ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers:

Those of you who are football fans will need no help from me in identifying the pennant on this month's cover . . . for it belongs to one of the Ivy League colleges, and its famous motto, Lux et Veritas has always been a favorite of mine. You may wonder, however, at my enthusiasm for football, since in England, where I was brought up, the only game comparably to it was called Rugby, and I never saw a football game until I took up residence in these United States. My enthusiasm for it is an acquired taste, rather like the taste for olives is said to be, and I enjoy it thoroughly. Many of you, dear readers, have had to acquire a taste for crime-mystery-fiction, or so you tell me in your letters. You also tell me that you enjoy reading my fine little publication each month, for which kind remarks, many thanks.

As an aid to you in your enjoyment of these stories, from time to time, I point out those which I think are especially appropriate to the season. Such is the case with Three-Faced Witness, by Tom MacPherson, which appears in this issue. I hope you will find it intriguing, too. All in all, I hope you enjoy the entire issue.

May I call your attention, also, to the Christmas gift offer, details regarding which appear in the pages of this month's issue.

Alfred Hitchcock

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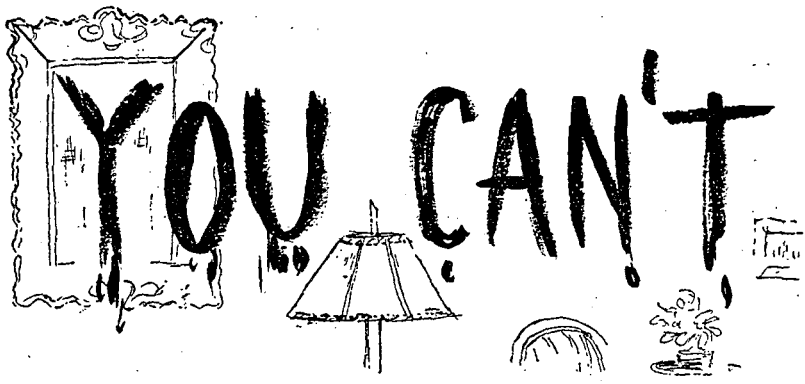


IT BEGAN like any other day. Mr. J. Brodsky heaved himself out of bed, thrust a cigar between his broad jaws, tilted the blinds, peered down one story at his garbage cans on the curb and at his super, Mac, who was sweeping. Mr. Brodsky put on a good suit, thinking a man owned six garbage cans, he was somebody. He placed a homburg on his big, hairless head and descended to the marble lobby, which, with its rows of brass mail-boxes, was another proof that he'd made it, that he was now the landlord of an apartment house. Maybe it wasn't as classy a house as it had been, say, fifty years ago, but it was still good, built solid, although dated.

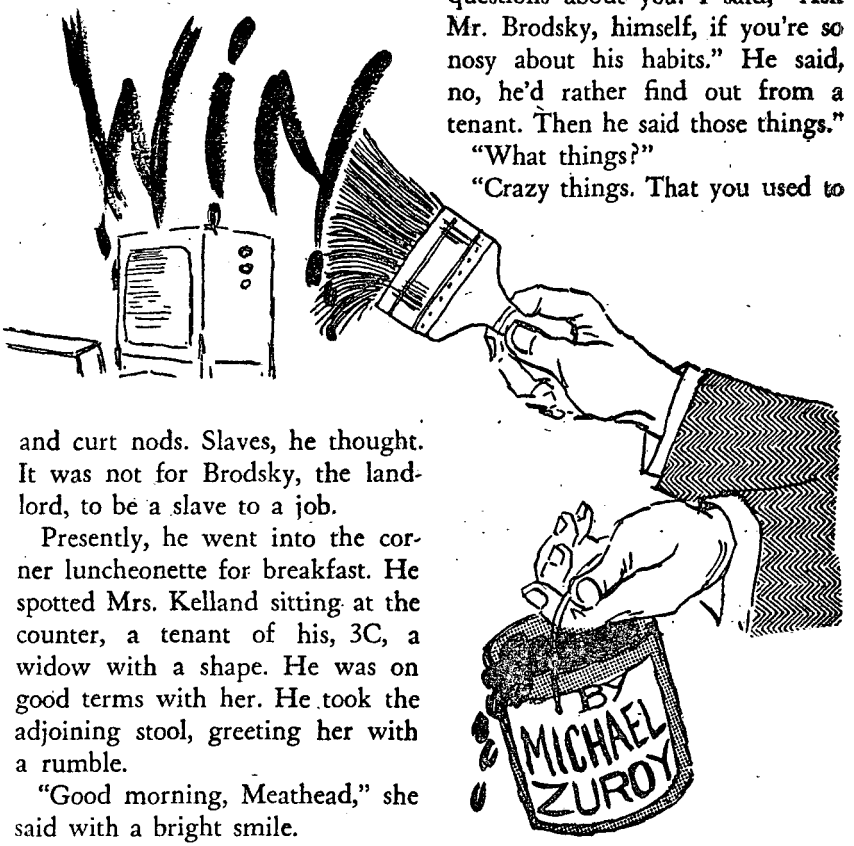
Mr. Brodsky found a long envelope in his own mailbox. It gave him a small jolt, because the return address said, BUREAU OF INTERNAL REVENUE.

He took a pull at his cigar. What did they want? Could this be trouble?

He put the envelope, unopened, into his inside pocket. He didn't feel like knowing about trouble this nice morning. He'd look at it later.

Out in the bright sunshine, he settled himself on the sidewalk, hands behind his back, watching his work-bound tenants leaving his building. He gave them grunts

It may seem strange that a man should desire only to be a landlord, when there are many other more exciting pursuits. A modest ambition, one might say, yet strangely unattainable, in this case.



and curt nods. Slaves, he thought. It was not for Brodsky, the landlord, to be a slave to a job.

Presently, he went into the corner luncheonette for breakfast. He spotted Mrs. Kelland sitting at the counter, a tenant of his, 3C, a widow with a shape. He was on good terms with her. He took the adjoining stool, greeting her with a rumble.

"Good morning, Meathead," she said with a bright smile.

His hand, in the act of adjusting a trouser leg, jerked. He stared at her as though stricken. "What," he said. "What what? What did you call me?"

"It's what that man called you yesterday," Mrs. Kelland said, still smiling.

"What man?"

"This man who spoke to me in the lobby. He started to ask me questions about you. I said, "Ask Mr. Brodsky, himself, if you're so nosy about his habits." He said, no, he'd rather find out from a tenant. Then he said those things."

"What things?"

"Crazy things. That you used to be a gangster, a triggerman, and that they called you 'Meathead'. That at last he'd caught up with you and he was going to get even for his dead brother and he wanted you to know it." Mrs. Kelland's eyes went wide, as though hoping for a thrilling revelation. "Is that true, Mr. Brodsky? Did you used to be a gangster?"

Mr. Brodsky roused himself.

"The man's a crackpot!" he declared. "What he said is ridiculous! I'm Jerome Brodsky, the landlord. I got nothing to do with gangsters."

"I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Brodsky," Mrs. Kelland said, her voice a shade disappointed.

Mr. Brodsky smiled thickly and patted her hand. "Forget it, little lady. Just a crack-pot."

When he resumed his station on the sidewalk, his mood was dark. All he wanted to be was Brodsky, the landlord, and here was a man from once upon a time who said, No, this is Meathead, the gangster, who killed my brother, and here was a letter from Internal Revenue that was maybe saying, No, this is Brodsky, the tax dodger; and he didn't even want to try to remember if it was so. Mr. Brodsky scowled, trying not to remember, and after a while the day seemed to brighten again.

He watched the kids leaving his building, bound for school. He watched the housewives come out for their shopping and, puffing on his cigar, loftily accepted their greetings. He felt the warmth of satisfaction. Whether they liked you or not, a landlord got respect. That was the important thing, respect.

Mrs. Santiago came out. Mr. Brodsky braced for a fight.

"When are you painting our apartment?" Mrs. Santiago demanded.

"Who's painting your apartment?"

"The condition of our apartment is a big disgrace."

"So paint it." Mr. Brodsky clamped down on his cigar.

"The landlord is supposed to pay for the painting."

"Your apartment ain't due for another year."

Mrs. Santiago's chest heaved. Her dark eyes blazed. "You are a bad landlord," she said. "The for-

mer landlord would have painted now. Wait, my husband will talk to you."

"Let him talk," Mr. Brodsky said. Mrs. Santiago marched off. Tenants, thought Mr. Brodsky, you have to keep them in line.

Mr. Brodsky spent the next hour upstairs, figuring how to turn one empty apartment into two, then trudged back down towards his own apartment.

Rounding the landing, his foot stopped in air. Two men were standing before his door and the back of one of them looked familiar. Mr. Brodsky's foot came down very quietly. The man made a slight move and Mr. Brodsky saw a high forehead and a bent nose. Doyle. Detective Doyle.

What was this, more trouble? What kind of a day was this? Mr. Brodsky backed up and found Doyle's pale blue eyes watching.

"Well," said Detective Doyle. "Meathead."

Mr. Brodsky plodded down. "What is it?"

"A few words with you. Invite us in."

Mr. Brodsky unlocked the door and they found seats in the living room. "Look," Mr. Brodsky said, "Forget Meathead. I'm Mr. Brodsky, the landlord, now. I got no connections, I don't know nothing. I don't remember nothing."

Doyle lifted an eyebrow. He said gently, "Forgive me, I still got a picture of a crazy triggerman."

Mr. Brodsky leaned forward. "Look, try to understand. The way you knew me—it wasn't what I wanted, never what I wanted. But what could you expect, I should come out from a tough slum a doctor or a lawyer or a clergyman, me who wasn't even smart and whose parents were poor immigrants? Sure, I been a slob all my life. Now, I pulled myself out. I'm a landlord, I got a chance to be respected. Why don't you leave me alone?"

Doyle said, "We'd like to. Believe me, Meathead—pardon, Mr. Brodsky—we'd like to. But there's something bothering us. Where'd you get the money to buy this place?"

Mr. Brodsky blinked. He said. "That ain't your business."

Doyle's eyes became clear blue ice. "Maybe it is our business, considering the big payroll robbery—the Scott job—that happened just before you bought this building, a couple months ago. We were going to ask you at the time where you got the money. But then maybe you wouldn't have told us. So we figured we'd just get together information, a bit here, a bit there, and watch who comes to visit you —"

"I don't get visitors."

"We found that out. We were a little disappointed. We have an interest in your friends."

"I don't know nothing," Mr. Brodsky glared.

Detective Doyle's voice grew blade-hard. "Meathead," he said, "we've got a case against you right now, serial numbers, witnesses, descriptions, but if we pull you in the others who were in on the Scott job will scatter. It's the brains, the big boys we want. Who were they?"

"I don't know nothing," Mr. Brodsky said thickly.

Doyle stood up. The other detective, who had never taken his eyes off Mr. Brodsky, did the same. Doyle dropped a card on an end table. "Call this number if you want to do business. You got till tomorrow to get off with a light sentence. After that, we're pulling you in and you'll take the full rap. Running won't help; you'll be stopped."

Alone once more, Mr. Brodsky fell back into his chair, breathing hard. This was a bad day, an awful bad day. Everything was coming back, and the day wasn't over yet. All he wanted was to be left alone, to be Brodsky, the landlord, but, who knew, maybe worse things were coming. And there was a man wanted to kill him . . .

Mr. Brodsky went to the liquor cabinet and felt behind the bottles. He took out an automatic and shoulder holster. The gun felt cold; it made his hand shiver. He didn't want it. It wasn't for a respectable landlord. But he put the holster on and slid in the gun. The gun was on his side.

He sat in the house, waiting for the day to pass. A couple of hours later, the doorbell rang. He wasn't surprised. More trouble, he thought, trouble always came in bunches. But if he didn't let the trouble in . . . ?

He stayed where he was, very quiet. The doorbell rang again. It grew insistent, a series of long rings.

After a time, the ringing stopped, and the silence was heavy. Mr. Brodsky went to the blinds, tilted the slats into slits of light, watching to see who would come out of the building. A woman and a small boy left, slamming the door. A little later, two women tenants, then an elderly man. None of these meant anything to Mr. Brodsky. He waited, wondering if whoever had rung the bell was still prowling, maybe still outside his door.

At last he grunted, seeing them walk into the street, knowing right away that these were the ones. Hoods, he knew hoods when

he saw them. Ordinary looking men, sure, but from their walk and the flat tightness in their faces he knew them. He watched the two men walk in neat unison around the corner. Who'd sent them?

The answer came easily. Maybe he'd been expecting all along that they would someday come. This would be the day, of course.

You didn't just slip away from Johnny Oliver. Johnny must have been wondering, *Where's Meathead, what happened to Meathead, what's he doing, who's he talking to?*

Mr. Brodsky remembered that after the Scott job, Johnny had made a little speech to the boys, talking softly, his squinting smile just showing the edges of his white teeth. "Don't spend too much in one place," he'd warned. "That would be a tip-off to the cops."

So the time had been bound to come when Johnny would find out that he, Brodsky, had blown his whole wad on this building. And Johnny would be thinking, *what if the cops get onto Meathead, what if Meathead talks?*

So Mr. Brodsky knew who had sent the hoods. And these were strangers, probably from out of town, which meant killing.

Mr. Brodsky heard the door open slowly behind him, creaking.

His heart wrenched and he spun without thinking, his thick hand jerking the gun from under his jacket, holding it on the figure coming through the door. Once, the trigger finger would already have been in a spasm, pumping bullets into the man, but now this was Mr. Brodsky, the landlord, and the gun didn't fire; the hand only pulsated.

Then Mr. Brodsky saw that it was just Mac, the super. "Why are you using your pass-key?" Mr. Brodsky asked. "Why are you sneaking in?"

"No . . . no sneaking," stuttered Mac, white-faced, his eyes bulging at the gun. "I didn't think you were home. I was supposed to fix your faucet today."

"Yes," said Mr. Brodsky, remembering. "So why didn't you ring the bell? Why didn't you think I was home?"

"Well, there were two guys, just left, said you weren't home. Said they were looking all over the building for you, rang your bell a long time. I told them I didn't know where you were, you must be out."

"Ah," said Mr. Brodsky. "And these two, they said who they were?"

"Sure. Insurance men, from your fire insurance company."

"Insurance men?" And why not? Mr. Brodsky thought suddenly. He could be wrong. Insurance men did come to see landlords. "All right, Mac," he said. "Never mind the faucet."

It was very simple, Mr. Brodsky decided, after Mac had left. Either hoods or insurance men. If they were insurance men, everything wasn't bad today, everything wasn't dragging him back to being Meathead, the gunman. All he had to do was phone the insurance company.

Mr. Brodsky made the call, and slowly replaced the receiver. No, they had not sent any men to see him. No, the men could not have been independent agents. The company had no agents, worked through brokers.

So it was hoods.

Who needed them? Who needed hoods, who needed detectives, who needed from once upon a time the brother of a dead man waiting to get even, who needed the Bureau of Internal Revenue . . . ? Internal Revenue?

Mr. Brodsky realized that he hadn't opened their envelope. He didn't know what was inside.

Maybe it wasn't trouble inside.

Mr. Brodsky pulled out the crumpled envelope. He put it on the end-table. He watched it for a long time, as though it might move. He fumbled at it once, drew back. He was afraid of the envelope. There was something that felt like a taut chain inside his head and it wouldn't be good if it broke. Mr. Brodsky went to the liquor cabinet and poured himself two drinks. He came back and opened the envelope.

They wanted to investigate his income.

Mr. Brodsky brought up his hands and squeezed his head. He went to the window and sat down; very calm now. All right, they were all against him. All right, things were jumping up from the past trying to stop his being a landlord, trying to get him. All right. Under his lapel, he fondled his gun. Let them come.

He sat there until the night spread, and then until the street sounds diminished and the lights blinked out and the television blatter stopped. When the city was sleeping, he grew tired of waiting for more things and left the apartment. Let them come at him in the open. He was ready.

He prowled through the hallways, climbed through the silent building, clasping his gun once when footsteps sounded, to release it when keys jingled and a door slammed. Reaching the roof, he walked on the soft tar among clothes lines and antennas to the

low wall and looked out at the gloom of tenements leaning over street lamps. Maybe, Mr. Brodsky thought, this is the best way?

It was then the answer came, clear, simple. What was it Mrs. Santiago had said this morning? "You are a bad landlord."

Yes, Mr. Brodsky thought, in sudden shame and understanding, she'd been right.

He hadn't painted, he'd raised rents, he'd sliced apartments smaller . . . A bad landlord.

Now, he was being punished. It was clear. If he had been a landlord who deserved to remain a landlord, the things would not have come from the past. He would have been safe.

Maybe it was not too late? Maybe they could be sent back?

Mr. Brodsky hurried down to the basement, picked up what he needed, then up to the fourth floor. He let himself into the Santiago apartment with a pass-key, closed the door, placed the pails and brushes on the floor and clicked on a light.

A startled call. Cautious feet padded. Mr. Santiago's white face peered from a dark room.

"I'm here to paint your apartment, Santiago," Mr. Brodsky explained, smiling thickly.

Mr. Santiago came into the light, "In the middle of the night? You scared me, you know that? Get the hell out of here, Brodsky."

Mrs. Santiago appeared, holding her robe about her. "He must be drunk," she said.

"I got to paint your apartment right now," Mr. Brodsky said, quietly, patiently. "I can't wait."

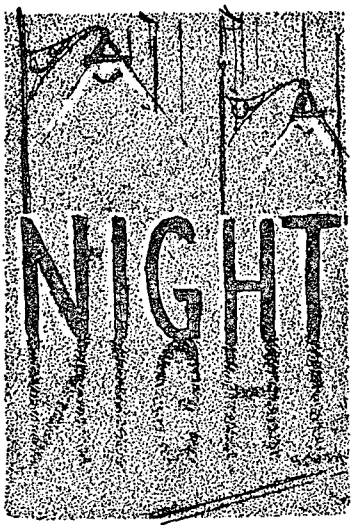
"Get out," Mr. Santiago said. Mr. Brodsky stared at him. "Get out," Mr. Santiago said again.

Mr. Brodsky's eyes changed into Meathead's. "You're one of them," Meathead snarled. "You don't want me to be a landlord." He pulled his gun and fired four shots. Mrs. Santiago's hands went to her cheeks as she stared in disbelief.

She's against me too, thought Meathead, and shot her.

Then, relaxed, Meathead Brodsky, landlord, began to paint the apartment.

There are some kinds of work which are best done at night, for one reason or another . . . and not only because of the heat of the sun.



MARTIN BASK entered a cocktail lounge just off Randolph Street and went directly to a rear booth where his friend Klepper was waiting for him. Klepper rose and greeted him with a smile.

"How are you, Martin?" he said.

"Fine, Hans, fine," said Bask, shaking hands warmly. "And you, my friend, how have you been?"

"Good, Martin, good. Never better."

The waiter came over and Bask ordered a drink for himself and another for Klepper.

"You're looking prosperous, Martin," Klepper observed, taking in the two hundred dollar suit Bask wore, and the thirty dollar necktie, and the platinum tie clip.

"Business has been good," Bask admitted. He glanced down at the ring on Klepper's little finger. "I see you still have your love for diamonds, Hans."

Klepper smiled rather sheepishly. "My only real weakness," he confessed. "I suppose I shouldn't indulge myself so much. I have a safe deposit box full of them now. But, as long as I'm making the money, why not? Besides, diamonds are good security for my old age."

Bask gazed fondly at his middleaged friend, whose hair was greying but still thick, whose face was wrinkling but still well-tanned and healthy. He chuckled softly. "You'll never grow old, Hans," he said. "I don't think you've aged a day in ten years."

This time it was Klepper who laughed. "You are too kind, my

good friend," he said modestly.

The waiter served them and Bask raised his glass in a toast. "To your good health, Hans."

"And yours," said Klepper. The two men drank and then Klepper leaned forward slightly across the

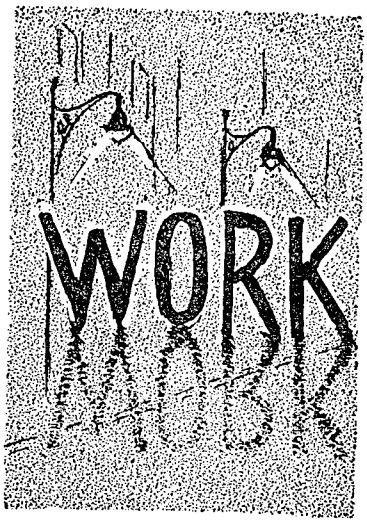


table. "And now, my friend, what can I do for you?"

"A favor," said Bask without hesitation. "I'll be working tomorrow night and a tube has gone out on my portable radio. I won't be able to get it replaced before then and—well, I was wondering if I might borrow yours. Just for the evening, you understand."

"But of course, of course," Klepper said at once. "A radio makes this night work so much easier."

"Yes, it does. I got the habit from you, surely you remember."

Klepper smiled. "How well I remember. I remember, too, how you thought I was a crazy old man when I suggested you play the radio when you had to work at night. Ah, Martin, you had very little discipline as a younger man."

"Yes, I know. But I learned

much from you, Hans. The working habits you taught me have been responsible to a large degree for my success today."

"Nonsense," said Klepper, shrugging off the praise. "You were always a bright lad, Martin. You would have been successful in any field you chose, I am sure of that."

"Well, perhaps, perhaps not," said Bask and let it go at that. "May I pick up the radio tomorrow?"

"Of course," said Klepper, "but you will have to pick it up early. I am also working tomorrow night so I won't be home for supper. And Anna donates her day to the orphanage tomorrow, so she is gone by eight o'clock. Can you make it over about ten?"

"I can, yes, but if you are working tomorrow night, perhaps you'll want the radio yourself—?"

"Not at all," said Klepper. "I won't be working inside tomorrow night. I'll be meeting a client."

"You're sure?" said Bask. "I wouldn't want to—"

"No, no, I'm sure," Klepper insisted, waving Bask's protest aside. "Come around in the morning and I'll have it ready for you."

"All right. Thank you, Hans." Bask glanced at his watch and saw that it was shortly after five. "Another drink?" he asked.

"I think not, Martin. I had better be getting home. Anna worries when I am late on nights I don't work."

Bask nodded knowingly. "A fine woman, your Anna," he said sincerely. "You are a lucky man, Hans."

Klepper smiled with pleasure. "She asks about you often, Martin. We never had children of our own, as you know, and Anna—well, she thinks of you as a son. I do, too, for that matter. We really don't see enough of you, Martin. You must come for supper one night soon."

"I will," said Bask. "When business is not so pressing—"

"I understand. Business before pleasure, as the saying goes. But you are still a young man, Martin. Don't work *all* the time. Enjoy yourself a little, too. Relax, you know?"

"I'll try," said Bask.

The two men stood up to leave and Bask reached for his billfold; but the older man, who carried his currency in a money clip, was quicker, and over Bask's mild protest had already dropped a five dollar bill on the table. They walked out together then and Bask hailed a taxi for Klepper to go home in.

"Until tomorrow, then, Hans."

"Good evening, my friend," said Klepper.

Bask waited until the taxi had pulled into the stream of downtown traffic, then turned and walked casually down the street to a drugstore on the corner. In a rear telephone booth he deposited a dime and dialed a number he had only recently memorized. There were but three rings before a male voice answered at the other end.

"Mr. Prindle?" said Bask.

"Yes, speaking—"

"Martin Bask here. I've arranged for the business meeting with your partner. What time would you suggest we set it for?"

"Well, I'll be leaving the office around seven, but he'll still be there until about eight, I suppose. Is that all right?"

"Very convenient," Bask said easily. "I should get there about quarter past seven. Suppose I meet you in the lounge of the Colonial Hotel about eight-thirty?"

"So soon?" said Prindle, his voice registering surprise.

"My business with your partner won't take long," Bask assured him. "I'm certain I can be there by eight-thirty."

"Very well," said Prindle, "whatever you say."

"And, of course," reminded Bask, "you'll have the—ah—"

"Yes, certainly," Prindle said quickly. "Just as you asked."

"Excellent," said Bask. "I'll see you tomorrow night then. Goodnight, Mr. Prindle."

Bask hung up and left the booth.

Twenty-four hours later, shortly after five p.m. the following day, Martin Bask emerged from the shower in his midtown apartment. He briskly toweled himself dry and slipped into a thick terrycloth robe. Draping the damp towel around his neck, he crossed his bedroom and stepped through a small hallway into the kitchen. Lin, his Chinese houseboy, had laid out a light supper of soup and cold beef as Martin had instructed.

"You work tonight, Mr. Bask?" Lin asked as Martin sat down. He knew his employer never ate heavily when he had to work at night.

"Yes," said Martin. "You can go on home anytime you're ready. I'll just put the dishes in the sink."

"Thank you, Mr. Bask," Lin said happily. The China-boy began humming softly. Bask knew from experience he would be out of the apartment within thirty minutes.

Martin dined leisurely until nearly six, then returned to his bedroom to dress. He put on a dark business suit and vest, an expensive British print necktie and Scotch grained wingtips. From an oversized jewel box on his bureau he selected a radium-dial wristwatch which he wound and care-

fully set by an electric clock next to his bed. As he was strapping on the watch, Lin came in to say goodnight.

After the houseboy had left, Martin opened a section of his sliding-door closet and turned on the inside light. He took out a black briefcase which he opened and placed beside the door. Then he pushed aside enough of the hanging clothes in the closet to enable him to step behind them to an indentation in the back wall where he kept his steamer trunk. He unlocked and pushed aside the two sections of the trunk, then used a separate key to unlock the inner doors. Kneeling down, he paused in thought for a moment, reflecting on what he would require for the night's work.

With its two sections fully opened, the trunk was shown to be a shelved affair on one side and a brace of drawers on the other. The shelves, on the left, were fully lined—top, bottom and sides—with sponge rubber. On the top shelf, wrapped in cotton secured by rubber bands, were a number of vials of nitroglycerin. Below them, on shelf number two, were bundles of dynamite sticks, five to a bundle, each bundle rolled in gauze bandage. Next, third from the top, were waxed paper envelopes containing black powder. On down the line, in order, were electric blasting caps, batteries, shape charge containers, white phosphorous grenades and, finally, sets of timing mechanisms, both electric and spring types.

Opposite the open shelves were the drawers. There were seven of them, each fairly large, each identical on its face, all unlabeled. Bask, of course, knew the contents of each drawer intimately. In the top two were his guns, all foreign makes, all automatics; in the next two were attachable silencers to fit all the guns; next were two drawers of soft-grain bullets, some for each weapon; and in the bottom drawer were the miscellaneous articles he used from time to time: several sets of handcuffs, a few pairs of suede and rubber gloves, a gun-cleaning kit, a pair of infrared eyeglasses, among other things.

Everything Bask needed was in its place in the trunk. When he prepared to go out on an assignment, all he had to do was select the necessary tools. This he proceeded to do now. First, from one of the drawers, he took a 9 mm. Bretsi automatic, inserted a seven-shot magazine into its handle, threw a round into the chamber, set its safety, and finally screwed a four-inch silencer over its barrel. The readied gun, along with a set of handcuffs, he put into the open

briefcase. The key to the cuffs he slipped into his vest pocket.

Next he removed a rubber-stoppered vial of nitroglycerin, wrapped some extra cotton around it, and put it, together with a four-foot length of slow fuse, in a separate section of the briefcase. Next to it he placed one of the waxed envelopes of black powder. The last article he selected from the trunk was a pair of black suede gloves, which he put in his inside coat pocket.

Gently lifting the briefcase, Bask carried it into the living room. There he picked up the small transistor radio he had borrowed earlier that day from his friend Hans Klepper, and slipped it into the briefcase, then closed the flap and snapped the catch in place.

Checking his watch and noting that he still had about fifteen minutes before his scheduled departure time, Bask crossed the room to a humidor and picked out an imported cigar and lighted it. He went on into an alcove off the room where he had a desk and a few bookcases; an area he considered his study. Sitting down at the desk, he unlocked the long center drawer and took out a map of the city. He unfolded the map before him and glanced over it until he found the area he wanted. The address he had in mind at that moment was situated near the southwest corner of a section which represented the Racine Avenue police district. The police station itself, for that district, was circled in red. Bask saw that it was about six blocks from where he would be working that night.

Considering the geography of the area, Bask moved a finger over to the extreme northeast corner of the same district, as far away as he could get from the station, and there found a street called Groves Court. The house numbers at that particular location were in the eighteen hundreds. Fixing that fact in his mind, he folded the map up and put it back in the drawer, locking the desk again. From a bookcase to his left, he then took down a street address directory and thumbed through the alphabetical listing of streets until he found Groves Court. Following the numbers down to the eighteen hundreds, he began to check the names of residents in that block. Entirely at random he chose a Joseph P. Mangle living at 1834 Groves Court. He jotted down Mr. Mangle's address on a sheet of scratch paper, then opened the directory to one of its front pages and from a list of district police stations copied the phone number of the Racine Avenue station.

Putting the directory back, Bask stood up and inhaled deeply of his cigar a few times before placing it in an ashtray to burn out. By now it was time to leave. He walked back across the living room, picked up the innocent looking briefcase, took a dark hat from the hall closet, and left his apartment.

The time then was exactly six thirty-five.

Martin Bask took a cab downtown, got out at a busy intersection and walked two blocks to a subway station. He boarded a northbound train and stood in the vestibule for the short ride across the river to the warehouse district. When he left the train and climbed to street level again, it was two minutes before seven and Bask was five blocks from his destination. He walked four of those blocks, consuming twelve minutes, then stopped at a public phone booth and dialed the number of the Racine Avenue station. The phone rang twice and then a voice answered.

"Racine Station, complaint desk, Sergeant Ledbetter."

"My name is Mangle," Bask said. "I live at 1834 Groves Court. Can you send an officer over here right away? There's a man prowling around in the alley behind my house with a gun in his hand."

"Do you know who he is, Mr. Mangle?" the desk sergeant inquired. "I mean, is he one of your neighbors or somebody like that?"

"No. No, he's a stranger. He seems to be waiting for something —or somebody, maybe, I don't know. I just thought I'd better report it."

"All right, Mr. Mangle, we'll send a car out right away. You said 1834 Groves Court, right?"

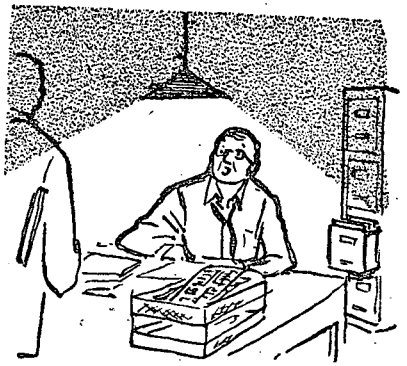
"Yes, that's right."

"All right, Mr. Mangle. The car will be there in a few minutes."

"Thank you," Bask said and hung up.

He left the booth and walked the remaining block to his destination. It was a two-story commercial building on the corner of a narrow truck street, with a loading dock at one side. There was a glass-doored front entrance above which was a bronze sign proclaiming: HORNER & PRINDLE, IMPORTS.

Bask ignored the front door and walked around the side of the building to the loading dock. A quick look around assured him that no one was in sight to observe his movements. He took the gloves from his pocket, drew them on snugly, and carefully turned the knob of a door marked DELIVERY ENTRANCE. The door



opened, as Prindle had told him it would, and Bask stepped inside quietly.

Locking the door behind him, he walked softly along an aisle stacked high with various sized packing crates and shipping cartons, some opened, some closed, many with foreign markings on them. In the quickly dimming light of dusk, Bask could make out labels from Spain, Holland, Africa, the Orient, all over the world. A thriving business, he thought. No wonder Mr. Prindle wants all of it instead of just half of it.

Coming to the end of the aisle, Bask paused and looked far across the warehouse floor to a small corner office where a light was burning. He could see a lone figure bent over a desk making entries in a ledger. Slowly Bask made his way around and through more crates and boxes until he was reasonably close to the office. Then he stepped out of the shadows and walked casually toward the door, making no further attempt to conceal himself. The man at the desk looked up just as Bask stepped into the office.

"Good evening, Mr. Horner," Bask said cordially.

"What the—? Who the devil are you?" the man behind the desk demanded to know.

"Mr. Prindle sent me," said Bask, his hand unsnapping the flap of the briefcase.

"Prindle—? How the hell did you get in here?"

"Delivery entrance. Mr. Prindle left the door unlocked for me. Very obliging man, your partner. Thinks of everything." Bask's hand slipped into the briefcase.

"Now look, if you're a salesman or something—" Horner began; and then he stopped and his words hung in the air as he saw Bask draw a gun from the briefcase and level it at him.

"This is a loaded gun, Mr. Horner," Bask said in a business-like tone. "Please do exactly as you are told and you'll make this a lot easier for both of us. Do you understand?"

Horner wet his lips nervously and nodded.

"Fine," said Bask. "Now go over there to your safe and open it. As quickly as you can, please."

Horner got up and moved side-

ways toward the safe. He had now turned very pale and his hands trembled noticeably, but he managed to kneel down and manipulate the dial in the proper combination of numbers to let the lever handle drop an inch, indicating that the door was ready to be opened.

"Very good, Mr. Horner," Bask said quietly. He put the open briefcase on Horner's desk and took out the handcuffs. "Now if you will step over to that straight chair, please, sit down and put your hands behind the chair."

"What—what are you—?" Horner stammered nervously.

"Just going to handcuff you, Mr. Horner," Bask assured him. "Merely a precaution so that I'll be able to go through your safe without fear of your attempting anything heroic."

"You mean—you're going to—to rob the safe?" Horner asked incredulously as he moved over to the indicated chair and sat down. "You mean my partner hired you to rob our own safe?"

"Well, not rob exactly," said Bask, deftly snapping the bracelets on Horner's wrists. "There are just a few papers he wants. He merely asked me to get them for him while I'm here."

Bask put his gun back in the briefcase and took out the small radio. He turned it on very softly and dialed the local symphony station. Quiet overtones of the Blue Danube settled within the little office. Bask stood listening to it for a few seconds, savoring the melody in silent satisfaction. Then he glanced at his watch, saw that it was seven twenty-six, and went to work.

Pulling open the safe door, he went through the small packets of legal papers and removed a file labeled PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT; then he searched on until he found another designated INVENTORY OF LIQUIDABLE ASSETS; and finally a third which indicated NON-TAXABLE ACCOUNTS—HIDDEN ASSETS. These files Bask put on the desk beside the briefcase. Then he took out the length of fuse and the envelope of black powder, and returned to the safe. As he knelt down and began unwinding the fuse, Horner spoke to him again.

"I—I don't understand what you said before," the handcuffed man told Bask. "I mean, about Prindle wanting you to get those papers while you were here. It, uh—sounded like you were doing that just as something extra, as if you were here for—something else."

"Well, I am, of course, Mr. Horner," Bask said over his shoulder.

"Surely you didn't think I was a common thief?"

Horner turned a shade paler and attempted to moisten his dry lips with an almost equally dry tongue. "Well, what—what are you here for then?"

Bask looked over at him and smiled. "Why, I'm here to kill you, Mr. Horner, naturally. Surely you must have guessed that?"

Horner swallowed audibly and choked slightly in the process. His eyes widened in fear and he shook his head in shocked disbelief.

"Oh, come now," said Bask. "Haven't you been at odds with Mr. Prindle for some time now? Disagreements as to the proper management of your business. Your not wanting to expand. Not wanting to move to new quarters. All that—plus, as I understand it, a little, uh—disharmony, shall we say, over Prindle's attentiveness toward Mrs. Horner. All that is true, is it not?"

Horner nodded his head slowly. "Yes. Yes, it's true. But I never dreamed he would—would—go this far."

"Well, of course," Bask said philosophically, "they say we never really see clearly those who are closest to us. Perhaps it's because our perspectives don't function properly when we think we really know a person well. I suppose it's just one other human weakness."

Leaving Horner to his own thoughts, Bask resumed working. He straightened and shaped the fuse to suit his needs and placed it in an almost perfect spiral atop some ledgers lying flat on the bottom shelf of the safe. Then he chose at random an ordinary sheet of correspondence from one of the file trays and proceeded to tear it into tiny bits and shreds. These he carefully formed into a small pile in the center of the spiral, just at what was to be the termination of the fuse. When this was done, he tore a corner from the waxed envelope and sprinkled the black powder over the little mound, covering it almost entirely.

Rising, Bask looked at his watch again. It was seven thirty-seven. He walked over to the desk, picked up the phone and dialed a number. The call was answered almost at once.

"Racine Station, complaint desk, Sergeant Ledbetter."

"This is Mr. Mangle," said Bask. "I called earlier about a prowler with a gun at 1834 Groves Court."

"Yes, Mr. Mangle, we already dispatched a car out to—"

"I know, I know," Bask interrupted, "that's why I'm calling again. One of the policemen has been shot and he's lying out in the alley—"

There was a thud as the phone at the other end was dropped to the desk. Bask smiled and gently put the receiver back in place. Reaching over to the radio, he turned the dial to a new waveband. Now instead of symphony music, the office was filled with the staccato chatter of police calls. Bask draped a leg over the corner of the desk and waited. The emergency call came through less than thirty seconds later.

"Signal Twenty-two. . . . Signal Twenty-two. . . . Signal Two-Two. . . . All units in the following districts—Racine, Wabash, Halsted—Proceed at once to 1834 Groves Court. . . . An officer shot. . . . One-eight-three-four Groves Court. . . ."

Satisfied, Bask turned the dial back to the music. Now he took the vial of nitroglycerin from the briefcase and returned to the safe. He placed the explosive on the top shelf of the safe, bracing a ledger on each side of it for support. Then he snapped open his cigarette lighter and held the flame to the end of the fuse where the spiral began. The fuse ignited and Bask checked the time at once. Seven forty-two. Mentally he considered the time element from that moment on: six minutes per burning foot of slow fuse equaled twenty-four minutes; then the black powder mixed with the bits of paper would ignite and the concussion would explode the nitro and blow the safe door off; about ten or twelve minutes more for an alarm to go in, another five or ten for a radio car to arrive; he had a good forty minutes minimum; plenty of time.

He gently closed the safe door, carefully raised the locking lever in place, and slowly turned the combination dial halfway around.

"Well, that about does it, Mr. Horner," he said, returning to the desk for the last time. He turned off the radio and put it and the files from the safe into his briefcase. Horner grunted a rather hopeless grunt.

"Why all the business with the safe?" he wanted to know. "Why not just the bullet and be done with it?"

"Because I am a professional," said Bask with a note of pride. "I specialize in assignments that reflect no guilt upon the person who hires me. Each assignment is carefully laid out like an architect's plan. In your case, for instance, there will appear to have been a robbery. It will look as if the safe was blown while all the district patrol cars were answering the emergency signal over on Groves Court. You resisted and were killed, you see? An ordinary

shooting without the blown safe, would make your partner—and your wife, incidentally—both prime suspects. This way, you are killed during a robbery. Everything is in order."

Bask checked the time again, now seven forty-seven.

"Suppose," Horner said urgently, "suppose I were to pay you more than Prindle is paying you? I could, you know. If you let me go and killed Prindle for me, I'd—why, I'd give you Prindle's half of the business—I'd even—"

Bask's face tightened into a mask of distaste. "I'm sorry, Mr. Horner, but I do not operate that way. The fact that my business is a somewhat left-handed form of endeavor is no reason for you to assume that I am unethical."

"No, no, of course not," Horner said hastily. "I didn't mean—"

"I know exactly what you meant, sir," snapped Bask. He looked at his watch one final time. "I really must be going now," he said, drawing the silenced automatic from his briefcase. "Goodbye, Mr. Horner."

"Wait—" Horner began to plead. "No—don't—"

But his words were to no avail. Bask had already raised the gun and was squeezing the trigger. Three muted sounds—blip, blip, blip—sent three bullets into the chest of the senior member of Horner and Prindle, Importers, and the partnership was dissolved with an undeniable permanency.

Bask removed the handcuffs from the slumped-over form and let it tumble to the floor. He moved the chair away from the body and put the handcuffs and gun back in the briefcase.

Before leaving the building, Bask raised one of the rear windows overlooking the alley and, with a claw hammer he found on one of the open crates, reached out and struck a small pane of glass from the outside, causing the glass to fall inward. Then, feeling this would satisfy the police as to how the robbers had gained entry, he closed the window.

When he stepped back out onto the delivery dock, feeling the door lock behind him, it was seven fifty-one and already dark. Bask walked casually up to the street back toward the subway station.

Half an hour later, sitting across a corner table from Mr. Prindle in the lounge of the Colonial Hotel, Martin Bask was almost as casual as he had been in the company of his friend Hans Klepper the previous evening. The difference was that with Hans it had been a comfortable casualness, while with

Prindle it was somewhat strained due to Prindle's nervousness.

"Please try to relax," Bask told him easily. "You have absolutely nothing to worry about. I've already explained how it will look to the police. You have the files you wanted, which will enable you to take over the business. Mrs. Horner is now a widow. You have an airtight alibi right here and all it will cost you is a dollar tip. So everything is in order. Everything, that is, except, uh—"

"Oh, yes," said Prindle, "excuse me." He took a manila envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to Bask. "An assortment, as you requested. Nothing larger than a fifty."

"Very good," said Bask. "And may I be the first to wish you and Mrs. Horner complete happiness in your new lives. And, of course, the continued success of Prindle and Hor—that is, Prindle and *Company,* Importers. Good evening, Mr. Prindle."

Bask left his client sitting at the table and made his way through the hotel lobby and out onto the street. He was standing at the curb looking for a taxi when he suddenly recognized a familiar face in a doorway across the street. Frowning, he walked the short distance to the corner and crossed over.

Hans Klepper was loitering at the entrance to a tobacco shop, pretending to examine a newspaper in the light of a display window. Bask approached him unnoticed and gently laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Hans, this is a surprise," he said. "What are you doing here?"

A flash of fear crossed Klepper's face for the briefest instant then, seeing it was Bask, he smiled in relief.

"Oh, Martin, it's you. Good to see you again so soon, my boy. I was just passing a few moments waiting for someone. As a matter of fact, here he comes now."

Bask looked back across the street and saw Prindle emerge from the Colonial Hotel.

"You are waiting to meet *him?*" Bask asked in surprise.

"No, no, not meet, just waiting for him to come out. Watch him, Martin."

Bask knew then what it was. He squinted his eyes and watched as Prindle walked down to a parked car and got inside; as he fumbled for a moment with his car keys; as he reached to turn the ignition. Then the car moved off toward the intersection, where it exploded like a bomb, undoubtedly blowing its occupant to bits.

Chaos followed, with people

running about, shouting, the black smoke gushing upward, the flames dancing brightly. "I used the old flintstone gimmick," Klepper said professionally. "You know, the one where you punch a hole in the gas tank with an ice pick, then use a magnet to attach a flint to the inside of one of the back wheels so that it throws sparks into the gas that has leaked out. An old trick, but it still works."

Bask continued to observe the melee across the street. "Who hired you, Hans?" he asked, although certain he already knew.

"His partner," Klepper told him. "Man named Horner. Said he was fooling around with his wife and trying to take over the business."

Bask sighed heavily. "I sometimes wonder what kind of world we live in," he said quietly. "Do you know that I just left an appointment with your Mr. Horner? Prindle there was *my* client."

Klepper's mouth dropped open. "No!" he said in amazement. "You don't mean it!"

"It is true," assured Bask.

"Remarkable," said Klepper, staring across at the burning car.

"What is civilization coming to, Hans, when partners, men in business together, cannot even trust one another?" Bask's voice was dark and moody.

"You are becoming too sensitive, Martin," the older man observed. "You cannot be the conscience of the whole world, you know."

Bask sighed again, reluctantly but with finality. "I suppose you are right, Hans. You usually are."

From far off a siren split the night. A moment later there was another. Then a third.

"Come," said Klepper, draping an arm around Bask's shoulders, "drop in on Anna and surprise her. She was baking when I left tonight, probably something you like. Come, eh?"

"A pleasant evening with you and Anna sounds like just what I need," said Martin Bask.

The two friends walked off down the street together as the sounds of sirens grew louder.

At the peephole I watched her slip the quarter pound of butter into her purse. Then I left the back storeroom and walked down the long center aisle to the front of the store.

Weaver was in the bakery goods section checking the new price changes. He looked up from the clipboard he carried when I came near.

"The woman in the gray-checked coat," I said. "She's in front of the frozen foods counters."

He shifted the cigar in his mouth and studied her. "Looks like East Side. Good clothes."

She was in her fifties, I thought, gray-haired, probably a grandmother. She wheeled her shopping cart toward the breakfast foods.

"What did she take?"

"A quarter pound of butter."

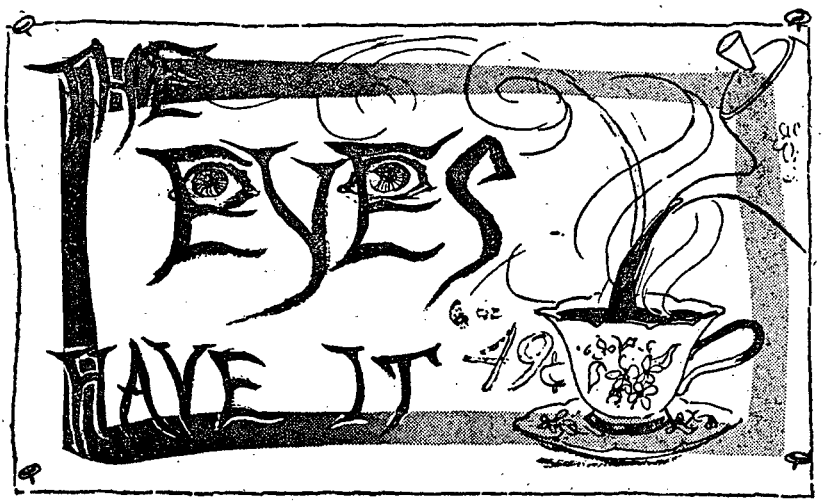
Weaver lit the stump of cigar and then we walked out the front of the store and stopped on the sidewalk.

Weaver kept his back to the large show windows. He rocked on his heels slightly and stared up at the sky. "Nice day. Perfect for golf."

We talked about the Greenfield course for a while and watched the traffic cop at the corner. Then I said, "She's at the check-out counter now."

Weaver didn't turn. "They just can't resist the butter. Such a small package and it just fits in the purse. Who's to know?"

I watched the girl at the register



Big Brother is watching you . . . even in the supermarkets, it seems. Chilling thought, is it not? Makes for cautious behaviour, too.

ring up the items. The gray-haired woman's fingers touched the clasp of her purse. She hesitated.

Sometimes they change their minds at the last minute. They say something like, "Oh, my land's sake. Look what I put in my purse! I'm getting so absent-minded lately." And then they pay for what they had meant to steal.

But she opened her purse only far enough to extract a wallet. She handed some bills to the girl and waited for change.

"She's not paying for it," I said.

Weaver took another puff of his cigar and said nothing.

Thirty seconds later she came out of the store carrying the large bag of groceries.

Weaver stepped in front of her. "I'm the manager of this supermarket and this is my assistant. Let's go back inside. We've got something to talk about."

Her eyes widened. "Talk to me? About what?"

"About the quarter pound of butter you just stole. It's in your purse."

Her face colored. She looked at us and then slowly opened the purse. She stared into it as though she'd never seen the inside before. "I was going to pay for it, but I just forgot. I'll give you the money now."

Weaver shook his head. "It's too late."

Her hands fluttered. "But I just *forgot*. I didn't really *steal* it."

"I watched you," I said. "When you shop for butter do you always look around carefully to see that no one's watching and then drop in into your purse?"

"Come on," Weaver said. "Let's go back inside."

We walked toward the rear of the store. On the back wall a large illustrated poster advertised a popular brand of coffee. The peep hole had been bored near the top of it and you got up there by climbing the stack of sugar bags in the back storeroom.

By Jack Ritchie

In the storeroom, Weaver pushed forward a wooden chair. "Sit down."

He went to the small desk and unlocked one of the drawers. He brought back two mimeographed sheets stapled together and clicked his ball point pen into writing order. "What's your name?"

She hesitated and then almost whispered. "Mrs. James Gillan."

"Address?"

"The . . . the Martin Apartments."

"Children?"

"I . . . I don't see why I have to tell you that."

"It's on the company form. That's all I know." Weaver asked more questions and then turned the first page under the second. He studied the printing and then handed the sheets to her. "Sign this. At the bottom."

Her eyes were frightened. "What is it?"

"A confession."

"But I *can't* sign anything like that!"

Weaver shrugged. "If you confess, it'll probably be easier on you." Then he glared at her. "Do you realize how much the company loses by the kind of thing you've done?"

"But . . . but it was *only* a quarter pound of butter."

"*This* time."

"I've never, *never* taken anything before."

"That's what every one of them says."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I *swear* I never . . . ."

Weaver indicated the paper. "Sign it."

She showed sudden determination. "I *won't.*"

Weaver turned to me. "Harry, phone the police."

She rose swiftly. "*Please.* Wait. Suppose I do sign this? What will happen to me?"

Weaver chewed on the cigar. "You got a record?"

"I told you I never . . . *never* . . . "

"All right, all right," Weaver said irritably. He rubbed his neck. "If this is really your first offense, you'll probably get probation."

"I'd be . . . taken into court?"

"Sure."

"Wouldn't that get into the papers?"

"I don't know. Maybe if you're important enough."

Her face was white. "But I just can't have the publicity. My children . . . my grandchildren . . . our friends would all know."

Weaver sighed. "I'm sorry. Why didn't you think of that before you stole the butter?"

"Couldn't I just *pay* for it and you could forget . . ."

He seemed to consider that. "It isn't that simple. Maybe I'd just as soon forget the whole thing, but . . ." He stared at me speculatively.

She turned to me. "Couldn't *you* just forget about it too?"

After a moment or two, I smiled slowly. "Of course Mrs. Gillan. I'd be willing to forget about it."

Weaver snorted. "I wouldn't bet a plugged nickel on that." He took the cigar out of his mouth. "He'd go to the supervisor and see that I got into trouble."

I put away my smile. "I wouldn't do anything like that, Bill. I don't want your job that much." I met Mrs. Gillan's eyes for a few seconds and then quickly looked away.

She studied me and then spoke slowly. "Suppose that I *gave* you a hundred dollars?"

Weaver's eyes widened. "Now wait a minute, Mrs. Gillan . . ."

She turned to him. "Don't you *see?* If he accepts the money, he can't possibly go to the supervisor. He'd get into trouble himself if he did."

I cleared my throat. "I've got hospital bills and . . ."

Weaver laughed curtly. "Like hell you have lots of hospital bills."

I didn't look at either one of them. "For about two hundred dollars, Mrs. Gillan, I think I could forget anything I saw."

Weaver started for me, but she put her hand on his arm. "Please! *Please* let him."

Weaver stared down at her. He closed his eyes for a moment, then he turned on his heel and left the storeroom.

I tore up the mimeographed sheets.

At two-thirty in the afternoon I left the peephole and went to Weaver. "The one in the bulky red coat."

He stared down the aisles. "What did she take?"

"A pound of butter," I said. "A dozen eggs. Cheese. She's in canned vegetables now and going strong. Probably got a bag sewn inside that coat."

Weaver glared. "A damned professional. We won't get a cent out of her. They'd all rather go to jail." He bit into the cigar. "Go down to the corner and get the cop."

GALS OR

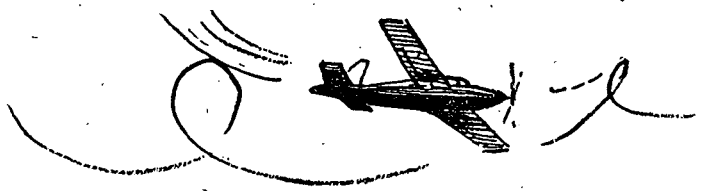
WHEN Ronald Logan King finally decided to eliminate his Aunt Frances, he couldn't help feeling a pang of conscience—just one. For, after all, she wasn't a bad sort. When his parents were killed in a plane crash, Aunt Frances not only took the boy in, but raised him like her own. That was just the trouble, Ronald often thought. A spinster herself, and hungry for affection, she tended to regard the child as a God-sent companion for her old age. Although she maintained, and honestly believed, that everything she did was done for Ronald's benefit, he knew better. She just wanted to keep him dependent upon her, lest he slip away and leave her alone again. As one of the last Howards, she was worth over a million, and yet Ronald was expected to get by on a mere six hundred dollars a month.

"As long as you refuse to practice a useful profession—one for which you have been carefully trained," she would tell him, "I owe it to my poor sister not to spoil her boy with overindulgence."

It is true that Ronald had a profession. At Laguna Beach College he had struggled through a number of confusing studies designed to turn him into an accountant. But after four years of such travail, he was both unwilling and unable to attempt the CPA exam needed to begin practice. In fact, even at that seaside country club, where boating and skin diving rated far higher than bookkeeping, Ronald had not been noted for his devotion to the simple texts. It was much more fun to spear fish under water, and angle for blondes on dry land.

So we find him at the age of

Those immutable laws of physics handed down to us by great men are things we take for granted; once having learned them we forget them, it seems.



GALS OR GALILEO

By Arthur Porges

twenty nine, subsisting on a mere six hundred a month, tax free; and very much under the wiry thumb of his Aunt Frances. Now six hundred a month may sound quite inviting to some people, but the nymphs who referred to themselves, with poetic license, as "starlets" and "models" came very high, absorbing expensive drinks as if their delicious contours concealed pure blotting paper. And one evening on the town could easily use up a week's allowance.

But to all his pleas for more money, Aunt Frances was adamant.

"Your mother was a Howard, too," she would tell him firmly. "The family goes back hundreds of years, as you well know, and has always been distinguished. It is your duty to at least lead a useful

life, even if not on so high a level, in terms of service, as our ancestors. Never forget that a Howard fought in 1588—the year of the Armada."

Whereupon Ronald, exasperated, was once foolish enough to retort: "On which side?", thereby receiving an icy glare that would have frosted a steam table.

There was another way out besides murder: one that seemed easy and obvious—marriage, and his own household. But here again Aunt Frances had ideas of her own. Ronald would gladly have married Melita Marlowe, who wore swim suits for thirty second glimpses on a TV variety show; likewise, he was ready to espouse "Honey" Coam, the stripteuse, who had a forty-six bust and ditto I. Q. Aunt Frances, however, wanted him to marry Jane Colwell, who had no more figure than a length of garden hose, and knew a great deal about Byzantine Art that Ronald didn't care to learn.

"I'd be delighted to have you settle down with a really *nice* girl, with a good background," she often told her nephew, who didn't believe a word. "The minute you do, the allowance would naturally be increased. But I warn you"—raising an admonitory finger—"the slightest hint of any return to those vulgar women of your bachelor days, and I'll cut you off without a single penny. Now I mean that, Ronnie. I intend to protect your wife, whoever she turns out to be. A nice girl can't cope with such tricks herself."

All of which meant, so far as Ronald was concerned, that she didn't want to let him marry except on terms so restrictive as to be impossible for a person of his temperament. In short, Aunt Frances intended to keep him with her forever.

After ten years of this, it was obvious that the woman had to go. And since she was a healthy sixty, and came from a family famous for its longevity, Ronald couldn't wait for natural causes. Her father was still alive, and had just remarried at the age of eighty-seven. Ronald had never dared to inquire about her grandfather, but suspected that even he might still be tottering about somewhere in Devon, the Old Parr of his generation.

When it came to planning a murder, Ronald had no direct experience, but paradoxically enough, was well trained in conspiracy generally. At college, he and his roommate, Ferdie Davis, were known as "Brains and Brawn." Ronald, small, dapper, and full of ingenious plots against the administration, found a perfect complement in Ferdie, who was husky, a bit simple,

and once committed, two hundred per cent loyal to his clever friend. They had made a great team, and still did make one, either at skin diving or girl chasing. In the biology lab, years ago, who put the black lace panties on the female skeleton? One guess. And who used an elephant's foot umbrella stand to make startling tracks across the snow and into the lake? You know. On the rare occasions that they were caught in *flagrante delicto,* Ronald spun a glib web of lies and alibis that would have baffled a Supreme Court Justice; while good old Ferdie just set his heavy jaw and refused to admit anything, including his name.

Eight years after graduation, they were still pals. In fact, every Saturday morning Ferdie flew over the Howard estate in his light plane, waggling the wings, and even stunting a bit. Mrs. Howard would knit her brows in annoyance; but Ronald would wave happily, forgetting, in his enthusiasm for the beauty of that frail ship against the sky, that the flight contrasted Ferdie's freedom with his own shackles. Not that Ferdie was rich; but he did have a good job with his own father, a very permissive fellow compared to Aunt Frances. Not many would call a fifty acre estate in Santa Barbara a prison, but that's how Ronald felt about it; everything depends on what a person is used to.

The first and only pang of conscience having been sternly quelled, Ronald began to plan his aunt's murder. For guides he had a dozen popular detective magazines, each with from eight to fifteen stories about ingenious crimes, real or imaginary. To be sure, most of them failed; but the flaws were just what he needed to make him cautious about his own scheme. Ronald read them all eagerly, and being motivated to a far greater extent than when studying "Principles of Accounting", learned much about police procedure and what detectives looked for when trying to break a case of suspected homicide.

The best method, he concluded, was to stage a convincing accident. Then, even if you bungled, there was enough doubt to make a jury hesitate. Why, a man could even take a friend out hunting, deliberately blow him apart with a shotgun, and claim to have done it quite by accident, while stumbling. Sure, it might seem fishy, but nobody could prove anything. If you stuck to such a story, the worst you could get was a year or two for manslaughter. Yes, accidental death was the thing for Auntie.

But it wasn't so easy to find a specific idea. She didn't hunt,

swim, or ride. Hell of a note for a gentlewoman of English descent, Ronald thought sourly. All she ever did was putter with her damned flower shows and serve tea to a bunch of frumpy dames.

For several [illegible] hunted for a soluti[illegible]otted something in t[illegible] paper that struck home. The item concerned an army plane that had somehow dropped a wing tank over Los Angeles. The big chunk of metal had just missed decimating a group of people barbecuing dinner on their patio. It was a lucky escape, since mathematical calculation showed that any falling object in Los Angeles is bound to hit a barbecuer.

Immediately Ronald had his plan; even the details fell into place at once. It was a natural. Good old Ferdie would fly over as usual. This time—careless fellow!—there would be something heavy loose in the cockpit—say a tool. It would plummet a couple of thousand feet, and by carefully planned circumstances, it would clobber Aunt Frances. But would Ferdie go along? This wasn't like blowing up the theology dean's john. Ronald thought he could convince him. After all, Ferdie had no love for Aunt Frances; she always treated him like the peasant he really was. German-Rumanian immigrants had been his parents. Besides, Ferdie could always use money, having acquired expensive tastes from associating so long with Ronald. Well, Ronald would promise him—and deliver, too—a sizeable payment after his aunt was dead. Ronald was her only heir.

He met Ferdie in a quiet bar at the edge of town. There was no need for ambiguities; they were old conspirators; and this was almost like being back in college.

"I don't get it at all," Ferdie said, after hearing the brief outline. "What makes you think I could hit anybody from that height? Hell, they couldn't do it with the Norden bombsight."

"You won't have to," Ronald explained patiently. He was always patient with Ferdie, who needed at least two explanations. But once he understood, you could depend on him to the end. "All you have to do is admit you were stunting over the area. They'll show you the tool, or whatever we use; and you'll say it's yours. When they tell you it killed a woman, you'll look horrified and contrite."

What'll they do to me?" Ferdie demanded uneasily.

"What the hell can they do? It will be an accident. Sure, they may take away your pilot's license for a while; at the worst, let's face it,

you might even get a few months in jail. We've both been there before. You'll also get ten thousand bucks soon after I inherit. Not to mention the dough I'll be spending on both of us later. I tell you Ferdie, it's perfect."

"But I can't hit her from two thousand feet up," his friend protested.

"I know that. I'm going to do it myself. But you and I will be the only ones wise to the trick. Just stick to the story that the thing fell out of the plane when you Immelmanned or whatever they call it. Nobody can prove it didn't happen that way. I'll come over tomorrow and pick out a good tool from among your stuff. Have you got the idea straight now?"

"Sure, Ronnie. I fly over as usual, stunt a little, and when they come for me, I admit it's my tool? Right?"

"Good boy. Brains and Brawn are back in business again. This time for a million bucks."

If Ferdie thought that ten thousand was a fair share of a million, Ronald saw no reason to disillusion him.

At Ferdie's house the next day, Ronald poked through a large tool box. Finally he chose a hammer. It had a large, bulky head and a thin steel shaft. He hefted it enthusiastically.

"Perfect. See why?"

"Sure I see," Ferdie said. "A thing like that falling from two thousand feet could kill an elephant."

"Right; but there's more. This hammer's built like a bomb, damn near. One look at that heavy head and thin handle would convince anybody." He stood for a moment lost in thought. "I can't swing it by the handle, though; that would be fatal."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Don't you see? I've got to hit her just the way it would fall; those medical examiners are sharp. They use every trick there is—microscopes, chemicals, the works. I've been reading up. I'd better fasten the hammer like the top bar of a letter "T" to a stick. Then I can hit her with just the top of the head, as if the hammer fell from above."

Ferdie's saturnine face brightened.

"I get it now. You sure think of all the angles. I'd have goofed right there."

Ronald was complacent. "That's why we're an unbeatable combination. I'm the planner; you back me to the hilt. Remember, you were tacking down the mat on the floor of the cockpit, and forgot the

hammer was there. Put in several tacks today, so if they look later, they'll find a few shiny heads. We can't miss a bet."

"Right."

Ronald knew his man. Nothing would break his story unless Ronald ordered him to confess.

"One more thing," Ronald said. He wiped the hammer all over with a rag, and gave it back to Ferdie. "Get your prints on the handle; mine mustn't be there at all."

Ferdie reached out one thick hand, then drew it back as if the tool were suddenly red hot.

"Hey," he protested. "I don't know about that. My prints on a murder weapon."

"It won't be a murder weapon—it's an accident; don't forget that, ever. If your prints aren't on a tool you just used to work on the plane, they *would* get suspicious. And mine can't turn up because I'm a good boy with sense enough not to touch anything at the scene of the crime—oops!—accident."

"What if they accuse *me?*"

"Don't be silly. The airport's your alibi. At the time of her death you'll have a dozen people to prove you were two thousand feet up. And don't go higher, by the way. I may not be able to hit as hard as something falling a mile. Don't worry about a thing; you know that you can trust me."

Ferdie knew that. Ronald had never let him take any rap alone.

"Okay," he said, and accepted the hammer.

The following Saturday, as Aunt Frances relaxed in the garden, reading a magazine, her privacy guarded by a tall hedge, a light plane appeared over the grounds, humming like a great insect. Mrs. Howard glanced up, frowned, and turned back to her story. One of these days she'd have the chauffeur take a note to the authorities about that annoying friend of Ronnie's. At that moment her nephew, watching the aerial acrobatics, and noting that none of the servants was near, knew that the time had come. He crept up behind the woman, absorbed in her reading; the hammer was tied to a length of wood. He measured carefully, took a mighty swing, and struck with the very top of the metal head. Without a sound his aunt crumpled forward against the marble-top table, staining the magazine with blood. Quickly, but with deliberate calmness, Ronald cut the twine that bound the hammer to the stick of wood. He gathered all the loose strands; but was careful not to touch the tool itself with his hand. It was allowed to

fall from the stick to the grass alongside his aunt's body. The bits of twine he dropped in the incinerator, the stick was returned to the shed with hundreds of other odd bits. Then he "discovered" the accident and phoned the police. Long before they got off the ground, the twine would be ashes; Horace, the gardener, would be burning trash any minute now.

The police arrived quickly; Mrs. Howard had been the grande dame of the community for some years. Many photographs were taken; and everybody was questioned. When it turned out that nobody had seen any strangers about, Ronald thought it time to mention the plane; but luckily, Mrs. Harris, the cook did so first. All that Ronald had to add, then, was that his old pal, Ferdie Davis, was the pilot. Ferdie, that wag, always clowned a little over the estate on Saturday.

"Looks as if your friend was damned careless," the lieutenant snapped. "I'll bet anything this hammer fell from his plane."

Ronald looked at him in open-mouthed admiration.

"You must be right," he exclaimed. "I never would have thought of that. But I knew it had to be an accident; nobody would want to hurt Aunt Fran. Poor Auntie," he added, with a quaver, "to die by such a crazy accident. A one in a million chance."

The lieutenant agreed; it was indeed hard luck for the old gal.

But the next day, late in the afternoon, a different policeman came: a Captain Swingle, who was not so sympathetic.

"We've talked to Davis," he said —something Ronald was well aware of, since Ferdie had called to say that the police had come, and that he was awfully sorry about Aunt Frances; all of which double talk meant everything was fine with the scheme. "He admits it was his hammer. Says it must have fallen from the plane while he was stunting."

Ronald shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry for poor Ferdie; he must feel terrible. Such a weird thing. Why, if somebody actually *wanted* to hit anybody from that height, he'd never—"

"It was a good try for both of you," the officer interrupted coldly. "A neat little conspiracy."

"What do you mean?" Ronald demanded, his voice full of anger. They always wanted to shake you, soften you up—especially without the evidence for a real case. But they couldn't prove a damned thing.

"It's the old fountain pen fallacy that tripped you," Captain Swingle said; and Ronald gaped at him.

"Years ago somebody decided it was silly to let a pen land on its point almost every time it dropped by accident. All you have to do, this joker figured, is weight the top; then the pen was bound to land point up. Only it just ain't so!"

"But I don't see—"

"Sure, you don't. That's why you hatched this little murder plot. Take a hammer like the one that killed your aunt. If you drop it in a vacuum, it will fall just the way you're holding it at the start—head up, head down, horizontal, or at an angle. If you doubt that, imagine the head fastened to the shaft by a light thread. Could the head fall faster than the shaft, tightening the thread? Not on your life; Galileo proved that over three hundred years ago."

Ronald's mind was racing.

"If it could fall any which way, then why not just the way it did —head down? If that's the way she was killed, I mean," he added hastily, cursing himself for the slip.

The captain smiled coldly.

"I said it would fall just the way you let go of it in a vacuum. There a one ounce weight and a one ton weight will hit the ground together. But in the air, the part which offers the most resistance falls slower. In this case, that means the bulky head. If that hammer had actually fallen from two thousand feet, through the air, it would have turned handle down after the first second or two, and your aunt's skull would have been pierced by the metal shaft instead of being crushed by the head. We've just verified that with the Department helicopter." He looked at the ghastly face before him, and asked: "Want to tell me about it?"

Ronald was silent for a moment, his pale lips working stickily. Then he said in a dull voice: "Ferdie had nothing to do with it. He's just dumb—and loyal."

The captain's iron face softened briefly. In a gentler tone he said: "Let's go." Later on, he told the Chief: "It was a case of too many gals and not enough Galileo." Then he had to explain it all over.

SHUBERT watched the shell pink sedan skid slightly as it lurched up to the far side of Front Street and stopped less than a foot short of the bus stop. He grinned and read his wrist watch. *Eight twenty-eight. On the nose again, Lewie. The exact time and exact spot every morning except Sunday for the*

past eight days. Well, no more after today, Lew.

Shubert tugged his chamois gloves tighter, then probed the glove compartment of his own car

The term two-faced owes its origin to the old Roman household god, Janus. This you already know. But I have searched in vain for the origin of the term three-faced, and so I leave it up to you to find it for me.

and pulled out an icepick. He lowered it to between the dash and front seat and manipulated it up inside the loose sleeve of his raglan topcoat. He knew that Lew had now finished his methodical locking of the four doors of the pink sedan and would be starting to cross Front Street.

As Lew picked his way, avoiding patches of ice, Shubert restarted his engine. He slid out of the driver's seat and walked around to the bare pavement fronting his convertible. He bent down and fumbled with the hood catch under the front grill.

Lew was passing behind him when Shubert straightened and pivoted in a single fluid motion. He whipped his left arm over Lew's left shoulder and forced his gloved fist hard into Lew's mouth. His right hand drove the icepick into Lew's spine. He pressed with his fist in Lew's mouth. After a brief, noiseless struggle, Lew's body sagged limply against him. He shoved the body onto the sidewalk, clear of the front of his car, and ran quickly around to the driver's door.

He saw the apparition the moment he grasped the steering wheel.

It stood motionless on the corner, less than fifteen feet away, one foot in the gutter and the other on the curb. A knitted gargoyle face stared at him from under a policeman's hat. Popping brown pupils were ringed by scarlet grommets. On each dark blue cheek were three large crimson triangles, all pointing in toward the nose and mouth. One scarlet grommet encircled both nostrils and another encircled the lips. The apparition stood slightly over five feet in a heavy blue overcoat. Crimson knee-length stockings ran from somewhere under the coat into floppy half-length snowboots.

The gargoyle face said, "Oh, my God," and pivoted back onto the sidewalk, turning its back to Shubert. It turned yet it didn't. The back seemed to present the same garish facial expression until Shubert realized that unlike the first face, the back-face had no bugging eyes. The same scarlet rings adorned the retreating face, but they encircled a solid blue background. Shubert struggled out of his seat as the apparition fled clumsily down the side street.

He swore at himself for his moment of immobile panic. He sprinted around Lew's protruding feet and reached the corner when a babble of high-pitched voices startled him again. Knots of children, laughing and arguing, were converging on the corner diagonally opposite. He glanced at them,

baffled. He ran back to his car, rammed the shift into 'S' and roared the vehicle down Front Street toward the turnpike.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God." Elaine Wrigley babbled, running and stumbling down Venable Street. Her face sweated under the woolen ski mask and she stumbled awkwardly in the loose-fitting snowboots. The bulkiness of her coat hampered her speed. Terror hampered her gait. Stumbling, sobbing, and gasping and sweating, her flight showed none of the form that had once inspired a square dance partner to name her "Wiggly Wrigley".

She lumbered onto a stretch of unshoveled walk and pitched forward on the ice, terror bruising her more than the fall. She retrieved her cap while flat on her stomach, then raised herself to her hands and knees. She tried to get up onto her feet but they skittered out from under her. She sobbed and flailed her arms and legs like a four-footed animal on a treadmill. She sprawled down on her stomach again and sobbed brokenly. Then she felt strong fingers grasping her upper arms.

"Come on, Wiggly. We've had three days to get over New Year's. Easy does it. Upsy-daisy. Attagirl."

She looked gratefully into the worrying eyes of Henry Landru and babbled, "He killed Lew. It was horrible. He stabbed Lew. I know he killed him. Oh, Henry." She was dimly aware that her words were unintelligible.

Chief Landru slipped his left arm around her back, getting a firm grip on her left armpit. He steadied her as they walked across the street to police headquarters. He sat her down at the only desk and opened the deep bottom drawer. He pulled out a bottle and poured a half inch of whiskey into a paper cup. It required both his hands to get the cup into her one hand.

"Here, drink this. It's against regulations, but you're not a regulation cop."

He watched her shudder and sip alternately. He knew it would be only a few seconds before she had full control of herself. Her free hand groped for the Inca ski mask which she had dropped onto the desk top, and her fingers tried vainly to bury deep into the shallow folds. Landru was half an inch short of six feet and his close-cropped blond hair contrasted with the rumpled mop the ski mask had made of Elaine Wrigley's copper-dyed hair. She drained the last half of the drink with a forced gulp and looked across at him.

"That creature stabbed Lew with something that looked like an ice-pick. Right in front of Lew's store. It was horrible. I'm not a cop. I'm not going out into that intersection ever again."

Landru slowly shoved the bottle across the desk. "Wait here, Elaine. Don't move from that chair until I get back." He ran out through the door and turned in the direction of Front Street.

Elaine poured another half inch of whiskey into the cup and sipped it. She told herself over and over that she would never serve as crossing guard again. She didn't need the job, not for the small fee it paid. She felt unhappy and self-conscious at the intersection and had suffered miserably during the first cold spell. The physical discomfort of winter was dispelled when she acquired her brother's bulky police overcoat and the garish ski mask, one of a dozen left over from a school Hallowe'en play. The other discomfort lingered.

Whenever she thought of resigning, she thought again of why she had accepted the job. She felt again the horror of learning that her husband was charged with manslaughter. She had seen Hal drunk just twice. The first time had been a carry-over from his bachelor party. The second time was when the Pirates had done the incredible by beating the Yankees for the World Series. That night Hal was driving home, drunk. The eighth graders were leaving school after a platter hop and Hal had slammed into one group. A thirteen-year-old boy and a fourteen-year-old girl had died.

Harold Wrigley hanged himself in jail that night and two days later Elaine Wrigley lost their unborn baby. She lived, but for weeks she couldn't understand why. She stopped about every activity other than breathing, and never would be coaxed into returning to the weekly square dances. Then Henry Landru had told her he could not find enough housewives for intersection guards. Younger wives had new homes and clubs; women with older children preferred full time jobs. Henry avoided suggesting that protecting school children at a crossing might be a form of therapy, but Elaine saw it that way.

The dull ache of recollection had pushed aside the sharper horror of Lew's murder, but her thoughts returned to Lew and she began to quake. The heavy door of police headquarters, made heavier by uncounted coats of dull green paint, swung open and her brother walked in. Landru came in behind Paul. She ran to her brother and he held her head against his chest

as she sobbed. Soon she lifted her head and turned to Landru.

"Is Lew . . ." she couldn't finish the question.

"He's dead. Guess he was dead before you ran, Elaine. You saw a hired craftsman at work, and that breed never leaves a job half done."

He leaned backwards toward the desk and sat heavily on the corner. They were not asking "why Lew?" but they were now involved in a way, so he explained why.

"Lew was being crowded by protection racketeers. They've been hitting liquor stores in the county. Lew has been keeping the county police informed through me, but he was pretending to bargain with the hoods for a lower rate. The county boys decided Lew might be in danger if they gave him a bodyguard, and Lew had them convinced that he had the hoods fooled." He picked up the telephone. "It's going to be easier telling county headquarters than telling Lew's wife."

Shubert spit out an explosive breath of relief. He had reached the turnpike without being chased, and knew he could easily let the car be swallowed up by mid-morning business traffic. *Hell! Why didn't I think about the Christmas school holidays. Jeez, will Phil work me over. I cased that street for over a week, and the day I pick for the hit is the day kids are going back to school, and with a female crossing cop walking right into me. Gotta find out who that broad was. You fink, Shubert, you fink! I know every clear piece of pavement on that icy street. Every morning I watch the target park that pink car at 8:28 and walk across the street to his store.* He snorted a bitter one-snort laugh. *The law says he can't open up for business until nine o'clock, so he's gotta get there early and open up at nine o'clock sharp. There isn't ever any customers there before nine-thirty or ten, and not another lousy store on the street opens before nine-thirty. For a whole week I got a full hour each morning with practically nobody on the street, and I pick the day they reopen school.*

"We've got one thing in our favor . . . maybe," Landru said. "It's unbelievable that anything could happen on our main street and go unnoticed, but we are reasonably sure that no adults yet realize Elaine saw Lew's murderer. The teachers are going to ask their classes if anyone saw what happened to Lew. We didn't tell any teachers about Elaine, and since she

had not reached her post it is a safe bet that the kids may not have noticed her."

"But the killer knows I saw him. He knows there's a witness."

"Maybe we won't ever catch him, Wiggly. Maybe he's already a hundred miles from here, with no intention of ever coming back. And, may the Police Chiefs' Association forgive me, I hope he's a thousand miles away and still running."

She sensed it in the way he looked at her.

Elaine was thinking: *I'm more than a witness. To that loathsome thing I'm a threat he has to erase.*

Landru was thinking: *A one-man police department has no right holding out on the county police. But I can't tell them about Wiggly or the papers will jump on it. Damn. A school crossing guard and a night watchman! Both cops, in a way, and Wiggly probably has the finger on her right now.*

Paul was talking: ". . . they'll sketch a pretty good likeness from Elaine's description and within two days they'll have flyers in every department in the country. Only seven out of every hundred murderers get away. They'll get him."

Elaine reached over and gave his arm a firm squeeze. "Paul, take me home now, huh?"

Landru moved over to the door where their coats were all pegged on galvanized hooks screwed into the high dado. "Wear my coat, Wiggly." He handed her his unlined topcoat, leaving her heavy blue coat hanging alongside his own uniform coat. He was relieved that Paul was wearing a car coat rather than his olive-green watchman's coat. "And, Elaine, don't wear that spooky mask again, anywhere, this winter."

Paul had waited for Elaine to protest going outside without the warm greatcoat. When she poked her arms into the light coat Landru was holding for her, Paul suddenly let his jaw slacken and Landru thought: *He's a little slow, but not out of touch altogether.*

Paul said, "Of course! That crud won't want a live witness. That's why you're keeping quiet about Wiggly."

Landru was driving home alone from Lew's funeral. He had ordered Elaine not to attend either services or funeral. He thought it would be easy to spot strangers at the cemetery, but was dismayed at the number of out-of-town relatives and morbid strangers who came in spite of temperatures in the low teens. He swung his car into Front Street, debating whether to go home and heat a turkey pie or drop into Guido's for a sandwich.

When he was forty yards from the intersection of Venable Street he saw a bluecoated figure walk out to Elaine's post, wearing the ski mask.

Landru had difficulty steering his car smoothly over to the curb. He parked and stared in disbelief at the police cap set absolutely level over the spook mask, the heavy blue coat—the coat Paul had bought in hopes he would get the appointment which Landru got instead—the knee-length crimson hose below the hem of the coat. He studied the motions of the guard as traffic was stopped for a knot of kids to scoot across. *Anybody who takes that for a woman is either too young to know the difference or too old to care.*

Landru shifted his gaze warily from the crossing guard and picked up all parked vehicles on both sides of Front Street; first in two long sweeps, then studying one vehicle at a time. He skipped the trucks he recognized, but scrutinized two unfamiliar panel jobs. He checked their rear doors frequently, watching for any movement of the doors from inside. Finally, he climbed out of his own car and walked over to the guard.

"Paul, I hope you've got that whole damn coat bulletproofed."

"Hi, Henry. I'm wearing my gun."

"Great! That should slow down any slug aimed at your left armpit."

Was Paul grinning? You couldn't tell what his face was doing under that spooky mask. Paul waved some straggling kindergartners across.

"Relax, Henry. See that florist truck in front of the five-and dime?"

Landru had seen it and had worried about it. It was the panel job parked on Front Street with the rear jutting out three feet from the curb, giving it sweeping command of the intersection and most vehicles parked nearby.

"Bud Wrigley, cousin of ours, is inside," Paul explained. "You remember him—from the square dances? He's a special for the Millbank force. I knew you wouldn't mind if I used him to back me up."

Landru had been shifting back and forth on his feet, seemingly just warming them, but constantly studying both pedestrians and vehicles. The school children had vanished. There were usually fewer youngsters who came out at the lunch hour. Many ate in the school lunchroom, and those who did go home seldom dawdled at twelve the way they would at three.

"Let's go, Paul. Standing out here without any business makes it pretty obvious."

"Okay. I gotta walk past Bud's truck and signal him that us sexy crossing guards knock off for a quick lunch."

Shubert watched the cop wearing the gold shield walk into the restaurant, then started the engine of his rented sedan. He was about to move out of Venable Street and down Front Street in the direction the crossing guard had disappeared, when he saw his quarry loom around the corner on foot and start walking down the opposite side of Venable Street, approaching parallel to where he was parked.

Shubert opened the glove compartment and slid out a short automatic, lengthened by a silencer. He cranked down his window and sharply surveyed all directions. A lone woman was walking up the far side of Venable, towards Front. *No witness this time,* he told himself. *I'll wait for that chick to get past.*

The chick didn't go past. She confronted the crossing guard and they stood face to face. The chick seemed to be doing most of the talking and it seemed to Shubert the crossing guard was being told off. *Some mama isn't happy with the lady cop. Maybe her kid doesn't get escorted personally across the street.* The chick turned, hooked her arm in the guard's arm, and they both continued walking down Venable Street. Shubert swore. He swiveled his head and watched them walk side by side and something nagged him into comparing their strides. He sucked his lips in against his teeth then popped them out noisily. He carefully replaced the automatic in the glove compartment.

A decoy! A big flatfooted decoy! That's why the papers haven't printed anything about a witness. She couldn't give the cops a working description, so they want to sucker me out into the open.

He started the engine, then stopped it and pivoted his head sharply to stare at the woman walking away with the policeman. *That's her!*

When he had seen her the first time she had turned and run, but he had observed enough to now recognize her overall size, shape, and motions. He pulled a road map out of the glove compartment and pretended to read it as he watched them in the rearview mirror. They entered the next to last house from the far corner. He restarted the car, coaxed it around in a back-and-fill U-turn, and rolled slowly past the house. The wrought iron scroll near the walk said "24 Wrigley".

Shubert headed the black sedan out of town towards the turnpike. *Mrs. Wrigley of 24 Venable Street, you and I are going to be seeing each other.*

Landru walked out of Paradino's Cafe and heaved a tired sigh. Maybe the killer did keep running. At least, no one had inquired about crossing guards' names in any of the bars or restaurants in town. He would have missed Paul if Paul had not pulled sharply over to the curb and beat out a series of short beeps on the horn. Paul was wearing his olive-green watchman's uniform coat.

Landru asked, "I thought you had wangled a few nights off to stay close to Wiggly?"

"I did. But my relief man phoned in sick. I figured I would n't have to stick around tonight now that you do have the county boys in on this job."

"County boys!"

"Yeah. They're sending for Elaine now. Want her to look at some mug shots. What's the matter, Henry?" Paul's voice dropped and trailed off hoarsely.

Landru shoved in beside him. "Turn this car around fast and head for your house. Tell me . . . C'mon, get moving! Tell me what and how about the county boys."

Gears and tires complained as Paul swung the car in a wide U turn.

"All I know is that Elaine said county headquarters called and told her they wanted her to look at some mug shots. Said they would pick her up in an unmarked car."

"Oh, God, no. Was Elaine still home when you left?"

"Yeah."

Elaine heard the single short beep of the horn. She had been told over the phone that an officer would park across the street in an unmarked black sedan. Would Mrs. Wrigley recognize the car? No? Well, it would be a plain, black two door sedan, and the officer would remain inside it and signal with one short beep. No, they really did not expect the killer would be watching her house, but there was no point in arousing anyone's curiosity. Elaine had said she understood.

She peered out the window and saw a black two-door sedan parked in front of the school. She noticed the plume trailing out of the exhaust pipe. "Smoke", she used to say; "vapor", Hal had always corrected her. At any rate it indicated the engine was running. She couldn't see the features of the

driver, but could make out the outline of a uniform-type cap. She wriggled into her coat, snapped down the light switch, and stepped outside.

She crossed the street in front of the sedan and opened the door. She felt a momentary annoyance, a slight to her vanity, when the officer did not reach over to open the door for her. She gathered the skirt of the coat snug behind her thighs with her left hand and lifted her left foot into the well of the low-slung front seat. The driver was facing front and a little left, presenting an indistinct profile. The cap was perched on the extreme right side of his head and he wore a suit, not a uniform. Bubbles of heat started rippling up and down her chest. She backed her foot out slowly and squinted at him, trying to recognize something about his face.

Suddenly the driver lunged across the front seat and seized her right wrist. Elaine gasped, but couldn't make herself scream. Shubert pulled himself up out of the car, his weight dragging Elaine down almost to her knees. He thrust an open hunting knife before her face and spoke coldly and evenly.

"This doesn't make any noise but you will if I have to use it. So suppose you climb in the car like a good little chick. All I want to do is talk to you."

He released her wrist but immediately seized her arm above the elbow. The new grip gave him more leverage as he forced her toward the open car door. Suddenly, out of Elaine's mouth came a sharp cry:

"Kaintucky running set!"

If she had screamed "help" Shubert might have knifed her immediately. The strange phrase baffled him and he hesitated. His switching of his grip to her upper right arm at the moment when her terror was partially giving way to defiance had stirred memories of a square dance step called the "Kentucky Running Set". But the maneuver it suggested to her brain automatically escaped her tongue.

When she shouted it, Shubert mumbled a puzzled, "Huh?"

Elaine quickly raised her hand, the hand on the arm he was holding, and grasped his upper forearm. Instead of resisting his pressure, she stepped into him, bringing her heel down heavily on his toes. Shubert grunted and shoved her off his foot. Again, instead of resisting, she jerked back and flung her arm outward, releasing her grip of his forearm. Shubert stumbled in an arc, and sprawled against the car's rear fender.

Now that they had tangled, how-

ever, his reflexes were faster than hers. He bounced off the fender and lunged past the open car door before Elaine could recover her balance. Too late she realized he had cut her off from fleeing back toward her house. She swung her head for a panicky look at the school and ran in that direction.

Wide stone steps led up to multiple doors that were the main entrance. She knew the upper doors would be locked. To the left the steps went down a half flight to the basement entrance. She darted down to the single door. *Oh, God,* she thought, *I hope the janitor didn't go out for his supper yet.* She gripped the brass handle and tugged. The door opened, but agonizingly slowly on the pneumatic door closer. She expected to hear his footsteps and feel his steel fingers or the stabbing sensation of his knife, but she made it inside the door. She tried to pull it shut so she might lock it, but that was even more agonizingly slow. She turned and fled inside when the door still had several inches to go.

Shubert stood indecisively between the car and the school entrance, watching. The basement door remained just off the latch. He forced himself to light a cigaret, using his cupped hands to screen his eyes as he studied the windows across the street. *Okay, chick, too bad you gotta have it this way.* He walked back to the car and reached into the glove compartment. He pulled out the silencer-equipped automatic and pinioned it against his body with his right arm. He pushed the car door to within a half inch of being closed, and once again surveyed Venable Street. Then he strode rapidly down to the basement door.

Paul's car careened into Venable Street and Landru was out and running as it bumped the curb. Neither of them glanced across the street. Landru ran up the front steps and was thumping the locked door when Paul ran up with his key. They knew before they had the door open that Elaine was not inside. Or if she was . . .

Paul paced in and out the five rooms, fidgeting. Landru stood with his back to the open door, scratching his head vigorously. He snatched up the telephone and demanded the operator get him county police headquarters in a hurry.

The homicide bureau was furious at learning for the first time there had been a witness. Landru shouted, "Okay, I did wrong. Tomorrow I'll crawl. But right now let's try to keep our witness alive. Road blocks, please, man!"

Paul had stopped pacing. When

Landru replaced the phone, Paul wet his lips and looked pleadingly.

"Can't we do something; anything, at this end?"

"Yes. We go out and ring doorbells. If anyone saw Elaine get into his car maybe we can find out which direction it took. That may not be much help, but it is doing something. You start working up towards Front Street. I'll start with the corner house next door, then check the two houses on the far corners."

They were both outside before Henry finished speaking. Paul turned sharply right and headed for the next house. Landru vaulted over the low wire fence to the steps of the house on the left.

Elaine fled down the basement corridor. Dim overhead bulbs revealed several shadowy doors. Despite her panic, she realized she needed a hiding place with more than one exit. She stopped at the first door and peered inside. A classroom. *Just one door. I've got to find a room with two doors.* She paused and listened. No sound of pursuit. She started to walk on her toes down the corridor. She stopped again as she heard the scraping noise of a heavy table being dragged across the floor. *He must be blocking the street door.* She ran farther down the corridor. *If I can only keep out of his reach until the janitor gets back from his rounds. If I can only get between him and the street door.*

She stopped running and leaned against the cinder block wall to remove her shoes. She had almost stumbled twice, and she knew her leather heels were making noise in spite of her effort to run on her toes. She looked back and saw his dim form moving slowly down the center of the corridor. She gasped as she noticed the silhouette of the long-barreled weapon dangling in his right hand. Clutching her shoes she ran in stockinged feet to the next door and peered at the faint gold leaf word, 'Library'. She remembered that there was another door to the library about thirty feet along the corridor. It had been three years since she had last been to 'Open House' at the school, but she remembered some details. Directly across the corridor was the AP room—the All Purpose room—also with doors at either end.

She remembered that both doors to the AP room faced both doors to the library. She darted across to the AP room, ran inside and down along the near wall until she came to the circuit box. She remembered, too, that the circuit breakers on the outside of the box controlled all or most of the basement lights. Emily,

the little third grader who had taken it upon herself to guide Mrs. Wrigley through the school on open house night, had explained that one flip of the hand could pop down all the circuit breakers and darken the entire basement. And Emily had done it, leaving Mrs. Wrigley to explain to startled teachers and parents. Now, Elaine flipped the circuit breakers and the few dim bulbs in the corridor became dark.

She ran to the far door and crossed from the AP room over into the library, making no noise with her unshod feet. Inside the library door she turned and listened. She heard shoe leather creaking gently and estimated her pursuer to be slowly nearing the spot between the far doors of the library and AP room. She pitched both shoes with a low underhand swing and heard them drop just inside the AP room.

She heard his footsteps stop, then continue very slowly. *I hope he doesn't know both these rooms have doors at this end.* She tip-toed along her side of the library wall, terrified because she was forcing herself to move toward him, even though separated by the wall. If the shoes decoyed him into the AP room via the far door, she would need every yard of running start she might get to escape to the unlocked street door. Half way along the wall she stopped. She couldn't hear him moving, and feared the reason she could not hear him was because of the thumping of her heart.

Then she permitted a gasping sob to escape.

Landru got no answer after pressing the bell for the third time. He ran down the steps and as he started diagonally across the intersection he looked automatically to his right for oncoming traffic. A flicker somewhere in the school stopped him. *Did I see lights go out in that lower floor?* He focused on the lone car silhouetted outside the entrance doors. He trotted over and bent down to read the license plate. The first few numbers on the plate told him the black sedan was owned by a car rental agency. He drew his service revolver and ran to the basement entrance. He pulled the heavy door open and found himself slamming into a heavy object immediately inside the door.

Shubert stopped and froze when he heard the sob. He was between the first doors to the library and AP room, and was positive the sob had come from somewhere to

his right. He pivoted and walked slowly across the corridor, his left hand extended like that of a child playing blind man's bluff. He kept the automatic cushioned against his right thigh as he walked.

His left hand met an obstruction. It was too smooth to be the cinder block wall, so he realized it was either glass or wood. A door, no doubt. He groped until he found the handle, then turned it slowly. He heard the slap-slap of unshod feet running as he pushed the door open. He raised the automatic in the direction of the footsteps, but decided not to risk the noise of breaking a window or anything else until he was more certain of his target. His eyes were now adjusted to the dark and he saw the gray patch of an open doorway at the far end of the room.

He back-tracked to the first library door and pulled it shut. Then he crossed the corridor to the AP room. He felt for the door handle and pulled that door shut. He waited, hoping for another sob or more footsteps. None came. Slowly, he walked down the corridor, sliding his left hand along the wall, groping for the next opening. He was sure now there was another entrance to the room on his left.

He stopped abruptly to listen. He was sure he had heard someone breathing, but he could not fix the direction. He groped in his jacket pocket and pulled out a packet of matches. In his inside pocket he found his folded motel bill. He opened the matches and held the back of the folder against the motel bill. He knew if he held the combination above eye level, with the motel bill between the matches and his eyes, he could ignite all the matches and get a torch effect without a back glare to impair his own visibility. He placed the automatic in his teeth, reached up with his right hand and struck one of the matches. He lit the bunched matches and grabbed the gun with his right hand.

Twelve feet away was a startled gargoyle face. *That crazy chick!* He dropped his torch and fired at the ski mask. Glass shattered. He reached down and picked up the still burning matches. Holding the striker with thumb and forefinger, he cupped the flickering matches in his hand and shone them in the direction he had just fired. The gargoyle face stared at him again. He fired, and the face kept staring at him. Outside, a car careened into Venable street, its bright lights sweeping in the windows and lighting up the room. The room was full of gargoyle faces.

Shubert screamed. He threw the burning matches at the nearest face and fired wildly until the automatic made nothing but silent clicks. He flung the useless gun into the area where he had seen the nearest face. *It's some damned trick!* his mind screamed. He ran blindly. He crashed into the wall, caromed off it and found himself going down in a tangle of hard, lightweight objects. He was scrambling to his hands and knees when the room lights came on in dazzling brightness.

Landru stood at the room switch, Paul at the circuit box, both holding service revolvers. Blood trickled down Shubert's mouth, and he remained kneeling as he shielded his eyes from the glare. Landru picked up the empty automatic. Shubert dropped his hands from his eyes and peered at the shambles around him. He was kneeling among four masonite life-size cutouts of choir boys. Another half dozen were scattered about the room, some punctured with bullet holes. Obviously constructed for an outdoor Christmas display, all the choir boys were wearing Inca ski masks.

Paul shouted, "Feel like coming in, Elaine? You ought to see this tough bird, now."

Elaine walked hesitatingly into the room, supported by the janitor who had a two-handed grip of her upper arm. She looked at Shubert, nodding identification and shuddering simultaneously.

"Crazy monitors," the janitor said. "Principal made them bring in the choir boys after school today and I guess they found these masks left over from the sixth grade's Hallowe'en play. Crazy monitors."

"Wonderful crazy monitors," said Elaine.

ONE-ARMED

ON THE DAY he robbed the finance company, Harry awoke at exactly 7:15.

He was a light sleeper, and so he awoke instantly as he heard the tiny click of the clock-radio turning itself on. He was wide-eyed and clear-headed and sitting up in bed before the radio had a chance to warm up. When the music finally came on, Harry yawned, stretched his right arm high over his head, then scratched contentedly at the stub of his left arm where it ended just below the shoulder.

He sat quietly in the bed and waited until the music ended and the announcer gave the time and then a short weather report. When Harry heard that it would be clear and cool that day, he grunted with satisfaction and got out of the bed and headed for the bathroom.

As he shaved himself with quick, sure strokes, he looked himself right in the eye in the mirror and gave another satisfied grunt at what he saw—close-cropped curly red hair, clear blue eyes, a broad nose, and a mouth that was slightly tilted at the corners in a cynical smile.

The smile was a permanent one. It was always there, and it was Harry's way of telling the rest of

the whole world to go to the devil.

Harry dressed slowly and meticulously, strapping the artificial arm on with great care. With the light topcoat and gloves that he'd be wearing today, the artificiality of the arm would hardly be noticeable, especially since he had practised holding the arm in such a way that it looked completely natural. It was important to Harry that no one at the finance company—or, for that matter, at any of the other places he had robbed—be aware that they were dealing with a one-armed man. This was not vanity on Harry's part. It was merely protection against too accurate an identification.

The last thing Harry did before leaving his small furnished room was to unload his gun and slip it into the pocket of his topcoat, placing the bullets in the other pocket. Although he always had complete control of himself, an unloaded gun meant there'd be no accidental killings. Harry was not a man of violence, and he also knew that the penalty for murder was a lot more severe than that for robbery.

He ate a light breakfast at a luncheonette on the corner, then boarded a bus for the ride downtown. He got off at a busy intersection, walked a couple of blocks, then stopped in front of a store window and reached into his inside pocket and took out a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. Harry's vision was perfect, and the lenses of the glasses were ordinary window glass. Harry slipped them on and looked at his reflection in the store

BANDIT

By DAN SONTUP

Places where gaming is allowed abound in machines called one-armed bandits, which sometimes, so I am told, yield up a rich harvest of coins, if one is lucky.

window, and the cynical smile on his lips broadened just a trifle. His face now looked completely different. This was the full extent of his disguise. He'd discovered quite by accident that glasses brought about a remarkable change in his appearance, and so he used them on every job, taking them off again once he was in the clear.

With the glasses in place, Harry started walking briskly. He passed a beggar propped up against the wall of a building. The man was leaning heavily on his crutches, one hand extended holding out his cap, the stump of his right leg prominently displayed for all to see.

The beggar looked pleadingly at Harry, and Harry glanced at him contemptuously as he went by. *Not me, buster,* Harry mentally told the beggar. *I don't give handouts to bums.*

Harry snorted out loud and quickened his pace. Three blocks further, he came to the parking lot he'd selected two days earlier.

Harry walked by the parking lot, noting with satisfaction that it was completely full but that the attendant was still waving cars in. These would be the cars of the office workers who drove to town, and Harry knew they wouldn't be back for their cars until after five o'clock.

He walked past the lot, then turned and entered a small alley in back of the lot. It was just as he'd seen it two days before. The alley, and a small side street off the alley was parked almost full with cars, and virtually all the cars had a parking lot tag stuck under the windshield wiper. This was where the attendant parked the overflow from the main lot.

Harry walked along, glancing at each car until he found the one he wanted—a small compact car with an automatic transmission. Harry looked about him quickly. No one was in sight. He opened the door of the car and reached in quickly under the sun visor. His fingers closed on the car keys, just where the attendant always placed them.

Harry smiled and looked around again. He was still alone in the alley. Quickly, he pulled the tag from under the wiper and then slipped into the driver's seat. It took him just a couple of seconds to start the car and pull it out of line, and he was out of the alley and into traffic in less than a half a minute after that.

Harry smiled again as he drove expertly through the heavy downtown traffic, his artificial left arm hanging at his side, his right hand gripping the wheel confidently. The car drove smoothly, and Har-

ry knew he'd chosen well. He now had a car that wouldn't be missed until the owner came for it after work.

In a few minutes, Harry had parked the car on the corner across the street from the finance company. He sat quietly in the car for several moments, looking around him casually. The office of the finance company was on the second floor of a three-story building on the opposite corner. From the street, the interior of the office could not be seen because of the heavy curtains in the office windows. It was an ideal setup except for one thing—the traffic cop on the corner.

Harry watched the cop standing in the center of the intersection, waving his arms vigorously at the moving traffic. It would be easy to avoid the cop, Harry thought. After the robbery, he'd come down the interior stairs in the building with the manager walking in front of him holding the briefcase containing the money while Harry walked in back of him, his one good hand holding the unloaded gun in his pocket.

At the foot of the stairs, Harry would have two choices. He could either go out the front door, across the street, passing the cop, and then directly to the stolen car. Or, he could have the manager turn and go out the rear entrance of the building to the small parking lot in back. Harry had watched the manager drive up and park there for several mornings during Harry's preparation for the robbery. The manager always arrived fifteen minutes before the office opened for the day, and he always carried a bulging briefcase. If Harry chose the rear parking lot, he could have the manager use his own car. Harry had considered this getaway method very carefully, and then had decided against it. Once the robbery was discovered, a search would be made of the area and the police would soon find out that the manager's car was missing from the lot—and this would mean an immediate police bulletin carrying the license number and description of the car.

It was much too risky, and so Harry decided on the lesser risk of passing the traffic cop.

Harry got out of the car, then removed the key from the ignition and glanced about him quickly. No one seemed to be looking at him, and he hastily slipped the key behind the sun visor, then rolled up the windows and closed the car door.

The key behind the visor represented another risk, Harry knew, but it had to be taken. With only one hand free, he couldn't hold

both the gun and the briefcase at the same time when he made his getaway from the finance office. Therefore, he'd have to use the manager to carry the briefcase. And, since he couldn't let the manager run around loose, he'd have to use the manager to drive the getaway car while Harry sat next to him and held the gun on him. The manager couldn't drive the car without the ignition key and, if Harry had this key in his pocket, then he couldn't hand it to the manager without taking his hand off the gun—and that would never do.

So, the risks had to be taken, and Harry accepted them as part of the job. Nothing was completely foolproof, Harry knew, but he planned each job carefully and thoroughly and thereby kept the chances of failure down to an absolute minimum.

Harry walked away from the car and turned the corner, heading away from the finance company. In the middle of the block, he went into a drugstore. Inside, he purchased three rolls of adhesive tape, which he carried from the store in a neatly wrapped package.

It was time now to get down to the actual robbery.

Harry went back to the corner and waited until the traffic cop signaled him to cross, then he walked quickly to the other side and then into the building.

He climbed the flight of stairs to the second floor and, without hesitation, pushed open the door of the finance company.

The office was divided by a waist-high wooden partition with a gate at one end. On Harry's side of the partition, a customer was filling out a loan application at a small table. On the other side of the partition were two men and a girl. One of the men—the manager—sat at a desk behind a nameplate that identified him as "J. Wilson". The other man wasn't important enough to rate a nameplate, and the girl's status was indicated by the fact that she was furiously pounding away at a typewriter.

A small office, Harry noted. Just one room. That meant the take would be small, too, but Harry had expected that. Small jobs involved small risks.

Harry walked to the partition and carefully balanced the package containing the adhesive tape on the narrow railing. The manager looked up briefly, then went back to his work, and the other man rose from his desk and came over to Harry and said, "May I help you?"

"Yes," Harry said, and he reached into his pocket and took out his gun. "Please don't do any-

thing foolish, something you'd regret."

The man stared at the gun in Harry's gloved hand and swallowed hard. The typewriter suddenly went silent as the girl realized what was happening, and the manager half rose from his chair.

"Easy does it," Harry said softly, and the manager sat down again.

Harry glanced at the customer at the table. The man was staring at him, his pen held over the application form on the table in front of him. "Will you join the others, please," Harry said to him. "But first lock the office door, if you don't mind."

The man seemed rooted to his chair, his eyes fastened on Harry. "Please—" Harry said again, his voice rising just a little. The man snapped out of it. He dropped his pen, got up quickly, then went over to the door and latched it.

"That's fine," Harry said, and he motioned with the gun. "Now go join the others."

The man opened the gate and went behind the partition and stood next to the girl's desk.

"All right, Wilson," Harry said to the manager. "Come over here and take this package." Harry nodded with his chin at the package still precariously balanced on top of the railing.

Wilson got up from his desk and started for the partition, and Harry took an instant dislike to him. It was obvious that Wilson wasn't the least bit frightened. If anything, he seemed faintly amused by the whole affair. He walked across the office with an arrogant strut, his eyes on Harry, a wisp of a smile on his lips.

"Well," he said, as he picked up the package, "a daring daylight robbery, as the newspapers would say."

"Your sense of humor is a little flat," Harry said. "Just open the package, please."

Wilson opened the package and looked at the three rolls of adhesive tape.

"Put a piece of tape over their mouths," Harry said. "Then tape their hands behind their backs, and then tape their ankles together."

"Think you've got enough tape here?" Wilson asked smugly. "Maybe you didn't plan this job carefully enough."

"There's enough tape," Harry said. "Just do as I say—and do it quickly."

Wilson shrugged and turned to the others.

"Just behave yourselves," Harry said. "No one will get hurt if you do as I say."

Harry leaned his elbow on the railing and kept his gun pointed

at Wilson as the manager very efficiently bound and gagged the two men and the girl.

"That's fine," Harry said. "Now go get your briefcase."

"Maybe I haven't got a briefcase," Wilson said.

"You've got one," Harry told him.

Wilson shrugged again and went over to the corner near his desk and picked up his briefcase. It was still bulging.

"Empty it on your desk," Harry said.

Wilson opened the briefcase, then held it high over his desk and, with a dramatic gesture, turned it over and dumped the contents on his desk. Papers and file folders fell to the desk in a big pile.

"Now, open the safe, and put the cash in the briefcase," Harry said.

"You've got the gun," Wilson said.

"Please don't forget that," Harry said. "I wouldn't like to use it."

"Of course you wouldn't," Wilson said with just the trace of a snicker in his voice, but he proceeded to do exactly as Harry told him.

"All right," Harry said when Wilson had finished. "Bring the briefcase and come out here."

Wilson came out from behind the partition, with no apparent fear.

"We're going downstairs," Harry said. "You'll walk in front of me and carry the briefcase. I want you to walk slowly and carefully because I'll have this gun in my pocket—and it'll be pointed at your back every minute."

Wilson sniffed loudly and looked at Harry with a bored expression.

"Let's go," Harry said, and he slipped the gun in his pocket. He turned slightly and said to the two men and the girl, "I don't think I have to remind you that Mr. Wilson's safety depends very much on what you do after I leave here. Please don't try anything heroic like kicking out the window to attract attention. Mr. Wilson will be the one who pays for any mistakes you make."

Harry motioned with his head at the door, and Wilson opened it and walked out into the hall. Harry was right in back of him.

"Lock the door," Harry said.

Wilson put down the briefcase, reached into his pocket and took out his keys, then locked the door and replaced the keys in his pocket.

"Down the stairs," Harry said. "Slowly."

Wilson picked up the briefcase and started down the stairs with Harry following. As they walked

down, Harry mentally ran through the rest of his plan. Out the door, across the street, into the car. Wilson would drive. Harry would have him drive out of town to a stretch of road hardly used by any cars, then turn off on a small side road. There, Harry would force Wilson out of the car and tell him to start walking. When Wilson was a good distance away, Harry would turn the car around and head back. It would take some time for Wilson to reach a phone, and this would allow Harry enough time to get back to town, abandon the car, then take a series of bus rides back to his furnished room. Neat, clean, quick, and no violence at all.

They were at the outside door now, and Wilson paused.

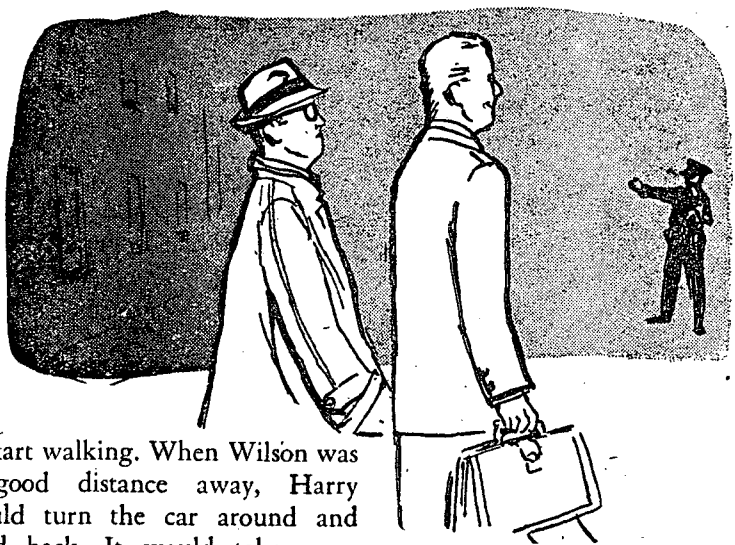
"Open the door," Harry said.

Wilson opened the door and slowly stepped out on the sidewalk.

Harry stood next to him on the sidewalk and looked around quickly. Everything was just as it had been earlier—including the arm-waving traffic cop.

"Across the street," Harry said, "and please don't try anything."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Wilson said, his voice heavy with sarcasm,



and then he stepped off the curb and started across the street, his shoulders back, his head erect, his strutting walk even more arrogant than it had been in the office. Harry walked on his left and slightly behind him.

When they reached the center of the intersection, they were no more than five feet from the cop. The cop glanced at them, then smiled. "Morning, Mr. Wilson," he said,

his arms still waving at the traffic.

"Hi, Bill," Wilson said, and he kept on walking.

Harry let out a deep breath as they reached the other side. He glanced back. The cop was busy with the traffic.

"Into that car," Harry said, motioning with his head to the stolen car. "Get in on the sidewalk side, then slide over behind the wheel."

"I'm driving?" Wilson asked.

"You're driving," Harry said.

Wilson shrugged and walked to the car and opened the door and got in and slid across the seat behind the wheel. Harry got in right behind him, swinging the door shut with his elbow while he kept his hand on the gun in his pocket. The briefcase was now on the seat between them.

"Get the keys from behind the sun visor," Harry said.

Wilson reached up and fumbled behind the visor.

"Hurry it up!" Harry said.

"Take it easy," Wilson said, groping behind the visor with his hand.

Harry drew the gun out of his pocket and jabbed it into Wilson's ribs. It was a nasty jab and Wilson winced.

"Relax," Wilson said, withdrawing his hand and showing Harry the keys.

Harry glanced out the window. The cop had left his post and was now hurrying toward them, his hand opening the flap on his holster.

Wilson looked at the cop, then turned to Harry and said, "I'd advise against shooting me. Bill is a good cop and a dead shot. You'll never make it."

Harry thought of the unloaded gun in his hand, and he looked at the hurrying cop, and he knew there had been some small risk he'd overlooked.

"You signaled him!" Harry said.

"In a way," Wilson said. "He knows I can't drive this car."

Harry looked at him blankly, and Wilson said, "My own car is specially built for me."

Then, as the cop with his gun drawn appeared at the window next to Harry, Wilson smiled cynically and rolled up his right trouser leg and let Harry see the varnished wood of his artificial leg.

Soft Sweet Sleep

By C. La. Sweeney, Jr.

She laid the bricks carefully, lovingly, using the same infinite patience and meticulous care that she used when ironing the ruffled curtains or polishing the furniture to a warm glow. The wall between them was now almost four feet high, and she paused at the end of the row and looked down at him where he sat in the rocker.

"Now, dear," she said, tucking a wisp of white hair neatly back into place, "there's really nothing to be so gloomy about. We've had more good years than most."

He stared straight ahead, seeing

Down through the ages men have written poems and composed songs in honor of that which we take for granted, soft, sweet sleep, doubly precious when it eludes us.

only the stark finality of the wall.

She smiled. "I know. Make believe you've come courting, the way you used to do. Make believe we've been sitting here on my front porch, and now it's getting late and in a little while you'll be going home. But we won't be sad because we know that very soon it will be tomorrow and we can be together again. Remember?"

He nodded dumbly. Upstairs, the grandfather's clock struck the hour, but he was scarcely aware of it. Time had ceased to have any meaning for him.

"I don't want you to think I'm just being selfish. It's just that I want to spare you any . . . any unpleasantness."

He knew this to be true, knew that her every word and action for almost fifty years had been for this one purpose. And yet, now—.

"Are you comfortable, dear?"

Again he nodded.

"Wouldn't you like to smoke your pipe?"

He wanted to answer her, to speak to her, to say something, anything, but the old familiar words seemed meaningless. He only shook his head.

"Well, there's not much more to do." She resumed her work, spreading just the right amount of mortar, placing each brick in its place just so. It was only a small niche in the cottage cellar which she was walling in, perhaps four feet across and five feet deep and six feet high, and so the work went quickly.

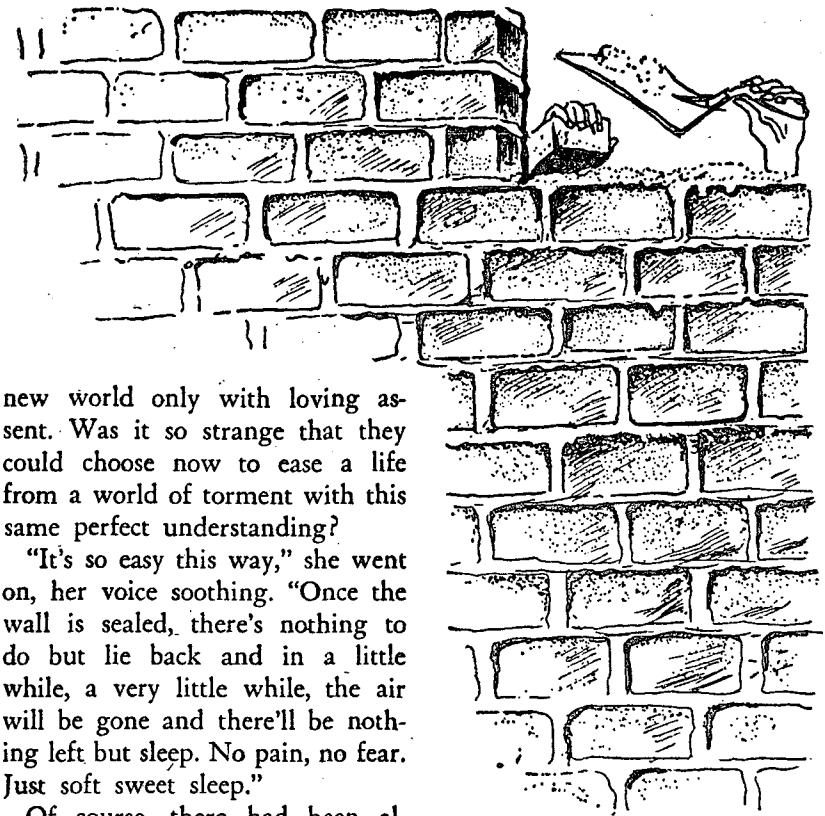
He might have offered to help her, but he had become so accustomed over the years to having her do things for him that it never quite occurred to him now. And so he only sat there, slumped in the rocker, the heavy weight of age almost too much for his frail shoulders to bear.

"There wasn't really any other choice," she said solicitously. "I mean, once they've told you, once you know for sure, there's no sense in just sitting and waiting to be eaten up by the pain, is there?"

He shook his head, slowly.

She sensed his rising doubt. "There, now, you can't go back on me now," she said, smiling. "It was all settled last night."

Last night was a million years ago. Then, sitting before the open fire, sipping tea from the tiny blue cups which she used only for very special occasions, they had talked it out rationally, sensibly, and he had finally agreed. But that was only natural. They had always agreed on everything. Even when, many years ago, she had wanted to bear their first child, they had talked it over beforehand and thus had brought a life into their bright



new world only with loving assent. Was it so strange that they could choose now to ease a life from a world of torment with this same perfect understanding?

"It's so easy this way," she went on, her voice soothing. "Once the wall is sealed, there's nothing to do but lie back and in a little while, a very little while, the air will be gone and there'll be nothing left but sleep. No pain, no fear. Just soft sweet sleep."

Of course, there had been alternatives to the wall. A gun, for example. They had talked about it, but she had immediately ruled it out. Life should end as it begins, she had said, not with a shattering explosion, but with only a faint gasp for breath and no more than a small cry. Too, there was poison, but neither had mentioned that. They had once owned a beautiful dog, a magnificent Collie. They both remembered how the dog had dragged himself home that late summer evening, whimpering against the gnawing pain of the poison that he had somehow eaten, how she had ministered to him all through the long night, and how he had mercifully died in her arms, licking her hand, as the sun broke across the hills at dawn. They both remembered, and so neither had spoken of it.

She paused for a moment to

wipe her glasses. "It isn't as though we were leaving one another, you know," she said. "We'll always be together, really, the same as the days when you went upstairs for a nap after lunch. I couldn't see you and I couldn't talk to you, but still I knew you were there." She smiled softly. "It was such a comfort."

He watched while she laid the next row of brick, ever so neatly, and then he could see her no longer, only the bricks being placed in their orderly succession. There was but a narrow strip left between the wall and ceiling now, and she began to fill this, tapping lightly to force the last bricks into place.

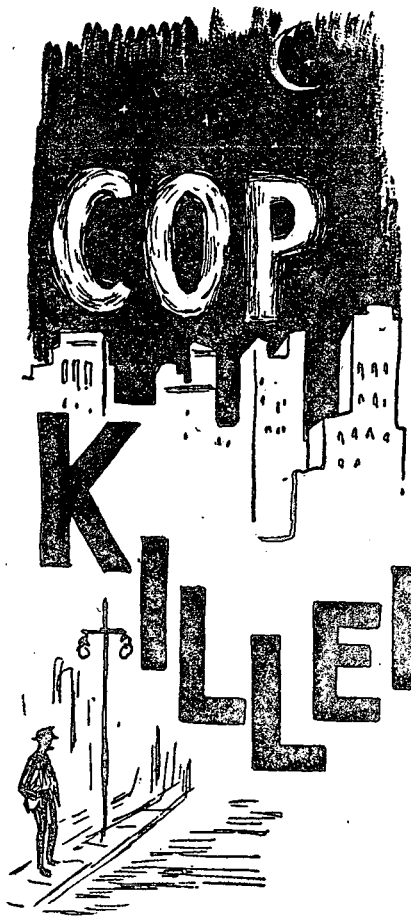
When there was only a single opening left, he heard her voice reaching out to touch him. "Goodbye, dear, and try not to think about it. Just set your mind to remembering the good years, the good things, and in no time at all . . ."

And then there was the tap-tap-tapping as the last brick went into place—and then there was nothing, only the wall and nothing more.

He sat back and closed his eyes and, obediently, tried to remember. He could remember the smell of new mown fields and the song of birds wheeling against the blue of the sky and the young warmth beneath a blue-checked gingham dress and the faint scent of violets as petal-soft lips met his own. He could remember . . . but the memories were far away and the years had blurred his senses and he dozed.

The grandfather's clock awoke him, bringing him back from the past slowly, reluctantly. Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, he forced himself to open his eyes and look at the wall. Oddly, he noticed, it did not seem cold and ugly now. Rather, it was somehow warm and graceful, like a garden wall shielding and preserving the beloved beauty within it.

Then he eased himself out of the rocker and went up the stairs into the kitchen and began to prepare his own supper.



by James Holding

KANGAROO KELLY was a happy man.

And why not? He had youth. He had a pretty wife named Nora. He had a neat little duplex on Seventh Street half paid for. He had a job he liked. And he even had more than his share of black Irish good looks.

Except, of course, for his unfortunate tendency toward steatopygia.

This malformation had earned him, as you can easily imagine, a wide variety of nicknames during his lifetime, of which 'Kangaroo' was by all odds the least offensive.

Yet Kangaroo Kelly had learned to ignore with lordly indifference all his colleagues' labored attempts at humor on this subject and was

Those in charge of law enforcement take a dim view of murder, naturally. Their chief aversion may be because it is messy to clean up as well as to track down.

therefore, as stated, a truly happy man.

His job contributed as much to his happiness as any of the other nice things he had going for him. For Kelly was lucky enough to have secured the job he'd always wanted, ever since he was a grade school shaver hanging around Young's Dairy Store with his pals on Friday afternoons after school, sucking on an ice cream cone, or a coke, and watching with something approaching awe the majestic passage of Clancy, the neighborhood patrolman, as he walked his beat.

To Kangaroo, Clancy had been an impressive symbol of law and order, a completely admirable man with an enviable way of life. And Kelly had frequently confided to his companions then that when he got big enough, what he'd like to be was a cop like Clancy. *If* he got big enough. For in those days, aside from his behind, he was kind of puny.

He got big enough, all right. And not just his rear section, either. He got big all over. He went two-twenty now on the gym scales, most of it muscle. And for four years, he had been Patrolman Kangaroo Kelly of the Juniata Police Department, happily walking a solo night beat on Juniata's South Side, and enthusiastically trying to keep assaults, muggings and purse-snatchings somewhere within reasonable bounds in his own tiny quadrant of the toughest section in the city.

He gave the job his best efforts, too, because he was deeply conscious of his responsibilities and exceptionally proud of the law enforcement traditions he was expected to uphold. He didn't laugh at danger; on the other hand, he didn't believe in fearing it, either. For he not only had great faith in his own ability to take care of himself while discharging his job; he also believed implicitly in the infallibility of the police force when it came to avenging one of its own in the event of injury or death inflicted by a criminal.

Pacing the streets of the South Side in the dark, dangerous, dragging hours before dawn, Kelly would often feed himself cheerfully this little morale booster: "Any of these mugs rub me out, even by accident, they're dead, too. And they know it. For there's six hundred cops in this town who'll get them for it if it takes a hundred years. I'm a cop. And you don't kill cops. Unless you want a fast ticket to hell yourself."

Occasionally, swinging his nightstick jauntily and walking with his tireless pigeon-toed stride down the streets of his beat, Kangaroo Kelly would run into Binksy Caputo. Binksy had been in high school with Kelly, a member of his class. They hadn't been friends, exactly. But they hadn't been enemies, either. A kind of rough *laissez-faire* had existed between them and still did. Binksy, it was true, had always laughed at Kangaroo's ambition to join the police force.

"What are ya, a sucker?" he used to say. "A big dumb sucker? The dough is on the other side, Big Tail. Why be a cop and starve when you can be a crook and get rich?" And he'd sneered goodnaturedly at Kelly's earnest attempts to explain how he felt about the police.

After he left school, Binsky followed his own advice. Only he didn't get rich. Far from it. He was a petty thief, a mugger, a pickpocket, who had been sent to the County Workhouse twice for short terms, once as a result of Kangaroo Kelly's testimony. Binksy lived from hand to mouth when he was home in a tenement on Flora Street.

Meeting Kangaroo by accident at the mouth of an alley, or on Express Street behind the brewery, or in the doorway of one of the South Side's two hundred dingy bars, Binksy would greet him in his taunting voice, "Hi, sucker! Still keeping us bad guys in line?"

And Kelly might reply, "Yep, Binks. Not doing too bad, either. Tripped up Spokane Jones the other night and you won't be see-

ing him again for one-to-three."

And Binksy would laugh: "Won't you ever learn, Big Tail? One guy! Out of this jungle! You send one guy to the sneezer and you're the greatest thing in crime prevention the world ever saw."

"Nuts," Kelly would say. "Keep your nose clean, Binks; or I'll show *you* the inside again, old Buddy."

"Face it, Big Tail," Caputo would grin, "You can't win. There's too many of us and not enough of you."

Kelly would pace slowly and solemnly away, very dignified. "Any cop is worth twenty of your kind, Binks," he'd throw over his shoulder. "So there's enough of us. Don't worry."

But there weren't. Because the muggings and the purse-snatchings and the assaults in Kangaroo Kelly's territory gradually increased to the point where a single patrolman, no matter how dedicated, simply couldn't control it.

That's when they assigned Kangaroo Kelly a partner. He wasn't too pleased about it at first, since he'd always been a solo operator and liked the feeling of personal, individual responsibility that carried with it. But he knew very well that he needed help. So he agreed with every evidence of pleasure when Pete was assigned to him.

Pete's full name was a long German mouthful ending in Augsburg or something of the sort, but right from the beginning, Kangaroo Kelly and all the other patrolmen at South Side Station started to call him plain Pete, and he seemed to like that all right. The day they told Kangaroo about his new partner, the Sergeant took him aside and explained to him that Pete was new on the force, he was young and green, but he'd passed the training with flying colors.

"You'll have to do most of the thinking for the both of you for awhile," the Sergeant said, looking across to where Pete was standing quietly, watching them but beyond earshot. "Teach Pete your way of doing things, Kangaroo. It shouldn't take long for you to get used to him and for him to get used to you so you can work together smooth. One thing I do know about Pete: Lieutenant Randall at the Police Training School says he'll be a tiger on the job; he won't be scared of any man, beast or devil, even on the stinking South Side. You ought to make a good team."

Kangaroo looked over at Pete, took in his broad shoulders, his relaxed stance, his quick brown eyes and the generally intelligent look of him, enhanced, no doubt, by the touch of premature gray in

his dark hair, and nodded slowly.

"Looks like he'd make a good partner, Sarg," he said. "Where's he living?"

The Sergeant grinned, a little embarrassed. "He ain't found a place yet," he said. "You got room for him at your house?"

"My God," Kangaroo said, aghast, "Nora won't go for that!"

"Who knows?" said the Sergeant. "Take him home and introduce him to Nora and see how it is. She may take to him."

"Well," said Kelly doubtfully, "I'll try it."

"He'll pay board," the Sergeant reminded him cannily. "You and Nora could use a little extra mazoo, I imagine?"

"That we could," Kelly said. He went over to Pete. "How's about coming out and meeting my wife?" he suggested. "She'll want to know my new partner."

He took Pete home and introduced him to Nora. Naturally, Kangaroo didn't say anything at first about the Sergeant's idea that Pete might live with them temporarily until he got a place of his own. But Pete was so polite and ingratiating in his manners to Nora, he shook hands so seriously and his eyes were so obviously full of ad[illegible]ation for Nora's looks and [illegible] Nora went as soft as [illegible]dding to her husband's new partner, and actually brought up the subject of where he was going to live herself. That was Kangaroo's cue, of course.

And once it was decided and agreed on, Pete—with his amiable, unassuming manner and his unique ability to appear almost as withdrawn and unobtrusive as though he weren't there at all—fitted in fine at the Kelly's house from the start. Much to the surprise of Nora and Kangaroo, neither their freedom nor their sense of man-and-wife privacy suffered much from Pete's presence. It's true that Nora commented once that Pete ate an awful lot, and another time that he was so big that she almost hated to have him sit on her delicate period sofa. But Kangaroo pointed out that Pete was built big and needed big meals just as he did, and that after all, he *was* paying board, for Pete's sake! Whereupon they both grinned at this inadvertent joke and Nora agreed that Pete really was a darling and she was glad to have him in the house. They both quickly grew fond of him and began to include him in their limited social life, as well as in Kangaroo's grim night work.

Kangaroo soon found that Pete was an excellent partner. True to Lieutenant Randall's advance billing, Pete was a tiger on the job.

He feared nothing, although he tried to be prudent in exposing himself to danger, at Kangaroo's urging. Between them, Pete and Kangaroo in their first month on the beat together began to make some sizeable dents in the record of petty crimes committed in their territory. Six months after they began walking the beat together, they had won the undoubted respect of all the hoodlums who operated there, and had even injected a pinch of wholesome fear into the criminal broth of the neighborhood.

Pete was the quietest fellow that Kangaroo Kelly, inclined to garrulity himself, had ever known. Pete walked beside him mile after mile every night, smelling out illegal activities with a fine sensitive perception, but very seldom making any attempt to communicate directly and at length with his partner. Perhaps words weren't needed, Kangaroo thought. For he realized that the communication between them was intuitive and instantaneous in emergency, that their sense of responsibility equally shared, of danger mutually faced, was drawing them more closely together as partners and friends with every night that passed.

Actually, only two things seemed important to Pete, as far as Kangaroo could tell. One was the job. You couldn't have any doubt of Pete's interest in that when you watched him, big-muscled and quiet, light and quick on his feet despite his size, prowling the dark streets of the South Side with his eyes open and seeking, his head tilted a little forward in constant alertness, and a small anticipatory grin on his face.

The other thing Pete valued, Kangaroo thought with a half-embarrassed shyness, was himself. There was no doubt that Pete admired and liked Kangaroo, felt comfortable and contented when working with him, and was perfectly willing to let Kangaroo boss the team and to defer to his orders when orders were necessary.

Even Binksy Caputo was impressed with Pete, although he wouldn't openly admit it. Kelly introduced Pete to Binksy on their first meeting with the remark, "This is a guy we got to keep an eye on, Pete. Binksy Caputo. A bad character. Been inside twice."

And Binksy laughed arrogantly, but with a threat of something beside arrogance in his voice, and said, "You got a partner, Big Tail. Well, what do you know? God knows you needed one, buddy!" He slanted his eyes at Pete, but Pete just stood there after his nod at the introduction, seeming slightly amused, and said nothing. He

bulked big in the rosy light of a bar sign overhead. His calmness and apparent indifference, along with Binksy's pseudo-friendship for Kangaroo Kelly, made Binksy bold. He said insolently, "He's big, ain't he, Kangaroo? But big ain't smart. You're proof of that, Big Tail. And he looks even dumber than you!"

Now Pete wasn't amused any more. He made an annoyed sound in his throat and reached for Binksy, but Kangaroo laughed and pulled him back with a hand on his shoulder. "Let him alone, Pete," he said. "He's scared of us and trying not to show it, that's all. He's always had a big mouth. Telling me there aren't enough of us cops to handle the bad guys. Now he's not so sure, since I got a partner."

They left it at that. But as they walked away down Flora Street, Binksy couldn't resist calling after them jeeringly, "Two dumb cops are twice as dumb as one dumb cop, Big Tail! Don't forget that!"

Pete wanted to go back and knock a little respect for the law into Binksy, but Kangaroo just grinned tolerantly and shook his head. He called back to Binksy: "Don't you ever let us catch you out of line, Binks, or you'll think the roof fell on you."

Which was a considerable understatement, if anything. Because the next time they saw Binksy Caputo, he had definitely stepped out of line. And more than the roof fell on him.

About three months later, Kangaroo and Pete were walking down Express Street behind the brewery at three-twenty of a balmy summer morning, a little late on their rounds because of a purse-snatching incident earlier that had held them up for awhile. Express Street, silent and deserted at this hour, littered with a week's accumulation of torn paper, discarded beer cans and worse, went right past the door of a glass-fronted annex at the rear of the brewery where the brewery's important officials and clerical staff had their offices.

As Kangaroo and Pete reached the top of the brewery block, a hundred yards away from the entrance to this office annex, they saw by the flickering illumination of a street light a furtive figure emerge from a half-opened window of the place, drop to the ground against the wall, and then make off down Express Street ahead of them.

They didn't know then that it was Binksy they'd seen. But they knew from the mode of egress he'd used that he wasn't merely a brewery employee working late in the office.

Their reaction was instantaneous. Kangaroo said in a tight

voice, "Let's get him, Pete!" And he began to run toward the fleeing man, fumbling with his holster.

Pete took off after the fugitive as though he were jet-propelled. He was faster than Kangaroo, whose overgrown derrière didn't help his running any. He soon left his partner yards behind.

The fugitive, now lost to view momentarily in the shadow of the brewery's shipping shed which bordered the street here, heard behind him the thud of Pete's hurrying feet on the pavement, flung one startled glance over his shoulder, and exchanged his leisurely pace for as fast a one as he could muster.

But Pete was faster than he was, too. He closed the gap between them rapidly. And suddenly, just under a street light at the corner of the main brewery building, the prowler realized he couldn't escape and turned at bay, his back against the wall of the brewery, his arms raised shoulder high in an involuntary gesture of defense.

Kangaroo, coming as fast as his bulk permitted down the street, saw then that the man they were chasing was Binksy. "Hold it!" he bellowed. "Hold it!"

Pete's momentum was more than he could master instantly, however. And besides, the wonderful exhilaration of doing his beloved job boldly and well was upon him. He had thrown himself bodily at Binksy, grabbing for his arms, before Kangaroo's shout could halt him.

Pete and Binksy went to the ground together in a furious scuffle that lasted only a few seconds. Binksy was yelling at the top of his voice in pain and fury. Kangaroo was coming up on the run, his gun out now. "Hold him, Pete, hold him!" he panted, short of breath. "That's the stuff, Pete! I'm here."

At that moment, the muffled sound of a shot echoed on the stale air of Express Street.

Pete relaxed his hold on Binksy. He rolled slowly over on his side, groaning deep in his throat as though he were very tired. Then he lay perfectly still on the dirty pavement except for a small twitch in his legs.

Slowly Binksy rose to his feet and backed against the brick wall of the brewery. His eyes glinted wildly in the harsh glare of the street light.

Kangaroo saw then that Binksy had a gun in his hand and that there were bloodstains on the arm of his sport shirt.

But Pete, his partner, was Kangaroo's first concern. He stood looking down at Pete's sprawled body, shocked, dazed, unbelieving

for a moment. Struggling to accept the fact that his partner dead, killed in the there was no doubt mind that Pete *was* imply scattered limbs hole in Pete's chest eeded), callously shot by a worthless punk over what was probably an unimportant piece of petty thievery. Kangaroo entirely forgot his own safety. He didn't even look at Binksy, who still clutched the gun in his hand and held it aimed shakily at Kangaroo's belly.

Up to that moment, Kangaroo had always been a happy man. But now, staring down at Pete, he felt his sense of happiness desert him for the first time. His uncomplicated delight in life and living drained out of him as though it were running out of a hole in him somewhere, like the one in Pete's chest. And he felt a vicious riptide of rage and resentment rushing in to take its place.

He raised his eyes to Binksy, crouched bloody and disheveled twenty feet away against the wall. "You're in bad trouble, Binks," he said in a harsh whisper. His breath was still sawing in and out from his run. "You killed a cop."

Binksy didn't change the aim of his gun or blink his eye, but he looked at Kangaroo with a very funny expression. "It was an accident," he said. "I didn't even have my gun out. But he jumped me and I panicked. I had to do *something,* you can see that, can't you?"

"You didn't have to kill him," Kangaroo said softly. "Look at him, Binks. Dead. A good cop. Worth twenty of you."

Binksy licked his lips and a sudden stab of mortal fear knifed through him as he saw how stiff and jaw-tight Kangaroo Kelly was holding his face.

"Listen, Big Tail," he said, his words tumbling over each other. "I tell you I didn't mean to do it. It was accidental. I'll drop my gun and you can take me in on a breaking and entering charge. Okay?"

Slowly Kangaroo shook his head. "That ain't enough, Binks. Not for you. You ever hear what happens to you when you kill a cop?"

"Yeah, a *human* cop, for God's sakes!" Binksy said hoarsely. "But not a damn canine cop like Pete, there!" He swallowed. "Just a lousy police dog!"

Kangaroo didn't seem to hear him. "Pete was a great partner," he said, "and a damn good cop. You killed him Binks."

"I killed a dog. Not a cop."

"You killed a cop," said Kangaroo. "So you're dead yourself. You know that, don't you?"

For a second or two, Binksy Caputo didn't say anything. He was watching Kangaroo's eyes and they told him nothing. Then he switched his gaze from Kangaroo's eyes to his gun hand, still hanging limp at his side, the big service revolver held almost negligently in lax fingers.

And suddenly, without a single doubt, Binksy knew it was true. He knew that Kangaroo Kelly was going to kill him . . . to exact his life in return for the life of the German shepherd dog that Kangaroo called his partner.

In a third of a second, Binksy's mind assessed the situation: here he stood, a known criminal with a record, with a gun in his hand, caught red-handed in another illegal act. He'd already murdered Kangaroo's dog. Any court in the world would certainly believe that Kangaroo was merely doing his duty if he shot Binksy down out of hand. Kangaroo Kelly would be exonerated. He'd be commended by his department, probably promoted.

And Binksy Caputo would be nothing but dead.

So Binksy made a fast, bitter decision. He steadied his gun on the lower segment of Kangaroo's belly and pulled the trigger.

A split second ahead of him, Kangaroo moved. He saw Binksy's hand steady the gun and his finger whiten with pressure on the trigger. He didn't have time to get his own gun up to [illegible]

So he just turned his back to Binksy's flaming gun.

The slug took him high up in his right buttock. The great soft cushion of mirth-provoking flesh he carried there absorbed the bullet, slowed it down, stopped it, the way a bank of fresh soft snow will absorb a thrown snowball.

He felt no pain at all. Not yet. But as he swung his revolver up across his turning body and squeezed off one careful shot at Binksy, he was thinking wryly that finally, after all these years, he'd found a reason for being glad that people called him 'Kangaroo', 'Big Tail' and all those other offensive names.

Seeing Binksy, the cop killer, fall to the street with a police bullet in his brain, Kangaroo Kelly stooped down and patted his dead partner's shoulder, and knew that someday he'd begin to feel happy again.

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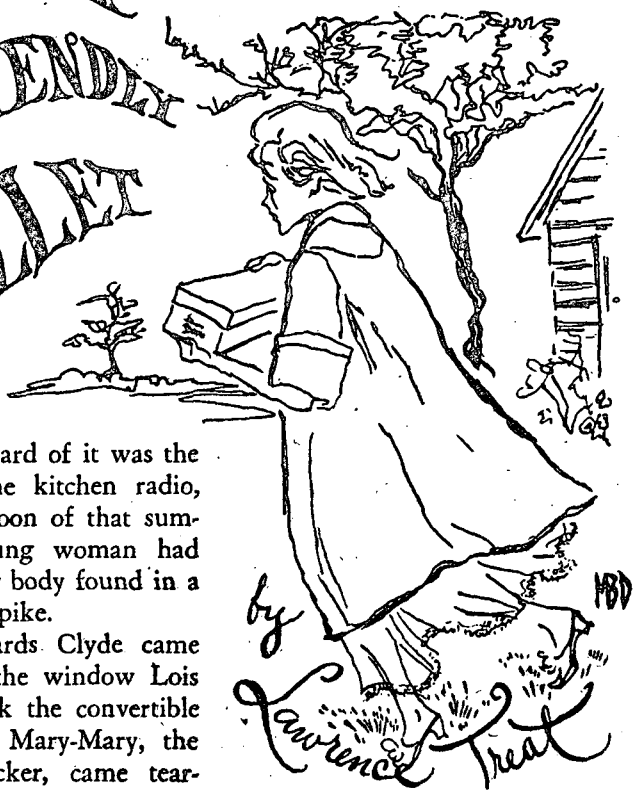
The theater, and opera as well, has many heroines who were sleepwalkers. Lady Macbeth and Lucia di Lammermoor are among the best known, and come to mind, most readily but we must not overlook Ophelia. Change the setting, and the costume, and history repeats itself.

SHOOT A FRIENDLY BULLET



by Lawrence Treat

THE FIRST she heard of it was the brief item on the kitchen radio, late in the afternoon of that summer day. A young woman had been shot and her body found in a lane off the turnpike.

Shortly afterwards Clyde came home. Through the window Lois watched him park the convertible and step out as Mary-Mary, the honey-colored cocker, came tearing across the lawn to greet him. He bent down, stroked the long, soft ears and spoke to the dog. Lois could see the furious wag of a tail, and she wondered what magic

Clyde was, as usual, performing.

He did seem to have magic. It had turned him into a brilliant young research physicist at the nearby Union Electronic plant. It had made him tall and handsome, and given him a charm to which she had reacted from the moment she'd met him, almost a year ago.

He called to her when he entered the house, but to her surprise he didn't come into the kitchen and kiss her. She worked on silently, telling herself that he was preoccupied and that she was too sensitive, too easily hurt. Anyone looking at her, seeing her delicate lips and the soft quality of her eyes, would know that.

She heard Clyde go upstairs, and then she heard the back door slam, and knew he'd gone out to the garden. He was probably lost in some intricate idea and was wandering in the firmament of astral physics. She switched stations and turned the radio up higher.

Another newscast came on, and by this time the police had identified the body. Bertha Sessions. They believed she had been driven to the lane in her own car and that the killer had left in it. Since traffic was heavy on the turnpike and since the lane was a dead-end, the police thought that the killer might have been seen driving away. They described the make and color of the car and asked that anyone who had seen it communicate with them.

When Lois turned around, Clyde was standing in the doorway. Since he disliked the radio, she switched it off at once. She said apologetically, "I was just listening. You know, you might have seen him leaving, Clyde. You usually pass there on your way home."

"I left early," he said. "Lucky, wasn't it?"

"Why lucky?" she asked.

"Well, unlucky, then." And, with an exaggerated bow, he swung around and went to the living room.

A few minutes later, on her way upstairs, she saw that he'd mixed himself a drink and was sipping it moodily while he stared at the empty fireplace. She supposed he was still wrestling with his cosmic problems, and she went on to the bathroom. There, she noticed the discarded band-aid wrapping in the waste basket. She meant to ask Clyde if he'd cut himself, but she forgot about it until he was undressing and she saw the bandage on his upper forearm.

"Did you hurt yourself?" she asked.

"Mary-Mary scratched me," he remarked, "in excess of love."

"But—" Lois said, then she

stopped short. He'd been wearing a jacket when he'd come home and he'd kept it on all evening, so how could Mary-Mary's claws have reached up there, just below the elbow?

"But what?" he said. "You leave me hanging in the air."

"But nothing," she said. "That was just a conjunction that came out all by itself."

"Nevertheless," he began.

She interrupted him quickly. "See?" she said. "You do it, too."

He burst out laughing.

In the morning, the murder was headlined in the local paper. Bertha Sessions had been shot twice, and her deserted car had been found ten miles away. Bloodstains left no doubt that she had been killed in the car and her body pushed out. According to the autopsy, she had been two months pregnant. Scrapings from under her fingernails proved that she had put up a fight and had probably marked her assailant. The police believed that she had been killed by a lover.

There followed the tawdry details of her life. Married and divorced twice, arrested for drunken driving, for passing a bad check. She had worked at Union Electronics, but she'd left her job last April.

Lois put the paper down. "You must have known her," she said.

"I've seen her," Clyde said. "She was in the secretarial pool for a while. A somewhat ravished blonde. I think she got fired."

"What a horrible end to come to," Lois said, shuddering. "For some reason, she haunts me."

"She met the appropriate fate of a stenographer who murdered the King's English," Clyde said. "So you see that justice has been served." He stood up, circled the table and kissed Lois on the cheek. "See you this evening. Any dates?"

"No. We're home alone."

"Fine," Clyde said, and went out. Mary-Mary saw him off with customary exuberance.

Lois stayed at the table and reread the paper. When the phone rang, she waited a moment or two before getting up. Irrelevantly, nonsensically, she thought of the times a couple of weeks ago when the phone had rung and no one answered her hello. As if someone, say, wanted to speak to Clyde and didn't want his wife to know about it, which was silly. When Lois picked up the phone, her sister spoke and asked whether she wanted to come to town for the day and shop, and maybe see a movie.

"Thanks," Lois said, "but I just don't feel up to it."

"Then I'll go alone. Tell me—

did you read about that murder? They say she went around with somebody tall and handsome, they're looking for him now. Tell Clyde to be careful."

"I wish you wouldn't joke," Lois said.

While she was nibbling her luncheon sandwich, she heard the next installment of the Bertha Sessions case. Bertha and an unidentified man had had dinner on

a Thursday night, two weeks ago, at an Italian restaurant on the turnpike. The waitress who served them had heard the man threaten her. "If you ever try that, I'll kill you."

The waitress had seen Bertha's picture in the paper and remembered the incident. She was certain she could identify the man. She described him as tall and handsome, and said he'd been wearing a red tie with a black horseshoe design. She remembered the incident vividly because the man had given her a five dollar tip, which made it a rare occasion.

Clyde always overtipped, and he owned a red tie with a black horseshoe design. Lois had given it to him for his birthday.

She stood up slowly. She had to force herself to climb the stairs and open his closet door to examine his tie rack. The red one was not there. Nor had he been wearing it this morning.

She sat down on the bed. It was too ridiculous even to think of. Clyde? Heavens, no! If nothing else, he was too intelligent to shoot someone without first figuring out the statistical probability of getting caught. She would have found complicated formulas with Greek letters and square-root signs all over the place, designated Project M. M for murder. And as for losing his temper, he had none.

But if you're under pressure? If you have a wife and a job and a reputation, and someone like Bertha Sessions tries to blackmail you, then what do you do?

Lois clenched her fists and hated herself for the thoughts she was having, but she couldn't control them. She couldn't help remembering that evening just a few weeks after their marriage when she'd been sitting in the living room and sewing a button on Clyde's jacket, for the first time.

She'd felt so foolishly proud and domestic and secure, until he'd walked in, smiling and twirling the revolver.

"Clyde!" she'd exclaimed in alarm. "What's that?"

"Smith and Wesson thirty-eight, Safety Hammerless," he answered. "Safest thing you can buy."

"Put it away," she said in a low voice.

"But you ought to have something to protect yourself with, when I'm away."

"I'm scared of guns. I hate the sight of them."

"Please be reasonable," he said. "This is just a precaution. I hope you'll never have to use the thing, but in case you ever do, this is how it works. Look."

Her eyes dropped to his hands and watched them do something.

"You have to learn how to break open a revolver and empty the chambers," he said. "And to load them. Like this. See?"

"I see," she said, closing her eyes. "Now put it away. Please."

"You're really scared, aren't you?" he said in a puzzled tone. She nodded and he said firmly, "Well, you don't have to touch it. I'll leave it in the drawer of the night table, within reach. Just in case."

"If you dare put it there, I won't even sleep in the room. I won't ever!" She shivered involuntarily.

"Honey," he said softly, "don't get upset. I'll put it on a shelf where you can't even see it, but I'd like you to know where it is. Come upstairs?"

She'd followed meekly and watched him put the gun on the shelf of her closet, behind the shoe box that contained the wedgies that didn't fit.

The scene came back vividly, as did another scene of a month ago. Again she'd been sitting in the living room, sewing. This time she'd been mending a bra strap, and Clyde had crossed the living room. He'd had the gun in his hand and he'd said, "I'm going down to the cellar. I want to set up a pistol range."

She'd waited nervously, steeling herself for the moment a shot would come. She could barely hold the needle steady. She began counting to herself, but it didn't help. She felt jumpy, unable to concentrate. When the shots finally came, they were a fusillade that seemed to rock the whole house and shake the walls. She screamed and rushed outside. Mary-Mary bounded over and Lois stooped down and hugged the dog.

"How can he?" she said. "Oh, Mary-Mary!"

She was still clinging to the dog when Clyde came out, holding the

revolver. "Sorry," he'd said guiltily. "I didn't mean to scare you."

He'd replaced the gun on her shelf, the same evening. She was certain of that. But was it still there?

She stood up. Reluctantly, almost against her will, she approached the closet, grasped the knob and pulled the door open. She could see the shoe box, but she didn't reach up to move it. She couldn't. She didn't want to find out whether the gun was there or not, for some things are best hidden. Sometimes you have to live with a doubt and keep it alive, because the end of doubt can be the beginning of something worse.

She turned and went downstairs. Clyde would never have left the gun up there, if he'd used it. Therefore, if it was gone—

But there were other doubts, other memories that kept flooding into her mind and piling up suspicion. For instance, the waitress at that Italian restaurant had told the police that Bertha Sessions had had dinner with an unidentified man on a Thursday night, two weeks ago.

Lois recalled that day. Clyde had announced that he wouldn't be home for dinner, he'd eat with some of his colleagues and then go on to a scientific meeting. He'd said he might be back late. Instead, he'd come home quite early.

"Not much of a session," he'd announced. "Everybody agreed. No fun in that, is there?"

With the sound of his voice seeming to echo in her head, Lois entered the kitchen and sat down at the table. Half a glass of milk and the partially eaten sandwich were still there, in front of her. She picked up the sandwich, put it down. She wasn't hungry.

And the other times that Clyde had been away? The night he'd phoned and said, "Lois? I'm up at Ellenville. I think I'll stay and sleep at the cabin."

"But what are you doing up there?" she'd asked him. The cabin was something special. They'd rented it for their honeymoon, but they'd loved it so much that they'd bought it, despite the primitive plumbing and the leaky roof and the poison ivy all around.

"I was driving," he'd answered. "Trying to think something out, and I landed up this way. It's too late to come home, so I'd better stay."

Had he really been in Ellenville that time?

She didn't know. She shook her head wearily, got up and opened the refrigerator and put the sandwich inside. Maybe she could eat it later. Maybe she could stop herself from thinking.

She was unable to. She tried to garden, and gave it up and went inside, to sit down and stare at the walls.

At two o'clock the police came. A young, serious looking man in a dark suit said, "I'm Detective Teller. I'd like to ask a few questions."

"About what?" she asked.

"Just a little matter I'd like to straighten out. On Thursday, two weeks ago—that was the ninth. Where were you that night?"

"Thursday? Oh, Mr. Teller—how would I remember? Thursday, Wednesday—I get so mixed up on dates."

"Then consult your date book. You have one, haven't you?"

"Heavens no! My husband wishes I had, because truly, I get confused. I should keep one, shouldn't I?"

"Can you remember anything about any other day that week?" he asked. "We can work it out from there."

"Well, we went to the movies on Tuesday. Or else it was Wednesday. But I'm not sure which week it was."

"We can check that," Teller said with satisfaction. "Tell me the name of the picture and where it was playing."

"I'm such a fool," she said. "We didn't even go. I had it in mind, but we didn't go, we stayed home."

"Mrs. Eckhart, you're not being honest, are you?"

"No, and neither are you. Because you really want to know where my husband was, and all you have to do is ask him. He has a marvellous memory. But it's quite obvious that you're trying to trick me."

"And obvious that I failed," he said.

He left her wondering.

At six o'clock she heard a car, and for a moment she thought the driver was Clyde. But the man who stepped out was his brother, Marty. Although Clyde saw him occasionally, sometimes to consult him as a lawyer and sometimes just to talk, Lois scarcely knew her own brother-in-law.

She went to the door and opened it before he could ring.

"Lois," he said, smiling with warmth, "you look lovely. Clyde's a lucky guy."

"Thanks," she said, "but why don't you come more often? You've been here exactly once."

"Clyde doesn't invite me," Marty said. "Afraid I'll take you away." He stared at her, embarrassed and blushing slightly, as if he wished he hadn't spoken those words.

"Don't talk nonsense," she said. "You ought to know you're always welcome, so come in and sit

down." She beckoned him inside.

"Glad to," he said, going into the living room. "But this is a professional call. Clyde asked me to drop by and brief you."

"On what? Where is he and what happened?"

"Nothing happened, but he went away overnight. He's in a jam, and I'm trying to get him out of it."

"What kind of a jam?" Lois asked sharply.

"This Bertha Sessions case. Apparently he knew her, and this waitress saw his picture and claims he was the man who threatened Bertha in the restaurant. And that's serious business."

"What does Clyde say?"

"That it's ridiculous, of course. The police show this waitress a photograph and she says, 'Yes, that's him.' That kind of identification sounds fine, but it's the most unreliable evidence you can get. So I want to straighten it out, first."

"How are you going to straighten it out?"

"There are ways," he said vaguely. Then, as Lois kept looking at him, he said, "I may as well tell you that I have an appointment with that waitress tonight. And after she's seen me, she may not be sure whom Bertha Sessions was with. Clyde, or me."

"Did you know Bertha?" Lois asked quietly.

The slight jerk of Marty's head showed his surprise. Then he shrugged. "What difference does it make? A tramp like her—she knew lots of men. The important thing is going to be whether Clyde had a red tie with a black horseshoe design." Marty leaned forward intently and waited for Lois to speak. When she made no comment, he said, "Did he have one?"

Lois hesitated, but when she spoke, the lie came easily. "I never paid any attention to his ties. A red one? I'm not sure."

"Fair enough," Marty said. "Now the real trouble is his alibi. He was driving around, doesn't even know where he was. He had a problem on his mind, and you know how he's unaware of the world when he's working something out. Which may be an attribute of genius, but it's a habit he shouldn't have indulged in on that afternoon that Bertha Sessions was shot."

"Where is he now?" Lois asked.

"Probably up at the cabin. He's gone there lots of times, hasn't he?"

Lois nodded. "Yes," she said. "Or at least—"

"No *at leasts,*" Marty said, interrupting. "For the moment he's safe, and unavailable. But he'll be

at my office tomorrow morning and he'll submit to arrest, if they want him. And I'm afraid they do."

Lois got up and crossed the room. It had happened. Clyde and this woman. And he'd been unfaithful. His trips to the cabin, his scientific meetings—lies, concealments. And in her heart, she supposed she had known. Nevertheless he was her husband, and whatever she thought, whatever suspicions she might have, she had to be loyal. How could she convict her own husband before the evidence was even in?

She turned around to Marty. "Tell me what I can do," she said.

"Nothing," he said. "Say nothing and answer no questions. As his wife, you're privileged not to testify against him, and I mean exactly that. Say nothing. If you're asked questions, don't answer. Just sit there with your mouth closed. You can open it to smile, but not to talk. And any time you need help or advice, call on me. And now let's go out and have dinner."

"I couldn't. I'd rather stay home and do some thinking."

Marty gave her a penetrating look. "Maybe you're right. But remember—say nothing, and keep a stiff upper lip."

"Yes," she said.

She watched him get into the car and drive off. From a distance, he could almost have been Clyde. The same build, the same color hair, practically the same movements and gestures.

She sighed. Then she went upstairs to her closet, opened it and looked up at the shelf. She could see the shoe box, but she still couldn't tell whether there was anything behind it.

She closed the door and crossed the room to examine herself in the mirror. Her upper lip wasn't stiff. It was soft and vulnerable, and it curved delicately, in a bow.

It began to tremble, and then it trembled some more, and it couldn't stop. She turned away from the mirror.

She went to bed early that night, but she slept badly and she had vague, disquieting dreams. Once, she woke up chilled and she lay there motionless, frightened as she used to be frightened when she was a child. Awed by something nameless, by her own feelings, by something disturbing at the back of her mind. It was dawn before she got to sleep again.

When she arose, she discovered that her slippers were damp, and that wet grass was clinging to them. She opened the closet door and looked up at the shelf. The shoe box was gone, and the space behind it was empty.

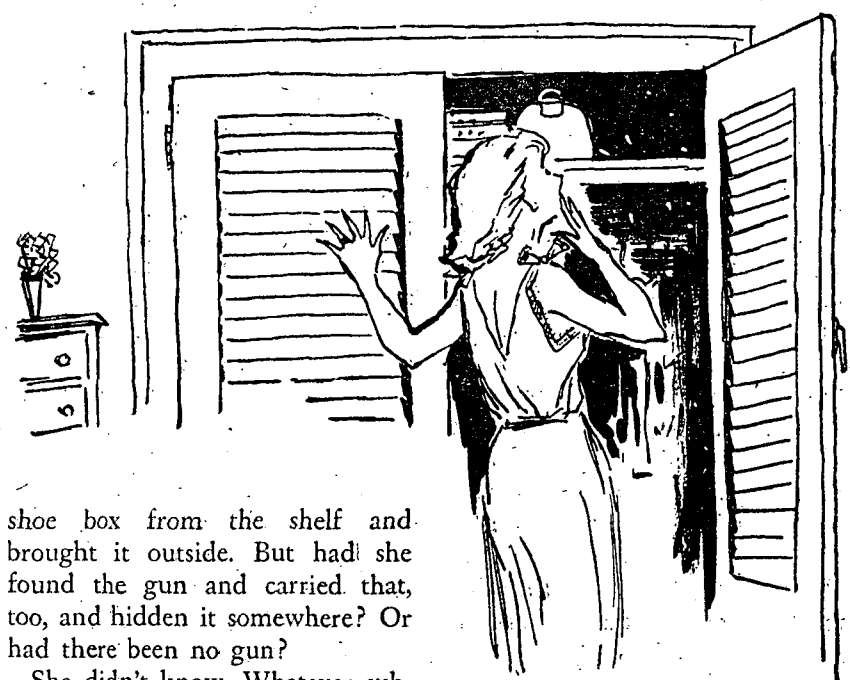
She dressed thoughtfully and went downstairs. The milk was on the rear stoop and the empty shoe box was next to it. Both doors, front and back, were still locked, and no one had broken into the house. She was certain of it. Then she herself must have walked in her sleep. But where? And what had she done?

Her memory was a complete blank when she sat down and tried to remember. Nothing came. It was obvious that she'd taken the shoe box from the shelf and brought it outside. But had she found the gun and carried that, too, and hidden it somewhere? Or had there been no gun?

She didn't know. Whatever subconscious pressures had impelled her, they had also kept the truth concealed from her conscious self.

She picked the paper up from the porch, and sat down and read the front page. Clyde's name was in headlines. He was called a distinguished scientist. The police were looking for him, and his lawyer had stated that Clyde would be available this morning, and could explain everything.

The paper summed up the case. Clyde had known Bertha Sessions, he'd had dinner with her two weeks ago and had threatened her,



and he had only a vague, unsupported alibi for the time of her death. The waitress had identified him from his picture, and the police knew that he owned a gun. The article ended with an ominous question: Did Clyde Eckhart have scratch marks on his body, or not?

Detective Teller arrived at ten o'clock. He was polite, impersonal. "May I come in?" he asked.

"Certainly. What do you want?"

"Your husband's gun," Teller said. "He says it's on a shelf of your closet. May I look?"

"I don't know. I don't know whether you're even telling the truth. You tried to trick me yesterday."

"And got nowhere."

"I'd like to call my lawyer, first. My brother-in-law, Marty Eckhart."

"Go right ahead, but tell him I have a search warrant and don't need your permission. I'd prefer it, as a matter of courtesy, but—"

He handed her the warrant and she read it through. "Yes," she said. "I'll show you the closet."

He examined it carefully, but he showed no surprise at not finding the gun. "Mrs. Eckhart," he said, "this is going to be tough on your husband."

"Why?"

"Because he said the gun was here. He asked us to get it and fire test shots and compare them with the bullet that killed Mrs. Sessions. I half-believed, for a while, that he was innocent and could prove it. But—no gun, no proof. And that may be tough."

"What do you mean?"

"His best chance would have been proving that his gun didn't kill her. But this way—" He frowned in perplexity, then seemed to think of an idea. "Mind if I use your phone?" he asked.

"It's downstairs, I'll show you".

He held the phone close to his mouth and spoke in a low tone. She was unable to overhear anything, and she hovered helplessly, anxiously, until he had finished.

"May I take a look at your cellar?" he asked.

She nodded. She watched him cross the room, head for the cellar door and go downstairs. He stayed in the basement for about twenty minutes. When he came up, he merely thanked her for her cooperation, and left.

She was terrified. Her doubts of Clyde could convict him, the disappearance of the gun would be damning. And if she told the police what she'd done, they'd conclude that his wife thought he was guilty and must have good reasons for her belief.

At noon, she heard the terse an-

nouncement on the radio. "The police have released Clyde Eckhart for lack of sufficient evidence, but the investigation is continuing in other directions."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Clyde was innocent, somebody else had killed Bertha Sessions. Clyde might have had dinner with her that Thursday evening, he might even have threatened her, but that didn't prove he'd killed her. And the scratch marks—the police must have accepted his explanation that Mary-Mary had scratched him, and Lois would accept it, too. She'd believe anything that Clyde said. Anything at all.

He came home in the middle of the afternoon. She heard the car and she heard Mary-Mary bark, but Lois didn't look and didn't go out. She stayed in the living room, for this was where he'd expect to find her. His wife, waiting for him.

When he opened the door, she cried out, "Clyde!" She started to rush towards him, but at his expression, she held back. Then she noticed that his arm was in a sling. The right one, where he'd had the bandage.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"That kerosene stove at the cabin," he said. "We ought to get a new one. Burnt half the skin off my arm right up to the elbow.

"You must have had an awful time," she said. "Oh, Clyde—I'm so sorry! What can I do?"

"Haven't you done enough?" he said coldly. "I sent the police to get my gun, and where is it? You hid it or lost it or something."

"But they did release you," she said shakily.

"Because I remembered the bullets I'd fired for target practice, down in the cellar. They found a couple of them and made ballistic tests. That's why they cleared me. You were quite a help, weren't you? Now tell me what you're so sorry about."

She froze up, stunned by his remoteness, his hardness, his hostility. Didn't he understand? Her heart was sorry, she was sorry about everything. About him and herself and the dead woman and about all the evil there ever was and always would be in the world. She was desperately, agonizingly sorry, and he rejected her and said, "Why are you sorry? Because you gummed up the best evidence I had, or because you think I had an affair with Bertha, or what?"

"Clyde, I tried to help. It wasn't easy. I was alone and Marty said you were in trouble, but you never confided in me. If you'd only told me things, yesterday. I've had an

awful, nerve-wracking time, too."

"Worse than being held by the police?" he said.

"Please," she said. "Let's not fight."

"I'm not fighting, but I just can't understand why you let me down."

"I?" she said in consternation, wondering why he'd changed so, whether he could ever revert to the Clyde she'd married, whether the words he was saying could ever be retracted. "You can't really mean that," she said.

He walked over to the portable bar, poured himself a drink and took it over to the couch. "You think I was unfaithful," he said. "You think I was at the restaurant with that woman, when I'd told you I was going to a meeting. And you still think so, because of that tie."

"I don't think anything any more. I want to forget it."

"I ought to confess I never really liked that tie," he said. He contemplated his drink and took a sip. "I gave it to Marty."

"Clyde!" she exclaimed. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"Marty didn't kill her," Clyde said. "He was in his office on the afternoon she was killed. He was thirty miles away."

"But," she said. She was confused now. Who *had* had dinner with Bertha Sessions on Thursday? Clyde or Marty? But it didn't matter. All Lois wanted was to forget, to have tomorrow come soon, to avoid this crisis and regain some peace of mind.

"But what?" Clyde said. "Will you finish the sentence?"

"No," she said furiously. "I don't want to finish it. I want you to."

"All right," he said. "You're still not sure, and you're afraid to ask me a direct question. But really, Lois—can you imagine my killing somebody, and then being stupid enough to leave the murder-gun where the police were bound to find it? Or pretending it had disappeared?"

She reddened. "Let's not talk about it," she said. "Give me a drink, too. Maybe I'll feel better."

He got up, went to the bar and poured out a glass of sherry. He handed it to her and she took a long gulp. It burnt like fire, and she gave a quick shudder.

"I guessed what was coming," he said, "so yesterday morning I went to see Marty and we talked it over. Between us we decided to lead the police on and let them build up a whole chain of evidence. That's why I went into hiding, to give them time to convince themselves. Then we tore the whole case apart, piece by piece."

"How?"

"There was the identification by

this waitress, which ended up in uncertainty. There was my alibi, which they can't disprove, and the gun, which wasn't mine, and the scratch marks, which I don't have. Although—" he held up his injured arm—"with this damn burn of mine, nobody can tell whether my arm was scratched or not. Anyhow, I let the police clear me and prove to themselves that I couldn't have committed the crime. My only bad moment was when they couldn't locate my gun. Now tell me what you did with it."

"I don't remember," she said miserably. "I walked in my sleep, and I have no idea where I put it." And she started crying.

During the night it came back to her, and she saw herself doing what she'd done the previous night. Taking down the shoe box and the gun. Putting the gun in the box because she was afraid to hold a loaded revolver. Walking out of the house and dumping the contents of the shoe box, there in the darkness. Afraid even to look, and then hurrying back to the house and leaving the empty box on the stoop. She remembered every detail now. Her mental block was over.

After Clyde had left the next morning, she went out to the fenced-in enclosure behind the house. Mary-Mary nipped at her skirt and barked with joy.

Lois entered the enclosure and walked straight to the kennel. It was fastened to a hinged floor, underneath which was a compartment that some former owner of the house had dug and lined with concrete. It was the secret place where Clyde, too, might have hidden the weapon.

Lois lifted the kennel and saw the pair of shoes and the two guns, and she gasped. Clyde wasn't stupid enough to use his own gun. Of course not. She was staring at the one he had bought for her, and at another one, the one he'd used.

She let the kennel drop with a bang, and she whirled around. Detective Teller, at the entrance to the enclosure, walked forward.

"Morning," he said pleasantly. "Mind if I look, too?"

TWO HEADLIGHTS stabbed their beams into the tree tops as if they came from the eyes of a back-broken monster. On the shoulder of the road, George Monroe looked down and smiled with satisfaction. Beautifully executed. A shame to have demolished the car, but what had to be done had to be done. He listened for another moment. Not a sound. Digging his heels into the loose gravel, George descended to investigate his handiwork.

A cold chill shivered across his back as he made out the limp body of Mr. Emerson, late auditor of the books at Mid-City Music Company. "Good thing I made my jump in time," George breathed.

He automatically reached to adjust his glasses, forgetting they had broken in his fall. Squinting, he looked more closely at the body to make sure. Yes, Emerson was dead all right; the unnatural angle of his head could come from nothing other than a broken neck. Suddenly the success and complete finality of his act swept over him. He squatted on his heels while the

Champagne tastes on a beer income are impossible to satisfy, as many a husband has found out to his sorrow.

moment of exhilaration passed, trying to clear his mind for the next step.

First thing to do was rough himself up a bit, look like he'd been thrown from the car. As he crouched there, George thought to himself that it wouldn't be too hard to give that impression. Just as the car pitched over the embankment, George had thrown himself out, landing on his shoulder, tearing his suit coat, and grinding gravel into his palms. He winced again as he took up a handful of dirt and wiped it across his cheek. That ought to do it. He would present a convincing appearance now when he flagged for help.

Too bad he couldn't tell Ellie about this. She admired men of action, and he had, after all, done this for her. A thin smile crossed George's lips as he started scrambling back up to the highway. Emerson was dead now, and Ellie would never know.

"A shame about him, though," George mused. "Not a bad sort, even though he did more or less bring this on himself. He shouldn't have turned up this morning at all."

Actually, the day had started quite normally.

George finished his second cup of coffee. He rolled up the newspaper and thrust it under his arm, then held his thumb on the front door latch so that it would shut easily without waking Ellie. Straightening his shoulders, he strode purposefully to the bus stop, glancing at his reflection, and lifting his chin slightly. Most younger men were careless about their posture, he felt. Made them look older, less active. "They wouldn't let themselves go like that if they were married to someone like Ellie," he thought. He inhaled a deep breath of morning air and adjusted his glasses. "Nothing like a pretty wife to keep a man on his toes."

George thought back to little more than a year ago when he and Ellie were married. He still couldn't understand why she had led him to propose, had actually encouraged him. She was so beautiful, so delicate. Her sleek blonde hair coiled about her head in unruffled perfection. Her long, slender fingers always displayed a perfect manicure. Her skin reflected a pampered softness that both invited, yet forbade him to touch it. It looked so fragile. In short, to George she was the sum of all the women who had avoided his attentions for the better part of his fifty years.

At first he had thought her naïveté about money amusing, tak-

ing her to the most expensive restaurants and exchanging balcony theater tickets for loges when she pointed out she thought they were so much more comfortable. Then, after the wedding, it was the innocent way she brought him all of her charge account slips and grocery accounts, surprised that they needed to be paid so quickly. It had pleased him to pamper her

whims, until one day he saw that he was dipping into his savings occasionally to pay for them. The first time he brought up the subject, suggesting that she be less extravagant—he tried never to think of it. First, she had called him names, the least of which was "stingy old man". Then, even worse than that, she wouldn't speak, and wouldn't let him touch her. His pleas for forgiveness were unheeded until he bought her the mink stole. Then she'd been all smiles again, and George saw what it was he had to do.

A bus sighed to a halt at his corner. George nodded to the driver, rattled a token into the coin box, and chose a front seat. His eyes really not focussing on the newspaper at all, he opened it to the financial section, folded the page lengthwise, and took a pencil from his inside suit pocket. Check. Smile. X. Frown. What a nuisance to go through this every morning. But it was part of the pattern he had established by now, helping to explain his new affluence.

George finished the last column of listings as the bus came to his stop. He folded the paper, descended to the street, and heard the bus whine on its way as he unlocked the side door to Mid-City Music. Once inside, he tossed the newspaper into a wastebasket and went to the safe. Everything was as he had left it the night before. The ledgers were stacked neatly in place; the cash box was still locked; the sales receipts were ready to be filed, and another stack of sales receipts, carefully spindled, was ready too.

George quickly totaled the sums on the spindled slips. Forty dollars. He opened the cash box and

slipped two twenty dollar bills into his pocket. He tried never to exceed that amount. "After all, no point in being greedy," he smiled as he took the receipts off the spindle and went into the wash room. Switching on the fan, he could feel the hair on the back of his neck start to bristle. No matter when or how often he went through the ritual, the apprehension of being discovered set him on edge. The scratch of the match, the pungent smell of sulphur, then of scorched paper, and with that, forty dollars worth of sales went unrecorded, washed down the sink. George breathed again as he put the empty spindle back into the safe and shuffled through the remaining stack.

It had seemed as if the entire method had been presented to him on an open platter the day the printing company sent him a duplicate shipment of sales books. All of Mid-City's records depended on the sales checks—each numbered in sequence. But with two identical sets, George could make extra sales that the company need never know about. He could just pocket the additional cash, and the spindle ritual that occurred almost daily would take care of the evidence.

As he closed the safe door and spun the dial, George started to hum, and looked up at the clock. Almost 9:30. Better air the place out and get ready to open. "There must be something to that old saying about working harder for yourself," he thought. "Ever since I've been taking home some of the day's receipts, I feel more like part of the company—in a profit-sharing way." He chuckled to himself, feeling his nervousness leave as he leaned down to pull up the shade on the front door. But tension gripped him again as the shade rolled up, revealing a pair of brown shoes, an umbrella, a briefcase, and a pair of eyes which looked in at him.

Quickly taking his keys from his pocket, George unlocked the door. "Good morning!" He stepped behind the counter. "Hope I haven't kept you waiting long." He cleared his throat, telling himself that there was no need to be nervous.

"Oh, I'm not a customer. Oh dear, no. My name is J. K. Emerson, C.P.A." He ran it all together, like a single word.

When George didn't reply, J. K. Emerson, C.P.A. continued. "Your employers have hired me to give you a hand with a mid-quarter inventory, and to take a quick check of the books. I thought they probably would have told you . . . ?" He paused, but George was still

too stunned to answer. "But then, they assigned me here only last Friday. I daresay you haven't had a chance to get your mail yet." J. K. Emerson removed his hat. "It's just routine, you know. One of those new tax regulations." He walked back toward the office. "Shall I just put my things back here?"

George nodded, trying to escape the strangling sensation in his throat. He heard the running of water coming from the washroom and felt the perspiration spring to his brow.

"Unusual aroma to the tobacco you smoke," loudly commented J. K. Emerson.

George removed his glasses, shook out a clean handkerchief and nervously polished the lenses. He had already covered the shortage in the regular inventory by faking the books. But there wasn't time to do that again. Not with Emerson right here. Had he overlooked something before? Did they suspect something? Of course not. They would have taken action before now. Besides, he had been too careful.

On the other hand, maybe too careful hadn't been careful enough. With the first money he had slipped into his pocket, George knew he would run the risk of spending years in prison. But without the money, the risk was losing Ellie.

The thought of her, probably still lying asleep right now, her dreams uncluttered with the everyday chores of paying bills, budgeting expenses, or even worrying about such things, filled him with a sudden determination. He couldn't let her think that he was a fumbling, middle-aged man who couldn't really afford her.

George slipped his glasses back onto his nose. Some men bought big cars or gambled on the races to indulge themselves. He felt it was a pity that sort of thing forced them to desperate measures. But desperate measures were necessary when it meant the difference between losing or keeping your wife. Mr. Emerson would just have to understand.

They finished the inventory just before dinnertime, but had not recorded or compared the figures yet. George suggested they relax over dinner, and as they approached the auditor's car, he stepped to the driver's side.

"There's an excellent diner just outside of town," he said. "Mind if I drive? It'll save time."

Surprised at George's audacity, Emerson hesitantly agreed. Then as they left the outskirts of town, and as George drove faster, he grew increasingly nervous.

"I say, Mr. Monroe," he said, "didn't I understand you to say the diner was quite nearby?"

"Yes, I believe I did say that."

"Then, what . . . ?"

George remembered trying to explain, much to the mounting bewilderment, then general alarm of Mr. Emerson. But it was so hard to make him understand that it had been absolutely necessary to embezzle the money. And it was even more of a problem to explain why he, Mr. Emerson, would have to be permanently silenced.

"If she ever finds out," he had said, "she would leave me." But even as the tears sprang to his eyes at the thought, he knew that Emerson would never quite understand.

Well, it was done now. At first George had thought the money would be enough to keep her; now murder was added to the price. "And she'll think it was only an accident." He couldn't help feeling a moment of pride. This had been man's work, providing for and protecting his dear wife.

In the distance, a car hummed its approach. George hurriedly scrambled to reach the road. Almost there. He could see the lights, but without his glasses, it was hard to judge how fast it was coming. He started to run, waving. His heart pounded from the hurried climb. Then he fell, and the back fender spun him back down the gravel embankment. He stopped, as limp as J. K. Emerson, C.P.A.

A girl raised her head from the driver's shoulder. "Did you feel that?"

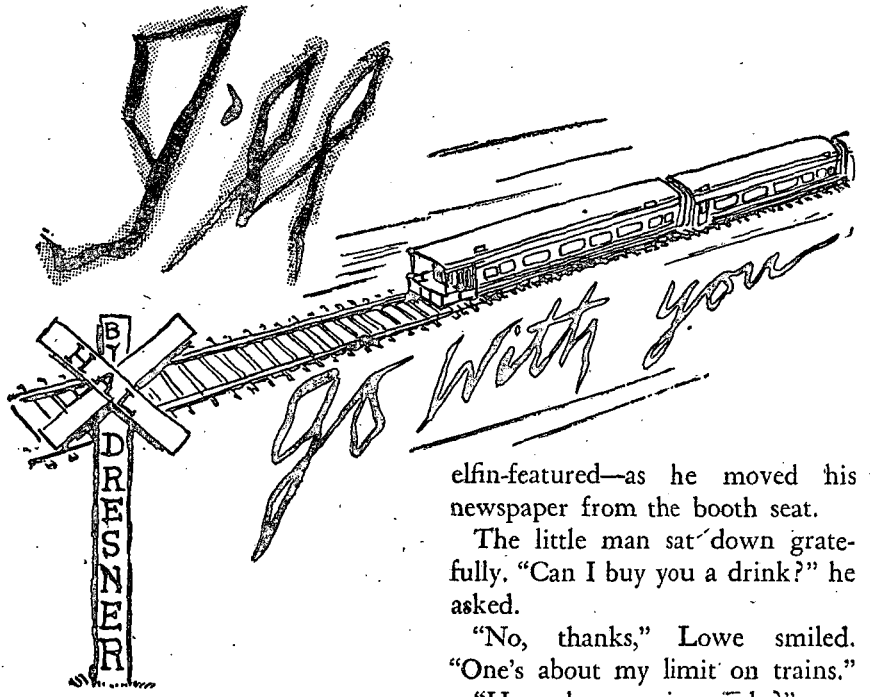
"What?"

"Nothing, I guess." She settled deep into her mink. "Probably a rock on the highway."

"Sure, baby. Here's our place." The car slowed and nosed into a side road. The driver switched off the lights. "What time did you say you had to be back?"

She ran her fingers along the back of his neck. "Oh, we've got at least an hour. George said he wouldn't be through with the auditor 'til late."

Strange as it may seem, the urge to confide in strangers is frequently exercised . . . and given way to, even by cautious people.



With an air of nervous, impulsive decision, the little man in the gray suit crossed the club car, drink in hand, and stood before Lowe.

"Mind a little company?" he asked with a strained smile.

"Not at all," Lowe said. He regarded the man—fortyish, balding, elfin-featured—as he moved his newspaper from the booth seat.

The little man sat down gratefully. "Can I buy you a drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks," Lowe smiled. "One's about my limit on trains."

"How about a ginger ale?"

"Okay. A ginger ale. Thanks."

The man ordered it and a Scotch for himself, finishing the drink he was holding in the time it took for the barman to bring the new ones. "You going far?" he asked when the attendant had left.

"Baltimore," Lowe said.

"That's where I get off, too. Bal-

timore." He paused, looked down at his drink, suddenly picked it up and drained it in a swallow. "Look," he said, "I know this must seem funny. I don't usually start conversations with strangers but I had to have someone to talk to."

"Train trips are boring," Lowe said.

"It's not that," the man said. "It's not that at all. Listen, do you mind if I talk about it? It wouldn't get you involved. It's only me they're after."

"Who?" Lowe said, slightly amused.

"The syndicate or whatever they call themselves. I don't know. It's so crazy that I'm mixed up in this at all. You know what I do for a living? I work in a Western Union office. I've worked there all my life, never held another job. I started as a delivery boy making ten dollars a week and worked my way up to office manager. Ninety-six dollars a week. Big deal. Does that sound like the kind of man to get involved with hoodlums?"

The question was obviously rhetorical.

"It's my brother," the man said. "My older brother. All my life I've always looked up to him. *He* was the smart one; *he* went to college; *he* started his own law practice. Fifteen, twenty, thirty thousand dollars a year he was making but it wasn't enough for him. Nothing was ever enough for him." He clasped his hands and stared down at them as if he were reading. "So somehow he got involved with the rackets. Maybe through one of his big shot clients, I don't know. I didn't know anything about it until two weeks ago, he came to my apartment and told me they were after him. Something about these papers that he had been holding for them and then they wanted them back so he gave them back and then somehow they found out he had a copy of them." He shrugged helplessly. "He told me so much and so fast with all the legal terms that I hardly understood a word he was saying except that he wanted *me* to hold the papers. I didn't *want* to hold them. I told him take them somewhere else, put them in a vault, anywhere. Why should I want to get involved? What do I know about rackets? I'm a plain ordinary man. But no. He said they had to be in a safe place where he could get at them in a hurry. You'd think he'd given them to his wife? No. He didn't want *her* to know anything about it. For her, it was too complicated but me—his *brother*—that was different." His jaw tightened in an expression that was both vicious

and impotent. He looked down at his empty glass and then over to Lowe's untouched ginger ale. "You sure you don't want a drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks."

"Well, I'm going to have another one." He signalled the barman. "I don't think I've had a dozen drinks in my whole life and now I feel like I've got to have one every minute. Cigarettes too. I smoked so many in the last three days, I can't stand the taste of them anymore. I'm like an animal. I don't eat. I don't sleep. All I can—" He stopped as the barman approached and waited until the man had set down the drink and left.

"They killed him," he said quietly. "A week ago they killed my brother. They rang his bell at nine o'clock at night, he opened the door and they shot him six times with a machine gun." His hand tightened about the glass and his teeth bit into his lower lip until the flesh whitened.

"When I heard about it," he said in a carefully controlled voice, "I couldn't believe it. To gangsters those things happen but to your own brother? I walked around in shock for days. Then I remembered about the papers and you know what I did?" He looked up, begging absolution. "Like a *fool,*" he said vehemently, "you know what I did? I burned them! I just dropped them down the incinerator without even opening the envelope. I tell you, I was still in a daze. All I could think was that they had killed him because of the papers so I had to get rid of them. Like a fool, I thought that. Then, three days ago, they called me. 'You've got some papers that belong to us', they said. I told them I didn't know anything about it. I told them they must have the wrong party and I hung up. The next night they called again. Then I told them I had burned the papers. I told them I hadn't even opened the envelope. I swore it to them. You know what they said to me? 'Find them', they said. That's all, just 'Find them'."

He picked up his drink and took a large swallow. When he set the glass down, he seemed to have aged another year. "You know I went down and looked in the incinerator?" he said. "I thought maybe the papers hadn't been burned yet, maybe they were still lying there."

"They weren't?" Lowe asked.

The man shook his head. "Ashes. That's all that was there. Ashes. And then last night they called again. 'By tomorrow night', they said. They were coming over the next night to pick up the papers

and I'd better have them." He took another swallow and looked at Lowe. "What would you do?" he asked pitifully. "Tell me, what would *you* do? Go to the police and if they believe you, they put a detective to sit in front of your door for a few nights? So then nothing happens and the detective leaves and then they kill me. Or maybe they get me one day when I'm going to work. Or coming home. I can't spend the rest of my life in my room. What would you do?" he asked plaintively.

"I don't know," Lowe said. "I imagine I'd do the same thing you're doing."

"I'm running away," the man said. "My mother still lives in Baltimore so that's where I'm going. It's the only place I can go. And if they know that from my brother, then I'm running right to them. For all I know they could be on the train with me this minute. What do I know about racketeers? I don't even know what they look like. If they don't look like the ones on television, I wouldn't recognize them if they came up and sat down beside me."

The barman came over with the check. He was a tall redhead with narrow features and a starched smile. "Anything else, gentlemen?" he asked.

The little man shook his head and put a bill on the table. "No change," he said.

The attendant thanked him and walked back to the bar.

"He could even be one of them," the man said pathetically.

"Maybe they decided to believe you and forget the whole thing," Lowe said.

"Maybe," the man said weakly. "And maybe I'll be dead in ten minutes, too." He finished his drink and pushed the glass from him. "I didn't mean to worry you about it," he said. "I just had to have somebody to talk to. If you're smart you'll forget all about it." He stood up, shakily. "Now I feel a little dizzy from the drinks. I think I'll go to the observation car to get some air. Goodbye," he said and started toward the door.

"Wait," Lowe said. "I'll go with you."

A NOVELETTE

Weep for the Guilty

BY HENRY SLESAR

THE TRUCK from Edalia was due at eleven o'clock, but Johnny Bree didn't have a wrist watch to mark its approach. None of them were permitted watches; their hours were measured by the commands and whistles of the guards. But Johnny needed one now, on that hot, sundrenched morning, stand-

There is as much reason to weep for the guilty as to weep for the innocent, the only question being which is which? For guilt is not merely a matter of having broken a law, it is also a matter of emotion and of feeling as well as of facts.

ing in the reddish-brown soil and looking towards the distant granary and the vanishing point of the road to Edalia.

He walked up behind Fisher, and the guard wheeled quickly. He relaxed when he saw who it was; Johnny was no trouble-maker. "What's up, Handsome?" he said.

"Stomach," Johnny said. He laced his fingers over the blue shirtfront and grimaced. "Got a cramp or something. Could I go in the shed and rest a while?"

Fisher's big, bland face looked doubtful. Then he said, "Sure, go ahead."

Johnny thanked him, and went inside.

The shed was dark and cool, with a rich farm smell. Johnny went to the sink and doused his face with water. He looked at his dripping hands and saw they were trembling. He had mentally rehearsed this moment for weeks, but now he was nervous and afraid of failure.

Five minutes later, he heard the wheel hum of the approaching supply truck. Moving swiftly, he pushed a riding cultivator towards the darkest corner and made himself a hiding place. In another minute, the truck would brake to a halt outside, and the unloading process would begin. He had observed the operation for a month. When the crates were unloaded in the shed, the driver and his helper would spend a cigarette's time with Fisher or one of the others. That was when he had to make his play.

The truck had stopped, and the doors of the shed were opening. The two men did their job methodically. Finally, the last crate had been stacked. They shut the doors when they left.

Johnny waited, and then went to the doors. Encouraged by silence, he opened one an inch, and saw the back of the truck, open.

It was now or never.

He made the rear of the truck in three leaps of his long legs. He clambered inside, crawled on all fours to the dark end. There was a loose tarp lying in back, and he pulled the heavy, damp fabric over him.

Then a figure cut off the light from the rear doors, and a hand slammed them shut. He felt the truck sway as the two men climbed into the cab. He listened to the nagging sound of the ignition and prayed. When the engine turned over, he almost sobbed with relief. They were on their way.

At a point he estimated to be ten miles away from the farm, he kicked open the rear doors and

watched the road sliding away from the wheels. He waited until the truck was going upgrade. Then he dove off, and tumbled into the grit.

Erika Lacy was in a mood only speed could satisfy. On the flat, empty stretch of highway between Sycamore Hills and town, she whipped the horsepower of her car, forgetting the admonition of her Uncle Bell. "Never drink or drive when you're angry," he had said, and Uncle Bell knew all about anger, he was the expert. He had set her a bad example, and Erika, thinking about Huey Brockton and their quarrel on the Point Placid dance floor the night before, had the same tight-mouthed expression she had seen so often on her uncle's face. With her reddish-gold hair flying in the convertible's air stream, she looked like a firecracker on the way to an explosion.

Uncle Bell himself had been the subject of the quarrel. Huey had a pointed dislike for Erika's guardian, and it was obvious where he had acquired the prejudice. His father, Howard Brockton, was Uncle Bell's business partner and chief antagonist, and their continuing feud had given Point Placid something interesting to talk about for the past three years.

Whoosh! The convertible swept by a column of roadside saplings and made them bow to its breeze. In the distance, a trailer truck was crossing the highway at Edalia Road, and she slowed down grudgingly. The action helped ease some of her tension. She thought about the lunch she was going to have with her Uncle Bell in town; he had promised to take her to the exclusive and masculine Iron Club, and she was looking forward to it. By the time she spotted the lonely, somewhat pathetic figure of the young man with the hooked thumb, she was feeling almost amiable. That was why she stopped, ignoring still another edict of Uncle Bell's: *Never pick up a hitchhiker.*

"Going to town?"

He was limping as he came forward, and trying to smile through a dust-caked face. He wore faded blue coveralls.

"Yes," she said. Then, with a sudden pang of doubt, added: "What are you doing way out here?"

"Car broke down," he grinned, opening the door.

He climbed in beside her, and Erika made a quick appraisal before driving off. He was a good-looking young man with a crooked grin that wasn't self-conscious, and

he had the ruddy brown glow of the outdoor worker.

"Must have been a hot walk," she said cheerfully. "We can stop at a gas station to see about your car, and you can get something to drink."

"Don't want to see about the car," he laughed.

"What?"

"I'm abandoning the old heap. Let the crows have it, I don't ever want to see that pile of bolts again."

Erika laughed, too. "I've got some sour balls in the glove compartment, maybe they'll keep you going a while."

"Thanks," he said, punching the button on the compartment door. "I thought I was going to have to walk all the way into town. Just quit a job over in Delmar, thought I'd go to Point Placid and see if I could do better."

"Farmer?"

"Not any more," he said fervently. "Not any more." He unscrewed the cap on the candy jar, and held it towards her. "Want one?" he said.

She was about to answer no when she felt the sudden, startling jab of the metallic point in her ribs. She stiffened, and almost let go of the wheel.

"Easy," the young man said. "This isn't very sharp but it can hurt. Just pull up to the side and keep quiet and you won't get hurt."

"What is this?" she said angrily.

"I said pull over, Miss. I wouldn't want to hurt you, you've been nice." He increased the pressure of his argument, and Erika, her eyes stinging with tears, put her foot on the brake and eased the convertible to a halt. When the car stopped, she looked down to see that his weapon was a small screwdriver, taken from the glove compartment.

She said: "This is a nice way to return a favor."

"Get out of the car, Miss."

"I won't!"

"I'll probably kill you if you don't."

She faced him, and he seemed as calm as ever. That frightened her, his calmness, and she decided it was safer outside the car. She stepped out, waiting for his next command.

"Throw that purse over."

She tossed it into the car. "You won't find much in it," she said contemptuously.

He slid under the wheel, and put the purse on the other side of him. Then he released the parking brake, and stomped the accelerator. The convertible zoomed away, kicking up dust.

"You—stinker!" Erika shouted after him. Then she started to cry. When a healthy sense of indignation returned, she stopped crying

and tried to think. It was another eight miles into Point Placid, and her chances of getting a lift on the deserted stretch of highway were small. She began to walk.

Five minutes later, she realized that her spike heels were no help on the hard-baked road. She took off her shoes, and began a barefoot march towards civilization, cursing herself for forgetting Uncle Bell's good advice.

In the distance, she saw a promising puff of dust. It was a car, heading in the wrong direction, but she stepped into the middle of the road and began to wave frantically. When it was a hundred yards away, she saw that she was flagging her own convertible.

It drove past her a few feet; then the young man in the blue coveralls swung the wheel sharply and made a U-turn. He cut the engine, and leaned over the door.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She hobbled across the road. He got out of the car on the far side and just waited, hangdog.

"I said I'm sorry," he repeated. "I don't know what made me do that, I must have been crazy with the heat."

She put her shoes on, and then climbed behind the wheel. She didn't touch the pedal. "I don't get it," she said flatly.

"There's nothing to get. I'm no thief, I just made a mistake. I didn't touch anything in your purse. You want to check?"

She chewed her lip. "I trust you."

"You don't have any reason."

"You came back," Erika said. "I guess that's reason enough." She turned her head and glared at him. "Well, get in. You won't enjoy walking; I know I didn't."

"You mean that?"

She put the car into gear. Quickly, the young man opened the right-hand door and climbed in beside her."

"My name is Johnny Brennan," he said.

She knew he wanted to talk, and that her silence would be the best incentive. More than that, Erika knew she wanted to listen.

"I've never done anything like this before," he said. "When that old jalopy of mine broke down, I guess it was the last straw. All I could think about was getting away someplace, anywhere, doing something different."

"When I quit that job over in Delmar, I swore I'd never work a farm again. I've got brains. You can't think on a farm, you're just another animal—"

"There are college graduates on farms these days."

He laughed bitterly. "Not the

kind I work. Dirt farmers, pig farmers. I want to wear a white shirt for a change. Only who'd hire me? They smell hay on me the minute I walk into a place. And it's all because of the war . . ."

"The war?"

"You probably don't even know what war I'm talking about; it's that mess we had over in Korea. I joined the Army when I was sixteen, lying about my age just to get away from home. I was over on Heartbreak Ridge when I was eighteen. I was just a dumb kid. I didn't know what it was all about. I ended up getting shot to pieces."

"I'm sorry," Erika said quietly.

"I wasn't too bad off; a hospital was a better place than a battlefield, only it was a long war for me. It took them eight years to put me together again. At that, I did better than Humpty-Dumpty.

"By the time they let me go, I was pale and skinny and in need of exercise. The Army doctors recommended outdoor work; they got me my first farm job. Since then, I've been trying to get away from it. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I guess so," Erika said. "I don't agree with you, maybe, but I can see how you feel. My grandfather was a farmer, but my uncle, my father's brother, he always hated the life. He ran away from the farm when he was eighteen years old."

"How did he do?"

"He did all right. He owns the Lacy Machine Company in Point Placid; he and his partner, anyway."

Johnny whistled.

"That's where I was going before you stopped me," Erika said. "To meet my Uncle Bell for lunch. Before you made your debut as a bandit." She smiled. "That's one profession I'm afraid you won't succeed at."

"I know what you mean," Johnny grinned. "Of course, if I'd known you were an heiress, I might have been tougher. Bet you've got a million bucks in that purse."

"That's what you think. I've got exactly thirty dollars."

"Well, that's thirty bucks more than I've got. When I left Delmar, I didn't even wait for my back wages. I don't even own a decent suit of clothes."

Erika gave him a sidelong glance, and did something impulsive. She picked up the purse and dropped it into his lap.

"Open it," she said. "Take the money."

"No," Johnny said firmly. "I didn't mean you to take it that way. If I wanted your dough, I could have stolen it."

"I want you to have it," Erika

said. "You'll need a suit of clothes if you're looking for a job."

"I wouldn't even know where to look."

Erika hesitated.

"I know one place," she said. "I've got an in with the boss. I don't know what kind of job it would be, maybe even sweeping floors. But I could put in a good word for you."

Ahead of them, glinting in the sun, was the tower of the Point Placid Hotel, surrounded by the smaller structures of factories and office buildings. Johnny stared towards the low skyline before answering.

"You mean your uncle?" he said. "You'd do that for me?"

"He's usually pretty agreeable when he's eating," she said lightly. "Won't be any harm in asking. Go on, take the money. Buy a gray suit; it's Uncle Bell's favorite color. I'll tell him that you'll be dropping around the front office at three o'clock; he'll be expecting you."

"This is nuts. You don't owe me anything."

"No, but you'll owe me thirty dollars. I'll expect it back, once you're working." She laughed. "The address is 300 Main Street. And you better be on time. Uncle Bell's a bug on punctuality. And a few other things."

Johnny Brennan looked at the purse, and frowned. Then he opened it.

The Lacy Machine company was at the end of Main Street, and its boundaries were marked by a high wire fence and several pugnacious men in uniform. The plant itself was spread out like a game of dominoes, with half a dozen one-story buildings jutting out at right angles towards each other. Johnny, walking up to the main gate in a poorly-fitting suit that had cost twenty dollars of Erika's thirty, peered through the wire mesh at the sprawling factory and decided that Uncle Bell was doing very well indeed.

He ran a gauntlet of gate guards, receptionists, and secretaries, and finally faced the mahogany door of Beldon Lacy's office. He knocked, and a gruff voice told him to come in.

He had expected something lavish, but found only size and clutter. There were two large desks, one used as a repository for papers and debris; the other faced the window and was almost as disordered. Behind it was a high-backed swivel chair, and the head denting the leather cushion was striking in its ferocity. It was the face of a warrior and the impression didn't disappear when Bell Lacy stood up

and revealed the ordinary striped tie and dull gray suit of the businessman. Under a high forehead, his eyebrows overhung dark sockets; a big nose was complemented by a jutting chin; there were small scars on both cheeks. Johnny had a hard time relating Erika Lacy's sweet mouth and incandescent eyes to her uncle's features.

"I'm Johnny Brennan," he said shyly. "I was told to be here."

Lacy wiped a hand quickly across his mouth.

"Yes, sure," he said. "Erika told me about you. Shut that door, will you? Place is full of drafts."

"Yes, sir." He shut the door quietly.

"Come on over here," Lacy said, coming around the front of the desk. He was grinning oddly.

Johnny walked up to him. Lacy put both fists on his hips and looked him over. The grin tightened.

"So you're Johnny, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

Lacy didn't hurry. He pulled back his right arm, and Johnny had plenty of time to see the hard ball of his fist looming up like a rock. When it landed on the side of his jaw, he was knocked halfway back to the wall. He stumbled over his own feet, and when he tried to get up, he couldn't tell wall from ceiling.

Lacy's hand came towards him, and he flinched, but it was being offered in aid. Johnny hesitated, and then accepted. He was pulled to his feet, and Lacy said:

"That was for what you did to my niece. Now if you still want to talk about a job—have a seat."

Johnny looked at the face. There was neither hostility or apology in it.

"Okay," he said numbly.

Looking back on the interview, Johnny couldn't recall much of it. His jaw was aching, and the machine-gun questions rattling out of Beldon Lacy's mouth were almost too fast to duck.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Parents alive?"

"Don't know."

"Don't *know?*"

"I mean—yes. I think so."

"Ever do anything but farm jobs?"

"I worked in a gas station for about a month."

"Mechanic?"

"No, sir. Just cleaning up, filling tanks."

"Can you run a lathe, a drill press?"

"No."

"Clerical work? Typing? Do filing?"

"I'm not much good at it."

"What *can* you do?"

Johnny rubbed his aching face.

"There's a dispensary on the second floor," Lacy said sourly. "Stop in there on your way out and get some court plaster on that bruise. Don't tell 'em where you got it, I got a bad enough reputation around here as it is."

"I wasn't going to tell them."

"You deserve a lot worse. I could report you to the police for what you did." He stood up, scowling. "This is probably the dumbest thing I've ever done," he said. "And I've done plenty. I'm going to fix you up with a job in the Supply Department. You'll work for an old geezer named Gabriel, he runs the place. You'll help him take care of the tool room and see that the men get the stuff they need. The pay is sixty bucks a week. You want it or not?"

Johnny swallowed hard. "Yes," he said. "I want it."

"I'll expect you to keep an extra clean nose around here. Erika thinks you're some kind of hero, all because you changed your mind about robbing her. That doesn't rate with me."

"I guessed that," Johnny said, moving his jaw.

Lacy laughed suddenly.

"It wasn't a bad right cross, was it? I used to do some pro boxing when I was twenty. In those days, a ring record was like a Phi Beta Kappa key. My first boss at the iron works hired me because he liked my style. Business was a lot rougher in those days. And a lot better," he added bitterly. "Okay, that's all. Report to this building on Monday morning, nine o'clock."

"All right," Johnny said.

"You'll like it here," Lacy sneered. "It's a real nursery school. You'll get free hospitalization, time and a half for overtime, bonuses, pensions. You'll even get a free physical; that's for group insurance. We do everything but wipe your nose for you."

"Nobody has to wipe my nose."

"Payday is next Friday. Got anything to live on now?"

"Not much."

Lacy took out his wallet and peeled off two tens. "That's an advance," he said. "We'll bite it off your first check."

"Thanks," Johnny said.

He walked out of the administration building without making the turn towards the dispensary. He spent the rest of the afternoon in an idle stroll around town. At six, he saw a sign in a brownstone window that read: ROOMS. He inquired, and the cheapest was a one-room rear that rented for nine dollars a week, payable in advance.

He borrowed a stamp, writing

paper, and an envelope from the landlady, and put a dollar bill inside. Then he checked the phone directory for Erika Lacy's address. He found it listed beneath Beldon Lacy's name: RFD 1, Sycamore Hills. Then he wrote a note.

Dear Heiress, it read. *This is the first installment. I now owe you twenty-nine dollars and thanks.*

Johnny

P.S. I'm working. Can I see you sometime? How about Saturday?

As she came up the driveway to the stone house on the hillside, Erika saw her Uncle Bell's car parked in the garage. Beldon Lacy rarely came home from the factory on week nights, preferring to spend them in his spartan room at the Iron Club. When he did show up, it was usually under the impetus of a black mood.

She found him in the living room, with an unopened bottle of whiskey and an empty glass.

"Hi," she said, trying to smile. "What happened? Club throw you out for not paying your bar bill?"

"Just felt like coming home."

She took the seat opposite and studied him. "I know you better than that. Something's bothering you. Is it Brockton?"

"Isn't it always Brockton? Only this time things have come to a head."

"What's he done?"

"It's not what he's done. It's what he plans to do. He came into my office today and asked me to reconsider his offer. I told him I wouldn't sell my interest for a million bucks, just like I always told him. That didn't shut him up."

"He can't *force* you to sell—"

"Can't he? You don't know Brockton. He can't tell a bit from a bushing, but he can do more tricks than Houdini." He picked up the whisky bottle and looked at the label. "He's calling a special meeting of the stockholders. He's planning to make a proxy fight out of it."

"Fight? What do you mean?"

"He thinks he can get enough stockholder support to put me in the freezer for good. If he can't buy me out, he can push me out, me and my old-fashioned methods."

"It won't work," Erika said flatly. "The plant can't do without you, Uncle Bell. Even if Brockton doesn't realize it, the other stockholders will. You *built* the place."

"Don't underestimate him, Erika. That was the mistake I made three years ago. He knows how to cozen people, he talks dividends to them, capital gains, all that junk." He broke the seal on the bottle, and poured himself a drink. "I don't mean to cry on your shoulder. I'll handle Brockton, don't worry. I've always been able to take care of

myself." He downed the drink quickly, and then stood up. "Think I'll hit the sack early," he said.

She watched him move slowly to the door, hesitating before asking her next question. "Uncle Bell—"

"Yes?"

"Did Johnny Brennan start work today?"

He turned. "Yeah, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. We put him through the wringer, and he'll start in the Supply Department tomorrow. I'll have to tell Gabe to keep an eye on him, see that he doesn't walk off with the petty cash."

"That's not fair," Erika said. "I told you about him, Uncle Bell, he's no thief."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because no thief would have done what he did. I think you can trust him."

"Do you trust him?" he asked quizzically.

"Yes."

Her uncle frowned. "Didn't you tell me he was some kind of war hero? In Korea?"

"I didn't say he was a hero, only that he was shot up pretty bad. He was in an Army hospital for a long time."

"That's funny," he grunted. "On account of he passed his insurance physical with flying colors. Those Army doctors must have done quite a job."

Erika started. "No sign of a wound?"

"Not a mark on him, arms, legs, no place. That'll teach you to be so trusting, moppet. You don't know people the way I do." He looked dejected, and turned back to the doorway. He paused there a moment, and said: "There's some mail for you. I left it on the hall table."

Alone in the living room, Erika tried not to think about Johnny Brennan, but thoughts of him kept intruding. She was glad for the interrupting sound of automobile tires on the gravel in the driveway.

She knew it was Huey Brockton even before she reached the front hall; the staccato sound of the buzzer was in his own playful rhythm. She didn't open the door, but leaned against it and said:

"Sorry, nobody home."

"Aw, come on, Erika."

"Go away, Huey, it's late."

"I've got to talk to you a minute. Please," he said pitifully. "It's freezing out here."

She couldn't stop the smile. She opened the door on the warm August night. Huey, wearing a silky sports shirt with tight-rolled sleeves, was hugging himself.

"Brr," he said. "Must be an early frost." He closed the door behind him and reached for her. She

pulled away quickly. "A *very* early frost."

"Cut it out," she said. "You have a short memory. As I recall, I said I didn't want to see you again."

"We all make mistakes," he grinned, running a palm over his glossy blond hair. "Besides, I came to apologize. I didn't mean all that stuff I said about your uncle. I really like the old guy, Erika, honest."

"I'll bet you do, you and your father."

"Look, can I help it if Dad and your uncle don't get along? The best thing we can do is get together ourselves. A sort of peace treaty."

"Very touching," Erika said coldly. "And I suppose you know what your father's doing now? About the stockholder meeting?"

"I never pay any attention to that jazz."

"You know what he's trying to do, don't you? He's trying to throw Uncle Bell out on his ear. Isn't that true?"

"Business is business," Huey said reasonably. "If your uncle can't handle himself, he ought to quit. Now will you stop yammering about that lousy factory and talk about us? I want to see you this Saturday."

Erika turned her back on him, and went to the hall table. There were three envelopes on the surface, laying addressed side up.

"Well, what about it?" Huey said.

She opened the first one, and read its brief contents.

"I said what about it?" Huey said testily. "Can I see you Saturday night?"

"No," Erika smiled. "No, I'm afraid not, Huey. I've got another date."

If it hadn't been for Gabriel Lesca, Johnny would have given up his new job the second day. The Supply Department of the Lacy Company looked like the storage center for the biggest, most intricate jigsaw puzzle in the world. There must have been two thousand bins containing tools and machine parts, and if Lacy expected him to memorize them all, he was crazy.

But old Gabe Lesca gathered up the wrinkles of his lined face in an understanding grin. "It's okay, kid," he said. "Nobody expects you to catch on right away, it's taken me forty years to figure this place out. You just do what I say. I'll take the check-out tickets, and you hunt up the parts for me according to the bin numbers. Then one night a week, you can take the inventory."

"At night?"

"Yeah, Friday nights you work until eight; we can't do the inventory during working hours. Don't worry, though," he chuckled, "you get paid overtime for them extra hours."

Gabe was the oldest working man Johnny had ever seen. He would have guessed the old man was over seventy, but when he knew him well enough to ask the question, Gabe winked and said sixty-four. Johnny wasn't surprised to learn that Gabe was the company's oldest employee, that he had worked side by side with Beldon Lacy when the first Lacy Machine Shop opened at the close of World War I. When Gabe spoke of the boss, and that was often, he spoke reverently.

"They don't make 'em like Bell Lacy anymore," Gabe told him at lunch one day. "Bell built every stick and stone of this place. Yes, there's some don't like him, and maybe with good reason, but there ain't no man that don't give him credit."

"What about this Brockton?" Johnny asked. "The name seems to be a dirty word around here."

"It is," the old man said bitterly. "Around '58, when times got tough, the company was in deep water. Sales were slowing down, orders were being cancelled, and Bell was stuck with a load of new equipment that he couldn't pay for.

"Then this fella Brockton got into the act. He had something Bell needed right then. Money. He offered to buy into the place, pay for the new equipment and keep the payroll up, if Bell would give him a partnership. Well, there wasn't much else Bell could do.

"Little by little, Brockton's been trying to take over completely. He's the one talked Bell into selling shares in the company, and we got more dang owners than you can shake a stick at. That spells trouble for Bell, you wait and see."

"It's a business, isn't it?" Johnny said. "As long as Brockton's doing a good job—"

"He's out for Bell's scalp!" said the old man angrily. "And that's all he wants. That's what this dang stockholders' meeting is about. It ain't fair!" Gabe said, pounding the cafeteria table and drawing curious eyes. "It just ain't fair!"

Someone at the next table said something, and there was a round of laughter. Gabe drew himself up stiffly and finished the rest of his meal in silence.

Johnny's landlady turned out to be a motherly type. She moved the buttons on his suit jacket, and altered the cuffs of the trousers, and when he dressed for his Saturday

date with Erika Lacy, he was looking a good deal more dapper.

In her note, Erika had suggested that she pick him up at the rooming house in her car. When the convertible braked at the curb, he climbed in with an embarrassed grin. "I feel like a gigolo," he said.

Erika laughed. "It's only practical that we use my car. There aren't many places you can go in Point Placid without one."

He let Erika choose the restaurant. It was a small wood-frame building almost hidden from the road. The dining room was small, the atmosphere congenial, and the menu, Johnny noted with relief, featured low-cost dishes. He ordered a bottle of red wine, and it proved to be a good investment. Talk flowed easier.

"Then you really don't mind the job?" Erika asked. "Even if you can't understand all those parts?"

"I'm learning," Johnny said cheerfully. "I can now tell you the difference between a cam and a crankpin. Also a slotter, a lapper, a honer, and a swager."

"Sounds like a foreign language."

"It is—to a guy just off a farm. If it wasn't for old Gabe, I'd really be in a fix. He's a great guy, but I'd hate to guess how old he is."

"Sixty-four," Erika smiled. "He's been one year under retirement for ages. But nobody bothers about that; they know that Gabe will quit the day he can't function at his best. The plant won't be the same without him."

She seemed saddened at the thought; or perhaps at something else. Then she looked up seriously and said:

"Johnny, could I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"When you were in the veteran's hospital, did they give you a lot of plastic surgery? For your wounds, I mean?"

He stiffened. "Yeah, sure. Why do you ask?"

"Uncle Bell said something about your insurance physical. Said you passed with flying colors."

He knew he had to be careful.

"I don't like to think about it," he said gravely. "I must have had fifty operations to patch me up."

She put her hand on his. "Don't talk about it. Just talk about the future."

"That's okay with me."

They left the restaurant at nine, and Erika asked if Johnny wanted to drive. He accepted, and slid behind the wheel.

They were just turning onto the main highway when they heard the insistent beep behind them. Erika turned in the convertible seat and made an exclamation of surprise and irritation. Johnny, eyes

on the mirror, watched the white sports car hugging the rear bumper, and frowned.

"What goes here?"

"It's nothing," Erika said. "Just a road hog. Keep going, Johnny."

He stomped the accelerator and tried to pull away from the two-seater. The sports engine roared and moved the low-slung car within inches of the convertible's rear. When Johnny tried to shake him by making a quick turn into a side road, the white auto matched his speed and then shot out in front of him, slowing them down.

"Watch where you're going!" Johnny yelled, hitting the brake. As the white car weaved drunkenly in front of them, he cursed and brought the convertible to a halt. The driver of the sports car stopped, too.

Johnny started to slam out of the car, his eyes on fire. Erika's hand fell on his arm, restraining him.

"Don't," she said hurriedly. "It's a boy I know. He's only being funny—"

"Some joke. I think I'll teach him some manners."

"Please, Johnny!"

The driver was getting out of the bucket seat and coming towards them. He was tall and lean, with glossy blond hair, and the suit he was wearing made Johnny's twenty-dollar bargain look it.

"Hi," he said casually. "How you been, Erika?"

"Have you been following us?" she said hotly.

He grinned, and looked at Johnny. "We haven't been introduced. My name's Huey Brockton. Maybe Erika's mentioned me."

Johnny studied the handsome face for a moment. Then he said: "As a matter of fact, she did. There was a pig with an apple in its mouth in the restaurant. She said it reminded her of somebody she knew."

Huey flushed, and looked at the girl.

"I wanted to see who you were dating. You didn't tell me it was the guy who swept the factory."

Johnny opened the car door, and Erika gasped.

"Please," she said. "Don't make any trouble. Huey, this is all your fault."

"Get back in your kiddy car, sonny," Johnny said.

"Who's going to make me?" When Johnny stepped up to him, he put his hand in his pocket. "Don't get wise, fella. I've got something in here that hurts."

"What is it? A rattle?"

Johnny moved. His left hand preceded him, whipping out in a jab that found Huey Brockton's chin and sent him reeling back. In the car, Erika screamed as Huey

hit dirt. When he got up, his right hand was out of his pocket, the knife blade touched by moonlight.

"Don't! Don't!" Erika cried. "Leave him alone!"

Huey made a lunge in Johnny's direction. He avoided the thrust easily, sidestepping to catch Huey's arm in both hands. He slammed the arm against the side of the open convertible, the shock urging the knife out of Huey's fingers. Erika tried to reach it, but Johnny was faster. He grabbed the handle, spun Huey around in a half-nelson, and then brought the blade under his chin.

"Now," Johnny said. "Now let's see . . ."

"Leggo!" Huey grunted.

The blade edge touched his throat, and Huey's eyes bugged at the cold, deadly sensation.

"I'm going to kill you," Johnny whispered. "I'm going to slit you like a chicken."

Erika was out of the car. She pulled at Johnny's arm, but he was immoveable rock. "Please, Johnny," she begged.

"I didn't want to play games with you," Johnny said. "But if I play it's for keeps. So you're going to die . . ."

Huey's eyes rolled. "Erika, help me!"

"Johnny," the girl sobbed, "Johnny, let him go!"

It took a moment, but his head began to clear. He relaxed his grip on Huey's arm, and then shoved him away. He stared down at the knife in his hand as Huey ran for his car. Then, as the sports engine roared into life, Johnny threw the knife into the woods and looked after it.

He got back into the car, dreamlike. Erika took the wheel, but didn't start the car. "Johnny," she whispered.

He put his hands over his eyes.

"I was going to kill him," he said.

"You weren't. You didn't mean it."

"I was going to kill him, Erika. Like those others. Like all those others."

She shrank back against the seat "Others?"

He couldn't look at her.

"There were four of them. I killed them all. Don't ask me why I did it, Erika, I don't know. But I killed them all."

"I lied to you," Johnny said.

"My name isn't Brennan, it's Johnny Bree. At least, that's what they called me. I told you I'd just come off a farm job. That was half right. I was working on a farm, all right, but it wasn't the kind you know. It's a place where they

grow the stuff to feed the prisoners."

"I didn't even know there was a prison near here."

"They don't call it that. They've got fancier names for it. I'm no ordinary criminal, Erika, I'm one of those mental cases you hear about. How does that make you feel?" He looked at her accusingly. "Well? When do you start screaming?"

"I won't scream, Johnny."

"Aren't you afraid? I'm a loony. Criminally insane. When I lose my head, people get killed. Like that boyfriend of yours . . ."

"But you let him go. You didn't hurt him."

"Sure," he said bitterly. "I'm making progress. That's why they trusted me to work the farm camp, because I'd been such a good boy. Those first few years—that was different. I don't remember when I arrived, or what I was doing there. It was like I was born in that place, a brand-new infant. Then—don't ask me how—I started coming out of the fog. I'd recognize a face the second time I saw it. I learned how to feed myself, dress myself, act like a rational human being. I couldn't remember much of the past, but I could get along okay in the present. But the future . . ."

"They must have been sure of the future, Johnny. They wouldn't have let you go if they weren't."

He became silent; the night sounds took over.

"But why were you there, Johnny? Do you know that?"

"That's the one thing I do know. The one thing I remember for sure. For some reason, I killed four men. It was something I couldn't help, a compulsion I couldn't control. I can't remember their names, or their faces, or where it happened. But I remember doing it, clearly."

He shut his eyes.

"One of them, I killed with a knife—just like I might have killed Huey Brockton."

Erika's gasp was involuntary. He didn't hear it.

"I strangled another one. I can still feel his throat under my fingers.

"The other two, I shot to death."

He turned to face her, and the agony of expression must have frightened her more than his confession. She moved away from him.

"I can't believe it," she said. "It must have been some sort of delusion . . ."

"It wasn't," he said harshly. "I don't know much about myself, but I know that much. It wasn't a delusion. *It was murder.*"

He knew she was going to cry out. The scream had been suppressed too long; it emerged more of a whimper, a sound of pain rath-

er than an expression of terror.

He got out of the car. She didn't try to stop him, and he didn't want to be stopped. He began walking down the road, in the opposite direction.

When the convertible was a speck in the distance, he heard the growl of its engine, and watched it disappear.

He was in the Point Placid bus depot an hour later, looking at a schedule that disappointed him; there would be no bus until Sunday morning at ten.

There was an empty bus in the alleyway, its doors open and its interior dark, the leather seats sweating in the high humidity. The slatted wooden benches of the waiting room were damp, too, and the atmosphere had a depressing, rancid smell.

An old man came through the doors, clanking a pail and mop together. He swirled a wave of soapy water on the tiled floor, and began to swish the mop lazily in the gray foam.

"All right if I stay here?" Johnny said.

"Eh?"

"Okay if I wait in the station? I missed my bus."

The old man laughed, and went on mopping. Johnny put his feet up on a bench, and lay on his back. There were eight pale yellow bulbs in the ceiling fixture, and he counted them over and over. Before long, he was asleep.

When he woke up, an early morning sun was in his face, and someone was shaking his foot.

"Come on," a voice said.

He sat up painfully, and looked at the deep-lined warrior's face of the man standing over him.

"That's a hell of a place to sleep," Beldon Lacy said. "Murder on the spine."

"Mr. Lacy—"

"Can you use a cup of coffee? There's a joint on the corner. The coffee's hot, that's all you can say for it." He put his hand on Johnny's elbow, and helped him up.

Lacy didn't say anything else until they were in the diner, with two steaming mugs in front of them. After his first sip, Lacy grunted.

"Okay," he said. "So you were running out on the job. First paycheck, and you're off. That's a heck of an attitude."

"Did Erika tell you what happened?"

"She told me."

"Then why do you think I was leaving town?"

"Look, buster. All I know is that Erika walks into the house blubbering like a kid with a busted balloon, just because you and Huey

got into some kind of a tangle."

"It was more than that."

"I know; Huey pulled a knife. I always knew there was a mean streak in that twerp, it runs in the family."

"Is that all she told you?"

"No." Lacy stirred his coffee, the frown lines deepening. "She said you'd been sick. That you got into some jam when you were a kid, and got locked up for it."

Johnny's heart was thudding. Erika hadn't told her uncle the most significant fact of all. Why?

"She said you were probably going to run away," Lacy said. "I checked with your rooming house and found you weren't there, so I thought of the bus station next."

"Why?" Johnny said. "Why'd you bother?"

"How do I know?" Lacy growled. "Because Erika wanted me to, I guess. And besides, you can't run out on old Gabe. He was just getting used to you. So I'll expect you back on the job tomorrow."

"I can't do that," Johnny said.

Lacy's hand went to his shoulder. It wasn't just a friendly gesture.

"I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. Nobody runs out on me, buddy, me *or* my niece. Nobody has to know anything about your past, and I'll see that our friend Huey keeps his mouth shut. Not that he'll want to brag about what happened."

Johnny finished the last inch of coffee in his mug.

"All right," he said. "You're the boss."

On Wednesday, Johnny put a new check-out system into operation. It was his own idea, involving a day-to-day ticketing of parts that would make Friday's inventory sessions a great deal faster. Gabe Lesca had seen the common-sense of the plan as soon as Johnny described it.

"You watch it, boy," he warned good-naturedly. "They'll yank you off this cushy job and turn you into an executive."

Johnny had blushed, and looked pleased.

Friday night, Johnny left the plant at the last shrill of the five o'clock whistle, leaving Gabe in the locker room. He wasn't due back until six for the final inventory of the week, and he spent the intervening hour at the diner across the road. The food was greasy, but he didn't notice.

When he returned to the plant, he went to the supply room and started going over the check-out slips. He wasn't going to benefit from the results of the new inventory system for another week, so

he had a good two hours of work ahead of him. Then he had a sudden concern. Would there be another week? Or would the stockholder's meeting that was scheduled for Monday put an end to his new life?

Howard Brockton. He said the name aloud, and realized he had never seen the man who was causing so much grief in the Lacy Company and Lacy household.

He bent to his work. He didn't look up again until eight-fifteen.

On his way out of the plant, he took the short cut through the administration building to reach the main gate.

At the end of a long corridor of executive offices, there was a partly opened door, spilling yellow light onto the polished floor. Somebody was working late in administration, too.

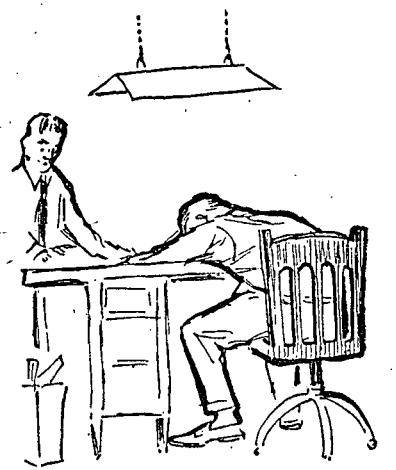
As he came closer, he saw Howard Brockton's name on the wall plaque. If he went by slow enough, he might actually glimpse the ogre in his lair.

What he saw startled him. The man was behind a large oak desk in the office, but his head was resting on the blotter. The light of the desk lamp gleamed on a bald scalp, and put a highlight in the circular stain that spread out from his chin.

He walked into the office, and said:

"Mr. Brockton?"

He touched the man's shoulder. Then he saw the color of the stain, and knew he was beyond response. He pushed him back in the chair, and saw that he had walked in on a dead man. The left half of his skull had been crushed, the skin of his cheek split like a ripe melon, the blood still wet on his face. He was a small-featured man, with colorless eyes. If there was cruelty



and calculation in him, it must have registered in his expression, and all that was wiped away by death.

Then Johnny heard the rattling, heavy-footed sound of the Lacy night watchman, coming down the hall, and he grasped the real horror of the moment.

If he were found in this office, how could he explain it? How

could he answer the questions they were bound to ask? Who was he? Where did he come from? What was his real name? Why was he hired? And then his answers. *I'm Johnny Bree. I'm a murderer. I've escaped from an asylum for the criminally insane. And I'm innocent, innocent!*

The watchman's footsteps halted outside the door. His hand was on the knob, and he was pulling it the wrong way. Open.

"Mr. Brockton?"

Johnny made his bolt for freedom. It meant a headlong rush at the guard, and surprise was his best weapon. But the man's reflexes were good; he flailed out and caught Johnny's arm. Johnny lashed out with his right fist and broke away, running down the hall even after the shouted warning.

"Stop! Stop or I'll have to shoot!"

At the end of the corridor, his soles slid on the polished floor for the last six inches, and he tugged at the knob of the outside door. Then he was in the courtyard, past the unguarded gate before the watchman could hinder him. But even as he went on a dead run into town, he knew the worst of the night was still to come, when the watchman found what had been left behind in Howard Brockton's office.

He climbed into a taxi and gave the Lacys' address, without knowing whether he wanted to see Erika or his boss. Then he discovered that it was a radio cab; that meant its low-powered network was available for commandeering by the police. If they were after him already, the bored, nasal commands of the dispatcher might be interrupted at any moment. *To all drivers . . . be on the lookout for . . .*

But no message came; they climbed the slope of Sycamore Hills, and he was safely at the Lacy front door.

Erika answered his ring. She was wearing a black dress, with some of the buttons undone.

"Johnny . . ."

"I've got to talk to you, Erika. Will you let me in?"

He gave her no time to think about it. He stepped inside and closed the door quickly.

"Is your uncle home?"

"No. He's at his club. What's wrong, Johnny?"

"I've got something to tell you. I wanted to tell your uncle, too. It's about Brockton."

"Howard Brockton?"

"He's dead, Erika. He was killed."

She put a closed fist to her mouth.

"Don't think that!" Johnny yelled. "I was working late at the plant; I found his body. But the

night watchman caught me in the office and I ran away. He saw me, Erika, they'll think I had something to do with it!"

She was staring ahead, unresponsive. He grabbed her thin shoulders and shook them.

"Believe me!" he shouted. "Believe me, Erika, please!"

The phone was ringing in the living room. Erika moved towards the doorway, waiting to see if he would stop her. He didn't, but only followed and watched.

"Yes, Uncle Bell . . ."

He took the phone from her ear.

". . . on his way there," he heard Bell Lacy say. "That's what the cab dispatcher told us. So get in the car and beat it, go to the Club and stay there until I arrive. Got that?"

Johnny pointed to the mouthpiece, and nodded.

"Yes," Erika said. "Yes, I understand, Uncle Bell."

"I should have known better," the voice said. "I never should have let him into the plant. Now look at the mess."

"Uncle Bell, listen—"

Johnny clutched her arm, warning her with pain.

"All right," she said. "I'll leave right now. But I can't believe Johnny did it, it's just not possible."

"He did it, all right, he was caught in the act. You told me yourself he was a killer; maybe he thought he was doing me some kind of favor, the poor slob. Don't waste time, Erika!"

She hung up. "What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Get me your car keys!"

She went to the hall closet. He came after her, and saw her struggling with a coat on a hanger. He pushed her aside and reached down to the closet floor.

There was a double-barreled shotgun leaning against the side. He picked it up, glowering at her.

"No, Johnny," she said. "I swear I wasn't going to do that. I was looking for the keys."

"Get them."

She found them in the pocket of a raincoat, and handed them over. He took them, and went to the door, but as he opened it, the light burst against him like an exploding shell. He slammed it shut and leaned against it.

"What is it?" Erika said. "What's happening?"

"The police. They're out there already."

He hoisted the shotgun and motioned her back to the living room. There was a drumbeat in his body, pacing his actions. He went to the front window and pulled back the curtain; there was a black-and-white trooper's car out front, its spotlight trained on the doorway. A figure moved into its glare, and

raised a bell-shaped object to his lips.

"Brennan!" the amplified voice said. "Brennan, this is Captain Demerest of the State Police. This is not an arrest. We want you to come out of there so we can talk to you."

Erika moaned. "Do what they say, Johnny!"

"We can't wait too long, Brennan," the voice said. "Every minute you stay in there counts against you."

A second car was pulling up the hill, its brakes screeching. Four troopers piled out, their arms laden with weapons. Johnny snorted, and edged up to the window.

"I'm not coming out!" he yelled.

"Send the girl out, Brennan! Don't make things worse!"

He turned to Erika, his face agonized.

"I can't," he said. "I just can't do that, Erika." Then, to the police: "Don't try and break in! I've got a gun in here! I'll kill her if you try to break in!"

He moved away from the window, and went to her.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "You know I won't, Erika."

"This can't help you, Johnny. You'll have to give in to them, sooner or later."

"Later, then. Later!"

It was later, much later, before he heard another stir from the cordon outside the stone house. For more than an hour, the law forces of town and state were conferring on appropriate steps. For Johnny, sitting in the living room with the shotgun across his legs, the postponement was a respite; it was torment.

Then the portable loudspeaker sounded again.

"Johnny! Can you hear me? This is Beldon Lacy!"

Erika whimpered at the familiar voice.

"Listen to me, Johnny. Nobody wants to hurt you. Throw that gun away and come out here."

"Please," Erika murmured. "Listen to him, Johnny. You know Uncle Bell likes you . . ."

"You think I didn't hear what he said on the phone? He said I was a killer . . ." The word jarred him as he said it. "How did he know that, Erika? He said you'd told him I'd been sick. But nothing about those . . . men I killed."

"I told him," Erika said. "Of course, I told him, Johnny, I always tell him everything."

"Then he knew I was a murderer. But he still wanted me to work for him? Why, Erika?"

"Johnny!" the loudspeaker boomed. "Will you listen to reason You've got friends out here. We want to help—"

"Why?" Johnny said harshly. "Why should he want a killer on the payroll? I'll tell you why, Erika. So he could have a fall guy . . ."

He rushed to the window.

"Send Bell Lacy in here!" he bellowed. "I'll talk to Bell Lacy and nobody else!"

"Uncle Bell! Uncle Bell, don't—"

He shoved Erika away, with enough violence to send her careening against the sofa. She began to cry, the first tears since his arrival.

Then a figure separated itself from the crowd.

"Don't hurt him," Erika sobbed. "Don't hurt him, Johnny."

The knock on the front door was bold. Johnny went to the hall and trained the muzzle of the shotgun in its direction. The door opened, and Lacy was there.

"Where's Erika?"

She ran to him, and he put his arm around her.

"Get away from her," Johnny said.

"Put the gun down, Johnny, you won't need it anymore. We know how Howard Brockton was killed."

Johnny laughed. "Sure you do. And so do I. Because you planned the whole thing. You knew I was a killer, and that's why you wanted me around the plant."

"That's not true, Johnny."

"Erika told you about those four men I killed. Only you wouldn't admit it. You made me think you didn't know."

"All right; so I knew. But Erika said you were cured; they wouldn't have released you if you weren't."

"You're a liar! You wanted an alibi, that's all you wanted! And I was elected."

He raised the shotgun.

"Brennan!" the loudspeaker boomed outside. "Brennan, there's somebody here to see you! Can you hear me, Brennan?"

Johnny moved cautiously to the window, and pulled aside the curtain. Another car had arrived on the scene, a gray civilian car without markings. There were two men climbing out of the front seat.

"Listen to me, Brennan. These men want to speak to you. They've come to help you."

Johnny shielded his eyes against the glare, and tried to make out the newcomers. One was a short round man wearing a crumpled business suit. The other was tall and angular, and wore the olive green uniform of a Marine Corps officer.

"Colonel Joe," Johnny whispered.

"What is it?" Erika said. "Who are they?"

"Colonel Joe!" Johnny shouted, his eyes widening.

He looked wildly between the girl and her uncle, and then broke for the hallway, clutching the shotgun in one hand. He flung open the door and ran out, his face strangely exalted, his eyes glowing in the lights of the police vehicles. The shot that came from the nervous ring of officers dropped him before he was three yards from the house, and he pitched forward into the gravel of the driveway and lay still.

When Erika walked into the hospital room, the Marine officer was at Johnny's bedside, and for the first time, she saw the caduceus insignia on his lapel. His hair was gray, but except for the wisdom in his eyes, he was still a young man.

"You must be Erika," he smiled. "I'm Joe Gillem."

She looked at Johnny, who grinned weakly.

"Sorry," he said. "I've been doing a lot of talking. A lot of it's been about you."

"How do you feel?"

"Right at home. They got the bullet out of my hip, and I'll prob-

ably limp around a while, but I'm okay."

"It's better than that," the Colonel said. "Much better. Johnny's starting to remember."

Erika held her breath. "Remember?"

"The past. The truth about himself. Somehow, his escape accomplished more than his whole confinement. Not that we recommend it as therapy, but it worked in this case."

"Escape?" Erika said.

"It's true," Johnny said. "That's one thing I was too afraid to tell you, Erika. I wasn't let out; I ran away."

She looked at the Colonel, her question unspoken.

"No," he smiled. "I don't think he'll have to go back, Miss Lacy, not now. He'll be what we call an out-patient . . ."

"Patient?"

"Did you think he was a prisoner? No, Miss Lacy, it wasn't a jail. It's a psychiatric hospital for veterans. Johnny was there because he had lost all conscious memory of his year in Korea; all he had left was guilt. . . .

"It happened in the fall of '53, on Heartbreak Ridge. Johnny was on patrol, and after his Sergeant was killed by snipers, he took command. They were behind Communist lines; that was the kind of war we were fighting. Suddenly, they found themselves facing an artillery barrage, and in trying to get away, they got caught in a pocket in plain sight of a machine-gun nest. The only hope of getting out alive was to put it out of action. That's what Johnny did; under covering fire, he got behind the nest and threw a grenade. The gun was out of action, all right, but four of the enemy were still alive.

"It was the first time he had to kill face to face. He was eighteen years old. He shot two of them and was forced to bayonet another. He lost his M-1 that way, and the last man had to be garroted. Those were his four 'victims', Miss Lacy, the 'murders' he's been guilty of.

"He was brought back to a field hospital in a state of shock, no wounds. He was in a catatonic state, and didn't snap out of it for months. His memory was gone; all he could recall was the fact that he was a murderer . . .

"When we heard the television broadcast about Howard Brockton's murder, and saw the plant photo of Johnny, I knew who it was—and that the police were after the wrong man. That's when I came over, with Dr. Winterhaus, the chief psychiatrist. We've both been spending a lot of time with

Johnny, and we're convinced he's coming back to health."

Erika had been listening with wonder, and mounting happiness, but when she turned to Johnny, she found his expression melancholy.

"I'm so glad for you, Johnny . . ."

"Yeah," he said. "But you know what it means, don't you? It means I must have been right about your uncle . . ."

She looked swiftly at the Colonel.

"Then he doesn't know? Nobody's told him?"

"Know what?" Johnny said.

Erika went to the bedside, and took his hand.

"It wasn't Uncle Bell, Johnny. It was poor old Gabe, who killed Brockton, poor unhappy Gabe . . ."

"Gabe?"

"Yes," Erika said sadly. "He thought he was helping Uncle Bell; he went to Brockton's office and argued with him; the argument ended with old Gabe hitting him with some tool he carried. He never even realized how seriously he had hurt him; then he learned, and came to Uncle Bell to tell him the truth."

"Poor Gabe," Johnny said mournfully. "What will they do to him, Erika?"

"Uncle Bell swears he'll fight for him. You can say what you like about Uncle Bell, but loyalty is like a religion to him . . ."

"Where is he now? Your uncle?"

"He said he'd be here at four o'clock. He wants to talk to you about something; I think it's that new inventory system of yours." She held his hand tighter. "If he offers you a job, Johnny, something in the front office, would you take it? Or would you be stubborn about it?"

"I don't know. He's not obliged to me for anything."

"But would you take it?"

"I'd have to think about it."

"I knew it," Erika said peevishly. "You're going to be stubborn. I could have predicted that. What do *you* do in a case like that, Doctor?"

Colonel Joe grinned. "I dunno. Guess I'd try some friendly persuasion."

She tried it and it worked.

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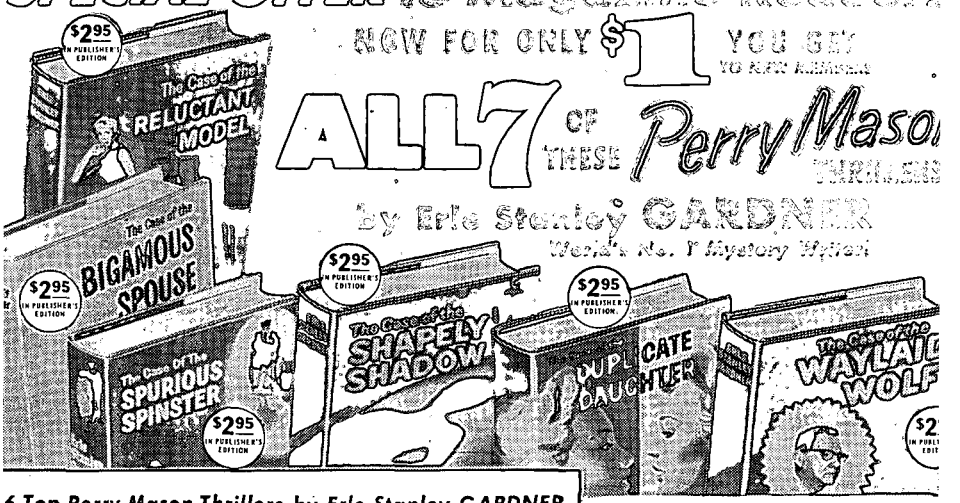

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