ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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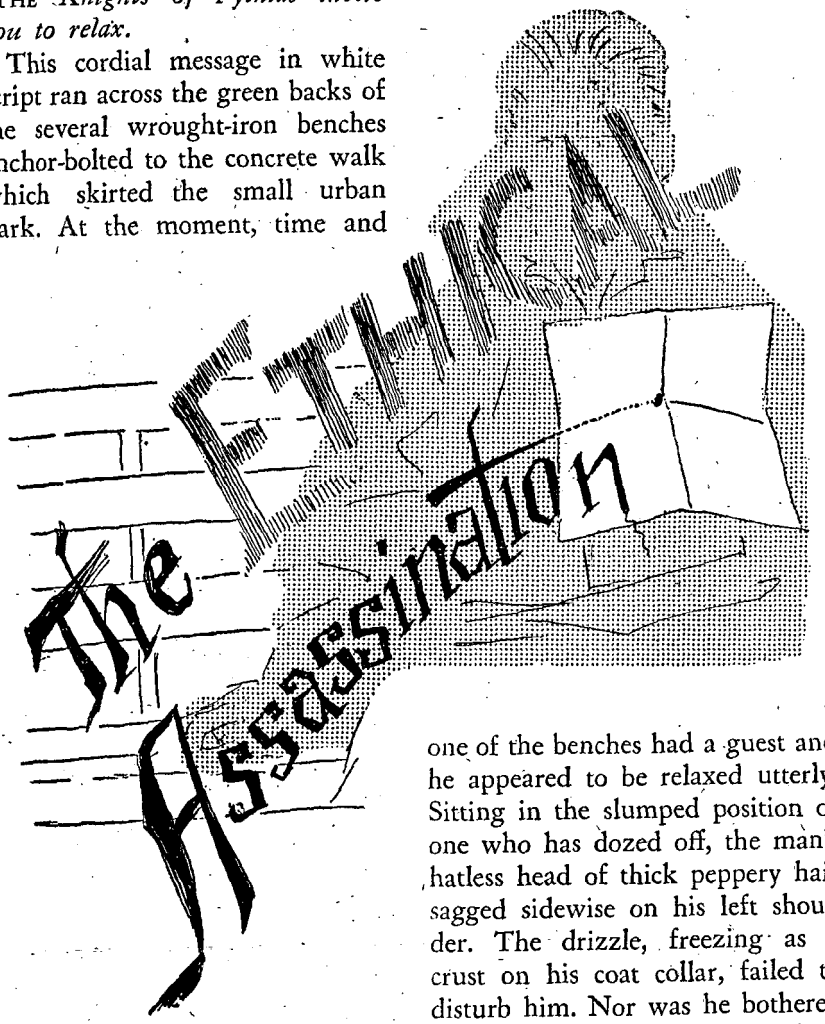


THE *Knights of Pythias invite you to relax.*

This cordial message in white script ran across the green backs of the several wrought-iron benches anchor-bolted to the concrete walk which skirted the small urban park. At the moment, time and clime were hardly propitious to acceptance of the fraternal offer. A bleak dawn, lowering with a sleety mist, had already turned yesterday's snow into a dingy slush. Yet one of the benches had a guest and he appeared to be relaxed utterly. Sitting in the slumped position of one who has dozed off, the man's hatless head of thick peppery hair sagged sidewise on his left shoulder. The drizzle, freezing as a crust on his coat collar, failed to disturb him. Nor was he bothered by the semi-circle of sound—shuffling feet and muttering voices—which grew steadily around him in number and volume. Even the icy voice of Captain Thomas Mc-

Fate left him totally unmoved.

McFate said, "All right. Cover the poor devil up."

A police sergeant, who had already fetched a spare raincoat from the nearby cruiser, draped it like a stiff yellow shroud over the dead man's head and forefront.

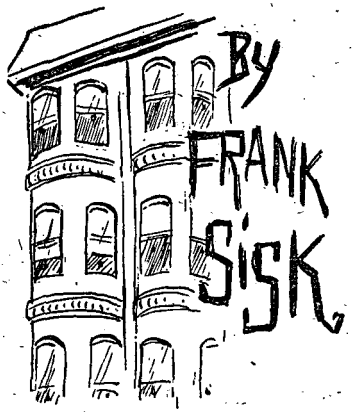
McFate next said, "Get rid of these damned gawks."

Behind him a patrolman turned to face the crowd that had been gathering for the past fifteen minutes and gradually inching closer. "Okay, folks. Move along now. That's it. Right on home or wherever you're going or you'll all catch cold and die."

"A high-powered rifle job if I ever saw one," McFate was saying to the sergeant. "At long range too." Half turning, he aimed his sallow hollow-cheeked face across the street. "From somewhere in that hotel. Sixth or seventh floor."

"Could be, sir. I'm no coroner but—"

"I'll take odds, Hanson. As soon as Bergeron gets back here with this Damroth, I want you and a couple of men to go through that



trap with a fine-toothed comb."

Just then a second police cruiser ranged along the curb, sending a sheet of dirty water among the reluctantly dispersing onlookers, and parked behind the first. A lieutenant, surprisingly youthful, leaped out and opened the rear door to assist an elderly man who obviously didn't desire assistance. He waved the young lieutenant aside and emerged by himself. Erect, he was a few inches over six feet and looked much taller because of his nearly excruciating thinness. His face was thin too, and long to the point of fragility, but the wide mouth was strong and the dark

All equations are not solved in the classroom. Herein a daughter and an undeserving wife vie for the solution.

eyes were alive with intelligence and a glint of humor.

McFate approached him, holding out his right hand. "Sorry to get you up so early, Doctor."

"Just call me mister," said the newcomer. "All my doctorates are honorary. Useful on the Foundation letterhead but preposterous in normal human intercourse. Now what's the crisis?"

"Bergeron told you nothing?"

"The lieutenant was most discreet."

McFate nodded grimly. "He was following orders, Dr. Damroth."

"To the letter. And may I remind you again that I prefer to be addressed as mister."

"Pardon me. I'm Tom McFate."

"I know. I've lived in this city for twenty of my seventy years, sir, and in the course of that time I have familiarized myself through the newspapers with your name, your face, and your exploits. Whenever a journalistic account of the day's news included the name of Captain Thomas McFate, there also was a crisis involving life or death. Generally death, and generally death due to homicide. That is the reason I have already asked you what crisis concerns you now. And more to the point, why does it concern me at this ungodly hour of such an inclement day?"

McFate's cheeks grew perceptibly more hollow as if he were suppressing the cold cackle that sometimes served him for laughter. "Well, Mr. Damroth, you're right about homicide. We got a clean one."

"Clean is not, I suppose, an incongruency."

"A thirty-caliber slug is my guess. Through the heart. Death instantaneous."

"Clean indeed," said Mr. Damroth with a thin smile. From a silver case he took a honey-colored cigarillo. "Am I acquainted with the victim?"

"We don't know. But he seemed to be acquainted with you."

"Who is he? Or who *was* he?"

"We don't know that yet either." McFate held a match for Mr. Damroth's cigarillo. "Nothing on him but an empty wallet with one of those cards, 'Notify in case of accident'."

Mr. Damroth bent toward the flame. "I can see my name on it."

"That's right, sir," said McFate. "Would you like to take a look at him for I.D.?"

"Naturally."

"This way then, Doc—Pardon me. Force of habit."

Smiling, the old man accompanied McFate to the bench and watched with clinical intentness as the upper part of the raincoat was drawn back from the face. The

clinical intentness remained but now was joined by the light of recognition.

"You know him?" asked McFate.

"Very well, yes."

"Who is he?"

But Mr. Damroth was posing questions to himself and to the cigarillo. "To go like this. A month or so before his time. Incredible. Poor Ketch. I wonder why?"

"That his name? Ketch?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, that's his name. Harlan Ketch. *Dr.* Harlan Ketch. A superb mathematician." He turned to look sternly at McFate. "In his case, the doctorate was *not* honorary."

Hanson, the sergeant, said, "I knew he wasn't no hood. Tell by his hands."

McFate said to Hanson, "Tell me something I want to hear when you come back from that hotel across the street." Then to Mr. Damroth: "Was he associated with the Foundation?"

"For the past ten years."

"You said something about a month before his time. Or did I hear wrong?"

"You heard correctly," said the old man, still musing with his own thoughts. "The unfortunate man was dying of cancer. He would have been dead within a month. Two months at the most."

"When did you see him last, Mr. Damroth?"

"Just yesterday afternoon. At tea we had our usual discussion, jocular on my part but quite serious on his, about his mathematical approach to ethics."

"A little out of my line." McFate drew a crumpled handkerchief from the pocket of his yellow slicker. "Did he have a cold at the time?"

"A curious question, McFate." The old man looked outward now with a searching interest. "The answer is no. In fact, he had been immune to the common cold for the past six months."

"Some new drug at the Foundation?"

"One of the oldest drugs in the world, McFate. Morphine. It not only kills pain but in many cases it appears to kill the cold virus."

"Be damned," said McFate. "Well, that proves something, sir." He shook open the handkerchief and held it up. Near the center was a ragged hole the size of a dime. "We found this in his lap. Hanson thought Ketch had been shot while getting ready to blow his nose. I thought different. I guess I was right."

Mr. Damroth appreciatively regarded the captain. "What a bizarre implication! The handker-

chief was an effective target."

"Held over his heart. White threads in the black fabric of his coat where the bullet entered. A man in a room in that hotel over there needed that kind of a target at dawn. With a scope on a rifle he could guarantee a clean job."

"Clean, again. I see the meaning now. But why should Dr. Ketch have himself assassinated when he was so near death anyway? Have you considered that?"

"I'm considering it, sir. Intolerable pain maybe."

"I think not. The morphine kept him tolerably comfortable. He assured me of this himself. He tired easily. He ate little. He was losing considerable weight. But those were the only symptoms evident to me or his other colleagues, and we saw him daily."

"Then it must have been something else. Insurance. Double indemnity for accidental death."

Mr. Damroth slowly rotated the cigarillo between his lips and nodded. "Yes, that might be it. It sounds more in character."

"Then he had insurance of that sort?"

"His financial arrangements were never a topic of discussion between us. I don't know."

"Was he married?"

"Yes. He remarried a few years ago. His first wife died shortly after he joined the Foundation. I hardly knew her. I hardly know his present wife—his widow, rather—but I deduced overtly that the union was not a huge success."

Thirty minutes later, A. B. C. Damroth, president of the Tillary Foundation, and Thomas McFate, chief of the Homicide Division, debouched from a cruiser and made their way along a wet walk to the entrance of a modest apartment building. It required five well-spaced but prolonged pressings of a button under a mailbox bearing Ketch's name to gain a response. And not a very civil one at that, until Mr. Damroth identified himself. Then the tone of sleepy annoyance left Mrs. Ketch's somewhat hoarse voice to be replaced by gushing surprise and apology. The buzzer sounded to admit the oddly assorted pair and they moved without a word down a long echoing hallway to a brownish door marked B-22. At their knock it was opened by an opulently endowed woman in her early thirties who was still folding a fluffy negligee around herself while at the same time trying to do something with her orange-colored hair. As, moving backward, she ushered them into the foyer and thence into the living-room, she again expressed surprise, apology, and even a feeling

of honor in having the famous Dr. Damroth in her presence.

When the torrent of feminine exclamations and non sequiturs was over, Mr. Damroth said softly, "I'm afraid we have some bad news about Harlan."

Mrs. Ketch didn't quite get the gist. "I'm afraid he's not here."

McFate said, "We know that." Then stiffly, "He's dead."

Mrs. Ketch looked momentarily baffled, but she didn't sit down. "Dead," she said, an expression just short of delight flitting across her face. "Well, that's that's that's —" her eyes widened now in complete comprehension. "That was to be expected." She sat down in a chair.

McFate's jaundiced eyes studied her sternly. "You expected him to die today?"

"Not today necessarily." Then the woman reacted to McFate's icy stare. "Just who is this man, Dr. Damroth?"

The old gentleman performed the introduction and, while Mrs. Ketch was repeating the word "police" to herself, he added to McFate, "With your permission, may I ask her a few questions?"

"Take it. Sure."

"I assume you were aware that Harlan was mortally ill."

Mrs. Ketch, mollified by this approach, said, "Yeah, I knew. Cancer. I didn't believe it at first. But then he had me talk to his doctor. It was incurable, just a matter of time."

"When did he tell you about it, my dear?" said Mr. Damroth with a silkiness that caused McFate to suck in his cheeks.

"A couple of weeks ago."

"I see. And why didn't you believe him at first?"

"Because of all his rigamarole about the insurance policies," said Mrs. Ketch. "Meek as a lamb, but sly as a fox when it suited him."

McFate cleared his throat; Damroth prevailed, however, by saying, "Exactly how did a discussion of insurance make you doubt that your husband was a dying man?"

"It was so out of character," replied Mrs. Ketch. "Or so *in* character. His *ethical self*, as he called it. Making me the sole beneficiary of his policy and cutting his darling daughter out."

"And he actually did that?" Even the old man's life-riven face betrayed another wrinkle: surprise.

"Yes, he did," said Mrs. Ketch a bit defiantly. "And why shouldn't he? After all, his daughter has a husband now, another poor bookworm like Harlan. But what do I have?"

"Do you recall the face amount of the policy?" asked Damroth.

"Twenty-five thousand."

"Then that's what you have, Mrs. Ketch."

Her face softened with satisfaction. "Why, that's right. So I do."

McFate interposed. "Maybe more, with a double indemnity clause."

"No, he didn't have that in his policy and they wouldn't let him add it. But they put it in mine because I was so much younger." She was proud of this.

"In yours?" Damroth took over again. "Then you now have an insurance policy, Mrs. Ketch?"

"Why, sure. For the same amount but *with* that indemnity thing. That was the deal. That's what made me suspicious when he first brought it up."

"And who, may I ask, is the beneficiary of your policy?"

"Who but his precious daughter? But I can always change that now. And don't bet I won't."

Damroth smiled oddly. "I see. You agreed to take out a policy on yourself, naming Harlan's daughter sole beneficiary, providing he made you sole beneficiary of his existing policy. Is that right?"

"Yes, but I'm no dummy. That ethics stuff he liked to spout—acting for the greatest good—I didn't swallow that one little bit. Before I signed on the dotted line, I made him take me to his doctor. He had cancer all right, no doubt of it."

Damroth remained thoughtfully silent, but McFate didn't. "It wasn't cancer that killed him," he said.

"No? Then what did?"

"A rifle bullet."

"You mean he was shot?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Who by?" Mrs. Ketch was obviously intrigued.

"We don't know yet. Any ideas?"

"Who, me? No. But what a funny coincidence! Just last night he—Spooky, very spooky." Her frown was more perplexed than fearful.

Damroth interposed quietly, "What is the coincidence, my dear lady?"

"Well, he gave me this envelope that was written on the front of it not to be opened until after his death. Sealed with wax and all. And inside was this key and a note saying—" She stopped, lips pursed.

"May we see the note?" asked Damroth.

"Of course not," snapped Mrs. Ketch. "Things like that are private between a man and his wife."

"Indeed, yes," the old man said, again with that odd smile.

Back in the cruiser five minutes later, McFate said to Damroth, "This is the first time ethics ever came into a case with me. Could

you educate me as we drive along?"

The old man chuckled. "On that subject, I'm not too well educated myself, but perhaps I can communicate the gist of Ketch's theory. He was a mathematician, not a philosopher. But since mathematics is a logical science, the pure practitioner invariably begins to think that equations can be devised for the chief aspects of philosophy which are said to be logic, aesthetics and ethics. Descartes once wrote, *Omnia apud me mathematica fiunt*—with me everything turns into mathematics. It was the same with Harlan Ketch."

McFate said, "I hear you but that's all."

"You were probably exposed to algebra once. You remember the simple equation $a + b = ab$. Well, Ketch used equations like that, though much more complex, to determine a course of action when he was faced by a problem. In the simple algebraic example, *a* might represent two apples and *b* might represent three apples. Thus, when you saw the symbol *ab* you knew it meant five apples. If squared, it became twenty-five apples. Now in Ketch's immediate history, he may have used *c*, let's say, for cancer and perhaps *d* for death, *t* for the time remaining, *m* for money, *h* for his daughter's welfare—"

"Mr. Damroth, I'm lost. Why *h* for his daughter's welfare instead of *d or w*?"

"Well, not *d* because we assigned that to death. Possibly *w* though. I picked *h* since her name is Honora."

"She's married?"

"Yes, to a grammar school teacher named Speares whom I've met possibly twice. Amiable lad. They're both quite young."

"And not much liked by the widow."

"Evidently. In fact, I believe it was this antagonism, especially between the—ah—widow and Honora that precipitated the wedding. The young people planned to wait until Bill—that's Speares' first name—took his master's degree. But the situation in the Ketch household grew intolerable. Finally, but reluctantly, Harlan gave his consent. His only child, you know, and she wasn't more than eighteen at the time. Still, unlike so many young-love matches, this one has turned out well. I gather that Harlan helped them out with a little money from time to time. Very little, however, for Mrs. Ketch apparently was voracious." The old man produced another cigarillo. "Enough of this gossip, McFate. Let's return to your education."

"Not now, sir, thank you." The

cruiser was pulling to the curb in the city's financial district. "I've got to learn something here first."

"Where in the world are we?"

"At the headquarters of an insurance company. Want to come in?"

"I must if my own education is to be complete."

After passing through a receptionist and several whitecollar personnel of progressively higher rank, Damroth and McFate finally gained access to a glass enclosure occupied by an assistant vice-president named Melrose. After listening to the police request, he spoke on an intercom. A few minutes later a pretty girl placed two perforated cards on his desk and, with a polite smile, withdrew. Melrose exchanged the glasses he was wearing for a pair from his pocket and examined each card quickly.

"Ketch, Mrs. Harlan B. parentheses Melanie," he said, "is insured for twenty-five thousand dollars. A clause doubles this sum in case of accidental death, except when such death occurs in a nonscheduled aircraft flight. The premium was paid in advance two weeks ago for a full year.

"Ketch, Mr. Harlan B., for Broadbent, was insured by us in the same amount, but without the so-called double indemnity clause, until four days ago. At that time, he terminated the policy and was paid its accumulated cash value of seven thousand three hundred and forty dollars and twenty-six cents. By check. The check was honored the next day by the Pioneer Bank and Trust." Melrose dropped the cards and removed his glasses. "Does that answer your questions, gentlemen?"

"All but two," said McFate. "Who is the beneficiary on Mrs. Ketch's policy?"

Melrose picked up a card, replacing glasses. "Speares, Mrs. William S. parentheses Honora."

"And on the other policy?"

"Speares, Mrs. — No, that had been changed. At the time of termination, the sole beneficiary was Ketch, Mrs. Harlan B."

Again outside the building, Damroth said, "McFate, I begin to discern the shadow on an equation involving logic and ethics."

"Then stick close."

"I also believe I know where we'll go next. The Pioneer Bank and Trust."

"I'll say one thing, sir. If I learned algebra as fast as you pick up police procedure, I'd be a deputy commissioner tomorrow."

They arrived at the bank a few minutes before ten o'clock and approached a starchy blue-haired lady sitting nearest the door be-

hind a mahogany railing. The nameplate on the desk identified her as second assistant treasurer. After a keen glance at Damroth's cigarillo and McFate's badge, she murmured something about a Mr. Kessler and left to go to another desk, a larger desk three rows back. When she returned, she pointed to it, saying Mr. Kessler would see them. This gentleman, brisk and prematurely bald, to judge from his youngish unlined face, proved to be the assistant treasurer, and he got down to the business at hand immediately.

"Dr. Harlan Ketch cashed a check here in the amount mentioned just four days ago," said Kessler, consulting memoranda and several files that seemed to be miraculously at his fingertips. "He did not deposit any of the cash. In fact, he closed out his savings account of two hundred and three dollars and eighty-three cents."

"And walked out with all that cash?" asked McFate.

"Not all of it. Five thousand he took in twenty-dollar bills. We provided the heavy manila envelope. The approximate remainder was converted into a treasurer's check in the amount of twenty-five hundred dollars. I handled the transaction personally, and I particularly remember it because of his insistence on the date."

"Who was named on the check?" asked McFate.

"George Tinker. It seems Dr. Ketch hoped to consummate a business deal with Mr. Tinker and wanted the check to bind it."

Damroth spoke around the cigarillo. "You referred to the date. I presume that means the date of the check."

"Oh, yes." Kessler consulted another document. "He was quite insistent that the check be dated ahead to—yes—it did not become negotiable until today."

"I wonder," said Damroth, that odd smile on his old face, "if that check has already been cashed this morning, Mr. Kessler."

"The banks have only been open an hour, sir. But—well, let me see. With a treasurer's ticket for that sum we usually get prompt reports." He lifted a phone, spoke, waited, spoke again with a frown of faint surprise, and hung up. "Dr. Ketch and Mr. Tinker are early birds, gentlemen. Mr. Tinker cashed the check at nine-fifteen with the Merchant Savings. We must assume the business deal was favorably concluded." He smiled with commercial pleasure.

"Irrevocably concluded at least," said Damroth, smiling oddly."

An hour later Captain Thomas McFate's cramped office was the scene of a report, a coffee break

and an analytical conversation. The report came from the youthful lieutenant named Bergeron on the results of a preliminary investigation he had conducted in the hotel across the street from the Knights of Pythias bench. Room 727 had been rented the previous afternoon to one W. Collins who had checked out this morning shortly after daybreak.

Nobody could recall what W. Collins looked like because he checked in at the latter part of the afternoon when, as usual, a lot of people were checking in. And he checked out during the last few minutes of the night clerk's shift when the night clerk was half asleep and trying to keep his eyes open just long enough to finish the essential closeout paperwork.

"Mr. Collins is a pro," said McFate after Bergeron left.

"Mr. Collins is also Mr. Tinker," said Damroth.

"And a couple of other guys too."

A sergeant brought in two containers of coffee and four sugared crullers. The practical man and the academic man, looking out the grimy window at the leaden day, sipped and chewed for a few minutes in silence. Then the practical man said, "How would a gent like Dr. Ketch ever find a way to meet a hood like this Tinker?"

The academic man said, "That thought has occurred to me too. A year ago Harlan's interest in the inevitable logic of numbers as they appear in games of chance turned him toward the gambling tables. Purely experimental, I assure you. The sums wagered were small and the profits small too. But he definitely had worked out some sort of system, and for a few months used the gambling dives as a laboratory. The system was not perfected, however, as I recall. He told me once that the house limit in most places prevented numbers from progressing to a real conclusion."

"This Ketch was quite a thinker."

"The treasurer's check was typical," said Damroth.

"Tell me about it," said McFate.

"As it appears to me, the key to the transaction between Ketch and Tinker was the payment. Each had to be sure that the other didn't default on his part of the deal. Obviously, nobody could pay Tinker for assassinating Ketch at his own request, except Ketch himself. And since this type of agreement isn't exactly adjudicable, Ketch could not afford to pay in advance. Men like Tinker, I imagine, might not honor the contract. Hence, Ketch devised a way to pay Tinker only after the service was satisfactorily

rendered. That accounts for the time—before the banks opened today. And the predated treasurer's check."

"If Ketch was still alive when the banks opened, he would have stopped payment on the check. That it?"

"Correct. In the business world this is called incentive. Ketch gave Tinker a strong incentive to kill him this morning before the banks opened."

McFate swallowed more coffee and then suddenly sat erect. "Incentive, that's the word. He also must have given this Tinker a strong incentive to kill Mrs. Ketch."

"Correct again." The old man wiped crumbs from his chin. "You're getting a knack for these ethical equations, McFate."

"A good gamble. Seventy-five hundred bucks against fifty thousand."

"With his daughter as sole heir. A nice equation. A slightly predated check, a slightly predated death plus an ethical assassination equals an estate for the deserving daughter minus any possible litigation from the undeserving wife."

"All right, sir," said McFate impatiently. "But now that the sitting duck is dead, how can he pay off Tinker for killing Mrs. Ketch?"

"Tinker will collect from Mrs. Ketch herself," Damroth replied.

"Five thousand bucks in a manila envelope. She doesn't look the type. He'd have to kill her for it."

"And he will. That's his business, isn't it?"

McFate was now on his feet. "I'm beginning to get it, yeah. The key he gave her last night. And that note."

"In an envelope not to be opened until after his death. He judged her well, didn't he? Timed it well too. When she broke the wax seal last night and read the note, it was probably too late to use the key. But she would have used it this morning whether Ketch was dead or not. Greed and curiosity. She's probably using it at this very minute."

"You think it's a key to a safety deposit box?"

"Definitely not. If I know my Dr. Harlan Ketch—and I'm growing to know him better today—he placed that manila envelope in a baggage locker at some out-of-the-way depot or bus station, a place that would be fairly deserted after the morning commuters left. A place, in short, where Mr. Tinker could work unmolested."

McFate reached for the phone and issued a command to the switchboard. To Damroth he said, "Maybe I can get her at home before she leaves."

Damroth smiled. "I'd wager it's too late."

It was. Nobody answered.

Therefore, McFate took the next practical police step. With a coded municipal map spread out on his desk and the phone still in hand, he began assigning men to every location within the city limits that had public baggage lockers, adding a personal description of Mrs. Ketch.

"She's one of these orange-haired dames about thirty-five," he was saying for the sixth time when he stopped abruptly to listen, his face cold and expressionless. Then he hung up and swiveled his chair around to face Damroth. "He got her. With a knife. They just found the body of an orange-haired dame in an alley near Brixon bus terminal. That's the end of the line."

Damroth said nothing for a moment. Taking another cigarillo from his case, he placed it thoughtfully between his yellowed teeth. "Well, sir," he finally said, "the ethical question that now comes to my mind is this: does crime sometimes pay? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Sometimes," answered McFate. "Why?"

"I'm trying to put myself in Ketch's frame of mind when he was working out his equation. He must have considered the fact that the insurance company would try to invalidate the policy on the basis of collusion."

"That's automatic, under these circumstances," said McFate. "But, of course, they've got to prove it."

"It takes at least two to collude, doesn't it?"

"That's what the lawyers say."

"Then all that has to be done is find Mr. Tinker."

"That's all."

"To humor an old man, would you tell me candidly what your chances are?"

"Off the record, yeah. About one in a hundred. Hell, one in a thousand."

Damroth nodded as if this confirmed a tentatively held opinion. Then, lighting the cigarillo, he said, "You know, McFate, I'm just learning to appreciate that mathematics is a terrifying science."

Hitting the big time for a "fast buck boy" may seem worth any price . . . even murder, to speed the process. However, success tainted by unsavory deeds is often shortlived for some, and a deadend for others.

THERE ARE professions that allow no margin for error. One mistake and a man is finished—kaput—dead. Barr Collard's profession was like that. He had seen pals finished, or had helped to knock them off for making that one fatal slip.

Barr Collard should have known better, for at fifty-three he had been a long time in the game, he knew the rules, but still, sometimes even the most cautious man will make a blunder.

His had happened ten months before, during the Security Loan holdup, when things had been going smoothly until a guard had jumped him. Barr Collard had shot the guard dead, but that hadn't been the mistake. The mistake had been that a letter with his name on it had been dropped in the struggle.

Carrying personal identification on a job was an error, but to leave it behind—beside a body—was much worse.

by Leo R. Ellis

Connie Spellano was furious about the mistake. Being the leader of the gang, it was his job to see that Barr Collard made no more mistakes. Barr was hot, too hot to be allowed to run around loose, so Spellano had given orders to have Barr Collard eliminated. For ten months Spellano's men had searched for Barr Collard.

The California desert is a lonely place, where few people visit, and it had made a good hideout spot for Barr. He had landed a job at Bert's Roadside Diner. He lived in a cabin behind the place and so far no one had connected the rather surly counterman, known as Doc Smith, with the much wanted Barr Collard.

Not even the Highway Patrol who stopped by each night had given him a tumble.

As usual, Doc Smith came out of his cabin at five minutes before six in the evening. He crossed the sandy stretch to the back door of the diner. He went through the tiny kitchen, and the first thing he did after entering the lunchroom was to reach under the counter and take out a gun. It was a P-38, a German handgun of WW II vintage, and it looked almost small in Doc's hand. With a deft motion he extracted the clip.

"You figuring on shooting yourself, or going rabbit hunting?" Bert Benson rose from where he had been inspecting the plumbing under the sink.

Doc snapped the clip back, replaced the gun and took a folded apron from the same shelf. "It might come in handy," he said.

"I don't know what for. The thing's been kicking around here for ten years, ever since a guy left it for a meal, and nobody's ever fired it yet." Bert screwed up his wrinkled face as he looked at Doc. "Nobody even bothered to oil it until you came along."

"A gun should be cared for." Doc tied the apron around his flat belly. His body showed no signs of dissipation. His eyes showed nothing at all as he gazed out of the front window. His face was grey, a dead and unemotional face.

Bert followed his gaze to where a slender young man stood beside the gas pumps in front of the building. "How are you and Sparky hitting it off?" he asked.

"He's a kid."

"You can't hold that against him," Bert said in a peppery voice. "He'll outgrow that. Sparky's a fair worker for a boy, and he's not undependable like old Frank."

Doc had opened the top of the cash register. He checked the amount and wrote it down. "I suppose you could call getting killed in town undependable," he said.

"Old Frank was drunk, the coroner said so. They didn't even look for the car that ran over him. I was lucky that Sparky happened along, otherwise I'd have been hard put to find someone to run the pumps."

Doc looked at the boy again. "He came to work early."

"Said he had the chance for a ride out, so he took it." Bert rubbed the stubble of his beard. "Maybe I ought to fix up a place for him out here, so he wouldn't have to make that trip back and forth every day."

"I wouldn't bother. I don't figure he'll be here long. The kid's got ants in his pants."

"Well I hope he stays awhile," Bert growled. "Help's hard to get in a place like this." He gave Doc a hard, appraising look. "You have to take what you can get and be thankful." He stomped across the lunchroom. "And put up with a lot to run a place out here," he added as he went through the screen door.

Doc watched his boss climb into his dusty old car and swing out on the highway.

It was half an hour later and the lunchroom was empty when the wall telephone rang. Doc answered it, then stood unblinking as the voice at the other end spoke.

It was Spellano's voice. "Hello, Barr," it said pleasantly enough, "long time no see." There was a pause before Spellano spoke again. "You're hot, boy. The cops want you bad."

"Nobody's spotted me out here."

"We did, sweetheart, and if we could, so can the law. I guess you know what that means—" When Doc didn't speak, Spellano continued, "I just wanted you to know that there ain't anything personal in what we got to do." There was a dead silence, a click then a humming sound.

Doc took the gun into the kitchen. He slipped it into his trouser pocket and dropped the apron—but as small as the gun had appeared in his hand, it made a bulge under the cloth. Doc pulled aside the curtain that covered the door to the lunchroom, peered out, then left by the back door.

Within three minutes Doc was back, and again he peered through the curtains before he entered the lunchroom and put the gun back on the shelf.

Sparky came in half an hour later, his low-slung, hip-hugging jeans making every step a swagger. He greeted Doc, went behind the counter and poured himself a cup of coffee, then came out to the juke box. "Corn," he said as he examined the titles, "strictly corn."

Doc sat on the end stoool. "Kid," he said in a voice that made

Sparky turn, "take off. Get out of here tonight."

Sparky's face was too smooth and youthful to show much expression of any kind. "What are you talking about?" he said.

"Grab a ride into town—take in a dance."

The boy stared. "A dance? are you kidding? There's nothing like that in this burg, it's strictly Dullsville, USA."

"Go to a movie then," Doc said, his voice rising. "What's the matter, can't you get yourself a girl?"

Red flushed over Sparky's already pink face. "Don't you worry about that," he said hotly. "I don't happen to go for these desert chicks. They're not my type."

"Pretty choosy for a grease monkey, ain't you?"

The red deepened and Sparky stood for a moment, tense. "This is temporary. I'm not going to make a life career out of it." He walked over and put his cup on the counter, then made a ritual out of lighting a cigarette. "I don't get it." He finally said, "You trying to get me fired?"

"I'm trying to give you a break. You just don't have the brains to realize it."

Sparky ran his fingers through his crew cut and shook his head. "I'm going to stick around and go in on that bus tonight," he said stubbornly. "I'm not going to take off unless Bert tells me to, personally."

Doc closed his eyes, his face immobile, then he opened his eyes again and got to his feet. "You're a smart punk," he said flatly. "But a punk can be too smart for his own good sometimes."

Sparky started for the door. "I don't need your advice," he said. "I can take care of myself."

Doc leaned against the counter until the screen door slammed. "I hope so, kid," he said. "For your sake, I hope so."

Sparky stayed outside for the rest of the evening. There was little business, and the clock that Doc looked at frequently, moved slowly. Doc left the spot where the gun lay only when he was forced to, and when a car would come in on the gravel he would freeze in a hovering position at the spot.

There were no more telephone calls.

The clock on the wall stood at ten-fifteen when the low black foreign car glided to a stop, with the rear half still in the darkness beyond the reach of the floodlights. Crouched over the gun, Doc watched as two men got out and talked to Sparky. Then they came toward the door as Sparky pulled the car up beside the building to the grease rack.

The men looked neither young nor old. They wore Ivy League suits as unwrinkled as their faces, and they stopped in the center of the room without speaking. One of them stepped to the juke box and dropped a coin in the quarter slot. He pushed a button at random, and when the machine began to play a soft, dreamy waltz, he jabbed another button, his eyes still on Doc. The blare of Dixieland music filled the room.

Doc was crouched, his left hand gripping the counter edge, his right low. Not a muscle twitched, but his eyes shifted to settle on the front door.

Cautiously one man turned, then nudged his companion.

A stocky, grey-haired man stood just inside the screen door. He was dressed in khaki shirt and pants and he frowned as he looked at the scene before him, then he made a move as though to turn back.

Doc stood up quickly. "Could I help you, sir?"

The man hesitated, then came forward to the counter. The two men walked over a few stools away and sat down. "I left my rig out on the highway," the stocky man said apologetically. "I walked in—I didn't want to block your drive with my big truck."

"One coffee, Mac," one of the men down the counter said.

"The same," said the second man.

Doc served the coffee, then put a glass of water in front of the grey-haired man. "You got anything except sandwiches?" the man asked.

"Ham and eggs—fresh eggs," Doc said.

The trucker nodded. "That's more like it. I've been tooling that truck for eight hours straight—I'm hungry."

"It'll take a little time."

"I'm in no big hurry, as long as the meal's worth the wait."

In the kitchen Doc went about his task with slow, methodical movements—every motion was deliberate. With the ham finally on the griddle, he came out and put a cup of coffee on the counter.

"You stay open all night?" the trucker asked.

"No," Doc said, "the transcontinental bus makes a comfort stop here at eleven." He had spoken in a voice that could be heard clearly. Now he looked up at the clock. "In about half an hour. We close down the front because the kid goes on into town on the bus, but I stay open for the Highway Patrol boys."

"I get it," the trucker said, grinning. "Stay on the right side of the law." He wrinkled his nose at the serving window. "Smells good," he said.

When Doc came back from turning the ham slice the two men were walking out of the front door. He rang up the coins left on the counter and carried the cups back to the kitchen.

"Unsociable cusses," the trucker said through the serving window. "Were they about to start something—I mean, any trouble?"

"No trouble."

"I just wondered—when I came in—say, how's that ham and eggs coming?" He turned as a shower of gravel hit the front of the building, followed by the protesting scream of tortured rubber against concrete as the black car turned back down the highway.

As Doc brought the plate of food in Sparky came through the front door, his face filled with rapture. "Man," he said to no one, "what a crate. A guy would be willing to give his right arm for a job like that and never miss it."

The trucker grinned at him. "A nice car all right," he said, "but they cost a pile of cash. It's a lot of money to spend for transportation."

"Who's thinking about transportation?" Sparky said, sitting at a stool. "Look at the kicks driving it."

"I suppose so," the trucker said, reaching for the salt, "but I'll have to get my kicks some other way. I can't afford one of those babies."

Sparky jammed his chin into his hands. "That's the point. If everybody could afford one, what would be the percentage in owning one?"

"How's that?"

Sparky didn't seem to have heard the man. "I'll bet that heap could climb up over a hundred without a sweat," he said.

"Sure, and I've seen some of them that did it. I've seen the remains along the highway." He poked a solemn fork at Sparky. "The guys that try to drive a hundred usually end up dead, son."

"You can get just as dead from pneumonia." Sparky got up impatiently, walked over and kicked the juke box. "If a guy's worried about dying, he might as well quit. Live it up, man, that's the only way."

"Sparky's a fast buck boy," Doc said to the trucker.

"There's other things in life besides money, son," the trucker said earnestly.

"Such as what?" Sparky demanded fiercely. His young face was set in hard lines as he faced them, his feet apart and his fists jammed against his narrow hips. "And don't hand me that peace of mind routine, I'm sick of it. What I want is action." He looked at the other two with contempt on his face. "You guys play it safe, but

Sparky ain't going to end up tooling a truck or playing nursemaid to a stack of hotcakes, you can bet on that."

The trucker looked distressed.

"Get on outside, kid," Doc said in a hard voice. "Lock up those pumps, so you can give me a hand when the bus gets here."

Sparky held his ground for a moment, his face defiant, before he snorted and swaggered out through the front door.

The trucker sighed and shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "sometimes these kids scare me."

"How about some more coffee?"

The bus arrived soon after the trucker had left. It stopped with a whoosh of air brakes and the passengers piled out, to stumble toward the rest rooms, or to stagger into the diner. Sparky sulked and refused to speak to Doc as he worked. Then when the passengers left to board the bus again, Sparky followed them out of the door without saying good night.

Doc waited until the big vehicle had pulled out and disappeared down the highway before he stepped out of the front door. The highway was deserted in both directions. There was not even an insect chirp, and the star splashed sky was a dark dome over the silent desert.

Doc turned out the front lights and went back to the cash register. Before he could pick up the bills, there was a scraping noise at the back door. With one long, gliding motion he slid down the counter and grabbed the gun. Before he could turn, the curtains parted and Sparky stood in the opening, an automatic in his hand. The boy's face was no longer young and fresh; it had been transformed into a harsh mask of squinted eyes and lips drawn back to expose the teeth.

"This is it, dad," Sparky said in a jerky voice.

Doc turned slowly and half straightened, the gun still held in his hand.

Sparky jabbed the automatic at him. "That gun you got won't do you any good," Sparky said. "It's empty. I unloaded it myself. That was part of my job."

"Your job?"

The automatic looked too big for Sparky. It appeared so heavy it seemed that the sheer weight of it was making the boy's slender hand tremble. "Sure, I ain't no grease monkey. I'm one of Spellano's boys. They got me this job by getting the old guy who worked here drunk, then running over him. I was supposed to set you up for the killing."

"You're talking too much, kid. You're nervous."

"I'm big time now—I'm with

the real pros—Connie Spellano."

"You're nervous because you don't know how to kill yet. The first killing is the tough one. After that it comes easy, too easy—don't do the first one, kid."

"Go on, beg—I want to see a big shot beg me."

Under the unshaded light bulb Doc's face was grey-white. "You're about to make a mistake—a big mistake, kid."

A high pitched giggle escaped Sparky's lips. "I don't make mistakes. You do. That's why you're on the spot."

"Spellano wouldn't send you to kill me. You're nothing but a flunky, an errand boy. Those two hoods came to do the job, but the trucker queered the deal. They'll be back after the Highway Patrol leaves. But you decided to move in first, try to grab the glory for yourself—"

"You're so right, dad. I'm going to be somebody."

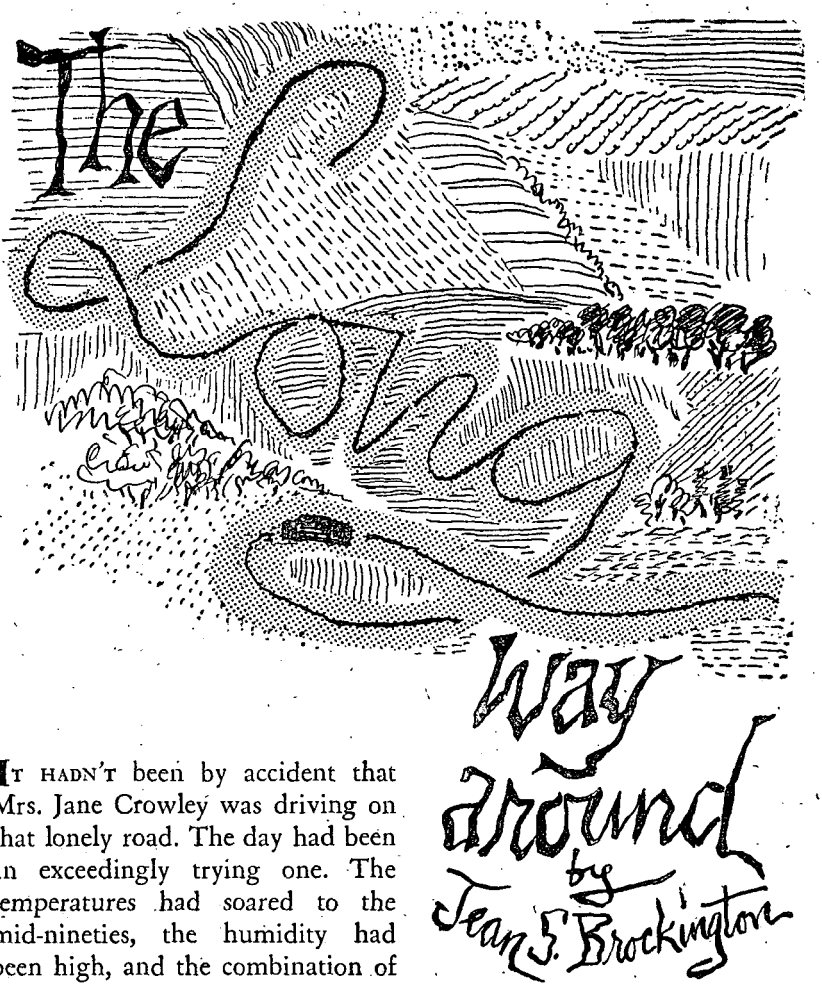
"—all you can see is to get there fast."

Sparky had worked himself up to bow string tautness. "I'm going places," he screamed. "I'm going to blast you!" The boy braced himself. The cords on the back of his hand stood out as he squeezed down on the automatic.

The P-38 in Doc's hand swept up and exploded in the same motion. Sparky's body jerked, reared, then started its slow slump downward. The unfired automatic clattered to the floor and skidded on the linoleum.

Doc looked down, his face emotionless. "I tried to warn you not to make the mistake, kid, but you were too smart to listen. You should have figured that I would have another clip for this gun in my cabin."

When the black and white car stopped before the diner, Doc was still slumped on the stool. He raised his head, and the flesh of his face had sagged into an expression of infinite tiredness. "I actually did you a favor, kid," he said to the body with its frozen look of startled disbelief. Then Doc looked away. "Maybe the first killing isn't the tough one after all," he said wearily. "Maybe it's the last one."



IT HADN'T been by accident that Mrs. Jane Crowley was driving on that lonely road. The day had been an exceedingly trying one. The temperatures had soared to the mid-nineties, the humidity had been high, and the combination of

The longest way home can sometimes be the shortest route to terror and near-tragedy.

these two weather phenomena, rare for New England, always gave her fierce headaches. Her two girls, Betsy five and Sarah two, had played long and hard in the stifling heat of that morning. Jane hadn't the heart, nor indeed the energy, to rouse them from their extra-long naps that afternoon so she could do her weekly grocery shopping. Luckily, she thought, the stores were open until 9 that night; she'd shop then, in the relative coolness of evening, and take the girls with her. She reasoned that it would be nice for Fred to have the house to himself for a few hours anyway, and that the girls would sleep better if the upstairs were given a chance to cool off. Fred had waved them off, standing knee deep among his prize tomato plants.

"Why don't you take the long way around. The highways will be jammed tonight with people leaving the city for the weekend. The country road will be less hectic, cooler, and should make a pretty nice drive."

"I'll take it on the way back. I want to get this shopping business finished. 'Bye, honey." The girls had waved happily out the car window, echoing her "goodbyes" to their father. It was such a treat for them to be allowed to "stay up" and share the sunless, but somehow bright hours of "grown-up" time.

Driving back through the cool darkness with the front windows open, she had a sense of well-being. The weekly food procurements were bagged and propped in the trunk. Fred would be waiting to greet them and he'd help her unload, one of the few truly distasteful little tasks of her household musts.

Betsy was trying to teach Sarah the words to "Pop Goes The Weasel". Their voices piped on, off key, but they felt the beat.

"The monkey thot 'twas a . . . a . . . all . . . ll in fun," a pause, "POP goes the weasel." Betsy clapped her hands smartly on "Pop". Sarah, always a few bars behind her older sister, echoed "Pop" (clap) "ohs da whee . . . zul." Laughing delightedly, they'd begin all over again, and Jane joined in with them, "all around the co . . . ob . . . bler's bench . . ."

The steering wheel suddenly jerked to the right and then began quivering and vibrating under her hands. The car was bouncing.

"Oh darn—a flat!"

Betsy's voice sounded alarmed, "What's the matter, Mommy?"

"Whassa mattah?" echoed Sarah.

"It's just a flat tire." She forced her voice to sound cheerful, with-

out a trace of the irritation she felt. "Now you two stay in the back seat; Mommy knows how to fix it." She had changed two tires in her lifetime and felt adequate enough for the task, "But such a nuisance!" She pulled over to the side of the road, tugged on the emergency brake and adjusted the knob to the parking light position.

The lid to the trunk was up, the last bolt had been placed into the hub cap and she had just begun to wrestle with the tire. She was aware of feeling some apprehension when she saw headlights coming toward them. A new station wagon drove slowly past. It pulled well off to the side of the road and stopped. Its lights went off. A short, youngish-looking man, judging by his carriage and build, was walking towards her.

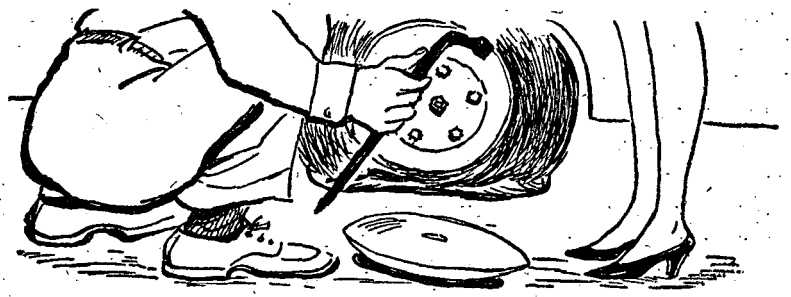
"Having trouble?"

She straightened up, feeling mildly relieved; the tire *had* been heavy. "Not *really*. Just a flat."

"That's no job for a little woman like yourself." He seemed harmless and agreeable enough. As he bent down to the tire his face was illuminated by the parking light. "Why, he's quite young," she'd noticed, surprised. She'd never been particularly perceptive on first impressions.

His hair was wavy and black. Full dark lashes capped high, delicate cheekbones. "Why, he's quite pretty." She was intrigued, "He'd have been a beautiful girl, too pretty for a man." These thoughts had come quickly, objectively.

"It's nice of you to help," she'd begun, trying to make conversation. "Betsy, don't let Sarah lean so far out the window. I've changed tires before and I could have done it . . ." her voice fell off to his silence. "But it's nice of you to



help," she repeated again, ending weakly. She guessed he just wasn't the talking type.

He was a fast worker and wasted no extra movements. Silently, skillfully, the tire was changed. When the trunk lid had been slammed shut on the flat she thanked him for everything and turned to walk to the front of her car. Her mind had already turned from the present and was sounding out the future. "Won't Fred be surprised when he hears. . . ."

"Your two girls?" She'd been so preoccupied with her thoughts that at first she didn't realize he had spoken to her.

She turned to look at him, "What? . . . oh, yes." An agreeable but rather shy smile was working around his lips. Things looked a bit clearer than they did before. They were in moonlight.

"They must be nice. What are their names?" He spoke softly and his hand remained where it was, lying on the tailfin. There was nothing wrong with his words or actions, but suddenly every sense perception in her mind and body was alerted, sending out their invisible feelers, straining towards him, scanning him.

"Sara and Betsy, and they are two tired little girls I'll tell YOU, and in just a couple of minutes they'll be where they belong . . . in BED!" Her voice had that 'no nonsense' quality of a mother and she was surprised at its strength. She wanted to give the impression she lived nearer than she did. She turned to open the front door to her car.

"You don't live near here. I know this road." A soft laugh, and suddenly her two arms were pinned to her sides. For a split second she thought she'd faint. The pain where his fingers squeezed her arms sustained her. She was heaved carelessly but forcefully into the front seat and he climbed in beside her.

"Come on now, the keys, the keys!" he snapped his fingers impatiently. Surprised to find the keys still in her hand, she handed them to him numbly.

"Mommy?" Betsy's voice was strained, questioning.

"Hi!" chirped Sarah.

The children's voices snapped her mind back to the present, the situation. Her head cleared.

"It's all right, girls. I guess we're going for a little ride." She stated it matter-of-factly, and dared to look at his profile directly. Her palms were wet and cold.

The car was rolling smoothly now and she was glad for his silence. She could think. It was too early to tell exactly what his intentions were, but she knew he'd al-

ready committed one criminal offense, kidnapping, and no—. *Two* offenses. Stealing—they were in *her* car. She turned to him.

"That was a pretty nice car you were driving. Aren't you worried about leaving it back there?" She was leading him, drawing him out. You've got to know your enemy, she thought, what you're fighting, what you're up against. You've got to know. She was afraid to ask him, point blank, what he wanted of her. She refused to think he meant any harm to the girls.

"No, I'm not worried about it, so why should you be? Besides, it wasn't mine." She felt he'd turned to glance at her and imagined he was smiling in that shy way.

"He's mad," she thought a little hysterically. "Probably a psychopath." But all psychopaths weren't necessarily criminal. She racked her brain trying to think of a definition her psych professor had given her. If only she'd taken more psychology. Psycopath: somebody who doesn't know right from wrong? No sense of morality—usually has a rather high I.Q. but can't accept responsibility. But he WAS a criminal, wasn't he? The kidnapping, stolen cars? Her thoughts raced on.

"Mommy, can we have an ice cream cone?" Betsy, in her own way, was sounding out the situation. "Ice keam, ice keam." The magic words had been enough to start Sarah off with her shrill persistent little voice. Happily, excitedly she kept it up. "Ice keam, Mommy. Ice keam!"

Jane, horrified, noticed something glitter for a minute in his hand. Something had been extracted from under his belt. An unmistakable click was heard and she saw a knife lying in his palm. She'd never seen one like it before, except on television. A shiv. He tapped it lazily against the rim of the wheel.

"I don't like children or their noises. Get her to keep quiet or I'll stick her—like a pig!" His voice was sibilant, so soft she had to strain to hear it, but when she did she automatically wrenched her body towards the back seat, her arms reaching out protectively to the girls.

"Maybe a little later. Not now though, a little later." She strained for a pleasant but firm tone in her voice, "Please girls—" Don't sound desperate, calmly now. "Betsy, I want you to lie down and go to sleep." Her eyes tried to probe into the little girls'. (Do as I say . . . PLEASE!) "Sarah, you lie down too, see, just like Betsy." Her knees were drawn up onto the seat and she was facing them. Extending

her arms, she prodded, patted and pushed their little bodies into somewhat less than the perfect reclining position. "If you're very good and take a nice little rest we'll maybe get a surprise later."

"An ice cream?" queried Betsy.

"Yes, an ice cream."

When she'd turned around the knife was out of sight and both his hands were on the wheel.

"You're a good mother," he said, "and a smart one."

She couldn't trust her voice to answer just then.

"You're pretty too." She felt that his throaty laugh indicated some strange pleasure he was feeling with himself.

There was more fear in her now than before. Threatening the children with a knife! Some inner perceptiveness forced her to realize that he was not only capable of using it but that he probably would. He couldn't leave them alive to describe him or to recognize him at some later date. The fear welled up inside and expanded to her throat. She felt she would suffocate with it. "Oh God, don't let me scream. I mustn't faint, the children. . . ." Their survival was irrevocably linked with hers.

She had thought at first that, with the children lying down in back, their bodies relaxed, if she should wrench the wheel and send them crashing into a tree or telephone pole they wouldn't be hurt. But she, herself, was in the vulnerable seat. The wheel would shield him, he'd come out of it, furious with her. She mentally discarded that possibility quickly.

They were approaching a lighted farmhouse. Alone, she would have chanced flinging herself from the car, even just screaming out the window. They had passed her usual turn-off a few moments ago and this part of the road was unfamiliar to her.

He extracted an empty package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. With a slight gesture of irritation he crumpled it into a tight little ball and tossed it out the window. "Do you have any cigarettes?"

Jane reached for her pocketbook, fumbling. "I don't think so but I'll check." She knew there was a whole carton in the trunk with her groceries but she didn't mention it. "I'm sorry, but I'm out too."

They drove in silence until he spoke again.

"I'll bet you went to college." It was a question rather than a statement.

"Yes," casually, "did you?"

"I *could* have if I'd wanted to." She mentally made a note to herself, high I.Q. Again casually, 'What kind of work do you do?"

"Handyman, sort of. I like gar-

dening best; you're nosey, aren't you?"

"Not particularly. But I'm here, *we're* here, we might just as well be civil. You know, make small talk, I mean."

He turned on her, his voice vicious, "You don't have to be so snooty. I know what 'civil' means. I sure do!" She cringed against the door. His sudden verbal onslaught had terrified her. "Watch it, Jane. Watch what you say from now on—"

He smiled suddenly, shyly. "You *are* very pretty."

Her right arm had been resting on the door frame, the window still being open. She dropped it and let it hang next to the outside of the car. (If I had my lipstick I could write 'help' on the outside of the door; printing upside down is simple, big caps . . .) She traced it, practicing, pretending she had the lipstick, not moving the upper part of her arm at all. She decided she'd chance it, and brought her arm in and rested it on her lap. (How to get the lipstick?)

"Ice keam, Mommy," Sarah mumbled sleepily, wistfully, from the back. He turned his head; Jane stiffened involuntarily, watching his hands, ready to spring if they should drop to his belt.

"That kid's got a one track mind." His hand went to his shirt pocket. "You sure you don't have any cigarettes?"

"I'm sorry, I don't. I'd kind of like one myself." Her throat was dry.

"We'll get some. I know a place."

Jane loosened slightly. Thank God, people—that's all she really needed—a public place, lights—just one other adult person, really. She'd scream, kick, snatch the ignition keys, simultaneously turning the ignition to "off" if it weren't already in that position, and then throw the keys out the window. He couldn't take the time to hunt for them with her screaming and people around—

"I know just the place, not much business, if any!" He laughed softly and turned his head to look at her. He must have imagined her thoughts. His words made her despair. But she'd go through with it anyway. She dared not chance continuing on into the unknown, even just *one* other adult person.

She'd known her gas had been low when she started out. Her glance flicked to the gas gauge. The needle was wavering on empty. Inwardly she pleaded, "Please hold out until we get there—for cigarettes—it must be a store, or a gas station!" She had a sudden, horrifying thought. Suppose there was no such place! Suppose he had just said that to fool her. Suppose

he had something else in mind, someplace other than a store or gas station!

She shoved this line of reasoning out of her conscious mind forcefully, viciously. That kind of second guessing would panic her. One thing at a time now. Don't cross bridges!

The sound of his voice startled her, interrupting her thoughts.

"I don't want you to get any smart ideas when we get there. I'm taking the little one," he jerked his head backwards, "the little one with me. Just remember I'll have the point inches away from her gut. If anything happens I don't like I'll stick her first—*her first,* like a pig!" He turned and grinned at her broadly, sadistically. "Like a pig." he repeated again.

"He's mad." Horror and despair overwhelmed her. "He thinks he's so clever, so wonderful." Her hands came up involuntarily to her mouth and fluttered there, ineffectually. "Steady now, steady; easy, calm. Yes, now think—alternatives, all the possibilities." Her mind was gyrating furiously and then somehow it was functioning clearly.

He turned onto another country road off to the right. Two more houses flicked past and they were approaching neon lights slowly.

"Kathy's Cupboard" she read. Propped up against the signpost was a blackboard. It advertised in chalk, "Home made ice cream". It was on their side of the road, to the right, a little roadside stand and nothing more. There were no other cars in the gravel drive circling in front. He parked as near to the street as possible and kept the parking lights on. No house, nothing else around but woods, a scrubby woods made up mostly of low thick brush, young trees and occasionally a large maple or pine. Jane strained her eyes. Through the screened windows of the outdoor serving counter she saw a young girl in a dirty white uniform which hung limply over her small, unobtrusive frame.

"Please," Jane thought, "be stronger than you look." She suddenly felt sorry for this girl, for whatever it was that she would be about to bring to her.

"Do you have any change?"

Again the fumbling for her pocketbook. "No, just a nickel and a five dollar bill."

"Give me the five."

She handed it to him and he pocketed it along with the car keys. As he reached into the back for Sarah, sleeping now, Jane just sat and clasped her hands together, digging her nails into her palms. Let him take her now, it's all right now. Later, you've got to wait until later.

"Come on, little girl, come on. We're going for a little walk." He stretched his frame and lifted Sarah gently; she scarcely wakened.

"Ice keam." Jane could imagine her little half-smile in sleep, her sweet sleep, "with visions of sugar plums", her soft warm flesh so rosy-warm, vulnerable. Jane's teeth were clenched, her raging heart pumped blood, surging, through her veins. Sarah was swept up and over the seat and out the car door. She clamped both hands about his neck and her head lay on his shoulder. The hand which was not supporting her was hanging over his belt, almost hidden behind Sarah's legs. He closed the car door and the light went out. Leaning down, he spoke through the window, "Like a pig." He said it pleasantly, and then he turned his back to the car and began walking slowly towards the counter.

He had taken but two steps when Jane opened her pocketbook and extracted a book of matches. Between tearing and biting she ripped off the thick sulphur-coated end and discarded it. After a few seconds of fumbling she inserted the remainder of the match into the ignition switch. With another match she jammed and prodded the first one way in, out of sight, as far as it would go. She then reached quickly up to the roof and grasped the frame encasing the overhead light. She wrestled with it furiously and suddenly it was wrenched free. Deliberately, carefully she unscrewed the little bulb and tucked it underneath her seat cover.

She saw him standing at the counter now—no! He was going inside! This would help. Sarah was still hanging limply over his shoulder, asleep.

"Betsy, Betsy . . ." Whispering, Jane reached backwards and prodded her oldest gently.

"Yes, Mommy." The child's voice was clear. Jane wondered if she'd been sleeping at all.

"I want you to listen VERY carefully now to what Mommy tells you, Betsy."

Betsy interrupted her, "He's a bad man, isn't he, Mommy?"

Jane forced the fear and impatience from her voice. "Yes, dear, he is, and he has Sarah now, and we want to get her back, don't we?"

"Yes, Mommy," the child's voice was alert, trusting.

(Bless her, Jane thought. Bless her for her keen little mind, her perception.)

"Well now, Mommy knows of a way, but you're going to have to do EXACTLY as Mommy tells you, EXACTLY, Betsy," she paused, wanting her child to get

the full meaning of her words. Betsy was silent, waiting.

"In a few minutes I'm going to open the door on the driver's side. I fixed it so the light won't go on when I open it and he won't be able to see us. When the door is open I'm going to lean forward and bring the back of the seat with me. Now when Mommy does this I want you to squeeze through as quietly as you can and step outside. Then you are to walk quickly on TIP-TOE across the street. When you're across the street you are to lie down quickly in the grass under the bushes. And Betsy, when you're going across the street I want you to keep the car between you and him. Do you know what Mommy means, dear? Once I watched you and Bobby playing hide and seek. You were behind our big maple tree and when Bobby started to come around to where you were hiding you kept moving around the tree. You kept the tree between you and Bobby, and he didn't see you, did he?"

"No. That was fun."

"Well, that's what you're to do. Keep the car between you and him."

"He won't hurt Sarah will he, Mommy?"

"No dear, I won't let him."

"Will the car stay here?"

"Yes, Betsy. I fixed it so it won't go. Quickly now, shh . . hh honey, you know what you're supposed to do, don't you?"

Jane had lifted the door handle slowly and was inching the door open. It squeaked slightly; she waited and then pushed it again; the door was still protesting and she dared not move it any further.

"O.K., Betsy—I'll call you when you can come back."

"O.K.," said Betsy.

"Go on now—"

The child slid agilely through the space open to her. Jane prayed fervently, "Don't stop, Betsy, don't stop to say anything, just go—go—".

She realized suddenly the child was gone and she released her hold on the seat, easing it back into its upright position. Her fingers were numb. She was straining her ears, watching him through the window apprehensively, hawkishly. He was standing over something, a cigarette machine. She dared a glance toward the road and saw something move in the bushes. Jane felt a lump in her throat. Good girl, Betsy. Bless her, she must have flown, she'll be eaten by bugs, here he comes—God help me to do the right thing—Sarah, protect Sarah—

She leaned out her window. "What kind didja get?" Her words slurred and she grinned at him.

How fast her heart was pounding!

"Filters." He ambled towards her smiling shyly and, reaching her door, handed her a pack of cigarettes through the open window. Keeping Sarah with him he walked around to the front of the car. Jane waited apprehensively for fear he'd notice his door wasn't really closed. Just as he was reaching for his door handle Jane lurched herself into the driver's seat and pushed abruptly against the door, simultaneously swinging her feet to the ground.

The door frame bumped Sarah's back and his arm. "You fool," he hissed at her. Coming at him unexpectedly as it did, the door caught him off balance and he had to take a step backwards. Jane was standing facing him then, her hands clasped firmly under Sarah's arms.

"Give her to me now. I want her now." She tried to lift the child up, out, and over the encircling ring of his arms. He squeezed the little body to him viciously with one hand and the other dropped to his belt.

"No! No!" Jane's abrupt shrieks pierced the air. Both her hands flew to the arm extracting his knife. She was pushing it, clawing and raking it with her nails. Her strength was such that she forced his arm down to his side.

"Get in the car, you fool. Get in there!" He slammed his body into hers, pushing her.

"Let go of her, give her to me. The car won't go. I jammed the ignition, it won't go. Please give her to me!"

He suddenly stood quite still. "You think you're so smart, so VERY smart, don't you? I'll get you."

Jane was unaware that Betsy had risen from her bed of thorns across the street and was screaming in short staccato-like little bursts, "Mommy, Mommy!"

Jane was again clutching at Sarah.

"I'll get you—" He had the child with both hands now, and he wrenched his body around facing the woods, taking the child with him. He half dragged Jane with him as she clung to one of Sarah's small legs, but she realized she had to let go; Sarah would be pulled apart. She relinquished her grip on the child in desperate reluctance.

"Help—help! He'll kill Sarah—murder, murder—" At first she wondered who was calling for help and then, with a strange objectivity, she realized the cries were her own. He was running towards the woods in back of the stand now, holding Sarah in front of him with both hands. Jane,

pursuing him, stopped momentarily and kicked off her high heels, her eyes riveted to his retreating back, her screaming child. The shoes off, she crouched a bit beginning her pursuit and then straightened up into a full free-swinging run. She must never lose sight of Sarah. Her full, light summer skirt rose and flattened itself against her pumping thighs.

He had reached the fringe of the woods and was crashing through the underbrush. The density of it, and Sarah's awkward weight, slowed him. It was easier for Jane, following his somewhat matted wake; and she, panting now, her breath coming in rasping gulps, realized she was gaining on him. Her stockings, shredded and torn by the grasping branches and thorns, were enmeshed with the criss-crossing gashes in her legs, but she felt nothing. She wasn't screaming any more but was deliberately concentrating on her running, the path before her, and judging distances to avoid tripping over the erratically patterned protruding roots, stumps and vines. All these things she knew could fell her if she weren't extremely alert and didn't coordinate her timing in jumping with her speed.

She remembered fleetingly the times when, as a child, she had

wondered whether in a real life emergency she'd go to pieces. She was suddenly glad for her long legs, her lean body. She remembered the foot races she'd won in the past against so many of the neighborhood boys. Why had she smoked so much?

In the scattered patches of moonlight she realized they had left the entangling fringes off the woods, and the going was easier for her. The trees were larger here, the ground less cluttered with underbrush. The still persistent strength of her child's cries urged her on hopefully. As he filtered himself in and out of the shadows in his mad flight there were terrifying moments when she couldn't see him at all; but she would plunge ahead, relying on her ears, reasoning foresight and intuition to guide her.

Suddenly he stopped in shadows ahead and turned to face her. Jane narrowly avoided plummeting into him. She recoiled instantly, jumping back, momentarily confused.

"I told you I'd get you." Suddenly everything seemed so very quiet, so very still. There were just his words and the sound of her heavy breathing. Sarah had ceased her crying, sensing the change of pace.

"Mommy."

Jane stepped forward and he flung the child to the ground carelessly. She landed on her side, her head forced upward instinctively, avoiding impact. She screamed again.

"Didn't I tell you I'd get you?" Jane couldn't see his face but imagined his shy, pleased smile.

"It's me he wants—Oh thank God, it's *me!*" But she had to be sure. She suddenly whirled and cut diagonally back, running deeper into the woods, luring him, drawing him away from Sarah. If he should "get" her she wanted to fall away from the child in a place further on in his path of flight. It wouldn't be likely afterwards that he'd head back towards the road, towards Sarah and people, but would continue on into the heart of the woods.

She could hear him now, his breathing, his short spurts of laughter, so close. She knew she couldn't run forever. When he'd catch up with her, as he must, her back would be exposed in this flight position, she'd be too tired to fight. Suddenly flashing into her consciousness, a television program she'd seen brought to her mind's eye vivid, detailed pictures.

She stopped abruptly then and bent down. Her fingers clawing into the earth, she pivoted to meet

him. He came upon her suddenly and recoiled momentarily, just as she had done before with him.

She noticed he was holding the knife in such a manner that it extended straight out in a line with his forearm, a "hand shake" grip on the knife handle. A split second flash-back revealed a time when she had had a date with a marine, a boy she'd known since grammar school. He'd told her that if someone attacked you with a knife, the way it's done in the movies, with the arm raised high, the business end of the knife pointing downward, you'd have a much better chance than if the knife were held out in front of the attacker in the "handshake" grip. She remembered vividly his demonstration with a butter knife. She'd said, "Oh sure, that'd be just *great,*" and she'd felt *clever,* somehow, saying this.

As he lunged she saw only the glittering blade reaching for her. It seemed almost a picture in slow motion. For a second she seemed to freeze, half crouched. Then her dirt-dripping hands shot upward and released their meager supply of miniature pellets and dust. Her left arm heaved upward as it thudded into his wrist and the knife. It's blade sliced pain into her but her mind scarcely had the time to register this.

He screamed with rage. Jane ducked and darted into flight once more, glanced back to see his pursuit. One hand was raised out in front of him holding the knife downward, the other was rubbing his eyes.

She knew she was not exactly the hunted one any more. To be on the offensive, suddenly, at least to *feel* that way, solidified the spirits; a new strength was found in the cunning functioning of the mind. For the first time she felt a glimmer of hope as she heard his spitting curses behind her, his occasional roars of frustration as he stumbled in his fury after her.

"That's it—that's it. Stay mad and uncontrolled."

She headed towards a large maple, her mind ahead of this racing, panting present. As she stumbled over the obscure, large root she thought she was going to fall prone, but her arm partially entwined around the trunk sustained her, and she spun around the tree. She knew the arm was skinned because it stung so. Leaning her head against the trunk, she strained for air and heard his noisy approach. She filled her hands with dirt once more.

She stepped out from behind the tree and he saw her. But she didn't have to extend her foot into his path as she'd planned. The

root, which had come so close to felling her, barred his rising foot and he sprawled face down onto the ground.

Jane knew, rather than saw, that his grip would be loosened on the knife, but only for a second. She flung herself at his extended arms. Her fingers, grappling and probing, found the knife. She was surprised to find it lifted so easily from under his hand. The breath had been knocked out of him; but she could suddenly see and feel his tensing—now, now!

Her arm rose and fell swiftly, persistently. Speed was of the utmost importance, speed and sureness of aim. This was no man. This was an animal, vicious, deadly—an animal so much stronger than she, faster and bigger than she, but for the moment the advantage of position, weapon, strength, and time were hers—and wasn't a cornered and wounded animal supposed to be more dangerous than one that wasn't? She didn't know, she didn't care, she'd just make sure.

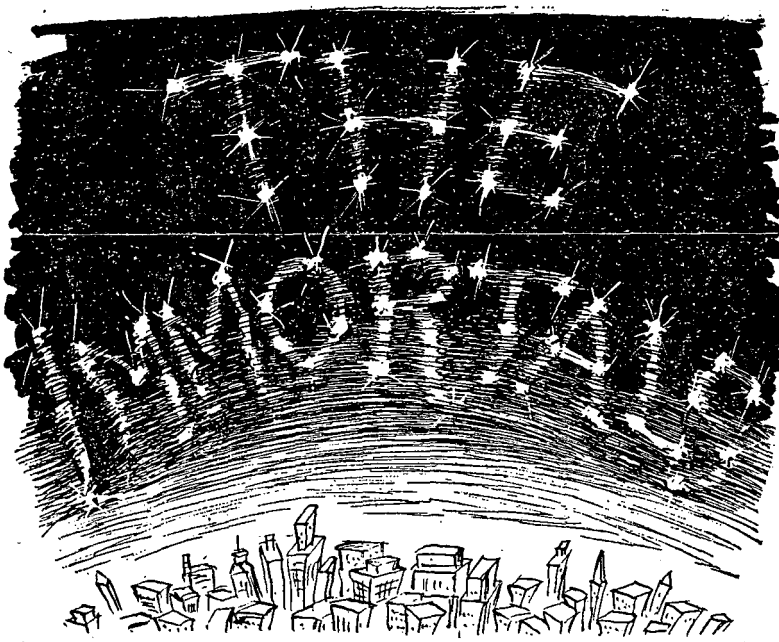
And even when the convulsive movements had stopped completely, and she heard sirens, Jane still went on making sure.

She traced her footsteps back towards the road, hesitating now and then, following the matted wake when she could see it, or the directions her mind indicated until finally Sarah's whimpering could guide her steps more surely.

She picked the child up, nestling the small body to her firmly, gently. "There now, Sarah, there, there—Mommy's here, see. It's all right, sweetheart—my love—"

They saw her walking towards them, calmly, slowly, the woods behind her, the child in her arms. She was smoothing the back of the child's head with one hand.

Betsy broke away from the policeman who'd been questioning her and ran towards her mother and sister crying, "Mommy, mommy—" With an effort Jane responded, "Betsy, Betsy, it's all right, dear. Mommy fixed it, see. We're all right now—" And then, setting Sarah carefully on the ground, Mrs. Crowley sagged into a blissful unconsciousness.



For the last two hours Christopher Henry had been sitting at his desk in his attic room trying to find the precise couplet with which to complete his sonnet. He had grown quite weary and sleepy, the light from the desk lamp seeming to grow thinner and less serviceable as his eyes became heavier. At last he put his pencil down next to the manuscript page. He stared at the pencil and the mute unanswering page as at maddening and insurmountable stumbling blocks.

'No,' he said to himself, burying his head in his hands in despair. 'It is in here,' he said with excruciating despair, pressing his hands against his temples as if to squeeze out the recalcitrant words. 'In here is where the trouble is,'—inside where the words would not churn and blend and create. He was not like Gabriel whose poems seemed to spring to life fullborn. "My thoughts are like sparks, my poems like fire," Gabriel, that insufferable egomaniac said, and said over and over again, proclaiming his genius to all who would listen, and today they were listening, for Gabriel was being heralded as the coming man in modern poetry. But no, Christopher thought, I am his equal, his superior. My poems

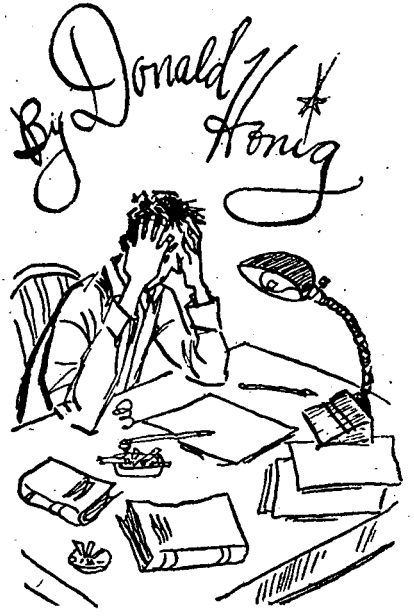
It isn't every day a cliche can induce murder and wing a mediocre poet into the footless halls of immortality on the coattails of a genius.

will be read forever. I will be remembered forever . . .

He looked at the clock. It was almost midnight. Susan had promised to be there at ten. Abruptly he became alert, sitting up. Why hadn't she come? She had always come, and promptly, to listen to him read her his poems. When he was through she would applaud lightly and quote aloud some choice line. He would bow his head accepting humbly and modestly (but with his heart filled with exultant fire) her accolade. But tonight she had not come, nor, as he thought about it, had she been there for a week. He pulled moodily on his underlip. What was that she had said last time, when saying aloud one of his images?—"Why, Christopher, that is lovely. Almost as graceful as one of Gabriel's." Spoken ironically, he had thought then. *She meant it,* he thought now. *She actually meant it.*

He got up, threw his scarf around his neck and went out, hurrying down the three flights of stairs to the street. He walked hurriedly through the narrow crowded streets, the stringy ends of his scarf beating against his back. He was in such an agitated state that he failed to hear any of the greetings from his acquaintances as he passed them by. He knew where she was and yet he was hoping he would not find her there. He crossed the street, almost running now, his eyes fixed upon the door of the Black Cat Coffee House.

By Donald Honig



The first thing he saw when he opened the door was Gabriel sitting up on the counter, a sea of blueish gray smoke hanging diaphanously across the warm, close air. Gabriel, with his long, thick, black hair and dark, mobile features fascinated even Christopher who loathed him with particular venom; even Christopher was compelled to stare at this young poet, at the tall, strong, yet somehow effete figure, listening to Gabriel's sonorous voice reciting his lyrics (which had already appeared in the most prized poetry quarterlies) to the rapt and enthralled faces at the tables.

Christopher closed the door quietly and stood with his back to it. Susan was sitting in the first chair, at Gabriel's feet, her face lifted to him, attentive, hypnotic. Gabriel had the gift, the recognition—and now he had Susan too. The hate and envy in Christopher's heart were stinging.

Gabriel saw him at that moment and stopped in the middle of his recitation.

"Christopher," he called out, smiling with mock warmth, lifting his hand for a moment. Everyone turned, in a chorus of creaking chairs, to stare at Christopher. "Ladies and gentlemen," Gabriel said, "allow me to present Mr. Christopher Henry, the mad poet of our mad decade. Of course he's not really mad, nor is he a poet, though he does try hard, eh, Christopher?"

Christopher came away from the door, moving through the tables.

"Have none of you heard of Christopher Henry?" Gabriel said with mock reproach. "Why he is going to be one of *the* American poets someday, an immortal."

Christopher, oblivious of Gabriel and the others, stood over Susan.

"Why didn't you come this evening?" he asked quietly.

"Go away," she said, not looking at him.

"Well now," Gabriel said, sitting atop the bar with feigned seriousness, his hands on his hips as though he were directing a class in calisthenics.

"Susan," Christopher said.

"Go away," she said tersely.

"I must talk to you," Christopher said, his face flushed with shame and anger.

"All right," Susan said with irritation. She left her seat and led him through the chairs and tables, out of the place. They stood on the sidewalk.

"Now what do you want, Christopher? Don't you know that you interrupted him?"

"Is that so terrible?" Christopher asked. "Since when has that become a cardinal sin?"

"Haven't you heard? Didn't you see the reviews of Gabriel's latest volume?"

"No. I . . ."

"Well, see them. Read them. See what they say."

"What do they say?"

"They say that Gabriel is a genius. They say he has the most wonderful lyric gift since Keats. One reviewer said this volume assures him of immortality."

Christopher stared at her, bewildered.

"I don't believe it," he said. Her face turned so resentful that he quickly amended, "Yes, yes, of course I believe it. It's just that I never . . ."

"It's just that it hasn't happened to you," she said sharply, turning around and going back to the coffee house.

Christopher stood alone on the sidewalk, staring in at Gabriel. *Assures him of immortality.* What he wouldn't give to hear the critics say that about *him,* about *his* work! To achieve a measure of lasting fame. To be remembered, to be spoken about by future generations, to know that one's name would never die. It belonged to Gabriel. Standing on the sidewalk, on the outside, staring in at that man, Christopher felt alone, and lonely. When all the others sitting there now would be dead and forgotten, people would still talk of that one man.

He walked away slowly, his hands clenched in his pockets, his heart heavy with sadness and envy. To him it was as if Gabriel had stolen something that rightfully belonged to Christopher Henry.

He returned to his tenement and climbed the groaning, yielding stairs which seemed interminable now, up to his attic room, the single small window of which allowed him to look down upon the narrow streets and the lights which seemed now to cast more gloom and shadow than light. He stood by the window for awhile, watching the streets gradually empty, the lights die out one by one. Then he went back to his desk and stared gloomily at his unfinished poem. He picked up his pencil. It felt like a piece of straw. He looked toward the window. He could see the river, dark and restive, and further out the stars, tiny and bright and everlasting—where they were going to inscribe Gabriel's name. It was true. Painfully he made the admission to himself. He had known it all along, from the first moment he had read Gabriel's poems. And himself? He had merely worked hard, too hard, to attract posterity. He was an amiable mediocrity. His own work, under his eyes now, showed him

the irrefutable truth of all that.

He dropped his pencil, lowered his head and, with tears welling hotly in his eyes, fell asleep on his desk.

The following morning Christopher knocked on the door of Gabriel's apartment. The great poet's face expressed surprise when he opened the door.

"Why, Christopher," Gabriel said. "Have you come to become one of my disciples?" He laughed. "Come in, come in. I'm sorry I was rude to you last night."

"Are you really?" Christopher asked skeptically, closing the door and walking into the shabby, book-cluttered apartment.

"No, not really, I suppose. It's nothing personal you understand. It's just that I'm too sensitive and can't abide bad poetry—and yours is *so* abominably bad, and therefore when I see you I think of your poetry and of all bad poetry and it rubs me the wrong way."

"I don't think it is so bad," Christopher said quietly.

"Good for you. But we all think that—though how few of us are right, eh? Only the critics are."

"The critics certainly were kind to you, Gabriel," Christopher said putting his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

"It's simply to their own credit. Well, some of us have the gift and some don't. A cliché, of course, but it's as simple as that."

"And you have it."

"It seems so," Gabriel said smiling.

"For which I am now grateful," Christopher said.

"Grateful? You? *You?* Come now, Christopher."

"I'm quite serious. If the name of Gabriel Mason is to live forever, what of the name of the man who . . ."

Christopher's hand rose slowly from his pocket, holding a gun. He pointed it at Gabriel.

Gabriel blanched.

"You're taking me with you, Gabriel . . . into the stars," Christopher said, a mad wild grin suddenly on his face.

Immortality and eternity banged together out of Christopher Henry's tiny revolver.

Never Trust an Ancestor

by Michael Zuroy

It was practically an inquisition. Eastern Chemicals, Inc. did not lightly select new employees for its ten stories of administrative offices in a Manhattan skyscraper. Drew Whitney had already filled out numerous application forms. He had undergone three gruelling interviews. He now opened yet another form headed: ADDITION-

One's family tree means more than money in the bank to some. A combination of money and lineage may land one on the end of a limb.

AL PERSONAL INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIAL.

Flipping through it as he sat at one of the small bare desks for job applicants set along a wall in Eastern's personnel office, he had trouble keeping a sneer from his coldly handsome features. Screwball stuff.

Big corporations these days, Whitney reflected, sometimes nosed into a man's personal background to the point of foolishness. This questionnaire was about as bad as they came. Probably doped out by the psychologists and the bright personnel boys to, in some way, help set up an overall picture of a man and determine what niches he might fit, Whitney understood the purpose all right, but to him it was still piddling hog-wash. "Have you ever owned a sports car?" He was applying for an accountant's job. What kind of a question was that?

Are you familiar with fine wines? Do you know any dentists socially? the questions went on. This was from outer space, Whitney was thinking. If married, list schools attended by your wife. Is your wife's hair color natural? Do you skin-dive? Is there a history of baldness in your family? Brother!

Forcing patience, Whitney began filling out the form. Objecting would only get him out the door and he wanted to work for Eastern. This was a deliberate, considered choice. Eastern Chemicals had what he wanted—standing, wealth, power, opportunity. It was in a firm like this that he'd decided to make his big push. A sardonic expression touched his lips. If they could see into his mind he'd lose his welcome here, fast. He'd thought out his methods while gaining experience in smaller firms. They were ruthless methods, but he meant to be a big man while he was still young. He meant to climb to power, no matter how many throats he had to cut. There was something in him that needed power and money.

Whitney wrote his answers neatly, knowing better than to let his handwriting betray impatience. They'd be watching for that, the bright boys, the psychologists. In sober figures, he put down his age, 26, although Eastern already had that information. Have you ever been arrested? the form inquired at another point. Whitney wrote, "No."

Father's occupation? Without pride, Whitney wrote, "Waiter." At least he didn't have to tell them what kind of third-rate joints the old man had worked until he died, or about the seamy life he'd given his family. The kind of a life, Whitney thought, he was going to

put far behind him, forever . . .

Do you know of any criminal record against your father? Whitney blinked at that one. He wrote, "No."

Your mother? Whitney blinked again. It wasn't his parents who were applying for this job. He answered, "No."

Do you know of any criminal records against your grandfathers, paternal and maternal? Your grandmothers?

Whitney stared at the form. This was over the line. This was too senseless and nosy even for Eastern Chemicals. He had a fleeting temptation to write in, "None of your damned business!" but while he hesitated he realized that from one of the nearby glassed-in cubicles he was being watched by the coldly appraising eyes of Mr. Johnson, the personnel man handling his application. Whitney knew that a show of annoyance would mean a mark against him. He knew he'd made a good impression so far. Tall, personable, respectful, he was aware that one of his assets was that he appeared the potential executive type favored by large corporations. Without further hesitation, he answered "No," to the question. He completed the form and handed it in to Mr. Johnson with a calculated smile, pleasant but not obviously ingratiating. He spent the rest of the afternoon taking an I.Q. test, then went home to await results.

Some days later, he was called back to Eastern's offices. He was to have a final interview with the president of the corporation. "The president himself?" Whitney said, surprised that he rated this. He was only being considered for a minor accounting job.

"President Mitchell personally passes on all administrative applicants, regardless of grade," Mr. Johnson explained aloofly.

President Mitchell's office was at the top of Eastern's tier, on the thirty-seventh floor of the skyscraper. The room was spacious, deep-carpeted, mellow with dark wood, heavy with the air of tradition. One wall was covered by an impressive mural depicting Eastern's mines and plants. On another wall were several portraits in oils of gloomy and severe-looking people who seemed to resemble Mitchell. A bank of low-silled windows afforded a spectacular panorama of the city and the river beyond, unobstructed by any other nearby tall buildings.

Whitney drew a quick, excited breath. Here was the pinnacle, the stronghold of power. He wanted this place for himself. Some day he might have it.

President Mitchell was a mas-

sive, powerful man whose shoulders bulged like a lumberjack's inside his expensive suit. Still under sixty, his voice was forceful, eyes uncompromising pits under looming brows. An overwhelming personality, but Whitney did not feel intimidated. He met the scrutiny guilelessly, while deep within himself the thought snuggled that Mitchell's throat, too, could be cut.

At last, Mitchell grunted. "You seem the right type."

"Thank you, sir."

"We're fussy, yes," Mitchell said. "A company can be ruined by its employees. We don't want anybody here who doesn't fit our picture. Above all, we insist upon high moral character. Did that grandparent question surprise you?"

"Well—a bit, sir," Whitney admitted cautiously.

"My own idea, that," Mitchell rumbled. "Based on a theory that hasn't failed me yet. I believe in heredity. Crooks breed crooks."

"Yes, sir," said Whitney, knowing when to agree. President Mitchell's stare brooked no contradiction.

"Blood will tell," Mitchell said.

"Yes, sir."

"For your job level, we check the grandparents. The higher the job level and the trust we have to place in an employee, the further back we check his ancestry. If an individual has a marked criminal heritage, no matter how far back, it will come out in him sooner or later. We can't take any chances on that sort."

"Yes, sir," Whitney said, incredulous at the idea, not venturing to comment that nobody could have a model ancestry.

As though divining his thought, Mitchell said, "Oh, we're realistic, we don't expect perfection. We use a crime-time ratio system that passes the great majority of our employees, but determines the worst risks. An unsatisfactory ancestry rating closes the more responsible positions to an employee. Serious ancestral crimes—such as murder—carry the most weight, naturally. Do you have enough faith in your heritage to work for us, young man?"

"I'm willing to trust my ancestors, sir," Whitney said without hesitation, knowing that it was the right answer. His thoughts were contemptuous. The personnel boys in big companies were sappy enough. When the big wheel butted in with his pet ideas it could be downright idiotic. Nothing to worry about once you were in, he was sure you couldn't run a company that way. Mitchell, himself, had just said that most employees passed. Besides, how much could

be dug up about anybody's ancestry, especially as it got more ancient? He didn't know very much about his own grandparents, for instance.

Again, as though understanding Whitney's thought, President Mitchell said, "Our investigators are expert and thorough. An individual's knowledge of his own ancestry is unreliable, so we do not depend on it. Our agents operate all over the world. The past is obscure, certainly, but each generation back doubles in number; if they lose one trail, they switch to another. They seldom fail. They are, in effect, detectives who work in the past. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Mitchell raised a thick finger. "This may be a new idea to you. It may seem harsh. I am satisfied that it works. Some of our key executives were cleared as far back as the Eleventh Century A.D. They've proved to be men of the highest integrity. Blood tells, right?"

"Right, sir," agreed Whitney, feeling somewhat dazed.

"Well," said Mitchell briskly, "our check of your grandparents bore out your statements. They're cleared. This will suffice for your present job level. You may report back to the personnel office."

Which, Whitney realized, meant that he had the job. He smiled.

Drew Whitney spent the next few months marking time, becoming familiar with the company and his job, preparing for his first ruthless move. Not for him the slow merit promotions, the crawling advance in seniority which might, in thirty years, bring him a minor executive post. He'd doped it all out. The fast way was to eliminate whoever blocked the road. It was a matter of watching for opportunities, creating them if necessary. Whitney found himself chuckling. Let Eastern putter around with the past and Mitchell's stuffy ancestor theories. Something was going to happen in the near future which they'd never understand.

The department he was in was Equipment Inventory. Whitney's first objective was to become head of this department. There were fourteen people with more seniority between him and his goal, all jockeying for position, while the incumbent head seemed to be settled for years to come, a usual situation in a large firm. Everybody wanted to climb, but nobody had the guts or the brains to do what he was going to do.

Whitney picked Ed Thorpe as the most suitable victim. Thorpe, a slight man with hair that curled around a bald spot, had been with

Eastern for twelve years and was one of the hopefuls for department head, when it became open. Whitney cultivated Thorpe. He turned on the charm, so that soon they were joking amiably together, engaging in serious discussions, lunching with each other. The friendship ripened gradually to the point where they began getting together with the wives on occasional evenings. Whitney even brought Thorpe's three curly-headed youngsters little presents, earning the name, Uncle Drew. Oh, a great guy the Thorpes obviously considered Drew Whitney, with his clean-cut looks and sincere manner.

Naturally, when Whitney began to ask casual questions about Thorpe's work, Thorpe was glad to explain. When the questions grew sharper, Thorpe showed no annoyance. Why not teach a friend a few things? Young Whitney couldn't be a competitor, he was too far behind in seniority. At home, and in the office, Thorpe taught Whitney the fine points of his work, transferred to him the essence of what he'd learned in twelve years at Eastern. "Hope this helps you, someday," Thorpe smiled.

"Oh, it will, Eddie," Whitney smiled back. "It will."

Once the brain-picking stage was over, Whitney gave thought to working out the next step. Tax time was approaching. This could be useful. Whitney began looking through certain folders from the files, referring to some of the entry books that were amassed in this accounting division. No one paid any particular attention. He worked here, he was doing his job, the records were open to him.

Whitney felt confident he would get away with what he was planning, simply because it was unthinkable. There were things that just weren't done in offices. There was a line that few, even the worse back-biters, would think of stepping over. He was going to step over that line. Because he had the guts.

From a current file of pencilled tax work-sheets awaiting posting to the permanent ledger, he chose several entitled ALLOWANCE FOR DEPRECIABLE EQUIPMENT. They had been prepared by Ed Thorpe and carried his signature. They also bore the O.K. of Lee Southerfield, who had checked Thorpe's work.

From among the crowded entries, he picked out one which read, "Owens-Hookworth Ore-Pulverizer Unit, Model G-48, Serial Number 879904R—$7,423.00. Deftly, he erased the figures which represented Thorpe's calculated de-

preciation allowance and substituted a figure of $9,898.00. He chose four more items scattered through the work-sheets and altered those figures upwards too. So meticulously did he make the changes and imitate Thorpe's figures that, when he was done, Thorpe, himself, could not have detected the tampering.

He waited patiently some weeks until after the tax-returns were in and all entries posted to the permanent ledger. Then he approached Mr. Bobak, the department head. His manner was that of one performing a reluctant duty.

"A serious tax error? An overdeduction for depreciation?" Bobak's round face was incredulous.

"Yes, sir," Whitney said. "Internal Revenue's sure to spot it. If we don't amend it first, it's liable to hurt us with them in the future."

Bobak's blue eyes had turned frigid and unblinking. They plainly conveyed his opinion of this young upstart. "Thanks for the warning," he said. "So, out of all the experts we got here, you were the one to find it out, hey?"

"Well," said Whitney diffidently, "I noted the figures in the ledger. They didn't look right to me. I computed the items according to our years-digit method. The figures were incorrect."

"A genius," Bobak murmured tiredly. "So who did the original accounting on this?"

"Uh . . . Ed Thorpe," Whitney answered with a nice show of hesitation.

"Yes." Bobak leaned back in his chair. "Look. Thorpe's been with us twelve years. He knows his job. Southerfield does the checking in that section. Another top-notcher. I'll go by them. We can't spend all our time re-checking complicated figures. This is very conscientious of you, young fellow, but I think you're speaking from inexperience."

Whitney left, outwardly subdued. In fact, he was quite satisfied. So much the better that Bobak hadn't risen to the bait at once, the shock would be all the greater when it came. Internal Revenue would see to that. But Internal Revenue was slow. However, they could be safely accelerated. They did not reveal their informants. Whitney posted a note to the Treasury Department.

Within a week, two polite men with brief-cases visited Eastern Chemicals, Inc. and spent some time going over the books in Bobak's department. As one of the results of this visit, Bobak emerged red-faced from what was apparently a severe chewing-out by his superiors. He, in turn, chewed out

Thorpe and Southerfield. "Don't know how I made those errors," Thorpe muttered. "Don't understand it at all."

To Whitney, Bobak said privately, "Eastern doesn't like spots on the record, especially with the tax people. I don't know why in hell I didn't listen to you, it would've been less damaging then. You seem to be a sharp young man. No one else caught this. Thorpe seems to be slipping . . . and if I can't trust Southerfield . . . look, Whitney, I'm going to try you out on more responsible work . . ."

"Thank you, sir," Whitney said gratefully, reflecting that the next throat to be cut would be Bobak's.

Thorpe's chances for the department head slot were gone. So were Southerfield's. And Bobak's status had been weakened. Eastern Chemicals was not tolerant of major blunders in any of their departments.

Whitney applied himself to his work during the next few months. He knew that he was sharp enough, that much was true. He'd picked Thorpe's brains. He had no difficulty applying what he'd learned. And he'd turned the charm on Bobak, he was high in his favor, acting as his watch-dog. He made a practice of looking for the inevitable small errors in other people's work and exposing them to Bobak. Inexorably, he was taking over an increasing share of Ed Thorpe's duties and responsibilities. Thorpe had the seniority, but his title was losing much of its meaning. Whitney now had only a distant politeness for Thorpe. The man had served his purpose.

Eventually, Whitney received official promotion. The day before this happened, however, a messenger from Personnel dropped a sealed envelope on his desk. Inside he found papers headed, CONFIDENTIAL ANCESTRY REPORT—EMPLOYEE'S COPY. "Congratulations!" it said. "Your ancestry has passed further examination. You are cleared for this promotion."

Whitney had almost forgotten about President Mitchell's pet project. He read the report, impressed despite himself with its thoroughness. He'd never known this about his ancestors. Four generations back, a Stafford Whitney had operated a sawmill in Turnbull, Missouri. There had been a Silas Whitney, intrepid Indian fighter. Barbara Sherman, who later married Colin Whitney, trader, had, as a girl, been noted in the town of Amesworth, Pennsylvania for her skill with the needle.

They dug hard enough, reflected Whitney with contempt. Let them, as long as they dug only in the

past. The future concerned him.

He continued to work diligently, often putting in extra hours on his own. He was the first to arrive, the last to leave. He was creating the picture of a dedicated, dependable, and highly capable company man, and he knew that the picture was in time noted by S. D. Simpson, head of division and Bobak's superior.

Meanwhile, he continued to deftly snipe away at the others in his department. Thorpe and Southerfield, who had been the two strong contenders for department-head, were now out of the running. The others in the department were not serious executive possibilities, but Whitney was taking no chances. He never relented from undermining them, trustingly backed up by Bobak.

He let another year go by, to build up more seniority and solidify his status. Then he went after Bobak.

His plan was simple, but he considered it safe, because again it was unthinkable, something that wasn't done. Again, he was willing to step over the line.

He managed a private talk with the white-clad cafeteria man who brought up their orders during coffee-break. He showed the man a bill which made his eyes narrow in greed. "Just some office fun," Whitney smiled. "You know. But you've got to keep your mouth shut or you might get us both in a little trouble. Everybody might not understand."

The man nodded slowly, but still with a shade of doubt. "Oh, sure, I know you guys kid around sometimes up there. But I don't wanna take any chances. You sure those pills are harmless?"

"For Pete's sake," Whitney said with a show of impatience, "I'm letting you buy them yourself, what more do you want? They couldn't harm a baby. Ask the druggist. All you got to do is slip a couple into Bobak's coffee order when I tell you to. But if you'd rather forget about it . . ."

The man reached for the money, convinced.

Shortly afterwards, some time past one of the coffee breaks, the office was astounded to see Mr. Bobak sound asleep in his chair. The sleeping pills were working very well.

Gradually, Bobak slumped to his desk, pillowed his head comfortably on his arms and began a piercing, regular snoring. For the benefit of the others, Whitney tried to shake him awake, but Bobak was too deep in sleep to respond. Later, Whitney was gratified to observe S. D. Simpson looking in disgustedly through the glass parti-

tion at the slumbering Bobak. Bobak awoke in a couple of hours, horror-stricken when he realized what he'd been doing.

A couple of weeks later, the same performance was repeated. "Don't know what got into me," Bobak muttered, aghast. "I don't usually feel sleepy during the day . . ."

Whitney was not surprised to find himself in S. D. Simpson's office one afternoon. "Of course, you're on the young side," Simpson told him, "and not as long in experience as some of the others, but, by George, we're convinced you're the most capable man in the department. And we're afraid Bobak's losing his grip. That tax trouble in his department last year . . . and when a man keeps falling asleep at his work . . ."

Again, another confidential ancestry report appeared on Whitney's desk. With some curiosity, Whitney noted that one of his forbears had been a naval officer under Drake. Well, well. There was a physician, a magistrate, a couple of clergymen. Another line showed blacksmiths, cobblers, other artisans, still in England. A few minor indiscretions had been noted, but the sum total was a satisfactory rating. Cleared for promotion to department head.

Bobak was removed to an obscure niche. "Too bad, Bobak," Whitney told him, having shed his respectful tone. "This is as much a surprise to me as it is to you. But you've still got your seniority. You've still got a pension to look forward to."

Whitney invested two more years in consolidating his position, presenting the ideas of underlings as his own if they had merit, running his department with a strict and efficient hand, calculating every move towards impressing the big wheels. He didn't mind doing a little waiting now; he was in the executive class. His next step could be a big one.

When at last he moved up again, it was to by-pass three high-level executives, including S. D. Simpson himself. A bit of blackmail could be useful.

While he waited, Whitney had had a firm of private detectives secretly snooping for indiscretions in the lives of Eastern's top officials. They couldn't all be angels, Whitney had reasoned. He'd struck pay dirt in the case of the Comptroller, Van Shilder. There had been a liaison between Van Shilder and a certain blonde model. Van Shilder had boosted Whitney up the line to avoid a scandal that would have ruined his reputation and his domestic serenity.

He was getting closer to the in-

ner circle now. He disposed of the next man in his path in short order. Whitney had built up a rumor mill, a private corps of spies and toadys, to which he consigned the reputation of R. J. Fredericks. Rumors soon spread all over Eastern that Fredericks was an alcoholic, that he was given to placing bets on the horses with bookies, that he was accepting under the table kick-backs from Eastern's venders, that he was selling out Eastern trade secrets to competitors. There were no open charges, nothing that Fredericks could defend himself against, only rumors, but the rumors kept coming to the ears of the top echelon, until at last, disquieted, unwilling to run risks, they removed Fredericks to a harmless sinecure. Whitney moved up again.

Barely thirty years old now, he was in line for a Vice-Presidency in the huge Eastern Chemicals Corporation. A most amazing advancement. He was regarded as one of the brightest young men in the industry, a man who undoubtedly must have remarkable executive ability to rise so fast.

With his promotions, further ancestry checks had been run, of course, far back into previous centuries, but had given no trouble. Whitney had anticipated none—that far back in the past, how much could be learned? And how much could it count?

He was somewhat surprised when President Mitchell, meeting him in the corridor, placed a hand on his shoulder and with a relaxing of his features that might have been a smile, rumbled, "Ah, Whitney."

"Yes, sir?" Whitney said respectfully. Beyond some occasional routine contact, Mitchell had had little to do with him. Mitchell was a remote, unbending figure, inhabiting a world of forbidding dignity penetrated only by Vice-Presidents, members of the Board, and others of equal importance.

"I've read your latest ancestry report," President Mitchell said. "An interesting point—in the Thirteenth Century, your ancestors lived in Wicklington, Cheshire in old England. So did mine."

"Really, sir? Then they must have known each other."

"Precisely," said Mitchell, in a kindly tone. He chuckled. "In a way, that makes us old acquaintances, doesn't it?" He took Whitney's arm, walked him along the corridor, chatting cordially about Thirteenth Century life in Wicklington.

While Whitney responded to the huge man in the proper tones of respect, interest and geniality, he was thinking that here was his

ultimate target. This was the man who held the position he wanted above all. This was the most important throat he was going to cut. The king is dead, long live . . . President Drew Whitney of Eastern Chemicals, Inc. It would have a fine sound.

During Whitney's other operations, he had also steadily been gathering data on Mitchell, seeking out his weaknesses. This ancestry business was one of the weaknesses. Whitney had discovered that it was not popular among the other high-level company officials, considered little more than one of those eccentricities to which men of great achievement and power were entitled. Mitchell sometimes delivered talks on heredity to his officials. "Heredity is not a dead record," he would say. "The past lives in us. We follow the patterns of our ancestors, we are, in a degree, responsible for their actions. . . ." Whitney had detected notes of weary boredom in the polite agreement of the other executives. There was no doubt that the ancestor policy would be thrown out when Mitchell was out of office—meanwhile, it was a chink in Mitchell's armor, possibly it could be useful in some way to help discredit the man with the Board of Directors when the time came.

But Whitney was not ready for Mitchell yet. He needed a Vice-Presidency first. He needed the job of his immediate superior, Vice-President F. Griswold.

And Griswold proved to be the most difficult obstruction he'd yet faced. Griswold was comparatively young and vigorous; there seemed little chance that he would retire in less than fifteen or twenty years. He was efficient, capable, sharp, powerful. He was strongly entrenched—his reputation was top-drawer. Blackmail was out of the question. Whitney's agents had been unable to get anything on him. Whitney felt that it would be dangerous to repeat any of his previous tactics, and against this man it would be futile. Griswold was too highly placed and impervious.

Griswold was blocking the road.

Whitney debated a long time before he reached his decision. He was willing to do the unthinkable, he was willing to step over the line, but this far? He would prefer some other way. It was a serious, risky act he was contemplating, the kind of thing which belonged in some other incredible, unreal world. Yet, would not its very improbability be its strongest point?

And against Griswold there seemed no other way. He wanted the Vice-Presidency badly, he needed it, like his right arm.

Whitney then made up his mind.

Once this was done, he acted with his usual thorough-going resolution and efficiency. During his investigations he moved cautiously and warily until he was sure that he had found the right man. "I'll pay top money," he told the man, "but I want a perfect job. Not just an injury. Injured people can recover."

The thin man looked at him from under light, almost invisible eyebrows. "I got a rep, mister," he said softly. "When I go after a guy, he's through. Quit worryin'."

The office was shocked by the news of the tragic accident. Vice-President Griswold had been struck down and killed by a hit-run driver. They had not been able to trace the car.

Another ancestry report reached Whitney's desk. Whitney had stepped into the Vice-Presidency. Sorrowfully, he stated: "It is with deep regret that I take over poor Frank Griswold's duties. These are painful circumstances under which to accept the honor of a Vice-Presidency. I shall try to respect Griswold's memory by doing the best job I can."

Actually, Whitney did have faint misgivings about what he had done, brief feelings of guilt. They soon vanished. He was almost there . . . Nothing must stand in his way. Nothing. He'd see to that.

In the third week of his Vice-Presidency, while he was still savoring the change in his status, the prestige, the new deference accorded him, he was summoned to President Mitchell's office. He walked into the room expecting that this would be an executive consultation on high-level affairs. He was not prepared for the grimness in the big man's face. He saw that they were alone. He closed the door behind him, hearing the automatic click of the snap lock.

"Sit down," Mitchell grunted. Whitney took a chair. Mitchell went to the bank of windows that looked out upon the vast panorama of the city, flung open a couple and took a deep breath. "This air conditioning's all right," Mitchell said, "but I like to get some real air in here every day." Whitney waited. Mitchell returned to his desk, extracted a folder from his drawer and opened it. His heavy brows drew together. His deep-set eyes regarded Whitney so steadily that the younger man's glance flicked away uncomfortably for an instant, registering again the heavy dignity of the room, the mural, the oil portraits of a few of Mitchell's forbears. "Got some new information here," Mitchell said at last. "It came late. Our investigators in England just turned it up in the

old vaults at Wicklington, Cheshire. It concerns your ancestry, Whitney. Belongs with your last report, by rights."

"My ancestry?" This was the furthest thing from Whitney's thoughts.

"That's right. It's a deathbed confession by an ancestor of yours, Garth Whitney, fletcher of Wicklington. It's dated August 12, 1173. Almost eight hundred years ago. Now, listen."

Mitchell read:

Synce I, Garth Whitney, did knowe that Baker Mitchell was a man of muche welthe, I did hie me to his abode on this darke nighte and did spie thru the window that he was alone and did knock uponne his dore and he did comen and openne. Then did I smite with a cudgel uponne his hed agen and agen and he did dye. I did find muche store of gold inne his cotage and I did flee and hyde the gold, so that when muche hue and tumulte was afterwards raysed, none did wot it was I who had donne this. So did I lyve out my dayes in Wicklington and later have gude use of the gold, and none did suspecte, but nowe I lye on my dying bed, I wishet that the treuthe be knowne.

There was a silence. "It appears," said President Mitchell at last, "that you have murder in your heritage, Whitney."

Whitney did not allow the stir of concern to show in his face or voice. He knew how seriously Mitchell took this stuff; it had to be minimized. He said lightly, "Sorry to hear that, but I disown the old boy. My other ancestors averaged out all right, didn't they?"

Mitchell's severe expression didn't change. "Did you note the name of the man your ancestor murdered? Mitchell, the baker. My own ancestor."

It struck Whitney. He stared incredulously at Mitchell. Of all people, did old Garth have to pick on a Mitchell . . . ? He forced a smile. "But that happened in the Twelfth Century, sir. Surely, you

don't hold that deed against *me*."

"Well," Mitchell said, not returning the smile, "as you know, I hold that we're all in some degree responsible for our ancestors' actions. However, I don't wish personal bias to enter into company affairs. The main point here is that the murder drops your ancestry rating below that required of a Vice-President. You'll have to give up that position."

"You'd take away my office because of this?"

"According to our present rating system, yes. You're still qualified to hold certain limited lower positions. Sorry, Whitney."

A wave of bitterness swept through Whitney. To have come so far, to have risked so much . . . and to have it snatched away because of the asinine theories of this man. . . . For an instant he considered fighting, lodging a complaint with the Board of Directors, trying to rally other company officials to his support. Then he knew that it would be hopeless. Mitchell was unassailable right now. Eastern Chemicals had achieved much of its greatness under his leadership. Like many other strong men, he could afford a few eccentricities. No, he couldn't get Mitchell now, he needed more time, another couple of years.

Desperately, feeling that it was

futile, Whitney said, "But this is ancient history. How about the present? How about my own record? You'll admit that it's top-notch. I've given my best efforts to Eastern. Doesn't that count?"

Mitchell rose, went to the windows and looked out. At last, he said slowly, "It carries weight, yes. As I say, you're still qualified for some responsibility. But, as for a Vice-Presidency, I'm afraid . . ."

It was while Mitchell was talking that the thought came to Whitney. The man was no more than a step or two away, back towards him. The window was open, the

sill low, ankle height. One firm push would do it. He'd say it had been an accident. Who could prove otherwise? Who could think otherwise? Mitchell's habit of breathing deeply in front of the open window was known. The man might have tripped or had a dizzy spell, he was getting along in years—

He'd destroy the report on Mitchell's desk. With Mitchell gone, nobody would concern themselves with ancestry reports anyhow. The whole foolish business would be thrown out; from the Directors on down, there was no real sympathy for the thing. He'd retain his Vice-Presidency; might even have a chance at the vacant Presidency sooner than he'd expected.

Whitney rose silently. Yes, he was willing to go this far. He'd already done so with Griswold. The decision was easy this time. One quick push would give him everything he wanted.

Whitney took a step and lunged at Mitchell's back.

He hadn't thought the big man could hear him or move so fast.

He found his arms imprisoned in a crushing grip, Mitchell's deep-set eyes locked with his own. He tried to struggle. It was useless. The man was too powerful.

"Murder me, would you?" Mitchell said quietly. "I thought you might try that. Proves my point, doesn't it? There's murder in your heritage. Blood will tell."

"Let go of me," Whitney said.

"In a moment," Mitchell said. His eyes held the detached contempt of a judge's regarding a vicious criminal. "The law's practically helpless against you right now, it can't punish you much for what you tried to do to me. Let you go free and in time you'll succeed in murdering someone, if it suits your purposes. And there's another small consideration. Garth Whitney never paid the penalty for his crime. Eh?" For an instant longer the two men's eyes remained locked. Then Mitchell said, "Well, over you go, my lad," as he heaved Whitney out the window.

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The Cemetery MAN

ED JESSON got into the business, the cemetery business that is, by accident. Or maybe more properly speaking, by necessity. Because Ed had a body to get rid of. And what better place is there to plant a body than in a cemetery?

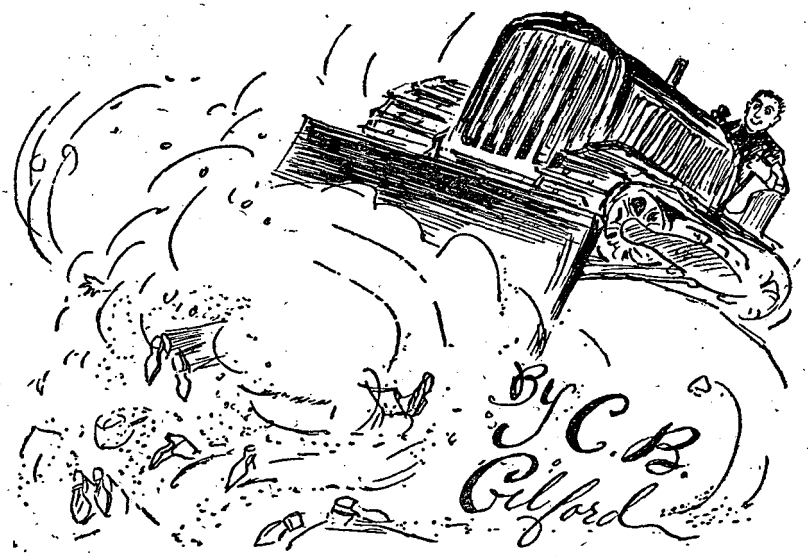
Problem was, Ed didn't own a cemetery. The owners and operators of such properties are all wealthy—a fact Ed was to discover later—but back in 1949 Ed Jesson was far from being a rich man. He was a working stiff, nothing more, a guy who got paid by the hour.

Ed wasn't looking for trouble that summer night in 1949. Sure he was restless, irritable from the heat. He'd spent the whole day in the saddle of that bulldozer, shoving junk around, and the sun had been blazing down. He came home to that crummy apartment with no air conditioning, and then when he suggested they go to a movie to get cool, Naomi said she had a previous engagement to play bridge with the girls.

Left to his own devices and unable to endure that stuffy apartment, Ed went down to Mike's. Mike's wasn't much of a place, but it did have an air conditioner, and the beer was ice-cold and slipped down the throat real easy. Ed

knew Mike and most of Mike's customers, so the conversation was easy too.

But that particular night there was a stranger there. Name of Wade. That was all the name Ed



ever knew him by. By some stroke of fate the bar stool next to Ed was vacant when Wade wandered in, so that was the stool he took.

They started to talk. Wade, it seemed, was a stranger in town, and he wondered if Ed knew any girls. Ed said he didn't, he was a married man. Oh yeah, then why was he sitting here in this bar all alone? Because Naomi was out playing bridge, that was why. Wade laughed nastily. He knew women, he'd divorced two of them, and Ed could believe that story about bridge if he wanted to. Ed resented the laugh and the insinuation. They argued, so loud, finally, that Mike told them to take their argument elsewhere.

They went outside, into the parking lot. It was one of the darkest nights Ed ever remembered, so nobody saw what happened. They drifted over toward Ed's car, Wade saying all the time that he wouldn't

Apparently it makes no difference how deep we bury our evil deeds, they usually come to light just as we are lulled into a sense of well-being.

trust any woman in the world, and Ed maintaining that Naomi was different. They'd drunk quite a lot of beer, and maybe it was natural for the argument to develop into a fight.

They were both big men, brawny men, the kind who worked with their muscles. The fight could have gone either way, with the combatants half drunk and the night so dark that it was hard to see your fist in front of you, much less the man you wanted to hit with it. But Ed got in a lucky punch that landed right on the point of Wade's chin. The target just disappeared.

Frightened, Ed went to the glove compartment for his flashlight. With the aid of its illumination, he found Wade's body stretched out on the gravel. The back of his head was bloody, and he lay absolutely still. There was also some blood on the bumper of the car. In the fall his head had hit that.

In a rising panic and suddenly sober, Ed Jesson realized that he had killed a man. Not deliberately, it had been an accident. He knew only vaguely about situations like this, but he was pretty sure they'd call it manslaughter. That meant prison, five years, maybe ten.

Ed Jesson had often complained about his lot in life, his unattentive wife, their lousy apartment. But he had things good enough that he didn't want to go to prison.

He had an overwhelming urge to flee. But the body would be found, if not tonight, then in the morning. And Mike, who wasn't going to risk trouble for the sake of one customer, would tell the police that the stranger and Ed Jesson had had an argument, been thrown out, and had last been seen leaving the place together, still arguing. It would be pretty hard to talk his way out of that.

Acting on a blind instinct, and because it was the only thing he could think of to do, Ed opened the trunk of his car, lifted the body and stuffed it inside. Afterwards he scuffed gravel over the blood stains.

When he drove away from the parking lot he had no clear idea of where he was going. He had visions of dumping the body by the side of the road somewhere, or into the river, or of burying it in the woods. One by one he rejected all of these alternatives. Bodies thrown into the water always came to the surface eventually. Even bodies buried in the deep woods were often discovered, by nosey dogs or Boy Scouts on a hike or something. And then identification, and Mike saying he remembered the argument the stranger had had with Ed Jesson.

He drove aimlessly for two hours, and when he finally went home he still had the body in the trunk. He debated about confiding his troubles to Naomi, but decided against it. He spent a sleepless night, seeking a solution and not finding it.

He rose with the dawn and ate a sort of breakfast by himself. Naomi always slept late after bridge nights. Then he went out to the car, and with his problem still unsolved, drove to work.

The minute, however, that he came within sight of the place, he knew exactly what to do. It was so utterly simple that he felt like kicking himself for being so dumb, for driving all over and spending the night awake and worrying, when he had the perfect set-up all ready and waiting. What better place could there be for the disposal of a corpse than a sanitary landfill?

No hurry, do it right, he told himself. The first trucks with the garbage and the trash wouldn't arrive for hours yet, and meanwhile he was out here all alone in what was practically a wilderness.

Could there be any slip-up, any mistake? It seemed impossible, but yet he ought to think it out first to make sure. This ought to fit right in with his normal operations. The landfill site was a big area, a series of undulating, semi-wooded hills, like a giant washboard. The idea was to fill up the ravines one by one, and some day this would be level land, maybe useful for something besides a dump. Ed's job was to bulldoze flat the stuff that the trucks unloaded, then cover it up with a layer of fresh dirt. All he had to do now was to drop the corpse in the middle of the trash, and bury all of it.

Was there any danger? He double-checked in his mind. A body buried here wouldn't be like a body buried in some shallow grave in the woods. Nobody came digging out here. The dozer did a thorough job of covering everything with dirt. That was what was "sanitary" about it.

But there was a problem, a single small one. Mr. Stuart, who owned this land, had explained it several times to Ed so Ed would do his job right. Mr. Stuart was in the business to make money. He'd bought this nearly worthless land for a song, and he made a little money out of using it for a dump. Mainly though, Mr. Stuart was thinking of future worth. Though it was miles and miles from town, Mr. Stuart intended to sell this land some day, after it was filled in and smoothed over. It could be a residential subdivision, or even a factory site. Maybe Mr. Stuart was pipedreaming, but Ed had instruc-

tions to make everything well-packed and solid, and the top layer of dirt plenty thick.

All of which pointed to just one thing. Wade's body had to be planted deep enough so that, even years later, some guy digging a basement for a house wouldn't come up with a human skeleton. Ed hadn't the slightest idea of how long it took bones to decay, or how good the laboratory people were on identifications. But why take the slightest chance? Bury him far down, plenty far down, so no basement digger would ever find him.

Ed set to work, took his time. He chose a ravine at least twenty feet deep, and lugged the body there. No one saw him, the place was too remote, not even close to any farms. Then he cranked up the dozer. When he'd finished a few turns, the man called Wade had disappeared forever, in an unmarked, nameless grave, in a place that wasn't even supposed to be a cemetery.

That was in 1949. Ed Jesson watched the papers, and no mention of Wade ever appeared. There wasn't a body, so anyone who knew Wade must have assumed that the transient had merely moved on. Ed felt that he had done the right thing. Wade had been a pretty worthless guy. What good would it have done for him, Ed Jesson, to have gone to prison on account of an accident?

In 1951, the trouble with Naomi started. Actually, things had been going on for a long time without Ed's knowing about them. The bridge games with the girls had been just a blind, a cover-up. With the connivance of a girl friend to corroborate the alibi, Naomi had been seeing another man.

He made the discovery quite by accident, wandering about town alone one night when Naomi was supposed to be playing bridge. He saw her with the man. But then he was too shocked to accost them, to confront Naomi with her guilt. Instead he followed them. And inside him, the hurt grew.

Later, he was waiting for her when she came home. He being awake at this hour was unusual. Naomi wasn't accustomed to being met at the door, and she sensed that something was wrong.

"Whatsa matter, Ed?" she started warily. "Why aren't you in bed?"

He had calmed considerably by this time, and had already begun to accept the situation as real. "Couldn't sleep," he told her.

"Yeah? Well, I'm dead."

He let her walk past him, but he noticed things about her. After six years of marriage, he had come to accept Naomi like he accepted the wallpaper on the wall. But now he

saw her differently. Maybe she'd gained a pound or two, but her figure wasn't bad. And she had a way of walking that sort of called attention to her womanly features. Her hair, helped by the rinses he paid for, was shiny and blonde. She used too much lipstick and other goop, but her face was still kind of pretty. She would certainly interest a guy who wasn't looking for a permanent attachment.

He followed her into the bedroom. "Where've you been?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Bridge at Dottie's. You know where I've been."

"I mean, where've you really been?"

She went on slipping into her robe, and she sat down in front of her boudoir table before she answered. "I said bridge at Dottie's."

"And I say you're lying."

She brazened it out as long as she could. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He crossed to stand behind her and looked at her face in the mirror. She met his gaze boldly, and he saw something in her eyes that he had never seen before. A hardness, a callousness toward him, where always before she had seemed so gentle and tender and loving.

"I saw you with the guy," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. "Okay. It was bound to happen, I guess. What are you going to do about it?"

"The question is, Naomi, what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"You're not going to stop seeing him?"

"No."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes."

"What about me?"

"You!" She snickered, swung around on the boudoir stool, and rose to confront him. "Why should I worry about you? What have you ever done for me?"

"I've loved you. I've supported you . . ."

"Hah! You bum! A lousy bulldozer operator in a trash dump!"

She shouldn't have said that. The idea might never have popped into his mind if she hadn't mentioned bulldozer and trash dump. Ed Jesson hadn't been a man accustomed to settling problems by violence. But when she made that crack he had a sudden vision—a vision of Naomi lying at the bottom of one of those ravines and then being covered over by garbage and junk and dirt. It was just too easy to pass up.

When his hands leaped to her throat, he took her completely by surprise. He had big, gnarled, sun-

burned hands, accustomed to manipulating the heavy steel levers. By contrast, Naomi's throat was soft and no test whatsoever for his strength. He squeezed tighter and tighter, and the fact that she fought and kicked and pleaded dumbly out of her staring eyes made no difference in the outcome at all. Her struggles, hopeless from the beginning, grew weaker quickly, and then ceased. She hung limp in his hands, and when he finally let go, she slid gently down to the floor and didn't move.

Later on, as he drank beer from the refrigerator, he realized that maybe he hadn't had to do what he'd done. Not that he really regretted it, or still loved his dead wife. And going through the motions of strangling her had been a satisfying experience, revenge for his spurned love and for the insult she had given him.

But he could have reacted less violently. He could have asked for a divorce, for instance. That would have been a complicated business, of course, costing money and taking time. His way had been simpler and surer.

Anyway, it was done now. He loaded Naomi's body into the trunk of the car, and then after a bit of thought, he put a lot of other stuff in too, her clothes, all the junk on her dressing table, the things around the place that were her personal property. Afterwards he went to bed and slept soundly.

He was up early though, and drove out to the dump in the pink dawn. He had already decided in his mind where to plant her, so when he arrived he simply backed his car to the proper spot and quickly unloaded the contents of the trunk. He took the same precautions as before, of course, making sure the body would be down plenty deep. In fact, Naomi would be even deeper than Wade had been, thirty feet eventually.

That evening, explaining to the neighbors, Ed said that he'd put Naomi on a train that morning to go visit her sick mother. Naomi did indeed have a mother, and a couple of sisters and brothers too, but it was the kind of family whose members didn't care whether the others were dead or alive. Ed also told the landlord he was moving out immediately. When he arrived at his next home, a little bachelor's kitchenette, he described himself as a single man.

Which he was, since he had no wife. But also he was a changed man. "A lousy bulldozer operator in a trash dump!" Those were the last words Naomi had spoken to him. He brooded on them now. Was his job, and the accompanying fact that he didn't make a lot of

money, the reason Naomi had gone to another man? Maybe old Wade had been right about women. You couldn't trust any of them. They simply went for the respectable guys, or the guys with the most money.

But what was he, Ed Jesson, going to do about that? He had no education, and he hadn't been real smart to begin with. All he could do was push a dozer around a trash lot. How could he make that pay? How could he become a big shot that way?

The answer wasn't long in coming. Because Ed Jesson had something nobody else had. He had what business men call a "valuable asset". In this case, a place to dispose of corpses when it wasn't convenient that these corpses should be disposed of in the ordinary manner. In other words, Ed Jesson had at least a potential bootleg funeral and cemetery service.

There ought to be people, he reasoned, maybe lots of people, who could use a service like that. The big problem was where to find them, how to contact possible customers.

He had no worries at all about the operation. That was slick and foolproof. The town wasn't moving out in the direction of Mr. Stuart's trash dump at all. So the site would be available for years and years. And if he buried his corpses deep enough, somebody could come in and build at this location, and Mr. Stuart and Ed Jesson, partners sort of, could move to another place.

If he just had the customers!

And then he read something in the paper about a man named Nicky Albert. Albert was a gangster, the head of a gang in fact, who operated not in Ed Jesson's small town, but in the city, seventy-five miles away. Nicky Albert was being suspected of the murder of another hood named Jimmy Trask. They didn't know for sure. And they didn't even know for sure that Jimmy Trask was dead. Just missing. But there were some very suspicious circumstances.

Ed took time from work and drove to the city looking for Nicky Albert. The gang leader wasn't an easy man to find, and a big rough-looking, weather-tanned man like Ed wasn't the sort to be granted an immediate audience with the high mogul of gangland.

But Ed was persistent and hung around. Finally a pencilled message, "I can do something useful for you, Mr. Albert," managed to get through. A couple of small, dapper underlings, with their right hands suspiciously in their side pockets, arrived to escort Ed into the presence of the great man.

Nicky Albert was a tiny fellow, which was maybe the reason he kept small men around him. He wore a gray suit that gleamed like silver, and a big diamond shone out of a crease in his necktie. He sat behind an enormous walnut desk, which didn't help his size any. But his head was large, indicating the presence of a brain, and he had piercing black eyes.

"So what can you do that would be useful to me, Mr. Jesson?" he wanted to know.

Ed had decided to be bold. "In case the body of Jimmy Trask is hanging around somewhere and getting in your way, I could get rid of it for you."

The expression on Nicky Albert's dark face never changed. He used the same words he must have used to the police. "I don't know anything about Jimmy Trask."

"I didn't say you did, Mr. Albert." Somehow he found himself talking easily and confidently. "I just said 'in case'. But I'm in a kind of business, you see. I'm always getting rid of things people don't want, trash, garbage, all sorts of junk. I operate a bulldozer in a sanitary landfill."

Nicky Albert flicked sharp glances at his hirelings, both of whom shrugged. "Mr. Jesson," he said then, "describe to me what's a sanitary landfill."

Ed obliged, giving full details. All except, that is, the information that Mr. Stuart's property already contained two bodies. Over the last couple of years Ed had developed a certain self-protective wariness.

"I think it would also be a good place to get rid of dead bodies," he finished. "Especially for people who can't afford expensive funerals, cemetery lots, tombstones, and stuff. You know, friends of the dead man who want to see him decently buried, but don't want the publicity, and don't want strangers noseying in on the final services. I know exactly when to expect the trash trucks, and I can see 'em coming for a couple of miles. So most of the time I'm alone, and anything I happen to have in the trunk of my car I can dump in with the rest of the garbage and junk. It's guaranteed."

Nicky Albert pursed his thick, sensual lips, and was thoughtful. As far as Ed was concerned, the gangster had already given himself away. He had a body stowed away somewhere. Ed noticed another thing about Albert too. He was just a little nervous, a little eager. That body was kind of embarrassing to the gangster.

"How do I know you're not a police stooge?" Nicky asked.

"You can check on me, where I

work, how long I've been there. You can come out and see the place if you want to."

Albert waved a soft, girlish little hand that was decorated with big rings. "No, I don't want to be seen there. The cops might have a tail on me."

Ed was ushered out, there was a debate in Nicky's inner office, and finally one of the underlings told Ed he could go home and he might hear from them later. Ed did as he was told, but he had a feeling he'd accomplished something.

Next day as he worked he was sure that he was being spied upon. Probably by someone quite a distance off, someone using powerful binoculars maybe. Then he happened to see Mr. Stuart in the afternoon, and Mr. Stuart was curious about a party who'd been around asking questions about Ed.

The evening of the following day, Ed received a long distance phone call. He was told to bring his car to a certain corner in the city that same night to pick up a package.

"How much do I get for delivering the package?" Ed wanted to know.

"Two hundred bucks," the unknown voice said.

"Make it a thousand and I'll be there," Ed replied.

The voice hesitated for a full ten seconds before it answered. "Okay, a thousand."

Driving his car into the city, Ed felt better about himself than he had for a long time. Already he was a real pro in the business. And as for his old job of pushing the bulldozer around, he was finally collecting some fringe benefits.

The corner where he'd been told to go was a dark one. There was an old delivery van there with the name of some dairy on the sides. Ed was given two objects, the first a nice fat bulky envelope, and the second a big stiff oblong thing about six feet in length wrapped in brown paper.

"Why is it so stiff?" he wondered.

"Been in the ice box," the man said.

The object was so rigid that Ed had to take the spare tire out of his trunk to get it to fit. The driver of the van cursed all the time he was doing it. But the job got done, and Ed made a mental note not to make the same mistake next time.

In the morning when he planted the package he had the same feeling as before, that someone was watching him from a distance. He didn't care about that. He was doing an honest job for honest pay. There'd been an even one grand in that little envelope.

That was only the beginning, of

course, back in 1951. The beginning of a lucrative, secret career for Ed Jesson. He'd picked a good customer in Nicky Albert. Nicky apparently had an inexhaustible supply of enemies, and he was the sort who believed that the best way to eliminate an enemy was to eliminate him permanently. And there was nothing more permanent, more final, more complete, than planting in the sanitary landfill. The police never did figure out how so many unsavory characters could disappear so entirely without a trace. Ed even started to imagine that he was engaged in a kind of social work, helping get rid of a lot of people whom society could better do without.

Sometimes there were so many of those brown packages that Ed got the impression that they were being imported from all over the country, that maybe Nicky had started a profitable sideline of being the middleman in this corpse disposal business. Maybe Nicky was charging the boys in Chicago, Frisco and other places, two grand for the job and then splitting with Ed. Ed thought about arguing the point, but decided against it. Nicky had all the contacts. He handled the sales end, while Ed was in production.

Besides, he didn't want to take a chance on ruining a good thing. Ed Jesson was becoming wealthy. He was careful not to be too obvious about it. In fact, he'd become a pretty sophisticated individual. He'd heard about such dangers as curious Internal Revenue men, so when anybody casually inquired, he explained that he was a frugal, saving man, and also he could afford a lot of nice things since his wife had left him.

The nice things in Ed's life included a new apartment, comfortable though not fancy, and a well-stocked home bar. Sometimes he had companions to share these modest delights with him. The companions were invariably young, pretty and fun-loving. Ed never remarried. He wasn't one to make the same mistake twice.

Some day, he reckoned, as his secret hoard of greenbacks accumulated, he would retire and really live it up, somewhere in a foreign country where strangers wouldn't be so curious. He planned for this day by studying travel literature. This was part of his enjoyment of life, planning for the future like any solid citizen ought to do.

He thought that future had surely arrived one afternoon when Mr. Stuart brought a man out to view the property. Mr. Stuart introduced the newcomer to Ed as a Mr. Macklin, but didn't say who

he was exactly. And then when Mr. Macklin went away, Mr. Stuart was still secretive.

"What's up?" Ed demanded to know. He'd always known that Mr. Stuart had hoped to sell this property and make a profit from it. Only the town had refused to expand in the direction of the trash dump, and although Ed had marched his bulldozer across ravine after ravine, leveling the countryside to the flatness of a billiard table, it didn't look as if it was going to make anything but a nice farm or pasture land. "Mr. Macklin going to buy this place?"

"Looks as if he might," Mr. Stuart admitted. "But don't you worry, Ed. You ain't going to be out of a job. If I sell this, I'll buy me another place north of town that I have my eye on, and we'll still be in the sanitary landfill business. I might even buy you a new dozer, Ed."

Ed Jesson relaxed for a while. But he had to be careful these days, because Mr. Macklin started to show up at odd times, and he usually brought surveyors and other people with him. And then one day he brought a man in a gray-blue uniform with a lot of gold stuff on the visor of his hat.

Ed quit work and rushed to Mr. Stuart's office. "What's going on out there?" he asked in real apprehension.

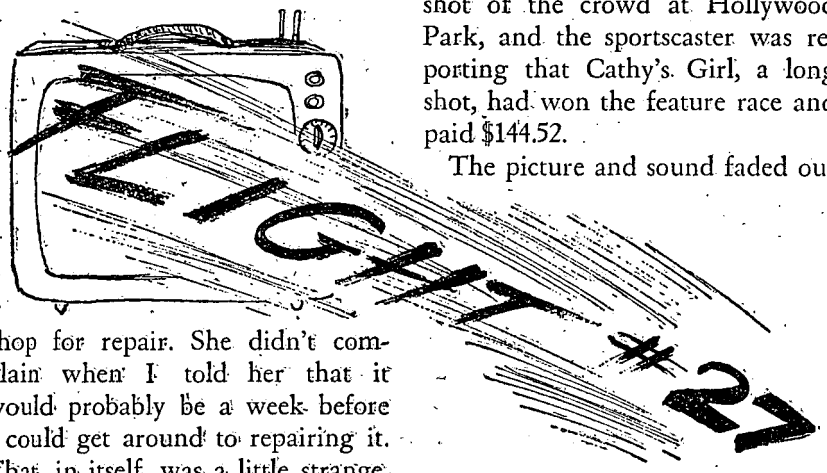
Mr. Stuart leaned back in his chair, plopped his heels up on his desk top, and smiled kind of sheepishly. "Guess we can't keep the secret any longer, Ed. The Air Force is going to buy my land. Going to install Minuteman missiles. Underlying rock strata seem to be just right or something. They're going to dig silos for those missiles sixty feet or so straight down into the ground."

Ed started out the door, and only half heard Mr. Stuart's next remark. "Ain't that just like the government though? We've been filling in for years, and now they're going to dig it all up again."

Ed went home and looked at his travel folders. Also he thought he'd better check on extradition laws. He was really a sophisticated fellow finally.

My name is Fred T. Banks, age twenty-seven. I am married and my wife's name is Louise. I own and operate a radio and TV repair shop in Burbank, California, known as Bank's Radio & TV Service. It's a small business and I employ only one man, Dick Larsen.

Dick was out on a house call that afternoon when a Mrs. Smith brought the TV portable into my shop for repair. She didn't complain when I told her that it would probably be a week before I could get around to repairing it. That, in itself, was a little strange, but at the time I paid no attention to it. The other part was even stranger, but, again, I gave it little thought. Instead of giving me her address, she stated she'd be back in about a week to pick it up. I had never seen her prior to that and I haven't seen her since then.



She told me that the sound and picture on the portable kept fading out shortly after the set had been turned on. When she departed my shop I turned on the set to give it a preliminary test.

At that moment the phone rang and, while I was getting the pertinent information from a customer needing a house call, I noticed that both the sound and picture had come on the portable TV. I didn't pay much attention to it, however; but I do recall that there was a shot of the crowd at Hollywood Park, and the sportscaster was reporting that Cathy's Girl, a long shot, had won the feature race and paid $144.52.

The picture and sound faded out before I finished with the phone call. On my way out I turned off the TV set, picked up my repair kit, and got into my truck.

That same evening, while I was locking up the shop and getting ready to go home, I chatted briefly with Larry Green. He owns the furniture shop immediately next door to my shop. We both park our

The ability to foresee the future is not accepted by many. We suggest each individual assess this case in his own way.

cars in the back of our shops, and he was also getting ready to go home.

Larry and I kidded around a bit, the way we always do, and I said, "I haven't seen much of you lately," or words to that effect. Larry told me that since Hollywood Park had opened he'd been out there practically every afternoon.

I asked, "Were you out there today?"

When he told me he had, I said he must have won a bundle if he bet on Cathy's Girl. Larry said that he didn't even know that horse had been running.

Again I should have realized that something strange was going on. Larry is a true horse player.

He knows more about the horses going each day than he does about the cost of each piece of furniture in his store. But, because I was eager to get home to Louise, I didn't give Larry's remark a second thought. Not until the next afternoon.

That's when Larry called me from Hollywood Park and thanked me for the hot tip I'd given him. I didn't understand what he was talking about until he told me that Cathy's Girl had run that afternoon, and that the horse had won and paid exactly the price I'd told him the day before. Naturally, Larry had bet heavily on the horse, and now that he'd won he wanted to know the name of my tout.

While Larry was pressing me, trying to learn my source of information, I kept looking at the TV portable that belonged to Mrs. Smith and that was still sitting on the bench. I felt a little silly telling Larry that I'd seen it all on a TV set, and so I merely told him that I'd dreamed the horse race sequence.

Horse players like Larry will bet

on nothing more than wild hunches, and I knew he believed me when I told him it had been a dream. After he'd hung up I went over to Mrs. Smith's portable and turned it on.

There was a picture of a town, faint and quite blurred, and a few minutes later the newscaster's voice faded in. He reported that three men, masquerading in clothes resembling space suits, had robbed the bank in that town and escaped with more than fifty thousand dollars. Again both picture and sound faded out, as Mrs. Smith had reported it would, and I turned off the set and went home.

While Louise and I were having dinner, we talked about the day's activities, the way we always do. I mentioned that I'd caught the report of the space bandits getting fifty thousand in that holdup. Louise said she'd had the radio on all day but somehow she'd missed that news report.

I was getting ready to tell her about the strange Mrs. Smith as well as the Hollywood racetrack sequence on her portable. But at that moment the telephone rang. After that, both of us were too concerned with the condition of Louise's mother to even think about TV sets.

The phone call had been long distance from Louise's sister in Illinois. Their mother had had a heart attack and she was now in a rather critical condition. Of course, Louise wanted to see her mother as soon as possible, but she didn't want to go because of the expense of the trip. I insisted she fly back home, and I finally convinced her to leave as quickly as possible.

I got Louise a reservation on Flight #27, non-stop. It was a propeller driven plane, but departing early enough next morning so that she would land at 11:15 a.m., Chicago time.

While we were at the airport, waiting for the plane to begin loading, Louise and I both noticed the actor, Rod Bayless, getting ready to board the same plane that Louise was taking. Louise and I kidded around about that—how she might be discovered and I'd then be her head cameraman. The plane took off, right on schedule. Then I had a leisurely breakfast on the way to the shop.

When I came out of the restaurant I stopped to read the headlines on the morning papers in the racks.

SPACE BANDITS ROB BANK OF FIFTY GRAND

I bought the paper and read the story. The holdup had not occurred yesterday, as I thought at first. It had occurred that very morning, just as the bank opened

its doors for the day's business.

That meant that Mrs. Smith's portable had again screened the holdup in advance, just as it had previewed the race at Hollywood Park.

I hurried to my repair shop and immediately turned on the portable This time when the picture faded in it was so fuzzy I couldn't distinguish the locale. But I did hear the newscaster's voice.

He stated that an airliner, flight #27, had just crashed a few hundred miles out of Chicago. All passengers, among them the well-known actor, Rod Bayless, had been killed.

The newscaster continued, but his voice was fading out rapidly, and a second later both the sound and the blurred picture had disappeared completely.

When I had entered my shop minutes prior to that I'd felt a strange excitement. Perhaps through some unexplainable reason Fate had endowed the TV set with the ability to predict future events. I could imagine all sorts of wonderful things that could happen for Louise and me, if I were able to foresee the future.

Now, when it had previewed the death flight to Chicago, the flight that Louise was on, I felt only panic and fear.

I immediately telephoned the airlines office and inquired about Flight #27. I was told it was proceeding on schedule and that the plane would be landing in Chicago right on time. The girl I was speaking to even verified the fact that actor, Rod Bayless, had taken that plane.

The plane was still several hours out of Chicago at that time, and my only thought was that it could not be allowed to proceed to Chicago. I told the girl that the plane should either be stopped or turned around, and made to land somewhere other than the Chicago area. Anything to keep it from nearing Chicago. I knew I was beginning to sound like a babbling idiot, but I kept thinking of Louise and the report on the TV portable.

I tried to explain that I could predict future events, and that it would crash. But that did little good. I told her that I'd seen the crash on my TV set. She tried to humor me, but I knew that she considered me mentally deranged.

I pleaded with her to stop the plane from proceeding further because my wife was on it.

And then I told her that I'd put a bomb on the plane and that it would explode any minute.

Immediately she switched me to one of her supervisors, and I repeated the story about the bomb to him. He talked to me for quite

some time, getting a lot of information about me, where I was calling from, my name, occupation, address, and all the rest. When he finally hung up he'd assured me that appropriate steps in the matter would be taken.

Seconds before that a man had already entered my shop and he was standing inside the door now, waiting for me to finish my call.

He identified himself to be Agent Forbes of the FBI, and he asked me to accompany him to his office.

He advised me of my rights. He explained that placing a bomb on a plane was a serious offense, as well as merely reporting it as a prank. Then he asked me to make a statement.

Voluntarily, and without any force or coercion of any kind, I have made the statement, and I have read it in its entirety and it is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

As Fred Banks finished reading it, he glanced across the desk and saw that Agent Forbes was offering him a pen.

"Will you sign it, please, Mr. Banks?"

Banks' head dropped as he stared numbly at his wristwatch. While he'd been reading the statement the minute hand had crept around the dial. The plane had already been scheduled to land at Chicago.

"Would you call, please," Banks asked, "and let me know how it happened?"

"As soon as you've signed the statement."

Fred Banks signed quickly. After Agent Forbes had inspected the signature and placed the statement on the desk in front of him, he picked up the phone.

Fred got out of his chair and walked wearily over to the window. He looked outside and saw the brilliant California sunshine and the traffic moving along the street. On the far sidewalk he watched the young couple, walking slowly. They were talking animatedly, and stopping often to laugh. And they were holding hands.

He remembered other times in the past, when he and Louise—

"—Mr. Banks."

"Mr. Banks!" the voice repeated urgently.

He turned away from the window and saw that Agent Forbes had called his name.

"Yes?"

"I've got good news for you, Mr. Banks. Flight #27 landed quite safely hours ago. Not at Chicago, but at another airport. Because of

your bomb threat they made an immediate emergency landing and searched the entire plane. You'll be happy to know that they didn't find a bomb, but they did find something else."

Agent Forbes paused a moment before he continued. "The pilot found that a crack had developed around the edge of one of the windows in the forward cabin. Had it gone undetected, the pressure would have blown out the weakened window and undoubtedly the plane would have crashed."

"And Louise—my wife—she's all right?"

Agent Forbes nodded. "I understand she's already on a train. Probably at her mother's side by now."

Fred Banks was blinking rapidly as he turned his back on Agent Forbes and went to the window.

After a while he heard Agent Forbes asking, "Do you suppose we could take a look at that TV set?"

"You bet," Fred said. "I'll call my assistant and have him bring it right down."

Fred Banks used the phone on the Agent's desk.

"Gee, Chief," Dick Larsen answered, "where have you been?"

Fred ignored the question. "Dick, that TV portable sitting on the bench—run it down here, will you. I'm at—"

"—the one belonging to Mrs. Smith, you mean?"

"That's right."

"She picked it up a couple of minutes after I came to work. I told her it hadn't been fixed but she wouldn't leave it here. She's a strange one—that Mrs. Smith."

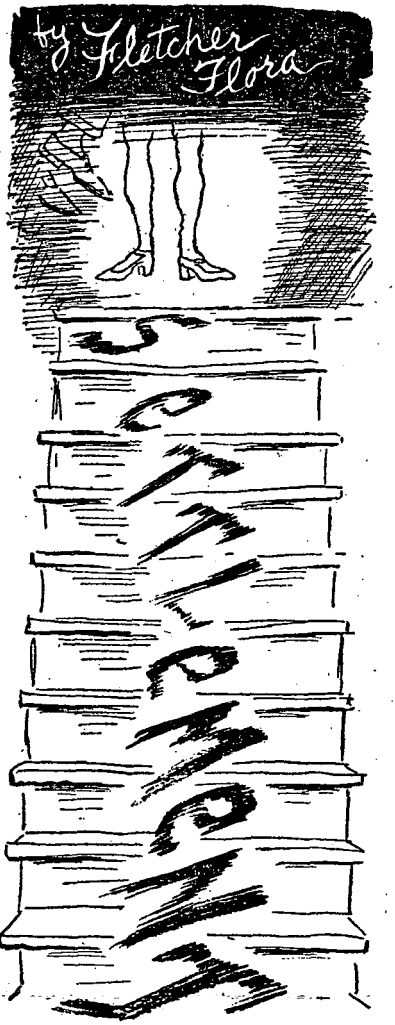
Dear Fans:

My desk is so weighed down with mail, requesting information about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club, I hope you won't mind if I reply in an open letter. Here are the particulars:

Membership dues are fifty cents which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year. You can't imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.

Most sincerely,
Pat Hitchcock

P. O. Box 434
Tarzana, California



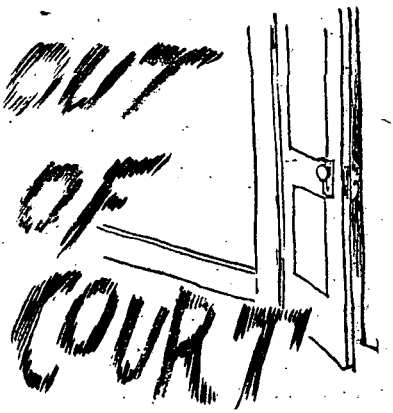
FRANCIS ETHERIDGE was sitting on the floor of a small closet at the foot of the stairs that ascended from the front hall into the shadows of the second floor of the rented house in which he lived with his mother and father. Francis had always lived with his mother and father in rented houses. The house was always old and shabby, furnished with odds and ends that always gave the impression of being strangers to each other, and it was always just a temporary expedient, something to afford shelter until Mr. Etheridge could find something suitable to buy. The funny thing about these houses, as Francis knew them, was that they were all alike. Although they were in different locations and varied somewhat in age and the number of rooms and stories they had, they possessed, nevertheless, a kind of strange and pervasive common denominator that made all these variations unimportant, so that Francis, thinking back, could not remember a single significant difference.

Francis had not been happy in these houses, and that was why, when you came right down to it, he was sitting now on the floor of the small closet in this one. He had learned that any house, no matter how shabby and depressing in general, always had a particular place, a corner or a closet or an attic or someplace, where one could withdraw in secret to security and peace. You could sit there, as Francis was now sitting, and do nothing whatever except listen to the

'Follow in father's footsteps' has been a parental credo for years and, though many sons fight the inevitable, a crafty young one is apt to recognize its advantages.

silence that formed a soft protective perimeter around a golden core of fantasy. If someone came near, you remained silent. If someone called, you did not answer.

It was dark in the closet. The only light was a dull diagonal swath that fell across the floor from the narrow crack Francis had left in the door. He liked darkness, which was comforting, but he did not like *total* darkness, which was terrifying. From where he sat, he could look through the crack and up the narrow, steep stairs to the landing above. The upper hall was full of shadows, but an odd layer of light, about eighteen inches thick, lay along the floor like a blanket of fog just at the head of the stairs. Francis was watching this layer of light, because it was odd and interesting and something to watch, and that was how he happened to see the legs move suddenly into the light and stop. The dim scene took on instantly a quality of eerie farce, as if it had been arranged by an intelligence with a sense of insane humor, for the legs appeared to be detached at the knees, the body above them obscured by shadows.



The legs were thin and ugly, a woman's legs, and they seemed for that reason, their ugliness, to heighten the farcical quality of the scene. Francis felt compelled to laugh, and he covered his mouth with a hand to smother any inadvertent sound, but he did not laugh after all, for there was suddenly a subtle change, an added ingredient of irrational terror. Behind, and a little to one side of the first pair of legs, there was all at once a second pair, simply not there one instant and soundlessly there the next; and it was perfectly clear to Francis,

with all the surety of revelation, that the first legs were not aware of the second, and were not meant to be aware.

All was static in utter silence, the four detached legs in a layer of light and Francis watching from the dark closet below, and then the first legs spoke in a high, querulous voice.

"Francis!" the legs said. "Where are you, Francis?"

Francis did not answer. He never answered unless there was a practical certainty that he would be discovered anyhow. The legs, which had remained static, became silent again for an interval of several seconds before speaking again in the same high querulous voice. They did not speak, this time, to Francis, or to anyone else, unless it could be considered that they spoke to themselves.

"Where is the boy?" the legs said. "Why is he never around when I need him? Now I suppose I must go down myself for the aspirin."

The first legs were his mother, of course, and the second legs were his father. His mother was always taking aspirin, and it seemed that she was always leaving them in a place where she surely wouldn't be when she needed them next. She was thin and sickly and afflicted with migraine headaches.

His mother's legs did not begin immediately to descend the stairs. They did not move, the legs of Mr. Etheridge did not move, everything was still and fixed in absolute absence of sound and motion. Then, with startling and almost comic abruptness, like an explosion, the legs of Francis' mother seemed to fly straight upward into shadows, and an instant later her entire body came flying down across the narrow range of Francis' vision. It looked for all the world as if she had deliberately dived head foremost down the stairs, and all this odd and comic action was punctuated by a sodden sound that was like the sound made in the imagination by a big, splashy period in an exclamation point.

Francis, who had stopped breathing, took a deep breath and released it slowly with the softest sigh. He continued to sit motionless, Indian fashion, his eyes fixed in the path of his narrow vision. The legs of his father began to descend, steps on the treads exactly cadenced, as if measured slowly by count, the body of his father emerging step by step from the shadows, until it was precisely in view, bounded by door and jamb. His father's face was like a stone. In his hand, hanging at his side, was a short, heavy piece of wood

or dark metal. He passed from sight, slowly descending, and Francis listened to the cadenced steps until they stopped. At almost that instant, the instant of the steps' stopping, there was a low moan, a whimper of pain, and after that, quickly, a second sodden sound.

Francis waited, his eyes now removed from their vision of the stairs, his head cocked a little in a posture of intent listening. He heard his father in the hall, his steps receding briefly toward the rear of the house. Then he heard a familiar sound and knew that his father was dialing a number on the telephone. A few moments later his father's voice spoke urgently a doctor's name. The telephone was behind the stairs, out of view, and Francis, self-schooled in the preservation of silence and solitude, arose in the closet without the slightest sound and slipped into the hall and from the hall into the living room, and so through the dining room and kitchen to the back yard.

At the rear of the yard, its branches spreading over the alley, was a big mulberry tree. No care was taken of it, but the berries, which were large and sweet and dark purple when ripe, somehow escaped the ravishment of worms. Francis often climbed the tree and sat there for long periods eating the berries and thinking about all sorts of things real and unreal, and he went there and climbed it now and sat on a sturdy limb with his back at rest against the trunk.

Sitting so, now and then eating a berry, he began to wonder why his father had killed his mother.

The days before his mother's funeral were desolate days. The shabby rented house was full of relatives who had to be fed and bedded down, and Francis was even forced to give up his room to a maternal uncle and two cousins. There was simply no place to go to be alone, no place in all the house, not even the small closet in the front hall, to spin securely the golden gossamer web of fantasy. The mulberry tree was invaded daily by the two cousins, both of them too young, in the tolerant opinion of the adults, to behave with the decorum of grief for a woman they had hardly known.

Francis himself felt no grief. He merely felt confused and lonely and violated. He spent most of the time alone in corners, and he kept wondering all this time why his father had killed his mother. He had pushed her down the narrow stairs, and then he had certainly given her a definitive blow with the heavy piece of wood or metal, and Francis wondered why. His

mother had been a submissive and oppressive woman, oppressive to the spirit, but she had been kind in her own way, within her limited capacity to sense the need for kindness, and if she had not created love, neither had she incited hatred.

There were reasons, of course, why men killed women. One of the reasons was other women, or another woman, but Francis could not believe that this was true of his father, for he had long ago perceived dimly, although he was very young, that his father had no interest in women, not even in his wife, whom he had killed. He was, in fact, a rigid and moralistic man who abstained from tobacco and alcohol and insisted upon clean speech. He said grace at table and spoke up for old-fashioned modesty as opposed to contemporary wantonness. It seemed strange to Francis, when he thought about it, that his father and mother had ever married, or that they had, having married, continued to live so long together. It was impossible to believe that either was in the least interested in the other, and that they had, sometime in these years, by deliberate design or in eruption of distorted passion, given birth to him, their son, was entirely beyond credence, an intolerable obscenity. He did not think of this so specifically or so precisely, of course. He merely sustained, because it was essential to what he was and had to be, the illusion that his relationship with them did not antedate the deepest probing of his memory.

Another reason why men sometimes killed women, he thought in his corner, was to gain money or something valuable that the women had, but this was even more untenable than love or hate as a motive for his mother's murder by his father. His mother had been as poor in goods as in spirit and body, and she had left nothing to his father except the expense of burying her and feeding for two or three days all the relatives who came to help him do it. There seemed to be, in fact, no rational reason for killing her at all, nothing to be gained that could not have been gained with less trouble and danger by simply going away. Francis, pondering the mystery, was filled with wonder, if not with grief.

It was a great relief when the funeral was finally over. Services were held in the chapel of the mortuary that had received the body, and Francis sat beside his father in a cool, shadowy alcove lined with gray drapes. He could look across the chapel to the casket in which his mother lay under a spray of fern and red and white

carnations, and by lifting his eyes he could see, high in the far wall, a leaded window of stained glass that transmitted the sunlight in glittering fragments of color. Most of the time he watched the window, but once in a while he would glance sidewise from the corners of his eyes at his father's face. He was curious to see if the secret his father thought he shared with no one would reveal itself, here in this dim alcove, in some naked expression, however fleeting. But if there was such an expression, Francis could not detect it, was not looking, perhaps, in the instant that it came and passed. His father sat as still as stone and stared at nothing with empty eyes.

After the chapel, there was the ordeal of the cemetery. Francis rode out there with his father in the back seat of a big black limousine furnished by the mortician. Beyond the edge of the cemetery where the earth had been opened for his mother's entry, a meadow of green grass, growing brown in the sun, sloped down to the bank of a stream lined with poplars and oaks and elms. Overhead, while the service was read, a crow flew lazily and constantly cawed. Francis watched the trees and listened to the crow.

Happily, the graveside service was brief, and after it was completed everyone went away, and Francis went home with his father in the limousine. All the relatives began to leave then, to go back to wherever they had come from, and that was the best of a bad time, as the shabby old house approached emptiness and silence. After a while, before dark, no one was left but Francis and his father and Uncle Ted. Uncle Ted, who had to wait until morning to catch a train, was the oldest brother of Francis' mother, and he and Mr. Etheridge, when all the others had gone, sat in the living room and talked. Francis, hardly noticed, sat behind them in a high-backed chair and looked out a window into the side yard and listened to what was said.

"Luther," Uncle Ted said to Mr. Etheridge, "I haven't wanted to discuss this with you previously, but if you don't take action in this business, you're a fool, and that's all I've got to say."

"I intend to take action," Mr. Etheridge said.

"If I were you, now that the funeral is over, I'd see a lawyer immediately."

"I've made an appointment for tomorrow, Ted."

"Good. In my opinion, you have a perfect case. Surely your landlord carries liability insurance."

"Oh, yes. Certainly. He has nu-

merous rentals, and could hardly afford to be without it."

"It's always easier if there's insurance. If it comes to a jury, they have much less compunction about soaking a big company."

"I have a notion it will be settled out of court."

"Quite likely. You mustn't accept too little, however. After all, your wife is dead and buried."

"So she is, and I'll not forget it for a moment. Any settlement will have to be most liberal."

"Well, the liability is perfectly apparent, I should say. It's almost criminal. That broken board at the head of the stairs should have been replaced long ago. It's a landlord's obligation to take care of such matters."

Then, of course, Francis knew why his father had pushed his mother down the stairs. There was no longer the least need to wonder about it.

He was in his room upstairs when the investigator from the insurance company came. Francis knew that the visitor was an investigator because Mr. Etheridge brought him right upstairs and showed him the loose board, and then they stood there in the shadowy hall at the head of the stairs and talked about what had happened. Francis had his door closed, and in the beginning could hear only the voices, not the words, and so he walked over silently from his bed, where he had been sitting, and opened the door a crack. Then he could hear clearly what was being said, and could see, by applying an eye to the crack, the investigator and his father standing face to face there in the shadows.

"It happened very suddenly," Mr. Etheridge was saying. "My wife and I were in our room. She had a severe headache and wanted some aspirin, but she had left the bottle downstairs. I offered to get it for her, but she said no, she couldn't remember just where she had put it and would have to look for it. She went out of the room, and I followed her, a few steps behind, thinking that I might be of help. When she reached the head of the stairs, she simply seemed to pitch down headfirst, almost as if she had dived. It happened so suddenly, as I said, that I couldn't reach her, although I tried. She struck her head on the edge of one of the lower steps. Her collar bone was broken also, as you know, but death was caused by the head injury. The doctor has certified that."

"I know." The investigator was a squat man with arms and torso far out of proportion to his legs, which were remarkably short. His voice had a harsh, rasping sound,

as if he had a sore throat that was painful to talk through. "Are you positive she tripped? She didn't merely faint and fall? You said yourself she wasn't feeling well. She had a severe headache."

"No, no. She tripped. She didn't merely collapse, as she would have done in fainting. She pitched forward with considerable momentum. That's surely obvious from the distance she fell before striking the stairs. You can see the board here. It had rotted away from its nails and come loose. It projects above the others perhaps a quarter of an inch."

"I see. It's quite dangerous, being right at the head of the stairs. I'm surprised that you didn't fix it yourself, Mr. Etheridge."

"I should have. I reproach myself for not having done so. But I'm not handy at such things. It's the landlord's duty to keep the house in repair, and I reported the board to him. He assured me that he would have it replaced."

"I assume that you were the only one who witnessed the accident?"

"Yes."

"That's too bad. It would simplify matters if there were someone to corroborate your testimony."

"Well, there isn't. My wife and I were alone in the house. The boy was outside playing."

It was then that Francis opened the door of his room and walked out into the hall and over to his father and the investigator. The door made a thin, squeaking noise in opening, and both men turned their heads in the direction of the sound and watched Francis approach.

"I've been in my room," Francis said, unnecessarily. "I heard you talking."

"Did you?" Mr. Etheridge's voice had an edge. "You shouldn't listen to conversations that don't concern you, Francis. It's bad manners."

"I'm sorry. I just thought I could help."

"There is nothing you can do. You had better go back to your room."

"Help in what way?" the investigator said.

"Well," Francis said, "I heard you say that it would simplify things if there were someone else who saw what happened, and I saw."

"What's that? You saw the accident? You saw your mother fall down the stairs?"

"Yes. I was sitting in the closet down there in the hall. I often sit in there, because it's quiet and no one knows where I am and it's a good place to be. The door was open a little bit, though, and I could see right up the stairs, *and I*

saw just exactly what happened."

Francis looked from the investigator to the face of his father, and his father's face was just like it had been in the alcove in the chapel, as gray as the drapes, as hard as stone. He did not move, watching Francis.

"All right, son," the investigator said. "Just tell me what you saw."

Francis turned his eyes back to the investigator. The eyes were pale blue, complementing his pale hair, the wide remote eyes of a dreamer.

"It was just as Father said. Mother tripped and fell. She just came flying down."

There was a long, sighing sound that was the sound of Mr. Etheridge's breath being released in the shadows.

"If you saw your mother fall," he said, "why didn't you come out to help her?"

"I don't know. I was afraid, I guess. It was so sudden and so terrible that it frightened me. I don't know why. Then you came down, and I heard you calling the doctor, and so I just went out the back way and sat in the mulberry tree."

"Well, I'll be damned!" The investigator shrugged at Mr. Etheridge. "Kids are odd little animals."

"Yes," Mr. Etheridge said, "they are, indeed. Now you will please return to your room, Francis. Thank you for speaking up."

"You're welcome," Francis said.

He went back into his room and closed the door and sat on the floor in a swath of sunlight. There was a large book there that he had been looking at earlier, and he began now to look at it again. It contained thousands of colored pictures of almost every imaginable thing, and Francis was still looking at the pictures about a quarter of an hour later when his father opened the door and came into the room and stood looking down at him.

"What are you looking at, Francis?" Mr. Etheridge said.

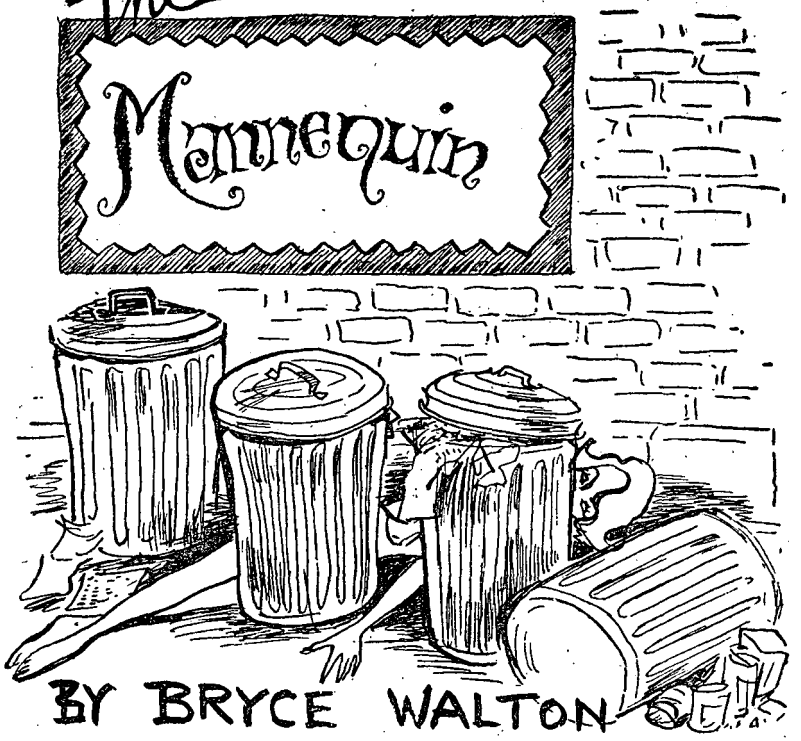
Francis looked up from the bright pictures to his father's gray stone face. His pale blue eyes had a kind of soft sheen on them. The sunlight gathered and caught fire in his pale hair.

"It's a catalog," he said. "There are so many beautiful things in the catalog that I've always wanted. Are we going to get a lot of money from the insurance company? If we are, maybe we could get some of the things. Maybe even a piano that I could take lessons on."

The soft sheen gave to his eyes a look of blindness. He did not seem to see his father at all.

"Yes," Mr. Etheridge said. "Maybe even a piano."

the Mannequin



BY BRYCE WALTON

THE CASE was only a week old when a querulous call began in the DA's office. It filtered down through the offices of the Police Commissioner, the Chief Inspector and the Chief of Detectives. It ended where all peevish, last-resort calls end—in the Office of the *Bureau of Special Services and Investigations.*

Should a university trained detective, thoroughly schooled in new techniques, try to compete with an oldtimer who relies on intuition?

Captain Charles W. Beaufort's ponderous countenance turned glum and overshadowed as he listened to the voice of sordid reality shattering another daydream; a dream in which Captain Beaufort was not a cop, but a famous international antique collector, slim, impeccably dressed, strolling among beautiful things. He closed a collector's publication called *The Victoriana Quarterly,* and with it his plan to attend an antique auction on 3rd Avenue that afternoon.

". . . so find Betty Myers," said the Chief of Detectives. "Find the body dead or alive, but find it, or a reasonable explanation of where it went and how it got there."

Captain Beaufort hung up, then called his three favorite stoolies. None of them knew a thing about what the papers referred to as the "vanished nude of Seam Street". He brooded then for two minutes in angry pouting speculation while caressing his second chin like a goatee. This case should have been easy. The murderer had confessed almost at once. He even insisted on his guilt and there was no reason to deny it. Only the murderer couldn't prove he had killed Betty Myers. Nor could anyone else, so far. The nude body of the supposed victim insisted on remaining invisible. There was no evidence of her having actually been murdered. There was no clue as to how she had disappeared.

Captain Beaufort's thick eyebrows massaged together wearily in an expression of interior pain. As head of the *Bureau of Special Services and Investigations,* he enjoyed a clean supervisory detachment from most cases. Squad commanders enabled him to avoid personal contact by keeping him informed of important developments and arrests. But his authority made it impossible to avoid all sordid direct involvement with crime. When local precinct detectives were stumped, Beaufort was usually forced to sink personally into the swampy degradation of police procedure. Then there was nothing for it but to hold your nose and get through it as fast as possible, much as you speed past a duck farm on a hot summer day . . .

"I been following this case, boss," said Sergeant Risken exuberantly as he drove uptown through a bleak gray December morning. "A fascinating puzzle."

Captain Beaufort sat in the rear munching his third ham-and-egg sandwich. Direct contact with the murky and sordid world of detection always inflicted him with a terrible hunger, insatiable until

the case was solved. "A fascinating puzzle, is it?" he said, wryly, and continued to study the peculiar shape of the back of Risken's red head. He considered it oddly shaped, extraordinarily large to house such an ordinary and platitudinous brain. He was in awe of Risken's remarkable ability to adjust to reality; his dumb lack of complaint; his admiration for uniforms and official procedures; his stupid inability to be introverted, repressed, resentful of the way things were; the way he enjoyed crime, every vulgar thing, including the wheeling of a car wildly through traffic with overbearing vigor and zeal.

"A real baffler, boss. It fascinates me."

"A beautiful woman, drunk, hysterical, naked, is assaulted and ostensibly murdered in an alley," Beaufort said wearily. "There's no accounting for taste."

"Those boys at the seventeenth precinct aren't dumb, but they're stopped cold. This case is a fabulous enigma!"

"College grads, the new cops," Beaufort said, scowling and gloomy. "Brains trained to think like computers. They know all the rules, they go by the book. They've got no imaginations and they ignore the obvious as though by deliberate intent."

"But everyone can't overlook a gorgeous blonde without a stitch on, boss."

"There's a reasonable explanation for everything, except why people chose to be what they are. For example why anyone would be a garbage collector, or a cop." He licked succulent residue from his lips. "Maybe there never is a choice for anyone."

"Only reasonable explanation

for this is what that one witness swore to. Saw it in the paper. Says early that morning he sees a flying saucer hovering right where she disappeared."

Captain Beaufort frowned. "Over ten thousand people disappear around here every year. Most of them are somewhere else living under assumed names. Others get killed and disposed of. Some may be hoisted by a saucer but we can't

ever write that up in a report, you damned fool. The Commissioner would never stand for it."

"Yeah, he's too square," Risken said, then he turned north past the Garment Center where the alleged crime had occurred, then east to the 17th Precinct Stationhouse. The confessed murderer was still being held there as a material witness. The DA couldn't charge him with murder that he was afraid he couldn't prove, while the confessor kept on stubbornly insisting that he had done the deed. Captain Beaufort wanted a word with him.

Young Detective First Grade Joe Straub regarded the obese, ill-kempt Beaufort with sardonic amusement. He didn't resent interference from Headquarters. As far as he was concerned, Beaufort was just an old horse retired to pasture on a charitably disguised pension. He knew he could solve this case in time, but meanwhile Beaufort was a shuffling bore to be humored and gotten from underfoot as soon as possible.

Captain Beaufort read all this on the young detective's up-nosed features like a headline, and it depressed him even more as he stood in the ill-smelling squadroom near Straub's desk. It was piled with file folders, and clipped data on the Betty Myers case.

"At your disposal, Captain. Complete record. You'll find we didn't overlook a thing."

"Except the body," Beaufort said and Straub's sardonic smile disappeared. "You don't always have to have a *corpus delicti* around, sonny, but it helps the DA hand out murder charges. Anyway, there ought to be good circumstantial evidence that there is one, that the body is somewhere, with reasonable motivation as to how it was disposed of, or made to disappear or whatever the hell happened to it!"

"But I know that. Don't you think I—"

"This is an especially bad case to lose a body in, my boy. Beautiful young woman, famous model's face and figure. It disappears naked into thin air. Foul play more than hinted at, but no proof. Now nothing works up like a pretty woman, sonny. The vanished nude stuff splashed all over the papers. The hard prod comes from the DA. He has to have evidence to go before the grand jury and come up with an indictment. A man's confession by itself isn't enough."

"I know, Captain. I happen to have a law degree from Northeastern," Straub said with deferential patience.

Beaufort gazed at Straub with a

frown of puzzled disapproval, as though viewing something bizarre. Sergeant Risken ran in carrying a large flat white cardboard box containing a large mushroom and anchovy pizza pie. "Bring that pizza to the interrogation room. And you, Straub, bring Veronsky in there too, on the double."

"But his testimony is all there in the files," Straub protested.

But Beaufort was lumbering away, muttering. Moving, Straub thought, in a formidable way, something like a glacier . . .

Hal Veronsky, thirty, slim, in rumpled slacks and sweat-stained shirt, was good looking in a too-sensitive, pale-skinned way. His flourwhite face was accentuated by black beard stubble and long black hair, and large black eyes so hurt they were turning dull like nerves numbed from being beaten too long. He sat under a light in the interrogation room. He sat in a steel chair, leaning forward, his hands rasping together between his knees like insect wings. He waited, bowed, to be punished.

"I said it already. I killed her. I want to die for what I did. What more do you want me to say?"

"I want to hear you say how you killed Betty Myers and why. I don't care if you've told it a thousand times. Tell it again." Beaufort sat in the shadows hunched over a steel table bolted to the concrete floor. He watched Veronsky while working with compulsive stubbornness at the pizza pie. Risken and Straub sat on steel folding chairs in back of Beaufort.

"We had been married only a little less than two years. I loved her. I would put up with anything because, whatever she was, I knew it was my fault. But it was hell. She worked all the time. I almost never saw her. Nights she wouldn't usually have much to do with me. But I figured it might get better and I did all I could to help."

Beaufort said, "You were her agent?"

"Yes. Veronsky and Bedelman Agency. We specialize in the best fashion show girls. She—Betty preferred us to one of the photographic agencies. I saw right away, when she walked in to the office, that she was the ideal. I took her as a client at once. I taught her how to walk, how to eat, how to live. I had her altered, rebuilt. I had her nose fixed, her teeth fixed, a piece of bone put into her chin, her hairline cut back, her whole body changed. Well, I also fell in love with her and later we got married. You see, she was only thirteen then, and

her mother was leading her around all the time."

"How long ago was this?"

"About seven years. I loved her. I mean really, for herself, because I'd seen her before, how she really was. I knew the real girl nobody else knew or saw anymore, including Betty. She couldn't love me though. She couldn't love anyone, you see, because she was too lonely, frightened. I mean, alienated. She couldn't believe anyone could love her, so—"

"Okay," Beaufort interrupted. "Let's get up-to-date. A week ago, Friday last, you were at this business party at *Milady Lucia's Fashion Frock* dresshouse on Thirty-Sixth. Office staff employees were there, as well as out of town buyers, models, fashion coordinators, merchandise managers, stylists, and you. Is that right?"

"But I didn't take Betty there. She had been there all day working. You see, she'd left me two months ago. She was living in a little apartment on Fifty-third Street. I was crazy trying to get her back. I hadn't slept for days. I went there to try to get her to come back, to quit the business, be a wife and mother and all that. I went there and she told me to get the hell out, we were through, but I wouldn't accept that."

"Tell me what happened then," Beaufort said. "Everything this time. If you left anything out before, put it in."

Veronsky nodded, but didn't look up from the floor.

"Everyone was getting loaded and it was crazy. They were looped silly, wandering in and out of office rooms. I kept finding Betty, losing her. She kept getting tighter and crazier, laughed at me, then disappeared with some guy. I'd look, find her, lose her again. She's getting dirty floppy drunk. She's parading around in a showing room before a lot of drunks, showing off clothes. I'm drinking and I can't stand it anymore. I've had it . . . I run across the room, grab her and keep yelling at her to come home, get out before it's too late. She screams and claws at me. The drunks are laughing. This is part of the show. Then I'm ripping her clothes off."

"Why?" Beaufort asked with pessimistic curiosity.

"I wanted her to stop kidding herself and everybody else. I wanted her to be exposed to herself, to the world, as a real human being. I guess that's the reason. I been thinking about it. Maybe I did it because I was responsible for changing her, making her what she was. Maybe I wanted to tear the phoniness away and make her what she had been once . . . or

could have been. I don't know. It doesn't matter now because she was sick anyway, getting sicker, and it would never have worked out anyway."

"What happened then?"

"I ripped her clothes off. She went crazy, hysterical. It was awful. What made it worse, no one cared. They all thought it was a good show. They'd come all the way from Texas, some of them, and this was bonus stuff. Betty was screaming crazy and she got away from me. I tried to catch her, but she went out the window, went down the fire-escape. I followed her and chased her a little way down the alley. You see, it was too much by then. It had all gone too far, and it was too far out to be any good again. I knew it, but I tried to tell myself I could bring her back, and I chased her. But it was cold. Freezing cold . . ."

"By naked," Beaufort said. "You mean she didn't wear anything at all?"

"Nothing at all. Freezing. I caught her. She screamed and fought me. It had gone too far . . . it was no good . . . I know that now. I'd helped create something bad and it was better to get rid of it. I felt guilty but I couldn't turn it back to what it might have been, and it was better to end it, like someone's got an incurable agonizing disease. So I hit her and knocked her down. She tried to get up. I hit her on the back of the head with a brick and she fell down still in among those garbage cans . . . and she died . . ."

Beaufort twisted another slice of pizza and thrust it into his mouth. "Of course no one hearing the screams, seeing you chasing her naked, came down to help or anything. They never do."

Veronsky nodded. "They didn't care, too loaded. Maybe they didn't know what was really happening. Who does?"

"But you're positive you killed her, that she lay dead among the garbage cans?"

"Sure. I'm sure. I was sorry after that, and I kept walking, but coming back, hoping she wasn't dead. She always was dead though. In a way, she kept getting deader. The stuff from all those filled-up garbage cans lay over her, and it was all freezing. All that junk piled around. She kept getting stiffer and colder and far away. I couldn't touch her even though I wanted to drag her out of the garbage. I ran."

"What time did you kill her?"

"Around midnight."

"You kept going away, coming back. Where did you go?"

"Walked around. Up and down the streets. Went to that all-night

diner several times between walking."

"Betty Myers was always there when you came back?"

"Until the last time."

"When was that?"

"Around five a.m. maybe, sort of just before dawn. I remember she wasn't there and I went crazy for a while, yelling and looking and falling all over those garbage cans, and then the cans were rolling away, banging down the alley. I couldn't find her. Then I calmed down. She had been found, that was all, and taken away. So I walked some more and finally went to the cops and told them. They looked and I guess nobody else can find her either. It's driving me nuts again. They keep asking where did—what did I do with her? Nothing. I just killed her, that's all, and I started killing her years ago when I started making her over . . ."

"What do you mean about her being sick?" Beaufort asked, without mercy.

"Any model making good money, she's got an analyst and couch. Betty was always trying out some new analyst. Looked into mirrors all the time, searching for her real self, she said. She thought she was ugly and unworthy of love, the whole bit. All of them are like that, more or less. Pretend, try to act like you're the image projected and paraded around. It didn't work. Sick, scared to be alone. No one, she kept saying . . . no one . . ."

"Was she physically sick?"

"Starving. All models are starving to death. She didn't come by her basic figure by chance. She began dieting when she was thirteen, when she first decided to try modeling. She knew what it takes. She couldn't stand it, she said, to see girls thinner than she was. And she's gone now. A has-been, used up at twenty, dead, burned out. A bottle of liver pills, a bottle of high potency vitamins, standard equipment in all the models' workbags. They wind up like Betty. Anemia, low blood pressure, no resistance . . ."

"And all for what?" Beaufort asked. "Did Betty ever say?"

"Start out, they want to be Miss Beauty Queen, the model's mecca. Into the movies or to the altar with a moneybags. Starved, worked like a horse, took insults from slobs. Modeling, showing, fittings all day. No time to eat anyway. Modeled for dummies. Sometimes she made $150 a day."

"She was a good model?"

"Ask anyone. The best on Seam Street. The hottest on the row."

"What made her better than the others?"

Veronsky gave a bitter laugh. "I did. I made her what she was. I destroyed her."

Beaufort stood up with a labored, long-drawn-out grunt, his lips curled in a spiteful scowl. He looked down at Veronsky with a puzzled sadness mixed with nausea. Then he ducked out the door with the amazing agility of a huge scuttling crab.

Beaufort picked up another glossy photo from the pile on Straub's desk. "No nudes?"

"No nudes. Those are all the pictures we could find of her."

"No old family albums or anything?"

"Only these professional jobs," Straub said.

"Her mother have any family photographs of the girl?"

"We went through the apartments. None. The mother's out of reach, gone schizo in Mannitabon Asylum. She really cracked up."

"Poor Mom," Beaufort said morosely. "These are the pictures used by the *Bureau of Missing Persons*? Hell, look at that face, the poses, the clothes! How would anyone, seeing these, know what she really looked like without makeup, in ordinary human clothes? How could anyone know? These aren't pictures of anyone real. An artificial doll."

Straub bristled. "Those are the only pictures we could find."

Beaufort's corrugated face softened a little. "You see a beautiful creature here in these pictures. Classic. Pieces of sculpture. Notice the delicate boned face, the range of body." He shook his head massively. "But where is the real Betty Myers?"

"That's still the big problem," Straub pointed out, with a careful hint of sarcasm.

"Everyone's different," Beaufort said. "Everyone's little bit of uniqueness colors the way he lives. It always makes everyone's death different too. And the way someone chooses to be murdered. I've often thought that if you know enough about someone, you'll know the unique way they'll die. Now I'd like to see that back alley where Miss Myers ended her glamorous career. Not with beer, but with garbage cans."

A raw bitter wind whined down the narrow alley. Risken and Straub, hunched inside topcoats, watched Captain Beaufort. "He's about ready to crack the case," Risken said, teeth chattering.

Straub only sneered hopelessly.

Beaufort poked about with torpid enthusiasm around the gar-

bage cans at the corner of a building and next to the beginning of a flattened area where a number of old buildings had been demolished to make way for modern housing. The cans, ten of them, were dented and stained, lids chained to the brick wall to prevent their being stolen or blown away. The demolished area covered at least half a square block, was a lake of flattened rubble like the aftermath of a bombing. Knobby slabs of white rubble had been bulldozed into flat-topped heaps. Thousands of bricks had been leveled. Across the alley was *Milady Lucia's Fashioned Frock* dresshouse, rear view. There was the fire escape down which Betty Myers had clambored, nakedness grating cold rusted iron in freezing cold, and not caring anymore. Above were offices. Above those, factory windows, dirtier. Behind them were pale-faced garment workers, green eyeshades bent over tables. Beaufort could feel the never ending pulse and beat and whir and merciless grinding of the factory.

Here, by these cans, right by the edge of the demolished area, she was supposed to have died. Refuse was everywhere, junk, tin cans, half-burned, discarded scraps of cloth from the dress factories. To the right the alley dead-ended in a concrete building. To the left it opened onto Seventh Avenue. The demolished area was heavily fenced off by wire mesh topped with barbed wire. Beaufort's cheeks puffed vaporizing air as he noticed the dark secret scuttling of rats in the refuse. He stood cumbersome and pouting, unmoving, seeming caught in a melancholy sulk, the sacks under his eyes turned hollow and black. He forced himself to ruminate with cold and calculated severity.

Detective Straub had been thorough in his pedagogic way. Veronsky's walking about after the alleged murder had been checked out and verified, as well as his entire story. Witnesses backed up his statement of what had occurred at the factory party. His trips later to the diner between midnight and five were substantiated. He couldn't have had time for a fancy, complex, unplanned disposal of the body. If he'd killed her, confessed, why bother with disposal at all? The vacant lot had been gone over. She wasn't buried there, nor had she, in whole or in part, been turned up in any surrounding building, or in the sewer. *Missing Persons* had gotten no reports of her likeness alive or dead, clothed or not. Cab companies had checked their driver's trip sheets to see if a pickup or letout had been made in or near

that alley between midnight and five Friday morning. None. A car might have been cruising, carted her off—this theory assuming she might not have been killed. But an old man who ran an all-night newsstand near the open end of the alley swore no car like that had gone in or out of the alley all morning.

The possibility that someone had dragged her into a factory, a basement, some upstairs loft, all had been checked out. A thorough search had been made of every floor, factory, building for blocks around. Every night-watchman had been checked out.

The tech men could make nothing out of her clothes that had been up in the office. No bloodstains. No sign of dragging. No murder weapon. The brick allegedly used by Veronsky had been tossed away into the demolished area to join a few thousand other pieces of brick, although Straub's men were still sifting.

The usual crackpots, compulsive confessors, advancers of fantastic theories were checked out. Hundreds of anonymous tips followed through. Nothing. Everyone present at the factory party checked out. Nothing. Betty Myers had no men friends, except perhaps Veronsky. Those spicy stories about "steady" models floating along Seam Street didn't apply to Betty Myers. No tape-measure Romeo had ever been encouraged to study her design. She was strictly business, intent on sewing up a big future.

Wind whipped three garbage cans away and rolled them banging down the alley. Beaufort watched them go away from the others too loaded to blow after them. Then he squatted laboriously, dipped a gloved hand into a refuse clot. He came up holding a woman's arm.

Risken and Straub ran up, then stopped as Beaufort wiggled the arm, bringing a rusty squeak from the elbow. "Dummy," he said, while his ponderous cheeks tinted with patches of reluctant enthusiasm. Using the plastic arm he probed up more odds and ends of discarded dummies, a torso, a leg. Abruptly he turned, lumbered across the alley toward the rear entrance to *Milady Lucia's Fashion Frocks.*

"He's hard on the scent now," said Risken with vicarious pride.

Straub gave a nasty laugh. "The scent of what, more jelly doughnuts?"

"No, that's why he's about to wrap this case up. He's losing his appetite."

"He's uncovered nothing new, not a thing," Straub said.

Mr. Rosen, in charge of display and the hiring and handling of models, showed Captain Beaufort around his lushly, period-furnished office suite. Beaufort admired a genuine, walnut, early Virginia Chippendale chair. "I need that to complete my set," he said.

Mr. Rosen, a willowy, fussy older man with a puckered mouth and the up-tilted twitching nostrils of a white rabbit, was surprised. "You're a collector of Victoriana?"

"Within the limits of my profession," said Captain Beaufort, while Straub clenched his eyes and snapped them open. Risken had been sent out for more pastry, just in case. Beaufort admired blue Bristol goblets, a statue of boy with bow. "It was a saner, more genteel time, Mr. Rosen."

"Yes indeed, an age of assurance and optimism," said Mr. Rosen.

"At least identity wasn't a problem," Beaufort mused, then turned suddenly toward Rosen. "You hired Miss Myers?"

"Yes, four years ago, through her mother, of course, Miss Myers being under age. She was soon very popular. During one day she'd have fittings, showings in perhaps six different houses."

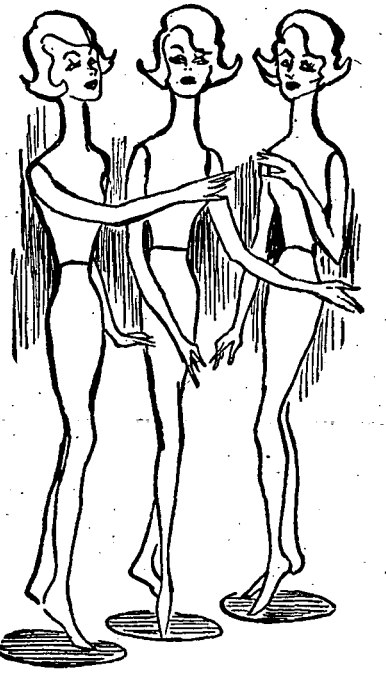
"A showing, she paraded clothes before buyers. What's a fitting?"

"In each establishment a dummy is made to the best model's figure. Then the designers and tailors work on the dummy. The girl comes in for the fittings of the samples. They make the basic form on the dummy and design the neckline and the little touches on her."

"There are plenty of these dummies around?"

"Thousands. Used for floor and window displays. They wear out and must be discarded."

"Miss Myers was a favorite mod-



el for making dummies from?"

"Really a dream, a sculptor's dream. She would fit anything. She was known in the trade as a basic."

"What's that?"

"She was perfect. 5-foot-7, barefoot, 104 pounds. Exactly right, basic. In demand to do fittings for every house on Seam Street. Basic, a favorite designer's dummy."

"Did she ever pose in the nude?"

"Oh no!" Mr. Rosen's hand fluttered. "Our clothing models don't do it. Not even cheesecake jobs like posing in lingerie and bikinis. Too thin you know."

"Do you have a dictionary?"

Rosen blinked, then got a Webster's from a glass bookcase. Beaufort opened it. "Mann, Horace . . . Mann, Thomas, Mann act. Ah, mannequin." He read, then snapped the book closed, frowned. "Webster defines a mannequin. One, a model of the human body, used by tailors, window dressers, artists and so forth. Two, a woman whose work is exhibiting new clothes in stores, and so forth, by wearing them. Tell me, Rosen. Did you, like Webster, make so little distinction between a woman and a dummy?"

"I don't believe I understand?"

"I'm sure you don't. Did you know this Miss Myers intimately?"

Rosen blushed. "That, contrary to myth, doesn't go here. Models are in demand, good ones are extremely independent and rare, and not required to be more cooperative than they wish to be. They only have to be good clothes horses."

"Or dummies," Beaufort growled.

Risken came in, red-faced, sniffing, carrying a bag. "Nobody else around here saw a flying saucer," he said seriously.

"Rosen," asked Beaufort, "did you ever take a personal, just a human interest in Miss Myers?"

"That is never good business. It was enough that she was a hard, steady, dependable worker."

"Now that Miss Myers has been retired, who is next in line to be the basic thing on Seam Street? Who will you make your favorite dummies from now?"

"Miss Gloria Meredith."

"I want to talk with her."

Mr. Rosen made a query on the housephone, told Beaufort she was at a showing upstairs, room 203 and that he could go right up.

"Thanks," Beaufort said and left without further comment.

Beaufort waited in the dressing room, squeezed among racks of dresses, a wall covered with photographs of Miss Meredith, a dress-

ing table piled with cosmetics. The air reeked with powder and perfume. He watched, through the partly opened door, Miss Meredith, a brunette, walk before buyers seated in easy chairs. Their interest was that of shoppers, bored, in a market. Miss Meredith went through the formal movements, like a wound-up mechanical toy, Beaufort thought, then she came back into the dressing room, shut the door, slumped at the dressing table, stared into the mirror. "I'm beat, always beat. I got dizzy again. I've another fitting soon. Whatever you want to know, ask, Mr. Policeman."

Beaufort noted that, except for her being a brunette, she looked much like the photographs of Betty Myers, same bone structure and build. Then she slipped her hair off. It was a wig. Her blonde hair seemed false. Her artificial eyelashes peeled away. She wiped her mouth off.

"Did you know Miss Myers well?"

"We had lunch, talked. That's par for these days, isn't it?"

"I've been led to believe she wasn't exactly happy."

She laughed harshly. "Who is on Seam Street? This place is an occupation hazard. I don't mean danger of tripping in high heels on a heavy carpet, or walking off a platform because you always have to look up, dear, and stepping into space and breaking your neck. She was bugged like all of us. You're you to start with. First thing happens, they make you over. You don't notice it at first. It begins slow, you're glamorblind. Finally you don't know who or what you were. Or are. You flip with being alone."

"Why?"

"Men are afraid, at first, of models. They seem in awe of us. We don't look like ordinary females. Then maybe they take a chance. They run like they'd been tricked by someone riding a broomstick."

"I don't understand."

"Fashion designers, artists who cook up styles we're stuck with, know what those creeps are? Plotters out to dewomanize the American female. We're scarecrows, spooks, all bone. Walking celery sticks, they say." She talked louder. "Not typical women at all, Betty used to say, but string bean fashion images. Images. Stylized creatures. We can't eat. We live on vitamin injections. We die of amnesia and neglect and narcissism turned sour." She gave a long laugh. "We starve, our nerves go kaput. We take benzies, then Miltown, but can't sleep. We end up on the couch. That answer your question about little us?"

"Partly. What about dummies made to your measurements?"

"What about it? I don't know. I get an eerie feeling going by show-windows, seeing those dummies created in my image. Hundreds, like seeing yourself hundreds of times in different costumes in a wax museum. Maybe you get a crazy little feeling like if maybe you're dead!"

"Did Miss Myers feel that way?"

"She said something about not being a personality, but something being illustrated. Not a woman, she said, just a figurine. You don't know what you look like when you're working. You make a long eyebrow line, it's a look you haven't seen before. You're different people, different images all day. You make up little games to play. 'Now I must be so and so or this or that.' Only Betty couldn't laugh at it. She cried too much. Not personalities, she said. We exist in pictures, exhibitions, dummies. Spend most of our time looking like something else. What's our skill? Being able to change all at once into someone, an image. Oh yes, Betty cried. She really felt she was losing her identity. Ask any model if she thinks she's beautiful and she'll likely as not start crying her eyes out."

"I see," Beaufort said gently. "It's like—well—like some sort of effigy."

"Let me alone," Miss Meredith said and started to cry. "I don't want to talk about her. I can't stand thinking about what happens."

"All right, thank you, Miss Meredith. I hope you find things getting easier."

She laughed wildly after him. "Sure, lover. But who am I?"

At the 17th Precinct's squadroom, Beaufort was no longer hungry. His body felt torpid, bilious, his mouth nasty-tasting. Sergeant Risken gloated over Detective Straub who sat chastened at his desk. "Naturally we checked those guys out. Both of them!" Straub said it again. "There was no reason to assume—"

"I know," Beaufort said. "They were innocent. They couldn't have known what they had done. But that's the only way it could have happened. Veronsky says he killed her, left her among the garbage cans. They were full then, he said, spilling over. He came back later. Cans fell and banged and rolled away as he looked for her. They rolled down the alley. They did that then *only because they had been emptied*. Check the time. At five or a little after, the truck comes round."

"Sure," mumbled Straub, his eyes lowered.

"The newsstand guy didn't see

anything suspicious about the truck going in and out. He knew those guys, knew they were okay, or thought they were. Anyway, a lot of used dummies are dumped there. The junk truck comes in about five, to pick up garbage and junk. The guys see the dummies, see the corpse of naked Betty lying half covered in refuse. She's been dead since midnight. Rigor mortis plus freezing. Stiff as a board. Thin, bony, light, soiled, stiff in the dim light. She's there with other discarded dummies. The two junkmen don't know the difference. Even if they could see clearly there wouldn't have been a helluva lot of difference between what was left of her and one of the dummies. Don't forget, those dummies had all been designed from her measurements. Her exact size and shape, down to the fraction of an inch!"

Beaufort made an unpleasant snorting sound. "Webster didn't make much distinction between a woman model and a dummy. Neither did anyone else in Betty's life, including her mother. Neither did a couple of cold junkmen. They tossed her into the truck with the other refuse, hauled her off."

"It figures," Straub said. "I'll go right out to the Jersey flats and dig everything up. It figures—"

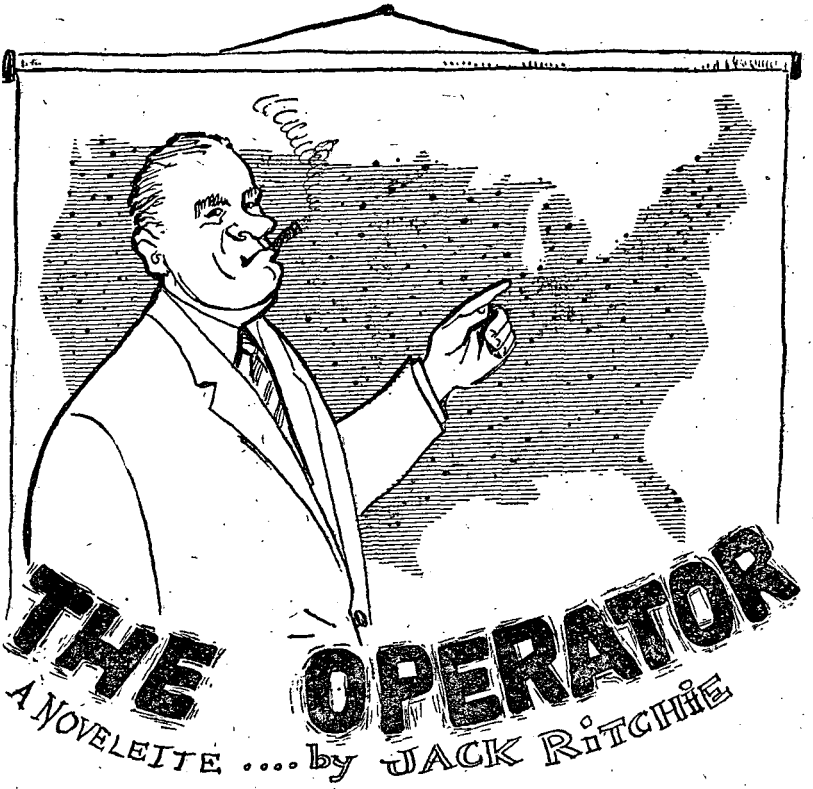
"You'll find what's left of her wherever they dumped last Friday's garbage," Beaufort said in corpulent self-approval.

"Now you want me to bring the bromo-seltzer?" asked Risken.

"Yes, then bring around the car. I can still catch that auction."

On the way back to Headquarters, Beaufort sat in the back seat looking at a photo of Betty Myers.

"Her unique way of life made the way she died and was disposed of sort of inevitable," he mused, as though to himself. "Fate. Who ever has a choice? Take this picture, Sergeant. Glazed, flawless, hollow girl, like a Dresden porcelain. A plastic girl, a living doll, a better thing for better loving through modern chemistry." He dropped the picture and looked through the window into a gray winter evening. "But there was a human heart inside. And the only one who knew or cared about that was the guy who killed her."



THE OPERATOR

A NOVELETTE .... by JACK RITCHIE

INSIDE the police station, I found the Motor Vehicle Section and approached the sergeant.

He took his time about going through some papers on his desk, but finally he looked up. "Well?"

I cleared my throat. "I'd like to report the theft of an automobile."

He yawned, opened a desk drawer, and reached for some forms.

"It was a 1963 Buick," I said.

This could be called the two faces of Hagen . . . a resourceful fellow who courted crime by day and death by night.

"Four door. The body is dark green and the top cream."

He looked up. "Buick?"

"Yes. I parked it on the bluff above the lake, on Lincoln Drive. I just got out for a minute or two and walked around. When I came back, it was gone."

"The license number?"

I rubbed the back of my neck for a moment. "Oh, yes. E 20-256."

He looked at the civilian clerk at the next desk. They both grinned.

"As soon as I found that my car was gone," I said. "I flagged down a taxi and came here. This is the right place to report this, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's the right place." He turned to the clerk. "Fred."

Fred left his desk and came over. He had a slip of paper in his hand.

The sergeant glanced at it and then looked up again. "Let's see your ignition keys."

"Ignition keys?" I reached into my right trouser pocket. Then I tried my left. I began patting my other pockets. Finally I smiled sheepishly. "I guess I must have lost them."

"No, mister. You didn't *lose* them." His face lost the grin. "Don't you know that it's against the law to leave your ignition keys in an unlocked car?"

I shifted uneasily. "But I was gone for just a minute."

"You were gone a lot longer than that, mister. The boys in the squad even took the trouble to look for you. They couldn't find you any place around there."

I frowned. "The boys in the squad?"

"That's right. They waited fifteen minutes and then one of them had to drive the car away."

"A *policeman* took my car?"

"He didn't steal it. If that's what you mean. He just took it to the police garage for your own protection." His eyes became cold. "Mister, did you know that in eighty percent of automobile thefts, the owner left his keys in the ignition?"

"Well . . . I guess I read something about that, but. . . ."

"No buts," he snapped. "It's people like you who make it possible for the punks to steal cars."

I bristled. "Wouldn't it have been simpler just to lock the car and take the ignition keys? And maybe leave a note under the windshield wiper?"

"Sure it would be simpler, but it wouldn't teach people like you anything. But *this* you'll remember." He seemed to relent a little. "It's just your tough luck, mister. We've got orders to crack down this week and haul away any car if we can't find the owner. You should have read about it in the papers." He reached into another drawer this

time and came out with a smaller form. "Like I said, it's against the law to leave your keys in the ignition. The fine is twenty-five dollars."

"*Twenty-five* dollars?"

"You can pay right here or take it to court. So far that's never done anybody any good. Just adds twelve dollars and ten cents to the tariff. That's costs."

I exhaled slowly. "I'll pay here." I took out my wallet and put two tens and a five on his desk.

"Let's see your driver's license."

I put the wallet on the desk in front of him.

He filled out the form, shoved it toward me, and pointed. "Sign there."

I signed. "Where can I pick up the car?"

He tore off the stub along the perforated line and handed it to me. "Your receipt. Show that to the sergeant in the basement garage. He'll let you have your car and keys."

Seven minutes later I drove out of the garage.

It was a clean car and handled nicely.

I wondered who it belonged to.

Earlier that morning, I had parked my car where the Lincoln Driveway arched down to the lake front.

It had been cool and only a scattering of cars were parked along the drive. I lit a cigarette and walked easy, taking in the automobiles I passed. Some of them were occupied and the empty ones appeared to be locked.

And then I came to the 1963 Buick. It was parked two hundred yards from the nearest other car and the keys were in the ignition.

I investigated the paths near the car and saw no one. At the bluff's edge I looked down.

A man and a woman strolled along the beach far below and it seemed like a good bet that they belonged to the Buick. Even if they started back up right now, it would take them fifteen minutes to get up the twisting path to the top.

I walked back toward the Buick and was almost there when I saw the squad car parked behind it.

Both cops were out of their car. The taller one glanced my way. "Your car, Mister?"

"No. But I wish it was." I kept walking and got back to my car ten minutes later.

I looked back down the long drive. One of the cops was still at the Buick, but the other had disappeared.

I watched. Five minutes later the tall cop reappeared. I guessed that he'd been looking for the owner of the Buick and hadn't found

him down there on the beach.

He got into the Buick and pulled away. The squad car followed.

I turned on my ignition and kept about two blocks behind them. They took the Buick to the downtown police headquarters and it disappeared into the basement garage.

I parked my car and slowly smoked a cigarette. The tall cop finally came out of the basement drive and got back into the squad car. It drove away.

I thought it over and then grinned. I opened my glove compartment and took out the wallet that had once belonged to somebody named Charles Janik.

I got out of the car and went into the police station.

I drove the Buick the half mile to Joe's Garage and he opened the doors when I blew the horn. I eased the car to the pair of doors at the rear of the shop and into the room no legitimate customer of Joe's ever saw.

In twenty-four hours the Buick would have a different paint job, the motor block number would be changed, and it would leave here with a new set of license plates. By tomorrow afternoon it would be across the state line and on a used car lot.

Joe closed the doors behind us and looked the car over. "Nice buggy."

I nodded. "Cost me twenty-five dollars."

He didn't get that. "Where did you pick it up?"

I grinned. "You'll probably read about it in the papers this afternoon."

We went into his office.

"I'll phone in," Joe said. "You should get your money in the mail tomorrow."

"Have it sent to the Hotel Meredith in St. Louis."

"Taking a vacation?"

"You might say that."

But it was more than a vacation. After what I'd just done, every cop in the city would have a complete description of me down to the last button.

I phoned for a taxi and took it back to where I'd parked my own car.

At my apartment I packed a suitcase and then drove to St. Louis. The trip took three hours and I checked in at the Meredith at two-thirty in the afternoon.

The clerk swiveled the register back so he could read my name. "How long are you staying, Mr. Hagen?"

"I don't know. It all depends."

Maybe I would stay three or four weeks before I thought it was cool

enough to go back. Or maybe I wouldn't have to go back at all—if I got the telephone call I was hoping for.

The story got into the St. Louis evening papers, all about the man who walked into a police station and stole a car. The newspapers seemed to think it was hilarious, but the police didn't, especially not the sergeant I'd talked to. He had been suspended.

I stuck to my room and the phone call came the next afternoon. It was a voice I'd never heard before.

"Hagen?"

"That's right."

He wanted to be a little more sure he had the right party. "Joe says we owe you some money for the last errand."

"Send it here."

He seemed to relax. "I see you got into the papers."

"Not my picture."

He laughed slightly. "Some people would give a lot to have it."

I waited, because I didn't think he had called just to congratulate me.

"The man in Trevor Park wants to talk to you," he said. "You know who I mean?"

"I know."

"Eight tonight." He hung up.

I got to the main gates of Trevor Park at about seven-thirty.

You couldn't call Trevor Park a town. It had no stores or gas stations and the big houses were far apart and not even numbered. But it was a place of trees and acres and money. It had its walking guards to keep the ordinary people out and a private police force to help them.

The cop at the gate came to my window.

"Hagen," I said.

He checked the clipboard he carried and nodded. "Mr. Magnus is expecting you."

"Which is his place?"

"The fourth one on your right."

The fourth one on my right didn't come up until half a mile later. There was another gate at the entrance, but it was open. Another two hundred yards brought me to a circle driveway in front of a three-story Norman.

Eventually I found myself in a large study facing two men.

Mac Magnus was big and graying at the temples. Looking at him you would have thought he was born to the clothes he wore. He was that far away from where he had started.

The other man was tall and thin, with shrewd gray eyes, and when he spoke I recognized his voice as that I'd heard on the phone. His name was Tyler.

We got drinks served on a tray

and Magnus looked me over. "Did you read about yourself?"

"In St. Louis. Page three."

He indicated some newspapers on the desk. "You did better than that locally."

I walked over and glanced down. The front page, bottom. There was a picture of the unhappy sergeant too, but I didn't think he would save it for his scrapbook.

When I looked up, Magnus was still studying me.

"I suppose you know you cut your own throat," he said.

I shrugged.

"You'll never be able to go back. At least, not for a long time. Right now if you passed even a rookie patrolman, he'd look you over sharp and wonder if he should have a talk with you."

I sipped my drink. "There are other cities."

Tyler spoke now. "Hagen, just why did you take a chance like that in the first place?"

"I just wondered if it could be done. And so I tried."

But that hadn't been the real reason. I stole the Buick in the way I did because I wanted someone up high to notice me. I didn't want to be doing nothing but stealing cars the rest of my life.

Magnus glanced at Tyler. "I still think it was a fool thing to do."

"Maybe," I said.

My eyes went around the room, taking in the expensive furnishings. "The car racket must be good, if you can afford all this."

Magnus laughed softly. "Not that good, Hagen. But I'm like a supermarket. I got all departments. The canned goods, the fresh vegetables, the meat counters, the frozen foods. Hot cars is just a little counter somewhere in the back of the store."

But I had known that too. Magnus had his finger in everything that paid. He *was* everything. He was on the top, and safe.

Magnus looked at Tyler. "He's got your okay?"

Tyler nodded.

Magnus went to the map on the wall and pointed. "Ever been there?"

I looked at the dot. "No."

"It's a medium-type city of about two hundred thousand. I don't have a big operation there, but I want you to report to Sam Binardi."

"I go to work for him?"

"No. You replace him."

"You don't like him any more?"

Magnus selected a cigar from a humidor. "Don't get any movie ideas, Hagen. Sam's sixty-five and worried about his ulcers. He wants to retire to one of those colonies in Florida and play golf all day." He lit the cigar. "Like I said, Hagen,

it's not a a big operation, so don't get excited. And you can thank Tyler for the promotion. He seems to think you got something—nerve, maybe—but as far as I'm concerned you're still only a second lieutenant, and that's way down on the ladder."

I decided to find out just where Tyler stood in the organization. "Tyler's second-in-command?"

Magnus laughed. "There *is* no second-in-command. You might say that Tyler's my Personnel and Recruitment Officer. And that's only for the operating personnel. Not the bookkeepers. He's got his job and I don't want him to know any more than that."

I reported to Sam Binardi the next day.

Sam was a small, florid man with nervous gestures, and his office was on the second floor of a toy factory.

He shook hands. "Tyler phoned. Said you were taking over." He indicated a cabinet. "If you want a drink, help yourself. I don't drink myself. Bad for the stomach."

"Later, maybe."

He looked me over. "They're sending them up young these days. I been in this business forty years—thirty before I got to sit behind this desk." He sighed and looked at some papers. "Well, let's get at it. We've got ninety-six people on the payroll, and they're all good men."

"Counting the toy factory?"

"No. That's legitimate. Thirty-two employees. Mr. Swenson is the supervisor." He looked down at the papers again. "The real business is organized into four divisions. D-1. That's all the gambling, including the bookies. D-2. Junk. Riordan in charge. He's not hooked himself, so you can depend on him. D-3. Mable Turley. The girls like her. And D-4. Cars."

"What do I do? Just sit here?"

"Most of the time. There's the toy factory to consider too. That'll keep you busy a couple of hours a day." He beamed. "We cleared twenty-eight thousand last year. Mostly because of the Dottie Dee dolls. Ever see one?"

"No."

"I'll show you around the factory later." He got up and went to the city map on the wall. "This is our territory. Everything north of the river, including the suburbs."

I looked at the map. The river divided the city into two almost equal sections. "What about the south side of the city?"

Binardi shook his head. "We leave that alone. That's Ed Willkie's territory. We mind our business and he minds his. That way we got no trouble." He came back to the desk. "We got a treaty like.

There's no sense in fighting. I play golf with Ed twice a week."

He sat down. "I'll be in every day for about a month to break you in."

I phoned Captain Parker and we arranged a meeting at the Lyson Motel just outside of Reedville.

Walt Parker listened to what I had to say and then grinned. "So it was you who stole the car?"

"I had to get attention from the right people some way. This fell into my lap."

Parker agreed. "You could be stealing cars for twenty years and maybe never got noticed by Magnus. You got away with five cars so far?"

"Including the Buick."

He nodded. "They ship them to a place called Karl's Used Cars in Hainsford. Just across the state line. We could clamp down, but there's no point to that now. We're after bigger things. So we dip into the fund, buy up the cars for real, and store them in the garage for now. After this is all over, we'll make the adjustment with the owners or their insurance companies."

"Pretty rough on the fund."

"If this all works out, everyone will forgive us."

"What about the sergeant?"

"In a way he's got it coming, considering how he let you get away with what you did. But we'll pass the word to the chief and it won't be too hard on him."

Parker sat down on one of the beds. "So now you're a second lieutenant in the operation."

"It's still a long way from the top. Magnus won't be handing me any secrets for some time yet."

"At least it's a toe hold. Magnus has got himself a great big organization. I wouldn't be surprised if it covered every one of the fifty states and Puerto Rico for frosting. And this isn't the type of operation where you can carry the bookkeeping under your hat or in a little black notebook. There's *got* to be a central bookkeeping headquarters and we're out to find it. It's the only way we can really nail Magnus."

Parker lit a cigar. "We know how Magnus runs the operation. Take Binardi's, for instance—it's just like any of the hundreds of others Magnus controls. Once every month Magnus has a crew come in to microfilm Binardi's books. The film is mailed to a box number. Somebody picks it up and mails it somewhere else. Maybe it goes through five or six hands before it reaches that bookkeeping headquarters. But Magnus has so many safeguards on the way that

we've never been able to follow the mail all the way through.

"And when the film gets to headquarters, half a dozen or more trusted accountants get to work on it—and the hundreds of others like it—and Magnus gets to know how much he made and where and when and by whom.

"Magnus' empire is like a head of hair. We can snip off a little here and there—maybe even give him a crew cut—but the roots are still there. We've got to get at those roots, and our best bet is to find out where in these whole blessed United States he's hidden that bookkeeping headquarters."

After a month, Sam Binardi left for Florida, and I was left to play golf with Ed Willkie on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

Willkie was in his fifties, tanned, and played in the eighties. His wife was dead, but he had a twelve-year-old son named Ted.

I learned that Willkie's organization was long-established and conservative. Everybody waited patiently for his promotion. There was no idea of mutiny. Everyone took his orders from Boss Willkie and didn't feel frustrated about it.

On a Tuesday afternoon, two months later, when I pulled up in front of Willkie's house, I noticed Ted duck back behind the garage.

I was about to ring Willkie's doorbell, but then I changed my mind. I went to the garage and found Ted hiding behind it. "Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

He glanced uneasily toward the house. "There's no school today."

"On a Tuesday?"

He didn't meet my eyes. "Well . . . I didn't feel so good. So I stayed home."

"But your father doesn't know that?"

Ted didn't say anything.

"Do you play hookey a lot?"

"You're not going to tell my father?"

"No. I never cared much for school myself. How do you get away with skipping school?"

He grinned. "I write the excuses and sign Dad's name."

"What do you do when you skip

school? You go somewhere special?"

His eyes brightened. "Mostly I go down to the lake and watch the boats. They have races almost every day now. There's a big one Thursday afternoon."

"And I suppose you'll be there?"

He grinned. "I guess so."

I went back to the front door and pressed the button. Willkie and I drove to the Wildwood course. He shot an 82 and I came in with a 76.

The next morning I left the office for an inspection trip of my territory. I found the two big men I thought I could use and had them report to my office in the afternoon.

I came right to the point. "I've got a little job for you."

They looked at each other a little uneasily. "Job?"

"It's about the simplest thing you've ever done in your lives. I just want you to sit on the back seat of my car. I'm going to pick up Ed Willkie tomorrow afternoon. I'll drive the three of you a couple of blocks, and then I want you to get out. Go back to work and forget everything."

They looked at each other again and then the bigger one spoke. "Just that? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"I don't get it."

"You're not supposed to. Just do as you're told."

He had one more question. "You don't expect us to do any rough stuff? I mean . . . well . . . those days are gone. I got a wife and . . ."

"No rough stuff. Nothing but what I told you. I'll pick both of you up at noon on the corner of 6th and Wells."

At noon Thursday I packed my golf bag in the trunk of the car and stopped at 6th and Wells. We drove on to Ed Willkie's big house and I honked the horn.

Willkie came down the walk carrying his golf clubs. He opened the car door. "A foursome today?"

"No," I said. "Just giving them a lift."

I drove two blocks and then pulled to the curb. The two men got out of the back seat.

When I pulled back into traffic, Willkie said, "Who were they?"

"Just a couple of friends from Chicago."

After the eighteenth hole, Willkie and I went to the clubhouse. We got some cokes and sandwiches at the counter and took a table near the window overlooking the first tee.

I glanced at my watch. "As soon as you're through eating, Ed, you'd better call a meeting of your division heads."

Willkie took a bite of his sandwich. "Why?"

"I want you to make the announcement that you're retiring because of your health. And you're appointing me to take your place."

His eyes narrowed. "You're crazy."

"No. You'll make that announcement if you ever want to see your son alive again."

He stared at me unbelievingly.

I smiled. "Remember those two nice men who were in the car when I picked you up? They've got your son by now." I tried my sandwich. "He's perfectly safe, Willkie. And he will be. As long as you do what I say."

He glared at me for thirty seconds and then rose abruptly. He strode to the telephone booth. I followed and kept him from closing the door. "I'll listen. I wouldn't want you to say anything rash."

I watched him dial his home number. He got his housekeeper, Mrs. Porter.

"Amy," he said. "Is Ted there?"

"Why, no, Mr. Willkie. He came home for lunch and then went back to school."

Willkie hung up and began paging through the phone book. I watched his finger run down the list of public schools. He dialed the number of Stevenson Grade and got the principal. "This is Edward Willkie. Is my son, Ted, in his class?"

It took about ten minutes for the principal to get the information. "No, he isn't, Mr. Willkie. And I've been meaning to speak to you about the number of times . . ."

I touched the hook on the side of the telephone and disconnected us. "Are you satisfied, Willkie?"

His face was gray. "I want to speak to Ted. I want to be sure he's all right."

"I can't accommodate you, Ed. I don't know where they took him."

He didn't understand that.

"Self-preservation," I said. "If I knew, you might be able to beat it out of me. But this way it wouldn't do you any good."

I gave him another minute to think things over and then cracked down. "All right. Start phoning your division heads. Have them meet at your office."

By the time we got to his office on the third floor of a furniture factory, his chief lieutenants were waiting.

Willkie took a deep breath and made the announcement, and the reason for it. They seemed to believe him. He didn't look too healthy.

I watched their faces for signs of resentment over the fact that an outsider had been promoted over their heads. I didn't see any. If there were some, they kept it off

their faces. And possibly they were just specialists in their line. None of them ever really expected to get the number one position.

When they were gone, Willkie turned to me. "Now do I get my boy back?"

"Not for a week. You'll be gone at least that long yourself."

I drove him to the airport and explained things on the way. "You'll take the first plane out of here to Los Angeles. You'll stay there one week. At the end of that time you can come back and you'll get your son safe and sound. One week will give me enough time to consolidate everything here. By the time you come back you won't be able to do anything about anything." The smile left my face. "But if I were you, I wouldn't bother to come back at all. It might not be too healthy for either you or your son. Why not just send for him? I think he'll like California."

At the air terminal I bought him a non-stop ticket to L.A. and we walked to ramp 202. I glanced at the waiting passengers. They were all strangers to me, but I nodded to a heavy man whose luggage seemed to indicate that he collected hotel stickers. He nodded back, probably wondering who the hell I was.

I turned my back on him and spoke to Willkie. "See that big man all wrapped up in the light tan coat?"

His eyes flicked that way. "The one you nodded to?"

"That's right. When you get to Los Angeles, I want you to follow him."

"Follow him?"

I nodded. "Check in at the same hotel he does. Stay there one whole week. He'll always be somewhere around to see that you do."

"He's one of your. . . .?"

"Don't talk to him. And don't try to buy him. He doesn't know any more than his part of the job. And remember, no phone calls to anyone. I don't want you arranging things behind my back. Remember, we've got your son. Don't even try phoning your home. If you do, I'll know about it. Mrs. Porter has orders to . . . ." I stopped and shrugged irritably as though I'd revealed something.

Willkie must have felt surrounded. He certainly looked that way.

Ten minutes later, I watched

him walk up the ramp and disappear into the plane. He was still wearing his billed golf cap and sports shirt. He looked small.

When the plane took off, I phoned Mrs. Porter and told her that Willkie would be gone for a week and not to worry. It was a business trip.

I expected a telephone call that night, but it didn't come until eight days later. Tyler told me to report to Magnus right away.

When I pulled into the circle drive in front of Magnus' house I noticed a dark-haired girl on the lawn near the lake. She had set up an easel and was painting. She gave me only a momentary glance and returned to her work.

Her picture was in the Mac Magnus file. Valerie Magnus. Twenty-three. His only child.

Tyler and Magnus were waiting for me in the study.

Magnus let me stand for a while and then he said, "I hear you took over the south side."

I nodded.

"That was eight days ago," Magnus said. "Why didn't you let me know?"

"I wanted to be sure the merger would take."

"Did it?"

"Willkie could come back today and I don't think anybody would listen to him."

Magnus went to the humidor. He took out a cigar, looked it over, and finally lit it. He walked to the TV set and tapped it with a knuckle. "If I turn this thing on I'll probably find somebody giving a spiel about soap. The talk will be that there's only one thing you're supposed to use when you do your washing. Soap. Don't use harsh detergents."

He tapped the set again. "And if I turn to another channel, I'll probably find somebody else pushing detergents. Detergents are the new, the modern thing. Don't use old-fashioned inefficient soaps."

I noticed that Tyler was smiling.

Magnus went on. "What most people don't know is that the *same* company . . . the same *syndicate* . . . manufactures the soap *and* the detergent. They really don't give a damn *which* you buy . . . as long as you buy one. The money all goes into the same pocket."

He waited for that to sink in and then he said. "Willkie works for me too."

I blinked. "Binardi didn't say anything to me about that."

"Binardi didn't *know* that. And Willkie doesn't know that Binardi worked for me either. I wanted it that way."

Tyler spoke. "Divide and rule. Empires are built that way."

Magnus held up a hand. "I don't

want one finger to know what the other's doing, but I want to control the hand." He took a deep puff of his cigar. "Tyler, I'm beginning to think that you made a mistake about Hagen."

Tyler rubbed his jaw. "Hagen, how many people helped you pull this off?"

"None." And I told them all about it.

Magnus was impressed in spite of himself. "Damn. You scared Willkie silly. He didn't do a thing but stay in that L.A. hotel for a week. When he got up enough nerve, finally, to phone his home, he found that his son hadn't been kidnapped at all. The next thing he did was to phone me." Magnus glared at me. "I told Willkie to come right back. And as for you, Hagen, I want you to get back to the north side and *stay* on the north side."

Tyler stepped forward. "I've been thinking, Mac. If Willkie scared that easy, maybe he's not the right man for the job."

"He was scared because of his kid," Magnus said.

"Sure. But he still shouldn't have waited eight days before he told us what happened to his organization. Do you want somebody like that working for you?"

Magnus worked on the idea for half a minute. "Tell Willkie he's through. He should have reported."

Tyler nodded. "And as long as the district's consolidated, why not leave it that way?"

Magnus showed teeth. "And I suppose you mean leave Hagen in charge?"

"Why not? I'd say he can handle the job. He has been, as a matter of fact. And it would cut down on overhead."

Magnus looked as though his arm had been twisted, but he said, "All right, Hagen, you got it." Then he glowered. "But if you get any other fancy ideas, you'd better clear them with me *before* you do anything."

Outside the house, I stopped for a moment to watch Magnus' daughter. Her back was toward me and she was still at the easel. She was slim, but from the picture in the files, you could hardly call her pretty. I had the suspicion that she did a lot of painting mostly because there was nothing else to do with her time.

I wondered what kind of a part she played as Magnus' daughter. Did he try to keep her ignorant of what he was? It seemed almost impossible that she could fail to know about him. Maybe she knew a lot more than he thought.

It was tempting to walk over there, admire her painting, and introduce myself. But on the other

hand, I thought that if I were that direct, and Magnus heard about it, I'd be broken down to private.

And yet, it might pay to know her.

I went to the left rear wheel of my car and let the air out of the tire. The wind came off the lake and I didn't think she could hear the hiss.

I got the jack and handle from my trunk and made some noise doing it.

As I jacked up the car, I covertly glanced her way. She had turned and was watching.

When I pried off the hub cap, I allowed the iron to slip and strike my knuckles. I jerked to my feet, holding the fingers of my left hand. I walked stiffly in a circle, cursing softly. It hurt more than I had anticipated.

That brought her over. "Are you hurt?"

"No. I always dance this way."

She looked down at the jacked-up wheel. "I can get somebody to change that for you."

"Thanks. But I think I can manage as soon as my wound heals." I flexed the hand. "Nothing seems to be broken." I knelt down and began removing the bolts from the wheel. "Do you work here?"

"Would I be sitting on the lawn painting second-rate pictures if I did?"

"Why not? I imagine you'd get time off and all the free scenery you can eat. No reason why a maid can't paint."

"I'm Magnus' daughter."

"Oh," I said. I removed one bolt from the wheel. Then the next. And the next.

"You're still allowed to talk to me," she said acidly.

I shrugged, but still said nothing. I removed the fourth bolt.

She took an exasperated breath. "I suppose you work for my father?"

I nodded. The fifth bolt came off and I removed the wheel. I went to the trunk for the spare. She followed me. "You just don't talk to anybody at all? Is that it?"

I took the spare out of the trunk and when I straightened, we were eye to eye. I kept it that way for about ten seconds, then I smiled faintly. "Let me put it this way. You're country club and I'm corner tavern. Kismet."

"I am *not* country club. As a matter of fact, we've never even been invited to join the one in Trevor Park."

I grinned. "Why not just buy the place? Your father ought to be able to do that."

"Of course he could. But you just don't *do* things like that. You've got to be *asked*. It makes all the difference in the world."

"To you?" I was mildly curious.

"No. I really don't care much one way or the other. But it does bother Dad."

I rolled the wheel to the side of the car. "Why doesn't he just send the club a five thousand dollar gift. But make it anonymous."

"Anonymous? What good would that do?"

"The members of the board, or whoever runs the placee, won't be able to send the money back, because they won't know who gave it to them. So they'll think, 'Well, now, that's nice, and we do need a new bar.' And they'll spend it."

I began tightening the bolts. "That's the first hook. A month later, your father ought to send another five thousand. Again anonymous. Keep that up for four or five months."

She was interested. "And then?"

"And then *stop* sending money. But by now they'll be accustomed to getting the money regularly. They'll be wondering how they ever got along without it. They've begun to depend on it. As a matter of fact, they wouldn't have started building that new swimming pool if they hadn't expected the dollar rain to continue."

I tapped the hubcap into place. "And then let it leak out that your Dad is the one who's been sending all that beautiful cash—out of the goodness of his heart, and in the spirit of general neighborliness."

I looked up at her. "And so there'll be a meeting of the board, and nobody will say anything direct about money, but someone will clear his throat and say, 'Everybody in Trevor Park belongs to the country club, except Mr. Magnus. Now I was thinking, isn't that just a little inhospitable?'

"And somebody else will say, 'After all, he's never been convicted of anything. There are just rumors. And this *is* America, isn't it? We shouldn't convict a man just on hearsay.'

"And they'll all feel good, and American, and virtuous, and besides they still need another five thousand to finish that swimming pool. And the next thing you know a delegation will call on your father, and within another six months he'll be the chairman of the Memorial Day Dance Committee."

She grinned when I finished. "I'll be sure to tell Dad."

And don't forget to mention who gave you the idea, I thought. I put the spare in the trunk and wiped my hands on a rag. This time I looked at her longer, bolder. I grinned faintly. "I still wish you only worked here."

Then I got into my car and drove

away, not pausing to look back.

I thought I had played things just about right. I didn't press the situation, yet I thought that she would spend some time thinking about me.

After I told Captain Parker how I'd taken over Willkie's territory, he frowned. "But we know that both Binardi and Willkie worked for Magnus. It's in the files we gave you to study. You should have remembered that."

I grinned. "I did."

"Then why . . .?"

"Because it was time for me to get noticed again. To move up another notch. And I did just that."

Parker rubbed his jaw. "What did Magnus think about it?"

"He wasn't too happy at first, and maybe he's not enthusiastic now. But the point is that he was impressed."

Parker sighed. "You have a lot of luck."

"Maybe some. Tyler seems to think I've got possibilities. As a matter of fact, I might not have been able to make it if Tyler hadn't been on my side."

Parker still looked unhappy. "Why don't you let us know before you do any of these crazy things?"

"I never really *know* what I'm going to do next. I make plans and wait for the situation. If it doesn't show up, I forget them. But if it does come up, I have to act fast."

Something else bothered Parker. "We can have you stealing cars, because we're working on a bigger thing. But this kidnapping. . . ."

"There wasn't any kidnapping."

"Not actually, I suppose, but still if Willkie had some other trade and could be in a position to complain, you'd get yourself into trouble we couldn't get you out of."

He took an envelope out of his pocket. "Your check. If you'll endorse it, I'll bank it for you."

I looked at it. One month's pay. Twenty years from now the figures probably wouldn't be much different.

I turned it over and signed my real name.

When I got back to the city, I had Willkie's chief clerk bring in the books. I went over them, hoping to find something wrong, something I could run to tell Magnus about and get another gold star in my record, but the books were clean.

I did notice something else though. Even if there were nothing wrong with the books, the handwriting had changed abruptly eighteen months ago.

I called the clerk back into the office and wanted to know why.

"That was when Fielding retired,

sir," he said. "And I took over the job. Is there anything wrong with the books?"

"No."

"Fielding was a very sick man, sir. His kidneys. You might say that he didn't exactly retire; he just wanted to spend his declining days in a warmer climate. California, sir."

"How is he getting along?"

The clerk sighed. "I received a letter from his wife last week. Fielding passed away."

When the clerk was gone, I lit a cigarette and mulled things over. What the hell, I thought finally, you can't hurt a dead man.

I studied Fielding's handwriting and for a while considered trying to imitate it. But I gave that up. I didn't think anybody was going to be comparing handwriting anyway.

I got some blank paper and copied two of the pages from the account books Fielding had filled out. I kept the items the same, but I changed the figures.

I folded the paper and rubbed it on the floor a few times. I wanted to make it look at least eighteen months old, but it wouldn't have to pass a laboratory test.

At one o'clock I made a call to Magnus' place in Trevor Park.

I got a formal voice. "This is the Magnus residence."

"Could I speak to Mr. Magnus?"

"He isn't here, sir. He won't be home until five. Do you wish to leave a message?"

"No." I hung up. Perhaps it was just as well Magnus wasn't in. While I was working on this, I might as well keep something else going too. And make it seem accidental.

I phoned the Magnus place again.

"The Magnus residence," the butler said again.

I hung up without saying a word. Five minutes later I called again and did the same thing.

Eventually the butler would get tired of picking up the phone and having no one to talk to. I thought he'd go to somebody and complain. And since Magnus wasn't there, it would be Valerie.

He must have been a patient man. It wasn't until twelve calls later that I finally heard Valerie's voice.

"Who *is* this?" she demanded.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Magnus."

"Have you been phoning every five minutes and then hanging up?"

"Why, no. I just got to my office and . . . ." I stopped. "The voice is familiar. Is this the girl who paints?"

"Hagen? Pete Hagen?"

"I didn't think I left the name."

"You didn't. I asked Dad." She laughed lightly. "He sent the first five thousand to the country club. He liked the idea."

"Good. Can I talk to him?"

"He's not here right now."

"Tell him I'll be there around five."

"Now look, Pete . . . Hagen. Nobody just *says* that he's coming here. That much I know. You wait until . . . ."

I hung up.

At a little after five, the patient butler showed me into the study once again. Tyler was with Magnus and they had evidently just returned from a golf course.

Magnus glowered, but held himself in until the butler closed the door. "Damn it, Hagen, nobody, *nobody* calls up and tells me he's coming here. If I want to see anybody here, *I'm* the one who does the inviting."

"I thought I ought to see you personally. I don't know how clear your phone line is."

He seemed to go along with that precaution, but he still wasn't happy. "All right. What is it?"

I took the sheets out of my pocket. "While I was going over Willkie's books, I found this. It must have slipped behind one of the shelves."

Magnus glanced at them. "So?"

"I checked these with the ledgers and found the right pages. The items are identical, but the figures are different. It looks like you were being taken, Magnus. For about five hundred a week."

He wouldn't believe that. "I have those books checked every month."

"There's nothing wrong with the books. The juggling takes place *before* the entries themselves are made."

He frowned. "Willkie?"

"No. A clerk Willkie used to have. Fielding. I compared the handwriting and it checks."

The name Fielding meant nothing to Magnus or Tyler. He was just another one of hundreds of clerks.

"I thought I'd let you know before I did anything about it," I said. "You told me you wanted things that way."

He studied me. "*You* want to do something about it?"

I nodded. "Fielding retired eighteen months ago. To California. But that isn't good enough for us. I think I'll take a trip out there."

Magnus waited.

"At least we'd have his hide," I said. "If not the money. We can't let anybody in the organization get away with something like this."

"And you'd take care of that little thing yourself?"

"Sure. But I wanted to clear it with you first."

Tyler looked worried and I thought he'd say something.

But Magnus laughed softly. "Thanks for volunteering. But all I need is Fielding's address. I've got a division that specializes in people like him."

And Magnus would arrange for Fielding to have visitors. But the visitors would discover that he had unfortunately died before they could see him.

But I had scored two points. For one, I could be trusted to keep the books honest. For another, so far as Magnus knew, I was willing to commit murder for the organization.

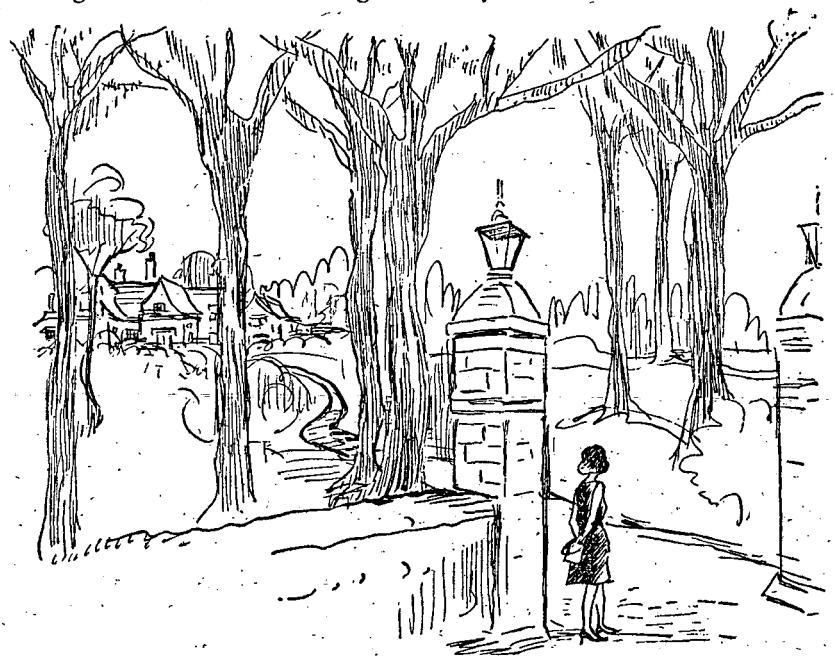
The phone on Magnus' desk rang and he picked it up. He listened for a minute and then hung up.

His eyes were thoughtful. "Benson's dead."

Tyler and I looked at each other. The name didn't mean a thing to either one of us.

"Heart attack," Magnus said. "Went just like that." He puffed his cigar and finally looked at Tyler. "You once mentioned that you had some kind of a degree in accounting?"

Tyler nodded.



Magnus let things ride for a quiet half a minute. Then he said. "Tyler, you got the job."

"The job?"

"Benson's job," Magnus said. "It's a promotion, Tyler. You'll be the only one beside me who knows where central bookkeeping . . . ." He stopped and looked my way. Evidently he had forgotten I was still there. "You can go now, Hagen."

Outside the room, I walked past doors to the front of the house. None of them opened.

I began to wonder about Valerie. I'd made the phone call specifically so that she'd know I'd be here, and when.

At my car, I waited. Still nothing.

I'd been wrong before in my life and this looked like another time.

I got into my car and drove down the winding drive.

Valerie waited at the gate. She gave the hitchhiker's sign and I slowed the car to a stop.

She smiled. "Hello."

"Hello."

"How about a lift?"

I rubbed my hand along the steering wheel and tried to look uneasy. "Car break down?"

"No." She smiled. "Are you afraid of something?"

I took a breath. "No. Get in."

I waited until we were out of Trevor Park before I said anything. "How will you get back?"

"I'll take a taxi."

"Wouldn't it have been much simpler if you'd just taken your car?"

"I walked down to get the mail. There wasn't any, so I decided to go to town. Flash of the moment type of thing."

"Does the mail come this late in the day?"

She looked at me. "Did you think that I deliberately waited for you to come along?"

I didn't say anything.

She stiffened. "You might as well stop right here. I'll *walk* the rest of the way."

I slowed the car down to about twenty and then stepped on the accelerator again. I sighed. "Care for a cigarette?" I took the pack and lighter out of my pocket and handed it to her.

She lit two cigarettes and passed one on to me. "Suppose I weren't Magnus' daughter?"

"Maybe I'd ask you for a date. Maybe."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why?'"

Her eyes were level. "I have a mirror. People don't ask me for dates."

I stared at her as though I didn't have the faintest idea of what she was talking about.

"Watch the road," she said. But she had blushed, and she was pleased.

I got the car back into my lane. "You wouldn't happen to know if there's a good restaurant in town? I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"There's Henrich's."

After a while I asked, "Have you had dinner?"

"No."

This time when I looked at her, I smiled. And so did she.

In the restaurant we kept the talk small, but at coffee she said, "I wish you didn't work for my father."

"He gives out nice money."

"No, he doesn't." She looked away. "As my father, I love him. And he loves me. But I know what he does. What he is. I'm not a little girl who thinks her father's in the investment business."

After I paid the check, I drove her back. At the entrance to Magnus' estate, she touched my arm. "I'll get out here and walk the rest of the way."

I had intended to stop here anyway. I didn't want Magnus to see me with his daughter. But I made the motions of protest. "I'll take you up to the house."

"No. I think it would be better if we just . . . ."

"Sure," I said. "I guess you're right. We're both right. It's better to say goodbye."

"I didn't mean that," she said desperately. "I mean—just for *now*."

I stopped the car, got out, and opened her door. She stepped out, looking small and lonely.

It was evening and a full pale moon hung in the sky. I looked down at her. "I like that restaurant. Henrich's. I don't suppose you'd like another lift to town? Say tomorrow night at eight?"

Her smile was sudden. "I'll be here. I will."

When I drove away, I glanced back. She still stood beside the road, watching me.

I got back to my apartment at about nine. I made myself a stiff drink and walked to the mirror. I looked about the way I felt. A little dirty.

I went to the window and stared out over the lights of the city. How long would it take before I found out where Magnus kept that damn bookkeeper's nest? One year? Two?

And then what? Another assignment and a three-figure monthly check?

I took out my wallet and counted the money. Nineteen hundred dollars. And that was just spending money. Something you carried around to keep from feeling

insecure. Just for odds and ends.

But I'd never had that much in my wallet before. I'd never expected to.

I had a good deal going here. Suppose I kept it that way?

Suppose I told Captain Parker to go to hell.

I swallowed half the drink.

There was a lot of money to be made with Magnus. A lot. But there was something else too. Just working for him was one thing, but suppose . . . suppose. . . .

It could be done, I thought. Get Magnus to see me more often. Get *him* to invite me to his house. Like Tyler. Get Magnus to trust me completely. Depend on me.

Make it so that when he saw what was happening between Valerie and me, it wouldn't bother him at all. Maybe I could even get him to think that it was his own idea.

Yes. It would take time. But I could sell it.

And what about Parker?

There wasn't much he could really do except to let Magnus know why I had gotten into the organization in the first place.

How could I get Magnus really to believe that I'd switched sides? How could I convince him? How?

My phone rang.

It was Tyler. "Hagen? I'm at the Carson Hotel in Bellington. That's about an hour's drive north of where you are. I'd like to see you right away. Room 408."

When I got there and knocked, Tyler opened the door. I noticed a bottle and two glasses on the table.

Tyler patted me on the shoulder. "Come on in and help me celebrate."

I closed the door behind me. "Sure. Your promotion."

He grinned. "I just finished inspecting Magnus' central bookkeeping headquarters. It's right here in Bellington. The front is the Spencer Insurance Agency. The complete books are there, Hagen. Everything."

I frowned. "I thought that kind of information was something you were supposed to keep under your hat."

Tyler laughed again. "There's no reason why I can't tell you, Hagen. We're both working for the same organization."

"I know. But . . ."

Tyler's face became serious. "Hagen, did you think that in something this big, Captain Parker would have only *one* man working on the job?"

I stared at him.

"There are at least a half dozen besides you and me, Hagen. I don't know who the others are, but I was told about you."

It took a little while for what

he had said to sink in. I shook my head. "Why didn't Parker tell me about you? Or the others?"

"Because if something went wrong, he didn't want any single man to pull down all the rest."

"But still he told *you* about me."

"Because I was in a position to help you along. Did you think that you alone made all your luck? You might still be stealing cars if I hadn't been there to keep calling you to Magnus' attention."

He poured whiskey into two glasses. "I've been on this assignment for five years, Hagen. And that's a long, long time. But it looked like I'd gotten into a dead end. So my instructions were to help you along whenever I could —try to get you to the top, and maybe you could do what I hadn't been able to. And then this good thing came along. Benson died. Luck? Sure. But it wasn't luck that I was up there for Magnus to tap on the shoulder."

I took one of the glasses and almost emptied it. "Have you told Captain Parker about the books?"

"Not yet. I phoned his office and got referred to his home. But his daughter told me that Parker and his wife went out for the evening. She didn't know where they went. I left a message for him to call me here just as soon as he gets home." Tyler lifted his glass in a toast. "Parker will get his squads busy and we ought to have this thing wrapped up before morning."

I stared at the liquor in my glass. No one knew about the books yet, but Tyler.

He frowned slightly. "About this clerk, Fielding. We've got to stop that. We don't want anything to happen to him."

"Fielding died about two weeks ago."

Tyler grinned slowly. "You're a smart operator, Hagen. For a while there you had me worried. Murder's going too far."

Is it? I smiled faintly to myself.

I would kill Tyler. I would kill him and tell Magnus who he was. What he had been.

And then I would tell him who *I* was—and that I'd changed sides.

Even then he might not believe me—until I told him I knew where central bookkeeping headquarters was and hadn't gone to the department with the information.

I reached for the bottle and filled my glass.

"Easy on the liquor, Hagen," Tyler said. "You want to be on your feet for the raid, don't you?"

"Sure." But I took another long drink.

The phone on the table rang. When Tyler picked it up, his back was toward me.

I slipped the .38 out of my hol-

ster, leveled it at Tyler's back.

Tyler spoke into the mouthpiece. "Parker?"

I found myself perspiring. Just one shot and it would be all over. It could be as simple as that. My finger touched the trigger.

And then I closed my eyes.

No. I couldn't do it.

I cursed myself for being a fool. A sucker. But I slipped the .38 back into the holster.

Someday I would figure out why a badge was more important than a million dollars. but I didn't want to work on it now.

When Tyler was through, he turned. "It's all set. Parker's getting the wheels moving. He's even going to pick up Magnus tonight."

A reflective haze came into Tyler's eyes and he grinned wryly. "There's a lot of money to be made with Magnus. There were times . . . well . . . you know . . . there were times when I was a little tempted to change sides."

I pulled a cigarette slowly from my pack. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

* * *

I parked and waited outside the car. The road ahead was white with moonlight.

There wasn't any reason for being here, I thought. Not now.

I glanced at my watch. Eight-fifteen.

Then I heard the footsteps, and in a moment Valerie stood at the gates.

She was a nobody now, I told myself savagely. She didn't mean millions. She didn't mean information I wanted.

And yet I was here.

She walked slowly to the car. "Why did you come?"

"I don't know." Was it pity?

"Everything was planned, wasn't it? Meeting me? Talking to me?"

"Yes. I planned it."

"You didn't have to come back now," she said. "Everything has been done."

"I know."

"Did you travel all this way just to say goodbye?"

I touched her face lightly and she began to cry.

I held her and I knew why I'd come back.

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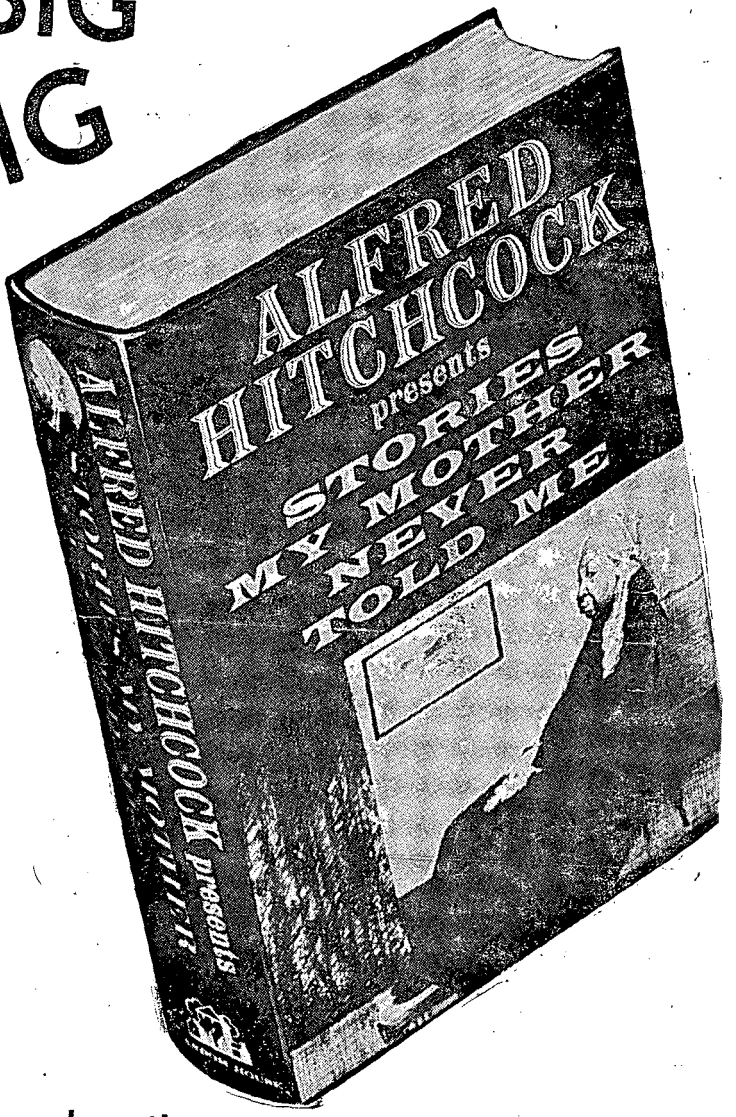

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