, "how complete silence elsewhere can magnify a little sound like that into proportions that can fairly drive you nuts!"

His eyes traveled slowly upwards from his wife's busy fingers to her pointed face, her mousy hair, and onto the wall of the little



room just above and beyond her head. The calendar hanging there showed the month of May, and the dates from the Third through the Sixteenth had been crossed out by heavy strokes from a black crayon.

From behind his magazine, Halsey looked at the needles again. "The last night!" he promised himself for the sixth time in as many minutes. "After nine o'clock in the morning, they'll be silent for good."

His exultation was cut short by a sudden stab of anxiety: *had he kept accurate count of the days? Had he by any chance crossed out a date and, later in the day, another one?*

No. That couldn't have happened. He had taken ample precaution, had made a ritual of crossing off the days. At six o'clock each night—and only at six o'clock—he had walked to the wall, picked up the crayon, and marked an X across the date. That way, there was no chance of a mistake.

But no sooner had the first wave of uneasiness subsided than a new one swept in, to cause tiny dribbles of cold sweat to trickle down over his ribs from his armpits. Maybe *she* had crossed off an extra day! She could have done it; several times, through sheer boredom, he had taken afternoon naps! But, no; there would be no reason for her to do so—nothing for her to gain! Yet . . .

"That would be an ironic twist," he mused, making light of the thought. "That way she would have me with her forever!"

He closed his eyes tightly against both her and her clanking needles. The old bat! Knitting him a sweater! A sweater he wouldn't be caught dead in! Her, with a hundred grand in her own right, knitting sweaters! Cooking those hideous boiled dinners! Keeping him grinding his heart out as a clerk in her cousin's stupid brokerage office! And never a night out to have any fun!

Well, beginning at nine o'clock in the morning, it would all be different. He'd kick that silly sweater to pieces, eat T-bones, quit that insipid job, and visit a few night spots—with Gertie, of course.

The very thought of red-haired, full-lipped, full-bosomed Gertie of the brokerage office spun him away as usual into a pleasing reverie. Now, if he had been cooped up here for fourteen days—nights—with Gertie. . . . Well, he wouldn't have taken any afternoon naps through sheer boredom.

A trace of a smile began to play about his thin lips as the reverie led him even deeper into the delights of fantasy.

Halsey had shown all his neighbors his bomb shelter as soon as it had been completed.

"These," he had told them, indicating the steel tanks along one wall of the concrete structure, "are my oxygen bottles. Enough here to last three weeks." He had placed the necessary amount of stress on the last statement.

"And this is the larder." He had opened the large twin doors to expose a series of shelves piled high with tinned bread, meats, vegetables, fruits, and bottles of vitamins. One by one, he had exhibited such other items as the garbage disposal, the toilet, the air vent, the water supply, and similar necessities.

"There is no radio or television," he had explained. "In a real raid, there probably wouldn't be any broadcasts to listen to after the first few minutes anyway, and probably no electricity to bring them in, and we want this test to simulate the real thing as much as possible. A psychological test, you know."

There was a shelf of books, a rack of magazines, and a number of puzzles and games. "And these," Halsey had said, indicating a small stack of cardboard cartons, "are models of ships, airplanes, and the like to be assembled. Something to keep the hands busy. My wife, of course, will bring along her needle work and her knitting. . . ."

He had always saved showing the lock on the steel door until last. Since it was to play the most important part in his plan, he felt that it should be left uppermost in the minds of his visiting neighbors.

"Anyone can live in a bomb shelter or a fallout shelter quite nicely for two weeks," he had stressed, "provided he can get out for a walk whenever he wants, talk over the telephone to his friends, or have the neighbors in for an occasional evening of bridge. But that is not a real test. *A real test can be made only when the occupants of the shelter cut themselves off entirely from contact with the outside world!*"

He had always paused here for a moment to let the impact of the thought etch itself deeply into the brain of the listener.

"This is a time lock activated by solar batteries which also are the source of power for the lights and the air fan. It is set for a period of two weeks to the exact minute. Once the door closes, the timer sets automatically, and the door cannot be opened from either the inside or the outside until the precise course of time is run. Only in this way can a true test be made as to whether two people can

remain compatible during a real raid."

And the neighbors had gone away duly impressed. If the Halseys survived the ordeal, then—if worse came to worst—they too could weather the storm harmoniously within their own shelters. It was, indeed, a worthwhile experiment!

Halsey smiled now at the memory. Tomorrow morning at precisely nine o'clock, the neighbors would be waiting for the steel door to open, waiting to see, first-hand, the outcome of the great psychological experiment. *And they would all be witnesses to his wife's accidental death!*

The clashing knitting needles ceased their clangor. Mrs. Halsey laid the sweater on the little table beside her chair, yawned, got up, went to a small mirror and began creaming her face for the night.

She didn't speak, and neither did he. They hadn't said much to each other for the past few days. Yet, the two weeks had been fairly satisfactory ones—she content in her complete dominance and possession of him; he content in the knowledge that the dominance and possession would soon come to a definite end.

He mumbled a good-night as she got into her bed, but her answer was scarcely audible.

Halsey thumbed through some magazines for nearly an hour, then got into his pajamas, climbed into his bed, and flicked the light switch at the head board.

The small room was plunged instantly into silent darkness, and in a minute or two the luminous dial of his wristwatch became plainly visible. It was a few minutes to midnight.

Halsey slept fitfully. He was tangled in the sweater. The door wouldn't open. The world was sprouting mushroom clouds. Something had gone wrong with the time clock. . . .

He found himself staring at the glowing dial of the wristwatch. It was exactly seven o'clock. He smiled into the darkness. He had practiced for a full week to awaken precisely at seven.

He lay for awhile without moving, giving the sticky webs of sleepiness time to clear. This was the zero hour. He could call off the whole idea, walk out of the door at nine o'clock, greet his neighbors—and go on living with her for the rest of his natural life. . . .

He stifled the groan the thought provoked. No, the plan had to be carried through! Otherwise, life to him would be intolerable!

Silently, he laid back the covers, swung his feet over the edge of the bed, sat up, and slid his feet into his slippers. Her bed was but a step away in the darkness. He sat for a moment, orienting himself and getting a measure of control over an inner trembling, then took the pillow from his bed in his two hands, rose, and took the step.

The pillow went down quickly over where he knew her head would be, and the bed clothes, held down tightly on either side of her slight form by his straddling knees, acted as a straitjacket against her struggles.

It seemed like hours, but it couldn't have been more than three or four minutes. There was a final spasmodic twitch of muscles, then a general relaxation.

Halsey put the pillow back on his bed and dented it sufficiently with his fist to indicate it had been slept on, then turned on the small night-light and glanced at his watch. Seven fifteen.

He didn't look at his wife's prone figure on the bed as he went around to the oxygen tanks. A moment later, the gas was hissing noisily from the open valves, and a moment after that Halsey was reeling drunkenly around the room.

"An oxygen jag," he said aloud and stumbled hurriedly back toward the valves. His fingers fumbled them shut. He wheeled about, stumbled over the little table, knocked it and the sweater and the needles to the floor, and finally reached the air vent control.

When the little fan was humming with increased industry, he went back to the gas vents, opened them wide, and sat down and breathed shallowly.

He found that he was trembling all over. He looked at his watch a dozen times, looked to see if it were actually running, then silently reprimanded himself for his impatience. He had estimated it would take a couple of hours or more for the large tanks to dissipate their contents; he had now but to wait.

When the hissing finally stopped, the silence came as a distinct shock, and the only sound in the room now was the body-shaking hammering of his own heart.

The gauge on the last tank, the one in use, showed a quarter full. He looked at his watch again. Eighteen minutes till nine.

He opened the valve wider and watched the gauge and his watch carefully, his body still trembling. A miscalculation now could well prove fatal. He manipulated the valve for several minutes, and the

last of the gas finally hissed from the tank at exactly five minutes till nine. There was now only the oxygen within the shelter itself.

Halsey hurried to the vent fan and turned it back to normal. Then he tore open the collar of his pajamas and lay down on the floor near the door. Everything was going precisely to plan. In slightly less than five minutes, the time lock would click, the door would spring slightly ajar, and the neighbors would rush in—to discover Halsey on the floor, half unconscious and gasping for air, his wife smothered in bed. All due to some failure of the oxygen tanks.

Once again, time dragged in an endless manner. What if the time lock failed to open? What if . . .

No! No! He mustn't permit himself to think of things like that! The time lock would open! He had tested it time and time again! In fact, his wife had insisted on a series of tests before she had consented to the experiment.

But what if he had released the oxygen too soon? What if the timing mechanism had slowed down? The neighbors would mill around outside, waiting. How long would they wait before deciding that something must have gone wrong? How long would it take them to force the steel door? Or would they, believing he had an extra supply of oxygen, wait a day or two before doing anything?

His nervous trembling increased. The air began to feel heavy and oppressive. His pajamas were damp all over his body, from perspiration.

His eyes never left the dial of the watch now. Three minutes. Two minutes. And, finally, one minute till nine; just 60 seconds.

He began to take deep tremulous breaths in an attempt to bring his quivering nerves under control, then stopped almost instantly as he realized that the deep breathing would deplete the oxygen rapidly. The thundering of his heart grew louder, and waves of pressure began to beat at his eardrums.

Forty seconds. . . .

He was certain that his watch had stopped, that he was slowly and helplessly smothering. Panic laid hold of him, and he suddenly realized the awful terror that must have tortured his wife during her last few seconds of consciousness. He tried to shake the thought from his brain—not because of any sorrow for her, but to rid himself of the fear of having to experience the same horrible ordeal.

Twenty seconds. . . .

Ten seconds. . . .

He wanted to cry out, to leap to his feet, screaming. But his throat muscles were constricted, his body unresponsive to his fear-ridden brain.

Zero seconds. . . .

He lay upon the floor in his own sweat, sobbing silently and convulsively.

Then it came! The great sledge-hammer blow of steel against steel. He thought at first it was the neighbors trying to break down the door. Then he realized in sudden elation that it was merely the metallic click of the time lock shattering the silence. The steel door was ajar! It had swayed inward a scant half inch!

The neighbors should rush in now. It was part of the plan. They should rush in just in the nick of time to witness the frightful scene.

But there was no babble of voices beyond the door, not a scrape of a foot on the stone steps, not a sound.

Halsey grasped the edge of the door with his finger tips and pulled. The heavy door was adamant. His fingernails splintered and broke. Gasping, he clutched the edge with the fingers of both hands. It gave an inch. Sunlight and fresh air rushed through the opening. Even as his lungs gasped in the air eagerly, his eyes quickly told him that the stair well was empty.

Bewildered, he struggled to his feet, flung the door open, and staggered up the short flight of steps, his eyes squinting against the raw sunlight.

The voice of the siren reached

him then. It began with a low moan, rose rapidly higher in pitch to split the skies, and reached out across the land with undulations of warning. He turned in its direction and saw the pall of smoke that cloaked Midville, a scant mile away across the lake. And even as he watched, a great column of flame spread upward from just beyond the town, its livid crest spreading rapidly outward.

Halsey's brain warned him of the shock blast that came from atomic mushrooms to level everything in its path above the ground, and through no volition of his own he went spinning back down the stairs and into the comparative darkness of the shelter.

Something in the shadows clutched his feet to engulf them in a strong tangle of mesh. Something bit deeply into his ankle. As he bent to free himself, the knitted mesh tightened as if pulled by unseen hands, and Halsey stumbled backwards against the steel door.

The time lock clanged deafeningly in the small room—and echoed and echoed and echoed.

Outside, the siren continued to wail in desperation as the people of Midville watched the flames leap ever closer to the second large storage tank of gasoline. It was the largest fire the townspeople had witnessed for more than thirty years.

Children whose intelligence quotient is way above normal, often seem to have adult characteristics out of all proportion to their immature bodies, but in keeping with their brilliant minds. Monstrous, some call it.

IQ-184

BY FLETCHER FLORA

RENA HOLLY was in the living room with the policeman when Charles Holly went downstairs to join them. Rena was sitting in a high-backed chair of polished walnut upholstered in dark red velvet. She was sitting there quietly, very erect, her knees together and her feet flat upon the floor and her hands folded in her lap. Her face was pale and still, perfectly composed, and she was even now, even in the violation of her grief by police procedure, so incredibly lovely

that Charles felt in his heart the familiar sweet anguish that was his normal response to her. Only her eyes moved ever so slightly in his direction when he entered the room.

"Charles," she said, "this is Lieutenant Casey of the police. He is inquiring about Richard's death."

Lieutenant Casey arose from the chair in which he had been sitting opposite Rena. He was a stocky man with broad shoulders and a deep chest and thin gray hair brushed neatly across his skull from a low side part. His face was deeply lined and weathered looking, as if he spent much time in the wind and sun, and the hand he extended toward Charles had pads of callous on fingers and palm, although its touch was surprisingly gentle. He seemed awkward in his gray suit, which was actually of good cut and quality, and the impression he gave generally was one of regret, almost of apology, that he had been forced by his position to intrude.

"Good-afternoon, Lieutenant," Charles said. "We've been expecting you."

"Sorry," Casey said. "It's a routine matter, of course. I regret that I'm compelled to disturb you at this time."

"Not at all. We must tell you whatever is necessary." Charles sat down and placed his hands on his knees in an attitude of attention, while Casey resumed his place in the chair from which he had risen. "Please ask me anything you wish."

"I think that Lieutenant Casey wishes you to tell him exactly how Richard died," Rena said.

She spoke softly, with a kind of deficiency of inflection. Charles was aware of the terrible and almost terrifying quality of her composure, and he wondered if Casey was also aware of this. He doubted it. Her horror and grief were not apparent, although the latter could be assumed, and Casey was not familiar, as Charles was, with the wonderful complexity of her character.

"I'd be grateful if you would," Casey said. "Just as it happened from the beginning, if you don't mind."

"Well." Charles paused, seeming to gather his thoughts, but he knew, in fact, what he was going to say, and his mind was functioning, as it always did, with precision and clarity. "Richard was a guest in this house for the week-end. Perhaps Rena has told you that. In any event, he asked me this morning to take a walk with him. I did not wish to walk with him, and I told him so, but he asked me to humor him as a special favor. I did

not really feel that I owed him a favor, special or otherwise, but he was so urgent that I agreed to go."

"What was the reason for his urgency?"

"The answer to that would involve Rena. I'd rather that she answered, if she wants the question answered at all."

"Oh?" Casey looked vaguely astonished and somewhat distressed that he had been led so quickly by his own question into an area of intimacy that he would have preferred to avoid. "Mrs. Holly?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant. As Charles has said, we must tell you whatever is necessary." Rena's hands moved, smoothing the skirt over her knees, and then sought and held each other again in her lap. "Richard was in love with me. And I with him. It was not an emotional attachment that either of us particularly wanted in the beginning, but it happened, and there was no help for it. We wanted to marry. I spoke with Charles about it and was, I thought, candid and reasonable. But it was an unfortunate effort on my part, I'm afraid. Charles was very angry. He refused even to discuss the matter. Then, of course, Richard wanted to approach him. I agreed rather reluctantly, and it was for that purpose specifically that I invited Richard here for the week-end. And that was why Richard urged Charles to take the walk with him."

She stopped abruptly, resuming the perfect posture and expression of composure that speaking had barely disturbed, and Casey, after waiting a few seconds until it was clear that she was finished, turned back to Charles.

"That is true," Charles said. "I suppose he felt that a brisk walk in the open air would be propitious to his purpose. The manly approach. Two gentlemen settling amicably between themselves a rather delicate matter. Richard was remarkably naïve." His voice took on the faintest color of irony, as if he were mildly amused in retrospect by something which had been irritating at the time. "I must confess, however, that I was not impressed. Richard's effort to win me over was no more successful than Rena's, although I listened courteously and gave him every chance. All this time, while he was talking, we were walking among the trees in the direction of the river, and we came out upon a high bluff just where the river bends. There is a wooden bench on the bluff there, for it's a rather scenic spot, and we sat on the bench until he had quite finished what he wanted to say. Then I told him that my feelings were unchanged, and that I should never

be reconciled to any kind of intimate relationship between him and Rena. It made me sick to think about it."

He paused again, ordering details precisely and accurately in his mind, and Casey waited in silence for him to continue. Rena did not seem to have heard him at all, or even to be aware at the moment that he or Casey was in the room. She had been staring at her folded hands, but now she raised her eyes to a focus beyond the walls and perhaps beyond the time. If she had listened to anything, or was now waiting for anything, it was a private sound and a private expectation.

Now, Charles was thinking, *I have come upon dangerous ground. Up to this point I have adhered strictly to the truth, because the truth served, but now it is time for the essential deviation, the necessary lie.*

"Please go on," Casey prompted.

"Richard was very angry with me," Charles said. "As for me, I wanted only to leave him, to terminate an unpleasant episode as quickly as possible, and I stood up and walked away to the edge of the bluff. Richard followed me, still very angry, and began to shake me by the arm. I do not like to be touched, even without violence, and I tried to jerk away, but he held on to my arm firmly. I struggled, finally breaking free, and the action caused him to lose his balance. We were standing right at the edge of the bluff, much nearer than either of us, I think, quite realized in our emotional state, and, to put it simply and briefly, he fell over the edge. The bluff, as you know, is high and almost perpendicular at that place. At the foot, the bank of the river at the bend is wide and littered with great rocks. Richard fell among the rocks, where you found him, and was, I believe, killed instantly. He was certainly dead when I reached him, after finding a way down the bluff farther along. When I saw that he was falling, I tried to catch hold of him, but he was gone too quickly."

And there it is done, and done well, he thought. *The essential deviation. The necessary lie. So slight a deviation and so small a lie. The difference between holding and pushing. Between life and death. Between innocence and guilt. Casey believes me, certainly, but Rena doesn't. Rena, lovely Rena, sits and says nothing and knows everything. She knows how Richard died, and why, but that is unimportant. What is important is that she submits to a deeper commitment than any she could have felt to Richard or feels now to justice.*

She is mine so long as she lives. She will never belong to anyone else.

"I see." Casey slapped his knees suddenly with both hands, the sound startling in the still room. It even startled Casey, who had made it, and he clenched one of the hands and stared reproachfully at the big knuckles under taut and whitened skin. "You were wise to leave the body where it fell until we had seen it. You have been very helpful altogether, I must say. Thank you very much."

"There is so little that one can do, really." Charles stood up. "Now if I may be excused, I'd like to return to my room."

"Of course. You've had a bad experience, I know. I appreciate your cooperation in such trying circumstances."

Having been excused by Casey, Charles turned toward Rena. She seemed unaware of this, still abstracted, but after a few seconds she turned her head and stared at him with her dark expressive eyes which were now so carefully empty of all expression. She nodded without speaking, the merest motion of her head, and he turned and went out of the room into the hall. He stopped there, out of sight but not of sound, his head half-turned and tilted, as he stood and listened.

"There's a clever young fellow," Casey said in the room behind him.

"Yes," Rena said.

"I must say, however, that I'd find him a bit disturbing after a while. He'd make me feel inferior. Besides, I confess that I'm always a bit shocked to hear a child call his mother by her Christian name. I suppose I'm hopelessly old-fashioned."

"Charles is not really a child, Lieutenant, although he's only twelve. He's exceptional. His intelligence quotient, I am told, is one hundred eighty-four."

It would have been natural if her voice had assumed a lilt of pride, but it did not. It still retained its odd deficiency of inflection. To Charles, who began moving silently away, it was a voice that had no choice of expression between a monotone and a scream.

THE HALF-MILLION DOLLAR DECOY

You don't feel everything at once if you happen to be looking down on mangled flesh that a few minutes before had been warm and eager under your hands and lips. You can't. You're numb.

John Randolph could see her in the light of the flickering flames without bending, because the top of the big car had been peeled back like skin under a surgeon's knife.

She had been wearing a light blue dress. It had been blown away. There was a kind of yellow tint to the part of her that was not bloodied or blackened. It was the same on the soft skin of her inner thighs as it was on that part of her face that had been left intact. Her shoes had been torn from her feet. Her feet pointed backward.

The big, heavy, expensive automobile that had been the very best in strength, beauty, and durability was now only twisted hot metal mingled with the once yearning flesh of a young and quick woman.

Reluctantly, John Randolph gave back before the heat of the flames that soon formed Henrietta Sme-

Decoys are of many kinds, human and inhuman, or perhaps I mean real and artificial, or live and dead? Suit yourself in classifying this one.

tana's unexpected funeral pyre. . . .

Randolph knew he could never erase that scene from his mind. He stood now at the bar of the old Alhambra Hotel, just around the corner from the explosion site. The bar was drab and dingy and empty in this early evening. He held bourbon and branch. His hand shook. The odor of burning flesh seemed forever seared into his nostrils.

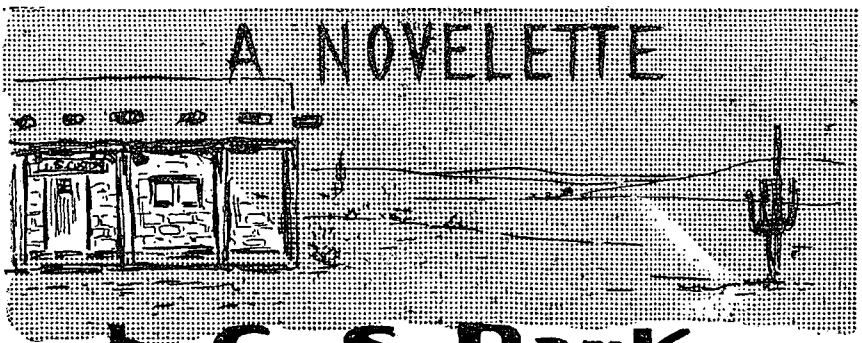
Beside him stood Vincente Gomez, chief of the Santo Tomas Police Department. Compared with big Randolph, he was a small, comic-opera figure in a fancy uniform.

He said, "This is a better place to talk than back there on that terrible dark street. The cries of the injured are distressing. You are lucky not to have been hurt."

The liquor was doing its work on Randolph, loosening the tightness in his chest and stomach. Henrietta's vibrant kiss had still been tingling on his lips when she had died. In shocked daze he had done what he could to help the stunned and bleeding residents of the street until more competent medical help had arrived. Now reaction was making him weak.

"I was with Henrietta, right here. I couldn't have put a bomb in her car."

"You might have kept her busy



while someone else did the job."

A year ago, Randolph had been stationed at the United States Customs House across the border from this tired Mexican village. From then, he knew that Gomez' improbable uniforms covered a shrewd investigator and a very tough man.

"She was a lovely woman, Vincente," he said. "Why would I want to kill her?"

Gomez nodded. "Why? Shall we start at the beginning?"

"I saw her the first day I arrived at the Project—Los Alamos. She was the wife of the most important scientist there: Baruch Smetana. Randolph finished his drink. "She was very much interested in the Mexican border. Particularly Santo Tomas. That gave us something in common."

Gomez said wryly, "You were seen embracing beside the car just before the explosion. Was that the atmosphere of romantic old Mexico, or an affair of long-standing?"

Stolidly, Randolph said, "She was never allowed to go anywhere without Smetana. He watched her all the time. He looks like a big fat toad with glasses. He is nothing but a big brain, with the rest of him completely out of touch with the world. He has no human feelings. He looks like the monsters he creates, and he used to beat Henrietta until she really hated him."

Dryly, Gomez suggested, "A young, beautiful woman forced to live with a man like that. A perfect set-up for an eager young man. Why was she here?"

"Smetana and Henrietta left the Project on the same day I did. Everybody thought they were going to New York. But she was the first person I saw when I checked in at the La Osa guest ranch."

"You didn't know she had already been on the border for a week? You didn't come to Santo Tomas to meet her?"

"I came to renew old acquaintances. Yours, for example."

"I only brought you bad luck, John."

He meant, Randolph knew, that although theirs had been a profitable association for Gomez, it had gotten Randolph into trouble. A year or so ago, acting upon information furnished by Gomez, Randolph had seized several thousand dollars worth of Swiss watch movements. Gomez had spent the informer's fees to which he was entitled on himself and Randolph right here in the Alhambra'a tap room. The staid Bureau of Customs, learning about that, considered Randolph's participation highly irregular. While they were debating what to do about it, Randolph quit. Subsequently, he

went to work in the Security Division at Los Almos, instructing the guards in target-shooting.

Randolph said, "For some reason, she wanted me to meet her here at the Alhambra. It was her idea that we drive around in her car and talk afterward. Not mine."

"But you were walking away from her car when the bomb went off. Why?"

"I was going to drive my car back to the Custom House and get it off your dark streets. She was going to pick me up there."

"Why hadn't you both come over in her car, or yours?"

"She said she had an errand to run and might be delayed."

Gomez sucked the last drop of beer from his glass. "So here was the golden opportunity? Clandestine romance?"

"She seemed—well, excited."

"And you think meeting you excited her?" Gomez shook his head slowly.

"Who else?"

Gomez said, "You know me, Juanito. If something doesn't ring true, I investigate it. I was interested in Henrietta, but she was too busy to get acquainted. Busy at what? So I kept her under surveillance. I listened in on a call she placed to Los Alamos."

"It would be natural that she place a call to there. She had friends and acquaintances there."

"Is the Director of the Security Division her friend?"

"My boss." Randolph hadn't known they were acquainted.

"She told him," Gomez said slowly, "that she knew where an atomic device was being introduced into the United States in the next twelve hours. For the full amount of the reward authorized by some Atomic Weapons Reward Act, she would tell when and where it was to cross the border. That, incidentally, was ten hours ago. There are about two left."

"It was a shake-down," Randolph said, but was disturbed, nevertheless. "A half-million dollar shakedown."

"She told him to arrange to have one man, authorized to negotiate, sent to Santo Tomas. Was she wrong in thinking that it was you?"

"So you disappointed Henrietta," Gomez said. "You weren't the man she thought you were."

"They wouldn't send a security guard on a mission like that," Randolph said. "I imagine the Director contacted the Atomic Energy Commission for instructions. It's a cinch you couldn't simply call up, like Henrietta did, and expect someone to show up with a

half-million dollars, a few hours later. There would be at least an elementary investigation. One could be going on right now. Probably is."

Gomez didn't say anything for a while. When he did, he was on another subject. "I didn't consider you seriously as a suspect in the explosion, John. But I'm thinking you might be marked down as another victim of the bomber."

Randolph felt quick, driving anger. "I'd like to get my hands on—"

"So would I," Gomez cut in. "My prime suspect is a man named Conrado Suarez. They call him *El Cubano*. A skinny man, a machinist by trade, with radical ideas about government and who has a police record. He operates the machine shop right across from where Henrietta was killed."

"Henrietta had been observed going into his shop often. There could be a jealousy motive. The bomb in her car could have been aimed at the two of you. I believe they were old friends. But on the other hand, why would he kill her if jealousy was *not* the prime mover? Maybe they did make an atom bomb, and Suarez might have wanted the full half-million dollars for himself, or sole possession of the bomb. Would you know such a device if you saw one? I don't know if I would."

"I might."

"Then," said Gomez, "let's go see if we can find one and blow my jealousy theory apart."

A white wrecker was at work on the demolished automobile. An ambulance had carted away the dead and the suffering. All that remained to show there had been tragedy on the street was the debris of the car.

Gomez called for light and a policeman with a battery-powered flash trotted from the fringes of darkness. He said, "The building is locked against us. We have not located Suarez."

Gomez led them through those curious ones who lingered on the death scene and talked in muted tones. He stopped beneath the gloomy facade of the tall old machine shop. Under the huge weathered doors ran railroad tracks, a short branch of the ice plant spur.

"Those doors lock from inside," the policeman said. "There is another door at the rear."

Gomez tapped the bone grips of the automatic at his belt. "We'll use my search warrant and my key."

Randolph walked gingerly in the darkest shadows, aware of danger. He did not intend to set him-

self up as a possible target. From somewhere close at hand, a radio blared a lively tune more suited to a gay cantina than to this dark place which death had visited so recently and so violently. A dirge would have been more fitting, Randolph thought.

Here behind the machine shop, the looming tall doors were secured with only a flimsy house door lock. Gomez shattered it with a bullet from his gun.

Flattened lead screamed off over the cluster of mud huts, getting lost among the returning echoes of the shot. A woman shrilled a worried question. A man supplied a shouted answer. A child's sleepy voice lifted in sudden startled inquiry, a lost sound that tugged strongly at Randolph's heart.

He stepped to one side to be out of the way of any stray bullet suddenly pumped through the door from inside. But none came, and he followed Gomez into the building.

The spotlight shifted through the dim interior. Huge lathes, long twisted endless belts, presses, and other heavy machine tools loomed, gleaming dully, like metallic monsters. The floor was of dirt, except for the concrete slabs under the larger tools. The odor of cutting oils made Randolph uneasy. He felt as though he was standing in a long dark tunnel that might explode with a careless spark.

Rails ran the length of the building. Heavy materials could be unloaded from flat cars with the powerful overhead crane. The doors at either end were high enough to accommodate a box car. Or a locomotive.

"A man who knew how could build a cannon with this equipment," Randolph said.

"Or an atomic device?"

"Provided he had the materials."

Gomez said, "Then we've got to find Suarez. We've got to know if he really built one, and where it is now."

Randolph, watching the spotlight dart about and touch here and there, saw nothing in its beam that wouldn't fit into any machine shop anywhere.

Gomez located a master switch. Dim lights sprang glowing in the cavernous shop. They searched for half an hour and found nothing, except the place where Suarez apparently slept—a greasy pad in a corner.

Randolph said, "If Suarez built a bomb here, I don't have the training to spot the tracks. And if he did build one and it's not here, where is it? And what is he going to do with it?"

"When we find him," Gomez said, "we'll find the answers."

He switched off the master switch and they walked the darkness, following the spotlight beam. As they passed a giant lathe, a sudden odor of hot metal stopped Randolph. Gomez also stopped.

The spotlight's beam came quickly back. The concrete slab under the lathe was conspicuously clean compared with the rest of the shop.

Standing there in the windy vastness of this machine shop isolated in the middle of a great desert country, an ominous feeling chilled Randolph. In his mind's eye appeared the sinister shape of the mushroom cloud.

For out of his memory had emerged one relative, pertinent fact: bits of uranium, laid across or against each other, create heat. If left alone long enough, they glow.

And just before the light had touched that concrete slab, Randolph had seen a tiny red spot!

Soberly, they walked outside.

The street was quiet. It was about as it had been when he handed Henrietta into her car, Randolph thought. Except that now the wind was dying. And a full moon, yellow as butter and big as a balloon, was slowly rising.

A policeman lingered under the cottonwood tree. He was Gomez' driver.

Gomez said, "Suarez is our man. He killed Henrietta because he wants the bomb all to himself."

Randolph listened to him spout orders over his car radio. Finished, Gomez said, "My men will have him by dawn."

"He could have gone north."

"Not legally. He has been refused border-crossing privileges by your country."

"A man with an atom bomb would hardly be liable to cross the border in the regular manner," Randolph said. And then, "Well, my vacation is shot, anyway. I'll have to call the Project."

"You said they were probably investigating already."

"An investigation will be made. But it might not be given the top priority that the discovery of the uranium scraps now demands. Henrietta's telephone call might have been dismissed as the call of some kind of a nut."

"Use our telephone," Gomez suggested, inviting Randolph into his car. "We'll drive you there."

"The phone in the United States Customs House will be more direct," Randolph said, and thanked him. From past experience, he knew that connections between the

two countries were often unreliable.

Gomez lifted his hand in acknowledgement and got into his car. Randolph walked back around the corner to his own vehicle. Driving north to the border, he had an opportunity to think.

When he had first seen Henrietta at the La Osa, he had been surprised. Pleasantly so. A week on the border with her seemed like the stuff of a young bachelor's dreams. But it had turned out to be a nightmare.

Putting those thoughts from his mind he dragged out the others. Where would Suarez have hidden the atomic device? Why had Henrietta chosen Santo Tomas and Suarez? Was it something that Randolph himself had told her about in their conversation regarding the border? Remembering that Suarez had not been here during his own sojourn in Santo Tomas with Customs, he wondered if Henrietta had contacted him, and if he had activated the machine shop for the sole purpose of making an atomic device. And where had Henrietta known him before? What was their common background?

These led to other questions for which he could not readily find answers and his approach to the border brought speculation to a stop. A dim light beamed over the doorway of the Mexican guardhouse. A single inspector dozed in a chair leaned against the adobe wall. His pants were too short, and Randolph could see that he wore no socks.

He had not forgotten Randolph. *"Anda tarde, Juanito,"* he said. "Like old times."

"But out late tonight on a more serious matter than those that kept me from my bed before."

"I heard. The shock shook this building. A sad thing. The woman was beautiful. Her car was very pretty."

"Tell me a thing. Was she always alone when she crossed here?"

"Except for the first time."

"Who rode with her then?"

"A toad. With a big bald head, pop-eyes behind spectacles that were so thick they could have been of bullet-proof glass."

He was describing Smetana. Randolph felt like a man standing upon the brink of some great and important discovery.

Now it could have been the fat scientist who had created and planted the bomb which had destroyed Henrietta and might have killed Randolph. He felt it was the kind of thing Baruch Smetana would be capable of, and had to admit he also had reason. Jealousy.

Perhaps it was not Henrietta at

all who was behind the construction of the presumed device and the shake-down. Then it would have to be the great, mean-tempered, invulnerable scientist who was detested, and respected.

"Would any of your other inspectors have observed him returning to the United States?" Randolph asked.

"I was interested in her, and him. I have asked. No one has seen him."

"Then he is still in Santo Tomas."

The inspector shrugged.

As he drove across the border, Randolph was thinking with a new seriousness: better to walk even more softly and look over your shoulder frequently. For it was already clearly possible that the life or death of one John Randolph could actually hinge upon the whereabouts of Baruch Smetana.

Randolph felt immediately safer across the border. The small United States Customs House was much like its Mexican counterpart, except that the inspection area was strongly lighted, making a bright hole in the vast darkness that extended well out over the bare ground. An inspector in a blue uniform, looking incongrously formal in this setting, lounged on a bench against the wall. His name was Haynes. He had close-set blue eyes and a tremendous chin. He was sandy-haired and had a slight speech impediment. When Randolph stopped under the canopy in front of the building and got out, Haynes said, "I hear you jumped right into the middle of big trouble over there."

"Can I use your 'phone?"

"Help yourself. If I had to bet, I'd guess it was that ugly old man she was with the first time she crossed here that did it."

"I thought of that." Randolph moved out of the bright lights which made everything under them a conspicuous target for anyone in the darkness beyond. He stood in the doorway, looking at Haynes, who was now doing the work that Randolph had been doing a year ago. About to turn and go inside, he noticed lights in the north, out on the wide empty desert that stretched endlessly.

The steady beam, Randolph recognized as the headlight on old 1098, the locomotive that shuttled between the border and the main line of the SP a hundred ninety miles away.

It was the twin headlights that held his attention. And Haynes said, "Who in the devil would be driving our road at night as

though they were in a cross-country race?"

Randolph had an idea. It was confirmed in a matter of minutes when two vehicles soared over a rise a hundred yards north and slid to a stop.

Eight men with a mission poured out of them. They moved forward into the lighted area together, a phalanx of dedicated FBI officers led by Stan Burkett, agent in charge of the region.

Randolph's greeting died on his lips, for there was no friendliness in Burkett's manner. He was a serious young man with a square chin, a crooked nose, very light blue eyes, and a lot of scar tissue built up on his brows. Roughly, he shoved Randolph toward the door.

Crouching to preserve balance, ready to do battle, Randolph heard Burkett through the deafness of his surprised anger: "You can make it easy or tough on yourself. Take your choice."

There was really no alternative. Randolph made no sudden moves. A thinking man seldom does—not when he's surrounded by revolvers and riot guns held in the steady hands of determined men.

They didn't tell him anything. They didn't even talk among themselves. They ignored his request to be allowed to use the phone to call the Project. They held him in the Custom House until Burkett, who had gone out, had returned. Vincente Gomez was with him.

Randolph was sitting at the desk in the office. The large men who crowded into the room made it seem smaller. The air was thick and blue with their cigarette smoke.

Burkett leaned against the desk. His pointing finger was almost as lethal as the shotgun held loosely in the hands of the nearest agent. Both were aimed right at Randolph.

"You left here under suspicion a year ago," Burkett began. "You've come back under a cloud. I don't like shifty characters."

You stand just so much kicking around, so much abuse, so much injustice, and then you have to retaliate. The agents' guns were suddenly toys in the perspective of Randolph's risen anger. He felt ten feet tall. He jumped up and his chair crashed over.

Then the shotgun nudged his short ribs roughly, and he got himself under control. He said, "Now I think much less of you, too."

"Then we understand each other. We have enough on you already to put you away for life.

Just as a starter, Baruch and Henrietta Smetana left the Project on the same day you did. They eluded agents assigned to them for security reasons. You were known to be friendly with Henrietta. You may have fooled Smetana, but he had other worries on his mind. Anyway, you don't have to love a woman, to conspire with her against your own government."

"What?"

"You left a trail as obvious as elephant spoor. You all showed up here at Santo Tomas. It all boils down to an attempt to extort a half-million bucks from the United States, using the Atomic Weapons Reward Act. You and Henrietta and Suarez and Smetana were all in it together."

"Stupidity," Randolph said slowly, "must be one of the requirements for your job. As a Federal officer, I couldn't sell the government that kind of information for anykind of money—it's written into the law."

"You found a way to get your share. We know that a man telephoned the Project with the same information that Henrietta had one hour after she called. That was you."

"I wasn't here then. That should indicate to even a feeble mind that I wasn't involved in her plan."

"It doesn't really matter, I guess," Burkett said heavily. "You already have a record of connivance—with Gomez here. You left Customs under a cloud. You've proven you can't be trusted—not even with another man's wife. Your kind will do anything for money. You were trying to cross up all your partners and collect it all for yourself. So why not confess?"

Randolph only stared at him. Then he shook his head in disgust at the utter wrongness of Burkett's reasoning.

Into the silence that fell after Burkett's question there came a growing rumble. The building shook and a little plaster fell. There was a hiss of escaping air, the crash of couplers. Old engine 1098 had arrived on the passing track beside the main line, directly in back of the Customs House. The old engine idled softly.

And with that overgrown truck engine sound in their ears, it formed a background for Vincente Gomez' voice when he said:

"Gentlemen, Randolph may know something about this plot, but I think only I know the present location of the bomb."

Burkett glared at Gomez. "Where the hell is it?"

"There is every reason to believe there is a plan to explode it

in Phoenix. In a very few hours."

He said it as calmly as though he was standing before a class of his policemen, giving them a problem in procedure. He couldn't have been more coolly at ease.

Here in this century-old thick-walled building that had never had to stand up to a shock greater than that of an occasional stray .44 calibre bullet, it wasn't easy to visualize the explosion Gomez so casually mentioned, an explosion that could reduce a city to rubble.

But it was getting slowly through to the men in the room. They moved uneasily. They stared at Gomez as though he was some kind of evil genie suddenly popped out of a bottle of smoke. Nobody said anything.

Then Burkett proved that at least others didn't share Randolph's opinion of his intelligence. He said, "I am authorized to receive the kind of information you offer. I have come prepared to deal. With cash, up to a point"

As if he had known it all the time, Gomez nodded. "Clear the room so we can talk."

Burkett said, "All except Randolph—leave."

The office which had seemed so crowded a moment before seemed almost empty when the others left it. Randolph said, "Why me?"

"You and Gomez are old friends. You might help us to reach a quick agreement."

Randolph studied Gomez. Had Gomez been playing him for the sucker all along? Had he known where the bomb was all the time?

Subjugating these more personal questions to the greater need to locate the device, Randolph said, "There is only one quick way. How much do you want, *jefe?*"

Gomez said, "You were always abrupt."

Burkett came away from the wall. "How much?" he asked.

Gomez stared thoughtfully out the window. Looking past his padded shoulders and sleek cap, Randolph could see a tall trainman made taller by the striped cap he wore as he walked into the lighted inspection area. He carried a lantern on his arm, a clip board in his hand.

Randolph knew the customs procedure. The trainman was calling for the customs releases and manifests for the train that had been made up in Mexico and pushed across earlier. The releases lay on the desk, tucked under a corner of the blotter holder. When Haynes pushed open the door, Randolph had them ready in his hand. Taking them, Haynes said, "You haven't forgotten," but wasn't very friendly. His eyes told that much as he looked at these

men who had usurped his office. He handed Randolph a switch list. "See if you remember where this goes," he said, and walked out, his back very stiff.

Burkett exploded. "There isn't a nickel's worth of business done at this border station all day long, but the minute we have something like this, it's like the Rose Bowl field after the game."

Randolph placed the switch list in the top desk drawer with the rest of the day's small business. Reflecting that men came and went but customs procedures rarely changed without an act of Congress, he came back around.

And now Gomez was ready to negotiate. He said, "It will be no holdup. I feel a moral obligation to tell all that I know." He paused there, head to one side, eyes alert on Burkett.

"Then talk," Burkett prodded.

"On the other hand," Gomez said, "Why should I pass up a chance at a little money?"

"How much?" Burkett asked again.

"Nothing at all like the half-million the woman wanted."

"Tell the man." Randolph's own patience was wearing thin.

"Say ten percent of the five thousand."

Burkett stared at Randolph. "I misjudged you. I apologize."

"Don't do it," Randolph said. "I'll have to take back all the ugly things I've thought about you."

"You wouldn't settle for so little. Fifty-thousand bucks is the figure named by a man who called the Project an hour after Henrietta did."

Gomez said, "I called."

"Well," Burkett said, "pending the arrival of a representative of the Atomic Energy Commission, I have the power to negotiate."

"Inside one hour," Gomez said, "the bomb will probably be on its way. Inside five or six more, it will be in position. Only Suarez and I know where it is now, or where it will be then."

"Let's get on with it."

Gomez turned to the door and they went outside in that order: Gomez first, then Burkett, then Randolph. The engine of the locomotive behind the customs house idled noisily, ready to pull out with the string of dark cars behind it. Five, Randolph noted, plus the caboose, which was backed up against the international gate.

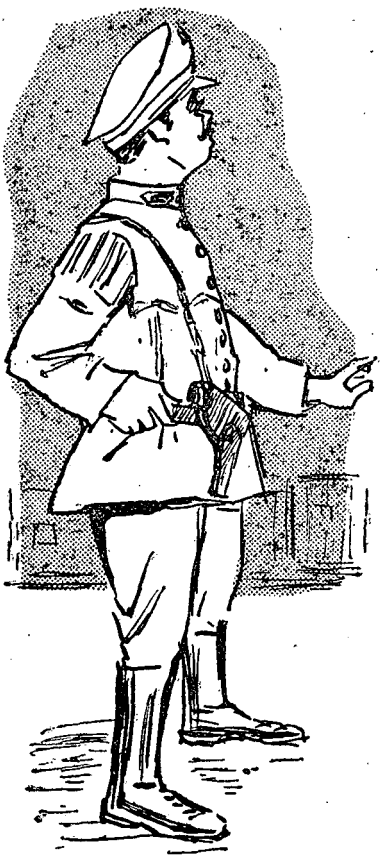
He was thinking that in the ordinary manner, it would take weeks of waiting for a sum of money with which to pay an informer's fee. He wondered if Burkett actually had money, or was he bluffing?

Gomez said, "This is no different than before, Juanito. I gave you

information, and you gave me money for it. You might say that you showed me how to do it."

Randolph couldn't keep some of the tough hardness he felt out of his voice. "What the hell was all that other routine? The questions at the Alhambra? The search in the machine shop?"

Gomez was standing directly under one of the overhead lights. A film of sweat showed on his face, attesting to strain upon him. Light picked out glints of gold from his polished insignia.



"Like Henrietta, I had to find out if you were sent to interview her. I had to find out what she had told you. But until you saw the uranium scraps, I wasn't even sure a bomb had actually been made. Now I am. Now I think I know where Suarez is."

"You must have known Suarez killed Henrietta. How much more do you know? You must have been closer to him or her than you've led me to believe."

Gomez shrugged. "Who knows for sure what goes on in the mind of a madman? He wants to go down in history, maybe. These Cuban *communistas* are all mad. Or maybe this is a part of some great plan. Who knows?"

"And you know where *El Cubano* is now?" Burkett asked.

"With the bomb."

"Well, where is it?"

Gomez turned slowly, raising his arm to point. Almost as though it was a signal, the train began to move. Slack came crashing up between the couplers. Randolph hunched his shoulders against the startling clamor.

Gomez suddenly stepped against Burkett, who staggered under the

impact. Gomez fell at Burkett's feet.

Burkett and Randolph stared down at him. There was blood on the front of Burkett's suit; there was blood spreading away from Gomez' body.

When you've seen death a few times in its various forms; when you've seen the sudden pallor, the half-closed eyes, the silent, jointless form, you don't need to feel a pulse or listen for a heartbeat to know.

And Randolph knew that in that brief moment of looking at and pointing to the noisy train, Vincent Gomez had been shot.

The winking lights on the caboose were growing smaller. The sound of the engine was fading, and the blast of the farewell whistle was ragged on the breeze.

Burkett said, "That shot came from the train." His voice was as steady as though dead men at his feet were an every day occurrence.

Randolph had another thought which he did not want to put into words. Gomez had been standing between him and the train. Could the bullet that killed Gomez have been meant for him?

Burkett said, "When Gomez was hit and stumbled against me, his mouth was close to my ear. He said something that started out with a sibilant sound and ended with something that sounded like *siete.*"

"Seven. Could it have been part of a car number?" Randolph asked.

"Could have been."

Somewhere close at hand a motor started and gears ground as an early trucker prepared to hit the road. The cool breeze seemed suddenly icy to Randolph, who started to trot back to the customs office.

Burkett was right behind him as he stepped through the doorway into the office. Randolph jerked open the top desk drawer, pulled out the switch list, and scanned it.

Haynes, coming in, protested. "There were only five cars. Cantaloupes. Me and the agriculture inspector looked at them early today."

Randolph showed the list to Burkett. His thumb was under a car number. "Could that have been it?"

Burkett said, "Yes. What's it's place in the train?"

"Just ahead of the caboose."

"It would have been located about right." Randolph looked at Haynes. "Did you look into the ice bunkers?"

"Sure, nothing in them but ice."

Burkett looked slightly puzzled. Randolph explained: "At each end

of the car is a compartment into which ice is loaded through hatches in the roof. Fans blow from the ice into the body of the car and cool the load."

Burkett put the question: "Did you look under the ice, Haynes?"

"No. Why should I?"

Randolph picked up the phone, and after a short delay, got the Mexican freight depot on the line. He asked the sleepy agent: "Have you moved a PFE 72127 out of the Taller Mecanico in the last few days?"

The answer came abruptly. "In and out. Iced this afternoon. Crossed it this evening. Who's calling?"

Randolph hung up gently. "That car was in Suarez' shop for awhile."

"Let's go," said Burkett, "and let's go carefully. The man who shot Gomez is dangerous."

Haynes complained bitterly that he would be missing the excitement because duty kept him at the custom house. But there was nothing to hold Randolph.

Burkett chose to ride with him. "You don't have to get involved any deeper in this."

Randolph said, "I just want to show you how wrong you are, thinking that I'm mixed up in it any way."

"Lots of things pointed at you. For instance, uranium was missing from the Project. Some day we'll learn how it was smuggled out. The loss was discovered almost immediately. Two things helped us: it had vanished apparently the same day you, Smetana, and Henrietta left. They never got to New York where they were due. Nobody knew where you were until I saw you here, but you were high on the suspect list. We had to work fast. There was no time for investigation. So don't blame me too much for jumping you."

Randolph said, "Forget it," watching the yellow strip of dusty road reel up under the wheels of his hurrying vehicle. "The immediate question is—where to stop the train?"

"On the road to the Papago village that lies out there along the border?" Burkett waved his hand toward the east.

"Yes. We race the train to the crossing. We park on the track and hope it stops in time."

"They'll stop," Burkett promised, "if I have to blow the engineer off his seat with a shotgun."

That kind of action was not necessary. The train was crawling at a bare five miles per hour as it approached the crossing.

Burkett, with Randolph, ques-

tioned the crew while the other men went over the train from head to rear end, with ready guns and strong flashlights. They found no one.

"If the assassin was on this train," Burkett finally concluded, "He got off. And for all we know he could be out there in the brush with us in his sights right now."

He looked at Randolph.

It gave Randolph a creepy feeling. Of them all, he probably had the greatest reason to believe the gun sights might be trained on him. He was conscious of his vulnerability when he joined the agents as they swarmed all over car PFE 72127 like harvester ants in an ant hill.

They tossed chunks of ice from the bunkers to the ground in complete disregard for the preservation of Crown Produce Distributor's valuable load of sweet-smelling cantaloupes.

They found no atom bomb. They found nothing that remotely resembled one.

But after they had removed the ice from the head-end bunker, they did find something not normally kept in such a place.

They found Smetana's body.

All of his fingers had been broken. His toes were flattened as though they had been beaten and smashed with a hammer. There was a small blue hole in the middle of his ice-cold forehead. The back of his head was a mass of hair and clotted frozen blood.

"He didn't give away any secrets voluntarily," Burkett said.

Randolph could also acknowledge that. He could also remember what he knew and what he had heard of the beatings, humiliations, and mental tortures to which Smetana had subjected Henrietta during their married life.

They wrapped Smetana in a blanket from the caboose, laid him on the ice in which he had been entombed. He was frozen so stiff that it indicated he had been that way for some little time.

"He was an unpleasant man," Randolph said. "We had standing orders never to speak to him," when he came into any of the areas we guarded. His mind was always 'way out. He would have any man fired who disturbed his calculations."

He wished he knew more about what had transpired after Smetana had entered Santo Tomas. He wished Gomez had lived to tell. Now they might never know who shot the scientist.

Burkett dispatched an agent into

San Manuel for a driver and a pickup to transport Smetana's body back to Santo Tomas. Burkett signed a release for the conductor, warning the crew to remain available for questioning. Then the late train moved out fast to meet its schedule.

In the gray light of that quiet day's dawn they unloaded the entire car of its cargo. Clear to the duckboards on the floor. Long before they had lifted out and examined the last crate, Randolph had given in to a growing despair.

But Burkett put it into words. "Somewhere we have misread our leads. We're off on a side trail into a box canyon."

They were standing, dirty, damp, and disheveled, beside the track. There was suddenly nothing more to be done. Burkett was gloomy. His investigation was collapsing around him.

"Here we stand," he said, "in the middle of the great Indian reservation, with our fingers up our noses and somewhere a madman has control of a blast maybe big enough to hoist a hundred and fifty thousand people into outer space."

"There is radio," Randolph said. "Pass the word. A massive net could be thrown around Phoenix with Army and Air Force personnel. A search could be made of every conveyance from a baby carriage to a Diesel tanker."

"And aircraft?"

"Those, too." Randolph studied the railroad car. "And this. Those are thick walls. There could be spaces hollowed out between them in the insulation." He looked down at the heavy tracks. "It may be possible for a clever machinist to design a device that would look like a part of the rolling gear. Have them leave the car here, Burkett, and ask for someone with detection instruments to go over it."

"I'm away ahead of you there," Burkett said. "I radioed a request when we were at Santo Tomas. Technicians are on the way."

There was nothing more for them here. They loaded Smetana into a pickup truck that the agent had commandeered. A shiny-faced fat Papago driver had no words and no interest in the blanket-wrapped body. He took off toward Santo Tomas. The pickup clattered tinnily over the washboard road with its tailgate chains rattling loudly in this quiet desert dawn.

An early trucker, wheeling a tarpaulin-covered one-and-a-half ton stake truck, thumped slowly over the railroad crossing in the pickup's dust. The discouraged men standing by the unloaded car

could hear both vehicles for a long time.

Now the agents could load themselves into vehicles and depart. For Randolph, again alone with Burkett, there was a vision of a long cold shower and twelve hours of sleep.

"Somebody is going to be unhappy about those cantaloupes," he said.

"Don't bother me with details," Burkett said. "They are the least of my worries."

Randolph had an idea of the way Burkett felt. This just wasn't the kind of job you worked at for eight hours and then walked off and forgot.

The early morning sun was laying its orange paint and blue shadows across the land. The smell of stirred dust along with the background odors of mesquite and creosote bush came through the open window. Randolph drove around a long bend in the road. Ahead was the big tarpaulined stake body truck, using all of the road. It pulled slowly over at the command of Randolph's horn.

Yellow dust coated the russet tarp and lay deep in its folds. And Randolph, as automatically as any law enforcement officer, noticed the license plate as they drove by, and was more interested in it.

Once ahead, he found himself still thinking about that license plate. For one thing, it was a Sonora plate. For another, its numbers were S 6-65-67. He said them to himself again, in Spanish, In either language, they were a mouthful of sibilants. Ending in seven.

He was abruptly wide awake. He sat up straighter, startling Burkett, who was dozing. Burkett said, "Bee sting?"

"We've got to stop that truck."

"What for?"

"Did you see the license?"

"With my eyes closed?"

Randolph repeated it slowly. Burkett looked at him sharply.

Randolph said, "We assumed Gomez was shot from the train. We overlooked the fact that the train was backed up to the fence. The shot could have come from Mexico. I heard a truck starting up immediately after the sound of the shot. It could have been this one—"

"How?"

"It could have rolled east out of Santo Tomas along the fence. Then there is a locked gate south of San Manuel, but the Border Patrol is always finding the lock cut. The Papagos don't like to have to come clear to Santo Tomas to cross the border if they happen to want to go south in a hurry."

Randolph's eagerness reached

Burkett. He said, "To any sane man, it sounds like a straw. But at this point I'm grasping for them. We can try."

So Randolph chose a site a hundred yards from the Santo Tomas junction to set up his road block. It was on a little knoll. They got out, two determined men, and waited for the oncoming truck in the freshness of this quiet morning.

Their shadows lay long in the dust behind them. Here in the road, Randolph thought, may lie the destiny of a city. Of a country. Or of the world.

The roaring sound of the truck's exhaust preceded it. As it lurched through chuckholes like an awkward elephant, great gouts of yellow dust were splashed up and over it. It came on and on, and when it stopped, the radiator was right up against Randolph's vehicle.

The only occupant of the cab was a skinny man with an olive complexion and shiny black hair and busy dark eyes. He wore black coveralls, and resembled a ghoul in work clothes.

"Suarez?" Randolph said. The man fit Gomez' description.

Burkett acted as though he knew exactly what he was going to do. He jerked open the truck door and covered the driver with his shiny, short-barrelled revolver.

The only thing was—the driver knew what he was going to do, too. He held in his hand the kind of push-button used by bed patients in hospitals. Two thin wires extended from it back into the truck.

He spoke English, not so poorly that he couldn't be clearly understood.

"I am Suarez," he said proudly. "Put the gun at my feet."

When Burkett hesitated, he lifted his hand high, so they could see his thumb quivering a fraction of an inch above the push button.

"Now!" he commanded.

There on the yellow ribbon of San Manuel road through the green mesquite country, all time stood still.

To Randolph, who was eight feet behind and to the left of Burkett, unarmed, came the sound of the slow wind sobbing through the trees, carrying up from Mexico the warmth and perfume of hundreds of miles of sun-soaked earth, oak knolls, and pine canyons. The whirling columns of dust devils danced sedately in the blue distances.

From the Santo Tomas road there came the faint sound of a passing automobile engine. It was

only a whimper, but it served to remind Randolph that he and Burkett were not alone with this madman.

A world full of people could feel, in one way or another, the result of whatever action took place here on this lonesome southern desert. A global war could conceivably be started. Or stopped.

A sense of destiny welled strongly in Randolph. So must it have been with Burkett.

The burning question in Burkett was whether to call this man's bluff, gambling that he would not commit suicide in order to kill them; whether to shoot him, gambling that the bullet would reach him before he could energize the bomb; or whether, by capitulating, to gamble that greater forces could surround and stop the truck before it left this vast, sparsely populated, desert country where it could do little damage even if it did explode.

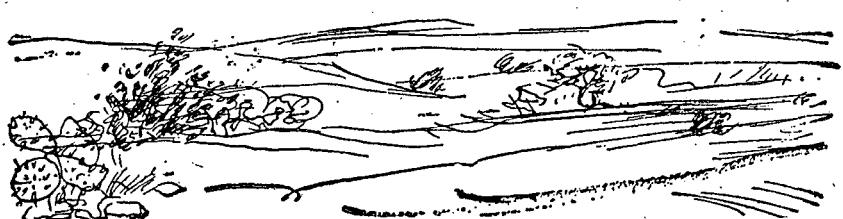
Burkett took the last alternative. Even as he bent to lay the gun at Suarez' feet, Randolph's lips were forming the words for a great shout: "*Shoot him* Burkett!"

For by Randolph's calculations, only Burkett, Randolph, and Suarez knew that the bomb actually existed in this truck. Therefore it was mandatory for Suarez to eliminate them.

In the space of time that it took Burkett to realize his mistake and belatedly reach for the gun, Suarez scooped it up and shot him. Burkett fell against the truck and then slumped into the dust.

Randolph had begun his move even when Burkett was reaching for the gun. The revolver blasted its bits of blinding, burning powder into his face. The bullet struck into the top of his shoulder, emerged under the scapula, and hammered him to the ground.

Falling partly across Burkett, shocked and numb, he lay wholly still. Blood streamed warm into his clothes, dripped into the yellow dust to mingle with Burkett's. Faintly, as through deafness, he heard the sound of his car's engine. It labored, and its wheels spun deeper in sand as it was driven off the road and out of



sight, no doubt, and finally the engine died altogether. Then there was a long time of nothing, then he sensed that Suarez was studying him, and he held his breath.

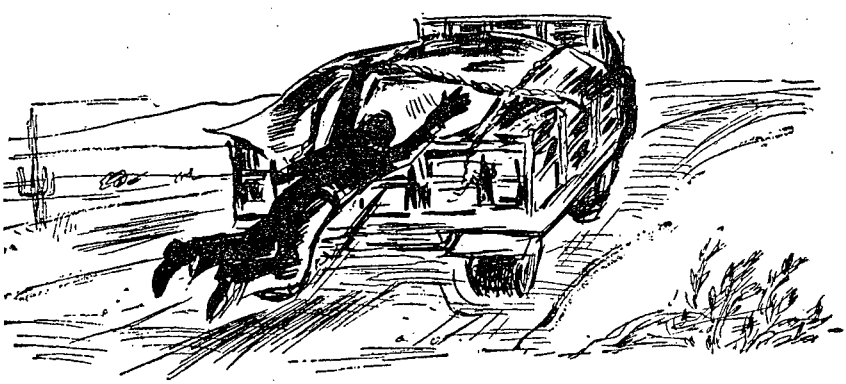
Then strong wiry hands grasped his wrists and pulled him through the dust, to be unceremoniously dumped at the base of a mesquite beyond the edge of the road. These things seemed to be happening to someone else, while he himself huddled in a dingy corner and nursed his pain. Instinctively, he did nothing to show the hurrying Suarez that he still lived. His breathing slowed and almost stopped.

A heavy weight held him pinned. The truck's idling engine roared. Randolph heard the crunching if its heavy wheels in the road, the open-mouthed bark of its exhaust. He got hands under his chest and pushed mightily, the pain in his shoulder like a streak of fire. Strength within him surprised him; he was also surprised that the weight on him had been Burkett's body, which now slid off and lay limp, mouth and eyes half-opened.

A few yards away, glimpsed through the close leaves of the mesquites, the truck moved slowly on as it passed through the low range of gears.

Randolph took a few stumbling steps forward. In motion, despite the pain in his shoulder, he could feel better. And he could run.

He could not see well. He set a dogged course through the mesquite. It took him along the base of a triangle formed by the two roads. His vision, impaired by powder burns, was not adequate to show him the catclaw and prickly pear through which he was running. Cactus speared him, forming a diversionary pain for that which already seared his shoulder.



He ran, head down and panting, falling and getting up again, as he had never run before. He felt his compressed lungs reach for air, but they did it without his volition. He knew vaguely that if he could keep going, could move fast enough, he could reach the Santo Tomas road when the truck was making the angle of the triangle.

It was the longest football field he had ever had to run. It was like running its full length through all eleven men of the opposition, plus at least half of the substitutes from the bench. And the roaring in his ears became the cheering of the crowd, on its feet now and urging him on as the white H of the goal posts loomed before him.

Then abruptly it wasn't the football field, not the tackling players, not even the goal posts. It was a dust-filled road, it was a stinking roaring exhaust, it was the square rear of a waddling, tarp-covered truck moving just beyond the reach of his finger tips, and the H was formed by the white cotton rope that held the trap from being blown off in the wind of the truck's own making.

Somehow he got his fingers under the rope. Someway he got another hand up higher, taking giant strides as the truck pulled him along. With a great reserve of strength he pulled himself up, got a foot on the edge of the bed of the truck, laid his arms on the canvas top, and hoisted himself to it.

The touchdown had been made.

The roaring crowds were there again, heard dimly as he gasped for breath, and each breath a searing pain in his chest. His team mates were jumping up and down around him gleefully, big thunderous men whose weight moved and stirred the hot earth under him.

Dust was in his nostrils. . . .

Then there was no dust. Only heat.

The earth had stopped rocking.

He was aware that there had been noise. Now there was quiet. The sky above was an empty blue void except for the burning pinpoint that was the sun.

Into his awareness crept a swishing sound, growing in volume until it seemed that hell had broken violently loose directly over him. Then, so close he could almost touch it, a T33 jet trainer blurred across his vision. On one wing he read dimly: "USAF." As the sound of its passage diminished, he heard a wild cursing below him. In Spanish.

Another swishing roar began. He propped up on his elbows,

conscious of coming up out of a tremendous bed of pain, and saw another T33 beginning its run.

Memory flooded back. He knew now that he was on a dusty trap over a stake truck, and that the stake truck contained a cargo of wholesale death. Further than that, he saw the truck was on that part of the Santo Tomas road north which passed through a diabolical upthrust black mass of burnt jagged rock in which lay a small valley the Air Force used as a gunnery range.

He knew that the jets passing over weren't making runs on the truck, but on the range three miles beyond.

When the next jet swished across with its spine-shivering sound, Randolph hitched himself to the edge of the truck and looked over. Suarez was squatted on the ground below him, his head turning to follow the jet's path. The cursing was coming from him.

He wasn't a large man. He was thin to the point of emaciation. He wouldn't weigh a hundred thirty-five, Randolph judged.

Suarez had the push button in his hand. What, Randolph wondered, was he going to do with it? Bomb a jet?

He hitched himself closer to the edge of the truck. He went over the side in a tight ball, oblivious to pain, oblivious to everything but the necessity to flatten this dangerous subvert who so obviously thought that the swooping jets were directing their efforts at him and the truck.

Primary in Randolph's reasoning, what there was of it, was the fact that he himself was lying right on top of the impending explosion. Suarez, turning on his heels, was calculating the approach of the next jet with his thumb white-knuckled on the push-button. His wild startled upturned look found Randolph as the big man left the solidity of the truck for the infirmity of the air, dropping down like the two-hundred-pound weight that he was.

He felt the give of Suarez' squatted, doubled-up thin body under him. He heard his wild scream. He felt the terrible shock of the landing, and then he was blasted on a wave of excruciating pain back into the unconsciousness from whence he had come. . . .

He fought the hands on him until the sound of soothing voices got through to him. He saw a familiar face and found a name to put to it: Haynes.

Haynes said, "They won't be letting anybody talk to you for awhile, so listen good. A helicopter

is setting down over there—" he gestured with his chin "—to take you to the base hospital."

Then that was the noise he heard—like the beating of a buzzard's wings, heard from afar in a still place. Except that this was amplified a thousand times.

There were others near, but it hurt him to move even his eyeballs. He concentrated on Haynes.

Somebody threw back the tarp on the truck, and dust fell on his face. Haynes said, "Watch what you're doing up there!" and gently brushed the dust away while a voice floated down from above, "Sorry."

Then Haynes said, "When the FBI boys pulled in at the customs house and you and Burkett didn't show up right away, I went along to see what was keeping you. I saw the blood on the side of the road, and we found Burkett's body. I read the marks, followed your bloodtrail and footprints, guessed a lot, and we started north. We got here a few minutes after a truckload of technicians. They're having a field day with the bomb. They had been so close that they saw you take your plunge off the truck onto Suarez. And Suarez talked. He's over there, with his back broken and his chest caved in. He won't live."

A tall man in Air Force uniform was approaching, carrying a black kit. His cool fingers went gently to work on Randolph, who never felt the hypo through his other pains.

Haynes said, "Suarez is afraid that history may never know what he tried to do. So he talked. He had known Henrietta in Havana. There he had been one of Castro's early underground aides. She was an AEC secretary, on vacation. When she came back to the United States she wrote to him with her scheme to make a fortune. He met her once in Juarez, again in Nogales. Then she married Smetana."

And the overall plan, Randolph saw now, was what had made her stay with Smetana, no matter what he did to her.

Haynes continued. "Finally, she got him down to Santo Tomas, where Suarez was waiting. But Smetana wouldn't cooperate. Except that she knew what to do. How she must have hated him! She tortured him until he told them how to build the bomb. After it was built, she shot him. She threatened Suarez, too, who had been waiting until the bomb was finished to tell her he wanted to use it in what he termed a try for world peace. He was fox-crazy. She saw that. She needed help. Gomez was the man to give it to her. Suarez, suspecting she would

try to cross him, unloaded the bomb from the railroad car and put it in the truck. He planted Smetana's body in the ice bunker and called the railroad company and told them to come and get the car. Then a chance to get rid of Henrietta came along. He had already planned to bomb her.

All he had to do was plant some dynamite last night when she was with you. When she stepped on the starter, she blew herself up. Knowing that Gomez would take over her scheme, Suarez drove the truck to an isolated garage. It was bad luck for him that as he later approached the border gate en route to the road that follows the fence down to San Manuel gate, he saw Gomez. He couldn't be sure Gomez hadn't seen him, and if he had, Gomez would figure the bomb might be in the truck. So Suarez parked near the railroad track and got out and moved up along the train—he was skinny enough to slide under the gate—and tried to get in close enough to where he could hear what was being said. When Gomez came out and pointed at the train, Suarez thought if they didn't find anything on the train, Gomez would remember the truck. So he gambled and shot when the train moved out, using the gun Henrietta had used on Smetana. He dropped it and lost it in the darkness. Then he went on to the San Manuel gate, crossed into the United States, and the rest you know."

The doctor finished, waved in two men with a stretcher, and they loaded Randolph on it. The hypo was taking effect now, making him hazy. He had a thought, even a pitying one, for doomed Suarez, to whom a human life was nothing.

The doctor said, "Only a few people will ever know what happened here until some time later. Even the knowledge of what happened might start the war the world is trying to avoid. And the world," he added thoughtfully, "will go on owing Randolph an awful lot it can never repay."

Before he drifted off into the haziness, Randolph heard Haynes say, "Take care of him, Doc. He's on the way to becoming a national hero of some sort. See to it that he lives to enjoy it."

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