ALFRED

FEBRUARY 35¢

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers:

Have you noticed a physical similarity between this stout little volume and me? The important thing, however, is its intention: to introduce you to the type of entertainment offered each month in my magazine, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mysiery Magazine*. The *Sampler* is actually composed of two issues of the magazine bound together. And after you've had it as an appetizer—and a most substantial and vitamin-enriched one it is—you will be most eager, I am sure, for more and more of this kind of mystery fare.

Scattered among the 256 pages of this volume, you will find several different subscription offers. All of these offers are still available at the prices quoted.

I won't keep you any longer. Take a deep breath and plunge into the first story. May you have a shivering good time.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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The Legacy of Peter Morgan

By Dion Henderson

PETER MORGAN sat sleepily in the big chair, his feet stretched out toward the fire, and his wife came across the cabin from the small kitchen and put a steaming cup in his hand. Then he sat down on the footstool made of deer antlers and unlaced his boots and pulled them off. She tickled one foot perfunctorily, then put her hand on his knee and let it lay there.

"There," she said. "Better?"

He grunted appreciatively.

"Fine. Real fine."

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"Sure, Jan. Real fine. Just great."

Her back was to the fire, she was all silhouette to him with the fire behind her, but he knew she was frowning. He wished she wouldn't. He didn't want her to worry. They had made it to the cabin, the fire was warm, the talk was good, the toddy delicious and he was going to die shortly but right now he felt fine and he didn't want to have anyone worry.

Jack Devlin came in the front door, his arms full of wood, and kicked the door shut behind him, then came across and dumped the quartered oak splits into the big woodbox beside the fireplace.

"There," he said, blowing on

his hands. "That ought to keep us warm all night."

"That and a toddy," Peter Morgan said, smiling. "Jan's secret recipe."

"I'll make you one," Jan Morgan said, rising.

"Never mind," Jack Devlin said. "I'll build one as soon as I get my coat off."

They both went into the kitchen. Peter Morgan could hear them arguing about who should make the toddy. He sat with his own hot cup in his hands, the spicy steam rising in his face, and smiled secretly at the fire.

It was all working out beautifully. They were good friends now, Jack Devlin and Jan. They were really good friends, with common interests and a good background of knowing one another long and well, and liking one another, and their relationship had moved quite imperceptibly from the polite association between a man's wife and his best friend onto comfortable personal grounds where it would ripen easily and comparatively quickly into

something good and enduring. After a decent interval, Peter Morgan thought wryly. After I am dead they will make a lovely couple.

He had planned it quite carefully, of course; or at least as carefully as his diminishing time permitted. He refused to be panicked in the planning, or the eventual decision. He had made sure that Jack Devlin was familiar enough with success to cope with more of it, and the accompanying responsibilities. He had exposed Jack Devlin to the family enough to find that he liked the children, and that they were comfortable

It is simple enough, when making out one's Last Will and Testament, to direct and control the disposition of one's material assets. It is not so simple to direct and control the behaviour of the legatees, unless a material reward is involved.

with him, and would accept him when the time came. Peter Morgan had been very slow and patient with this project of providing for his loved ones, because he would not have any second chances. Sometimes it was difficult to be so painstaking about matters that involved human values but he did not want to make any hasty irreparable mistakes and now sitting in front of the fire, he listened to his wife and Jack Devlin wrangling amiably in the kitchen and smiled secretly at the fire and felt death come a little closer to him. It was all right. It was working out beautifully. There was only the one thing, the stupid emotional thing, the messy sentimental thing in himself that he wanted to spare them all now and guard against their having to face again, his own childish feeling of desolation and loneliness at not wanting to give up the things he loved, of cherishing each passing moment inordinately and thus at the end coming in quite an undisciplined and pitiful way to the time of dying and of then, loudly and frantically and uselessly, not wanting to die.

He slipped one of the green pills under his tongue as they came back with the fresh toddies. Jack Devlin sat in the other big chair and Jan sat on the footstool leaning against her husband's chair, and they talked companionably of the trip from town, and the autumn foliage, and about the hunting and about the children and they included Peter Morgan in everything they said even though he did not say anything because in a way he was not there any more. He had begun to go away from them a little bit, withdrawing gradually, so that when he was gone finally it would not seem like such a great thing.

He remembered the day George Howat called him back to the office. There had been the pain, the infrequent and quickly passing feeling of something being too full in his chest, and afterward a more frequent and not so quickly passing feeling that started in his chest and backed up toward his shoulder and finally backed down his arm numbingly, a hot, choked swollen feeling. George Howat had given him a casual examination, and then a thorough examination, and then the tests, the basal and the sed rate and the cardiogram and then another more complicated cardiogram and then there had been the day that George called him back and he sat in the chair across the desk and finally George Howat said, "Oh damn it," and got out two glasses and poured them some Scotch. George

Howat was a good doctor but he was a good friend too. He looked Peter Morgan in the eye and picked up his glass. "Here's to life, Pete," Dr. Howat said. "May we each have enough of it before we take leave of it." They drank to that, and Peter Morgan said, "You're not to say anything to Jan, George. There are a few things I'd like to arrange, but I can do them without her knowing. There's no need to worry Jan." Dr. Howat looked at his glass. "All right, Pete," he said. "You've arranged the rest of your life pretty well. I guess you can arrange this part of it too." Well, now it was arranged. The investments were in order, the gifts made and deposited in the names of the children, the funds set aside for the taxes, and the will brought up to date. Even Jack Devlin had been arranged. Jan would not have anything to worry about, nothing at all except the temporary grief of bereavement and even that had been eased in advance for her because she would not be left alone.

Now, in the cabin, Peter Morgan said, "If we want cream and eggs for breakfast, you'd better go on down to the farm tonight and get them."

"All right," Jack Devlin said. "I'm looking forward to those fresh eggs. Let's all go for them."

"No," Peter Morgan said. "I'll stay here and rest."

Jan said, frowning, "Are you sure you feel all right?"

"Of course," Peter Morgan said. "You know how the flu is, though. I'll rest it tonight."

Jan was worried because on the way up he had gotten out of the car to open the gate and swayed and staggerd a little and if it had not been for the gate he would have fallen. Flu, he'd said breezily. Had a touch of it all week. Still, Jan was worried.

"If you're sure you'll be all right," she said. "I'll have to go with Jack to show him where the farm is."

"Hurry back," Peter Morgan said, smiling.

They were gone quite a long while. It began to rain shortly after they left and for a while the rain came down very hard. There was even a little lightning, and in the flashes Peter Morgan could see the water streaming down the windows and the stark shape of the big oaks at the edge of the clearing. The rain would take off most of the remaining leaves, and the hunting would improve. After the rain you would be able to move quietly through the woods on the wet leaves and duff without sounding as though you were

driving a tank, and you would be able to see the deer. You still would not be able to see the deer as quickly as they saw you, however. Not so long as you kept moving, however quietly. But if you found a comfortable stump and sat very quietly, sometimes you would be able to see the deer a hundred yards off in the treeless woods, watching them picking their way along casually until they passed within a few feet of you, still not noticing. It was the easiest and most efficient way of hunting. Peter Morgan had hunted a great variety of game in a great many places and he did not much care for hunting this way. He had hunted enough so that the easiest and most efficient method no longer appealed to him. It might be efficient but it was not planned well, and he believed in planning.

Presently the rain let up and he heard the car laboring up the hill. They had gotten out the jeep, and it probably was a good thing. With the rain, the logging road would be slick and greasy. A moment later they came into the cabin, drenched and laughing.

"I hope there are enough eggs left for breakfast," Jack Devlin said. "That was a rough ride."

"We couldn't get the side curtains up," Jan said. "And at the bottom of the hill the road turned but we kept right on going into the woods. That's what took us so long."

"A likely story," Peter Morgan said, smiling. "Are you sure you didn't just stop to make love?"

"No," Jack Devlin said. "If we had stopped to make love it would have taken much longer."

He winked broadly. Peter Morgan looked at Jan. She had flushed a little and was looking at Jack Devlin and laughing. Of course they had made love, a little. He was glad they had, he was glad to know that they could make love a little without being guilty about it. After all it wouldn't be any good if they couldn't make love. From a practical point of view it wouldn't be any good at all. Peter Morgan was glad, but he felt the sadness too, and the loneliness, only it wasn't a sharp, hurting thing now; he had moved away from them again, and the sadness was cool and rarified, and with it he had the feeling of loving them both, and approving, as though they were children and his responsibility.

In the morning, Peter Morgan was wakened by the sound of chopping: Jack Devlin was splitting more wood on the big block outside the cabin door. There were the smells of bacon frying, and

coffee, and he could hear his wife humming in the kitchen. Presently she lifted the curtain at the bedroom door and said, "Ready for breakfast?"

"And waiting."

Jan came in and sat on the edge of the bed and ruffled his hair.

"It's nice being up here again in the fall."

"I've been lying here thinking how nice it was."

She leaned over him.

"Here, here," Peter Morgan said. "We've got company, remember?"

"I know," Jan said. "But as long as he keeps chopping it's all right."

Peter Morgan thought for a moment how very nice it was, and then he stopped. Thinking like that did not lead you anywhere that he wanted to go now. Thinking like that would soften him and confuse him and in the end he would not want to leave and then when he had to leave anyway he would leave gracelessly and resentfully and it was not the way he wanted to leave. It was better to think that he really was very lucky, savoring the morning and the woman and the smells of breakfast and knowing that it was the last time he would have them this way and thus be able to savor them far more than most men on the last morning of their lives.

They ate breakfast on the glassed-in porch where you could look out across the clearing and down the hill to the river and on up the valley with the river showing occasionally through the bare trees, the water glittering in the sun much bluer now than it was in summer, and on up to the next hills.

"After breakfast," Peter Morgan said, "I will go down and cross the river and go up through the cedars to the granite outcropping and past the swamp and see if the deer are still using the old trails. If they are, I'll pick out a stand for each of us, and tomorrow we will be ready to begin hunting."

"I'll come with you," Jack Devlin said.

"No. You chop wood. You are a guest and you can do the hard work."

"I'll go with you," Jan said. "The jeep can get through most of the brush there."

"You can wash dishes," Peter Morgan said smiling. "I feel fine. Maybe I do not feel fine enough to carry a buck four miles through two feet of snow, or even a man, but there is no snow."

"What about carrying a man?" Jack Devlin was startled.

"They killed a man down in our valley one year," Peter Morgan said. "I carried him out on my back to where George Howat was

meeting me with the car, but he was dead."

Jan said in explanation, "Someone thought he was a deer."

Jack Devlin looked upset.

"I've read a lot about that sort of thing. What did they do to the fellow who shot him?"

"They never found him," Peter Morgan said. "They never do. When there was open hunting in our valley, it was pretty bad. The men who shoot at sounds, and the men who shoot at the white flash of handkerchiefs if anyone is foolish enough to carry a white handkerchief, and the men who shoot at movement."

"Yes," Jan said, "and the men who shoot at other men wearing red jackets. Let's talk about something else."

"I'm sorry," Jack Devlin said. "I've never been deer hunting before. I've shot crows at a hundred yards and woodchucks at 200 yards but I've never been deer hunting before."

"It's much easier," Peter Morgan said. "The deer are much closer, and much bigger. The rifles are not so much different."

"I can't use my own rifle on deer?"

"Not the .220," Peter Morgan said. "Mostly, the varminters are illegal on deer. The people do not know how to shoot them and they let wounded deer get away to die."

"I know how to shoot them."

"Yes," Peter Morgan said. "But there is still the law. And you will find the .270 shoots very much the same with the 150 grain bullet. Very flat, very fast."

"Well," Jack Devlin said.

"Wait until tomorrow. You can prove it to yourself on the first 10-point buck you see."

"But don't wait," Jan said smiling, "until you see a 10-point buck."

It was very nice. Peter Morgan was tempted to dally a little longer with the coffee. But there was the feeling in his chest, so that he had decided against eating very much of the breakfast, and he did not know about drinking so much of the coffee at this point. He still had a long way to go. The conservation department's small plane buzzed overhead, the wardens flying their transects down the valley at low level, counting deer, counting concentrations of hunters, counting everything for the endless statistics of ecology. Peter Morgan pushed his cup away from him decisively.

"Time for me to go," he said. "I don't want to hurry."

Jan helped him with his coat, the big red hunting jacket, and wrapped the long red scarf around his neck. Then she kissed him

lightly. He had carried it off, he thought, with just the right casual touch. He had told them where he would be, they would know exactly where to find him, if it came to that, but he was determined it would not come to that. He had planned the whole thing very carefully. He went out the cabin door, paused a moment with the thought of saying something casually memorable to Jack Devlin, then straightened his shoulders and waved his hand and started down the hill.

Going down the hill was not so bad. He walked down the hill, feeling the swollen ominous thing in his chest not changing, then at the bottom he crossed the river on the stones and the exertion wakened the thing in his chest and it began to move. He finished crossing the river on the stones, feeling the sweat come out on his face and at the same time noticing small things, the way the water was browner up close, almost amber beneath your feet, and still blue from a distance with the sun of a fair day on it.

On the far side he moved in among the cedars, walking with disciplined ease on the rain-soft footing until he was out of sight of the cabin on the hill. Then he sat down heavily on a log and fished a little green pill from his shirt and slipped it under his tongue. He had waited a long while, and crossing the river had been harder than he expected; it was a long time until the numbness went away, until he could move his left arm easily again, and the choked feeling of pain retreated from the arm into his chest again. He would have to be more careful. The pain did not go away entirely and he did not stop sweating and as soon as he got to his feet again and started along the trail through the cedars the thing in his chest swelled up again and pushed outward along his arm. He stopped to slip another pill under his tongue but it did not help much and he knew that he would have to hurry, but he would have to do it without really hurrying or he would never get to the place he was going.

After that he set his pace very carefully, walking like an old man among the trees, beginning to haul his left leg after him and fighting down the nausea. The sweat ran down his face and into his eyes and he could feel it soaking through his shirt. Several times he looked at his watch, calculating the flight pattern of the conservation department plane which would fly its ordered zigzags all down the valley, then circle and fly a reverse pattern the other way.

It would be a close thing, but he had planned it that way.

Peter Morgan was at the foot of the granite outcropping when he tried to look at his watch the last time, and could not lift his left arm high enough to see the face. In addition, it had grown dark beneath the trees, and even out in the open at the foot of the granite there were shadows everywhere and the sun somehow was fading. He found, leaning against a boulder, that he could look directly at the sun and see it clearly but distantly, a round cool orb like a full moon hanging there at midday in the purple darkness of the sky.

It was very interesting. Peter Morgan stood there contemplating the wonder of it when he realized he was not standing any more, but was seated with some dignity against the boulder, his feet awkwardly under him. The thickness in his chest had pushed out, it was like a great balloon expanding in his chest, pushing out along the artery of his arm and pushing upward into his throat, choking him a little, and pushing even into his head, against his eyes, swelling all the time and stirring panic in him despite his knowing how it would be, and expecting it.

He climbed laboriously to his feet and made his way around the boulder, holding on firmly and sliding his hand from one rough place to another. When he came to the top of the rockfall he could hear the plane. He took off his scarlet coat, the motion slow and clumsy because of the numbness of the arm, and spread the coat out carefully. Then he took off the scarf and arranged it on the flatness of the granite, making the pattern of the signal with great care, and weighting the cloth down with rocks. When he was through, he was very tired. The pain was very bad now, and he couldn't breathe very well, but the little airplane was coming closer.

Peter Morgan felt himself slipping down to a seated position again, this time facing the river, with the granite behind him. It was a lovely view, although the shadows kept creeping up and taking the color out of it, or perhaps it was the thing swelling up through his throat now behind his eyes.

The little plane swooshed over him, then banked suddenly and came back. It made a tight turn over the signal he had laid out on the granite with the coat and the scarf. They did not look like anything from the ground, but from the air they made a very readable signal. The door of the little plane opened and a uniformed warden leaned out against his seat belt, his

binoculars swinging. He shouted something and waved his arms. Peter Morgan did not answer. He heard, but he could no longer answer.

He heard the little plane go on beyond the cedars, then he heard it swing in toward the highway, and heard the engine cut. The wardens would take it down on the road, they often landed on the road in an emergency. They would land on the road and leave the plane there to tell others where they were, and they would come into the brush to help him. Peter Morgan had considered all this; it would take them a half hour or so to come around the swamp, and they would feel badly because they were too late. They were idealistic young men and Peter Morgan felt badly that they would feel badly on his account, and he would not be able to tell them that there was nothing they might have done anyway. He was glad, though, that he had crossed the river as soon as he left the cabin. If he had not done it then, he might not have been able to cross at all, and then the young men would have had to cross to get him. The river was a little high from the rain, and it would have been very difficult to cross on the stones carrying a body. Peter Morgan thought of the dead man he had carried out through the snow, and was glad he had crossed the river.

He was sitting there bolt upright against the rock in the sun, feeling the cold and the darkness gather comfortably around him, feeling the heaviness in his chest that somehow was squeezing the pain away; there was a thing he wished he could tell George Howat, how at the end the pain was squeezed quite away and you felt fine again except that you could not breathe. Then suddenly he saw his wife and Jack Devlin. They were driving along the bank of the river, on the far side, driving along slowly in the jeep. They were looking for him. Peter Morgan hoped they would not see him; he had planned it all so there would be no shock nor sudden pain nor the wild spontaneous grief of having someone die helplessly right in front of you, he'd wanted to spare Jan all that and he had very nearly accomplished it. In a few minutes the wardens would be here, and they would carry him out to the road, and then either put him in the plane or stop a car and take him to a hospital and when the hospital was certain he was dead it would take care of him and a warden would go up to the cabin and tell Jan and she would weep, of course,

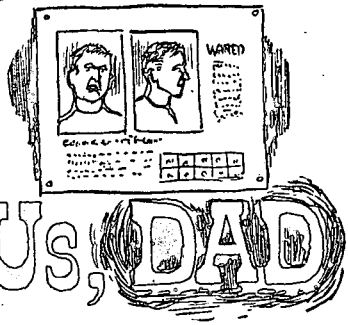
but Jack Devlin would be there to help and it would be hardly another bother at all, comparatively. He sat there in the sun hoping desperately that they would not see him.

But of course they did. The bank on the opposite side was clear of trees and they stopped the jeep in the middle of the open place and Jan pointed at him. Then Jack Devlin got out of the car, and reached back into it and picked up a rifle, and then Peter Morgan stopped thinking what he had been thinking about not being a bother to anyone.

He knew quite suddenly what was going to happen, and how it would be. He saw Jack Devlin take the covers from the telescopic sights of the rifle and kneel beside the jeep, he could see that clearly, sunnily, as though he were looking down along a tunnel to a bright place at the end; and behind him he heard the soft sounds made by the boots of the wardens climbing up to get him, the idealistic young men in green uniforms. Probably they could see him already, perhaps they could see Jack Devlin too. Peter Morgan was grateful that he would not be listening when his wife and Jack Devlin tried to explain to the young men who had been watching, how Jack thought Peter Morgan was a deer. Especially the day before the deer season opened.

Then he saw the big gun in Jack Devlin's hands steady, and the jolting puff of it, and his wife covered her face with her hands, *that* was very nice of her, and the disappointment flooded through him, the knowledge that he had not been able to arrange it after all, that there are some things you can't arrange no matter how well you plan. He remembered George Howat lifting his glass and saying, "May we have enough of it before we take leave of it," and he thought: *All right, George. I've had enough of it.* He was very calm, knowing that the swelling, choking something in his chest at last had broken, but you would not be able to tell after the bullet hit him, and then the bullet hit him.

JUST Between US, DAD



By Jack Ritchie

JAMIE was twelve and narrow-shouldered. He touched the day-old bruise on his cheek and studied his father. Then he spoke. "Dad, we went downtown to the main post office today."

Matt Corrigan scowled at him and leaned closer to the radio. The sixth race. Echo Hall, Black Ribbon, Teakwood. He cursed softly and reached for the can of beer beside his chair.

Jamie cleared his throat and raised his voice. "Your picture was in the post office, Dad."

Matt slowly raised his head.

"Miss Thompson took the whole class downtown this afternoon," Jamie said. "Like a tour, only it was school work. A man showed us how everybody worked and the mail goes through."

Matt's face was expressionless. "What about my picture?"

"It was way down in the bottom of a pack hanging on the wall. It showed you from the front and the side."

Matt's big hands opened and closed. "Come here."

Jamie hesitated. He touched the bruise again. "Miss Thompson

In the ideal state of things, a boy admires, respects, and tries to emulate his father. This holds true, I am assured, even when his father is not worthy of admiration or respect. Of course, once in a while, the son may think more clearly than the father, and in that case, the father would do well to emulate the son, the reverse English of a "chip off the old block".

wanted to know how I got this, but I didn't tell her. I said that I fell down the stairs."

"Never mind that. Did anybody else see the picture?"

Jamie shook his head. "No. They were paying attention to something else." His eyes went over his father's face. "I guess they took the picture a long time ago. You didn't have the mustache then and you had more hair. But I knew it was you."

Matt's hand went out and he pulled Jamie toward him. "Did you say *anything?* Anything at all to *anybody?*"

"I didn't say anything. Honest, I didn't."

Matt's fist tightened on the jacket front. "And don't *ever* say anything to anybody about that picture. Can you get that through your thick head?"

Jamie closed his eyes and nodded.

The hand released him.

Jamie stepped back and took a deep breath. There was a faint tic in the corner of one eye. "We're supposed to write a theme about what we saw at the post office, but I won't say anything about the picture."

His father reached for the can of beer and then changed his mind. He rose abruptly and went into the kitchen.

Jamie followed and watched him open the battered refrigerator and take out the bottle of bourbon.

Matt poured three fingers into a water glass and downed that. He tilted the bottle again and took the half-full glass back into the living room.

Jamie went to the refrigerator. He stared at the bottle, at the three cans of beer in the torn six-pack, at the sticky jar of peanut butter, at the half a pound of cheese. He closed the door.

He buttered a slice of bread and sat down at the oil cloth covered table. As he ate, he rocked slowly back and forth on the rear legs of the chair. His eyes went around the room to the single faucet sink, to the open shelves with their chipped dishes, to the iron-legged gas range, to the bare bulb in the ceiling fixture. He went to the sink and got a glass of water.

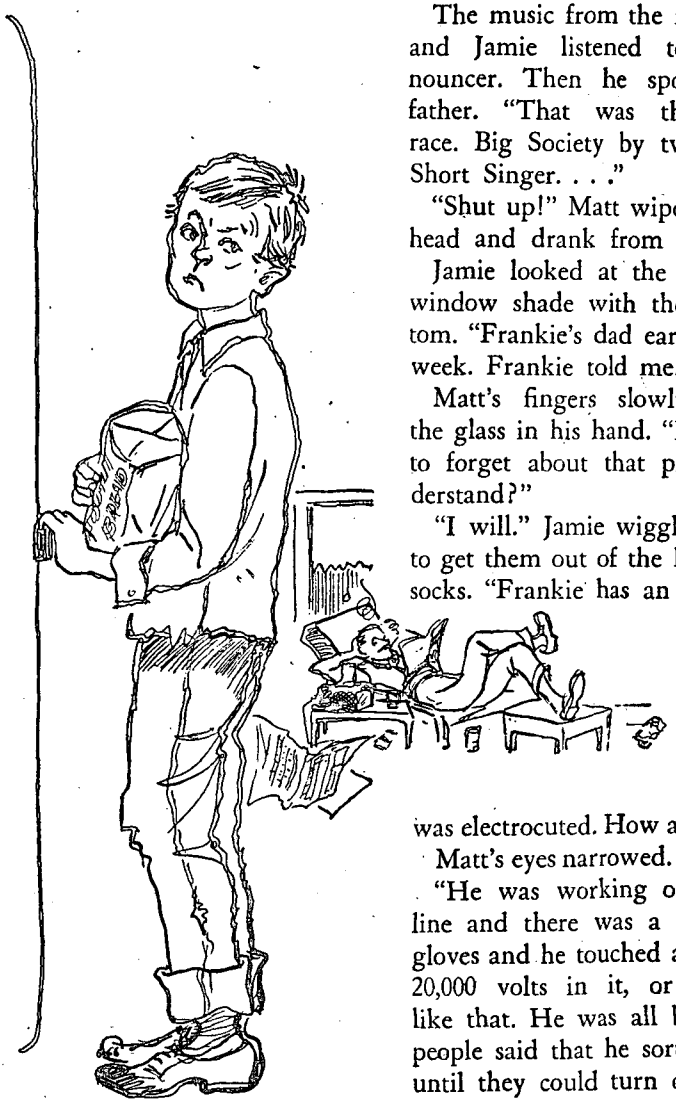
When he finished the slice of bread, he walked back into the living room.

Matt sat on the edge of the dirty green easy chair. Faint sweat had formed on his forehead.

Jamie licked his dry lips. "What's homicide?"

Matt's eyes gleamed dangerously.

Jamie looked away. He walked around the room. He ran a finger along the scars on the end table, he touched the cluttered magazine



rack with his toe, and then he sat down on the davenport where the springs weren't broken.

The music from the radio faded and Jamie listened to the announcer. Then he spoke to his father. "That was the seventh race. Big Society by two lengths, Short Singer. . . ."

"Shut up!" Matt wiped his forehead and drank from the glass.

Jamie looked at the half-drawn window shade with the torn bottom. "Frankie's dad earns $87.27 a week. Frankie told me."

Matt's fingers slowly revolved the glass in his hand. "I want you to forget about that picture. Understand?"

"I will." Jamie wiggled his toes to get them out of the holes in his socks. "Frankie has an uncle who was electrocuted. How about that?"

Matt's eyes narrowed.

"He was working on a power line and there was a hole in his gloves and he touched a wire with 20,000 volts in it, or something like that. He was all burned and people said that he sort of danced until they could turn off the cur-

rent." Jamie frowned at the worn rug. "Frankie's got a real nice apartment. Everything's new. Like the refrigerator, and the sink, and the furniture, and the rugs."

Matt finished the glass. "You'll shoot off your mouth to somebody about that picture. I'll bet on it."

"No, I won't. I can keep a secret pretty good."

Matt coldly studied his son.

Jamie picked up a magazine. His fingers made damp prints on the pages.

The radio music stopped for the results of the eighth race. Matt irritably snapped it off.

His eyes went back to Jamie and after a while a thin hard smile came to his face. He seemed to nod to himself. "Jamie," he said softly. "How'd you like to take a little ride with me tonight?"

Jamie didn't look up. "Me? In your car?"

"Sure. In my car. We'll take a nice ride in the country for a couple of hours."

Jamie turned a page. "We won't see much. There's no moon."

Matt's voice hardened. "I said we'd take a ride."

Jamie nodded. "All right."

Matt went into the kitchen. When he came back the glass was three-quarters full. "A nice little ride in the country. The fresh air will do you good."

Jamie ran his hand over a worn spot on the davenport. "Why don't we get new furniture?"

Matt held a lighter to his cigarette. "Because I can't afford it."

"But you make $96.57 a week, Dad. I once saw your pay check. That's $9.30 more than Frankie's dad does. And there are just the two of us."

Matt snapped the lighter shut. "The hell with Frankie's dad. I said I couldn't afford it."

Jamie pulled a ravel from the frayed wristlet of his jacket. "Frankie's dad doesn't play the horses. Or drink. Except for a beer now and then. I guess that makes the difference."

Matt took a swallow from the glass. "We'll leave at eight tonight." He thought that over. "No. Nine."

"What time will we get back?"

Matt smiled without humor. "Don't worry about it."

Jamie stared at him and the tic began working again. "I made out my will today."

Matt still smiled faintly. "Will?"

"We got a project at school," Jamie said. "We're supposed to pick what we'd like to be when we grow up and then talk to somebody who's doing it. We write it up for the end of the semester and I picked a lawyer."

Matt waited.

Jamie's words seemed to rush into one another. "I dropped in at this lawyer's office after school and talked to him and he happened to mention that lawyers make out wills too. And so I thought I'd be grown up and make one out and so I asked him how much. And he laughed and said that for me he'd do it for nothing."

He looked up at his father. "Well, not exactly a will, because I don't really have anything to leave. So I just wrote anything and pretended it was a will. It was sort of a letter, mostly bragging about how you earn more money than Frankie's dad and that you're important enough to have your picture in the post office."

Angry color rushed into Matt's face.

"But you don't have to worry about that, Dad," Jamie said quickly. "I mean the lawyer didn't read it. I wouldn't let him because I didn't want him to see that it wasn't really a will. He just sealed it and put it in his safe. And he won't open it unless I die or something like that. And I won't."

Matt towered over him. "You're lying, you little punk. You just made up the whole story. Right now."

Jamie said nothing.

Matt grabbed the jacket. "What's the name of this lawyer?"

"I don't remember. I don't even remember where his office is."

Matt drew back his fist.

Jamie's face was pale, but he met his father's eyes steadily. "That won't help me remember. Nothing will. No matter what you do, I won't remember. You can even kill me."

Matt stared at his son. After a minute he slowly released his grip.

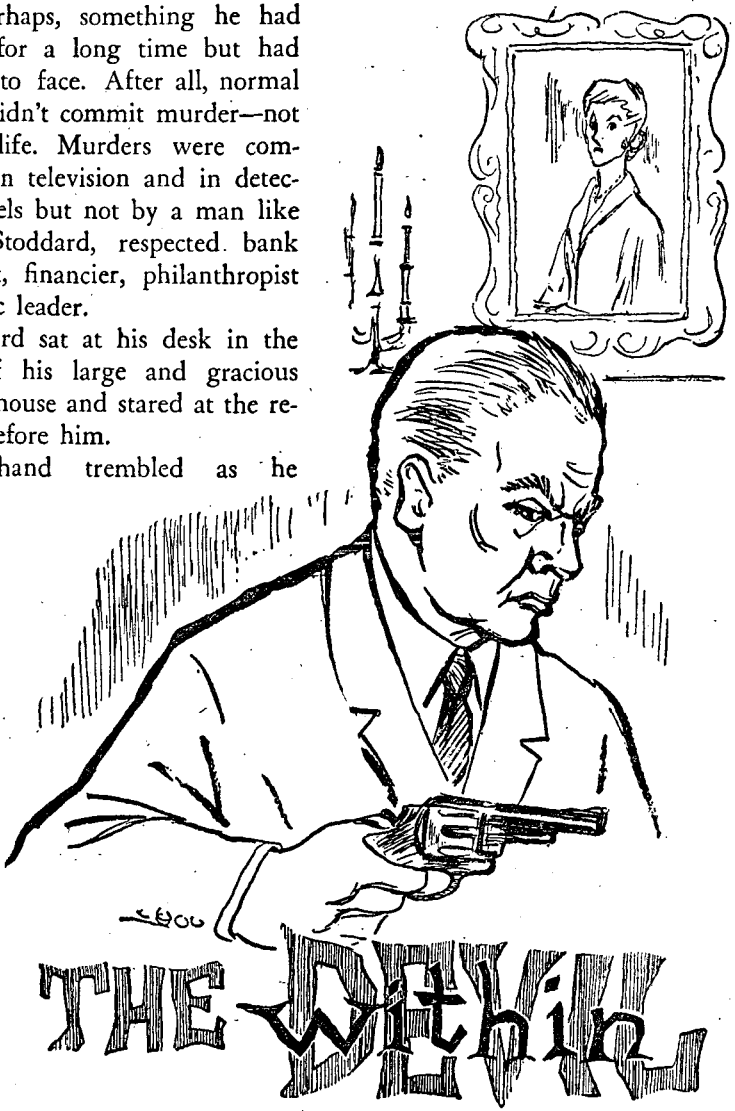
Jamie straightened his jacket front. A small smile came to his face. His voice was soft and almost hissed with threat. "You'll stop playing the horses. Right now. You'll stop drinking. Right now. We'll get the new furniture."

He went to the door and then turned. "And I just thought of something else. I want a bicycle." His dark eyes flickered. You'll take care of that too, won't you, Dad?"

STODDARD tried to remember when it was he first realized he would have to kill Jerome Fetterman. It was, perhaps, something he had known for a long time but had refused to face. After all, normal people didn't commit murder—not in real life. Murders were committed on television and in detective novels but not by a man like Philip Stoddard, respected bank president, financier, philanthropist and civic leader.

Stoddard sat at his desk in the study of his large and gracious country house and stared at the revolver before him.

His hand trembled as he



THE WITHIN

By Jack Morrison

brought it to his brow to shade his tired eyes. What, he wondered, were the steps that had led him to this terrible moment? It had all happened so gradually and yet so relentlessly and, yes, even logically.

He thought about Fetterman. There was no doubt that in some ways the young man reminded him of himself at that age. He was ambitious and ruthless. Stoddard himself had stepped on a lot of people, perhaps even destroyed some lives, as he wheeled and dealed his way to the height of wealth and privilege. He saw in Fetterman the same ruthless passion that had driven him, and yet Fetterman was an extreme case. Fetterman, Stoddard believed, would stop at nothing to attain his ends.

Stoddard began to realize now just how much he had hated Fetterman, almost from the first moment he laid eyes on him. The young man was handsome and charming but his eyes never met another's direct gaze and his handshake was moist and flabby.

Stoddard looked at his own hand as it trembled before his eyes. It was moist with perspiration, but it was not a weak hand—not anymore. He had learned the trick of a firm handshake and how to meet another man's eyes. And the ironic thing was that Fetterman, too, would learn those little tricks—tricks that made a weak man appear strong.

The sight of his own hand made him suddenly feel revulsion. He got up quickly, impulsively, as though to get away from something—his thoughts, perhaps.

He walked to the window and looked out. There were his

Many a man whose public image presents a smoothly irreproachable facade, undergoes torments in the private thoughts which his admirers know nothing about, nor would they believe them if they did.

grounds, broad and spacious in the moonlight. This was his estate now. And these furnishings, the soft leather chairs and sofa, the big mahogany desk, the expensive rug, the priceless painting on the wall, were all his—bought and paid for.

Strange, how this thing he was about to do was warping his thinking. All these symbols of his wealth now made him nervous, almost self-conscious, as though they had eyes and were watching him.

He shook it off and made his thoughts return to Fetterman. Stoddard knew from the first what it was that Fetterman was after. He wanted Margaret's inheritance. It was that simple. Stoddard knew it, but there was no convincing his daughter. Even evidence that an expensive private detective agency had uncovered about Fetterman's past—his previous marriage, his jail terms for forgery and assault—could not convince Margaret. She flatly refused to believe it.

Poor Margaret. She had inherited her mother's plain features rather than her father's good looks. But underneath her homeliness and lack of social presence, she had wonderful qualities that Stoddard had hoped some respectable young man someday would recognize. But it had begun to appear more and more unlikely. Margaret was twenty-nine now and, before young Fetterman came along, had spent all her time at home. It was no wonder she had fallen so madly in love with Fetterman. He had been the first man ever to show real interest in her. And now they planned to be married.

Stoddard had tried to resign himself to the hard fact that he was not going to be able to stop the marriage. He told himself he must accept the inevitable. But it was impossible. The idea that his hard-won fortune someday would go to that despicable creature made him physically ill.

But murder was a different thing. Perhaps the idea of mu[illegible] had not really occurred to him until, ironically enough, Fetterman suggested it himself.

It had been a windy, rainy night, a night for talking about crime and violence. Stoddard remembered that it was he who had turned the conversation to these topics. Margaret had excused herself and gone to bed early with a headache. Fetterman was waiting for the rain to abate before taking the long walk to his bus.

Stoddard had begun by discussing a famous murder that had shocked and baffled the local community some years ago. Fetterman related a puzzling murder he had read about. Then the conversation

turned to the possibility of committing the perfect murder. Stoddard contended that modern scientific crime detection had made the perfect murder nearly impossible. Fetterman disagreed.

"For instance," he said, "I think you could kill me and get away with it rather easily."

"For the sake of argument," Stoddard said, "how could it be done without getting caught?"

"You live in a remote area," Fetterman said. "I imagine you're bothered by prowlers every now and then. I'm a stranger here. Few people know me or that I've been seeing your daughter. There you have a near-perfect combination of circumstances."

"How do you mean?"

"You begin calling the police," Fetterman said, "perhaps two or three nights a week, complaining about a prowler. The police come, the prowler flees. But he comes back. You become angry with the police. You call them one night and tell them that you are arming yourself.

"Then you figure out a way to get me out here on some night that Margaret doesn't expect me. I think that should be fairly easy to do.

"Then you simply wait for me outside. When I arrive, you shoot me for the prowler. You can make up some story about having heard noises outside the house again. You went out with your gun, saw someone skulking about and ordered him to stop. You thought the person made a threatening gesture and you fired.

"Of course, it turns out to be an unfortunate accident, but you tell the police I had not been expected that night. Your own daughter will vouch for that."

Fetterman lighted a cigarette and looked at Stoddard. Thunder grumbled overhead. The rain beat at the windows.

"What do you think, Mr. Stoddard?" he asked.

"It sounds good on the surface," Stoddard said, "but so do most crimes when in their planning stage. The flaws and the slip-ups don't occur until later."

The discussion began to lag with the lateness of the hour. Finally the rain slowed to a fine drizzle and Fetterman left.

When he was gone, Stoddard practically fled to his room. His heart was pounding. He lighted a cigarette with trembling hands. Fetterman had struck some chord within him, reached some source of evil that Stoddard had not known existed in himself. He had not slept well that night.

But a week later, he called the police to complain that there was a

prowler outside his house. The police came, searched the area, but, of course, found nothing.

That was two weeks ago. Five more times in that period he called to complain of the prowler, pretending greater anger each time that the police were unable to do anything about it. Two nights ago, he told Chief Wilcox he was arming himself.

Even then, after all that preparation, he had not permitted himself to believe that he would actually go through with it. Besides, there was one phase of the plan that he hadn't been able to figure out: How to get Fetterman out to the [redacted]se without Margaret's knowing he was coming.

[redacted] had been three weeks since Fetterman had suggested the plan. Probably he had forgotten all about it. And yet there was a chance he would remember and suspect something if Stoddard called him and invited him out himself. Still, he had thought, it might be worth the risk. No scheme, whether for the commission of a crime or a business coup, was without a certain risk, he knew.

And then, that afternoon, his problem was unexpectedly solved by Fetterman himself. He had called to tell Margaret he would have to go away for the weekend on business. Margaret was not at home. She had gone into town to shop as she did every Wednesday. Fetterman had asked Stoddard to tell her that he would be out tonight at eight to see her briefly before he left.

Stoddard had said he would give his daughter the message. He had hung up the phone with trembling hand.

Now, Stoddard stood alone in his study. He found that he had been staring fixedly at a portrait on the wall above the fireplace. It was of Rhoda, his late wife. It could have been a portrait of Margaret. It had been painted when Rhoda was about Margaret's age, shortly after they were married.

Rhoda looked at him from the portrait. The painting was so lifelike that, through the years, Stoddard actually had been able to read different expressions in the eyes.

In the beginning, not long after her death, the eyes had been accusing and, for a long time, he didn't go near the study. He couldn't meet those eyes. And yet he had let the painting hang there and finally he had come back to face it.

Conscience was something a man of power and influence could not afford, he had decided. The idea that he had driven her to sui-

cide he had been able to put out of his mind. All right, he had never loved her, but he had been decent enough to her—most of the time.

He felt compelled to say something to his wife's portrait.

"Yes, this is my house now," he said aloud. "I took it from you and your snobbish family in the beginning, but I've earned it now. I've worked hard and made more out of your money than you would have alone. You and your kind don't know what it means to be hungry. What I did was excusable."

There was no accusation in the eyes now, he saw. There was only a kind of sad questioning. It was worse, by far, than the accusation.

He sat back down at the desk and covered his face with his hands. After a while he stopped trembling and a calmness came over him.

He looked at his watch. It was just seven-thirty. Fetterman would arrive at eight sharp. He had his faults, but the young man was punctual.

Stoddard opened the desk drawer and took out a sheet of writing paper, an envelope and a pen. He bent forward and began to write. When he was finished, he folded the paper and put it in the envelope, addressed it and placed it on the table. Then he put the gun in his pocket and went silently down the back stairs. Margaret had returned home and was in the living room. The servants were in their quarters in the east wing.

It was a cool night and Stoddard shivered. He thought of Margaret, of her reaction to Fetterman's death. But he knew she would get over it. She was not old. In six months, a year, she would forget all about him.

There was enough moonlight to see some distance down the long driveway. Stoddard crept along, keeping in the shadows of the trees.

He was about a hundred yards from the house when he became aware of someone close behind him. He whirled about but it was too late. He was struck to the ground. Before he could recover, the gun was wrested from his pocket and hurled away. He sat up groggily and looked at the figure that stood over him.

"So you followed my advice," Jerome Fetterman said, a half-smile curling his lips.

"What—what do you mean?" Stoddard asked.

"Margaret overheard one of your conversations with the police about the prowler and happened to mention it to me. I knew then that my plan was working perfectly. Of course, I knew you couldn't call me, so I called you."

"I—I don't understand all this."

"Don't you see, you old fool?" Fetterman said, laughing. "You're going to be murdered tonight—by the prowler you've been telling the police about. No one will suspect me for one moment. I'll marry your ugly daughter after a decent interval and your fortune will be all mine."

"I was right," Stoddard said, half to himself. "You are evil. You're the Devil himself."

"Don't forget, old man, you were going to kill me first," Fetterman said. "What does that make you?"

"Yes," Stoddard said softly, [illegible]ag off toward the dark trees. [illegible] evil must be destroyed."

"That's right," Fetterman said, taking a switch-blade knife from his jacket pocket. He flicked it open. "And I'm going to start right now."

The knife flashed down again and again until Stoddard lay still and bleeding on the grass. Then Fetterman removed the dead man's wallet. He took out the bills and stuffed them in his pocket. Then he ripped the wallet and tossed it beside the body. He picked up Stoddard's gun, wiped it carefully with a handkerchief and pressed it in the dead man's hand.

The morning newspaper was full of the story of the tragic death of one of the area's most distinguished citizens. Jerome Fetterman sat in his small apartment reading an early-edition account of the crime. As he read, his smile broadened.

"Preliminary investigation," the story read, "indicates that Mr. Stoddard was the victim of a prowler. A concerted search is underway for the killer."

Fetterman put down the paper and took a sip of coffee. He was feeling exceptionally well after a fine night's sleep. He decided he had better get right out to the Stoddard home and offer his deepest sympathies to the bereaved daughter.

He got up and was going to his bedroom to dress when there was a heavy knock on his door. He opened it and two policemen pushed their way inside.

"You Jerome Fetterman?" the older of the two officers asked.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I'm Chief Wilcox. This is Officer Holliman. You're under arrest."

"Under arrest? For what?"

"The murder of Philip Stoddard," Wilcox said firmly.

"But that's absurd. The paper says he was killed by a prowler."

"The fellow who wrote that didn't know about a little discov-

ery we made later in Mr. Stoddard's study. Seems he left a letter."

"A letter?"

Chief Wilcox produced an envelope and took out the folded sheet of paper. He opened it.

"You're very clever, young man," Wilcox said, "but you overlooked one thing. Because you don't have a conscience yourself, you didn't think Stoddard had one. Let me read you this letter."

The chief read:

"Dear Chief Wilcox: I am about to commit a terrible wrong tonight and yet I know I shall go through with it. Very shortly I will kill a young man named Jerome Fetterman.

"It is ironical that young Fetterman designed his own murder and gave me the perfect opportunity to commit it. It was he, himself, who innocently suggested using the non-existent prowler as cover-up for the crime. And it was he who called me this afternoon to say he would make an unexpected call on my daughter tonight at eight. He unwittingly gave me the perfect opportunity to kill him.

"I had intended up to the moment of this writing to perform this terrible deed and try to escape my just punishment. I believed it to be a pure, unselfish act. I thought I was doing it to save my daughter from this man, whom I am convinced has only the most dishonorable intentions toward her.

"But now I am assailed with doubts. I have begun to see that this man is a symbol of something, a symbol perhaps of the evil that exists within myself, an evil that must be destroyed. You see, my hatred for him goes very deep.

"And so I have made up my mind that when the deed is done, I shall take my own life. Only in this way can I be certain that I have destroyed the Devil within. Please forgive me.—Philip Stoddard."

Fetterman stood through the reading of the suicide note with jaw drooping.

"Okay, son," Wilcox said. "Get dressed and let's go to headquarters."

Meanwhile,

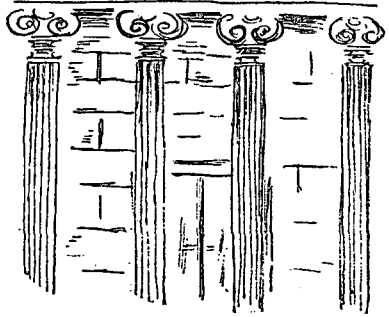
MY PLAN was to steal two hundred thousand dollars from the Sierra National Bank where I worked as a teller. I had an ingeniously devised escape plan, ingenious only because it would appear to the authorities that I had worked for months perfecting it, which indeed I had, yet including enough loop holes so that I would be apprehended, tried, convicted and sentenced to ten years for grand larceny.

Crazy? Perhaps. But I did not intend to go through the rest of my days looking over my shoulder. I wanted to pay for my crime, serve my time, take my three years off for good behavior—and be free to spend my stolen money with a clear conscience. Does that sound like unsound reasoning? Probably it is. Nothing that I had done or thought about or said since the plan began to germinate in my mind seemed quite normal. I am convinced that that is why some criminals are successful in their endeavors: They operate in variance with the norm.

Laura Amesbury, the girl to whom I was engaged, was to play a major role in my escape plan, although she did not know it and, I hoped would never know it. I think that it was because of Laura that the plan, which must have lain half dormant in the back of my mind for many months, began to take concrete form.

Laura was a native Californian, and she talked incessantly of the many and rapid changes that had taken place and were taking place in Southern California since she was a little girl. She talked particularly of the great land booms, the population explosion. She implied that a fortune could be made by a young man of vision with very little capital. I knew that she meant me, and I knew that she was falling in love with me.

back at the BANK



I did not love Laura and I know now, looking back, that at the time I was incapable of loving anyone but myself and my great plan. I was merely using Laura as a means to an end. I should have felt like a heel, but I didn't.

And so Laura began to figure strongly in my plan. I courted her and wooed her and won her. We became engaged. It was on a Tuesday in June that we plighted our troth, that I gave her her ring. The timing was all part of my master plan. On the following Friday Laura had planned to leave on her annual vacation in San Francisco. She would spend a week there, visiting her married sister. It was on the Friday after that that I planned to steal the money.

I told Laura that I would leave for San Francisco directly after work on this day. I would stop off in a motel enroute, ariving at her sister's on Saturday. We would have an engagement party Saturday night and on Sunday we would drive back to Los Angeles.

Laura was delighted. Her eyes shone. We spent the rest of the evening planning our future, and mostly we talked about me making a fortune as a real estate broker.

On Friday after work I drove Laura to Union station. I bought her ticket and checked her luggage, and then we walked across the patio and went into the bar

Beset by greed a young bank teller buries his stolen "poke". Returning as an ex-con years later to retrieve it, he finds that Fate has played him a cruel joke.

and had a martini. We held hands and Laura told me that she had written her sister Madge and that Madge was planning a somewhat more elaborate party than I had suggested. Madge was Laura's only living relative, and Laura's face glowed when she told me about the party. She was happy. She held my hand tightly and once she brushed my cheek with her lips.

It was train time at last. I kissed Laura and made it good. She clung to me for a moment. "I love you, Paul. It was wonderful of you to think of driving up to San Francisco next week-end. I'll think of you every minute."

She kissed me again and turned and went up the steps of the pullman.

It cost me no effort to put Laura out of my mind during the days that followed, and concentrate on my plans for the next Friday. Over and over I went through the routine, and it always came out perfectly. I didn't see how the scheme could miss. It wouldn't miss. I would not let it.

On Monday I withdrew my small savings, three hundred dollars, from the loan company that paid four percent interest, and mailed it to a savings bank in Fresno.

On Tuesday there was a postcard from Laura. It was gay and cheerful, stating that she had arrived safely and was looking forward to the party and to seeing me on Saturday.

Thursday night I put a shovel, several rolls of heavy foil paper, a canteen of water, a flashlight, an empty suitcase and a canvas sack about the size of those used by the postal department in the trunk of my car. The canvas sack contained my overnight things. I also included a large square of yellow sacking.

On Friday I arrived at the bank carrying the empty suitcase and told Ed Vance, who had the window next to mine, that I was driving up to San Francisco after work to spend the week-end with Laura at her sister's.

Everything I did now was like enacting a dream. My window is at the far end of a line of ten and there is a small niche between my counter and the wall. There is a wastepaper basket there and I put the suitcase in front of it.

Shortly after three o'clock, when the bank was closed to customers, Rus Michaels, the custodian, came along pulling his big canvas box behind him.

I didn't know what was going on until he stopped directly behind me.

"Sorry, Mr. Kent," he said. "I'm getting off an hour early today so

I'm emptying the wastebaskets now."

He reached for my suitcase to get it out of the way, and I froze and my throat was suddenly dry and I couldn't speak. Rus sort of braced himself and picked up the suitcase—and almost fell over backwards. His expression registered startled astonishment.

I grinned at him. "How much do you expect one toothbrush and a pair of pajamas to weigh?"

Rus laughed, emptied the wastepaper basket and pushed my suitcase back with his foot, and I breathed again.

Just before five o'clock all of the tellers cashed out and at five after five Ken Abrams, the uniformed guard, let the last of them through the door. I picked up the empty suitcase and, holding it in my right hand, headed for the vault. Ken, at the rear door, was watching me, but because of the waist high counter, I knew he couldn't see that I was carrying anything.

"Be with you in a minute, Ken," I called, and entered the vault. It was but the work of a moment to scoop the currency I had placed in a convenient spot into the suitcase.

I returned the suitcase to its niche, went back and closed the vault and set the time lock. This closing of the vault was one of my jobs as a responsible employee and it fitted neatly into my plans. I returned to my window, picked up the suitcase and headed for the rear door.

The suitcase was heavier than I thought it would be, but I walked casually and nodded to Ken, who said, "Give my regards to Miss Amesbury."

"I'll do that, Ken. See you Monday."

It was only a few steps to the parking lot, but it cost me an effort to keep from running. Then I was beside the sedan. I placed the suitcase on the floor in back, got in behind the wheel and started the motor. My heart was racing, and I couldn't stop it, but I willed myself not to look back at the bank.

An hour later I was climbing up into Santa Rosa Pass. I had driven up there many times before by daylight and I knew it to be a wild and rugged country, with huge boulders and caves and only scrub growth. The road was narrow and winding.

Full darkness had come when at last I dropped down into the wide undulating expanse known as Santa Rosa Flats. I had not passed a single car since starting the climb up over the pass.

Two miles farther along I parked opposite a small hillock, switched off the car lights and sat

listening. There wasn't a sound, not even the distant honk of an auto horn or the whistle of a train.

Moving swiftly now, I opened the car trunk, removed my overnight things from the canvas sack and dumped the two hundred thousand dollars into the sack. I put my overnight things into the suitcase and placed the suitcase on the back seat of the sedan. Then I stuffed enough rocks into the sack beside the money so that the resulting bundle was almost circular in shape with an irregular surface.

Then I opened the packages of foil and wrapped the bundle tightly. The foil would protect it against worms and weather. Finally I wrapped the sack in the square of yellow sacking. It now looked exactly like one of the thousands of boulders that were strewn about and had fragments of the yellowish clay-like earth that was indigenous to the area clinging to them. Not even a puttering old prospector could have told the difference, I thought with a feeling of satisfaction.

I picked up the rock-like-looking bundle, the foil wrappings, the shovel and the flashlight and headed for the hillock. The way had long since become as familiar as my own apartment.

I moved in behind the hillock and dropped my burden. The flashlight showed me the hole I had dug two weeks earlier. It was a deep hole, fully six feet. I put the flashlight on the ground, picked up my two-hundred-thousand-dollar package and tossed it into the hole, following it with the wrappings.

It was but the work of a few minutes to shovel in the dirt. At last it was done. I patted down the loose dirt, then got a scrub branch and brushed the top. Breathing heavily, I stood for a minute fixing in my mind the landmarks that I had studied over and over again during my daylight trips up here. I would have to depend upon my memory entirely to relocate this spot.

I picked up the shovel and flashlight, went back to the sedan and headed back toward the main highway by a circuitous route. A half mile this side of the highway I stopped, got out the shovel and canteen of water and washed the shovel thoroughly. Then I threw the shovel as far as I could into the bushes. I had read that the police could determine where certain clods of dirt came from by testing samples with chemicals.

It was almost ten o'clock when I reached the outskirts of Bakersfield. I pulled over to the side of the road, lifted the car's hood and yanked off a sparkplug wire. Ten

minutes later I limped into a motel and asked a sleepy-eyed clerk if he had an empty cabin. He nodded and swung the register. I signed and paid and he handed me a key.

"Third on the left."

"Fine. May I use your phone? I have to call San Francisco." I put a dollar on the counter and the clerk shoved the instrument across to me. A minute or two later I was talking to Madge, Laura's sister.

"Paul! Where are you? We didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I'm in Bakersfield," I told her. "Car trouble. Is Laura there?"

Then I was talking to Laura. I told her what I had told Madge and added, "It might take a couple of days. In that case I'll go back to L.A. You'll have to come down by train."

"Oh, Paul!" There was genuine disappointment in her voice. "Oh, Paul," she said again. "We were all looking forward to the party so much. Madge is thrilled that we're engaged."

"I'm probably being a pessimist," I said. "In any event, I'll call you tomorrow."

I hung up, and the clerk said, "Car trouble?"

I yawned and nodded. "It'll have to wait. I'm beat."

I woke early, went out to the overhang where I'd parked the car, lifted the hood and reattached the sparkplug wire. Then I took the distributor apart and removed the spring from beneath the rotor, reassembled the distributor and then, to make doubly sure that a mechanic would have difficulty locating the source of the trouble, I pushed a common pin through the ignition wire at a point where the pin's point would be in contact with the motor, thus shorting out the motor.

At nine o'clock I called a local garage and the guy said he'd send a tow truck. The truck arrived at 10:30. The mechanic tried the motor, shook his head, and hauled the sedan away. Toward the end of the afternoon he called and said he hadn't been able to locate the trouble. He'd have to keep the car another day. I said okay and called Laura.

"I'm awfully sorry, honey," I told her, "but it's going to take longer than I thought. I won't get the car until Sunday at least. This means that I'll have to head back home at once, probably drive all night to get to work on time."

"Oh, Paul!" This time there was a tear in her voice and I wanted to feel sorry for her, but I couldn't. What I was doing was too important to the success of my plan.

I spent the evening sitting in a bar, drinking and watching television. At ten the next morning

the garage mechanic drove up to the motel in my sedan with a three wheeled motorcycle hitched behind his tow truck.

"Mister," he said, "someone's been messing around with your motor. Those things just didn't happen by accident."

"Kids," I said. "You never can tell what they'll do these days. Must have happened when I stopped for coffee last night."

The mechanic gave me a queer look but he didn't say anything. I paid him off and went back into the motel to get my stuff.

I arrived on time at work the morning. Possibly my expression revealed something of how I felt. I don't know. I tried not to let it. It seemed, though, that I was being stared at and whispered about.

Outwardly everything seemed normal. At ten o'clock the doors were unlocked and the customers came pouring in. It was business as usual. But there was a tenseness in the air. I could sense it and feel it.

At three o'clock Ken Abrams locked the doors. By three-fifteen he had let out the last of the customers. At three twenty Marge Edmonds, Mr. Maxon's, the bank president's, secretary, touched me on the shoulder.

"Mr. Maxon wants to see you in his office." Her face was grave and she refused to meet my eyes. This, I knew, was it.

I followed her toward Maxon's office, knowing that eyes were on me, knowing that there were whisperings.

Mr. Maxon, a balding man of fifty, looked grim, but there was an unhappy, pitying expression in his eyes. He sat behind his big desk, flanked on either side by two men in plain clothes who also looked grim but with no sadness or pity in their expressions. I knew they were cops.

There was no beating about the bush. Mr. Maxon said, "Two hundred thousand dollars has been stolen, Kent. We know you're guilty. If you want to tell us what you did with the money, I will be happy to recommend leniency."

My mouth felt dry and I swallowed hard. Then the moment of stage fright passed, and I went into my act, the words coming smoothly. I looked from Maxon to the two cops, then back to Maxon. I am sure that my expression registered shock and disbelief.

"I don't follow you, Mr. Maxon. What money? Are you accusing me of stealing some money?"

"It's no use, Kent." Maxon sucked in a lungful of air. "We know you stole it. Just tell us where it is and be grateful that we

can promise a light sentence."

I worked up what I thought was a convincing head of steam and yelled angrily, "This is ridiculous! I don't know what you're talking about. What right have you to accuse me of being a thief?"

One of the cops stood up then and came around the desk, shaking his head as if he had known all along that this was how the thing would go. "Buster," he said, producing a pair of handcuffs, "we've met 'em like you before and we know how to handle 'em. Why don't you be one of the smart ones and save yourself some grief?"

I started to protest again, but he cut me short. "Okay, okay. It's your funeral." He snapped on the cuffs.

The trial was a fiasco. Besides a couple of character witnesses there were only three others who could testify effectually in my behalf. They were Laura, her sister Madge, and Ed Randall, Madge's husband. The best they could do was establish the fact that I had called from Bakersfield over the weekend. It was pitiful.

During the first few days of the trial Laura watched me constantly. Her expression was one of distress and shock and sympathetic understanding. On the fifth day she dropped her eyes when I glanced at her. I knew what was happening. She, like everyone else, was becoming convinced that I was guilty.

The prosecution's line of witnesses was long and formidable. First, there was the motel manager, a man named Ray Burke. He told the court that when I arrived the motor of my car was running but that it had a skip in it. He also confirmed the fact that I had made a call to San Francisco.

Then came the garage mechanic who stated flatly that the damage to my car's motor was deliberate. He said that he had told me so and that I said some kids had probably tinkered with the motor when I stopped for coffee. Then he really threw a Sunday punch. He swore under oath that the sedan couldn't have been driven a foot with the rotor spring removed and the engine shorted out with a pin.

But the testimony that really cinched the thing was that of Rus Michaels and Ken Abrams. My suitcase, the one which I had told Rus contained my overnight things, was introduced as evidence. Rus identified it and then was asked to heft it. Then the prosecutor said, "Mr. Michaels, when we removed this suitcase from the defendant's car after his return from Bakersfield, we found that it con-

tained a pair of pajamas, a robe, slippers, a clean shirt, shaving articles and a comb and brush. Would you say that those articles were contained in the suitcase that you have just hefted?"

"I would not. I would say that the suitcase was empty."

The suitcase was opened and, of course, it was found to be empty, just as it had been that Friday afternoon when Rus had tried to get it out of the way of the wastepaper basket.

Ken Abrams stated that I was walking in the manner of a man who was carrying a heavy suitcase when I left the bank. The prosecutor handed me the suitcase and ordered me to walk back and forth in front of the jury. Then he filled the suitcase with paper which, it was established, weighed approximately the same as two hundred thousand dollars in currency. In spite of myself I could not effect the casual stroll that I had when the suitcase was empty.

Then Ken put on the finishing touch. He testified that he had watched me until I had reached my car in the parking lot. He said that I had used *both* hands in lifting the suitcase into the back seat of the sedan.

They had me and I knew it, but up until the very end I denied my guilt, even when, after three weeks, I stood in front of the judge's bench and he sentenced me to ten years in prison.

Laura came to see me on the first visiting day. I was at first surprised, and then I knew. The distressed look was still in her eyes, but there was more now. There was pity and accusation.

"Oh, Paul, Paul, I love you. I always will."

"But you think that I'm guilty."

"Darling, why don't you tell them where the money's hidden? They would make your sentence so much lighter."

"Who's 'they'? The people who sent you here to try and [illegible] me to talk?" I stood up, my eyes suddenly cold and hard. "Look, kid. I don't love you. I never did. Do me a favor. Let me alone. Don't come up here again."

Time, time, time. I wished it away. I willed it away. I worked and ate and slept, and worked and ate and slept again. Routine. Dullness. Monotony. I moved as a man in a dream. But never, not once, did I regret what I had done.

The day came. At last the ordeal was ended. I was shaking hands with the warden. I was walking to the great gate and the gate was

opening and beyond was freedom.

I went to Fresno and drew out my three hundred dollars, plus interest, and rented a room for eight dollars a week. The next day I got a job as a dishwasher. Dishwashers don't have to have references. The following week-end I made the down payment on a used car.

I wasn't naïve enough to believe an attempt wouldn't be made to follow me, but I was not concerned. Each time I had a day off I made brief sorties into the surrounding countryside. Once I drove to Modesto, and again to Bakersfield. Everywhere I saw evidence of the land boom that Laura had so often spoken about, and I smiled grimly. Perhaps I would be smart to invest in land and watch the values go up.

I changed my rooming house five times during the next two months. Once, when driving south on Route 99, an airplane circled overhead three times. I laughed out loud. The fools! Did they think for a minute that I hadn't thought of that?

At last the day dawned that I had been waiting for. There was a heavy overcast and a light rain was falling. No planes would be able to fly low enough to observe ground movement.

I started south early. Ten miles out of Fresno I pulled to the side of the road and waited. No car pulled in behind me. When I started up again I stayed in the right lane and made no attempt to overtake cars up ahead.

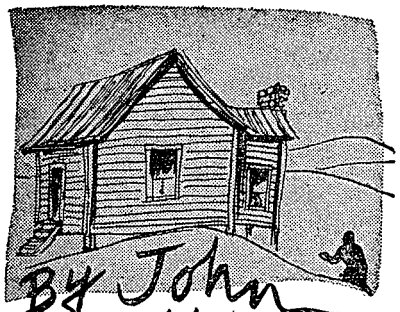
Three more times I repeated the maneuver, but no cars swung onto the road's shoulder for as far back as I could see.

Then I was at the turnoff that was the back way into Santa Rosa Flats. I drove for a mile along the narrow road, stopped and sat waiting. I waited for thirty minutes, but no car came along.

I went ahead again, driving cautiously. Then I came down into the northern edge of Santa Rosa Flats, and my heart quickened its beat. I drove faster and stared and blinked and my heart kept time with the swishing of the car's tires. This was where I had buried my two hundred thousand dollars. My throat was constricted and tears were pouring down my cheeks.

Laura had been right. The land boom had snowballed. There had been no puttering prospector but instead the indifferent gulping prod of a steam shovel that could excavate a ton of dirt in one scoop.

There on the exact spot where I had buried the suitcase was a massive building. There was a sign over the door. It read: Sierra National Bank. Santa Rosa Flats Branch.



By John Faulkner

JAMES and Jesse Arnold, double first cousins and almost as alike as twins, stood at the filling station across the road from the main gates at Parchman, the state penitentiary. They had just been released after serving a sentence for cattle stealing back in the hills. It was not their first offense nor their first sentence. They were trying to catch a ride back home.

The prison supply truck came out the gates on its daily trip to Clarksdale and Memphis. They flagged it and climbed in the empty back end.

At Tutwiler, the crossroads North and South and East and West, Jesse dropped off. James remained in the truck.

"Ain't you coming home now?" Jesse said. "We can catch a ride from here."

"I ain't coming home," James said.

"Where are you going?"

"Memphis. Arkansas, maybe."

"When are you coming home?"

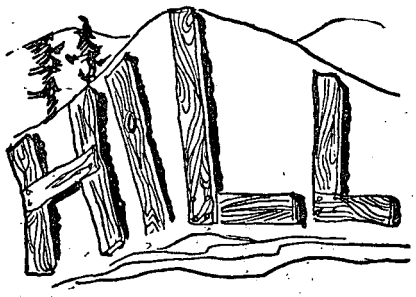
"Don't know. Maybe never."

The truck moved on. Jesse stood watching James in the empty rear.

It is early April, a month later, in the flatlands at the Arkansas foothills. Lights of scattered cabins sprinkled the night. One was in the living quarters in the rear of a combination filling station and grocery store. The front of the building was dark. There was no other light near it.

A car, second-hand and battered, pulled to a stop on the apron in front of the building. Four figures got out and walked to the front door. One of them banged on the panel with his fist. An inner partition door opened limning an old man in the light from the back room.

"I'm coming," he called. "Just a minute."



Dilemmas are the psychiatrists' daily diet, but when double cousins exchange genetic qualities and identities, even the best medicos are baffled; and so, particularly, are the victims themselves.

He turned the light on in the store, crossed to the front door and opened it. He peered out, saw the car beside the gas pump.

"You fellows want some gas?" he said.

The four pushed past him, pushing him aside.

"No," one of them said. "Cheese and crackers."

"You needn't to be so rough about it," the old fellow said.

"Step on it, old man," the first man said. "We're in a hurry."

"You ain't going to get nowheres running over folks."

The first man brought his hand up with a pistol in it and raked it across the old man's head.

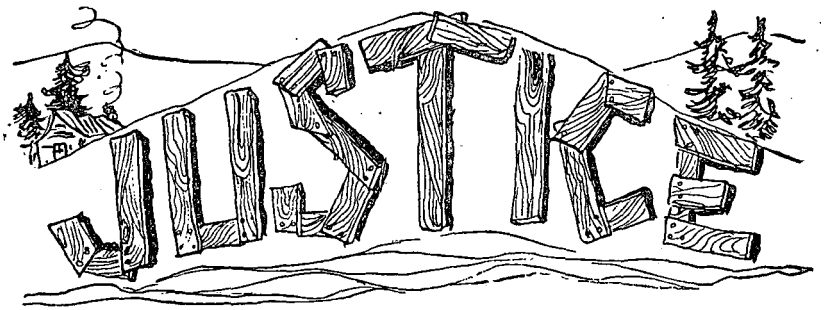
"I said, hurry it, old man," he said. "Now get that cheese and crackers out here on the counter."

The old man put his hand to his head from which the quick blood flowed. He looked up at the man who had hit him, startled fear in his eyes. He scuttled around behind the counter still holding his head and with one hand and a hip lifted the hoop of cheese from a shelf to the flat surface before the men and set a box of crackers beside it.

"Who is it, Henry?" came from the back room.

The old man turned his head toward the partition door and opened his mouth to call when the man with the pistol said,

"Tell her you'll be back there in



a minute, and not to bother you."

The old man closed his mouth, looked toward the man, opened it and turned again to the partition door.

"Go on. Tell her," the man said, raising his hand with the pistol in it.

"I'll be back there in just a minute," the old man quavered.

The man laid his pistol on the counter and the four of them began eating the cheese and crackers.

A few minutes later the voice came through the door again.

"Henry?"

The man picked up his pistol. The old man looked at his face.

"O.K., men," the man said. They all stopped eating. "Let's have what money you got, old man," he said.

The old man's eyes suddenly grew secretive.

"I ain't got none here," he said.

Like a striking snake the hand reached across the counter and raked the old man's face. The old man jerked away from the blow and bumped into the shelves behind him. Both hands were to his face now and fresh blood welled through his fingers.

"Don't make me have to do that again," the man said.

The sound of the disturbance reached the back room.

"Henry?"

"Get over there and look in his cash box," the first man said to one of the others.

The man spoken to vaulted over the counter, looked quickly under its edge, located the cash drawer and gave it a wrench. A small bell tinkled under the counter. The drawer refused to open.

"Hand him that axe," the first man said to another of the men, nodding with his head toward an axe beside the front door.

The other man crossed to the axe, brought it back to the one behind the counter. He pried at the cash drawer and it came open with a small splintering of wood. From the back room came the voice again.

"Henry?"

"Hell, there's nothing here but pennies," the man at the cash drawer said.

The first man had been watching the man with the axe. Now he turned to the old man.

"Alright, old man. Where is it?"

"I ain't never done nothing to you fellows," the old man said from between his hands.

The first man struck this time viciously, leaning far over the counter and bringing the pistol barrel down across the old man's head. The old man crumpled to the floor behind the counter.

"You guys get over there and

help find where he's got it hid," the first man said to the two still beside him.

"Red, I cain't," one of them said. "I'm going to be sick."

Red whirled and slapped the man almost as viciously as he had the old fellow behind the counter but with the flat of his hand this time.

"I told you not to call me by name," he said.

The one who had been slapped swayed and almost fell but caught the edge of the counter for support.

"Lemme go get a drink," he said.

"Let him go," one of the other two said. "He ain't worth much to us like he is now."

"O.K.," Red said to the man holding onto the counter. "But hurry back."

The almost sick one loosed his hold on the counter and plunged for the door.

The two men searching behind the counter finished their search and one of them said, "Ain't nothing back here. Maybe he keeps it in that back room."

They all three looked toward the door to the back room.

"One of you stay out here and watch," Red said. He started for the back door. One of the men came around the end of the counter and joined him.

"What about him?" the man still behind the counter said, jerking his head at the old man on the floor.

"Watch him," Red said without turning his head.

"What about him out front?" He's at that jug."

"Keep him up here if he comes in."

An old lady was in the back room. She was sitting by a table with a lamp on it. A shawl was around her shoulders. She looked up as the door swung open and the two men entered.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she said. "Where's Henry?"

"Where does Henry keep his money?" Red said.

"What have you done with Henry?" the old lady said, placing her hands on the arms of her rocker to thrust herself erect.

The two men had come to a halt before her. She struggled from the chair. The shawl fell from her shoulders. She stared from one of them to the other then broke into a tottery run toward the door that led into the front of the store where Henry had gone.

The man with Red moved to stop her but Red said, "Let her go. She'll be out of the way."

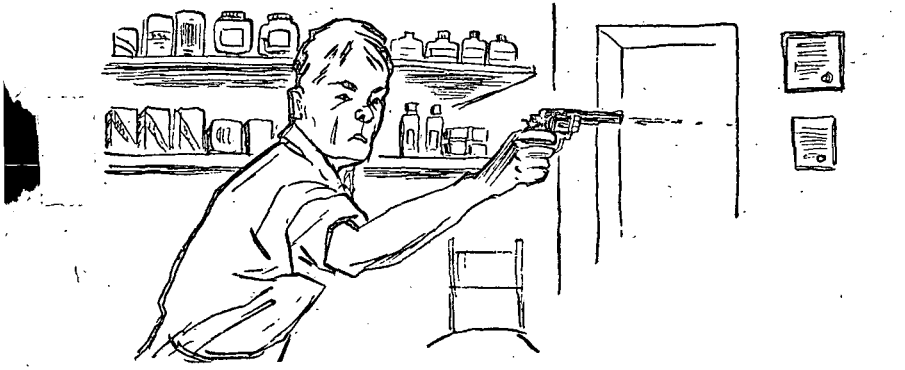
They went to work on the room then, pulling out drawers and tearing at the covers on the bed.

They found the canvas sack of money under the mattress. Red stuffed it in his shirt and said, "Let's go."

When they came back into the front of the building they couldn't see the woman. She was on her knees behind the counter hovering over Henry, cradling his head, moaning and crying.

The fourth man was back inside now. He had the jug with him.

"Have a drink, Red," he said, waving the jug at Red and taking



one staggering step toward him.

Red slapped him across the face again, this time with the pistol in his hand.

"I told you once before not to call me by name," he said.

The jug crashed to the floor. The man staggered back against the counter with one hand to his cheek. He leaned there a moment, gathering his wits that were fogged by one drink after another since he had gone to the jug. Now he pushed away from the counter and tugged a pistol from his pocket. Red stood with his pistol poised, waiting.

"Take it easy," one of the others said. "You're drunk."

The fourth man paid him no attention. He spoke to Red.

"You think I ain't good enough for your gang, don't you? You think I ain't brave enough. Well, watch this."

Before they could stop him he leaned across the counter and shot the old woman in the back of the head.

Four men huddled about a campfire back in the Arkansas hills. Night was coming on.

"Let's build the fire up a little," one of the men said, shivering, huddling into an old quilt.

"You want everybody in this

part of the country to know where we are?" another said.

The first speaker drew the ragged quilt closer about him.

"I stay so cold at night I cain't stand it much longer," he said.

"If we build this fire up and somebody comes in here and finds us we'll all be hot a-plenty. Specially you."

The shivering one lay back on the ground, on his side, and brought his knees up against his chest in the ragged folds. He lay with his back to the others.

Soon the fire died completely and was not built up. The other three rolled into their ragged covering. Night closed in.

The next morning they all lay shivering in their thin cover until daylight set in and then they lit a small fire and cooked breakfast. Immediately after, they covered the fire with handsful of dirt.

The one who had complained the night before huddled to the dying warmth and then said, "By heaven, will I ever be warm again!" He stood then, with the quilt clutched about him and walked stiff-legged toward a nearby thicket.

One of them still squatted by the mound of dirt that covered the fire said, "Watch him."

"Who, Red?" one of the others said. He looked up at Red. The third man looked up at Red too.

"Him," Red said.

The two of them followed Red's gaze.

"Oh, James," one of them said. "What's wrong with him?"

"Watch him," Red answered.

"Oh," they said.

It was later that same day. They were lying on their quilts spread on the hillside in the sun. James was on his side, propped on an elbow, staring at the ground beside him where his hand plucked ceaselessly at small twigs and blades of grass. His lips moved, forming soundless words. He looked up to find the others watching him. He started, his hand became still. He looked from one to the other of them, dropped his gaze, then looked up again.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" he said. "You been a-staring at me all day. Watching me like . . . like . . ."

"Like what?" Red questioned.

"Like . . . like . . . like you are now. What are you watching me like that for? Quit it."

His gaze held theirs for another moment then dropped back to his hand. The hand plucked once, twice, at the grass. Then abruptly he rose to his feet and flung away down the hill, almost running. One of the others made a quick move to get to his feet but Red said,

"He ain't going anywheres . . . yet."

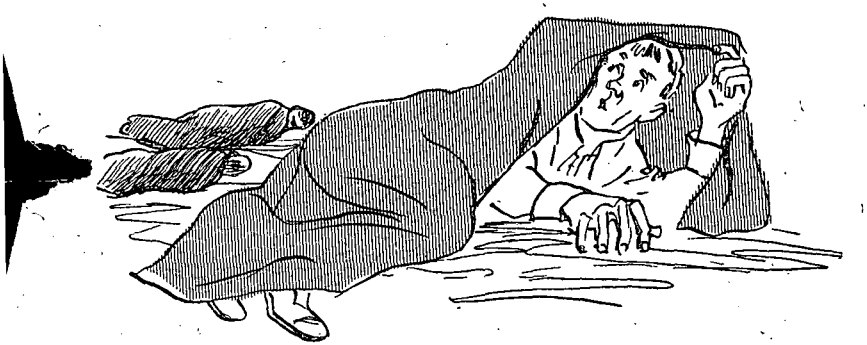
It was almost an hour before James came back. He swaggered across to his quilt and dropped on it. He was different, confident, like a man who had solved a problem secretly, to his own advantage.

"You guys think I had run away?" he asked with bravado. He flicked a quick gaze across their faces. "I could have if I had wanted to. I don't reckon nobody here could stop me."

guy even go to the bushes without you setting there watching, watching, watching?" He stopped talking. He stood there glaring at them, panting, then he whirled and bolted for the thicket.

Supper had been finished long since. The fire was out. The men lay huddled in their covers in the darkness.

A head rose slowly from a lumpy cover. It listened toward the other forms, then slowly the whole man rose and rearranged



No one answered him. They lay there watching. His gaze flicked their faces again. Suddenly his confidence became less than it had been. Abruptly he again jumped to his feet and started toward the near thicket. Halfway he stopped and turned and came back a step. His hands were clenched at his sides.

"Quit watching me," he said, his voice rising to just below a scream. He was panting. "Cain't a

the cover to look like someone was still in it, then slipped away down the hill. As soon as it faded into the shadows another head thrust up and a low voice said, "Jake?"

"Yeah. Yeah," Jake said. "What is it?"

"Follow him."

"James?"

"Yeah."

"Which way?"

Red pointed towards the hill.

Jake slid from his covers and Red said, "Be easy. Don't let him hear you."

The third form stirred.

"What is it?" it said.

"He's gone," Red said. "Jake's tailing him."

It was not far from daylight when Jake came back. The two still at the campsite were awake, shivering in their quilts. Jake squatted beside them.

"He made a deal with the cops," he said.

"You hear him?" Red said.

"Yeah. There's a phone in that third house down there. I heard him through a window. Named everyone of us to the cops. Drew his pistol on the old man that lives there and told him he'd kill him if he ever let out anything about it."

"Where is he now?"

"Behind me. Not too far back."

"What's his plan?"

"Going to meet the cops at midnight tomorrow . . . that is, tonight, down where he phoned from and bring them in here."

"O. K. Get in your quilt."

Toward evening, that night, not quite dark, they had eaten supper, and Red spoke.

"We are going out on a job tonight."

They all looked up at James then.

"Tonight?" he queried. "Tonight?"

"What's wrong with tonight?" Red asked.

"Nothing," James replied. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Nothing's wrong with it. I just didn't know we were going to leave here anytime soon."

"You act like you are sort of surprised about it," Jake said. "About us not going to be home tonight."

"Shut up," Red said.

James eyes darted from one to another of them.

"I just didn't know we were going anywhere tonight," he said.

"Let's get going," Red [illegible] standing erect.

The others rose, James last, and followed him down the hill.

It wasn't far to where their car was hidden, just off the trail. They got in, Jake and James on the back seat, Red and the driver up front. James kept looking from one side to the other as the car drove down the mountain. At last they reached the concrete highway at the foot of the hills and sped eastward through the night across Arkansas. James no longer looked from side to side of the car. He sat slumped in the back seat, silent, unmoving, his chin on his chest, the picture of dejection.

Through the early hours of the night they drove, crossing the flats of Arkansas, the River, and into the hills of North Mississippi. Here on a back road they stopped. Red got out of the car and opened the door beside James.

"Get out," he said.

"What for?" James asked, looking up through his brows at Red.

Jake caught him roughly by the shoulders and thrust him through the door. He fell sprawling at Red's feet. Jake descended from the car and he and Red stood over the sprawled figure in the dust. James got to his hands and knees and began backing away toward the [redacted] of the road.

[redacted] . . . What are you aiming on doing?" he said, still backing.

"Turn the car around," Red said over his shoulder to the driver in the car.

The car backed, cutting back and forth over the narrow road and, as the lights swung past, Red stepped forward and sliced down with his pistol and laid James flat on the road shoulder, his feet in the roadside ditch. Jake pushed his body into the ditch with his foot and he and Red followed and went to work methodically on the writhing form with their clubbed pistols. James lay there moaning, writhing, his hands covering his face and head, his knees drawn up like a foetus in a womb. At last Jake and Red stepped back, mounted to the road and walked toward the car standing there with its motor idling, the driver behind the wheel. Just before they re-entered the car Jake said, turning to the figure in the ditch, "Stay here where you belong, you Judas. We don't need your kind in Arkansas." He got in the car then, beside Red, and they drove away.

James stayed cringing in the ditch 'til the sound of the car faded; then he rose, trembling, to his feet in the ditch and listened toward the way the car had gone. Hearing only silence he shook his fist that way and cursed the occupants of the vanished sound.

He was not as badly hurt as he had pretended. He had whined and groaned to make them think so. His head and face were scarred and cut, but not badly; his hands and arms had taken most of the blows. Now he mounted to the road and looked about him. As he looked he thought, 'What damned luck. I had to turn my name in to them policemen to get them to listen to me, and now the rest of them have got away to hide somewheres where cain't no one find them and I'm left here all by myself with nowhere to go.' He was almost crying in self pity. The Ar-

kansas patrolmen could trace him easily through his record at Parchman. They likely already had checked there. Now the Mississippi Patrol would begin checking his and Jesse's cabin every time they passed to see if he had returned. No place to go, he thought. No place for James Arnold. He stood there, near tears, cursing his luck.

It was then he began to recognize where he was. During the ride he had paid no attention to where they were going. He had sat on the back seat, his head on his chest, not noticing anything. Now he began to recognize landmarks. By chance, Red had dumped him out not far from his own home, his and Jesse's cabin. And I bet Jesse is safe and snug in it right now, he thought. And me out here in the cold and no place to go. How come it's Jesse in there and not me? How come he has all the luck and I don't have none? It ain't right. It could just as easy be me in there where he is. They wouldn't no one know the difference. Even the neighbors had never been able to tell them apart. If he could just swap places with Jesse, no one would know it and he would be safe and sound and Jesse could find out what it meant to be out in the cold with no place to go. Jesse had no more right to be safe than he did. By heaven, he would swap places with Jesse. He would show him.

Then it came over him that fate, luck, had taken a hand in his affairs at last, else why had he been brought back by chance to where he could carry out this new plan that had just formed, just come to him out of the clear blue, like. Things like that didn't just happen. They were meant to be. If he wasn't meant to trade places with Jesse why was he brought back here, of all places, where he could? James began walking briskly through familiar lanes and woods toward where he was certain Jesse would be waiting in his appointed place. He no longer cursed his luck, no longer was irresolute; he moved briskly forward along the path his destiny had pointed out.

James approached the cabin from the rear, circling through the woods. He paused by an outhouse, scanning the cabin's back. A glow was in the sky, off to one side. Intent on the cabin he paid no attention to it but continued stealthily across the yard and peered in a back window. A room, the kitchen, was lighted. Jesse was in there bent over a lamplit table, his back to the kitchen door. It was another sign to James, another OK, another stamp of his new luck. Jesse was there as he had known he would be, in the lighted

kitchen with his back turned. James tiptoed to the woodpile, selected a piece of dried oak, hefted it, and returned to the door. It opened softly. James took two quick steps and brought the stick down with all his force on the back of Jesse's head. Jesse crumpled but James continued to beat him as he lay on the floor. At last he desisted and leaned against the table, panting heavily as if he had just won a long race, his lips writhed back in a grin of triumph and accomplishment.

It was then he noticed the pan of water on the table and a washrag in Jesse's still hand. The rag was red, the water had a pinkish cast.

"What the hell was he doing washing his face this time of night?" James said. "And what's that pink in the water?"

He leaned over Jesse, turned his head sideways on the floor to look in his face. There were cuts and bruises there, Jesse had been cleaning blood away in the water.

"Now what has he been into?" James said. "Some sort of fight, I reckon."

His hand went to his own face, to the cuts and bruises there. They were about like Jesse's, another proof he would be able to take his brother's place, another sign from fate. He was almost glad Red and Jake had beat him like they had.

"If it was a fight ever'body will know about it and these scars will prove better than ever I am Jesse," he said.

Now the problem was what to do with Jesse's body. A quick solution was there, too. Within a quarter of a mile of where he stood was a bottomless quicksand hole in the creekbed. Stock had been lost in it never to be recovered, a man had been lost in it, and a child. Nothing had ever been found of any of them. It was directly beneath a bridge that spanned the creek at that point, of easy access.

Before throwing the body over his shoulder for the short trip to its disposal forever, James went through Jesse's pockets. Jesse usually had a little money on him and James needed it. It was another reason for James' feeling of vengeance toward Jesse. James never had any money, for long, that is. Jesse always had a few dollars. Well, he wouldn't need them where he was going. James went through his pockets and found a few dollars and some change, then he found a separate wad that he found contained three hundred dollars.

"Now where in hell did he get that?" James said. "Must of stole

himself some calves and sold them."

He stuffed Jesse's wallet with the few dollars in it and the wad of three hundred in his own pocket and, slinging the body over his shoulder, left the house by the back door.

It did not take him long to reach the bridge over the quicksand hole. He flung Jesse's body into it and stood there watching it sink from sight. He was about to leave when suddenly he thought of the contents of his own pocket, his wallet with his driver's license in it. He flung this into the quicksand too. "Good-bye, James, you hard luck beast," he said, and smiling lightly, began his journey back through the woods to his cabin.

James was standing there in the kitchen in the lamplight with the three hundred dollars in his hand when a quick step sounded on the front porch and before he could get the money from sight a man entered the door without knocking. James was in plain sight as the man crossed the front room and came into the kitchen, calling over his shoulder to someone behind him, "He's here."

The man had a pistol in his hand. It was pointed at James. Other men came in the door, also with drawn pistols. Two men came in the back door as if they had been sent around that way to prevent an escape of any kind.

"What the hell is he doing still here?" one of the men who had come in the front door said. "If I was him I'd be long gone by now."

"He figgered that house would burn down on old man Jones and couldn't no one identify him," another man said.

"What is this?" James said. "What are you fellers doing here?"

"As if you didn't know," a man said.

The lead man stepped up to James and took the money from his hand. James did not resist. He simply stood there.

"What are you fellers doing here at this time of night with them pistols?" he said.

"You'll find out what we aim to do in the morning," a man said.

James attempted to argue but the men would have none of it. They told him to shut up and one threatened him with his gun.

"Ed," the lead man said to one of the others in the room, "You and George take the first watch. Two of us others will relieve you in a couple of hours." He weighted the money in plain sight on the table. "We want to keep this in sight at all times so they won't be no doubt about it being the money you fellers seen me take from his hand when the time comes in

the morning—the same money."

Through the rest of the night, the change of guards, James was made to keep a seat in a chair by the table. He was not allowed to talk, to speak to anyone. He sat there sullenly, glowering at them, a little frightened, too. He did not believe an armed posse would have come for Jesse for the simple crime of stealing cattle. He did not know what Jesse had been into. The next morning he found out.

Court was convened in Jesse's own frontyard at eight o'clock to try him. A chair and table were brought from his house to serve as bench. Judge Pruitt presided.

Judge Pruitt was not really a judge. He was a Justice of the Peace. As such, his powers and authority were not clearly defined and therefore almost unlimited. He read from an indictment he had prepared.

"You, Jesse Arnold, are accused of the murder of Dan Henry Jones . . ."

"Murder?" James said. "Murder? I never even knowed he was dead. I never murdered no one," he lied.

The judge frowned on him for interrupting. The man beside him jerked on his arm to silence him. The judge continued.

It seemed that Jesse had known old man Jones kept money in his house. It was common knowledge in the community. The old man did not trust banks. Jesse had attempted to slip in and steal the hoard and had been discovered in the attempt. A scuffle had followed. Blows had been exchanged. The old man had told them he had scarred Jesse's face. Finally Jesse had struck him down with a poker from his own hearth and had left him for dead. He had set fire to the house to burn up all evidence of his crime. That was the glow James had seen but had paid no notice as he slipped across the yard last night to peer in the window at Jesse bent over the kitchen table. Jesse had fled the burning house with the money, three hundred dollars, the old man had told them. Neighbors had seen the fire and had arrived in time to drag the old man in the clear. He had lived long enough to tell them what Jesse had done. He had made a sworn statement before he died.

"Are you guilty or not guilty?" the judge asked, leaning forward across the table and looking up into James' face.

"Not guilty," James shouted. "I ain't even Jesse. I'm James."

"James is over in Arkansas. He never come home after he got out of Parchman the last time."

"But I just got back last night.

I don't know nothing about old man Jones."

"Where did you get them scars on your face?"

"Why, I . . . I . . . Some fellers beat me up."

"Who?"

"Look," James shouted. "Jesse was here when I come in last night."

"Alright," the judge said. "Where is he?"

Jesse. Gone past all recovery in the quicksand hole.

"He's went. He left. He went away last night."

"He ain't went near as far as we are aiming on sending him," a man said.

"Silence," an appointed bailiff said.

"Where is Jesse?" the judge said.

Suddenly James thought of his fingerprints at Parchman.

"By my . . . my . . ."

He could not say it. The Arkansas police would be waiting to take him back for the murder of the old woman in the filling station. Parchman would be alert for any trail that led to him. He had sold himself for thirty pieces of silver that he no longer dare reach out and grasp.

"Who do you claim to be?" the judge said. "James or Jesse?"

Again James could not speak, could not force himself to make the choice for he had none except that of a choice as to the state in which he should hang. He looked numbly at the judge from that point of no return to which his own sorry contriving had brought him.

The judge now leaned back, turned half-face to the jury standing double-ranked at the end of the table.

"The jury will now retire and find its verdict," he said.

The jury retired to the far corner of the yard. They were back in less than five minutes.

"Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

"We have, your honor," the jury said.

"What is your verdict?"

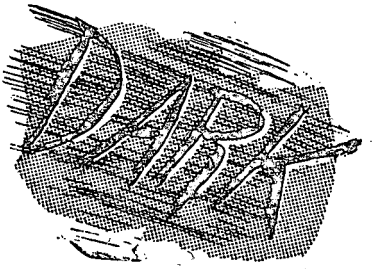
"We find the defendant guilty as charged and sentence him to be hanged by the neck 'til dead."

I'M Liz Cunningham, reporter, 27 year old bachelor girl, and big, non-hysterical redhead—a sturdy combination that is not easily frightened. If this makes me sound too formidable, let me add at once that truck drivers usually whistle when I cross the street and I'm famous here around Tucson for my lemon meringue pie. So I am a woman, but of the more stable variety.

I emphasize this so that you will not dismiss what I am about to say as the fabrication of an emotional female mind. Because it happened, all of it, exactly as I shall relate.

You didn't read about it in the newspapers because it wasn't there. Perhaps it should have been. Americans need to be made aware of the sinister net of intrigue that is today woven about even the farthest reaches of the world. Europeans are used to this sort of thing. We are not. But we should know that it exists.

For the sake of clarity I shall have to start my story two weeks before July tenth when a small, anxious-faced girl with enormous dark eyes and an unnaturally pale complexion appeared at my white stucco house in Tucson holding a letter in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Her clothes were rumpled and her hat sat carelessly askew on the brown hair she wore drawn back in a simple knot on her neck.



When she spoke her English was precise and accurate.

"You are Miss Elizabeth Cunningham?"

"Yes, I am."

"I have here for you a letter from your brother." She extended one tiny gloved hand. It trembled violently and she let it fall to her side while she sagged for a moment against the screen door. "It

Truck drivers are considered Knights of the Road and herein they add, albeit reluctantly, patriotic laurels to this honor.

is because I am so tired," she said.

She tried to smile as she straightened up but the corners of her mouth stayed stiff and set. "Please," she faltered, "will you take the letter?"

I hesitated. This girl wasn't only tired. She was frightened. I could see the fear looking out from the troubled depths of her eyes. Besides, Chris was always sending me people—guys down on their luck who needed a new chance in a new place; widows with kids whose health could be benefited by the dry Arizona climate; girls who needed a refuge for a few months and then a chance to try again to keep on the straight and narrow. They have a name for my kid brother in New York—Crusader Chris. He's a reporter, too.

While I hesitated the girl at the door turned away. "I told Chris that it would be no use," she murmured. "I am sorry to have bothered you."

She stumbled and almost fell. What could I do? I opened the door. "Nonsense," I said briskly.

"Come on in and we'll talk it over."

Hope flickered in her eyes but she said nothing as she gave me the letter and walked before me into my bright living room. I opened the envelope. Chris began without the soft soap that usually attended requests such as this. As a matter of fact he didn't begin at all. He went right on from where we were at the moment.

You've just met the girl I'm going to marry, his letter said. She's Eva Polenkoff, yesterday a secretary at one of the UN delegations, today a woman who doesn't want to return to her homeland. Her government refuses to be convinced and our State Department won't touch it. Maybe marriage to a U.S. citizen will give her a chance. She's not safe in New York any longer so I'm sending her to you until I can get away. Keep her for me, Liz. I love her. And thanks.

I walked slowly to the sofa where Eva Polenkoff sat twisting her slender fingers in her lap.

"Are you so important that they won't let you go?"

She laid her head against the back of the sofa and looked up at me. "Here in your country I have learned to distinguish between what is true and what is false. It is this that they cannot allow to go free." She closed her eyes then in utter weariness and almost immediately she was asleep.

We had two weeks together. I sunned her in my tiny patio until her skin glowed warm and golden brown. I joked with her, scolded her, reasoned with her, teased her and sometimes even laughed at her, because fear seemed such a foolish thing in this bright, hot Arizona sunshine so far from New York, Europe, the Iron Curtain and all the rest.

But in those two peaceful weeks all I really succeeded in doing was convince *myself* that Chris' elaborate scheme was totally exaggerated and unnecessary. Eva still got up several times a night to check all the locks. She still cringed when the telephone rang and ran to the bedroom when anyone came to the door. Maybe I wasn't frightened but things began to get on my nerves and I was glad when Chris' next note came in the mail on the morning of July tenth.

Meet you at the Traveler's Lodge in Yuma on July 11, it said. Public transportation's being watched so you'd better drive. Love and luck. . . . Chris.

There was no question about when we'd make our trip. In the fierce summer heat my car would hardly have got out of Tucson without boiling. I had a small

yellow convertible that was far too old for such folly. We left the city at eight o'clock in the evening. It was still hot but the sun had gone down and there was a smell of coolness in the air. Away from the house for the first time in her two weeks with me, Eva surrendered once more to the pressure of her fear. She sat with her small body rigid against the brown leather upholstery, her hands turning and twisting in her lap, her jaw tight.

Far from sharing her concern, I was elated over the prospect of having this cloak and dagger business soon over.

"It's a beautiful trip and you'll love it," I assured her almost gaily as we started out. Then I leaned forward to press a button on the dashboard. "We'll put the top down so that you can really enjoy all the star-spangled beauty of our desert night . . ."

Eva's lips were stiff when she protested. "But it is so—so uncovered, Liz. Everyone can see . . ."

I laughed as I patted her anguished hands. They were cold and clammy. "This is the good old U.S.A., my friend, and you wouldn't be safer if you were in God's pocket!"

And with these brave words—far braver than I knew—we set out in the gathering darkness.

It was a friendly darkness, one that I knew and loved well. The stars overhead were cool and bright and the air was fragrant with freshly watered growing things. It was like a soothing balm after the white heat of the day and I felt my nerves and body relaxing. But conversation was impossible. Eva sat in a tormented world of her own, the oval of her face turned up to the evening air. So I sang softly, the way I always do when I'm driving alone. It was in the middle of 'Dixie' that I felt the first faint suggestion of fear touch me. I looked anxiously at my gauges. There was nothing wrong. Unconsciously I stepped a little harder on the gas and as I did so I raised my eyes briefly to my rear view mirror.

It was then that I realized why I was concerned. The same car had been behind us ever since we left Gila Bend. I knew that I was not mistaken. One of its headlights was turned a little off to the right. I went faster for a few miles, accelerating erratically, then looked again. It was still there, just as close and suddenly very menacing.

Eva hadn't noticed. Her eyes were closed. We weren't doing more than forty-five, and car after car passed us. But that one car stayed where it was. My hands froze on the wheel and the prick-

ling at the back of my neck spread slowly up into my scalp.

Eva stirred restlessly. "Is there anything wrong?"

"I don't know." My voice felt strained as though it had had to fight to get past my throat. "The same car's been behind us for over an hour."

Eva turned to look and at that moment the driver behind me switched on his bright lights. For one brief instant Eva's pinched, white, horrified face was spotlighted against the blackness of the night, then it was gone and the car behind us moved out to pass.

"They're passing, Eva! It's all right. Coincidence, that's all. They were just signalling that they wanted to pass. Look." Relief washed over me in warm welcome waves, and I almost laughed. This persecution hysteria was certainly infectious.

I slowed down and watched the car come even with mine. It was a black sedan, a big car with Arizona license plates. Inside sat a man and a woman, an ordinary man and an ordinary woman who paid no attention to us or to our car as they moved ahead. Eva didn't look up, but I relaxed. Then I stiffened and jammed on my brakes. The sedan had stopped abruptly in the middle of the road. I felt confused. Had they really been following us then? Or did they need help?

The man got out and with a quick glance up and down the road started for our car.

"Do not stop here, Liz! Back up—go around them—do not sit here . . ." Eva's voice was shrill. Her terrible fear swirled around me. It overwhelmed me with panic. Frantically I shifted into reverse and backed off. The man began to run. I jerked my car into the other lane and whipped around him. He raised his fist in the air then turned back to his car.

They were after us in a second. I pressed the accelerator to the floor, watching the lights of the big car recede as we sped along the highway. They had chosen their moment well. There were no other cars anywhere on the road. My little car began to tremble like an aspen leaf in a high wind and I realized that we were doing seventy. Gradually I slowed down until the wheel once more felt steady under my hands.

Eva was crying softly. "It is all wrong. I should never have let you do this thing," she moaned in her precise English.

"Nuts!" I said shortly. "Just pray for a cafe—a gas station—anything with lights and people."

With these words I realized that

I had at last admitted to myself the very real existence of this danger. And I felt better. More than that I felt angry. Whoever you are, I thought furiously, you're not going to get us that easily!

The big sedan came up fast. We were both doing sixty when they moved out beside us once more. I could feel the wheel begin to tremble again and I wondered if I'd get past them this time without turning over. Cold perspiration trickled down between my breasts and I shivered. "They can't frighten me, damn them!" The words came out in a kind of sob. "I'm not afraid . . . they can't make me afraid . . ."

Eva sat up straight. "You mean that you are not going to stop?"

"Stop?" I thought of my tall, straight brother and the things he had asked me to do for all those other people. Then I glanced at Eva—the only thing he had ever asked for himself. "Do you love him, Eva? Chris, I mean?" We hadn't ever talked about that.

Her voice sounded muffled when she replied. "For what other reason would I do this thing that could mean death for all of us?" She turned her head toward me, and now her words were clear. "Chris is the finest man I've ever known—the most kind. Yes, I love him, Liz."

"All right then. I'm not going to stop." The black sedan in front of me was slowing down again. The convertible rocked wildly as I swerved to avoid hitting it. "I'm going to get you to Chris, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

I sped on past them and as I rounded a curve, there in the blackness ahead, I saw the lights of a beautiful, dazzling, corny sign —"Joe's Joint—Eat—Drink." I pushed still harder on the accelerator and the car surged forward. The other car dropped behind a little.

"Eva," I said quickly, "I'm going to turn in ahead there where you see those lights. I'm going to turn without slowing down and without giving any sign. So hang on. It may be rough."

Eva pushed her small feet hard against the floor and gripped the arm rest beside her.

"Here we go!" I wrenched the wheel suddenly to the right. The driveway was gravel. We almost turned over. Our rear skidded crazily but somehow, by the grace of God and nothing else, we avoided hitting any of the cars or either of the trucks that stood in the parking area. We waited only long enough to see the sedan skid to a screaming stop twenty-five yards up the road. Then we ran inside.

From a window we watched them back up and drive in beside our car. We could see them arguing and gesturing angrily before they turned to peer after us. I held my breath. But they didn't come in. They drove off.

I felt weak as I turned to Eva. "They're gone," I said gently. "Whoever they are, they're gone."

"They will be waiting up the road." It was a statement of fact. "You must know that they never give up. Never!"

Suddenly I became conscious of the bedlam around us. Hamburgers were sizzling on the grill. From one corner a juke box vibrated with 'Jailhouse Rock'. A line of people sat at the counter, all of them screaming and laughing at a tall, skinny guy without any teeth who kept lifting his threadbare scivvy shirt up over his face to grin idiotically through the holes.

"Take your choice of nightmares," I murmured to Eva. "What a joint!"

She smiled. "But this is wonderful! So much light. So many people." Her brown eyes strayed off to the window and the darkness outside.

"Eva," I leaned toward her. "I've got to tell someone what's going on. We need help. I'm going to call the highway patrol."

"No! You can't do that!" She spoke sharply. "Chris said that no one must know. They would send me back . . ."

"I don't believe that."

Her face changed subtly. She looked all at once shrewdly calculating. "What will you tell them? What charge will you make?"

"I don't know. That they've been annoying us, I suppose, and trying to drive us off a public highway." It didn't sound like much. Once more I was confused. I reached for something I knew and believed in. "Look, Eva, in a country where there is law—good, honest law—you have to give it a chance. You have to try."

"Are you willing to press charges? To appear in a court of police and say that these strange things are true of this very respectable man and woman?"

"Respectable? How can you say that . . ." I was shocked.

"But respectable, of course. I am certain that everything about them would prove to be quite in order." She put one hand over mine. "Do not tell the police, Liz. It can mean only trouble."

I jerked my hand away. "And what, exactly, do you think we've got already?" I asked tartly as I got up. "Just a nice friendly game of hide and seek?"

I started toward the counter.

"May I use your phone?" I asked the man in the white apron.

"Sorry, lady. There's no phone here. What's the matter? You got car trouble or something?"

"No. Someone's trying to run us off the road and I want to report it to the highway patrol. They even followed us in here."

Everyone was quiet now.

Toothless Scivvy Shirt came and stood beside me. "Yeah," he said. "I seen 'em. Big black car, wasn't it? Stopped a minute, then took off like a bat outta Hades." He put two dirty hands out in front of him. "Look, lady," he sputtered kindly, "any car tries to run you off the road you just keep a-goin', see. Don't care for nothing —fenders nor nothing. Just keep a-goin'."

The people were turning back to their drinks. I felt suddenly helpless and terribly alone. Maybe I couldn't tell the highway patrol, but I had to tell someone.

"It's not just that. It's my friend. They're after her." I was immediately sorry I'd said the words out loud. They sounded theatrical. They sounded crazy.

Everyone looked at Eva.

"Yeah?"

"What'd she do?"

"Nothing. Except run away. She doesn't want to go back to her own country. . . ."

"Oh—a foreigner, in trouble." "Whadda y'know . . ."

Two truck drivers who had been sitting in a corner booth got up and headed for the door. One of them was a little man hardly any bigger than Eva, but the other was as fine a speciman as I'd ever seen—big, dark, and glowering as a thundercloud over Picacho. The little one stopped beside me.

"Don't fool around, lady," he said kindly. "Whatever it is, report it. I been driving these roads fifteen years and I seen plenty. Don't take no chances."

I clasped my hands to keep them still. "I *want* to report it. But there's no telephone here . . ."

"Maybe up the road somewhere?" The little man looked around inquiringly. But everyone turned away.

Only Toothless Scivvy Shirt answered. "Ain't no place I know of in the summer except Hackett's and he's closed up tighter 'n a drum. I just come through there tonight."

"Then maybe we'd better wait here until the highway patrol comes by." I looked at the man with the white apron.

He finished polishing a glass before he said, "They were here a couple hours ago, lady. We won't see them again till tomorrow

night. Better luck next time."

"Sounds like a cock and bull story to me," the big, dark man growled from the doorway where he was waiting for his friend. "Whenever anyone gets in a jam these days he drags out the good old reliable Red herring for all the world to see. Why, those guys wouldn't dare pull a stunt like that here." Suddenly he grinned at me, an amused white grin that made me want to slap his smug, handsome face. "Anyway whoever heard of a redhead who wasn't in some kind of trouble?"

Several of the men at the bar snickered in agreement. I bristled and the little man looked embarrassed. "Don't mind Dan," he said soothingly. "He's a part time writer and you know how writers are. Always running off at the mouth." He winked at me. "Where you bound for, miss?"

"Yuma." It seemed a million miles away.

"Well, you just talk to the patrol boys there. They'll fix you up O.K."

"You don't understand, any of you. They'll never let us get to Yuma. It's sixty miles away—sixty miles of nothing—nothing at all."

Dan opened the door. "You've been seeing too many movies, Red—bad movies. There are plenty of cars on the road. Just get going and keep going no matter what. And remember, baby, this is America. Come on, Jake, we're behind time now."

I made one last desperate effort. "Where are you boys headed?"

Dan grinned again. "Nice try, but we're going in the opposite direction, to Tucson. Come on, Jake. Luck, girls!"

The door closed on them.

"Isn't there some place near here where we could stay for the night?" I tried to sound matter-of-fact. "Just till dawn. We'd go on then."

No one answered. They hadn't believed any of what we'd said. God bless America where such things couldn't happen! They didn't understand, they didn't believe, and they didn't care. We were in some kind of trouble, sure. But they didn't know what it was and they didn't want any part of it.

"Can't we stay here, then," I persisted, "right here all night? We'll pay . . ."

"Look, lady, this ain't my place. I only rent it and I don't want it busted in nor shot up nor nothing. You better move on. I close up and go home in half an hour anyway."

I sat down again across from Eva. The coffee in front of me was cold but I drank it. "We could

pull off the road and park till it gets light." I looked at my watch. It was two o'clock. "That will be in three hours about."

"They would come back to find us. A yellow convertible—it is so easy to see." Her eyes accused me and all at once I understood these guys in the cafe. I hadn't believed either a few short hours ago.

"O.K. We'll put up the top then and make a run for it. Unless—Eva, why don't we turn back?"

"Do you think that they would not have thought of that? Do you think that there is no one back there—waiting?"

I didn't say anything more. I paid for the coffee and went out to the car. Eva climbed in beside me. Without a word I closed the top and fastened it and we started off. Twice I was so overwhelmed by fear that I could hardly see the road in front of me. But each time I pushed the panic down and tried to think. To think? That was a laugh. What was there to think about but that big, black sedan and when it would appear again out of the darkness.

I never even saw it come out from beside the road. But all at once just as I turned a curve there it was behind me exactly as though we had never been separated. At this hour there were no longer many cars on the road. For miles now the highway was deserted. I had never felt more alone in my life.

Eva must have known. She reached for my arm and patted it. "You are very brave," she said. "You are very good . . ."

"Eva, when—if—they stop us, shall we run?"

She shook her head. "They will have guns. It would be no use. You must know that they always win, Liz, they cannot be beaten. Ever."

I felt the helpless anger rise in me again. It was so strong I could almost taste it. And at that moment, with a sickening grind of crumpling metal, the black car ran us off the road. Before I could get my key out of the lock the man was at my door.

"Get out," he said.

I don't know what I'd expected. Shouts maybe, and abuse, and guns brandished in the general direction of my heart. But this man's voice was soft and if he had a gun I couldn't see it.

"What the devil do you mean running us off the road like that?" It was my voice. I could hear it but I was so frightened that I was hardly conscious of the fact that I was speaking.

"You make a mistake, young lady. Everyone makes the same

mistake because I speak only softly." He took a small revolver from his pocket. "Now—get out!"

His accent was the same as Eva's. But the woman who waited for Eva on the other side of the car was an American—a dumpy, middle-aged American.

"Have you decided . . ." she began.

The man's voice snapped coldly. "Quiet! There is a car coming. Get the other one down so that no one will see her."

I found myself dragged to the far side of the car and pushed roughly to the ground. I could tell by the sound of the motor that a truck was passing on the highway and for one wild moment, while its headlights shone briefly on my car, I considered making a break for it so that I could somehow flag it down. But the hand that held me in the sand was too strong and in a flash my chance was gone. The lights vanished in the distance and we were allowed to stand up.

"What are you going to do with the other one—the redhead? Have you decided?" The woman sounded anxious as she pushed Eva into the big car.

"I have decided."

"You won't kill her, George, will you? It could make things very embarrassing for us."

The man shrugged. "Even Americans have accidents, Comrade, or are sometimes murdered in their wild, empty deserts by other Americans.

I could hear Eva crying inside the sedan. I turned to look at my own car and the man released his hold on me. "Go ahead," he said. "Go on back to your car if you wish. We have what we want."

Eva called desperately from the car. "Don't go, Liz! Don't run! He will shoot you in the back."

I couldn't move. My legs wouldn't carry me. I felt my head swim and I knew that I was going to faint. I opened my mouth to scream and nothing came out but a weak, sad moan.

A sudden crunch of sand in the darkness behind him made the man's glance waver. I tore my eyes from the gun and saw something coming toward us, a large, black shadow moving very quickly. I gasped involuntarily and the man before me turned. I gathered all my strength to take advantage of the distraction and ran for my car. I heard a shot and felt a swift sharp pain in my leg before I tumbled into utter darkness.

It was Eva who was holding my head in her lap when I regained consciousness—a battered, bedrag-

gled Eva with her hair loose on her shoulders and one of her cheeks raked with welts. But it was Dan—the big, smug, part-time truck driver—I saw standing in front of me in the glare of his truck's headlights.

"Hello, Red." He grinned strangely through bruised swollen lips. Then he dropped to the ground beside me. "You little fool, running like that with a gun on you! You could have been killed!"

I tried to sit up. "Those people —that man and woman . . ."

"Easy does it, baby." Dan pressed me back onto Eva's lap. "They're in the truck trussed up like a couple of Thanksgiving turkeys. What matters now is getting you to a doctor—fast."

"I don't need a doctor. I feel wonderful," I said, "pain and all. I'm alive!" I closed my eyes for a moment. "Why did you come back, Dan? You said you wouldn't help. We were all alone . . ." Tears trickled down my cheeks. "No one wanted to help."

Dan brushed at the tears with an awkward finger. "Yeah," he said. "I got to thinking about that. About that and about war. I'd gone and fought in two wars because I didn't believe little guys should be pushed around. And it didn't make sense for me to close my eyes when a couple of little guys right here were taking a beating. When I thought over what you'd said, it figured. It sounded like those lousy . . ." He broke off sheepishly. "Let's face it, baby. I just never could resist a redhead."

I blinked away my tears. "You believed us, Dan, and I'm glad." I felt exhausted but I remembered one more thing. I looked up at Eva. "You see," I said triumphantly, "you were wrong. They didn't beat us after all. And they never will!"

Eva put her good cheek against my hair. When she spoke her voice was soft and tender. "Tonight, for the first time in my life, I feel free to believe that what you say is true."

There was no international incident. Our charges were discreet—assault with a deadly weapon—and our demands were modest. But they paid a price for our discretion. They paid the price we asked—Eva's freedom.

The DEADLY Impersonation

BY C. B. GILFORD

THERE are all sorts of uses, I suppose, that a woman can put a man to. She can use him as a lover, a meal ticket, a companion. If she's the vine type, he can be the thing she clings to. Then there are a few women who know how to use a man as a sucker, a patsy, a fall guy. So that he takes the rap instead of her. Even for a murder.

Nancy Colmer was that kind. Only right at first I didn't know her name was Nancy. She called

Picking up a pretty girl can often be calamitous. Fancy this young man's quandary when he finds himself not only a psuedo-suitor but uncomfortably unsuited for murder.

herself "Marjorie" on this occasion.

It was a pick-up pure and simple. Of course I thought I was picking her up. But it wasn't that way at all. Marjorie arranged everything, right from the beginning.

She just sat there at that soda fountain and looked bored and lonely and unhappy. When she saw I was looking at her, she glanced away, ashamed that she'd let out her secret to me, a total stranger. I moved in fast. Not that that's my usual speed. But the door of the trap was so wide open.

She was small. Not tiny, just femininely petite, the way I've got to have them because I'm not very big myself. Her figure wasn't voluptuous, and her hair-do was kind of boyish too, not any longer than what the motorcycle set wears. Blond, blue-green eyes, nice skin, a little tilted nose.

The one thing I should have noticed—I only remembered it later—was the way she sized me up. Like I was applying for a modeling job. Well, in a way I was. I was going to pose for her. As a murderer.

"That's a real rain out there," I said.

We went on talking about the weather. It was depressing her, she said. Why didn't we go to some livelier spot, I suggested. She refused at first, demurely, making the right impression. But finally she gave in. Maybe I could cheer her up. I guess I did. I was just the dumb guy she was looking for.

While we were driving, she gave my car the same close examination she'd given me—though I didn't recall that till later either. The fact was, she wanted to make sure she'd know how to drive my five-year-old crate.

In the crazy little bar I took her to, she let me do all the talking. She found out my life history. I wasn't exceptionally bright. I wasn't important. I didn't have many friends. I didn't hang around with a crowd. And I didn't have much money.

When it came time to take her home, she said no. She was due at her long-distance switchboard at midnight. Disappointed, I drove her to her job, let her off in front of the telephone building, and watched her go in. As it turned out, of course, nobody named Marjorie worked for the phone company as a long-distance operator. No Nancy Colmer either, as a matter of fact.

But before we parted, I made a date with her for the next night. No, don't pick her up at her house, she said. Her father was a problem. Why not meet at that same drug store? This way, naturally, I wouldn't find out where

she lived. She played the angles.

That next night was *it*. A beautiful night, no rain. It was a shame to spend a nice night like that inside somewhere. I suggested we ought to drive around, and she fell for it. Yeah, that's what I actually thought she was doing, falling for my line.

There was a parking spot where I hadn't been for two or three years, because I hadn't had anybody to take there. What a thrill it was to take an attractive girl like Marjorie there, to sit and watch the reflections of light on the river, listen to the soft-tuned radio . . . and then finally to slide over on the seat and have Marjorie edging to meet me. There was nothing in the way she kissed me to make me think that this was the kiss of Judas.

"Gee, Marjorie," I said.

I lost track of time. I started getting the craziest ideas. This was *the* girl maybe. This was . . . the real thing.

"You're sweet, Hershel," she said.

Then it happened so suddenly. I could see what she was doing, fumbling with her purse, because the moonlight was bright in the car. Out of the purse came a shiny thing that I thought at first was a cigarette lighter. When it pointed toward me it became a gun.

"Where did you get that?"

"Start driving back the same way we came, Hershel."

I drove. Once in a while I'd sneak a look at the gun, and it never wavered. Marjorie never took her eyes off me.

"Pull over and park," she said after a few minutes.

It was a dark, unfamiliar section, without street lights or houses. "Look," I told her, "I've only got five or six bucks."

"Take the keys and get out," was her answer.

I did what I was told. She slid under the steering wheel and followed me out on my side. When we stood together there in the street, she nudged my spine with the gun.

"Open the trunk." I did it, still puzzled. "Now take off your clothes."

"What!" I don't know what I felt most acutely, modesty, outraged dignity, or sheer surprise.

"Jacket, shirt, trousers, and shoes. You can keep your underwear."

I was so grateful for that favor, I suppose, that I accepted the partial disrobing without further question. I dropped everything into a neat pile on the street and stood there, shivering and feeling more foolish than scared.

"Now climb into the trunk."

"Hey, look . . ." I finally *was*

scared then. What was she up to?

"All I'm going to do, Hershel, is drive your car around for a little while. If you behave yourself and don't make any noise in there, I'll let you out and give you back your car in about an hour. I'll be stopping a couple of times though. If you make any noise then or try to attract attention, I'll shoot right through the trunk. You know a bullet can go through that thin steel, don't you?"

I didn't know, but I wasn't going to test it out. "But I don't understand," I began to say weakly.

"Just get in."

She waved the gun menacingly, and I scrambled inside the dirty trunk, hitting my knees and shins on various metal projections as I went. There was plenty of room as long as I curled up—which I did, because I didn't want that trunk lid smashing me when it came down.

Marjorie closed the lid softly though. Because she didn't want anybody to hear the sound, I figured. Then afterwards there were other, very small noises. I supposed that she was picking up my clothes. Why did I have to take my clothes off before I got into the trunk, I wondered.

I heard her climb back into the driver's seat, close the door, and start the engine. We started to move at what must have been ordinary speed, but I was still jolted around in that trunk. The rubber mat wasn't soft, even after I moved a few tools and some other junk out of my way.

It seemed that we drove for about ten minutes. Then we turned off and stopped. It was easy to tell where we were, because somebody started unscrewing the gas cap right next to my head.

Almost automatically I opened my mouth to yell for help. There was a service station attendant standing within a few inches of me. But I caught myself just in time, remembering Marjorie's threat to shoot right through the trunk lid.

We were there for maybe four or five minutes. I was starting to feel cramped, but I didn't want to stir and make a noise. I waited till we were moving again.

This second part of the ride was a shorter one. Maybe it didn't last more than a minute or two. Then we glided to a very gradual, silent stop. I held my breath. Maybe now Marjorie was going to open the trunk and I could breathe fresh air again.

But she didn't. She got out of the car all right, but I didn't know where she went. It occurred to me

at the time—though I didn't make much of it—that I definitely did not hear her spike heels clicking as she took her departure. Yet I had the notion that she was gone, and that I was alone.

Nothing to do but be patient and wait. I tried not to let my imagination make guesses about where we were or what Marjorie was doing. I was being kidnapped temporarily. Marjorie wanted the use of my car for a little while.

But the time went slowly. There wasn't a sound from anywhere. How long was I going to wait before the danger of suffocation would force me to start banging to summon help? Then there was the possibility that the car was standing in some deserted place too distant for anyone to hear. Marjorie wanted to kill me. Or maybe she was just standing there waiting for me to make a noise so she'd have an excuse to start firing bullets into the trunk.

I was right on the verge of hysteria, ready to start screaming when there finally was a sound. Small, indistinct, a sort of shuffling. I knew it was Marjorie.

I was right too. The key grated in the trunk lock, the lid swung open, and the fresh air rushed in so deliciously that for a moment or two I was drunk with it. Then in the darkness I saw Marjorie standing there with that shiny gun still in her right hand.

"Get out," she whispered.

There was never an order I obeyed more willingly. I stepped out, stretched and flexed. I felt so good and so relieved that I almost could have forgiven Marjorie, since after all I hadn't really been harmed.

But Marjorie wasn't seeking forgiveness. She pointed to a dark heap on the street. "There are your clothes," she told me.

She started backing away from me then, slowly, warily, still keeping the muzzle of that gun pointed at my chest. Her dress was dark, and she melted quickly into the shadows.

After a minute or so I decided that at least I could put my clothes on. As I struggled into my trousers and shirt, I discovered that something had been spilled on the front of both garments, something almost dry but still a bit sticky. My jacket wasn't there—I found it later in the back seat. The shoes seemed to be dirty, and the idiotic notion occurred to me that Marjorie had been wearing these clothes.

Cautiously I worked around to the driver's side of the car. There was no challenge from the empty darkness. I opened the door and climbed in. As quietly as I could,

I started up the engine and eased away from that place. I was rid of Marjorie.

Since I didn't even know what part of town I was in, I just drove in the hope of finding a familiar street or landmark. It was finally under a light when I stopped to look at a sign, that I noticed the color of that stuff that was on my clothes and my hands. Blood red.

When you're in a jam, or begin to suspect that you're in one, it's just too easy to panic. You don't think straight. You overlook small details. You forget that the odds might be on your side. In other words, I still had a chance, lots of chances, but I didn't know it.

I was at the opposite end of town from where I lived, and driving in the wrong direction. I did a quick turn-around and headed home. It was the only course of action I could think of. Get home, get rid of these bloody clothes, then very carefully watch the papers and try to find out what happened.

The little matter that I overlooked—the part that Marjorie hadn't planned but which made everything easier for her—was the fact that patrol cars prowl around at night watching for suspicious looking drivers. One of those cars found me almost right away. They sneaked up from behind, then were right beside me, telling me to pull over, before I knew they were anywhere close.

"I'm sorry I didn't see you," I started to say, "or I'd have stopped sooner."

They first thought I was drunk, I guess. One of them got out and leaned up against my door. "How could you see behind you?" he asked, not too politely. "You've been driving with your trunk lid up."

Then he noticed the blood, of course, which was smeared all over my shirt front. They yanked me out of the car and took a good look at me. I don't blame them, considering my appearance, for taking me down to the station right then. On suspicion of murder. Even though they didn't know yet that a murder had been committed.

A lieutenant named Sol Bentz was in charge of the case. I told Sol everything I knew, and everything I didn't know and had to be told came from him.

He wasn't a bad guy, firm but gentle even when dealing with an obvious murderer. He was a big man, but he looked soft, and everything about him drooped, his shoulders, his clothes, his eyelids, the corners of his mouth. So he

looked not only soft but sad. His hair was gray, and I never saw him but that he needed a shave.

I met Sol Bentz that first morning. I'd spent the night in a cell while the cops wondered what I'd done. About dawn they found out. A couple of hours after dawn I received a visit from Lieutenant Bentz.

"So you're Hershel Norman, huh?" he asked as if he didn't believe it.

"Yes sir." I was wearing clean trousers and shirt. My bloody clothes had been taken away from me.

"Ever heard of a man named Eugene Sperry?"

I shook my head.

"Did you kill a man last night even though you didn't know his name?"

This time I shook my head violently. And although Sol Bentz hadn't asked for it, I launched immediately into my story. It was the first chance I'd had to tell it. Sol listened thoughtfully, without interrupting, watching me calmly through a haze of cigar smoke.

"Do you expect me to believe that?" he asked when I was finished.

"Well, it's the truth."

He closed his eyes for a minute. When he opened them he said, "The only thing in your favor is that ridiculous story of yours. Maybe it has to be the truth simply because it's such a lousy lie. Not that I believe it, however. Now shall I tell you a story?"

I desperately wanted to know what had happened.

Sol Bentz spoke quietly. "Last night, just before midnight, a black car drove up to a Bridge Avenue gas station. The attendant notices details about cars, and he doesn't have many customers at that hour. He described the car as having a bad dent in the driver's door . . ."

"Look," I interrupted him, "I told you Marjorie stopped at a service station."

"Your car did anyway," Sol corrected me placidly. "The man remembers the driver somewhat too. A young man, slightly built, acting fidgety and nervous. Wore dark gray trousers, gray sport jacket . . ."

"Then Marjorie was dressed in my clothes!"

Sol Bentz stared at me. "I've already put the two stories together," he told me mildly. "If they do go together, that is. You don't have to explain things to me, Mr. Norman. I'm the detective."

He seemed hurt, offended, in some ludicrous way, so I let him go on.

"Gray sport jacket, white shirt, dark tie, dark hat. The driver went

inside the station while the gas was being pumped. But the attendant is always suspicious of late customers, so he kept his eye on the young fella. Put a dime in the pay phone, tried to make a call, didn't succeed, got his dime back. Put a quarter in the cigarette machine. Got a package of smokes."

"Look, I don't even smoke." I couldn't keep still. "And isn't it clear why she stalled around inside? So the man couldn't get a good look at her."

"Thank you, Mr. Norman. May I go on? Well, the driver came out finally, paid for the gas. He'd ordered an even dollar's worth, handed over the dollar bill, and drove off."

"Did the man see the driver's face?" Things were clearing up fast for me now.

"Yes, he did. We'll run a line-up later, Mr. Norman, to see if he recognizes you. Now let's go to Mr. Eugene Sperry. He was a bachelor around thirty-five. He lived in the end unit in one of those things they call 'garden apartments'. Not the real noisy sort. Not noisy enough to get kicked out of the place anyway. But his neighbors suspect he was a pretty gay blade. This Mr. Sperry had a good job, had nice furniture in his place, possibly a fair little wad of cash, which, however, doesn't seem to be there now. This morning, right before dawn, the milkman comes, sees Mr. Sperry's back door wide open. On second look he also sees Mr. Sperry. Lying on his kitchen linoleum. He's very dead. Because he's been stabbed about six times. Real vicious cuts. Mr. Sperry, by the way, lived about two blocks from the service station we've discussed."

"How did you get the attendant's story so quick?" I demanded, querulously.

Sol Bentz wasn't perturbed. "We'd have got it eventually anyway," he said, "because we'd have combed the area. But Mr. Thomas was short of help and working the late night and early morning shifts both. He was the closest area merchant open at night. On the first question maybe we hit the jackpot, huh?"

My luck was all bad, I couldn't argue that. "And then you found me with blood all over my clothes," I said.

But Lieutenant Bentz had one more surprise for me. "And there was a bloody knife in the back seat of your car," he added.

I sat on the cot in that jail cell and put my head down in my hands. I cried. I shed tears. Tears of anger and frustration. I wasn't frightened at the moment, because I couldn't imagine that everything

wouldn't be cleared up. All they had to do was to find Marjorie. But I wanted to find her. I wanted to get my hands on her.

"Well, Mr. Norman?" the Lieutenant questioned after a long time.

"Well what?"

"You want to change your story?"

"Why should I? It's the truth."

"Okay."

"Why should I have killed Sperry?"

"Robbery."

"You didn't find any money on me, did you?"

"Maybe you threw it away. Or maybe you didn't get any. My guess is that you managed to get inside Sperry's apartment, demanded his money, threatened him with that knife. Sperry resisted. You killed him."

"But I've never robbed anybody before."

"Not that we know of. But we have plenty of unsolved cases."

"Look, this is a frame-up."

"It may be. Is that all you have to say?"

"Till I see my lawyer. Maybe I've said too much already."

Sol Bentz went away then. I lay down on my cot and closed my eyes and tried to think clearly. It wasn't easy. I was in jail. I was accused of a murder which I hadn't committed. But Marjorie, who had committed it, had done some very clear thinking ahead of time. And she was free somewhere.

Early in the afternoon they ran the line-up. It was cut-and-dried. Mr. Thomas, the gas station man, swore to the Lieutenant that I was the young man in the old black sedan.

I had a minute with the Lieutenant afterward. "Look," I explained to him. "I know I'm small, but I'm five-six. Marjorie couldn't be more than five-three. Maybe she weighs a hundred and ten. I weigh a hundred and thirty-five. And we're *built* different. How could that guy not have noticed that my clothes didn't fit her?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Norman."

"But Marjorie would have had to roll up the trouser legs. The shoulders of the coat would have been too wide. Everything would have looked baggy."

The Lieutenant shrugged. "Mr. Thomas is no style expert. He was busy pumping gas."

"But he identified me!"

"By the face mostly. Tell me something, Mr. Norman. Did this Marjorie resemble you in the face?"

I hadn't considered that possibility before. Now I stared at him. "Well, maybe a little bit," I admitted. "Except that she was a girl."

"But dressed as a man, Mr. Norman."

The awful, probable truth was descending on me then, and I didn't mind confiding it to the Lieutenant. "Maybe Marjorie planned all this. Maybe she sat around that drug store for a long time waiting for just the right sucker. A guy who wasn't too much bigger than herself, with light skin, blond hair, and just enough facial resemblance . . ."

Sol Bentz nodded. "How often do you shave?" he asked me.

"Twice a week."

"Marjorie was a smart girl."

"Then you believe me!"

"I didn't say that." He walked back to my cell with me. As I went inside, he stayed in the corridor and said to me, "By the way, Mr. Norman, we checked with the phone company, and they don't have any long-distance girls named Marjorie."

It was a long, miserable afternoon. I didn't have any money. I didn't have any friends. No relative closer than five hundred miles. I had no one to speak up for me. They asked me if I'd accept a lawyer that they could send me. I said I would.

Arthur Karnes was a young guy, not much older than myself, probably just out of law school. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and seemed very serious. He listened to my story very patiently, and as far as I could tell he believed me.

"Do they have enough evidence to pin this on me?" I asked him.

"They have quite a bit," he admitted. And he ran through it. "They've established that you and your car were in the area. They'll run chemical tests on the blood stains. It'll be Sperry's blood all right. They've got footprints from outside Sperry's door that match your shoes."

"Well sure. Marjorie was wearing my shoes."

He nodded. "Let me think about all this," he said.

So I spent another night in jail. I felt helpless. I was locked up here while the police were gathering one piece of evidence after another to convict me of murder. I couldn't do anything to protect myself.

In the morning Lieutenant Bentz came to see me again. They'd been taking fingerprints in Sperry's apartment.

"Did you find any of mine?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Well, doesn't that prove anything to you?"

"It proves you didn't leave any prints there. But that's possible."

"What about other prints? Mar-

jorie's fingerprints, for instance?"

"There were plenty of prints. Mr. Sperry's mostly. But others too. The trouble is, we don't have anything to match them with."

I'd already done some thinking in my spare time. "How about the knife?" I asked. "Are my prints on that?"

"The knife is too smudged. No usable prints."

"Well?"

"A point in your favor, Mr. Norman."

"Another thing, Lieutenant. The driver of the car bought a package of cigarettes. I imagine you've been in my room by this time. Did you find any cigarettes? Or matches or ash trays?"

"Nope."

"Then why would I have bought cigarettes at the service station?"

"Sometimes people don't have the habit, but they smoke occasionally. Like when they're nervous. Going to pull a robbery or something. It's possible."

"But where's that package of cigarettes now?"

He shrugged. He didn't know. I realized I hadn't proved anything. But maybe there was a tiny doubt in Sol Bentz's mind. Maybe he was just a little on my side. I could use somebody on my side.

Just before I was formally arraigned on a charge of murder, he confided to me what he'd uncovered on the love life of Eugene Sperry. He looked sadder, droopier than ever. Sol Bentz had been really working on this case. He had given me the benefit of the doubt.

"If there was such a girl as Marjorie," he said, "and she'd been the one who'd killed Sperry, then robbery wasn't the motive. The motive was feminine. Revenge, frustration, something like that. Sperry had double-crossed her. Or he refused to marry her. So she wanted to kill him, but didn't want to take the rap for killing him. Sperry was a bachelor, with plenty of money to spend on girls. He was the type who could get mixed up with a girl, but wouldn't want to take the plunge into matrimony. We got all this from the neighbors. Sperry dated girls, plenty of 'em. Once in a while he'd have quiet little parties in his apartment. Now and then, not very often, a neighbor would get a look at one of Sperry's girls. They were always pretty, they said. Sperry never bothered with any other kind. All in all though, these neighbors couldn't tell us much. Sperry never confided his private affairs to anybody. And there's another thing that sort of stymies us too."

"What's that, Lieutenant?"

"Sperry seems to have relied on his memory when it came to girls. He didn't keep an address book."

Whatever verdict is reached, whatever they do to you later, a murder trial itself is almost punishment enough. My crime wasn't quite "the crime of the century," but we had a full house every day just the same. A courtroom packed with grinning apes watching everything like they might watch a football game and cheering for their side. Which wasn't my side.

Arthur Karnes continued as my lawyer, mainly because I couldn't afford a better one. The prosecutor was a big, middle-aged, red-faced fat man named Jim McGahan. And he knew a hundred times as much about handling juries and the subject of murder than Arthur Karnes would ever know.

All the circumstantial evidence was trotted out, and in the glare of that brightly lighted courtroom it looked bad for me. A lot of it was pictures and the testimony of witnesses. The actual objects, the exhibits were much worse.

The knife first of all. I'd been shown it before but in the courtroom it seemed bigger, more terrifying. The blood had dried and browned, of course, but it was still there. It was a weapon, a doctor said, which well could have inflicted Eugene Sperry's wounds. It was the same kind of blood, another doctor testified. And a policeman wrapped it up by saying he'd found the knife in my car.

The clothes were equally damning. The shoes had been soiled with the same kind of dirt as the dirt in Sperry's yard. And a footprint in that yard, preserved in a plaster mould, just fitted the shoe. Then there was blood on the trousers, the belt, and the shirt—the tie having been found in the back seat with the jacket. This was where Marjorie had wanted to make real sure. It was obvious to me at least what she'd done. She'd dipped her hands in the blood of the man she'd murdered, and had deliberately rubbed it into the garments. Almost the whole front of the shirt. The trousers nearly down to the knees. On the belt you had to look closer to see it, since its brown color was nearly the same as the color of the dried blood. But because there was blood on the belt too, you could see that she'd splashed on the blood from her shoulders to her knees.

"Can't they see it's faked?" I whispered to Arthur Karnes. "That much blood couldn't get on accidentally."

"That would be a hard point to prove," he told me.

Then on the second day of the trial, I had a brainstorm. Suddenly I got the notion: put yourself into Marjorie's shoes—like she was in yours that night. What would you do if some guy was being tried for a murder that you'd committed? Would you attend the trial to check how your scheme was working? Maybe you would. It would be pretty important that this guy's crazy story shouldn't be

believed and he should be convicted. In fact, how could you stay away?

But Marjorie believes too strongly in the value of disguise, I told myself, to come as Marjorie. So she won't be blonde and cute. She'll be . . . well, as opposite as she can be.

So I started checking over the spectators in the courtroom. On the sly, of course. As it happened, I had a pretty good view. I eliminated the fat ladies, the old ladies, the tall ladies. And then I saw a female who theoretically could have been Marjorie, except that she had black hair and wore horn-rimmed glasses.

It had to be Marjorie! She was sitting in the very last row to be inconspicuous. Just what Marjorie would do. I checked carefully over the rest of the courtroom. There was no one else who came close. If Marjorie was there at all, she was that brunette.

I had to take the risk, pretend that I was certain when I was only guessing. Lieutenant Bentz was there that morning, due to testify. When we sat down, I ignored my lawyer and passed my note straight to Sol. "Marjorie," I said, "is sitting in the back row on the left. Brunette, blue dress, blue hat, horn-rimmed glasses. A disguise. I don't think she knows I saw her."

When we had a ten-minute recess, Sol Bentz came across the hall to talk to me. "Are you sure it's the same girl?" he asked.

"I swear it is. You've got to arrest her."

He shook his head ponderously. "Not so fast, boy. What have we got besides your identification?"

I was furious with him. "You could fingerprint her," I told him. "Then compare her prints with some from Sperry's apartment."

"What if none of 'em match? Listen, if she's as smart as you say she is, I'll bet she didn't leave any prints."

"But she might have something that would connect her with Sperry. A picture . . . or letters . . ."

Again Sol Bentz shook his head. "She's dumb if she does. I got maybe a better idea, Hershel."

"Like what?"

"Well, all of us just go on pretending we don't know she's watching the trial. And meanwhile we put a tail on her. We find out what her real name is, and where she lives. That way we've always got her if we want her. Then, once we know who she is, we can start working from her direction, trying to find out if she ever knew Sperry. I think it'd be smart, Hershel, if for a while she wouldn't know she's been recognized."

I'd made a pretty good deal, considering I wasn't a hundred per cent sure the brunette was Marjorie. The rest of the day I kept my eyes on her. She stayed right with it. I became more and more convinced she was the one. When the judge called it quits for the day, I saw her leave. One of Bentz's men following her, I hoped. I went back to my cell and waited.

Bentz brought his first report that evening. "Our girl," he announced, "lives all alone in a little kitchenette on Waterloo Street. But she didn't need those glasses to get home. She took 'em off a block away from the courthouse. As for the dark hair, it may be real. Who knows what color a dame's hair really is. And her name isn't Marjorie. It's Nancy Colmer."

"Nancy," I repeated. I'd hated a girl named Marjorie for so long that I didn't know whether I'd be able to shift my hate to the name of Nancy. But I was elated. I'd taken a chance and it had worked out. My luck was turning.

"Tomorrow she'll probably come back to the trial," Bentz said. "I might get inside that kitchenette."

"You're a real friend, Lieutenant," I said, and I grabbed his hand and pumped it.

Embarrassed, he tugged away from my grip. "I don't want you to get the idea," he said, "that the police are trying to convict everybody they get their hands on. We're interested in justice too. Besides, the business of the glasses is a mite suspicious."

Well, it worked out just like that. Marjorie—or Nancy rather—was in the back row again next day, black hair, spectacles and all, and Bentz went out to Waterloo Street. I met him at the noon re-

cess. I knew the answer when I saw his face. Sadder than ever.

"We lifted some prints," he began hopefully. "We'll compare them with the prints from Sperry's apartment."

"What else?" I wanted to know.

"Nothing else."

"Nothing at all?"

"If she was acquainted with Eugene Sperry, there's no sign of it. In fact, she doesn't seem to be a girl who saves personal stuff. There's just one picture. A family group. Snapshot. Hard to say about the color of the girl's hair. But she's not wearing glasses. No letters, not even from the family. There's not even anything to give a clue about what kind of work the girl does, or used to do. And right now all she's doing is attending this trial."

"But you can still arrest her," I pleaded with him. "Question her . . ."

He shook his head stubbornly. "I got a feeling, Hershel," he said. "I got a feeling that'd be all wrong. She isn't the kind who would answer questions. Right now we've got one advantage. She doesn't know that we know she's watching this trial. Let's don't throw away that advantage."

Sol Bentz was my friend, so I had to trust him. He'd keep a tail on Nancy Colmer. Maybe she'd lead him to something. Wait and see.

Meanwhile the trial droned on. Jim McGahan did a beautiful job. When Mr. Thomas, the service station operator, was on the stand, McGahan made his testimony that I was at the service station sound practically like testimony that I'd been seen at the Sperry apartment. My lawyer cross-examined, but got nowhere. McGahan took four whole days to present the case for the prosecution, counting the flairs and flourishes and insinuations that he added. In his summation to the jury, he referred to me as a "dangerous punk," a "killer-burglar," a "maniac" who wasn't content to stab a man once, but who had to stab six times and then wash his hands in the victim's blood. The jury was impressed.

On the fifth day, Arthur Karnes had his chance. What with Nancy Colmer sitting right there in the courtroom but Sol Bentz still not wanting to let her know she'd been spotted, all the defense had was my story.

I told it straight. It was painful, because I could tell from the expressions on the face of the jury that they didn't believe me. I had to be careful to call the girl Marjorie rather than Nancy, but I didn't slip.

Then came the showdown, Mc-

Gahan's cross-examination. It was easy in one way, because all I had to do was to stick to the truth. But it was hard to endure McGahan's sneers and taunts. I glanced over his shoulder now and then. Nancy Colmer was in the back row, and somehow I sensed that she was enjoying the ridiculous way McGahan made my story sound.

As a sort of climax, he had the exhibits brought in again. He started with the knife. "Mr. Norman, do you recognize this knife?"

"Yes. It's Exhibit A."

He smiled. "Do you recognize it as your property?"

"I never owned a knife."

"Yet this knife was found in your car."

"I explained how that happened."

"Oh yes. The mysterious girl must have left it there. What was her name? Margie?"

"Marjorie."

"Oh yes. Well, this is the knife that killed Eugene Sperry."

"But I didn't use it."

McGahan shifted to the clothing. He held up the shirt, almost more reddish brown than white. "Your shirt, Mr. Norman?"

"Yes."

"Now don't be hasty. Take a good look." He put it into my hands, and I had to hold it for a moment. I could hardly refuse.

"It's my shirt," I said, uneasily.

He removed the shirt and thrust the trousers at me. "Were these yours?" he asked with a grim smile.

"Yes."

"Rather bloody, aren't they?"

"I explained that too."

"Oh yes, I keep forgetting. Margie."

"Marjorie," I corrected him.

He took away the trousers and practically threw the belt at me. It coiled like a snake in my lap. I picked it up cautiously, almost like I would have picked up a snake.

"Your belt, Mr. Norman?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

I got mad suddenly. "Look, this is a good belt. I paid five bucks for it. I've worn it since I was in high school. You can see how it's creased. Why should I take my best belt and smear blood all over it?"

Then I stopped just as suddenly, and something was all at once very clear to me. This was real, tangible. I wanted to talk to Sol Bentz desperately. He was sitting right there. I glanced at him, but he didn't seem to receive my message. I'd have to go it alone and take my chances.

McGahan's big red face was leering close to mine. I felt so ex-

hilarated that I shook the belt right in front of his nose, close enough to make him step back in a half-fright.

"I'll show you something about this belt," I told him. My voice was loud and strong. I stood up, stripped off my coat, and started to fasten the belt around me. Maybe the judge was too surprised to order me to sit down again, or maybe he didn't mind.

"You see," I said to McGahan. "This is my belt all right. It just fits me. See, the tongue of the buckle fits into the worn hole. Now let's pretend I've just committed a murder, and I'm slopping the blood all over myself." I demonstrated with both hands. "The blood goes everywhere except under the little strip where the buckle crosses and grips the belt. Okay? There shouldn't be any blood there." I ripped the belt off again. "Take a close look, Mr. McGahan. It's hard to see because the dried blood is almost the same color as the leather. But there *is* blood where there shouldn't be. And look here. About four inches farther over. The bare strip with no blood on it is over here. Somebody with a waist line *four inches smaller than mine* was wearing this belt when the blood got on it. Marjorie was wearing it. Only her real name's Nancy Colmer. You can measure her waist if you want to because she's sitting right there in the back row."

A lot happened very fast then. But the thing I saw clearly was Sol Bentz catapulting out of his chair and heading back toward the spectators. Nancy Colmer tried to run, but Sol caught her at the door. There was quite a tussle, but Sol handled her all by himself. And I think he enjoyed it. Sol believes in justice.

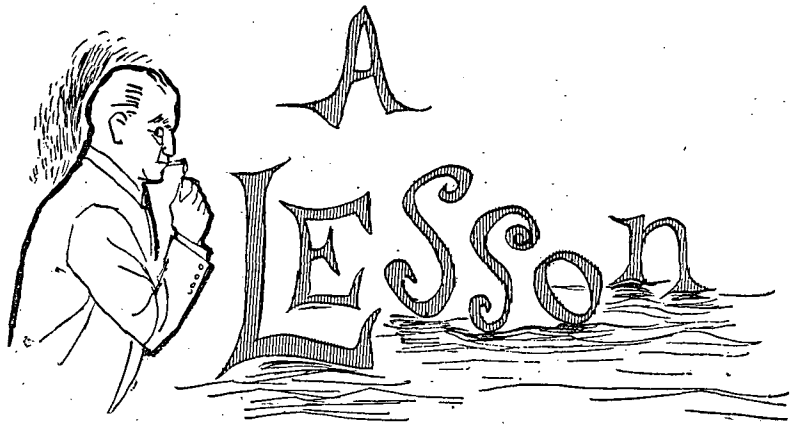
I was released from custody that same day. Sol Bentz officiated, once again his sad, droopy self. He stared at me reproachfully.

"This turned out all wrong," he muttered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He had that ridiculous, hurt look about him again. "I'm supposed to be the detective," he said.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Lieutenant," I told him. But I wasn't. Not completely anyway.



GLADYS PARKER wore a pink dress and a little hat that was pinned to her blond hair and her glasses were still in place, even though she was floating face up and was quite dead.

"I could tell she was dead," the young manager of the Brookdale Community Club swimming pool was saying to one of the two uniformed policemen who answered the call. "I figured I better call the cops before I touched anything."

"You got a bathing suit on. Think you could get her over here to the edge of the pool?" the officer said.

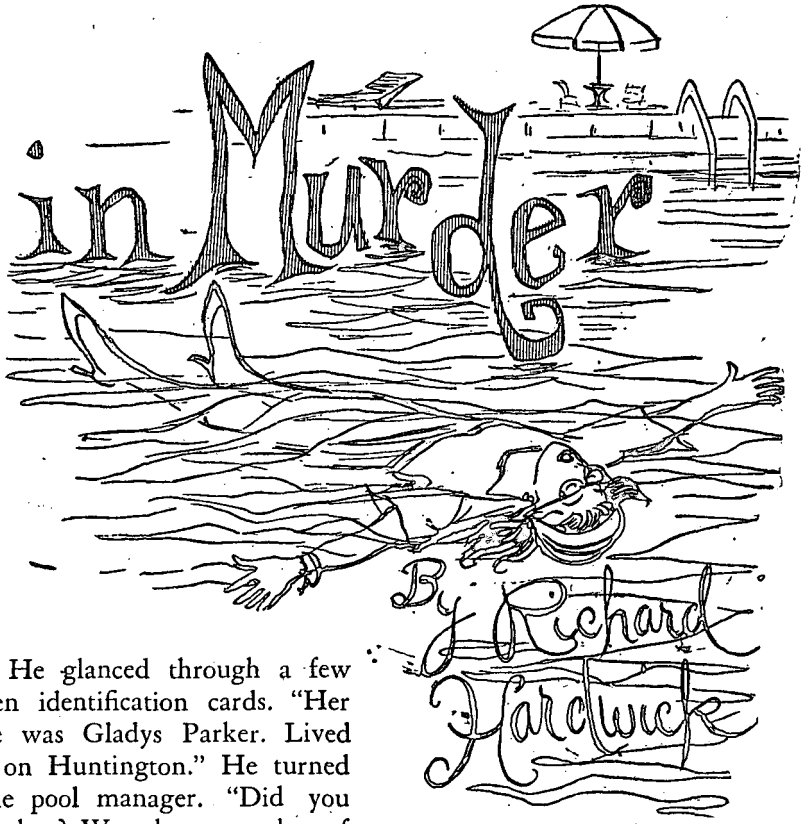
The young man looked out at the floating body and nodded. "I guess so."

He waded out waist-deep and gingerly pushed the body to the edge where the two policemen hauled it out, dripping, and stretched it out on the concrete parapet.

"There's something else out there," the young man said. He waded back out, ducked under the surface and returned to the poolside with a dark handbag. "It was on the bottom."

One officer opened it, drained the water out, and took out a bill-

Malfeasance isn't limited to the average money-grabbing citizen; it has far reaching tendrils that sometimes send even the "tried and true" hurtling toward disaster. Here we have one who skirts it, with a blonde, and still retains some fringe benefits.



fold. He glanced through a few sodden identification cards. "Her name was Gladys Parker. Lived over on Huntington." He turned to the pool manager. "Did you know her? Was she a member of the pool?"

The young man shook his head. "I never saw her before. Huntington's a pretty good ways off for our members, anyhow. Clear across town."

"How do you suppose she got in with the gate locked?"

The young man pointed across the pool. "There's a hole over there some kids cut in the fence. The committee hasn't got around to fixing it yet. I guess that's where she got in."

"Hey, Jim," the second officer said. "Take a look here at her throat. See them marks?"

The first officer knelt beside his partner and looked at the smooth flesh of the woman's throat. After a few seconds he said, "Get back to the car and call in. Tell 'em to get somebody from homicide over here."

Lt. George Jernigan was in the squadroom when the call came in. He was standing at the third floor window staring down at the Sunday vacant street, and he was idly wondering about the motivation of crusaders. Why, he rhetorically asked himself, couldn't everyone adjust to reality. Why didn't they see that a man had to live, that he had to put something aside for his retirement, that it was not necessarily evil intent or greed or dishonesty that prompted underpaid civil servants to take a little extra when and where they could find it.

"A body just turned up, Lieutenant," said Detective Ed Marvin. The young man looked down at the memo slip in his hand. "A woman, a Gladys Parker, was found in the swimming pool of the Brookdale Community Club. The boys who answered the call said she looked like she might have been strangled."

"Let's see that," Jernigan said, taking the slip from Marvin. He looked at the pencilled name for a moment and rubbed his chin. "I know a girl named Gladys Parker."

"We better get a move on," said Marvin.

Marvin drove, using the siren sparingly because traffic was light and Sunday school was in session. They reached the oak-shaded street in the quiet suburban neighborhood and pulled to a stop behind the black and white patrol car.

"Morning, Lt. Jernigan," the uniformed officer greeted them. "The body's down there by the swimming pool. The meat wagon's on the way."

"Who found it?" asked Jernigan.

"A kid named Latham. He's the manager here. He was opening for the day and he spotted her floating out there in the middle of the pool."

Jernigan led the way down the curving stone steps from the street level and through the open gate in the steel fence. The three men stopped beside the woman's body.

"Is that the Gladys Parker you knew, Lieutenant?" said Marvin.

Jernigan nodded, looking down at the bluish marks about the young woman's throat.

"Here's her handbag," said the second uniformed officer.

Marvin took it and carefully went through the contents. Among the effects was seventy-eight dollars in small bills. A gold ring was in the bottom of the bag. "Doesn't seem to have been robbery. Who was she, Lieutenant?"

"Gladys was a small time blackmailer, among other things. She

was also a source of information to me."

"One of your stoolies, huh?"

Up on the street the police ambulance pulled to the curb, the red blinker atop it flashing. The two attendants got out and came down the steps carrying a wheeled stretcher between them.

Jernigan slowly rose from squatting beside the body, feeling the protest of his leg muscles. He looked again at the dead woman. She couldn't have been more than thirty, but she had packed a lot of living into those years. He shook his head, not philosophically but resignedly, as a man does who has come to accept almost everything as being inevitable. Then he turned and went to question Latham, the manager of the pool.

"Jernigan," said Captain Johannsen, walking around from behind his desk and pausing at the window with his hands clasped back of him. "You know as well as I do that this damned grand jury investigation of the department is going to stir up a commotion that will be far out of proportion to anything they might turn up. There's nothing we can do about that." The captain turned from the window and looked at Jernigan. "Good publicity is the only weapon we can fight it with. A good press right now would be one hell of a help. How does this Parker case look? Have you got any lead on it?"

Jernigan stubbed out his cigarette in the desk ashtray. "I knew the woman. She dabbled in blackmail, and that's always a risky business. She was indicted a few years back on a blackmail charge but the charge was dropped before it came to trial."

"Then it could have been somebody she had the hook in," suggested the captain.

"I've got my feelers out. Maybe something will turn up."

"I want you to concentrate on this one, Jernigan. I want you on it full time, and you can have Marvin or anybody else to give you a hand. I want this one cracked and cracked fast. A murder case, particularly one involving a woman, always sells a lot of newspapers and we'd get quite a boost from that direction if this one was wrapped up quick."

"Alright, Captain. I'll keep Marvin on it with me. He's new and he's eager. Sometimes that pays off."

"I'll look for a report every day on this one, direct to me."

Jernigan went from Captain Johannsen's office to the squadroom. Detective Ed Marvin was at a

desk, a dogeared file before him.

"That the Parker package?" Jernigan asked.

Marvin nodded. "You were right, Lieutenant. She was a blackmailer, and apparently a damned slippery one. How do you go about finding out who someone was blackmailing? We searched her apartment and came up with nothing."

"How'd we get into her apartment?"

"How'd we get in?" the young detective said. "Whatdya mean?"

"I mean *how*. There was a door and it was locked. Who opened it?"

"The apartment super—*Say!* I see what you mean! There was no key in her purse!"

Jernigan sat down and pulled the file to him.

Marvin went on. "Then the murderer probably took the key and went there after he killed her. If there was anything pointing to him, he got rid of it."

"Has the medical report come in yet?" asked Jernigan.

"Right there under the folder. Looks like the killer tried to strangle her, then hit her on the head with something blunt. She was apparently unconscious when she was put in the pool. She died by drowning."

"The Captain's hot on this one," Jernigan said. "He wants action and he wants it right now."

"That grand jury business?"

"That's right."

"Do you think there's corruption in the department, Lieutenant?"

"The department is made up of human beings. Underpaid human beings." Jernigan pulled an ashtray toward him and lighted a cigarette.

"So we all get the name 'crooked cop' because of one or two, is that it?"

"I know how you feel, son. I used to feel that way myself."

"You *used* to!"

"Until I realized I couldn't change the world, that there wasn't one damned thing I could do about it. And also until I realized that people have short memories. So-called police corruption is just another form of sensationalism, and as soon as it gets out of the headlines everybody forgets all about it."

"That sounds a little cynical," Marvin said. He looked carefully at his superior and he wasn't sure he liked Jernigan.

"Maybe," Jernigan said. "If being practical is cynical, then I've got it."

The squadroom phone jingled and Marvin answered it. He spoke briefly, then held the instrument

out. "Call's for you, Lieutenant."

Jernigan pushed the medical report aside and took the phone. "Lt. Jernigan," he said. He listened for half a minute, wrote something on a memo pad, and said, "If you pick up anything else get in touch." Then he hung up.

Marvin looked at him expectantly. But for a long while Jernigan stared down at the pad before him on the desk, then he slowly shook his head.

"What is it?" said Marvin.

"It might be a lead on the Parker case. And then again it just might be a hot potato, a helluva hot potato."

"Yeah?" Marvin perched on the corner of the desk and waited.

"Have you ever heard of a fellow by the name of George Webster?"

Marvin touched a thumbnail to his lips. "It rings a bell . . ." He snapped his fingers. "Webster! Isn't he the guy that's heading up the Citizens' Committee? The guy who's so hot on having the department investigated?"

"That's the one."

"Well, what about him?"

"He's had a couple of meetings with Gladys Parker lately."

Marvin stared. "You mean she was putting the bite on *him? George Webster?*"

Jernigan got up and went to the window. He watched the cars moving along the street. People on the move, going places. Not many of them knew where they were going, or why. They just went, and most of them minded their own business along the way. Why was it some of them had this urge to come poking their noses into places that didn't concern them? Your nose could get caught . . .

"You think she was?" said Marvin.

Jernigan raised his eyes and watched a jet liner climbing over the city, the engines pouring black smoke. "At least it's worth checking out."

"How about your tip, are you sure it was on the level?"

"As sure as I am of any of them," said Jernigan. He went to the water cooler and filled a paper cup. He came back to the desk, took a vial from the middle drawer, shook out two capsules, and swallowed them with the water.

"What'll we do?" said Marvin. "If we start questioning Webster all hell will break loose."

"Are you saying we can't bring in a man because he's heading up a Citizens' Committee?" Jernigan smiled vaguely. "The law's supposed to be the same for everybody."

"Sure, Lieutenant, but . . ."

"I know what you mean, son. I

was just trying to pull your leg."

Marvin threw out his hands. "You know what it'll look like. If we can't nail him and nail him good he'll say it was just a smear campaign! Besides, what the devil is the word of one of your stoolies to that of a man like Webster?"

Youth and reason. The boy would make a good cop in time. Jernigan crumpled the paper cup and sent it spinning into the wire waste basket.

"The Captain didn't tell me where to draw the line, Marvin. He just said crack it."

Detective Ed Marvin started to say something, then turned away and drew a hand across his forehead. He whirled and knuckled down on the desk. "Look, Lieutenant. I've just been out of uniform for a little over three months. The department is my career, my life, and I'm just starting. I don't want something to screw it up now! I—"

Jernigan interrupted. "What you're trying to say is a lot simpler than that. You're saying you're afraid to tackle a man like Webster."

"Alright, Lieutenant! Have it your way! But you've put your time in, in five or six years you get your pension and head for Florida—"

"Four and a half years," said Jernigan, pulling the package on Gladys Parker across the desk. *And I don't want anything to happen to that either, my wise young friend,* he thought.

"Can I get off the case?" Marvin said flatly.

Jernigan raised his eyes and looked squarely at Detective Marvin. "No," he said simply.

Captain Johannsen was nervous, Jernigan could tell that by his superior's mannerisms, the way the cigar shifted from one side of his mouth to the other. He'd had essentially the same feelings as Marvin about bringing in George Webster for questioning. And yet, there had been little alternative. Jernigan had checked out the tip and found witnesses to the meeting of George Webster and Gladys Parker.

The Captain moved to his office window, his hands busy grasping each other behind his back. He turned reluctantly to face the man in the expensive business suit.

"Mr. Webster, two days ago a woman's body was found in a swimming pool on the north side of town. You may have read the accounts in the newspapers. The woman's name was Gladys Parker." The Captain came back to his desk and sat down. This was

hard going for him. It always was.

Jernigan moved to the side of the desk and looked with deceptively mild eyes at George Webster. "Did you know Gladys Parker?"

"Did I—" For a moment the man was startled. He recouped quickly. "I read that the woman was a blackmailer, perhaps worse. Why would I know her?"

Jernigan's gaze remained on Webster's face. "We have information that you met with Gladys Parker on two separate occasions within the past ten days. There are witnesses to these meetings, Mr. Webster. I feel I should tell you that before you make any further denial of knowing Gladys Parker. These witnesses will swear in court—"

"Alright! I did know her! But there was no personal connection. I was—" He looked quickly to Captain Johannsen and back to Jernigan. "I was looking for information that might be of value to the grand jury. Oh, I know what you're thinking, Lt. Jernigan! You're thinking that I've seen too many private eye shows and that I should leave the investigating to those who know about such things. Well, if it weren't for us nosey amateurs the professionals would cut City Hall up and cart it away!"

"Is that an accusation, Mr. Webster?" prodded Jernigan. "If it is then maybe you'd like to make a statement to the newspapers, and perhaps you'd also like to back it up with a little proof."

"That's enough, Jernigan," said Johannsen. He turned his attention to George Webster. "Frankly, Mr. Webster, I was somewhat surprised when your name came up in connection with this case. It was . . . untimely."

"Where were you Saturday night, Mr. Webster?" asked Jernigan.

"At home, as usual. Alone." He whirled on Johannsen. "Captain, if you think I don't see through this little game then you're a very naive man! It's the old shell game. You try to draw attention away from what's really going on. If you can discredit me, even by implication, then you think the investigation of the police department will lose steam. I'm no fool! I am a reputable businessman, not a . . . a . . ."

"Not a stupid cop, Mr. Webster?" said Jernigan with exaggerated patience. "Mr. Webster, I've been on the police force of this city for thirty-eight years. I've got four and a half years to go for retirement. In my time I've seen more than a few so-called citizens' committees come barging in here with a big broom, yelling corrup-

tion at the top of their lungs. And I've seen these same self-righteous individuals go sneaking to this or that judge or police captain or lieutenant wanting to get a lousy parking ticket fixed, or trying to get junior off on a speeding charge or worse. It's been my unfortunate experience that almost all these high type citizens somehow consider themselves above this same law that they are so hell-bent on straightening out. And you, Mr. Webster, are no exception in my opinion."

"I don't have to stand for this!" George Webster exploded, springing up from his chair.

"Please sit down, Mr. Webster," said the Captain. He glared at Jernigan. "The Lieutenant has been working hard on the Parker case. I think perhaps he's tired."

"You're right, Captain," said Jernigan. "I am tired. I'm bone tired. I'd like to leave if I may."

Johannsen, with obvious relief, nodded.

Behind him as he closed the door, Jernigan heard the Captain's voice as he began his effort to close the breach that had been opened.

"How'd it go?" asked Marvin.

"It surprises Webster how us 'crook cops' have time between shakedowns to find out things about him."

"You don't think much of this grand jury thing, do you?"

"I've seen them before. They screw up the routine. It takes time to get things rolling again."

Marvin nodded. "Maybe it's only intended as a control. You know, just to sort of let everybody know that people are interested in how their tax money is spent."

Jernigan sighed. "Then why the hell don't they spend their time checking on paving contracts, or purchasing, or—". He swivelled around in his chair and picked up a pencil from the desktop. "Four and a half years and they can have it. They can have the whole damned mess. Right now we've got us a murder case to work on."

Marvin pulled a chair to the desk. "Where do we go from here? This George Webster character is the only lead we've got so far."

"Until I hear different, that's the lead we follow."

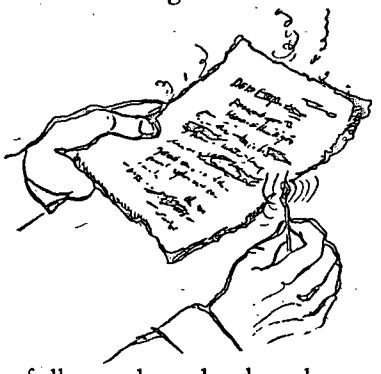
"You're sticking your neck out, Lieutenant. You could get your head chopped off."

Jernigan shook a cigarette from his pack and looked at Marvin over the flame of a match. "It's been swung at before."

In his small apartment that evening, Lt. Jernigan had two drinks

before preparing himself a frozen dinner. Usually, he limited himself to one drink, but tonight something was on his mind. There was a decision he had to make and it was not at all the sort of thing he liked to do. It seemed that lately there had been a lot of decisions.

He finished his dinner and methodically cleaned up the small kitchenette, then he went to the desk in the livingroom and opened the center drawer. He looked through the papers there and withdrew a letter that had been written in green ink. This he



carefully read, and when he was done he snipped away portions with a pair of nail scissors, charred the entire edge of the paper with a match flame, and put the letter in his pocket. He sat for several minutes, staring into space. Then he sighed and got up wearily and went to the hi-fi. He took the *Eroica* from its jacket, placed it on the turntable, and sat down in his sagging easy chair. Jernigan closed his eyes and a slow smile came to his face, as if a great weight had been lifted off him.

"You think you're on the right track in this thing, Jernigan?" Captain Johannsen said.

"You know as much as I do, sir. I've always counted on my contacts and ninety percent of the time it's paid off to some extent."

"And this latest tip is that you might turn up evidence in the Parker case if you search George Webster's home, is that it?"

Jernigan nodded.

The Captain shook his head and resumed his pacing over a section of carpet that had obviously participated in many a thorny decision. "I don't know. If this thing backfired . . ." He stopped pacing and looked at Jernigan. "How reliable is this source of yours?"

Jernigan shrugged. "They don't have credentials or give guarantees. In fact, this particular bit of advice happens to be from an anonymous source."

"A*nony*mous! Are you out of your mind, Jernigan!"

"The record speaks for itself, Captain."

"Well," Johannsen conceded, "it's a fact that you've got more and better underworld contacts than any other man on the force. If it was somebody else who

turned this up I think I'd squash it before it got off the ground. But you . . ." The Captain began his walk again.

"Webster's out of town for a couple of days. This would be a good time to make the search."

Johannsen sighed. "Why can't things be simple! A lousy blackmailer gets herself knocked off and who turns out to be our one and only suspect? Just the head of the Citizens' Committee!"

"I remember a sweet little grandmother who murdered four people with a butcher knife. She was so sweet she even took her knitting to death row and knitted the executioner a pair of argyle socks. You can't put murderers in a category."

"Save your object lessons for Detective Marvin," the Captain said sourly.

"You want this case wrapped up," said Jernigan. "This could do it."

"What did this tipster of yours say to look for at Webster's?"

"He didn't say."

"It could be a trap. George Webster didn't like our bringing him in here, he didn't like it one damned bit. And your little extemporaneous lecture went over with him like a lead balloon. This thing could be a plant to get my scalp."

"And mine," Jernigan added. "If you say so I'll go out on the limb by myself. I can wait till you're off duty and get the warrant on my own."

Johannsen shook his head, as Jernigan knew he would. "If we pull this we pull it together." He looked again at his subordinate. "Do you really think this might be something?"

"I say let's get a warrant and find out."

"But Webster's *position*—"

"If a man hasn't got position, if he hasn't got something to lose, he's not worth the time of day to a blackmailer."

Captain Johannsen sighed heavily, realizing the battle was lost. "Get your damned warrant," he said.

"Some joint, huh?" Detective Marvin said nervously as he stood on the porch of the house with Lt. Jernigan and waited for someone to answer his ring.

"Shows you what you might have ended up with if you hadn't decided to be a cop," said Jernigan.

"Yeah," said Marvin, shifting his feet.

The wide white door opened and a middle-aged woman in a pale green uniform said, "Yes?"

Jernigan flashed his badge. "Police," he said. "We've got a search warrant."

The woman looked puzzled. "Mr. Webster isn't here. Could you come back tomorrow?"

"No ma'am," said Jernigan, stepping through the door and past the woman. "Take the upstairs, Marvin—"

"Wait a minute . . ." the woman objected. "You can't do this . . . Mr. Webster . . ."

"We can do this, lady. This piece of paper says so. Now, you just go back to your kitchen or get on with whatever you were doing."

"But . . . the police . . ." Her hands worked nervously.

"We *are* the police, Miss," said Jernigan. "Take the upstairs, Marvin. I'll check down here."

"What should I look for?"

"How the hell should I know! Just get busy!"

Marvin went up the curving staircase two steps at a time. The housekeeper moved uncertainly back to the sanctuary of the kitchen, and Jernigan busied himself by beginning his search in the library.

Forty-five minutes later Jernigan paused at the foot of the staircase. "Marvin?" he called. "How you coming up there?"

"Nothing yet, Lieutenant. I've got one more room to check."

Jernigan grunted and went into the kitchen. The woman sat at a white work table and stared at him. He went past her and out into the back yard.

Five minutes later, when Marvin came down the stairs, Jernigan was in the livingroom looking through the volumes of a small bookcase recessed into the wall beside the fireplace.

The young detective shook his head. "It looks like a wild goose chase to me. There wasn't anything up there. If I knew what to look for—"

"Check outside," said Jernigan. "Check real good."

Marvin went out and Jernigan sat down and took out his pack of cigarettes. A small pile of butts had built up in the brass ashtray and Jernigan got up and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. The housekeeper had disappeared and the sound of a washing machine came from an adjoining utility room.

Marvin came running in from outside, a broad grin on his face. "Lieutenant! Take a look at this!" He held out a partially charred piece of white paper. "I found it in the incinerator. It would have burned except that somebody probably crammed too much paper in and the fire was smothered."

He cleared his throat and held

the paper out and started to read: "George,

You won't talk to me on the phone so I'm writing you. I know you think I won't do it, but I will. Don't kid yourself. If I haven't heard from you by Saturday, then I'm going to—

Here, a portion of the letter was burned away, and then it continued, part way through a sentence.

. . . it will ruin you and I'm sure you don't want that. Remember, Saturday, and you better have the money with you. You know I don't joke about something this important.

Gladys"

Marvin's grin returned. "That ought to sew it up! She was blackmailing him and there's the ultimatum right there! Whatdya think?"

"I'd say it doesn't look too good for Mr. Webster."

Lt. George Jernigan turned away to the kitchen window. By the strong sunlight he saw the long smudge of black along the side of his hand, and he held out the hand and turned on the tap, washing away all trace of the soot.

He looked out the window at the patio and the barbecue grill, and he thought, *That guy could have saved himself a hell of a lot of trouble if he had held up his lousy crusade for four and a half more years. . . .*

Then he turned to Detective Marvin. "Nice work, son. Now let's get back to the office. I want to get off these feet for a while."

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THE DANGEROUS DANETREE SISTERS

By Wenzell Brown

When two 'old girls' forsake their polyunsaturates to curry murder, and find their unsavory victim is similarly inclined, the fat is definitely in the fire.

THE TWO elderly ladies had sat up until long after midnight discussing plans for murder.

At first the idea of murder had been hard to accept, but, whenever they had wavered, their resolution had been renewed by reminiscing about their father. Old Judge Danetree had been stern but just, a zealot in the cause of righteousness. "Make no compromise with evil," he had often commanded his

daughters. "Stamp it out wherever you find it." So certainly they were obeying Daddy's edict in planning to kill John Mayo. No one could doubt the evil in the man. And besides, there was all that lovely money.

"For people like us," Miss Abigail said resoundingly, "poison is the only thing."

Miss Laetitia shook her head sadly. "But rat poison, my dear! It's not genteel."

Miss Abigail paused in her knitting. "You have a point, Laetitia, but after all we must be practical. I'd much prefer something more exotic but nothing else is available. Besides, it's inexpensive. Greenguff's are having a sale on Rough-on-Rodents. Just fifty-nine cents a tube."

"I know, darling, but bargains are a bit crude. After all we are one of the better families. I mean we do have a tradition to uphold. You remember what mother used to say, 'It's all right to do without, but never skimp'."

Miss Abigail pursed her lips in exasperation. She was a slender, erect woman with gray hair drawn up in a severe bun at the nape of her neck. She had always thought her sister something of a flibbertygibbet. She said acidly, "Well, Laetitia, I haven't noticed you coming up with anything better."

"Perhaps we could run over Mr. Mayo with a Cadillac."

"But we don't have a car of any kind, to say nothing of a Cadillac."

"Maybe we could borrow one—or persuade the agency to let us have one on trial."

"Fiddle-faddle! Anyway neither of us knows how to drive."

Miss Laetitia clapped her plump hands in delight. "So much the better. We could say the car got out of control. No one could blame us for that."

Miss Abigail said severely, "You'd probably miss Mr. Mayo by a mile and knock down the house."

"Oh dear, you do underestimate me, Abbie. I'm really quite clever about such things."

"Nonsense! You've never been able to learn how to use the electric can-opener that Cousin Elbert gave us for Christmas."

Miss Laetitia pouted and sank into aggrieved silence.

Miss Abigail gathered up her knitting, smoothed down her skirt and started toward the stairs, only to be stopped by a series of muffled thuds from the room above.

"Oh dear," she sighed. "I imagine he's drinking again. A very uncouth young man. We really must get rid of him soon."

Meanwhile in an upstairs room

the object of their discussion sprawled in an easy chair. He was a small man but gave an impression of wiry strength. His hair was black, his eyes a glittering brown. Other than that he was undistinguished of feature. Magazines were arrayed around him and a glass half-filled with whiskey was close at hand. The empty bottle lay on the floor where he had just tossed it.

He cocked an ear to the tap of Miss Abigail's precise footfalls in the hall. The two old biddies were up late tonight. He'd like to have a show-down with them but it was wiser to wait. He was bored stiff but even so he knew he was sitting pretty. He had a perfect set-up here and with his skill he might parley it into something permanent —a new identity, respectability, a front no one could question. But he didn't dare wait too long. Not if what he suspected was true.

He got up and padded on stocking feet to the bureau, dropping down on his knees beside it. He examined the padlock he'd fitted on the bottom drawer, then unfastened it and pulled the drawer open. The neat stacks of green bills were right where he'd left them. He removed them and counted the money slowly. No more shortages. Not since he'd bought the padlock. But before that he'd swear that a century note was missing. Someone in the house had a long nose and sticky fingers. Was it the tall skinny dame who acted as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth? Or was it the tubby one who looked like a fat Dresden doll? Not that it mattered much. They were both dangerous to him now. They'd both have to go as soon as he could reckon out the safest way of getting rid of them. Disposing of the bodies was the tricky part. He needed a few more days to work out the angles.

In the room at the end of the hall, Miss Abigail was having difficulty in falling asleep. Miss Laetitia was curled in the bed beside her, snoring softly. Ever since the advent of Mr. Mayo into the house, the sisters had taken to sleeping together as a matter of precaution. With a man about, you could never tell what might happen.

It had all started so innocently with an advertisement in the local papers. The sisters hadn't really wanted a roomer but they were at the end of their rope. There seemed no other way to save the old house that had been in their family for three generations. So Miss Abigail had composed the ad with care to keep the words to a minimum: Two elderly ladies will share spacious well-furnished house

with lady of similar background.

The trouble was that no elderly ladies had applied for the vacancy. No one had except John Mayo. When Miss Abigail had opened the door to his ring, he had come thrusting into the house with two big suitcases in his hands. In vain it was explained to him why they couldn't accept a man as a tenant. He had brushed all her arguments aside.

He had said, "Listen, little lady, when I seen that ad, I reckoned that was the spot for John Mayo. What I want's a lot of peace and quiet, like a long rest, you know."

Miss Abigail had tripled the price she had intended to ask but John Mayo had paid up without a quaver. He had installed himself in the big front room upstairs within the hour.

Mr. Mayo had really been a good enough tenant, Miss Abigail reflected. Even in his drinking bouts he had remained quiet. Of course, he had the disconcerting habit of appearing at your elbow when you least expected him but he compensated for that by doing odd jobs about the house and grounds with apparent pleasure. Miss Abigail's objections had been intangible. His presence seemed to pervade the place with an atmosphere that was masculine and subtly dangerous. Miss Abigail had been repelled, yet she had felt a tug of fascination too, and she had sensed a growing excitement in Laetitia.

John Mayo seldom left the house except for daily strolls, after which he came back laden with packages from the delicatessen, bottles from the liquor store and an assortment of crime magazines, all of which Miss Abigail deplored. From the first she had recognized that their roomer was not a gentleman but it was not until Laetitia's big discovery that she suspected he might be something far worse—a criminal, possibly a counterfeiter or even a kidnaper.

Of course it was very wrong of Laetitia to have prowled Mr. Mayo's room and especially to have unlocked the bottom drawer of the bureau to peek under the soiled laundry. But then if she hadn't done so, neither of them would ever have learned about the fortune concealed in their own house.

Laetitia had extracted the top bill from one of the stacks and brought it down to Miss Abigail to prove her story.

She had said, "I just took one at random, Abbie. There must be thousands more."

"Put it right back again," Miss Abigail had scolded. "You don't want Mr. Mayo to think we're

prying, spying thieves, do you?"

As always, Letitia was outwardly compliant but Miss Abigail suspected that she had tucked the bill down the front of her dress, a suspicion which was confirmed when, a few days later, a hamper of choice delicacies had arrived on their doorstep, prepaid.

Miss Abigail hadn't said a word at the time. After all John Mayo had made no comment about missing money and, if he did, it would be an excuse to ask him to leave.

It was the next morning that she had discovered Laetitia at the top of the stairs busy with thumb tacks and a spool of thin wire. Laetitia had been too preoccupied to hear the approaching footsteps.

Miss Abigail had stood watching her, arms akimbo. Finally she had blurted out, "Whatever are you doing, Laetitia?"

A flush had spread across Laetitia's plump cheeks as she explained sulkily, "I was just trying an experiment I read about in one of Mr. Mayo's magazines."

Miss Abigail had looked back over her shoulder at their roomer's closed door. Fortunately, Mr. Mayo always slept late. This was a conversation it was unwise for him to overhear. Scooping up the thumbtacks and the spool of wire, she took Laetitia's arm and led her down the stairs.

Surprisingly Laetitia had put on a show of truculence. She had said, "After all, Abbie, there is all that money. And if anything should happen to Mr. Mayo, it would be ours, wouldn't it? I mean if we just took it and hid it somewhere else before we called the police, nobody would know anything about it."

"But a trip-wire, Laetitia! That would be murder!"

Laetitia's blue eyes had remained widely innocent. "Why, what a terrible thing to say, Abbie! Besides we're the Danetree sisters, aren't we? Who would suspect us?"

Miss Abigail had pretended to be scandalized but thoughts which had been tantalizing her for the last day or so started to shape into a pattern. She had no doubt that John Mayo was a criminal and, that being the case, the money was not rightfully his. Certainly she and Laetitia could put it to a better use than the purchase of whiskey and lurid magazines. If he should just disappear and leave the money behind, why shouldn't they spend it? But Laetitia's method was clumsy. What if Mr. Mayo should spot the trip-wire and avoid it? Or what if he should trip over it and catch himself on the bannister? Or fall and simply break a leg? He'd know what they were up to then. He'd be

furious. Dangerous too. He might even be violent. No, you couldn't go into a thing like this carelessly. It required a lot of skillful planning.

Miss Abigail's meditations were broken off as Laetitia threw her arms about her and kissed her. Belatedly she realized that she had been expressing her thoughts aloud.

"Oh, darling," Laetitia had gushed. "I'm so happy you see it my way."

Now, lying on her bed, Miss Abigail stirred restlessly and looked over at the mound of her sister's body. Tomorrow, she decided, she must go down to Greenguff's and buy a tube of Rough-on-Rodents. No matter what Laetitia said, her plan was the best. And having made the decision, she fell into a gentle sleep.

A festive air permeated the Danetree house the next evening. Miss Laetitia bustled from kitchen to dining room, setting out the Minton China, the best table cloth with its tatted border, the crystal glasses and homespun linen napkins. She hummed happily to herself as she worked.

Miss Abigail remained in the kitchen amid the savory odors of onions, garlic, coriander, green ginger and sizzling slices of beef which were integral parts of the curry she was preparing. As she stirred the ingredients in a pot she congratulated herself on the smoothness of her operations.

She had bought several household items from Greenguff's this morning, including a tube of Rough-on-Rodents. After collecting her purchases, she had purposely taken them to the dizzy blonde at the front counter who had been too busy making eyes at a pair of high school boys to spare her a second look.

She had arrived home before John Mayo was up and, after depositing her packages in the kitchen, had descended to the seldom-used cellar. She had inspected the cracked cement of the floor. Floods, two summers previously, had seeped beneath the foundations with disastrous results. The cement blocks at one end had sunk and those adjacent jutted from the earth at crazy angles. It wouldn't tax her strength too much to pry one loose and the soft earth beneath would make a perfect grave.

She had given a start as she heard slithering footsteps on the stairs. Swift panic had sliced through her as John Mayo had come into view. She had had to fight the impulse to turn and run

but, as he drew closer, she saw that he was grinning amiably.

"Well, well," he said, "this place is a real wreck."

"Floods, you know," Miss Abigail murmured.

"Tell you what. Me, I got plenty of time on my hands. Maybe I could get some cement mix and fix the place up good as new."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Mayo, but we couldn't impose."

"Think nothing of it."

Miss Abigail cleared her throat. "Miss Laetitia and I have wanted to invite you for dinner, Mr. Mayo. Tonight we're having a special curry. We have been hoping that you would join us."

Mayo smacked his lips in an exaggerated manner. "Curry, that's one dish I really go for. The hotter, the better."

"Very well. We'll expect you at seven."

"I'll be there with my best bib and tucker. You can bet on that."

Miss Abigail could not restrain a little sigh of relief. It would have been so difficult if Mr. Mayo hadn't liked curry.

All the rest of the day had been spent in preparations for dinner and now it was half-past six. Miss Abigail examined the black paste she had squeezed from the tube, wondering how much constituted a lethal dose. She would have to be careful too to see that none of it reached her plate or Laetitia's. She hesitated in her work to listen to Mayo moving about upstairs. He might come down at any moment. She gave a little despairing gesture. There were so many details that required her attention.

The buzz of the doorbell caught her by surprise. She wiped her hands on her apron and hurried to the front room but already Laetitia had the door open. The blur of a man's hulking figure loomed up on the porch but not until she came up close behind her sister

did Miss Abigail recognize Sheriff Tom McGee.

The Sheriff put a thick finger to his lips as a signal for silence and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper.

"We hear you ladies got a roomer here. Is that right?"

Miss Abigail answered, "Why, yes, Sheriff. His name is John Mayo."

"Is this him?" The Sheriff shoved a piece of paper at her and Miss Abigail took it automatically. It was a wanted circular, the kind Miss Abigail had often seen attached to the walls of the post office. The two photographs at the top, one presented in full face, the other in profile, were indistinct, but still there was no mistaking the nondescript features of the man upstairs. For a moment her eyes flicked across the black print: WANTED FOR MURDER AND BANK ROBBERY. Then a name and a half dozen aliases.

Miss Abigail gulped but her voice was steady as she responded, "Yes, this is the man."

McGee grunted approval and took the circular back from her limp hand. Miss Abigail looked beyond him and saw for the first time the two chunky men in plain business suits who flanked the door.

"FBI," McGee explained. "Now you ladies better get back in the kitchen because we're going up to get Mayo. He's a dangerous man. There might even be some shooting so you keep out of the way."

Dutifully the sisters retreated to the kitchen doorway. The three men were surprisingly silent as they climbed the stairs and disappeared into the upper hallway. Then there was the sudden slam of a door, a hoarse shout, the sounds of a brief scuffle. Quiet descended on the house again, broken only by subdued voices and the moving of furniture as the room was being searched.

Then suddenly John Mayo began to scream. His ranting voice went on and on. But finally when he appeared at the head of the stairs, handcuffed to one of the federal agents, his bluster seemed to have been dissipated. His manner was surprisingly meek until he reached a spot just opposite where the sisters were standing. Then he raised his head, gave them a baleful glare and lunged in their direction. The officers jerked him back and frog-marched him out the front door and across the lawn, where their car was waiting. Only Tom McGee lingered on.

The Sheriff sniffed at the aromatic scents wafting in from the kitchen. "Curry," he remarked in a chatty fashion. "Seems like you ladies had invited Mayo to an

appetizing home-cooked dinner."

"We thought he needed a good meal," Miss Laetitia said timidly.

The flat of McGee's hand came down hard on the table and his voice was unexpectedly harsh. "I've known you two ladies since I was a little nipper and there ain't nobody I respect more. But I got to say this. You've acted like a pair of ninnies taking a strange man into your house. You know what we found upstairs? Close to twenty thousand dollars from the stick-up of the Federal Bank across the state line in Oldtown."

"Twenty thousand dollars!" Miss Laetitia breathed.

"Yeah, and we never would have located him if it hadn't been for you, Miss Laetitia."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"The FBI had a listing of the big bills and one of them showed up in the local bank. It took us a long time to trace it. But finally Joe Katz remembered your coming into his store with it."

"Why, I never—"

"Don't get me wrong, Miss Laetitia. We knew the Danetree sisters were above suspicion but we started snooping around and learned you had a roomer. Well, you know the rest. But all the same, there's something funny about this set-up. Mayo was right cautious in paying for everything else with small bills. I wonder how he had happened to pry loose with a big one in paying you."

Miss Abigail interrupted quickly. "I'm sure we don't know. But tell us what will happen to Mr. Mayo."

"He'll go to the chair, Miss Abigail. Not much doubt about that. There's three witnesses to the killing of that bank guard. But just in case you're wasting any sympathy on Mayo, there's something you ought to know. I hate to throw a scare into you ladies, but maybe it'll teach you to be more careful in the future. You heard him raving up there. He really hates you, accuses you of stealing some of his money. Of course that's nonsense. But he was practically out of his mind and blurted out that he was all set to kill you both and bury your bodies in the cellar. I reckon he thought it didn't matter what he said, seeing how he's headed for the chair anyway, and just plotting a murder ain't no offense when it ain't carried out. He even admitted he intended to throttle you right after dinner tonight."

Miss Laetitia echoed, "After dinner! Why that would have been too late." Then as Miss Abigail shot her a baleful look, she clamped a hand over her mouth.

The Sheriff didn't appear to notice. He said, "Mayo had some

crazy idea he could go on living here, pose as your nephew, say you'd gone on a trip. Sure, I know it sounds weird but the guy's a psycho. How can you tell what goes on in his mind? Well, I got to run along ladies. I sure wish I could stay and share some of that curry with you, but they'll be needing me down at the station. Now I'm telling you again, watch your step from now on."

"Oh, we will," sighed Miss Laetitia.

After he was gone, Miss Abigail returned to the kitchen. Reluctantly she dumped the curry into the garbage pail. It seemed a sinful waste of good food but she was certain that neither she nor Miss Laetitia could eat a bite. She toyed with the idea of throwing the black paste away too but ended up by scraping it into a jelly jar and putting it on a shelf. You never could tell. Rat poison might come in handy some day.

When she had finished cleaning up, she went to the front room. Miss Laetitia was slumped in a rocker, her face tear-stained. She looked up and said, "Just think of all that money gone to waste."

"I know, dear. It's a shame."

"If we'd only acted sooner, everything would have turned out for the best. Think of poor Mr. Mayo dying in the chair. I'm sure our way would have been a lot kinder. You might even call it an act of mercy."

"Yes, I imagine you might."

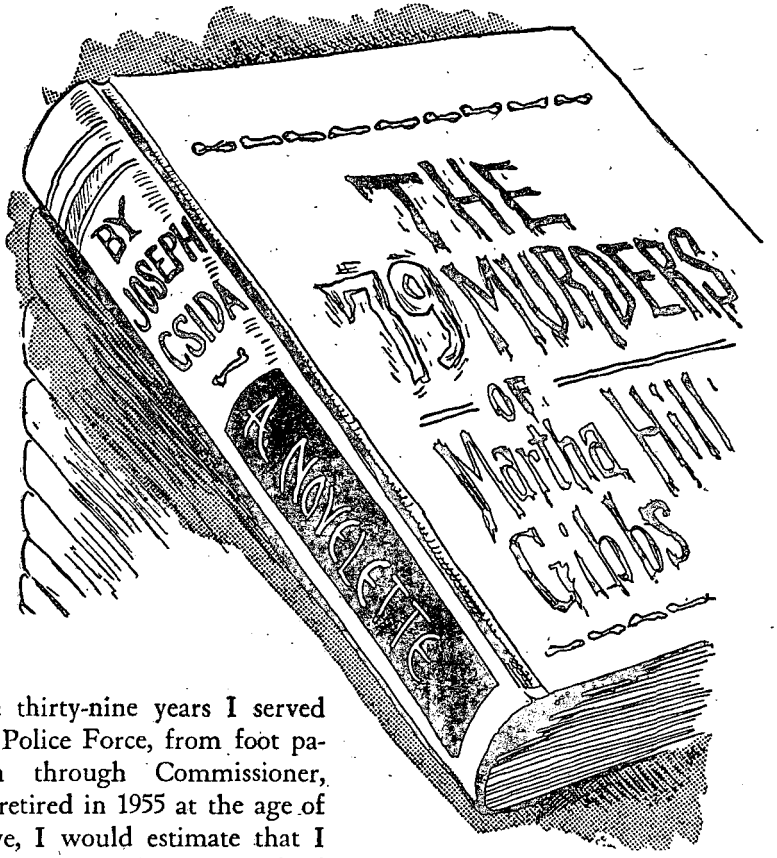
"And now it's all over. Life will be so dull."

Instead of answering, Miss Abigail seated herself at the old birds-eye maple escritoire and drew out a piece of stationery.

After awhile Miss Laetitia got up and peered over her shoulder. Suddenly she clapped her hands. "Dear Abbie!" she said. "Another ad for the Daily Bugle. Why didn't I think of that?"

Miss Abigail glanced up and smiled. "I don't think we should specify another lady this time. Just a few well-chosen words about a quiet, gracious home. Don't you agree, Laetitia?"

"Oh yes, darling. You're so right."



In the thirty-nine years I served on the Police Force, from foot patrolman through Commissioner, until I retired in 1955 at the age of sixty-five, I would estimate that I was directly or indirectly involved with slightly over 4000 matricides, uxoricides, filicides, fratricides, parricides and homicides of every

Discarnate personalities don't exist for many but ex-Police Commissioner Malloy ("only the facts Ma'am") finds himself inescapably entangled with the supernatural.

conceivable description. Right after I was promoted to Detective Second Grade, while still quite a young man, I was personally responsible for solving a very complex case in which a psychotic chemist killed his wife by injecting bubonic plague germs into her vein, and I have sat in a hundred times on the breaking of the more common dull-witted felon who beats his innocent, and generally weaker victim to death with his fists or whatever other blunt instrument he finds at hand.

In all those years, apart from official reports, I have never written a single word about any of these homicides. Now at seventy-one when writing comes quite hard to me, both because it is difficult for me to concentrate as I did when my brain was more nimble, and because the arthritic condition afflicting my hands makes it painful to hold this pencil tightly for more than a half hour or so at a time . . . now I find I *must* write the complete story of these recent deaths.

You note I do not call them homicides. I do not because I do not know whether or not they were homicides.

And if they were homicides I do not know whether the homicides were perpetrated by human hand or by some supernatural force.

It is to attempt to clarify these haunting questions in my own mind that I write this story at all. I have not slept a full night for three weeks, and I am not sure I ever will again until I feel I have exhausted every effort to determine what crimes were committed here, and by whom.

Until Martha Hill Gibbs herself died last week, I could not have brought myself to write this essay at all. Martha Hill Gibbs was one of my oldest and dearest friends, and as fine a woman as I have ever known. If you read detective and mystery stories at all you yourself must surely feel as though you, too, know Martha Hill Gibbs.

She was often called the American Agatha Christie. She wrote her first detective novel, featuring Nurse Mary Brown, in 1921. That year she just wrote the one novel, since she was doing a full time job as a reporter on The News to pay her husband's way through medical school. But every year from that point on, right up until this year, she wrote two complete detective novels each and every year, not to mention countless short stories. You were probably a Nurse Brown fan, just as many people today are Perry Mason fans. Or more likely you are a Chuck Silk, Hollywood Actor-Private Detective fan, since Martha stopped writing the Nurse Brown stories about

1946, and has concentrated almost entirely on Chuck Silk since then.

(But I ramble. You must forgive this terrible weakness of an old man, this tendency to ramble. I will try not to do it.)

As I said I could never have brought myself to write this story while Martha was alive, no matter what the urgency. And now that I have embarked on the task, I find I hardly know where to begin. Perhaps that morning about six months ago, when Martha phoned to tell me that her husband, and my life-long good friend, Dr. Edward Gibbs had died, is the best place to begin. As I think back on it, it does seem to me that it was shortly after Ed's death that Martha began to act peculiarly.

It was 6:02 that morning, when my phone rang. I put down my toothbrush, rinsed my mouth, went into the bedroom and picked up the phone.

"Frank?" Martha said, "Frank, Ed's dead. Please come over." There was no hysteria in her deep, resonant voice, just sadness and weariness.

I live diagonally across The Hemlocks from the Gibbs', so it didn't take me more than five minutes to get over. The front door was open, and I walked in, and went up to the bedroom.

Martha was sitting on the side of the bed, holding Ed's hand. Ed was lying on his back, a soft, pleasant smile on his lips, his eyes closed as though in most relaxed sleep.

"You haven't really gone away, Eddie, have you?" she was murmuring. "I don't want you to go away."

Then she saw me.

"Ed's dead," she said again, quietly, rising from the bed. Martha was a tall woman, about 5' 10". She was never really beautiful, but rather handsome and efficient. Ed's death seemed to have caused her to shrink in a strange way. "But he hasn't really gone away, has he, Frank?" she said now.

I consoled her as best I could. We called our mutual friend, Dr. Goldstein. Ed had died quietly in his sleep of a heart failure. Since he was seventy-five years old, and both he and Martha had had a coronary condition for a number of years, his death came as no real surprise to any of us. But surprise or no surprise, there is always a measure of shock, no matter what the deceased's age, and when people love each other as deeply and genuinely for almost forty years as did Ed and Martha Gibbs, there is also a fierce if quiet heartbreak.

Miss Schmidt, Martha's secretary, and I made all the arrangements for the services and the funeral. I myself broke the news to

the Gibbs' granddaughter, Sue, who was away in her first year of college in Los Angeles. Sue is practically like my own granddaughter, just as my own son and daughter, now doing well in Tokyo and Ypsilanti, Michigan respectively, grew up viewing Ed and Martha Hill Gibbs as a second father and mother.

It was right after the funeral that Martha again displayed the odd new attitude she was developing. Sue, who is seventeen, and Martha and I were in the kitchen of the Gibbs' house, quietly sitting at the table with coffee Sue had just made. Sue was still crying, dry and invisible but very real inner tears.

"Now," she said, "now . . . Gramp won't be able to come to my wedding."

"Of course, he will, sweetheart," Martha said, in her husky, almost baritone voice.

"What wedding?" I asked. "I didn't know you were going to get married, Sue. . . . Martha, you never mentioned it."

Martha looked at me in a most startled manner for a moment. Then she looked at Sue.

"Yes, Susie dear," she said, "What wedding? You never mentioned a wedding to me. . . . And of course, Gramp will be there."

Sue reached across the table and took Martha's hand.

"I'm sorry, Gram," she said, and looking at me, "I'm sorry, Uncle Frank, it's terribly selfish of me. But Charlie Silk and I are planning to get married next month."

Martha again looked startled.

"Charlie Silk?" she said. "You can't mean Charlie Silk. He's my detective, and of course, Gramp will be there."

That sounds even more peculiar than it is, or than I mean it to sound. Charlie Silk, as I mentioned earlier and as you know, is the detective character Martha created, just as Erle Stanley Gardner created Perry Mason, or Agatha Christie created Hercule Poirot or Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes.

As a matter of fact the Charlie Silk TV series is doing almost as well as the Perry Mason series they tell me. But there is also a real Charlie Silk. Somebody discovered him last fall when Martha and Ed went out to Hollywood to get the Charlie TV film series launched. This Charlie Silk was a Private Investigator who doubled as a bit part actor and vice versa.

For a time it looked like he would actually play the Charlie Silk part in the series. But Martha told me later that he was too incompetent an actor, and she didn't like him generally.

The series' producer, however,

did use the real Charlie Silk quite extensively in publicity in connection with the series at the time. And I think it was then that Silk met Sue Gibbs, since she had gone out with her grandparents to enroll in school out there.

This particular evening, following the funeral, Martha made some vague, sometimes gentle, sometimes aggressive objections to Sue's marrying Silk, but finally she dropped the subject. She also mentioned repeatedly that Gramp would not like the idea at all, but she finally told Sue not to worry, that Gramp would come to the wedding anyway. I was rather upset to see Martha so distraught and so obviously thrown off her balance by Ed's death. Over the next several weeks, even after Sue went back to school, the situation did not improve. If anything it became worse.

I visited Martha each day, and on each visit she would go on at great length about her conversations with Ed and their plans for the future. Once I walked into the house, and as I approached her study through the living room, I heard her saying:

"Mr. Grau, you are being utterly ridiculous. There is a very substantial difference between murdering someone for profit, and a State execution of that murderer. Murder is not merely murder no matter what the circumstances. I do not necessarily believe there is any such thing as justifiable homicide. . . ."

I walked into the study. Martha was sitting at her desk. She was speaking to the empty chair at the side of the desk.

I said, "Hello, Martha," and she turned slowly and smiled.

"Frank," she said, "how nice you could come. I was just talking with Mr. Grau."

I tried to hide my bafflement, but apparently didn't succeed, for she said:

"You know Mr. Grau, of course. He was the murderer in "Death on the Dixie Highway." He killed that lovely young couple from Alabama."

You may remember "Death on the Dixie Highway". I think it was one of the best Martha had ever done. Mr. Grau was a particularly cunning killer. As I remembered him, a kindly gentleman of about sixty with a surprisingly luxuriant head of white hair and handlebar mustache to match. But Mr. Grau was a character in a seven year old novel, not a real person sitting in Martha's study. At least I thought so then.

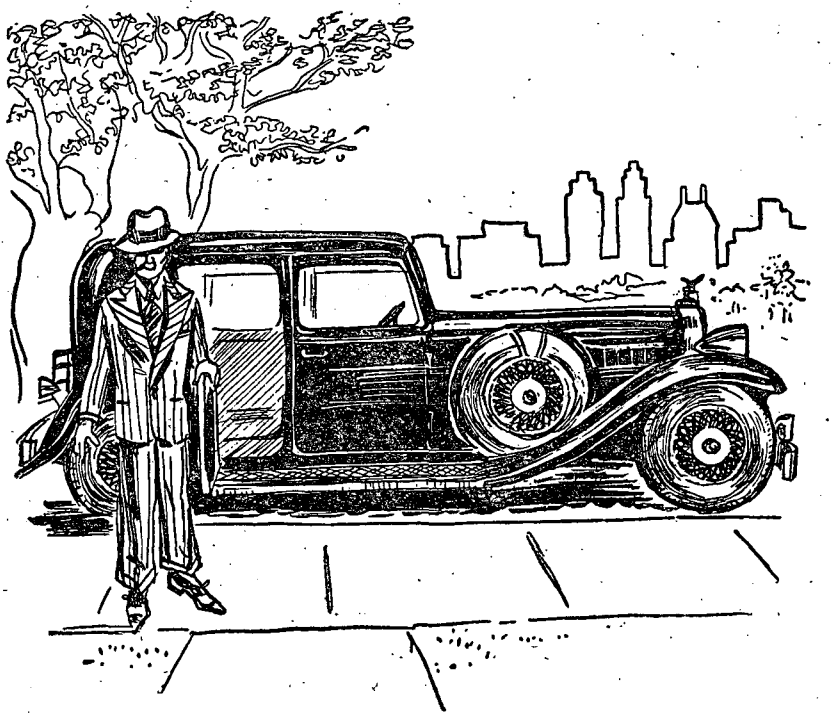
I joined the conversation with the invisible Mr. Grau and Martha long enough to humor her out of

it, then discussed a new rose bush I had planted that morning. I also spent about an hour and a half trying to persuade Martha to begin a new book. I felt that if I could get her immersed in her writing again, an occupation which she truly loved, it would help her. At one point in this discussion she smiled sweetly at me and said:

"I have the most wonderful plot, Frank, but I don't believe I'll write this one."

And the next morning—it was a Sunday—Martha disappeared.

About seven-thirty that morning, I was out trimming the rose bush I had discussed with her when a very well kept and polished ebony limousine pulled up across the street directly in front of the Gibbs house. I put down my shears and put on my glasses. The car looked like a 1927 model of the kind the more affluent gangsters of that era sported. And as I looked a thin, tall, swarthy man stepped out of the car on the driver's side and came around to the opposite side, the side facing the Gibbs house. He was, ridiculously enough, dressed in a loud, light-



colored suit and white panama hat. He, like the automobile, looked like a tin horn but successful gangster or gambler of the late twenties.

I peered at him, and had the strange feeling that I knew him. Just then Martha came out of the door. She waved to me as she strode down the path. She seemed to walk more briskly and with more vitality than at any time since Ed's death.

"Good morning, Frank," she sang. I use that word advisedly, because that is virtually what she did, and this was the first time Martha had sounded of good cheer since Ed's passing. The tall man held the door open for her, she stepped into the car, he went around to the driver's side and they drove off. Martha waved again as they pulled away. I don't know why, but I noted the license number.

About four that afternoon Miss Schmidt called me.

"Mr. Malloy," she said, "Did Mrs. Gibbs tell you she was going to be away today?"

"No," I said. "Why?"

"Well, she asked me to come in at my regular time today, about ten o'clock, and when I got here she was gone. I've been through the mail, and in addition to the normal correspondence and bills and solicitations, I found something very peculiar."

"What?"

"There's a note here . . . It says: 'We are having a very special reunion and would be greatly honored if you would join us. Johnny French will pick you up at 7:30 a.m., Sunday, August 11 if you care to attend our meeting.'

"And it's signed," said Miss Schmidt,

" 'Affectionately,

Your Murderers'."

A number of thoughts ran through my mind. I thought: Very interesting, she's plotting a new story. I thought: Johnny French, Johnny French, that's a very familiar name. I thought about the tall, thin swarthy man from 1927.

As I have said Martha Hill Gibbs and Ed, and my deceased wife Ann, and I were close friends ever since we were all in our twenties. I got to know Martha originally when she came to see me at police headquarters to ask whether I would help her with some technical information she needed for her first detective novel.

Miss Schmidt said, rather anxiously, "Mr. Malloy, Mr. Malloy, are you there . . . Mr. Malloy!!!"

I didn't realize that I hadn't said anything for a long, long moment. And then it flashed through my mind that Johnny French was

the murderer in the very first detective novel Martha Hill Gibbs wrote. And that the description of Johnny French, as I remembered it, fitted perfectly the description of the tall, thin swarthy man who had come to call for Martha that morning.

"Don't get excited, Miss Schmidt," I said, "and leave everything just the way it is. I'll be right over."

The arthritic pain in my hand and wrist and lower right arm is so intense now that I shall have to stop writing for a moment, but it is just as well. I need a little time to think again. About the fact that first I had come upon Martha having a conversation with Mr. Grau, one of her murderers, invisible though he was. And now I had *seen* Martha drive off with another of her murderers, Johnny French. A quite visible and real person. Quite possibly, I am forced to admit, Johnny French!

When I hung up the phone after talking to Miss Schmidt I took a moment to look up "The Wheel Stops at Murder", Martha's first detective novel, in my library. I was right. The murderer's name was Johnny French and he looked precisely like the man who had picked Martha up that morning. And in the novel he drove a very expensive ebony limousine.

"I'm so glad you're here," Miss Schmidt said, as I walked into the study. "Here's the note."

She handed me a rolled document. Unrolled it measured approximately four by six inches. It was like no paper I had ever seen or felt. It was like no parchment either. And yet it was not exactly cloth. At the risk of seeming hysterical, I can only describe its color as an eerie blue. I did not know then, and have never found out, just what kind of material it was. The message Miss Schmidt had read me was typed neatly in the center of the material. I say typed, although I do not know that for sure either. The letters looked as though they had been typewritten rather than printed or handwritten. They were of a strangely faint gray or silver color.

In carefully interrogating Miss Schmidt I ascertained that as far as Miss Schmidt had been able to discover the document had simply appeared on Martha's desk. That is to say that while all the other mail of the day had been in envelopes, stamped and postmarked, this document had merely been lying in the center of the desk. A very thorough search by Miss Schmidt through the waste baskets also revealed no container in which the

rolled message might have come.

I told Miss Schmidt she could go home. I made up my mind that if Martha was not back by the following morning I would call in the police. She did not return by the following morning, and so, at my request, a young officer of about fifty, a Sergeant from the Missing Persons Bureau met me at the Gibbs house.

Naturally I did not tell him anything about Martha's behavior. I merely told him in the most explicit detail about her departure, described the man who had picked her up, and gave him the license number and rolled message which Miss Schmidt had found on her desk. I asked the young man, Sergeant Otto Hunseker, to keep me informed as to whatever progress he made, and he promised he would. He was as good as his word. It wasn't a full twenty-four hours later that he called me.

"Commissioner," he said. "This is Sergeant Hunseker. We found the limousine in a parking lot out at Idlewild. The owner is a Herman Grau and we're looking for him now. And we've found witnesses who saw the tall thin man you described escort Mrs. Gibbs to the gate for a jet flight to Los Angeles. So far we haven't found the man himself, nor anyone who saw Mrs. Gibbs after she got off the plane in L.A. I'm sure she's all right, though, and as soon as we find out anything more I'll let you know."

I thanked the Sergeant. But I was still quite worried. At the time it seemed to me utterly ridiculous that a name, Herman Grau, the same as the murderer in Martha's story should pop up again. I called Sue Gibbs in Los Angeles, on the pretext of wishing to know how she was coming along in her studies, and how her wedding plans were progressing. Since I called her fairly regularly this raised no suspicion on her part that anything might be amiss insofar as her Grandmother was concerned. She asked how Martha was, and I told her she was just fine. But this, of course, made it plain that Martha had not gone to Los Angeles to visit Sue.

Sergeant Hunseker came by to see me the following morning about ten.

"We can't find this Mr. Grau," he said. "But we know he's a small man about sixty, with a heavy head of snow white hair and a white handlebar mustache. He bought the car about a week ago from the old opera singer, Ferdinand Wilmot. Wilmot's hobby is collecting and refurbishing old automobiles. The old man gave Wilmot $10,000 for the car. In cash."

As I have indicated, I have been involved with criminal oddities of every description for almost forty years and I'm not easily jarred or shocked. But I must say that Hunseker's announcement gave me a most uneasy feeling.

"In the meantime," said Hunseker, "we're having a rough time pinning down that wacky note. The lab boys have checked it out with every available piece of information they have on manufacturers of paper and all kinds of special fabrics, and they can't find anything like it. And they checked every typewriter in the Gibbs house and every standard typewriter make, and can't find a machine on which this could have been written. Seems strange, doesn't it?"

I told him about Sue, and my call to her, and he agreed with me that neither his department, nor the Los Angeles police should talk to Sue.

"There's no sense in alarming her," Hunseker said. "I'm sure Mrs. Gibbs will show up any minute."

On Friday, five days after Martha disappeared, I was preparing to go to bed. It was one minute of eleven, and as is my habit, I went into my den and turned the television set on to the eleven o'clock news.

"What kind of a day has it been?" asked the newscaster. He went on to answer his own question. He covered a new international crisis, a local election, and then he said, "And in Hollywood today, Charles Silk died. Silk, a private detective and sometime actor, had been seriously considered for the part of the fictional sleuth of the same name in the popular TV series, "The Adventures of Chuck Silk." Silk crashed to his death in a fall from the terrace of his penthouse apartment on the Sunset Strip in the film capitol sometime late this evening. . . ."

As is the irritating custom with shows of this kind there were no further details. I put in a call to Sergeant Hunseker and got him,

finally, just as he arrived home.

"Yes," he said, "we got word about an hour ago. I'm trying to get an okay to go on out to the Coast to see if there's any connection between Silk's death and Mrs. Gibbs' disappearance. I'll let you know if I find out anything."

As much as my professional career has taught me patience and inured me to what the average person considers unbearable suspense, I must say that the next two days dragged on interminably for me. Nothing of any consequence happened. Sergeant Hunseker got permission to go, and left for Los Angeles on Sunday morning.

Sunday night about ten p.m. I was up in my den idly passing the time with my stamp collection, when I happened to look out the window facing the Gibbs' house. I looked over toward the chimney, then back to the page of early Roman stamps again, then my head jerked up, and I stared at the chimney. Incredible as it seemed, on a hot mid-August evening, smoke was coming from the Gibbs' chimney.

With an excitement which would have been much more becoming in a younger man, I got up from my desk, and put a pair of trousers on over my pajamas. I was halfway down the flight of stairs when the phone rang. This inexcusable excitement mounted in me at such ridiculous rate that I became more than a little irritated with myself. I tripped and fell down the last three steps, hastening to the phone. Fortunately I did not damage any of my ancient bones.

"Hello," I said, irritably, to the mouthpiece of the telephone.

"Hello," said Martha Hill Gibbs' deep voice. "Hello, Frank? This is Martha. . . ."

She sounded extremely weary, wearier than I have ever heard her before.

"Martha, where are you?" I asked.

"Here, right here. Home," she said.

"Home? You mean across the street? In your own house? Right now?"

"Yes, of course, Frank. I just got in a few minutes ago. I'm terribly, terribly tired but I must talk to you. Could you come over in about an hour. . . . Just let me rest for an hour, and come over . . ."

"Of course, Martha," I said, "I'll come right now."

"No," she said with what seemed to me a sudden desperate note in her voice. "Please don't come now. Come in an hour."

"All right, Martha," I said, puzzled, "but there's smoke coming from your chimney. . . ."

"I know, Frank, I'm burning some old boxes and papers Mrs. Klein left in the kitchen."

"Oh, all right, I'll be over in an hour."

It was about ten minutes of twelve (I just couldn't wait the full hour) that I burst into the Gibbs' house. Martha was lying on the sofa in the living room. At first I thought she might be asleep. But as I hesitated at the door, she rose, slowly and sat up.

"Come in, Frank, please," she said.

In the lamplight she looked more exhausted than I believe I have ever seen any human being look. But there was a brightness in her eyes that startled me. I know that this will sound inexcusably dramatic, but it was as though her whole being was burning with a fierce inner fire which showed only in her eyes. For the rest, her skin had a greyish pallor, and there were deep purple-black shadows beneath her eyes.

"Martha, Martha," I said, "where have you been I. . . ."

She reached out her hand.

"Frank, it's so good to see you again. But please don't press me. Please sit down. Make yourself a drink, if you wish . . . but please, hurry and sit down. I have had the most frightening, the most fascinating, the most exhilarating experience of my life. I must tell someone. I. . . . please, Frank, sit down."

As I sat it occurred to me that the living room was filled with a strange odor. It passed through my mind fleetingly that the odor was similar to one I smelled often years ago, when a regular part of getting my hair cut was a singe, when the barber burned the edges of my freshly cut hair with the flame of a lighted taper. It was, quite plainly, I thought then, the smell of burning hair. I looked over toward the fireplace. The last embers of a small fire were dying there.

But Martha had my hand and was pulling me down beside her on the French provincial sofa.

"Frank," she said, "you must promise you'll never tell anyone this story as long as you live."

"Well, Martha . . ."

"Please, Frank, you must promise. . . ."

I nodded vaguely, and sat down beside her.

"I just attended a reunion of all my murderers," she said.

"Oh, Martha, come on now, be sensible. . . ."

"You remember last Sunday morning when I waved to you as I was leaving?" she said. "You know who that was? That man who picked me up?"

I looked into the wild flame of her eyes. I hesitated, then I said,

"You mean French? Johnny French?"

She seemed very pleased that I knew.

"Of course! Francis Xavier Malloy," she said, "as you have been all my life, you're a dear, wonderful, understanding and wise friend. I knew I could tell you this."

I do not know now whether to attempt to tell this story as Martha told it to me, to report the dialogue verbatim, or whether to state the facts without color, emotion or dramatization of any kind, as I gathered them from Martha.

I have rested and flexed my arthritic fingers again now for a half hour while I have thought about this, and I believe a combination of Martha's own words, and my honest narrative where it would make the picture clearest is desirable.

French took her to the airport, she said, and politely bade her goodbye at the gate whence her flight was scheduled to depart. In Los Angeles, as she entered the arrival gate, she was quite startled to see a sleek, black haired young man with sharp green eyes, full lips and a generally dashing and insolent manner. It was Rory Williams, the murderer in her last book, "The Meek Shall Inherit Murder." Johnny French had told her Williams would meet her in L.A., so she wasn't as surprised as she might otherwise have been.

Williams escorted her to a gleaming black new limousine, and when they were about a quarter mile away from the airport, he pulled the car over to the side of the road, pulled down heavy, black silk cloth blinds with which the car, strangely enough, was equipped.

"You're not to know where you're being taken," he said to Martha, in the friendliest manner, as he got back in behind the wheel.

The ride took about an hour, as closely as Martha could estimate. They seemed, she thought, to be traveling long winding and ascending roads, and when Williams finally stopped, she saw they were parked before a lovely rambling house high on a mountain.

Williams took her into an exceptionally large, nicely furnished modern living room. Seated in groups around various lounges and chairs, and standing in knots were approximately eighty people.

"It was, for all the world," Martha went on with her story, "just like any large cocktail party you might ever have attended. They were drinking and smoking and talking and laughing. But . . . but it was the strangest thing. They were all dressed in the clothes of

different periods. Some like people dressed in the twenties . . . the way Johnny French was dressed. Some like the thirties. Some like the forties, and . . ."

She paused as she recalled the meeting.

". . . and there was something very, very familiar about them, all of them. Before I realized what it was . . . in spite of the note, and in spite of Johnny French and Rory Williams . . . a little white haired man with a white mustache, Herman Grau—you remember him—he got up from a chair in a corner of the room. He clapped his hands sharply, and he said: 'Ladies and gentlemen. Rise please. Here is your creator!' "

I said, "Martha, you look very tired. Wouldn't you like to go to bed, and tell me the rest of the story in the morning."

She said, "Frank, please don't interrupt me. I must tell this to someone. I told Ed, but that's different. I must tell someone here, in this world. I must tell you. Please . . ."

I walked to Ed's bar in the corner of the living room and poured a water glass half full of whisky. I did not bother going after ice. I sat down on the sofa beside Martha again, and said, "Of course, Martha, go on."

Martha wrote seventy-nine detective novels between September of 1921 and last month. The first forty-eight of these featured Nurse Mary Brown as detective and the last thirty-one featured Chuck Silk. Each novel had one murderer. They were all there, at the reception, Martha said, except Johnny French, who had stayed back in New York. And Wilbur Hatch.

"You remember Wilbur?" Martha asked.

I did. He was the murderer in "Seven, Eight, Death Can't Wait." He was a hypochondriac.

"Wilbur couldn't come," Martha said. "He wasn't feeling well."

That evening, said Martha, after the cocktail party, they had the most wonderful dinner. Herman Grau acted as Master of Ceremonies, or Host or whatever you might call the spokesman of an assemblage of that kind. When they were on the dessert course, Grau got up and made a speech.

Martha repeated it for me, almost verbatim, but I really do not dare attempt to repeat it thus here. The gist is what is important.

Grau told Martha that the assembled group, the murderers she had created had long smarted under the injustice of her treatment of them. Each of them had met death in one fashion or another, either via execution by the State, or by the hand of Silk or Nurse Brown,

or some allied law enforcement officer. Each of them had died, officially or otherwise, simply because he or she had committed one or more simple murders.

It was Grau's firm belief, and indeed, he maintained it was the well-considered judgement of the entire group of murderers that Charlie Silk and Nurse Mary Brown were guilty of many crimes far worse than murder, and that they (Martha's murderers) were therefore going to take it upon themselves to kill detectives Silk and Brown. They were going to take Martha along, so that she could personally witness each of the two executions.

You will find it difficult to understand this, and perhaps it was the Scotch I consumed as Martha told the story, but by the time she told me about the murder of Charlie Silk, I almost believed it had happened, exactly as she described it to me. This very minute as I write about it, I am not at all sure that I do not believe it still. After all I had heard the newscast myself. Charlie Silk was dead.

The charges against Charlie Silk, as Grau explained them were:

(1) About ten years ago in Phoenix, Arizona, when he was twenty-six, he had married a young girl of sixteen, had quickly sired two children by her, and then deserted her. One of the children, a girl, had died of malnutrition at the age of six, about two years ago.

(2) Silk, who had since come to Hollywood, become a bit actor and opened a private detective agency, had managed to get a divorce, and had married a moderately wealthy woman of about fifty-five. He had squandered the woman's money through one bad investment after another, and had then divorced her. She was presently in the alcoholic ward of the county hospital.

The charges against Nurse Mary Brown were even more unattractive. She'd been a nurse since 1920 when she was only eighteen years old. But, fatherless and motherless, and brought up in a foster home where the adults were cold if not outright cruel to her, she was about as amoral and feelingless as a person could be. Strangely enough nursing gave her the opportunity to indulge her amoral tastes as few other occupations might.

For one thing she was able to filch narcotics from the hospitals in which she worked. And since she used them only to stimulate herself and whichever man she was consorting with at any given time, she apparently never stole enough to arouse suspicion.

She had, said Mr. Grau, caused the deaths of at least six innocent

persons either directly or indirectly, and it was high time she was punished.

As Martha finished narrating Mr. Grau's comments about Nurse Mary Brown, I looked over at the clock on the mantle over the fireplace. It was two seventeen a.m. Martha had been talking for more than two hours, and I had hardly interrupted her at all.

I looked at her now and I ached with compassion for her. Her cheeks were sunken, and the glow that had lain behind her eyes had diminished, almost as though the fire which caused it had died like the fire she had burned earlier in the fireplace.

She was tired beyond human endurance, and I should have refused to carry this meeting any further. Actually I tried to end it by showing her how far-fetched were her ramblings.

I said, gently, "Martha, your Nurse Mary Brown was never like that. She was a sweet girl, something like you yourself . . ."

Martha shook her head.

"No," she said, "I didn't write her like that because I didn't know. But she *was* like that! She was! She was a wicked, wicked woman!"

It occurred to me then in an alarming flash that I, too, now was talking about a fictional character as though she were real. I reached over and patted Martha's hand.

"Come on, Martha," I said, "you're tired. Let me take you up to your room. After all Mary Brown is just a name you made up. There's no real Nurse Mary Brown."

"Yes, there is," said Martha. "There are. There are thousands of Mary Browns, and scores of them are nurses. And this one, this evil one is dead. They killed her yesterday. And she *was* my Mary Brown."

She wanted to go on and tell me more but I prevailed upon her to go to bed with the promise that I would come over first thing in the morning to hear the rest of the story. I did not sleep at all that night.

Martha maintained that her murderers had planned the death of Charlie Silk, and Charlie Silk was dead. That was a coincidence. A strange one, but a coincidence nevertheless. As far as I knew there was no real Nurse Mary Brown. Or at least no Nurse Mary Brown who had been killed by Martha Hill Gibbs' murderers.

Yet the next day, just before noon when Martha urged me to come over again, I heard the rest of the story from her. Now it was not two o'clock in the morning. It was almost high noon of a bright

August day in a quiet suburb, and yet Martha's story gave me the same eerie feeling its beginning had given me the night before.

Grau himself, she said, had taken her to Charlie Silk's penthouse apartment on the Sunset Strip. He had engaged Charlie in a conversation about the possibility of taking over the part of the character bearing his own name in the TV film series. He had maneuvered Charlie to the low brick wall on the edge of the penthouse terrace, and with one firm push had hurled him over. Martha said she sat there and watched the entire event.

Then, she said, one of the murderers, a Captain Samuel Hotchkiss, had flown with her from Los Angeles to Boston, direct flight.

"Do you remember Captain Hotchkiss, Frank?" she asked me.

I did, and quite well. He was a craggy-faced, red-haired, red-bearded ex-New England seaman, about sixty-five years old, who had been around the world a dozen times. He had murdered a wealthy owner of a line of pleasure steamships in a novel of Martha's called "Death Sails at Dawn."

"When we got off the plane in Boston," said Martha, "Captain Hotchkiss took me directly to this brownstone house in Boston where Nurse Mary Brown lived. He told her he was an old friend of her dead husband's, and that I was his sister. She made tea for us. While she was out of the room, he put some kind of a drug in her cup of tea. She fell asleep, and when she was sleeping, he took a large hypodermic needle out of a little bag he was carrying, and plunged it into a vein on the inside of her left arm. He said it was a shot of heroin, sufficient to kill a dozen people. He then wiped the hypo and placed it in her right hand so it would look like she killed herself."

Now with the bright sunlight shining through the windows and making boxes on the living room rug as we talked, Martha's story simply seemed like the wanderings

of a mind which had torn loose from its moorings and was drifting harmlessly. A good mind, trained through an adult lifetime of very successful detective story writing, to concoct all kinds of fanciful plots.

"That's very interesting, Martha," I said, "but you look very tired. Don't you think I should call Dr. Goldstein? Just to give you a routine check-up?"

"Don't you dare, Frank," she said. "I'm fine. I am tired, but I'm fine." She smiled then.

"You don't believe any of what I've told you, do you?" she said "You think I'm a crazy old woman, who's having hallucinations."

I patted her hand.

"I don't think anything of the kind, Martha. I think you're just tired. Is it okay if I call Dr. Goldstein?"

She smiled again.

"Sure, Francis Xavier Malloy. You always were a dear. A dull dear with no imagination whatsoever, but a dear anyway. Call the doc."

Dr. Goldstein came that afternoon. Martha's heartbeat was extremely weak and irregular. He gave her an injection and prescribed complete rest.

"I'm worried about her, Frank," he told me. "I don't know what she's been through since Ed died, but she's in very serious trouble."

It was so serious Martha died a week later, exactly the same way Ed had died. Quietly, in her bed, sometime during the night. She, too, had a smile on her face. A very pleased smile, it seemed to me, strangely enough.

Our police department, in the meantime, had checked out the death of Charles Silk with the Los Angeles police. Although the L.A. officers felt that either Silk's first wife or someone close to her, or his second wife, the elderly woman who was in the county hospital alcoholic ward, or someone close to her might have had a strong enough motive to kill Silk, they had no evidence to indicate that he had not either fallen or jumped from his penthouse terrace.

They had talked to everyone who had seen him the day of his death, as far as they knew, except for an elderly gentleman with snow white hair and a snow white handlebar mustache. This gentleman had inquired at the desk if Silk was in his apartment, but he seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. Hunseker thought it strange that this description should be similiar to the owner of the ebony limousine, but simply could not find any such person.

Naturally I did not ignore Mar-

tha's story of the murder of Nurse Mary Brown. The same day she told it to me I went into town, to the public library, and looked through every page of every newspaper for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. I scanned each page carefully looking for a report on the death by heroin of Mary Brown. I found nothing.

I went over to the out-of-town newsstands and purchased all the Boston papers for those days. In the Boston papers there were two homicides reported. A man had gone berserk and killed his wife and four children, and a teen-age hoodlum had stabbed a policeman in a hallway. But nothing on Mary Brown, or a death by hypodermic needle.

Still Martha's story, the story itself and the fierce conviction with which she told it continued to haunt me.

Martha had left a considerable estate, over and above what Ed had already left. I had been designated the Executor of the estate. It came to well over a half million dollars. One hundred thousand dollars of it went toward the establishment of a continuing scholarship at the same college where Martha had majored in English Literature, and where Sue was now going. The rest went to Sue, under my guardianship and with me acting as trustee of the estate.

All of Martha's papers, manuscripts and notes she bequeathed to me. I was worried about Sue as I anticipated her arrival for the funeral. She had had to withstand the shock of the deaths of three people whom presumably she loved, in a pathetically short time. Her granddad, her grandmother, and Charles Silk. Under the circumstances I was much relieved, rather than shocked by our conversation on the way back from the cemetery.

"Uncle Frank," she said quietly, "do you remember how Grandma objected to my marrying Charlie Silk? How intense she was, even though she seemed a little incoherent about it?"

"Yes, I certainly do. I most certainly do."

"Well, she was right, Uncle Frank. He was a terrible man. When they were investigating his death, a very nice young man—his name is Rog Shane—he was one of the detectives on the case—he became very irritated with me because I was crying and carrying on about Charlie's death. He forced me to come with him to the county hospital to have a talk with Charlie's second wife . . . that poor, poor woman. And he told me about the girl in Arizona . . ."

"I know," I said, "your grand-

mother was a wise and unusual woman."

She wanted to finish summer school, so she returned to California the day after the funeral. I proceeded with all the legal arrangements in connection with the will. A couple of weeks later, I sat in Martha's study in the Gibbs house going through her papers. She was the type of woman who apparently kept many of her letters. She kept them in composition file boxes, one box for each year.

I went back to the first ones in the 1922 box. That was the year my wife, Ann, and I had first met Ed and Martha Hill Gibbs. Reading the letters was like reliving a whole, extraordinarily interesting and happy lifetime. There were clear reflections of my own early years with Ann and our two children; of Martha's pre-marital romance with Ed, and his youthful struggles as a doctor. There were all manner of letters, birthday, anniversary and other cards marking milestones in our lives. The birth of Martha's daughter, Ann, in 1923, one year after Martha and Ed were married. And Ann's own marriage at the age of eighteen, the same age her daughter Sue now was, to a nice young man of twenty, named Jimmy Hart. That was in 1941, and even though Jimmy went into the Navy almost immediately, Sue was born early in 1942.

Jimmy had been wounded in France, and shipped back to a Naval Hospital in Boston early in 1945. The German war, you'll recall, ended in May of that year. Jimmy was in the hospital there till the middle of June. They were tender and touching, these events of the war years, as reflected in Ann's letters to Martha and to Jimmy and his to Ann. And then I came quite without warning of any kind, upon a letter which jolted my heart in my chest. I felt like I had been hit by a hard fist. Perspiration broke out on my forehead, and I felt the moistness gather under my arms and in the small of my back.

The letter was dated July 19, 1945. It was to Martha, who was then living in this very house, from her daughter, Ann, who was still living in Boston. It said:

"Dearest Mom—

I have not wanted to write you about this, but if I don't I will go out of my mind. I am losing Jimmy and I don't know any way to stop from losing him. You remember how much pain from his back he suffered all the while he was in the hospital. They started to give him drugs to ease the pain, and it did. I think they gave him the drugs right up until the time

he was discharged. But I don't think that would have been bad, but one of his nurses, a girl, began to pay a lot of special attention to him and make a big fuss over him. It is the oddest thing, but this girl's name is Mary Brown, the same as the nurse in your stories. One time he even told me that this Mary Brown gets him extra drugs. She even gave him a shot, I think it was morphine, one night right after he and I got through talking to the doctor, and the doctor telling us that he was going to have to start easing off on the use of the drugs.

She is a very beautiful girl, Mom, but she is a very bad girl. Since Jimmy came home from the hospital, she has been seeing him and going out with him. I suspected it for weeks, but just tonight, about an hour ago, Jimmy and I had a big fight and he admitted it. He says she gives him everything he needs and I don't and never could. I'm pretty sure she still gives him narcotics. I think she even uses them herself, but maybe just marijuana, but anyway he told me they have these wild parties, just the two of them. I love Jimmy, Mom, and I don't know what I will do if he leaves me. I don't know what Susie will do either because she loves him and needs him even more than I do. Please help me, Mom. Anyway you possibly can.

Love,

Ann"

It came back to me then. I remembered Martha saying she was going to Boston to visit the kids. She didn't tell me anything about Mary Brown. She evidently didn't tell anyone, even Ed.

The night she got there Jimmy and Martha's daughter, Ann, were killed in an automobile accident. He ran off the road at high speed and crashed into a large oak tree. Martha brought Susie back to live with her and Ed. Susie was four years old.

And Martha's last Nurse Mary Brown detective novel was published in January of 1946.

I went to the bookcase and found it. It was "Death Sails at Dawn." The murderer was a red-headed, red-bearded, ex-sea captain from New England named Samuel Hotchkiss, and the dedication in the book read,

"To Susan
and her future
which I vow to protect"

There was nothing more about Mary Brown in any letters or notes beyond Ann's last letter to her mother. Now I was even more tormented by Martha's story. I went to Boston the following morning. It took me exactly eight days, and if it were not for the fact that I

found a number of colleagues in high ranks in the Boston police department with whom I had worked over the years, I would not have been able to secure the information I needed in that time, if at all.

I learned that Nurse Mary Brown had been discharged from the Naval Hospital in 1948 because she was arrested and convicted on a charge of possession of narcotics. In 1955, when she was about thirty, she had married a doctor named Wilkerson, who was about seventy years old at the time. He died a year later, apparently from natural causes. She bought a small house in Newton, and it was there she was found dead the day Martha said she had been killed.

The police decided she had died from a self-administered overdose of heroin. A number of tradesmen had come and gone into the house that day, and one man with a red beard had entered and left, but there was nothing particularly suspicious about him, and in any event a fairly aggressive search did not produce him. It did not make the papers because other more spectacular news crowded it out.

I also learned that an autopsy on Jimmy Hart, following his death in the automobile accident, revealed that he had been under the influence of narcotics, although it was morphine, not heroin.

On the plane returning from Boston, I turned these facts over and over in my mind. Since then, in virtually every waking moment, and they have been many for I cannot sleep, I have reviewed the case. Again and again and again!

Certainly Martha had the motive to kill both Charlie Silk and Nurse Mary Brown. By killing Silk she had prevented Sue from entering into what almost surely would have been a tragic marriage. By killing Mary Brown Wilkerson she avenged the death of Ann and Jimmy Hart.

But, I ask myself, why would she have waited sixteen years to kill Mrs. Wilkerson. And the answer, of course, is that she probably never would have killed Mary Brown Wilkerson except that the death of Ed unbalanced her. Or perhaps it was the combination of Ed's death, and Sue's sudden announcement that she was planning to marry Charles Silk.

How could I account for the fact that Martha herself was not seen at either the Silk murder locale or the Wilkerson murder scene, but that a man fitting the description of Martha's murderer, Herman Grau, was seen at the first; and her murderer, Samuel Hotchkiss at the

second? It was certainly puzzling.

In-reviewing this phase of the case in my mind, I recalled Martha's appearance at a Famous Persons masquerade party, which our mutual neighbor, Mrs. Dorsch, gave at the Country Club two summers ago. Martha came dressed as Josef Stalin, and with a wig of coal black hair and a black handle-bar mustache, plus a little stuffing, she made a very convincing Stalin. There was no reason in the world why she could not have made up as convincingly as Grau and Hotchkiss, as she did as Stalin. And her normally, deep husky voice would have abetted those impersonations just as it did her Stalin impersonation.

As I pondered the possibility of the masquerade I recalled that hot August night not so long ago when I had seen the smoke coming out of the Gibbs chimney, and Martha had asked me not to come over for another hour, and the lingering smell of burning hair when I finally did enter her living room. She could have been burning the Grau and Hotchkiss mustaches and hairpieces on that occasion.

But I, myself, had seen Johnny French, or at least a man who resembled Johnny French, pick Martha up in front of her house. He was certainly real. But then he may easily have been a man resembling the Johnny French of Martha's story, whom Martha had hired to pick her up that morning, just to make me feel that her subsequent tale of fictional murderers was true. I am a creature of habit, and she knew I would be out at that hour of the morning.

But why would she go to such pains to set me up for acceptance of such a wild and improbable series of circumstances? Why, indeed! Why would the idea of having her fictional murderers avenge their capture, and own deaths, by murdering the living counterparts of the fictional detectives who exposed them occur to Martha in the first place? If indeed it did! Who, after all, knows what the human mind will do under certain stresses after more than six decades?

I checked and rechecked every element of the situation. I even went up to New Rochelle to talk to Ferdinand Wilmot, the retired opera singer from whom Herman Grau had bought the ancient limousine for $10,000 in cash. His description fitted Grau perfectly.

In the position of the Executor of Martha's estate it was not at all difficult for me to trace through every known bank account she possessed to find a $10,000 cash withdrawal around the time the car was purchased from Mr. Wil-

mot. I found no such withdrawal, but then Martha could easily have had that amount in an account I knew nothing about, or for that matter she could even have had it saved and put away somewhere in cash. And if she was unbalanced enough to have decided to perpetrate the entire mad scheme in the first place, she certainly would not have hesitated to waste $10,000 carrying it out.

There were, and there are still times when I fit all the pieces into place, and as a veteran, coldly logical, altogether mature ex-law enforcement officer, I say to myself: My friend, Martha Hill Gibbs became mentally deranged when her husband of almost forty years died, and she killed a man named Charles Silk and a woman named Mary Brown Wilkerson.

There are other times when I say: No! Life is full of coincidences much stranger than any of these. This is simply a case of an unsavory and unwholesome man named Charles Silk who fell from the penthouse terrace of his apartment, or possibly could not tolerate himself as a human being any longer and therefore decided to destroy himself. And a woman who led a wicked and dissolute life did likewise.

And then there are those increasingly frequent times when I say: As completely incredible as it seems, a group of fictional murderers came to life and executed the living counterparts of the fictional detectives who exposed and disposed of them in a series of very successful novels.

Then again I say: No, it is utterly ridiculous! There are no supernatural forces in this world. My friend, Martha Hill Gibbs, killed those two people.

I had come to that conclusion for the thousandth time yesterday, when Sergeant Hunseker dropped by. From the viewpoint of the Missing Persons Bureau, and for that matter, of the Police Department as a whole, the Martha Hill Gibbs case was of no official interest whatsoever. As far as they were concerned, Martha had just gone away on a trip which was entirely her business, and returned voluntarily. And a man in Hollywood had either accidentally fallen, or deliberately hurled himself from his penthouse terrace. And a woman in Newton had, again either deliberately or accidentally, given herself an overdose of heroin.

We talked about all sorts of things, Sergeant Hunseker and I, and at one point, we touched on the Martha Hill Gibbs case.

"You know, Commissioner," he said, "one thing about that case. You remember that crazy invita-

tion signed, 'Affectionately, your murderers', we found. . . . ?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

"Well, I was talking to Phil Collins, a friend of mine in the Lab the other day. They've checked that note out with the FBI, Scotland Yard, the French Sureté Nationale and Interpol, and you know what, Commissioner? As far as any of them have been able to determine, no typewriter ever built by man could have written that note, and it was not handwritten, printed or duplicated in any other way known to science. Isn't that weird?"

"It is, Sergeant," I said. "Yes, indeed, it is."

And last night I fell asleep in my chair—at least I think I fell asleep—while watching the eleven o'clock news, and I had the strangest dream. I dreamed that Martha Hill Gibbs came into the room and sat down in that blue chair right across the room, and greeted me most warmly.

And she said:

"I just had to come by to tell you, Frank. I'm so happy. Sue is marrying a young man just like you. He's just been promoted to Detective Second Grade in the Los Angeles Police Department. She met him while they were investigating the death of Charlie Silk."

I woke with a start—or at least I thought I did. And I thought I saw Martha walking out the door, but through it, unopened. And it wasn't more than a half hour later, when my phone rang:

"Mr. Malloy, please," said a woman's voice.

"Yes, yes, this is Mr. Malloy."

"This is long distance. Will you accept a collect call from a Miss Susan Gibbs in Malibu, California?"

I tried to say "yes," but no sound came from my dry throat until my third attempt. Then Sue came on.

"Uncle Frank," she said, "I'm calling you collect because I'm in a phone booth on the Pacific Coast Highway, and neither Rog nor I had enough money on us to pay for the call. We were driving along, and he just asked me to marry him, and I made him stop the car at the first phone booth we came to——"

I don't know. I don't know.

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