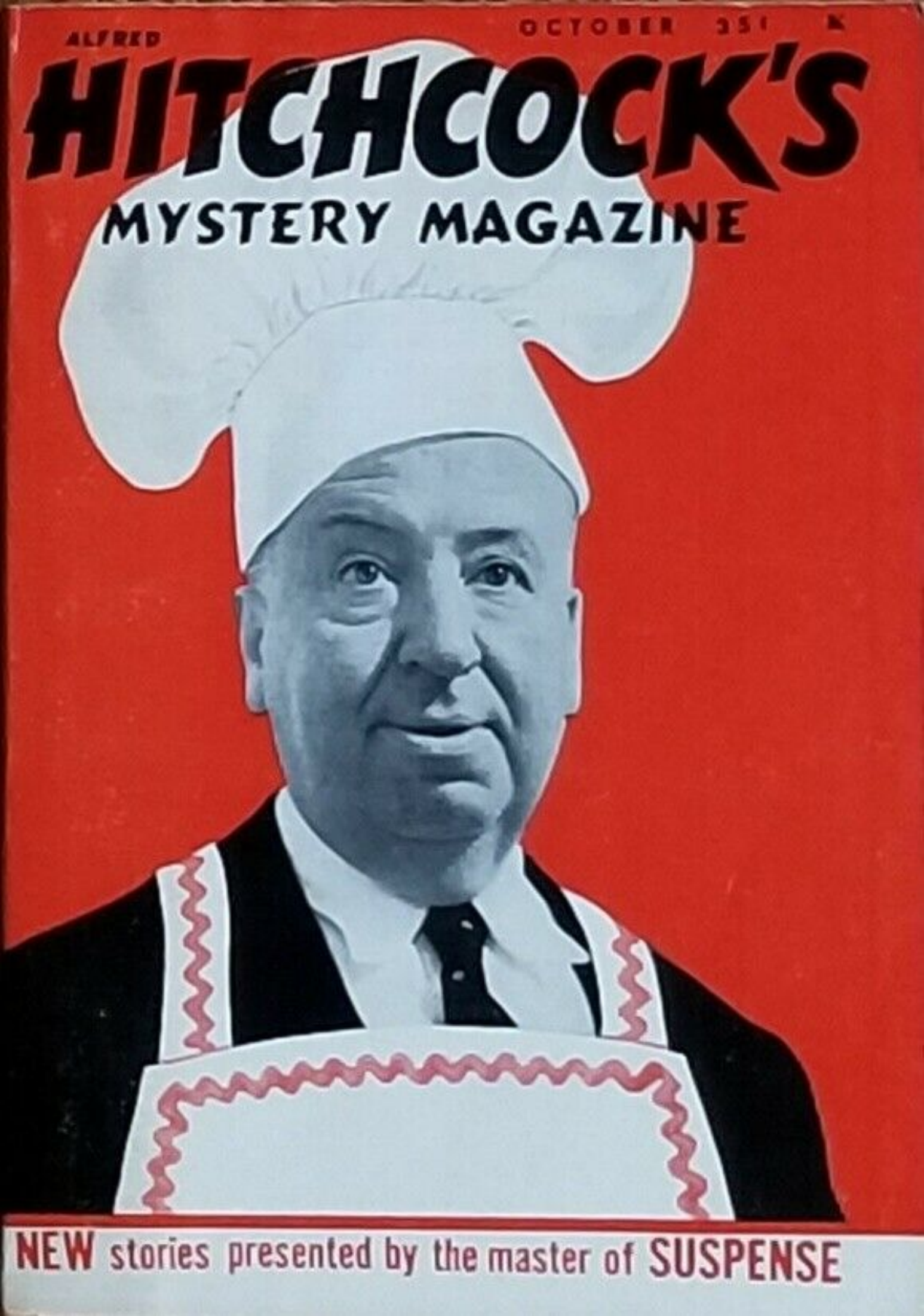
ALFRED
OCTOBER 35¢
HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE
NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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I know you are anxious to get started so I won't keep you any longer. Take a deep breath and plunge right in. May you have a shuddering good time.

Alfred Hitchcock

VOLUME 8, No. 10 OCTOBER, 1963

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

RICHARD E. DECKER
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A virile language is normally identified by its slang. Considering the simple phrase, "It's a bomb"; a teenager might be referring to a sports car; a drama critic to a dismal play. Police spokesmen, however, are usually less imaginative.

THE BOX I carried was approximately nine by nine by nine, and it was wrapped securely in common brown paper.

10 MINUTES

I entered the huge lobby of the city hall and strode rapidly toward the elevators. I noticed several policemen scattered throughout the crowd, several of whom seemed to take more than a passing interest in what I carried—or perhaps it was my beard which attracted their attention. However none of them attempted to intercept me.

The elevator took me to the third floor. In the corridor I walked by several more policemen, one of whom rubbed his jaw and frowned as I passed.

I opened the door to the mayor's reception room. Except for a single young man at a desk at the far end, it was unoccupied.

His eyes flicked uneasily to the box I carried. "May I help you?"

"You may. I would like to see the mayor immediately."

His tongue ran over apparently dry lips. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I would have mentioned it if I did." I glanced at my watch. "It is absolutely imperative that I see him at once."

"Just one moment," he said quickly. He darted through a door behind him and I thought I heard the click of a Yale lock.

There followed approximately four minutes of silence and then the door from the corridor edged open cautiously.

A tall man in a plain blue suit hesitated in the doorway. Behind him a number of uniformed police officers craned their necks.

He glanced at the box, then at me, and seemed to gauge the situation. Then he motioned the officers behind him to retreat. He sidled into the room alone and closed the door. "Did you want to see Mayor Pettibone?"

"Are *you* Mayor Pettibone?"

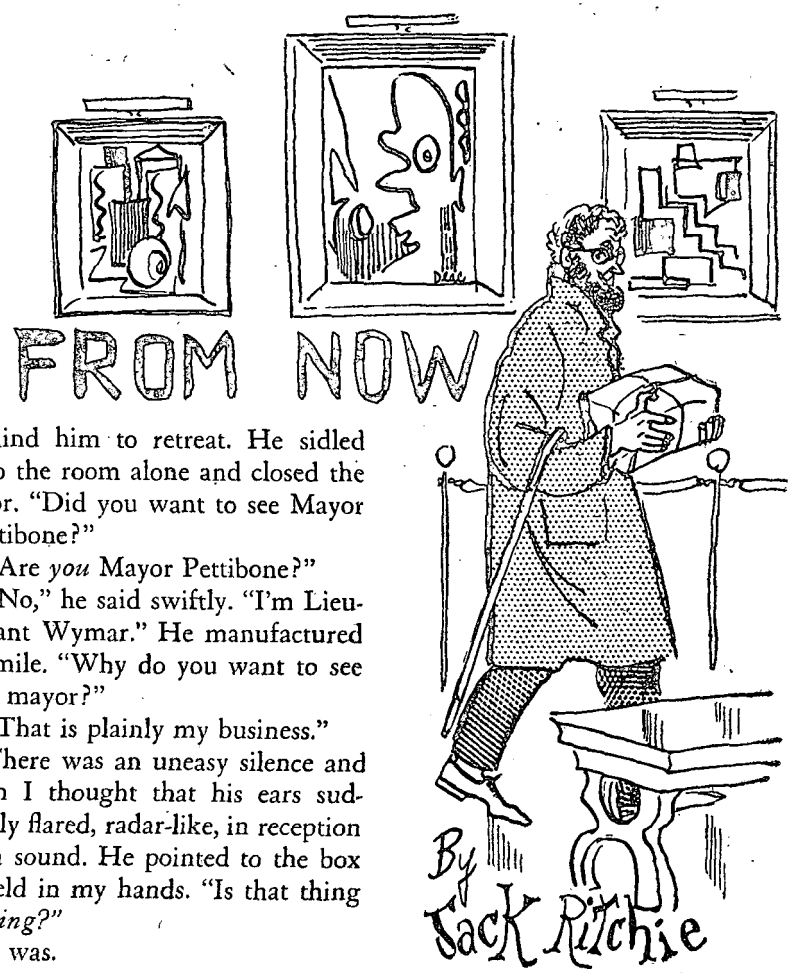
"No," he said swiftly. "I'm Lieutenant Wymar." He manufactured a smile. "Why do you want to see the mayor?"

"That is plainly my business."

There was an uneasy silence and then I thought that his ears suddenly flared, radar-like, in reception of a sound. He pointed to the box I held in my hands. "Is that thing *ticking?*"

It was.

The box almost slipped from my lap, but I managed to retrieve it before it hit the floor. When I looked up, I saw that the lieutenant's eyes were clamped shut and he seemed to be waiting tensely for something to happen.



His eyes finally opened and he exhaled. "What's in that box?"

"That is *also* my business." I consulted my watch again. "I must see the mayor within the next *ten* minutes. Not one second later."

He seemed to brighten a little. "Ten minutes?" He took several steps forward. "The mayor is busy right now. Couldn't you come back later?"

"No." I put the box down on the bench beside me. "If I don't see the mayor immediately, I am tempted to blast my way into his office."

What occurred next was lightning fast. Wymar's hands seized my package and he flung open the corridor door. "Quick! Somebody get a bucket of water! This thing's timed to go off in less than ten minutes."

I followed on his heels. "See here, what's the meaning of this?"

He ignored me. "Damn it, doesn't *anybody* have a bucket of water?"

I glimpsed half a dozen policemen dashing about. One of them wrenched open a door which proved to be a janitor's closet. It contained various cleaning materials and a deep sink. He immediately plugged the sink and opened both faucets wide. "Over here, Lieutenant!"

Wymar thrust the package into the sink and in a few moments it was completely immersed in water.

I watched the air bubbles rising from the submerged package and sighed. "I *do* hope it's waterproof."

Wymar's eyes widened. *"Waterproof?* I never thought of that." He waved a hand. "Everybody back! The bomb may go off any minute."

I found myself automatically involved in a retreat to the end of the corridor.

"Somebody phone the bomb squad," Wymar ordered.

A very young policeman saluted. "Yes, sir. What's the number?"

Wymar turned purple. However he immediately pointed to a sergeant. "Murphy, get the bomb squad."

The sergeant departed and Lieutenant Wymar's attention returned to me. I was rather forcibly escorted into an empty room down on the second floor.

Two policemen remained to guard me while Wymar departed, presumably to superintend evacuation activities. He returned fifteen minutes later looking considerably relieved. "The bomb boys are here."

And then he removed a sheet of paper from an envelope and thrust it before my eyes. *"You* wrote this, didn't you?"

He would not let me touch the paper, and so I had to squint as I read the typewritten words.

Mayor Pettibone:

Your actions on the Veterans' Memorial development were arbitrary and clearly not in the public interest. Since there seems to be no legal means of removing you from office immediately, I intend to blow you to kingdom come.

The Avenger

I shook my head. "Elite type. I prefer Pica. Much easier to read."

He scowled. "Did you or did you not write this note?"

"My dear sir, if I intended to blow up the mayor, would I forewarn him?"

"Maybe," Wymar said. "Some bombers are nuts."

I smiled. "Are my fingerprints on the note?"

Evidently there weren't any fingerprints on the note, except possibly the mayor's, because Wymar did not answer the question. "What's your name?"

"James B. Bellington," I said.

He began writing in a notebook. "James C. Bellington."

I corrected him. "James B. Bellington. As in bomb."

"And your address?"

"I have a room in the Medford Hotel. A miserable place, but it is all I can afford at the present time."

"Did you lose any money when the Veterans' Memorial development was switched from the east to the north side?" He paused.

I patted a stray hair of my beard. "I refuse to say another word until I've seen my lawyer."

At that moment one of the men who was evidently a member of the bomb squad entered the room. He was encased in pads and he carried my soggy package. He levered up his mesh face mask and spoke. "We checked it out, Lieutenant."

"Well?" Wymar demanded.

The padded gentleman shrugged. "An alarm clock. That's all. Just a cheap alarm clock."

"Of course an alarm clock," I seconded testily. "What did you expect? A bomb?"

Wymar spoke in a slightly strangled voice. "Do you still want to see Mayor Pettibone?"

"Not at the moment. I'm afraid the mood has left me." I smiled slightly. "You *do* protect the mayor very well, don't you? A thing like that is nice to know. Anyone wishing to blow him to bits would have to be very clever about it, wouldn't he?"

Lieutenant Wymar's eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me.

I rose. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Wymar remembered something. "Don't forget your alarm clock."

I shrugged. "I'm afraid it is ruined. You may keep it for exhi-

bition in the police museum." I smiled again. "Tell Mayor Pettibone that I shall return. Perhaps this after . . ." I stopped, waved amiably, and departed.

In the lobby downstairs I purchased a five pack of panatellas. I lit one of them and continued out into the street.

At the corner newsstand, I stopped and glared at the garish magazines exhibited, especially those which apparently appealed most to people with damp palms. After a while I snorted. "Rubbish. Absolutely rubbish."

The newsstand attendant, an elderly man in a frayed overcoat girdled with a change maker, sighed. "Look, mister, if you wanta copy just stick it under your coat and give me the money. I won't tell nobody."

"Sir," I said stiffly, "I would not be caught dead with any one of these miserable rags. They should be banned from sale."

He favored the sky with a weary appeal. "Why don't you just go to the library and borrow yourself a solid book? Like medical. I'm just a poor man engaged in private enterprise."

I pointed my walking stick at the base of the stand. "One bomb placed right there could blow your messy literature sky-high." I took two savage puffs of my cigar and strode away without looking back.

A block farther, as I waited for a light to change, I glanced back. A tall man in a trench coat appeared to be conferring with the attendant. They both looked my way and the attendant shrugged.

The light changed and I crossed the street. I entered a large dime store and purchased a cheap alarm clock. Downstairs, in the hardware department, I bought two dry cells and five feet of No. 20 telephone wire. Returning down the aisle on my way back to the stairs, I passed the man in the trench coat. He seemed to be supremely absorbed in a display of cafe curtains.

Out on the street, I lit a fresh cigar. The weather was rather damp, but it was the type of day I prefer. It stimulates the blood.

I walked smartly for several blocks when it began to drizzle. At the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, I hesitated. I glanced at the facade. Horrible taste, I thought. How much dynamite would it require to destroy a monstrosity such as that?

I tossed away my cigar and ascended the flight of stairs to the entrance. Inside, I wandered about and eventually reached a small gallery at the rear of the building.

For one of conservative tastes, the exhibit was truly one to raise the hackles—an indiscriminate mix-

ture of Utrillos, Picassos, and Modiglianis. I scowled and sharply rapped my walking stick on the brass rail. "Tripe. Complete tripe."

One of the uniformed guards appeared at my elbow. "Don't do that, mister. You're denting the brass rail."

I indicated one of the paintings. "This appears to me to be nothing more than a badly wounded piece of canvas."

He seemed to agree. "You can't blame them boys too much, though. The invention of the camera must of hit them pretty hard. Like automation and you got to learn a new trade."

"They should be burned," I said firmly. "Every last one of them. Or better yet, blown to bits. To shreds."

"Mister," the guard said, "if you got to point, do it with your finger. Not the cane. I got to account for any holes in them pictures."

I spent the next fifteen minutes amid the mental security of the Dutch masters.

When I returned to the street, it had stopped raining. At the first corner I noticed the man in the trench coat descending the steps of the museum. Apparently he had been in the building while I had been there.

I rubbed my beard.

Now I entered a succession of stores, departing immediately via side and rear entrances. Eventually I established beyond doubt that I was no longer followed.

In the neighborhood of my hotel, I purchased a quarter pound of butter, a quart of milk, a loaf of bread, some cold cuts, and a five pound bag of sugar.

As I entered the Medford, I noticed the man in the trench coat in a lobby chair reading a newspaper.

In my room, I constructed a sandwich and re-read last night's newspaper, principally the article dealing with the Veterans' Memorial Center. It was to be an ambitious project encompassing several acres and consisting of a number of buildings. The anticipated site had been a stretch of semi-tenements near the lake front. As a matter of fact it had been so well anticipated that there had been brisk selling

and buying by a number of individuals and the value of the properties had suddenly sky-rocketted.

Yesterday, however, the city council, mostly as the result of pressure from Mayor Pettibone, had decided to switch the site to a more northerly—and cheaper—location. Needless to say, a number of holders of the originally planned site had lost their shirts.

My phone rang and Geoffrey Mipple was on the line.

Geoffrey and I were roommates at college and have since preserved our fast friendship. On any number of subjects we are of a like mind.

"James?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you go to the mayor's office?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Just about what I anticipated."

"Are you going back again this afternoon?"

"I believe so." I took a bite of my sandwich. "You're not calling from your room, are you?"

"No. A telephone booth."

"Good." I hung up, finished my glass of milk, and then went to the closet. I removed an empty cubic box from the top shelf and went to work.

At two that afternoon, I reached for the phone and got the desk clerk. "Could you tell me how long the city hall is open today?" I asked.

"Is this Mr. Bellington?"

"Yes."

There was an appreciable pause. Perhaps he was conferring with someone. He returned to the phone. "The city hall is open twenty-four hours a day. However almost all of the offices close at five. Is there anyone in particular you wanted to see?"

"Yes. There is." I looked at my watch. "Would you please have a taxi waiting for me in approximately twenty minutes?"

I smoked two inches of my cigar and then put on my coat. I carried my cubic box when I left the room.

The desk clerk's eyes seemed both curious and wary as he glanced at my package. "Your taxi is waiting, sir."

A single taxi stood at the curb. I entered, gave my destination, and as we pulled away, so did another taxi about a half a block behind us.

At the city hall, I noticed a peculiar vehicle parked near one of the side entrances. It was quite metallically sturdy and its rear consisted of a huge wicker-work cage.

The lobby was incredibly crowded and one had the impression of a defense alert with everyone evacuated to the main floor. At the elevators, a number of policemen seemed to be turning back anyone who wished to ascend.

I expected similar treatment, and yet a path cleared before me and I found myself in the elevator alone with the operator. At the third floor he quickly opened the door and when he descended alone I had the impression that it was at high speed.

The corridor before me was completely empty and my footfalls echoed and re-echoed. When I opened the door to the mayor's reception room, I once again found the nervous young man alone at the desk.

"I would like to see the mayor," I said. "Within the next ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," he said hastily. "Of course. Would you please take a seat over there?" He pointed to a leather upholstered davenport.

I sat down and placed the box carefully beside me.

The receptionist cleared his throat. "Would you do me a small favor, sir?"

"Perhaps."

He got up. "I have to move this bookcase from *here* over to *there*. Would you lend me a hand? Or rather, *two* hands?"

I sighed. "Very well." I left my box and grasped one end of the bookcase. "Ready?"

At that precise moment, the corridor door burst open, and Lieutenant Wymar, followed by a bevy of policemen, stormed into the room. Two well-padded gentlemen in masks appeared in their wake.

One of the masked men spoke. "Everybody out of the room. And don't touch the box." He turned to Lieutenant Wymar. "We'll roll in our machine and X-ray the package just where it is."

Again very shortly I found myself in a room far removed from the mayor's office, with Lieutenant Wymar glowering over me. "You've got a one-track mind, haven't you?"

"One-track mind?"

"That's right. You threatened to blow up a newsstand."

I blinked. "Sir, never in my life would I . . ."

He raised a hand. "Don't bother to deny it. We had you followed when you left here yesterday. And you also threatened to blow up the Metropolitan Museum of Arts."

"Only the modern paintings," I corrected. "Have you seen that pathetic Utrillo in which he attempts . . ."

"We also know that you bought another alarm clock, some dry cells, some . . ."

The door opened and one of the padded technicians entered. "It's definitely a bomb, Lieutenant. We can make out the dry cells, the wiring, the alarm clock, and the powder charge."

I spent four hours in jail before

Lieutenant Wymar saw me again and when he did he appeared as frustrated as a lip reader at a ventriloquist's convention. With him was an intentionally informal young man wearing a crew-cut, a tweed jacket, and a smile of professional wisdom.

Lieutenant Wymar seemed to have difficulty restraining an urge to throttle me. "The powder charge wasn't a powder charge."

I smiled. "Really?"

His hands opened and closed. "It was just a bag of sugar."

I nodded. "If only you'd *asked* me."

Wymar turned abruptly to his companion. "All right, Doc. He's all yours."

When the doctor and I were alone, he offered me a cigar from a new five-pack. It was my brand and he had evidently done research.

He lit the cigar for me. "My name is Dr. Barton. Dr. Sam Barton. Just call me Sam."

"Why?"

He blew out the match. "Do you often have this compulsion to blow up things? People?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

He smiled tolerantly. "Did you lose heavily in the Veterans' Memorial operation?"

I said nothing.

"And do you blame Mayor Pettibone? Well, do you or don't you?"

"I believe I'm catching a cold," I said.

He smiled conspiratorily. "You were just *testing* their defenses, weren't you?"

I sneezed.

He almost patted me on the knee. "Yes. *Testing*. The first time just an alarm clock. Then the alarm clock and the mechanism, but not the powder charge. And you will keep taking boxes with you until the police get . . . how shall we say? . . . *tired?* Until they no longer bother . . . and then one day. . . ." He seemed to search for the next word.

"Pow?"

He nodded. *"Pow."* And now for half a minute he became thoughtful. "But the mechanism of the bomb would have to be different from what it is now, wouldn't it? After all, if you merely set the clock for a certain time, there would be no guarantee that you would be *with* Mayor Pettibone precisely at the time when the bomb is due to go off."

"You have an incisive mind."

He flushed slightly. "I was always rather good at logic in school. Straight A's." He leaned forward. "You would have to have something on the *outside* of the package. Something like a *doorbell pushbutton?* And when you *pressed* the

button, the bomb would go off."

I savored my cigar. "Open circuit? Closed circuit?"

He rubbed his chin. "With an open circuit, when you pressed the pushbutton, the circuit would *close* . . . then current would begin to *flow* . . . and the the bomb. . . ." He stopped and shook his head slowly. "No. That wouldn't really do, you know."

"It wouldn't?"

"No. You see when you are carrying this package, couldn't the police put a bullet through your head?"

"That seems reasonable to me."

He nodded. "And don't you see, the sudden termination of your life might not even leave you with sufficient reflex to *push* the button."

"That *is* a problem."

"And so we come to the *closed* circuit system of wiring. In this case the current is already flowing through the circuit, but the bomb does not explode because the contact device is held magnetically immobilized by the current. However when the push button is *released,* demagnetization ensues, the contact device is released and. . . ."

I supplied the word again. *"Pow?"*

"Precisely." He smiled at his triumph of electromagnetic reasoning. "In other words, if the police shot you through the head, it would actually serve no constructive purpose. Your finger would merely release its pressure on the pushbutton and the bomb would go off anyway."

"By George," I said admiringly, "I believe you have it."

He frowned thoughtfully. "You haven't bought a pushbutton yet, have you?"

"No. But if I ever do, you will be the first to know."

He was pleased at the precedence. "Now remember, when you *do* buy a pushbutton, *don't* use it until you talk to me first." He took a card with his name and office address from his pocket. "In the meantime, would you care to come to see me? On Thursday at ten A.M."

"Just for a visit?"

"Of course," he said reassuringly."

"Then I am not to be kept in jail?"

"Of course not. You are free to go."

"Why?"

"Well . . . actually the police have nothing on which to hold you. Not even disorderly conduct . . . since it appears that it was actually the police who were disorderly. And since your package wasn't really . . . on closer examination . . . *rigged* as a bomb. . . ."

"And there is no law against

peacefully carrying a conglomeration of objects in a package?"

He nodded. "And besides, it's the District Attorney's private suspicion that this may turn out to be some scheme whereby you get to sue the city." He studied me earnestly. "Will you?"

"I hadn't planned on it."

He seemed relieved. "Good. And besides, I prefer my own theory . . . that you were *testing*."

Twenty minutes later I found myself free on the streets. After walking a block, I once again observed that the man in the trench coat was dogging my footsteps.

It was evening now and I found it not at all difficult to lose him. When I had satisfied myself of that accomplishment, I returned to the lighted downtown section and entered a dime store.

I purchased a push button.

I did not return to my own hotel room. Instead I registered at Geoffrey's hotel and then went to his room.

Geoffrey is a thin, pipe-smoking man. "Are you going back tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said. "I've purchased the push button."

"Well . . . good luck. I hope it goes off this time."

"Thank you. It should."

I did not sleep well that night. I had a number of catastrophe dreams, the most vivid of which being the disintegration of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in one tremendous explosion.

In the morning, I returned to Geoffrey's room and we constructed my third and final cubic package.

At ten o'clock, I phoned Dr. Barton. "Doctor, I just bought a push button."

He was disturbed. "You have? So soon? But you haven't had a session with me yet."

"I called to bid you goodbye. I do not believe that we shall meet in this world again."

"Now wait a minute," he said desperately. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to see Mayor Pettibone. This morning I shall not fail."

"Where are you now? At your hotel?"

"No." I hung up.

I sat down and read the morning's paper while I smoked a full cigar. Then I went downstairs with my cubic box and directed the first taxi driver to take me to the city hall.

However, one block before my destination, I ordered him to pull to the curb. I paid my fare and stepped out onto the sidewalk. I carried the package in front of me, one thumb firmly depressing the

push button affixed to its top.

I surveyed the panorama before me.

The avenue ahead was innocent of all vehicles and pedestrians. The side streets had been roped off and uniformed policemen were stationed at intervals to see that none of the spectators—and there appeared to be *thousands*—trespassed into the clearing. In effect, a wide path led directly to the entrance of the city hall.

To one side I spied Lieutenant Wymar and Dr. Barton. The latter, as a matter of fact, seemed to be hiding behind a lamp post.

With all those thousands of eyes staring at me, I suddenly experienced a new and strange sensation.

Stage fright.

I took two tentative steps toward the city hall, then I turned abruptly and walked away.

For some moments there was silence behind me and then Lieutenant Wymar shouted. "Hey, wait a minute!"

I walked faster.

When I glanced back, I saw him, Dr. Barton, and a host of police officers in pursuit.

I broke into a trot.

Hundreds of pedestrians seemed to join the procession behind me.

I dashed down the block, glanced back again, paused for a breath, and quickly darted up the stairs of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts. The swarming mass turned in my direction and I dashed into the building.

I puffed badly as I trotted through the Dutch masters. Behind me the roar of the chase clung like adhesive. My heart thumped with the exertion as I quickly traversed an exhibition of Roman sculpture. The relentless pursuit continued.

Eventually only one corridor remained ahead of me. I staggered past two startled guards into the exhibition of modern art. At the far end of the gallery I came face to face with a blank wall. I turned and faced the far door.

The pack surged through the doorway, Lieutenant Wymar and Dr. Barton acting as point.

I held up my free hand and shouted with evident hysteria. "Stop! Everybody *stop!* One more step and I shall release this push button!"

Lieutenant Wymar and his army skidded to a halt—possibly leaving heel marks on the marble floor.

I took several breaths before I managed to speak again. "Lieutenant Wymar, I have decided to give up trying to see Mayor Pettibone. Apparently he is completely inaccessible."

That was pleasant information for the lieutenant. "Well, now you're showing some sense." He

took a quick, eager step forward.

"Halt!" I shouted, my voice verily ricocheting off the walls. "One more step and I shall release this button."

Lieutenant Wymar froze.

I again raised my voice for an announcement. "In exactly ten minutes, I shall release this push button. I would do so at this exact instant, except for the simple fact that I have a desire to regain my breath before making such a momentous decision."

Dr. Barton cleared his throat uneasily. "If we could just talk to you for . . ."

"On the other hand," I said, "waiting to regain one's breath at a time like this is frivolous . . . procrastinating . . . perhaps I should. . . ."

Dr. Barton spoke quickly. "No. No. By all means, regain your breath."

Lieutenant Wymar turned to an aide at his side. "Just how much damage could that box do if it went off?"

His assistant frowned thoughtfully. "It's hard to say, Lieutenant. With some of these new combinations, he might be able to blow up the whole building."

I looked at my watch. "In *nine* minutes I shall release the button."

The lieutenant made a swift decision. "Clear the building. Hop to it." He then spoke to Dr. Barton. "You stay here and try to talk him out of it."

Dr. Barton seemed unhappy. "I really don't think I could do anything in a case like this, Lieutenant. We need somebody with a little more experience in this particular field." He looked at me hopefully. "A priest? A minister? A rabbi?"

"Eight minutes," I said.

Dr. Barton immediately joined the general retreat.

Through the doorway I saw that my pursuers had at least temporarily halted in the sculpture department. I smiled grimly and advanced. The retreat recommenced immediately.

A new and unique emotion took possession of me.

The feeling of power.

I found myself chuckling as now I pursued them through the Early American primitives, through a lane of lithographs, and pell mell down the hall of prize winning junior high school watercolors. When they reached the front door they were fairly tumbling over each other.

I laughed triumphantly and then dashed about the building rooting out any brave souls who might have chosen to remain. I discovered two—though not brave—crouching beneath their desks in the adminis-

trative department. I sent them fleeing out the back door into the gathering crowd.

When I returned to the front windows, I saw Lieutenant Wymar, Dr. Barton, and a number of people who appeared to be officials, gathered in conference at a safe distance from the building.

I watched them for five minutes. Ten. Twelve.

And then I went to one of the front doors, opened it, and stepped out.

A strong murmur rose from the crowd—possibly at the prospect of witnessing some poor soul blowing himself to bits—but I noticed that none of the civilized spectators departed permanently. They merely retreated, attempting in the process to preserve their line of sight.

I gazed at the assemblage for fully one minute.

And then I removed my thumb from the push button.

Nothing—of course—happened.

I quickly removed the wrapping from my box and extracted the alarm clock and the wire. I held them up for all to see. Then I upended the box, signifying that it was now indeed empty.

I put the entire mess into a convenient trash box nearby. I did not want to be arrested for litter-bugging.

I was immediately—*immediately*—surrounded by a large number of angry men—of whom Lieutenant Wymar seemed typical. His face was definitely mottled and he communicated in something of a strangled manner. "Just what kind of a practical joke is this?"

I glared. "It is no practical joke. I merely wanted to see Mayor Pettibone, but apparently that is a capital crime in this city."

"Now wait a minute!" he roared. "So maybe there wasn't any bomb in the box, but. . . ."

"Of *course* there was no bomb in the box," I snapped. "There never has been and there never will be."

"But the clock . . . the wires . . . the push button. . . ."

"Is there a *law* against wires? Push buttons? Experimenting with timing devices happens to be my hobby." I wagged a finger under his nose. "The Civil Liberties Union shall hear about this. I shall sue. For a million dollars."

"Mister," Wymar announced wearily, "*you're* going to jail."

I showed my teeth. "Really? On what charge? It is I who have been hounded, abused. It is *I* who have been pursued by what clearly appeared to me to be a lynch mob *led* by officers of the law. I shall sue for *two* million dollars."

A small worried man appeared at Lieutenant Wymar's elbow.

"Now just one moment, Lieutenant. Let's not get rash. We're having enough trouble with the budget as it is."

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He spoke almost apologetically. "Mayor Pettibone."

"Ah, ha!" I said. "So finally you have come out of hiding. I've been trying to inform you that directly below my hotel window there is a series of holes in the street. When trucks rattle over them at night I find it *impossible* to sleep. I demand that the city do something about them immediately!"

I struck my walking stick sharply on the pavement, turned indignantly, and stalked away.

I rather expected to feel an authoritative hand on my shoulder, but apparently my abrupt departure had left them mired in indecision. A precipitous retreat often leaves the enemy in confusion.

I forced my way quickly through the crowd and within one hundred and fifty yards found a taxi. I entered it and directed the driver to a west side address.

However, after half a mile, I ordered him to stop before a supermarket. "I'll be out immediately," I said. "I have to make a small purchase."

I entered the supermarket and exited immediately by a rear door. In the alley, I tossed away my walking stick and hat. I pulled off my false beard, reversed my topcoat, making my attire brown rather than blue, and donned a cloth cap.

I walked down the alley and more than a block before I found another taxi. I settled in the back seat. "The airport, please."

I met Geoffrey the next day in St. Louis.

He showed me the three Utrillos, the two Picassos, and the two Modiglianis. "Everything worked perfectly. I hid in the lavatory. After you cleared out the building I slipped into the gallery and shoved the pictures under my coat. When I ran out of the back of the building nobody paid much attention to me. They thought I was just someone you were chasing."

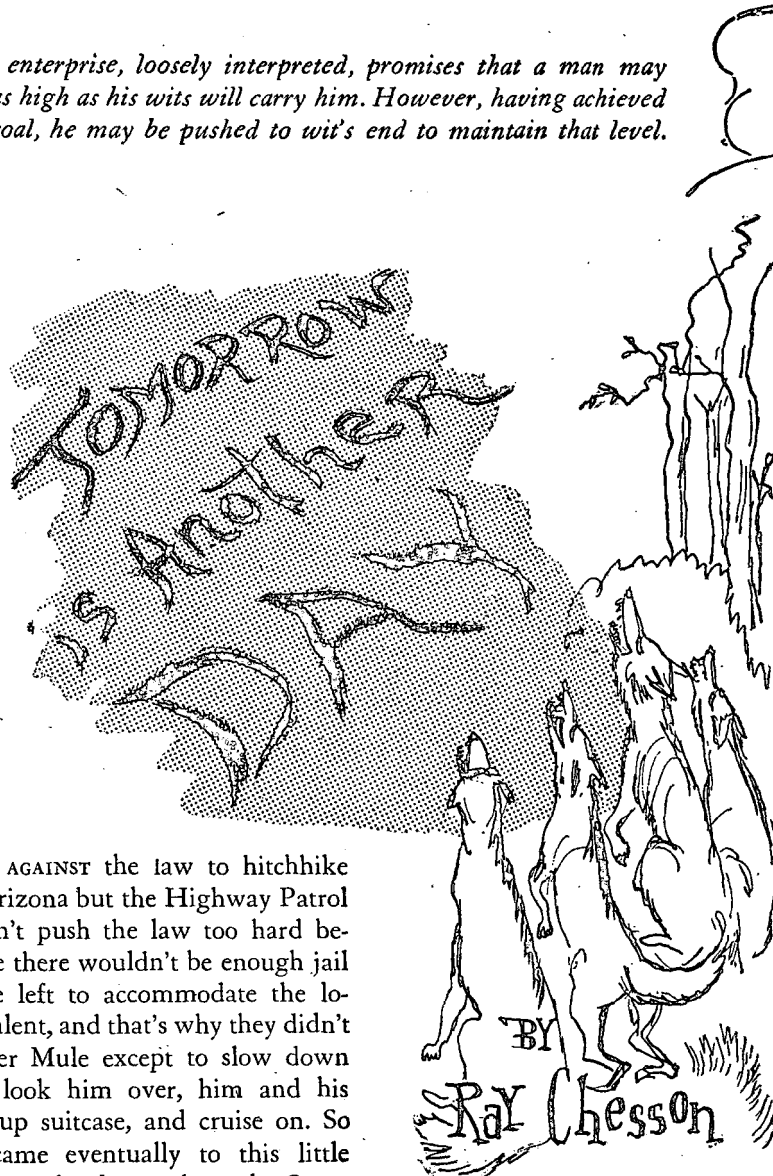
He poured us two drinks. "Suppose they had arrested you?"

I shrugged. "They could have suspected anything they wanted to, but they could have proved nothing. My lawyer would merely have to point out that while everyone hounded me, some dastardly thief took advantage of the situation to steal some paintings."

He handed me my glass. "Do you think we can pull this off again?"

I smiled. "No. However, I am sure I shall think of something else next time."

Free enterprise, loosely interpreted, promises that a man may rise as high as his wits will carry him. However, having achieved his goal, he may be pushed to wit's end to maintain that level.



IT'S AGAINST the law to hitchhike in Arizona but the Highway Patrol doesn't push the law too hard because there wouldn't be enough jail space left to accommodate the local talent, and that's why they didn't bother Mule except to slow down and look him over, him and his beat-up suitcase, and cruise on. So he came eventually to this little town in the desert along the Santa

Fe tracks and went to work as a dishwasher, which was a trade he followed between small-time burglary and strong-arm jobs, while he moved around the country watching for the main chance, the one big score that would put him out front for the rest of his life. There was nothing to indicate that he was finally walking straight into his big chance, that he would spend the rest of his life here, the day he stopped in the Square Deal Cafe and asked Mr. Newman for a job.

Mule put his suitcase inside the door and looked around. It wasn't a big restaurant. There was one waitress on duty serving several tourists, a few ranchers and a bunch of Indians. It was easy to spot the owner. He was sitting on a stool at the end of the counter nearest the cash register. Mule took the stool next to him. "Coffee," he said to the waitress.

He stretched his coffee out while he looked things over and made up his mind. He decided there might be a fair amount of business but not too much. There were sufficient cups and saucers at the urns, and through the open door to the kitchen he could see plenty of dishes on the shelf above the steam table. A man wouldn't have to knock himself out to keep ahead in a rush. He glanced at Mr. Newman. Mr. Newman was reading the county paper. Mule said, "I just got settled and I'm looking for a job dishwashing."

Mr. Newman examined Mule without seeming to take his eyes off his paper. He saw a well-built, medium-size young man with a hairline, Hollywoodish mustache and an insolent smile. Mr. Newman didn't like floaters but occasionally he had to hire one. He said, "Where you settled?"

Mule had noticed a sign, BUENA VISTA HOTEL, on the second floor of a roach trap building down the street. "Buena Vista," he said.

Mr. Newman said, "How come you're still carrying your suitcase?"

"Got in on the Santa Fe this morning," Mule said. "Left it at the station. Just went over and picked it up."

No train had stopped since yesterday. Mr. Newman went on looking at his paper. He was a small, trim man, about sixty, whose entire life had been dedicated to making money. He had done very well in this improbable town. He owned the restaurant plus most of the other places of business. He owned the whole top of a pine-crowned mountain sloping up from the edge of town where he had installed his wife in a fifty thousand dollar home. He himself spent little time in that home. He got there around midnight and early every morning

he hurried back down to check his enterprises and count his money. Then he bought his paper and came to the restaurant and sat on his private stool at the end of the counter. He had some sort of gland trouble, and while his neck wasn't badly deformed it was outlandishly big, looking like a neck that should have been on a man weighing two hundred pounds. It caused Mr. Newman a lot of trouble when he tried to buy a shirt. Sometimes he felt like he was choking. He said, "I need a dishwasher for the swing shift."

"All right," Mule said.

He put a dime down for his coffee. He said, "You positive this job will be here when I show up?"

Mr. Newman said, "The job's not going anywhere. It'll be here. What I'm wondering is, will you be here?"

"I'll be here," Mule said.

He got his suitcase and went out to rent a room at the Buena Vista.

That afternoon he met Dimples, a blonde with skin tanned the shade of honey. He had just gone on shift and was standing beside the tubs tying his apron when she came swinging into the kitchen. She must have been thirty-eight but she could have passed for much less. She sang out to the cook, "Hi, Jack, top rare french fries ground round and hold the onions!"

The cook's baggy face came alive with a grin. There was something about Dimples that made just looking at her, hearing her voice, a happy thing. The cook said, "You going to help us out while Mabel's sick?"

Dimples said, "I'm going to run you ragged!"

Then she was gone and all the sunshine went with her. Mule stepped to the door to watch her hurry down the counter. "Man!" he whispered. "In a joint like this!"

She hadn't spoken to him but he knew she had noticed him. There was an arrogant challenge in Mule's eyes that women always noticed. It wasn't long before she acknowledged the challenge.

It started when he took a tray of glasses out front. Mr. Newman had left his stool to go down the street and check his other cash registers. Mule met Dimples in the narrow aisle behind the counter and they moved in unison from side to side, trying to pass, and she commenced to laugh.

"Shall we dance?" she asked.

After that when she came to the kitchen she would look at him and smile. When she brought dishes to the tubs he caught her hand and held it and she stood for a moment, staring up at him, not smiling now, a cautious awareness in her eyes. When he went out back to the potato bin he heard the cook's hostile voice behind him, "You better watch out, fellow."

"Watch out for what, dad?"

"I'm just telling you."

Mule leaned over the bin, filling his bucket. "So all right. Tell me."

"You make a pass at Dimples and her husband finds out you'll leave this town a damn sight faster than you came here."

Mule turned to laugh in the sallow, aged face. "So who is her husband?"

"Mr. Newman."

"What do you know!" in a soft, thoughtful voice.

"I'm just telling you."

And right then Mule knew that something good was coming his way, that through the woman called Dimples he would make at least a small score. He first thought it would be blackmail. Later, when he realized the bigness of the opportunity, he knew that it would be murder.

The conquest of Dimples took three weeks and in the end it was Mr. Newman himself who made it possible.

Dimples had been back on the mountain several days. One morning she drove down, and when Mule went in for lunch she was sitting at the counter beside her husband. She was wearing shorts and a halter and she looked surprisingly young. She was saying to Mr. Newman, "The Mexican's not up at his cabin. He must be in town."

Mr. Newman pushed his paper aside. There was a rare smile in his eyes when he looked at his wife, a gentle pleasure in his voice. "The Indians got their government checks," he said. "Pancho is helping them drink up the money."

"He knows I want that balcony fixed," she said, making a careful show of ignoring Mule. "I'm going to get somebody else."

Mr. Newman leaned forward to speak down the counter. "Mule, you want a little extra work?"

Mule shrugged. "All right," he said. "Sure."

But Dimples commenced to hedge. "I'll wait for Pancho," she said uncertainly, "I don't know . . ."

Mr. Newman had small patience with indecision. He reached for his paper. "It's Mule's day off," he said. "Take him up the mountain and get the job underway."

Her car was a convertible. She drove in silence along the street, already regretting this thing she had started. Away from the restaurant, the sun hot on the tanned smoothness of her arms and shoulders and legs, she was nervously conscious of the man beside her.

Mule said, "You knew I was off today, didn't you?"

"No," she lied, shaking her head.

They turned on the mountain road and curled through the joshua trees that grew on the slope above the desert floor, and Mule said, "How long you been married to the old man?"

"Twenty years."

"You were just a kid."

"I was never a kid," she said.

He leaned back, folding his hands behind his head. "Where did you come from?"

"I came from a sharecropper's shack by a Mississippi swamp," a touch of defiance in her voice, "slopping hogs as soon as I was big enough to lift the bucket, staggering through the morning dew, mosquitoes like a veil on my face and legs."

They purled upward, away from the joshua trees.

"When I was thirteen my stepfather gave me shoes and a pair of cheap hose and he stood in the bedroom door to watch while I pulled the hose up. I knew it was just about time for me to leave."

They climbed smoothly through scrubby pinon pines and four deer crossed ahead, bounding high in the sun.

"How did you hook the old man?" Mule asked.

"I moved west doing one thing or another, mostly working in restaurants. He gave me a job. He was the first clean thing ever happened to me."

"Any children?"

"No."

Climbing in silence, purring toward the blue sky, Mule asked, "How much is the old man worth?"

"Half a million. Maybe more."

Mule straightened up. "If something happens to him will it all be yours?"

"Yes."

Now the pines were tall and the road was in shadow, and she said suddenly as though reaching back for some known solidity that was already slipping beyond her fingers, "But he's good to me. He loves me. And I love him."

"In a way."

"I love him," she repeated, refusing the qualification.

"Sure," Mule said. "Sure."

They passed the caretaker's cabin where the errant Pancho lived and then they came to the great, rambling house itself, squatting solidly under the cool pines, its back on

the knife edge of a sheer cliff. They went inside and Mule looked about him at the luxury of this place that he knew would somehow very soon be his own. "You did all right," he said. "It's better than slopping hogs."

He wandered through the huge silent rooms where Dimples had spent twenty lonely years while her aging husband carved out his fortune in the town below. "Where's the balcony?"

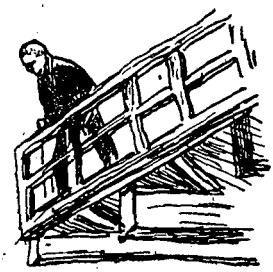
It was small, a little roofless porch built against the house, thrusting out over the blue depth of the canyon. A door opened to it from the kitchen. He stood out there in the sun, five hundred feet above the trees and boulders at the bottom of the canyon, hammer and nails in his hands. Dimples had stopped in the doorway. He winked at her. "I'll do a little work on the floor," he said.

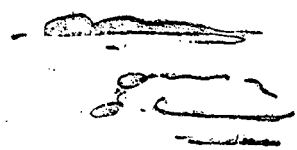
She turned quickly away into the shadows of the kitchen. But he knew she was watching him. He knew she'd be back when she could think of an excuse. She had lived too long with loneliness. When she came again to the door she said, "Be careful of the railing. It's not very solid."

He sat on his heels smiling at her.

"We had a great dane," she said, flushing, "and he used to romp out here. One day he jumped against the railing and it gave way and I watched him go down through the thin air, turning over, smaller and smaller until he disappeared in the tree tops. I never saw him again."

"Didn't you go down to bury





him? It seems that you would."

"There wouldn't have been anything to bury. The coyotes ate him."

Mule looked down at the trees.

"The coyotes eat everything that falls in the canyon. At dusk I throw scraps of meat down and I hear them singing in the night."

He stood up. "You got anything to drink?"

"Bourbon," she said. "In the cabinet over the sink."

He came into the kitchen, not yet attempting to touch her.

"My husband likes a drink out on the balcony when he comes home at night."

"Always on the balcony?"

She nodded.

He took the bottle in the living-room to a couch in front of the fireplace. He sat and thought, waiting until she came to sit slightly apart from him.

She watched him pour two tumblers half full and she knew that their little game was being played out, finally, to its end. "No," she said. "I don't drink."

He held the glass toward her.

"I had to stop," she said. "I can't handle it."

He placed the glass in her hand.

"Not that much," she said. "Anyhow not that much."

But she drank it, and after a moment she began to relax. When he poured even more in the tumbler she drank that too, without comment.

It was dusk when she took him back to town.

After that she was lost. When her husband had eaten breakfast and was gone in the first pearl gray of morning she would pace the floor, remembering, and when she couldn't bear it any longer she would drive down, coming into town on a back road, leaving her car in a vacant garage at the edge of town, and she would hide behind garbage cans in an alley, watching until the street was empty, and then, even though the cook, Jack, lived only a few doors down the hallway from Mule's room, she would creep up the dark stairs.

They would talk softly on the sagging bed in the dingy room, softly for fear of Jack, but unworried about the hotel clerk who stayed always half drunk in a room at the far end of the hallway—talking, and when he believed the time was right Mule commenced to put his plan into words.

Intent on his scheme, not noticing that Dimples had grown quiet and thoughtful with the passing days, he said, "If we were married we wouldn't have to sneak like this."

"Yes," after a long pause.

And another time, "Did you ever

get your balcony repaired yet?"

"No," she said. "Pancho hasn't come home yet."

Mule had seen to that. Each afternoon before going to work he would find the bar where Pancho was hiding and he would slap the Mexican's back in feigned friendliness and say, "Pancho! . . . a little hair of the dog?"

When he was gone there would be new money on the bar. It was one long glorious drunk for Pancho.

So the days became more than a week, and when he had no final doubt of his hold on her Mule said, "We can't get away with this any longer."

"I know," she agreed.

"So we'll have to do something."

"Do what?"

"Don't be stupid. You know what we're going to do."

She had been half asleep. She opened her eyes.

"We're going to kill the old man."

"Old man?" She frowned at the ceiling, wondering if he had really said it.

"Your husband."

She laughed, hoping it was a joke. Laughter didn't come easily to Dimples lately.

"We'll throw him off the balcony, through the railing."

"You're joking, Mule!"

"It'll be like the dog. Nobody can prove it wasn't an accident."

"Mule," she said, "don't talk like that."

"We'll get married and that half a million will be mine. It's the break I've been waiting for."

She stared at him, beginning to believe.

"My next day off I'll be there. When he comes home we'll get him."

She got up, refusing even to look at him, and he realized that he had blundered, searched for a way to erase his mistake. "I didn't mean it, Dimples," he cried, "I was only joking."

She stopped in the door. "Goodbye, Mule," she said.

"I didn't mean it, Dimples!"

He turned to look down the dim hallway, wondering if anybody had seen or heard. He thought that Jack's door moved but he decided it was only a shadow.

In his room he sat on the bed, gaining control of himself.

"But I've still got her," he said to the empty room. She'll have to help me do it. I'll still make that score."

At four o'clock he went to work as usual. When he passed the stool at the end of the counter Mr. Newman said, "Just a minute."

Mule's breath caught in his throat.

Mr. Newman said, "Here's your pay. This cuts you off."

Mr. Newman turned back to his paper. "For some reason Jack won't work with you anymore. Good cooks are hard to find but dishwashers come a dime a dozen."

Out on the sidewalk Mule commenced to breathe again. "This dishwasher won't come that cheap!"

He stood in the blazing sun, feeling the anger and frustration twist at his stomach. "Suppose Jack does know? They still can't prove it's not an accident."

He moved in blind fury along the street, elbowing through a group of Indians.

He was in a bar. "Whiskey," he said.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, heard a familiar voice, "My good friend!"

He turned and swung, welcoming the release, following the squat, stumbling form of the astonished Mexican across the floor, swinging again. Then Pancho was against the wall, the grin gone from his bloody face, black eyes sobering. He surged forward like a bull and Mule crashed through the door and rolled across the sidewalk toward the gutter.

He got up and commenced to run. He crossed the tracks in front of a freight, ran alongside the train, the Diesel's horn roaring in his ears. He came to a patch of tumbleweeds in a ditch and hid there. When he was calm, thinking clearly again, he knew what he would have to do.

In late afternoon he left the ditch and bought two fifths of whiskey at a liquor store. He went to his room, cleaned up and changed clothes. He got a heavy revolver from his suitcase and stuck it in his belt beneath his shirt. He took one bottle of whiskey to the clerk's room.

He sat and talked while the clerk swilled from the bottle, sagging forward in his chair until he sprawled on the floor. By then it was dark.

Mule switched on a table lamp. He reached down and slapped the snoring, doughy face. Satisfied, he took the clock from the table and turned it back more than an hour. He snapped off the light and left the room. The clock would still be short of midnight when he returned. He would sober the clerk until the man was able to remember the time. Then after the second bottle, when the clerk was down again, he would reset the clock. He skirted the town and started walking up the mountain.

It took longer than he had thought, but he knew it wouldn't take nearly as long to come back

down. When he got to the house he was surprised to find the door unlocked.

Dimples was standing in the livingroom. "I was expecting you," she said.

He leaned against the fireplace, resting. "You left some of your things in my room," he said.

"I know."

"That was a mistake."

She nodded.

"Your initials are on the things."

"Yes."

"What would your husband do if I took them to the restaurant and threw them on the counter in front of him?"

"He would be hurt."

"What would he do?

She moistened her lips. "Divorce me, I suppose."

"And then what would you do?"

"I don't know."

"You'd be slinging hash for the rest of your life. Or slopping hogs. Would you want that to happen?"

"No."

He stared at her through the silent minutes.

"One slip," she said, "one mistake in twenty years and this has to happen."

He shrugged. "I've got you, all right."

"Yes, you've got me."

"When the old man comes home you'll help me kill him."

She shook her head. "I couldn't do that."

"Maybe," Mule said, "you don't know who you're mixed up with."

Without warning he hit her on the chin. She fell over a cocktail table and pulled herself up from the floor to cower on the couch, looking at him now, for the first time, with fear in her eyes.

"Maybe," he said, "that'll help you to understand."

"I understand," she said.

He sat on the couch beside her. "When I go after something this big I don't give up."

They sat in silence, listening to the wind in the pines, watching the clock on the mantel.

Mule said, "Don't get the idea you can run to the cops and pin anything on me. I'll have proof I was in town when the old man came home."

She held her hand to her face, not answering.

He said, "After the job's done I'll walk back down. Sometime before morning you come down and report your husband had an accident. Don't try to get there ahead of me. You pass me on the road and I'll shoot you."

He got up. "Now come outside and help tear the telephone line loose."

When they came back to the livingroom it was after eleven.

They sat again on the couch, watching the clock.

Mule said, "When it's all over don't think you won't marry me. You wouldn't live to spend your money."

"I know."

They watched the clock's hands move toward twelve.

"You're in this thing all the way."

"I know," she said. "I'm in it."

Then it was midnight. A few minutes later they saw the lights of the car swing in toward the house. They went to the kitchen.

Mule said, "I'll be watching through a crack in the balcony door. You'll stay right here. You try to leave the kitchen to warn him and I'll get both of you."

"I won't warn him," she said.

He took the gun from his belt. "Make sure he comes out on the balcony with his drink."

"He always does," she said.

They heard footsteps crossing the front porch.

"Give me a cloth to wrap the barrel," Mule said. "When I slug him I don't want any blood before I throw him through the railing."

She gave him the cloth.

"It might be rough on you tonight," Mule said, "but you'll get over it. Tomorrow is another day."

He opened the door and stepped quickly through.

When Mr. Newman came to the kitchen Dimples was pouring his drink. There was a puzzled expression on his face. "A moment ago I heard something," he said, "a long, fading scream, like someone falling through space."

"It was only an animal," she said. "I heard it too."

He loosened his tie, smiling, happy to be near her. He took his drink and started toward the door.

Dimples caught his arm. "You'll have to drink it in here."

"Not on the balcony?"

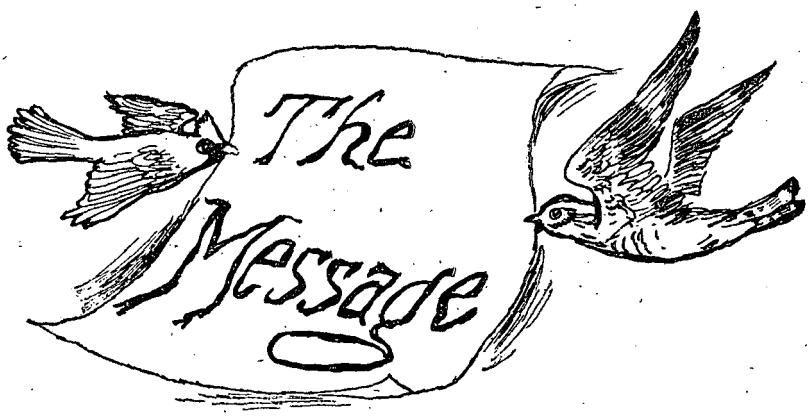
"There's no balcony out there," she said. "Pancho came back this afternoon. I had him tear it off the building."

That night she lay awake staring wide-eyed into the dark, listening to the coyotes singing in the canyon.

International politics and diplomacy represent continuous ambiguity to the ordinary man. Occasionally professional wearers of the cloak and dagger must also pause to decipher their handiwork.

It was a tense moment in international affairs—nothing very novel in this decade—and Tom McHugh, top trouble-shooter for the State Department, didn't enjoy being bothered by unscheduled callers.

But Professor Charles Westmore Norton came from Harvard, and



claimed to have important information, so McHugh yielded, saving the valuable time by gnawing on an apple, all the lunch he could hope for that day.

He expected nothing but a crank, and was properly surprised at the mention of Beddoes Blake. His jaws stopped working, and he put the remains of the apple on his cluttered desk, already a heterogeneous maze.

"A letter from Blake? He wrote you?"

Silently the professor held out the envelope with its huge green-and-purple stamp of a trumpeting elephant. McHugh pulled out its contents, and studied the single sheet of paper with great eagerness. As he did so, his eyebrows rose.

Dear Uncle Chuck:

I'm allowed to send a brief note, and as my only living relative, you are it.

I am well-treated here; in fact, I've gained weight, and am up to 178 pounds.

I hope you had a good birthday

last week—your 73rd, wasn't it?

Please drop me a line when you can.

Affectionately,
Beddoes

"So you're Blake's uncle."

"The point is, I'm not," Norton said drily. "Furthermore, nobody who knows me would ever use the name, 'Chuck', which I loathe; my best friends call me 'Charlie', and my students"—a wintry little smile touched his lips—" 'Old Frozen Face'. And I won't be seventy-three for another fifteen years, which Blake must know very well."

McHugh looked distinctly unhappy.

"He wrote you," he said, apparently thinking out loud, "knowing that they wouldn't let him contact us. He's been under close confinement for several weeks. But why you—were you two very friendly at Harvard?"

"No; I hardly knew the boy. And he didn't work with me there, but at Bateman College, where I was a visiting professor for one year." His smoky-blue eyes twinkled a little at McHugh's expression, and he added gently, "Perhaps it would help if I mentioned that I had a top security clearance during World War II. And it might help me if you would tell me something about the situation in Zenobia."

"What field did you work in with that clearance?"

"Biological Warfare."

"All right," McHugh said. "It can't do any harm; most of the information is in the papers, anyhow."

"As you know, Zenobia is the newest of the free African states. There was a coup six weeks ago, and Kwaku Mensah became the head of the government. There has been a good deal of uncertainty, particularly about the fate of the white settlers in Zenobia.

"Actually, Blake's job was to find out if Mensah intended to start a blood bath, or try to keep the lid on.

by Arthur Porges

"If we knew for sure that violence was due, we could move in with airborne striking force, and the U. N. would hold still. But if we invade Zenobia without definite grounds in advance, we will be in real trouble.

"Things are very delicate now, because of Mukerji's announcement. He's one of the first Indian Cardinals, an old acquaintance of Mensah's, so the U. N. asked him to talk to Mensah, and get assurances that

European life and property would be protected. Well, Mukerji just reported that Mensah has no intention of harming a single white settler, and that he—Mukerji—is certain Mensah means it.

"With that report to the U. N., we wouldn't dare go charging into Zenobia; yet I'd feel better with Blake's viewpoint. He was the only man we could get in; oddly enough, he met Mensah at Harvard, and the African rather liked him. But now, they've locked him up on some silly charge of hit-and-run driving, claiming he maimed a child."

"I see," Professor Norton said. "It's obvious this is a coded message. He must have assumed I'd know him by the unusual first name, even though I'm no relative, and haven't seen the boy for several years. His father, Blake told me, greatly admired the poetry of Beddoes; that's where the boy got his name. I mention this in case the poems are part of the code."

"Let's try a simpler approach," McHugh said. "You mentioned that the age was wrong. Well, the weight doesn't make sense, either. Blake couldn't possibly weigh more than a hundred and forty pounds. Now, how could he gain—let me see—" He glanced at the letter again. "—thirty-eight pounds in a few weeks? No, there's a reason for those two wrong numbers."

"Your logic is quite convincing," Norton said, looking at the official with new respect. "But another vital point is this. Why, with relatives and close friends to write to—why did he pick me, a comparative stranger? He could have sent the same data to his father, who is—or was—alive; but if not, to dozens of friends. He was always well liked. So why me?"

"Because," McHugh replied judiciously, picking up the remains of his apple, which had turned brown, and studying it with a rueful expression, "the code must be something that would have significance only to you. Remember, he probably got this one brief note out only because Mensah knew him, and was friendly once. The message was carefully scrutinized, probably by Mensah himself, a man well-trained in English; in fact, a Harvard graduate. Apparently, Blake gave a good deal of thought to the problem of whom to write, and how to say the most with the least suspicious looking device. I'm sure that those two numbers conceal vital information, and that you are the only one with the key."

"I'll go along with that; but I don't know what the key is. This cloak-and-dagger stuff," he added wryly, "is a little out of my line."

"Which is biology, I presume."

"That's right."

"Then that must have been the area of contact between you and Blake. What did he study with you?"

"Ecology."

McHugh blinked.

"The study of how living things relate to their environment. It used to be called 'The Balance of Nature'."

"Sounds like a very wide field."

"It is, indeed. Nobody has done more than scratch the surface."

"Was there any phase Blake particularly liked, or concentrated on?"

The professor reflected for a moment. Then he said, a little piqued: "Why the hell do people always expect teachers to remember everything about their students, even years later? Do you know how many pink vacuous faces I confront every semester?"

McHugh was grinning widely at this plaint, and Norton's own lips twitched suddenly.

"Blake," he muttered. "Beddoes Blake—ecology. Of course; I remember, now. He was a terrific bird-watcher. I'm no slouch myself, but in the field he made me look silly. He could pick a golden plover from a flock of black-bellied or snowys before I could focus my binoculars."

"But there's no mention of birds in the letter. Do the numbers have any ornithological meaning? The number of bones, or feathers—anything like that you might recall?"

Norton thought for a moment.

"Not to me," he said. "Ornithology was big at Bateman; they had the best collection of skins in the middle west."

"Think," McHugh urged him. "What relation can the numbers 178 and 73 have to birds? Any relation at all, no matter how wild. We *must* break the code."

"One seventy-eight. Seventy-three. Weight—impossible; speed—possible, but no bird's been that accurately clocked. Species—maybe, but so what? Nobody agrees on what belongs to each group, anyhow." He was pacing the floor now, a thick-set, vital figure. Suddenly he stopped, his eyes flashing. "The collection!" he exclaimed. "The skins were numbered. I wonder if—" His voice dropped to a mumble.

"The bird skins were numbered at Bateman College," McHugh prompted him. "You think Blake was referring to skins in the collection?"

"It's possible. I can't see what message you could send that way, but there are some pretty wild names among birds."

McHugh grabbed one of the phones on his desk. "Janie, get me Bateman College in Ohio—somebody in the biology department, and hurry."

"You think Blake could actually

remember such numbers well enough to use the names for a message?"

"If anybody could, he's the one. He used to spend hours with those skins, studying markings, feathers, dimensions. There are more than ten thousand skins, at least, but he'd only have to use the ones he recalled. Oh, I don't know—maybe I'm way off base!"

The phone jingled, and McHugh snatched at it. "Who?" he demanded. "Professor Carr—hold on a minute. You talk to him, Norton, will you?"

The professor took the phone.

"Hello, Norm—this is Charlie Norton. Fine, fine—and you? Glad to hear it. Say, Norm, I can't explain just now, but would you check the files and tell me what skins in the Peterson Collection are numbered one seventy-eight and seventy-three, respectively. I'll hold on."

There was a tense silence in the office for several minutes, then Norton pressed the phone harder to his ear.

"Got it," he said. "Thanks a lot, Norm. I'll explain later. Goodbye."

"Well?" McHugh demanded.

"One seventy-eight. Seventy-three. the redbird, or Eastern Cardinal—a bird darker than normal. The other is—" he gulped—" a goatsucker." He sighed. "Guess I was off base, all right—by a million miles."

"Not so fast," McHugh objected. "I like cardinal. That could mean Mukerji. Even the dark part fits. But that second . . ."

"Goatsucker. I wonder if Norm read the wrong card?"

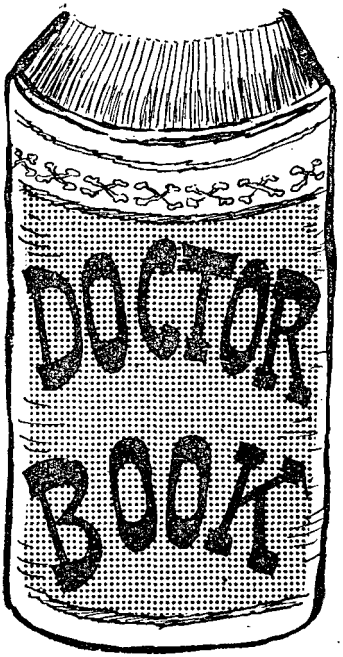
"No, Norton. That's it—it makes perfect sense. Listen: Cardinal—goat, sucker. Don't you see? Blake's trying to tell us that Mukerji was taken in by Mensah— that the Cardinal's a goat, a sucker." He sucked in his breath. "And that means Mensah intends to start a massacre any day now. We'll have to move in."

Norton was shaking his head in wonder. "Cardinal, goat—sucker," he muttered. "Well I'll be damned." He saw that McHugh was busy on four phones, and slipped out.

That night he read about the airborne invasion of Zenobia.

Incidental to the customary attributes of a model wife is usually some degree of nursing skill. Of course, a bit of medicinal lore, like any little knowledge, can be a dangerous thing.

YEP, she was mad, all right, Nim kept repeating to himself as he kicked around through the moldy hay. Yes siree! this time Maudie was really sore! Maybe even mad enough to walk out on him. Yep, probably for awhile he'd be doing his own cookin' and washin' and milkin' and so forth. Yes siree, bobtail! Some women are just made like that. Get so infernal mad at a man they'd temporarily forget their wifely duties.



Nim raised his straw hat and scratched his thinning hair. Then he stuck the toe of his shoe under a bale of hay and tipped it over. Nope, no wad of money under that one. Only a mangy rat that ran as if his conscience bothered him. Still, the money was bound to be around here someplace. If only he could find it before someone else did. Five thousand smackers that his no-good stepson, Buck Harris, had hidden before he was caught. The loot Buck had stashed away before the sheriff slipped in and lassoed him at five o'clock this morning. Well it had to be here somewhere. And Nim had resolved to find it before the sheriff could come back for a closer look.

Leastways, Nim was proud his stepson was in the process of being put away for good this time. Armed robbery, third offense, ought to cool him off right smart of a spell.

Really, in a way, Nim was sort of sorry he'd had to be the one to turn Buck in. Somebody had to do it, but Maudie, Buck's mama, never would have, for danged sure. Nobody knew he was hiding in their barn but him and her and Buck himself. And it was a cornbread cinch Buck wouldn't tattle off.

Yeah, Maudie'd got pretty riled up about it. Kind of a shame, too, seein' as she'd been a right useful wife and farmhand the whole ten years they'd been married. Well, if she didn't thaw in a reasonable spell, he'd find a way to get her straightened out. Man had to look out for his rights, didn't he?

Buck was twenty five—old enough to know right from wrong—even if he hadn't ever shown any signs of strong brains. He'd been in scrapes with the law ever since he was sixteen; now he was only gettin' what was rightful comin' to him.

Now take himself, Nim Hunter, he reflected as he seated himself on a mound of hay and took a rag from his overalls pocket to mop his sweaty face. In all his fifty-three years Nim had never been anything but a peaceable, law-abiding farmer. Never had no desire to be nothing else. So yesterday, soon as he discovered his sneaky stepson hiding in the barn, he then and there decided he wasn't going to be arrested for harboring a criminal, even though he didn't yet know what the boy had done. Besides, there likely was a reward out. So he'd got word to the sheriff who at daybreak had surprised the sleeping Buck and taken him in to ice him down. Nim learned about the money when the sheriff described a loan company stick-up across the state line a couple of days earlier. So now he was trying to locate the swag before the sheriff's men returned and completely turned his old barn wrong-side out.

Now, about Maudie. What made her so stinkin' mad was she'd sent Nim in for the doctor, Buck having a bullet in his foot, and instead of the doc, Nim had sent the sheriff. She'd already searched her thick old doctor-book from cover to cover looking for treatment for feet that happened to contain bullets, and finally in desperation had tried to get a doctor for the worthless pup. Nim, for his part, thought he'd done society a real favor by turning the scoundrel in. His action, he admitted as he chewed on an alfalfa stem, might've partly been prompted by memory of the sound beating Buck had given him last time

he'd been home, which was four years back. Anyway, Maudie was madder'n an old sow. She'd bawled worser'n a cow over a lost calf.

Oh well, give her time—she'd probably forget it. Women were odd critters at the very best. Man wasn't supposed to be able to figure 'em out. Anyway, the big problem right now was beating the sheriff's men to the money.

Nim yanked up on a board from the rotting floor. As it broke off, he felt the sudden shooting pain of a nail far up in the middle finger of his right hand. It took nearly all his wiry strength to loose himself from the rusty nail. Spurting blood quickly painted his overalls a vivid red.

Nim stared dumfounded at the gushing blood. Never had he realized one little old finger could hold so much. Finally, by squeezing the finger with his left hand, he reduced the spurting to a dribble; then, at last, it stopped. But before that, it had begun to ache like all get-out. At the tip was a great, jagged gash, indicating the nail must have been crooked at the point. Gee-whillikens, he thought, what a blasted sore finger to have with so much hay to move! By now he was feeling a trifle sick in the stomach. Better get up to the house, he decided, and make Maudie put something on it. She could find a remedy for anything in her trusted old doctor-book—anything ailing man or beast. Well, nearly anything, as he recalled the events of the morning. Then he almost smiled in spite of the pain. If she was still as angry as when he'd last seen her, a couple of hours earlier, she like as not would bite off his finger when he showed it to her. Maudie had right smart of a temper. Still, the thing throbbed like the old mischief!

She was standing in the kitchen when he entered, her broad back as unyielding as a boulder. She didn't turn around when he started pawing through the cabinet with his good hand; instead, he could see her watching him out of the corner of her eye. Not through sulkin' yet, he told himself.

"Maudie, I cut my finger," he finally said by way of explaining the crimson drops spattering the white-enameled surface. Then, in the event she suddenly had become hard of hearing, he loudly repeated, "I stuck a nail in my finger, and you've got to find something to put on it!"

She only stared.

Nim was feeling pretty dizzy; likewise, a little mad. "Find me something, Maudie," he said testily, "to put on this finger! Don't stand there staring at me like I was a plumb stranger. This thing

hurts worser'n fire! Now hurry up!"

Calmly she said, "Does it hurt worse than a bullet in the foot?"

Nim stopped and looked her straight in the eye. Naggin' at a man when he'd only done his duty as a law-abiding citizen. "Maudie," he said slowly, "you want me to slap you down!"

The stiff, black curls of her thick hair wriggled like angry snakes, though her plain, lined face was the color and consistency of set concrete. Her glasses fogged over, and she removed them to clean them on her apron. Her eyes were still red from crying. Finally she dropped her gaze and reached for a box of epsom salts which she proceeded to pour into a pan. She added hot water from the teakettle. "Here," she said, sliding it toward him, "soak it in that. It says so in the book." She indicated with a nod the thick medical encyclopedia that lay on the table.

Nim plunged his hand into the scalding mixture and yelped with the pain. Sweat popped out on his forehead, and he couldn't reach the rag in his pocket to wipe it away. He looked at Maudie, his joy and his helpmate of ten years. Somehow he got the notion she was enjoying his agony. He jerked his hand out of the water. "Go start the pick-up, Maudie. We're goin' in to the doctor."

She stood unmoving and unmovable, her dark eyes gleaming. Nim picked up a skillet with his left hand. "Maudie, I said let's go—'less you want your head bashed in."

He followed her out to the pick-up. Wordlessly, she got in and stepped on the starter, grinding it harshly for several minutes. The motor refused to fire. Nim stood with his head leaned against the cab, watching the red soak slowly through the dishtowel he'd wrapped around his hand. When he was convinced the truck wouldn't start he returned to the house, taking off his shoes and overalls and lying groaning and giddy across the bed.

For a long time Maudie sat at the kitchen table studying the thick old medical book, with Nim growling at her from the other room. She seemed not to hear his uncomplimentary phrases, but concentrated on finding a way to ease his pain. Finally, then, she resumed the hot water and epsom salt treatment, being carefulf to keep the water almost at the boiling point. By evening the finger had grown to enormous size and showed a marked change in color. Twice Nim had risen and dressed to go down to the barn, but each time backed out because of the pain. Then, just at sundown, by sheer willpower he forced himself to the barnlot gate.

He was standing there trying to open it when Sheriff Stover drove up.

"Well, we got our boy cooled off!" the sheriff greeted cheerily. "Sure much obliged to you." Then he noticed Nim's drawn face. "Good gosh, Nim, you look sick! What's the matter with you?"

"Nail," said Nim wearily, unwrapping the injured member.

"Jee-zis whiz! Man, you need a doctor! Get in this car, quick!"

Within an hour the doctor had dressed the finger and given Nim a massive injection in the arm. "Tetanus antitoxin," he explained to Nim and the sheriff. "Double dose. Man, that's how you get lockjaw—rusty nails from dirty places. Lockjaw's bad. Real bad." He exhaled a couple of drags of cigar smoke in Nim's face before continuing. "I'll tell you what it's like. You ever see an animal die from strychnine poisoning? Rat, maybe?" Nim coughed, nodded, and coughed again. "Well, it's a little like that. Man gets all stiff and paralyzed and can't swallow. Can't even breathe. Finally, you bend backward like a bow; then it's Katie-lock-the-door. Man'll literally choke to death." He continued his verbal comfort a moment longer, but Nim by then was so dazed by the pain and cigar smoke he scarcely heard the words. After mumbling something about the doctor sending his bill in the fall, Nim rose to leave.

"Will he need to come back, Doc?" asked the sheriff.

"Well, one shot usually does it. Still, that's a meanlooking finger. Real mean. Wish I had some place to put him up here, where I could keep an eye on him. However, I think we caught it in time. Yet you never know. Tell you what, Sheriff—if he's not a lot better, you bring him back tomorrow. Give him another dose, just in case."

It was dark when they got back to the farm. Stover helped Nim into the house and told Maudie what the doctor had said. "Now take care of that hand, Nim!" he cautioned before leaving. "And you watch him, Mrs. Hunter. Doc says this tetanus business is dangerouser'n the bite of a cobra snake. Says a feller'll stiffen up and make faces and choke himself to death!" Then he laughed. "But I'm not wantin' to scare you. Doc says the stuff he vaccinated you with is powerfuler'n it is." He clapped Nim on the good shoulder. "Well, see you tomorrow, old buddy," he said. "I'll be back to search the barn in the daylight."

Nim dozed, racked with fever and his head hurting almost as much as his finger. Maudie faithfully sat beside his bed, with the open doctor-book, rocking and

reading. Each time Nim opened his eyes he saw her studying. Fitting and proper, he thought, that she should have forgiven him. After all, hadn't he supplied her with bed and board for ten years? Though she had a hair-trigger temper, he'd never known her to hold a grudge for long. Doubtless she was smarter than she looked. And if he got any reward money, he'd buy her a present. Something nice, like an automatic shotgun.

Early in the morning she brought him a cup of coffee, and a poultice made up of a clean rag with white crystals embedded in a layer of salve. She proceeded to remove the doctor's bandage. The finger started bleeding. He winced and hollered a little. "What're you doing to me?"

"Looks like you'd know epsom salts by now," she chided. "I've read about lots of things in that book, including lockjaw. I've studied all the remedies, and nothing seems to help as many different ailments as plain epsom salts. Here now, let's let your finger soak up some of this."

Though she was not rough with the finger, still the pain stabbed like hot needles. She tied the poultice on fairly tight. Nim drank his coffee. By golly, seemed the pain had lessened a mite. Maudie probably knew what she was doing. At least she was gentle—not mad anymore.

He dozed a little. When he woke he was extremely thirsty. Maudie brought fresh, cool water from the cistern, but he couldn't swallow much of it at once, rather taking it in small sips. His head throbbed and his back was killing him. "What time is it?" he feebly asked.

"Eight o'clock." Her voice was soft and kind.

He tried to rise. "Got to get down to the barn before the sheriff does!" he groaned.

"You stay right there where I can watch you," she said, pushing him back. "You're too sick to get up now." She kept looking out the window, nervously, as if time passed too slow.

Nim made a wry face. By gum, she might be right. He felt too sick to go tumbling hay. That could wait a little. He lay back, stretching his legs to the foot of the bed, softly moaning. Maudie laid a cool, strong hand on his forehead. "The epsom salt poultice seems to be doing the job," she said. "I'm going to fix you a fresher, stronger one."

He watched her bring it in, but turned his head when the hand was unwrapped. If it looked as bad as it felt, he couldn't bear the sight of it. "There now," she said, tightening the strings as she'd done be-

fore, "that soon ought to show results." She dropped the soiled poultice into her apron pocket.

He lay back panting. His neck seemed to be getting strangely stiff. In panic he sat up. "You suppose I'm catchin' lockjaw, Maudie? Maybe you ought to go in for the doctor!"

She patted his head as if he'd been a child. "No, Nim, you'll never have lockjaw. I don't think there's a chance in the world you'll ever have lockjaw. Now lie back and don't worry about it. Rest. Just rest. We're going by the book."

A great shudder seized him. All his muscles jerked, and his eyes seemed trying to turn out of his head. She stood over him, carefully watching his every move. He tried to look at her, but his neck felt as stiff as a willow post. "Water!" he gasped, but when she pressed the glass to his lips, his mouth wouldn't open, and the water ran over his face. Another spasm shook him. His hands fluttered and he tried to tell Maudie to run for help. When he attempted to speak, all he could accomplish was to draw his lips back into a wide grin. He felt great, crushing weight on his chest, and he could no longer force his ribs up and down in breathing. Dimly, he heard a car drive up as he felt his chest arch upward from the bed, like a bridge. When he reached for the next breath, it wasn't there. Maudie tore off the poultice and crammed it into her pocket.

Sheriff Stover walked in a moment later. Maudie silently pointed toward the bed. "It just now happened," she finally said.

"Great balls of fire!" said the sheriff. "It's just like the doc said it might be, only quicker! First man I ever saw die of lockjaw!" He pulled the sheet up over the grinning face. "Now, Mrs. Hunter," he said, "you let me take over. This must be a terrible shock to you. Just leave everything to me. I'll take him into town and make all the necessary arrangements. Bein' the sheriff, I usually act as coroner, too, seein' as this county don't have one." He rolled a cigaret and scratched a match on his levi's. "I'll go by Doc's and get him to certify the cause of death, which'll be no problem since I practically seen Nim die, and since Doc treated him only yesterday. Specially when he sees how bowed-up poor old Nim is. Sure wish we could've got him in a little earlier yesterday. Anyway, you leave it all to me, Mrs. Hunter." He laid a consoling arm across her broad shoulder.

She recoiled violently from his touch, but her eyes were steady and her voice low. "If you will, sheriff," she replied calmly, "just leave me alone with him a few minutes. Just

a few minutes for things a person wants to do at a time like this. If you don't mind, I'd rather you wait in the car."

"Sure, Mrs. Hunter. Sure! Take all the time you want," he said, retreating. "Like I said, this is the first person I ever saw die of lockjaw. I'll take this old doctor-book and read on it a little. Just call me when you're ready."

The instant she heard the car door slam, she grabbed the blue can from the cabinet drawer—the can that said RAT POISON—and dropped it into the pocket with the poultices. She ran out the side door, opposite the sheriff's car, into the potato patch. She tugged on a rotting post till it loosened, then dropped the contents of the pocket into the hole. With one determined thrust she rammed the post back into place. She straightened and drew one calming breath before reentering the house.

In the kitchen she carefully wiped up every trace of spilled, white crystals before going into the bedroom to slip on a clean dress and run a comb through her tangled hair. Then she walked to the back door. Stover got out of the car. "I'm going with you," she said, "to be sure nothing is overlooked."

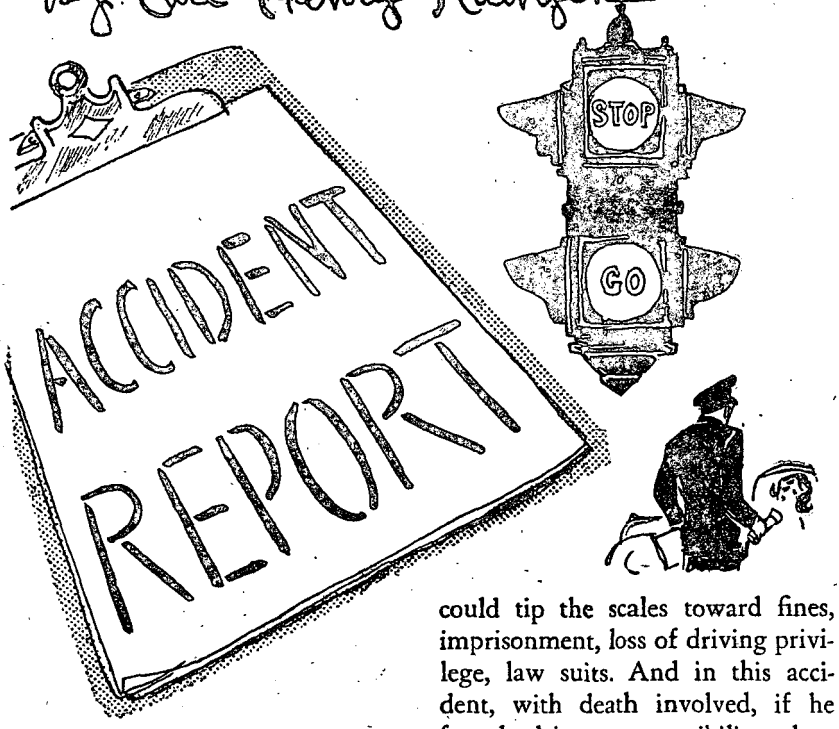
"You know, a blamed funny thing," said the sheriff, bringing in the heavy book. "I just happened to be reading here how much the symptoms of tetanus resemble those of strychnine poisoning. Every farm family knows what strychnine is—harmless looking, crystally-white stuff with a kick like ten mules, used for killing pests. Now if I didn't happen to know your husband died of lockjaw—if I hadn't heard the doctor with my own ears —I'd have him checked to see if he'd accidentally got hold of a pinch of strychnine. 'Specially, there, with them convulsions like that. And that funny grin on his face. *Risus Sardonicus,* the book calls it. That's Greek, ain't it?"

Maudie nodded, her eyes brimful of tears.

"Anyway," continued the sheriff, "it's a right interesting piece. Someday, when this is all over and you're sort of at yourself again, you might enjoy reading it."

Woe to the man whose duty it is to investigate the driving habits of his wife. Whatever the charge, the job is always murder.

By Carl Henry Rathjen



SEVEN MINUTES after the girl was killed that night, Ed Stevens, Police Traffic Unit 45T1, arrived on the scene of the two-car crash. His specialty job was to determine the cause. The opinions and recommendations in his accident reports were not final judgments, but they could tip the scales toward fines, imprisonment, loss of driving privilege, law suits. And in this accident, with death involved, if he found driver responsibility there could, in this state, be charges of felony, second degree murder with

maximum penalty of twenty years.

Getting out slowly with clipboard and flashlight, he scanned the well-lighted signal-protected intersection of Beverly and Seventh, a residential district. He couldn't see the features of the woman still behind the wheel of the green car with smashed front end. The blue car had overturned, crushing a plump young girl. Martinez, Patrol Unit 23P4, dark-complected, thick in build, worriedly approached Stevens while his partner held back sightseers.

"She was the driver, got thrown out when the other one clobbered her." Martinez, usually flip of tongue, deepened his frown. "Ed, I just found out. The other driver is . . . your wife."

In name only, Stevens thought, jerking his gaze toward the green car. He hadn't recognized it because it wasn't the one Elaine had taken when they'd separated. He felt deep trembling. He didn't look at Martinez.

"I can't handle this. Call for another traffic unit."

He went slowly past the front end of Elaine's car. Half the bumper was torn free, the grill smashed in evenly, all headlights broken. She'd hit straight on, and hard. The trembling took on a reckless quality as he approached the left side of the car. Elaine's dark hair, the dark coat, the dark interior of the car made a black velvet setting for her fragile oval features, whiter and perhaps more mature than he'd remembered.

"Hello, Elaine." He checked himself. Don't reassure her. You've no right to. Keep it impersonal, and he hoped she would too, wouldn't cry as she murmured his name. He'd had enough tearful scenes before they broke up because he wouldn't pamper her the way her folks had. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Just shaken up." Her frightened dark eyes looked toward Martinez, coming from his car. "Ed," she said quickly, "this wasn't my fault. I had the green light coming along Beverly. She jumped the red on Seventh. I never had a chance to use my brakes."

Stevens frowned. "You're wasting your breath on me." He saw sudden moist hurt in her eyes. He added quickly, "It wouldn't be proper for me to handle this when there's a . . . personal element involved. But I'll stand by, of course."

It sounded harsh. Martinez nodded him to one side.

"Ed, there isn't another traffic unit available. The lieutenant says you're to handle it, for the time being. I'm to doublecheck you."

Stevens could feel something coming between them. It could be

his own fear. Martinez tried a smile.

"Pretty good. I get off traffic because I don't like all the paper work. O.K., Ed, do your homework and I'll play teacher and correct it, if necessary."

Stevens stood undecided. Should he take Elaine first or get other findings before sightseers destroyed them? One might be as incriminating as the other. Keep it impersonal. He got the measuring wheel. He and Martinez recorded the distances from curb to curb on both streets, got the exact location of the Point of Impact, and measured from P.I. to each car. They found no skid marks to show that Elaine had put on her brakes or swerved. The blue car had made diagonal rubber burns on impact, then overturned on its driver and left a trail of pavement gouges, scrapings of flesh and blood.

Martinez grunted. "I'd say they were both rolling pretty good at the P.I."

Stevens just went on with the measurements. He couldn't forget Elaine's driving history. She'd always been heavy-footed, and became worse after marriage. Their break-up row had been caused by a citation for failure to make a boulevard stop. True, he'd told her to drive at night with windows well up, doors locked, and make only a rolling stop if she thought someone might be about to accost her. But she'd got into the habit and that citation, one of many, had been in broad daylight.

"Aside from how it looks to the Department, what's all this driving and running around for anyway?"

She'd come right back at him. "I've told you I'm tired of sitting home alone, day and night, while you donate time to the Department."

She'd never been able to understand the compulsion he felt to ferret out details of accident responsibility, often on his own time. He also hoped the extra work would aid in his becoming detective. "Then you'll be away more," Elaine had cried. "Ed," she'd pleaded, "isn't there some other work—"

"If you mean outside the Department, no. I warned you before we married, my job has to come first when necessary. I'd be a fine husband to live with if I thought I'd made a snap decision that aided in convicting an innocent driver."

He'd tried to give in, the way her folks always had, but he didn't give enough. So there was intensifying misunderstanding at home, and on the job there was irate and often abusive misunderstanding from citizens. Something had to break and it did. She went back to her folks.

Stevens, with Martinez trailing

him across the intersection, went to Elaine's car. "What was your speed when the accident occurred?"

She hesitated. "I don't know exactly. Probably . . . about forty."

The admission surprised him. "Thirty-five's the limit here," he muttered. He studied her, impersonally. "Have you been drinking, Mrs. Stevens?"

She flared. "Don't you know I don't touch it?"

"You could have changed since . . . I last saw you. Has a doctor been prescribing for you; or have you, on your own, been taking sleeping pills, tranquilizers, any barbituates or other drugs?"

"No, I'm as healthy as I've ever been."

But she looked sick with emotion as her gaze searched his. He diverted it by pointing above the visor of his cap.

"Look up here, please." As she obeyed, he beamed his light into her eyes. The response of the pupils, their size and shape, betrayed no lie about her answers concerning drugs and medicines. "Would you get out of the car, please." He and Martinez watched her closely. Stevens saw nothing to indicate alcoholism. He began to feel relieved, but still plenty worried. "Thank you."

Other patrol officers, who had arrived during the measuring and interrogation, had been seeking possible witnesses of the accident. The nearest they came to any were neighborhood residents who had rushed to windows and doors upon hearing the crash.

"Did you notice the signal lights?" Stevens asked.

"They were red for Beverly," declared a stout man, and a few of his neighbors nodded. He gestured importantly, and accusingly, toward Elaine's car. "She must have jumped the red light."

"That will have to be determined," Stevens said. "May I have your names, please."

He tried to cling to his relief. Elaine *could* have had a green light which *could* have changed right after the crash. Then again, too many drivers—such as she had been and might still be—thought they could beat the change of lights until, sooner or later, luck deserted them.

Finished with the "witnesses," he heard an ambulance coming. Then he saw a young man crouching in silent sobs by the body of the plump girl, Joan Kramer, according to her driver's license.

Martinez murmured. "Husband, I'd guess. They live only a few blocks from here. We sent word there."

Stevens always hated to intrude on grief, but he had no choice.

"Mr. Kramer?" Shock and horror glistened in the blue eyes that looked up. "May I ask you a few questions about your wife?"

She'd left the apartment to get some items she'd forgotten to buy while at the supermarket late that afternoon. A TV commercial had jolted her memory.

"While you were watching the TV," Stevens inquired, "had you, or rather, *she* been doing any drinking?"

"She never touches the stuff. Well, not the way you're hinting. Maybe just one small glass of something at a party, just to be sociable. We had milk with supper tonight. At least, I did."

"Has she been getting any prescriptions from a doctor?"

"Not yet. We've been hoping she'd have to see a doctor." The young face twisted and turned away from Stevens. "Not yet . . . we've been married only three months."

Stevens waited until the shoulders didn't shake so violently. Then he asked several questions about possible self-medication. The shoulders went rigid, then Kramer stood up to face him.

"What are you trying to do, copper, make a hophead out of her? Why don't you ask the dame who killed my . . . my . . ." The shoulders started again.

Stevens heard eavesdropping bystanders talking. "That's the way I feel about it, too. I've seen that girl driving back and forth. She never drove fast, always obeyed the lights, stopped for pedestrians, was always careful."

Stevens felt that deep trembling again. He crouched beside the young husband.

"These questions *have* to be asked, Mr. Kramer. There are so many factors that can affect driving habits. There's still one more to be asked. Before your wife left the apartment this evening, did you and she by any chance have a quarrel?"

He'd covered too many cases where emotions at the wheel had been almost as bad as alcohol.

"No," Kramer snapped. "And I'm not saying our marriage was perfect. Whose is?" Stevens nodded understandingly. "But we've never had a bad set-to," Kramer went on. "The last time was about a month ago. We got over it. So tonight there was no row, no discussion, no hurt silence, nothing. Why don't you give it up, copper?"

Stevens straightened, looked at Martinez, then radioed in the data from each driver's license. In a few minutes the dispatcher reported there was no want or warrant on either driver. Stevens didn't know what he'd been hoping to hear. He requested two trucks for the

wrecked cars, then he and Martinez compared notes.

"For the sake of appearances, Ed," Martinez murmured, "we'd better handle this one tough."

Stevens nodded grimly. "I'll prepare my wife's statement first." Turning the car's spotlight down on the hood which he used as a desk, he printed with pencil on the interview summary. Then he went to Elaine. "Please listen, Mrs. Stevens, and make any corrections. 'I was driving west on Beverly at approximately eight forty-five this evening. I was going about forty miles an hour and the traffic light at Seventh was green for me. . . .'" When he finished, he still spoke in the same flat tone. "If you agree with that statement, Mrs. Stevens, please sign it here."

A tear slid out of control as she complied. "Ed, do you have to be so cold?"

He carefully took the pencil and clipboard without touching her trembling hands. "I can't make unbiased evaluations if I let anything else intrude." How many times had he told her how it had been with marriage and work? Each had its place and he needed each of them in his life. He looked away from her, bypassed Martinez, and ignored the staring bystanders as he tried to find his next words. The tow trucks were arriving. He used them as an excuse to stall off facing his point of impact.

The overturned car was put back on its wheels. He checked the interior of it. There were seat belts which the dead girl obviously hadn't used. On the floor were several pieces of paper which weren't crumpled as though they'd been in the litter bag. They'd probably been on the seat. He looked at them. It bore today's date and Joan Kramer's signature. Then there was her market list—eggs, hamburger, a brand name of something, six-pack of cola, paper towels. Quite a few items to forget, he thought, trying to read something into the list, but failing. He looked at another piece of paper. It was a job reference from an employment agency. He turned abruptly to young Kramer, abjectly watching the ambulance crew removing the body.

"You told me your wife was working for Paynton Plastics. What does that job reference mean?"

"Nothing. She just knew that Old Man Paynton didn't like her anymore, for some reason or other. He was going to fire her and she was trying to beat him to the punch by finding another job. She wasn't mad or bothered about it at all, so don't try to stretch that into causing what happened here."

Stevens went slowly back to Elaine. "You can go home, and

we'll come for you later, if . . ." He winced inwardly at the look on her face. "Or you can ride to the station with me. I'll drive you home later, if . . ."

But Elaine had been a policeman's wife long enough to know the implications.

"I'll wait at the station, until it's decided."

He was pleased by her acceptance, and worried by it. Did she think that by coming along voluntarily she could influence his report? He couldn't honestly answer that himself. Martinez and his partner followed them in. Lieutenant Alverson, a balding man who was going to need more notches in his belt, was waiting with Detective-Sergeant Berliot, tall, dark, and handsome dynamite for female evasion of the truth. They greeted Elaine effusively, like an old friend. Then Berliot escorted her into the lieutenant's office rather than an interrogation room. Alverson lingered a moment in the hall.

"You and Martinez better get on with the paper work. Sorry we had to do it this way, Stevens."

Stevens got a file number from a clerk. At a table in the squad room he set out all the forms and waited, stalling again, until Martinez brought coffee, took off his cap and nightstick, swung his holstered .38 to rest on his lap as he sat down. They checked the sheet of persons involved, names, addresses, phone numbers, places of business. Then they went over the statistical data, including damages to vehicles, weather, visibility, condition and kind of pavement, traffic aids and hazards, everything that could have a bearing on cause. But there wasn't anything new and helpful. They put the signed summary aside. Stevens felt the horrible lack of one from the dead girl. He slid the distribution sheet toward Martinez.

"No," said Martinez. "Nobody likes my drawings."

With a template, Stevens laid out an exact diagram of the intersection of Beverly and Seventh, scaled ten feet to the inch. He traced in signal lights, positions of wrecked vehicles, Point of Impact, and other pertinent factual objectivity. It was the reverse of a blueprint. It projected back toward something that could never be again—undamaged cars, bodies without injuries and with life. A flat picture, seeking perspective to cause, a condition that shouldn't have been allowed to exist, a car that shouldn't have been on the road, a driver who shouldn't have been at the wheel. Finally, Stevens clenched his pencil. He'd arrived at *his* Point of Impact.

"What's your opinion, your recommendation?" he asked.

Martinez kept his eyes on the dia-

gram. "Your wife could be telling the truth, Ed. She was honest about her brakes, her speed."

"Forget she's my wife." Why didn't she get a divorce? "Do you think Mrs. Kramer was at fault?"

Martinez shrugged. "I don't know about that either."

"You're supposed to be helping me," Stevens growled, but he saw the parallel with the impasse that had broken up his marriage. No one could help someone else to give up a principle or a way of life. Gathering up the papers he started toward the lieutenant's office. In the hall he met Berliot.

"What did you come up with?" the detective asked.

"Nothing, so far." Stevens's face felt warm. "Have you got anything you can add to it?"

"Only things to make it look worse. Your wife admitted she'd had a row with her folks. They wanted her to start divorce proceedings. She didn't want to."

Stevens lifted his head. Berliot shook his.

"She claims it couldn't have affected her driving, her attention at the wheel. She still insists she had a green light. Of course, we can get the engineers to backtrack the time sequence, but then we've got only a surmise about those traffic lights unless we can pinpoint the exact second of the impact."

"I tried that with the people who heard the crash," Stevens said. "It's only an approximation of time, and maybe I'm being prejudiced. I shouldn't be on this case."

"You're doing all right. But maybe you're too prejudiced against your wife."

"It's the only safe course." Stevens hesitated. "O.K.. let's try it the other way. I've had something in the back of my mind." He told Berliot about the brand name on Mrs. Kramer's market list. "Do you recognize it?"

"Reducing pills," Berliot said. "I'd have to look it up, but I'm sure this particular type contains the same, basically dangerous, ingredients that—"

"The same ingredients," Stevens cut in sharply, "that are in certain medicines and drugs where warnings are put on the labels about driving a car or handling dangerous machinery."

Berliot squinted. "I see your point, Ed. But how are you going to apply it to Mrs. Kramer? There's been no test devised yet for this kind of stuff. Nothing we can take into court like blood test for alcoholic content. And if you try to force the blame on Mrs. Kramer to save your wife, how do you think that will look to her husband, to insurance companies, to a court?"

"I know," Stevens said grimly.

"But what if I could get supporting evidence to show *them* how it looks to us?"

Berliot studied him. "I'd say forget it, if I hadn't seen you run down obscure details on other traffic cases."

Stevens knocked on the lieutenant's door. Elaine sat on the edge of a chair. She gave him a wee smile, but her eyes were searching and frightened. The lieutenant extended his hand for the papers. Stevens held onto them.

"I haven't had them approved by the sergeant yet, sir. There's more data I want to obtain, if possible. I'll be offwatch in ten minutes. May I leave now in my own car?"

The lieutenant studied him the same as Berliot. "It'll be on your own time in ten minutes. But take a traffic car on special detail. You can contact us quicker with radio, or we can call you in."

Stevens felt Berliot touch his arm as he left. They weren't going to lean away from Elaine, but they were giving him a chance to show them they should, if he could. He swung around the parking lot and told the trustees to top the gas tank of 45T1. While they were at it, he checked addresses in a phone book. Then he took off and drove first to an all-night service station on Seventh. The attendants knew him. When patroling, he always checked their station, liquor stores, markets, and other places of likely hold-ups. So, whenever he needed co-operation, he rarely encountered opposition.

"You sold some gas today to a Mrs. Kramer," he said. "Is she a regular customer?"

"Sure is, Chief. She's not in trouble, I hope."

"What makes you think she might be?"

"You're asking about her, aren't you? I want to play ball with you, Chief. I do the same for my customers."

Stevens nodded. "She isn't your customer anymore. She was killed in an automobile accident tonight." He had to give some details about it. "I'm not asking you to stick your neck out," he went on. "I just want to know how she acted today."

"Which time, Chief? She came in twice."

"Twice?"

"Yes, she bought gas late this afternoon on her way home from work. Then she came in again about eight-thirty and wanted gas again. But the tank wouldn't take any. She was sort of embarrassed about forgetting she'd been in this afternoon."

Stevens restrained his voice. "Has that happened before?"

"No, Chief, but now that you mention it, she hasn't seemed herself

lately. She used to chat with us and kid a bit, especially about her losing battle with weight. But the past few weeks she'd just sit in the car and hardly have anything to say, as though she had something on her mind. It was none of my business. I just figured the honeymoon was over."

"Thanks," Stevens said quickly. "Thanks a lot."

He drove to an address on the west side, just a few blocks beyond his station's district. The man he wanted to see had already turned in and was irked at being roused, a round gnome with gray hair fuzzed and wearing a bathrobe that was too big and too loud for him. Sleep fled from his eyes at sight of the uniform. Stevens wondered what traffic ordinance had been violated in this household.

"Mr. Paynton? Sorry to bother you at this hour. I understand you employ a Mrs. Joan Kramer in your plastics plant."

"That's right. General office assistant."

"I also understand you may be planning to discharge her. May I inquire why?"

Paynton pursed his lips. "May I inquire why you want to know?"

"It's important, Mr. Paynton," Stevens replied, and waited.

"Well," Paynton said slowly, "I don't *want* to let her go. She's a good worker, keeps things cheerful around the office. At least, that's the way it used to be. But since her marriage, I don't know. About a month ago she changed, became sort of moody, made mistakes, forgot things I asked her to do. Even forgot to come to work a couple of times. I tried to talk with her, discover her problem, help her. I got nowhere."

Stevens radioed the dispatcher and requested that Berliot meet him at an address. He briefed the detective, then they started up to the Kramer apartment.

"I'm making no promises," Berliot said. "If he denies the implications, he and his lawyers will be tipped off what your wife's defense will be if they decide to sue. But go ahead. You handle it. I'll jump in if you need help."

Young Kramer's family was there They resented the intrusion, so did Kramer when he finally appeared.

"We just need some more details," Stevens said. "May we speak to you privately, Mr. Kramer?" They went in the kitchen of the little apartment and closed the door. "Mr. Kramer, you mentioned a quarrel with your wife about a month ago. May I ask what it was about?"

"What's that got to do with what happened tonight?"

Stevens waited, just looking at him. Kramer glared at him, at

Berliot. Finally, in the silence, he shrugged.

"I'd had a rough day at work, came home irritable, and somehow or other . . . I forget whether she bumped into me, stepped on my foot, or what . . . anyway, I jawed her about getting too fat and sloppy now that she had me hooked. I didn't mean it and I apologized right away. We made up, as I told you earlier."

Stevens pointed to a nearly empty bottle he had spotted on a shelf. "Was that when she started buying reducing pills?"

"I told her to forget what I said. I liked . . . loved her as she was."

Stevens still pointed to the bottle. "But she began trying to reduce anyway, right? She started buying these and taking them. She gave up drinking milk at meals, and other things. After she began dosing herself with these pills, she was in danger of losing her job. And tell me, Mr. Kramer, was she absent-minded, hazy, dis-oriented around here too?"

The bereaved eyes saw what Stevens was driving at. There was no longer resentful anger in the voice, dropping almost to a whisper.

"Is that what made her . . . so distant . . . and forgetful? Are you saying . . . that's maybe . . . why she drove through a red light tonight? Believe me, copper. Honest, I didn't know when you questioned me at the . . . the accident. And neither of us knew before then that . . . that that stuff could be so . . . dangerous."

Pity took some of the edge from Stevens's voice. "You could have read the warning on the label, or asked a doctor's advice. Her condition must have been as obvious to you as it was to everyone else, Mr. Kramer. Your wife was not in sufficient command of herself to drive."

Berliot said. "I'll handle from here. You finish up your report.

Back at the station it took only a few moments to complete the distribution sheet. The sergeant looked it over, then initialed it. Stevens took all the papers to the lieutenant's office and placed them in the tray. Alverson didn't look at them.

"Berliot phoned in," he said. "Nice work, Stevens. More coffee, Mrs. Stevens? If so, let *him* get it. I'm going home."

Stevens hesitantly faced Elaine when they were alone.

"Sorry I kept you waiting, but you had company this time."

"I didn't mind, Ed, even if I'd been alone. You had to be sure. I'll never mind waiting again, if—"

He didn't give her a chance to finish it. The signal lights in her eyes were Go, and he went to her.

It is superstition, surely, but ideas persist of ill omens, tainted money, and the like. When conditions are right, this category may include a dead man's clothes.

TUXEDO JUNCTION

HUDKINS, the bell captain, phoned the newsstand, told Artie, "Bring a shopping bag to the baggage room."

"What is it?"

"Come in here." The curtness in Hudkins' voice told Artie this wasn't a matter to be discussed over the hotel phone.

Minutes later Artie locked the cash register, lumbered across the lobby, a paper shopping bag under his arm. Artie was a fat, stooped man of 68. Hudkins wasn't ten years younger than Artie, but he was slim and lean in his fancy red uniform, with brushed silver hair. Locking the baggage room door, the bell captain held up a new tuxedo, told Artie, "This should fit you like a glove. The pants are far too long, but you have a barrel chest so the coat will fit fine. Take it."

Artie, who put in a seven day week—most of the days fourteen working hours—behind his stand, rubbed his bald head as he asked, "What am I going to do with a tux?"

Hudkins gave him the final sell of a Broadway sharpshooter—

"Don't be a dope—it's new and for free—take it!"

Folding the coat and pants into the shopping bag Artie asked, "Where did you get it?"

The bell captain glanced around the baggage room before he whispered, "That big joker in 1625 died of a heart attack this morning."

When a single, transient guest died in the hotel—a rare event—an alert bellhop used his passkey to enter the room before the manager, or anybody else, if possible. The bellhops were after money but might pick up anything striking their fancy—a new lighter, new tie, any item which wouldn't be missed. Hudkins was an expert at this and it wasn't exactly pure dishonesty on his part. In his thirty years in the hotel he'd seen many valuable things rot in the cellar before they were thrown out, uncalled for. Rather, it was almost a natural state of mind for Hudkins; anyone dependent upon tips has to be a scavenger.

"1625?" Artie repeated, not surprised that he hadn't heard of the death. The management kept such things very hush-hush. "Yeah, guy built like an ex-heavyweight, checked in two nights ago. Smoked two-bit cigars. Heart attack? Did act nervous, now that I think of it, but young for a heart case; didn't seem 50. You get anything?"

"Naw," Hudkins lied. He had taken $85 of the $157 in the dead man's wallet. "All he had was a crummy watch, old electric razor.

Rest of his clothes were nothing. Too big for me. But this new tux—I thought of you at once. Keep still about it."

Artie nodded. When he was behind his stand again he went into the closet-size stockroom, tried on the tuxedo jacket. For most of his life, before his wife died and he'd bought the stand, Artie had worked in a hat factory, knew something about material and sewing. The tux wasn't the best but still an expensive suit. Artie looked great. Except for the long sleeves the coat was a good fit. But the pants were silly—far too small for Artie's hanging stomach, and at least a foot too long for his short legs.

Shortly before noon, when the Medical Examiner came and the house manager had a maid packing the deceased's few things, they found something behind a curtain Hudkins' sharp eyes hadn't seen—a worn shoulder holster and a stub-nosed .38. The manager was upset. It meant a police investigation. Hudkins was also a trifle upset. If he'd seen the gun he wouldn't have touched a thing in the room. Stopping at the stand he whispered, "They found a damn gun!"

"A gun?" Artie repeated, sallow face going pale. "Trouble!"

"We've got nothing to worry about, be a routine deal with the cops. We know from nothing, but absolutely from nothing! Remember that and keep your mouth shut."

Later a detective asked the desk clerk for 1625's registration card. The man had signed in as Harry Stone from a mid-west city. The detective checked to see if the dead man had made or received any phone calls; he hadn't. A morgue ambulance quickly removed the body, while the detective took the gun. The rest of the dead man's things were packed in his battered suitcase, left in the cellar storage room. The Medical Examiner said Harry Stone had indeed died of natural causes.

That night when Artie went home to his tiny apartment he hung the tux in a closet, then soaked his swollen feet in a tub, watched a midnight movie on TV as he always did. But Artie couldn't quite lose himself in the movie. "I was a fool to take the tux. Cost me a fortune to have the pants altered, if they can be altered that much, and when am I ever going to use a tuxedo? Be different if Milly was still alive; sometimes we went to the lodge affairs. A dead man's clothes—might have had a disease? But it was a heart attack and the suit looks new. No label on it but perhaps I can pawn it for a dozen bucks."

Artie was too sleepy to give the suit much thought. The next morning, Friday, as he was opening his

stand at 7 a.m., stacking the morning papers, Hudkins came over to squint at the headlines. Artie asked, "Anything new on the stiff?"

"Naw. If nobody calls for his junk in the next few months, hotel will throw it out. See they had a big fire out in Brooklyn. . . ."

Saturday afternoon the detective returned, told the manager that fingerprints on the gun had idenified the deceased as one Harry Turner, a small time syndicate thug from the West, with a record. If anybody should call for his things or inquire about him, the hotel was to stall, phone the precinct house at once.

Sunday was Artie's "day off"; he closed his stand at two in the afternoon, and after eating lunch in the hotel coffee shop, usually went home to have a drink or two, sleep, read the papers, stay off his feet. As he was hanging up his pants this Sunday he took out the tux and examined it again. A certain odd stiffness to the coat material disturbed him, although there wasn't any sign of a stain. Perhaps it was the stiffness of dried blood? Sitting on his bed, puffing on a cigar, Artie was about to throw the suit into his trash basket—a dead man's clothes made him uneasy—but the contradiction of the obviously new suit and the stiffness, especially the lining, puzzled him. Using a razor he expertly cut the lining threads, and found sixty $1000 bills sewed inside the coat!

After carefully examining the pants, and the shoulder pads, Artie neatly resewed the lining, hung up the tux. For several dazed moments he stared at the thin pile of bills before the happy shock of what he had fully hit him. "I'll sell the damn stand, take a trip around the world!" he mumbled, almost caressing one of the beautiful bills. He'd never seen a $1000 bill before. "I swear, I'll just *sit* for the rest of my life! Sixty grand—haven't more than a dozen years left—I'll live real good!"

But when the first wild surge of joy died, Artie sucked on his cigar, knew it wasn't going to be easy. A bank wouldn't take any bill higher than $100 without putting down the serial number and the depositor's name, report it to the tax people. Certainly no store, steamship line, or even the gambling places in Las Vegas, would cash a $1000 bill. Once the serial numbers were known—who knew where the money came from, what trouble Artie might find himself in? Even the tax bite would be large.

But this didn't dampen Artie's excitement too much. He had a fortune, the bills looked 'good', and sooner or later he'd find a way of cashing them. Even if he 'sold' the money for half price, thirty grand

was more money than Artie ever imagined having.

Artie spent the rest of the afternoon hiding the money, taping the bills to the bottoms of his dresser drawers, and making plans. At first he was going to destroy the coat and pants, but on second thought he decided it would look better to keep them. Just in case there ever was any fuss about it, say Hudkins somehow mentioned giving Artie the tux, why he could give it back to the police, say he'd never used it. But that was silly; Hudkins wouldn't talk, it would cost him his job. Closing his eyes Artie tried to picture what 1625 had looked like—a burly man with a rough face. Artie recalled the man had purchased a dozen 25¢ cigars, sat around the lobby once, smoking one. Being a cigar man himself Artie knew a nervous puffer when he saw one.

"All I have to do," Artie told himself, "is act natural. Anybody wants the tux, they can have it. This fellow must have been on the run, why he was so nervous, must have double-crossed his pals out West. But since he has a record, the cops seem interested in him, little chance of his buddies coming here, asking for his things. I'm in the clear. All I have to do is play things cool, work and look my usual shabby old self for a few months, and think of a way of cashing the bills. Maybe I'll say I'm ill, sell the stand, try to cash the money over in Europe. Main thing is, all I have to do is —nothing."

For the next month Artie forced himself to forget about his new fortune. Aside from adding a lock to his apartment door, feeling under the drawers for the bills when he returned home at night, Artie lived as before, the long hours behind the stand killing his feet, bulling with the bellhops, usually about the sex life of the guests, going home to watch TV and sleep.

Hudkins only mentioned the tux once. When Artie had sold a couple a night club tour, the bell captain who had been glancing at a magazine said, "Now that you have a tux, Artie, you ought to take one of these night spot tours yourself."

"All my poor feet need, dancing!" Artie answered, glancing sharply at Hudkins for a split-second. The wiseguy grin on the bell captain's sharp face reassured him, and he added, "Told you I got no use for it. Give it to anybody my size."

Another time, while making a bank deposit, Artie casually told the teller, "A fellow in the hotel, on his way to Europe, showed me a $500 bill. I told him he should carry his money in checks, but I guess a five hundred buck bill is a big deal abroad."

"He'll have a rough time cashing it over there. Difficult to exchange any US money over $50. Even in the past war blackmarket days large U.S. bills weren't popular—too easy to trace."

Sometimes Hudkins would glance across the lobby at Artie, a dead cigar between his flabby lips, lost in thought as he sat back of his stand. Hudkins would tell one of the younger bellhops, "Fat Artie is slowing down. Ought to watch his diet, and all those ropes he smokes . . . his heart. Looks asleep on his feet."

Actually Artie's mind was working overtime as he considered various schemes to 'cash' the $1000 bills, and it always boiled down to selling the money, settle for $30,000, or whatever he could get. That, plus the few thousand the stand would bring, and he could still live out his years in ease. But peddling the money meant dealing with gangsters.

Artie considered selling the stand and moving to Miami, or Los Angeles, looking for a gangster there, wondering if it would be easier to find one as a stranger. On the same street with the hotel there were a number of bars. One of them was owned by an expensively dressed fellow named Jimmy, who also drove a big flashy car. Everybody on the street knew Jimmy was a bookie. Now and then he purchased a crossword puzzle magazine at the stand. While Artie had never said more than hello to Jimmy, he decided to approach the bookie, who in turn would know where to find a buyer.

Two months after 1625 had died in his sleep, Artie asked Hudkins to watch the stand, said he was going to the bank. Instead he walked into Jimmy's bar, ordered a beer, and took the dapper bookie aside, told him: "Listen, Jimmy, without asking any questions. I have a business deal you may be interested in. Just give me a yes or no answer. I have a $1000 bill which I can't deposit, for tax reasons. I'll sell it for $500 in small bills. Can you handle it? It isn't phony money."

"Only an idiot would turn out a thousand buck queer," Jimmy said, amused at the tenseness on the old man's face. "Got the bill on you?"

"Of course not, but you can examine it. Can you sell it for me?"

"Yeah. I'll give you five hundred for it."

"You will?".

Jimmy nodded. "But nobody else is to know, understand?"

Artie rubbed his almost bald head, then blurted out, "Jimmy, I have sixty of the bills! Can you swing *that?*"

For a moment the bookie stared

at Artie with wide eyes, a trace of fear in his look which Artie was too excited to notice. Jimmy hissed, "Jeez, thirty grand for me!"

"Can you h-handle it?"

"Yeah. But a bundle that big takes time. I'll drop by your stand Saturday, but don't you come in here again. Sure you haven't told anybody about seeing me? Not even your wife?"

"I don't talk about money like that to anybody. My wife, God rest her soul, has been dead for years."

On Friday Artie didn't open his stand. The hotel manager phoned Artie's apartment without receiving an answer. "The old boy must be sick," the manager told Hudkins. "Does he have any relatives?"

"A sister-in-law out on the Island. I remember Artie went there for Christmas supper, and he was complaining because he doesn't like the biddy. I'll see if she's in the phone book."

Artie's sister-in-law never had much use for him and it wasn't until Sunday when she knocked on the locked door of his apartment. When he didn't answer she called the police and they broke the door down. Artie had been beaten to death, his place in a shambles, all the dresser drawers out and upside down.

The police had two theories. Some young punks had figured Artie for a miser and robbed him; or as one detective said, the brutal way Artie was beaten had all the earmarks of a 'hit'—pro killers hired by a gang to get information before they killed. But the detective didn't press his theory. Artie didn't have a record and little money.

As the sister-in-law told Hudkins when she came to the hotel to inform them of the funeral time, "Kids today are regular animals. Robbing poor Artie, for his 'money!' Why he had almost nothing in the bank. In fact his clothes were so shabby I was about to buy him a decent second hand suit, to bury him in. But in the bottom of his closet—he was such a slob about clothes—I found this folded tuxedo jacket. I'm having it pressed and Artie will look just grand in his casket. Better than he ever looked in life."

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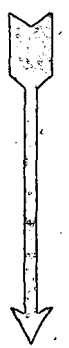

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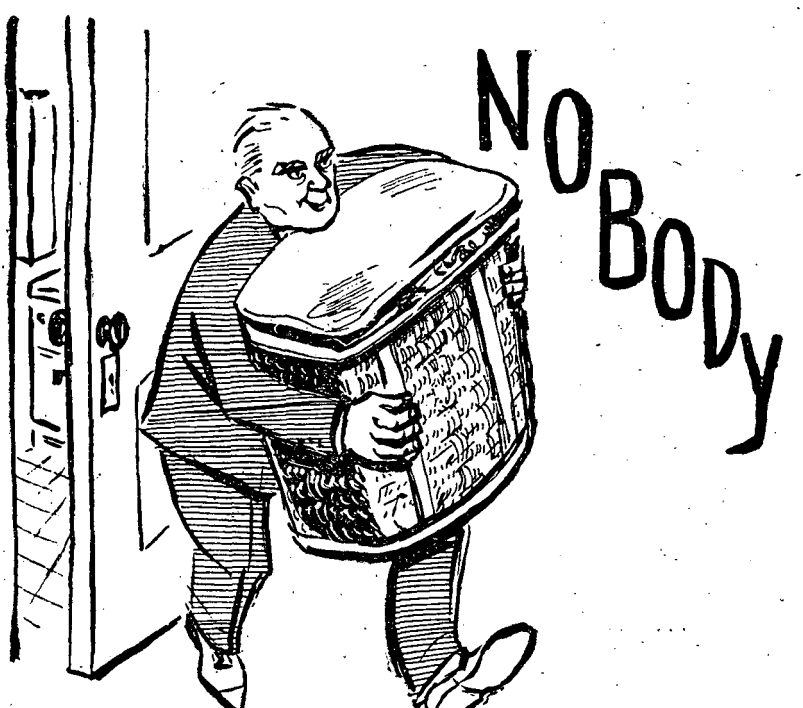
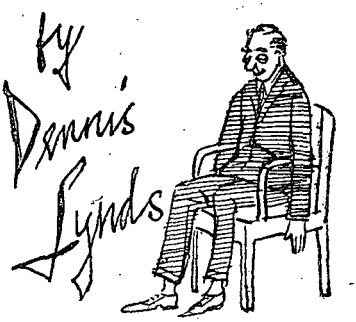
NO AGENCY ORDERS REMITTANCE MUST ACCOMPANY ORDER

A man whose occupation necessitates a considerable amount of danger must always be prepared for the worst. Habitual pessimism, however, may give rise to situations that are equally as dangerous as folly.

THE MAN in the chair was quite definitely dead. Big Sam Remington did not need an engraved Coroner's Report to tell him that. Propped up in the chair like a grotesque, grinning doll, the man was certainly, finally, among the departed. It did not make Big Sam happy. The man was Alton Colyer, and too many "friends" of Big Sam knew that Big Sam had been looking for Alton Colyer.

Here was a frame-up, pure and simple.





NOBODY FRAMES BIG SAM

The jumping fingers of panic danced a twist up and down Big Sam's vertebrae. The big gambler began to swear in a stream of pure invective that would have done credit to an old-time cavalry sergeant. He got a grip on himself. He glided across his living room with the agility of a jungle snake and felt Colyer's heart. The heart had murmured its last murmur. Colyer was dead in the armchair in Big Sam Remington's livingroom, and Big Sam had king-sized trouble.

Trouble was not exactly a shining novelty to the big gambler. He swung into action. He walked quickly to his front door and opened it a crack. Big Sam's apartment was at the head of the stairs on the second floor of the three-story building. Big Sam was rich and careful. From his front door he had a full view of the stairs and the downstairs front hall. Big Sam was allergic to friendly surprises. Now he saw what he had expected. Mrs. Billington, the landlady, was busily sweeping the downstairs hall.

Big Sam could estimate to the minute how long the landlady would be manicuring the front hall. He made it his business to know the habits of everyone in the building. Big Sam had been a gainfully employed gambler, smuggler, hi-jacker, and in other assorted illegal gambits for forty years. That makes a man nervously careful if he wants to live. Big Sam was still alive. He wanted to keep up that happy state of affairs.

Mrs. Billington had appeared in the front hall just as Big Sam had come into the house two minutes

before. She had called out to him. The landlady was a long-winded bore who made deafness seem a rather pleasant prospect, so Big Sam had smiled, waved politely, and made a fast climb up the stairs to the safety of his apartment.

And Alton Colyer had been waiting for him. A smiling and very dead Alton Colyer. Two long minutes ago. Now Big Sam watched the bustling landlady rearranging the dust in the front hall and knew she would be there for five more minutes. Five minutes! And from the front hall there was a clear view of the back door out to where Big Sam had his car parked.

Big Sam took a deep, slow breath. Did he have five minutes? It was a classic frame-up. The bloodhounds would be banging on his door after a hot tip any minute. It was such an obvious old set-up it just might work. He had one distant glimmer of hope. He had arrived home fifteen minutes earlier than usual, and that meant fifteen praying minutes before the frameup men would expect. Fifteen minutes might not be enough.

The danger was panic, the urgent need to put wide spaces between himself and the gratuitous corpse they had handed him. He could not panic. Big Sam leaned against his closed door and took deep, even breaths. It occurred to him that he might not have too many deep breaths left. He brushed off that unpleasant thought and began to study his apartment. He had to wait, and while he waited it was a good idea to see if the corpse had left any helping hints lying around for the cops.

There was nothing on the surface to see, but if it was a frame-up there would be clues. Big Sam was a most careful man. He never left his apartment without setting his little booby traps to tell him when someone had decided to pay him an uninvited call in his absence. He checked the window. There was a thread that would break if anyone raised the window. The thread was intact.

He walked into his kitchen and checked the back door. Big Sam always had an apartment with a handy second exit. It was more important than an insurance policy. He inspected the edge of the door where he always stuck a pin. Big Sam found the pin on the floor. Someone had opened the back door without an invitation from him.

Back in his living room Big Sam let his gimlet eyes scan everything. A neat job. Everything was in place. Smart boys, his callers who had left the corpse to remember them by. Or maybe not smart enough. The telephone was a hair out of place. Big Sam picked up the receiver. The almost invisible film of dust on the receiver had been smudged. Big Sam smiled. Later he would get the prints. Only his happy visitors had probably worn gloves, and whoever they were they would not have been the type to call anywhere that could be traced.

Finally, with the distaste of a man who didn't mind killing but was too fastidious to touch a corpse, Big Sam studied the remains of Alton Colyer. There were no visible marks on his grinning caller. The twisted lips were faintly blue. Big Sam bent gingerly over his departed visitor. On the neck there were red welts, almost scratches. The collar of the shirt was slightly torn. Strangled? The blue lips could have been from poison. Big Sam knew more than one "friend" who would do either to him or Colyer with a smile.

As he straightened up with a sigh, Big Sam kicked something. He bent and picked up a small, evil-looking .32 caliber automatic. Big Sam had seen the gun before. It was Alton Colyer's silent partner. It had not been fired, which was par for the course. The people who had eliminated Colyer would not have given the victim a sporting chance in their game. And the gun would make it look like the late Colyer had been definitely afraid of Big Sam.

The chilling sound of the sirens hovered suddenly in the silent air of the room. Faint and distant sirens, but coming inexorably closer as fast as a two-dollar bettor who'd hit a four horse parlay. Big Sam looked at his watch. Right on time if he hadn't had some gambler's angel who had made him come home fifteen minutes early! And the neutral dial of the watch also told him that the landlady should have packed up her pails and brooms and gone for a well-earned rest.

Big Sam went into action. He hoisted the unprotesting corpse onto his brawny shoulders and carried the late Alton Colyer into the kitchen. He dumped his unwanted companion into his clothes hamper and covered him up with dirty clothes. Then he opened the back

door, and slid the hamper bumping down the stairs unceremoniously. At the back door he was unobserved. He hauled the hamper with its unaccustomed extra cargo out to his car. He heaved the hamper into the trunk and closed the trunk. The sirens were still wailing in the distance.

Already smiling, Big Sam ran back inside the building and up the stairs into his apartment. Not even a cockroach saw him. He locked his back door from the inside, left the key prominently in the lock, and walked quickly through his apartment and out the front door. He made as much noise as he could going down the stairs. As he had expected, the landlady was sitting in her room, her feet propped up, her door open so that she could conveniently observe the interesting events in the front hall.

Big Sam paused at the foot of the stairs, waved to Mrs. Billington, and said cheerily, "Going out now, Mrs. Billington. I'll be late. You can go up and clean if you want."

The landlady started to say something, but Big Sam had no time for interesting conversation now. Satisfied that Mrs. Billington would remember when he went out, that he went out alone, and that he carried nothing, Big Sam walked out the front door and headed fast for the rear and his car. The sirens still sounded like distant hounds after a fox. They did not seem any closer, as if they were moving not toward him but parallel to him. But they would turn soon enough, Big Sam was sure of that, and he wasted no idle minutes listening.

He got into his car, backed slowly out the driveway, and turned and drove sedately down the tree-shaded street. He even waved to a few passers-by. He was more than a mile away from his building, the sirens long faded behind him, before he let out a slow, sweet sigh of relief. He had made it. Only the details were left, and Big Sam let out a loud laugh. He laughed aloud for almost a mile on his way to the City Dump. Until it happened to occur to him that he had little to laugh about.

Big Sam abruptly changed his laughing to swearing. Not only had someone tried to frame him, but no matter how it came out he was definitely the loser by $20,000! That was what the unlamented Alton Colyer had welshed on, and you don't get paid by dead men. But someone was going to pay, one way or another. Big Sam began to consider the unlimited possibilities of who had framed him.

Forty years of gambling and other assorted low-work, high-pay trades earned a man a certain number of enemies. Big Sam could count twenty without even trying. Every-

one knew Colyer had owed him $20,000 on a gambling debt, everyone knew he had been looking for Colyer, and everyone knew he had killed men before for less than $20,000. Those were his salad days, before he learned that for a killing it pays to hire expert talent who know the work and are handy to have around if the cops get nosy, and no one had ever proven anything against him beyond a double parking rap. He was no angel, but he hadn't done a day in jail in his life, and no one framed him. The man wasn't born smart enough to frame Big Sam!

He could think of twenty, but there were only two with enough guts, organization, and recent enough reason: Al Mertz and Paoli Constantine. They were both killers, they both knew Alton Colyer well enough to get close enough to hand the welsher his one-way ticket, they both had the organization to move the corpse unnoticed, they both knew Big Sam's habits, they both knew he had a five o'clock appointment that night so would be home at the right time getting dressed, and they both hated his guts. They both had business reasons to hate him, and they both just didn't seem to like him personally.

Big Sam almost smiled happily again when he thought about Al Mertz. He was still feeling sort of warm about the hijack he had engineered right under Mertz's nose. Half a million in pure heroin and Mertz couldn't prove a thing. Not that Mertz didn't suspect; that was what had made the job so beautiful. Big Sam had worked the deal by conning two of Mertz's best boys. Both those boys had exited suddenly the hard way a month ago. It was possible Al Mertz had decided to get Big Sam the same way, proof or no proof.

Paoli Constantine had a bad temper. He did not know how Big Sam had fixed the biggest poker game the city had seen in twenty years, and Big Sam was not about to enlighten the loser. But Paoli knew the game had been fixed somehow. It had cost him plenty, and Paoli was not a man to forgive or forget. What hurt Paoli almost as much as the loss of all that buying power was the blemish on his reputation as a gambler. It was bad public relations when a gambler was beaten, and cheated, by another gambler.

Thinking, Big Sam drove on with his untalkative cargo locked in the trunk. It had to be one of them, and after he finished his cover-up work, Big Sam decided he would make life just a little more unpleasant than either of them thought it could be. The prospect made him feel much better. He began to whistle as he drove into the gray, smol-

dering smoke of the City Dump.

Two hours later Big Sam Remington drove into the parking lot of Paoli Constantine's gambling house. The big gambler was still whistling. The body of the unmourned Colyer was a warm pile of bones and ashes in the City Dump. No one had seen Big Sam hard at work over the hot incinerator, and he had even found twenty dollars in Colyer's pocket. He was twenty dollars richer. No one could trace the corpse to him. A good night's work, sort of rewarding in a way, and now Big Sam was enjoying the score he was about to start settling.

All the way back from the City Dump Big Sam had gone over the frame-up in his mind. Both Constantine and Mertz fitted, and the frame would have been perfect if he had not stopped off to fix a broken roulette wheel at his River Street joint. That had cost him his last appointment before five o'clock, and he had made it home early. Both Mertz and Constantine had known about his last appointment. One of them did not know he had missed that appointment. That was the big one Big Sam wanted. He had a few choice rewards in mind for that one.

In his car the big gambler reflected. His door had not been broken open. That meant a key. A key to the front or back door, and that sounded like Al Mertz—the racketeer had the organization. The body had been moved like it was invisible, and that sounded like Mertz and his neat hard boys. On the other hand, Mertz was too careful to have set up a frame and not tailed Big Sam. Mertz would have known about coming home early. And Mertz wasn't the strangle, poison, or frame type. Mertz was a devotee of direct action. A frame-up and a loud shout to the cops was more in Constantine's line of work.

Big Sam left his car and went to begin work on Paoli Constantine. He was anticipating an enjoyable evening. At the inner door, inside the cover-restaurant, Big Sam brushed past the guard as if the man was part of the furniture. The guard squawked and made tracks for the wall telephone. In the back room the action was going strong. Paoli Constantine was counting the take at a dice table. Big Sam saw Constantine's head suddenly jerk up like a startled chicken. Someone had signaled, and Paoli stared at Big Sam.

"Surprise!" Big Sam said.

"You're a brave man, Sam," Constantine said. "In here I never expected to see you. Maybe you'll even get out alive."

"You didn't expect me anywhere," Big Sam said. "Not out of cold storage anyhow. You missed your tim-

ing, Paoli. It wasn't like you."

"What timing? You ain't got time for small talk, Sam."

Big Sam laughed. Paoli would do nothing in his own joint. That was considered very poor form in the trade, and besides, it could get a man in difficulties with the law.

"It was a bad frame, Paoli. It didn't hold," Big Sam said. "You should have had me tailed. Very careless."

"Frame?" Constantine turned purple. "I got a score to take you for, big man, but I don't fink to the cops."

"You play fair?" Big Sam said. "Not since you heard there ain't no Santa Claus. Keep someone walking close behind you, big boy."

Big Sam spun on his heel and sauntered out of the bustling back room. He left the citizens fighting to give away their cash, walked through the restaurant front, and out into the night. He walked to his car and drove off. A few hundred yards down the highway he stopped among some trees. He left his car and ran back to the gambling house. He waited in the dark where he had a good view of Constantine's back door. If he was right about him there would be some men coming out fast to find out what had gone wrong with the frame-up.

No one came out. Big Sam swore in the dark. Paoli should have been running scared by now. Unless Constantine had decided to let a miss be as good as a mile and pretend it had all happened to two other guys. After a time Big Sam knew that Constantine was not going to move. The big gambler snaked quickly to the back door, neatly put the man on the door to sleep with a light tap of his blackjack, tied the man with his best boy scout knots, and went into Constantine's office.

Big Sam searched for twenty minutes. He found nothing more interesting than heartburn powders. Poor Paoli had a nervous stomach. Big Sam hoped it was getting considerably more nervous. There was no duplicate key to his apartment. There was nothing to connect Constantine to Colyer. Maybe Al Mertz was his friendly corpse-giver after all. The racketeer just might have changed his ways and become sloppy at the same time.

Big Sam left the way he had come, gently kicking the guard on the floor as he passed. When he reached his car he got in and then noticed a gleam on the seat beside him. Colyer's .32 caliber automatic. Big Sam laughed aloud. He got out of the car again, walked back to the gambling house, and left the gun hidden near the back door. He hid it well, but not too well. The cops were underpaid and he didn't want them to have to work too hard.

He laughed all the way back to his car again. Sooner or later the redoubtable police would find what was left of Colyer. Then they would find the gun like a bottle of milk on Constantine's doorstep! That would cause them to ask a certain number of pointed questions. Constantine would be disturbed. He would have a good alibi, but might be caused some discomfort in the process. Big Sam liked that thought. It made him laugh all the way to the riverfront where Al Mertz had his office in a warehouse.

As Big Sam drove down what should have been the proverbial deserted street, Al Mertz did not like company, he became acutely aware of a great deal of purposeful activity. There were police cars all over the street in front of Mertz's innocent warehouse. Big Sam jammed on his brakes. Deftly he eased his car over to the curb and imitated a tourist who had gotten lost looking for a hotel. He could have saved himself the effort. There were two patrol cars and two homicide cars, and they were not even glancing his way.

Big Sam knew every police car in the city. The two homicide cars belonged to Captain Balsam and Lieutenant Fife. The two cars were quite clearly empty. The detectives were having fun and games with Al Mertz. The idea did not exactly disturb Big Sam. And the cops could be after something beside Colyer's sudden end. Al Mertz was not a good boy. Big Sam did not think the police could have found, or identified, what was left of Colyer yet. Not that Big Sam fooled himself that the cops would not identify Colyer some day. Teeth, and bones, and skulls don't burn like oiled paper.

It could have been something else the cops wanted, but it could also be Colyer. Maybe the police had found out about the frame and that Mertz had done it. Big Sam was not greedy; he had no objections to letting the police do the job on Mertz. There were times when the police did a fine job of sweating a killer. As a matter of fact, Big Sam decided that it was only his civic duty to help the police if he could. If it was Colyer involved in the social call on Mertz, the police would certainly want to talk to Big Sam. He could readily admit he had been after Colyer, trot out his alibi through Mrs. Billington, and drop a few well-chosen hints about how much Al Mertz had hated Colyer too.

Considering just what he could say to help Mertz on his way to the final destination, Big Sam drove away from the river. He drove around for an hour or so, driving aimlessly but making sure he passed

places where people could see him and wave, and then drove leisurely home. As he expected, there were police cars in front of his building. If they had found Colyer, he would be a logical suspect. Especially if they had arrived earlier on the tip-off and found nothing. They would know that someone had tried to frame him. Big Sam thought with relish of how he would stoutly refuse to incriminate Al Mertz or Constantine.

He drove noisily but calmly into his driveway, locked the car, and sauntered slowly around to the front of the house. As he walked in the front door he saw Captain Balsam and Lieutenant Fife. The two detectives had finished with Mertz in a hurry, it seemed, and come straight to his place. That would figure. It was clear now that Al Mertz had done the frame, and the racketeer was scared and grasping for straws by telling the cops that Big Sam had killed Colyer in the hope that there would be at least a clue left in Big Sam's rooms.

Big Sam almost laughed when he thought of Al Mertz sweating in the hope that the frame-up would not be turned on him. Al Mertz was going to learn about frame-ups. Big Sam walked straight to where Captain Balsam and Lieutenant Fife were standing at the foot of the stairs. They were talking to the landlady, Mrs. Billington. Big Sam very nearly did laugh when he saw that Paoli Constantine was there too. The Greek looked slightly scared to death. Lieutenant Fife was holding Colyer's evil-looking little .32 caliber automatic. Mrs. Billington was talking her usual non-stop marathon of words to Captain Balsam. As Big Sam walked up, Mrs. Billington saw him and smiled.

"Why, here he is now! Good gracious, Mr. Remington, I've just been telling . . ."

The Captain and Lieutenant Fife turned to look at Big Sam.

"Hello Captain, Lieutenant," Big Sam said easily. "I see you got Constantine with you? What's up? A gambling pinch?"

"Alton Colyer's missing," Captain Balsam said.

Big Sam was surprised. "You don't say? Why I was looking for him only yesterday. I told Al Mertz; he wanted to find Colyer too. Constantine know where he is? I mean, I'd . . ."

It was then that Mrs. Billington spoke up again in her bright, eager, twittery voice. She beamed at Big Sam.

"I was just telling the Captain that you really couldn't have seen Mr. Colyer since half-past four this afternoon, Mr. Remington. I distinctly remember you coming in and then going out alone at half-

past four. When I went up to clean, why . . ."

Big Sam Remington blinked. He stared at the twittery old woman. He was aware that she seemed to be saying something quite important, but he could not really understand just what it was.

"Half-past four?" Big Sam said tentatively.

"When you went out," Mrs. Billington said positively. "You came in about a half hour after I let Mr. Colyer into your apartment, and you went out at half-past four. I knew you wanted to see Mr. Colyer. I'd heard you mention it on the telephone, so when he came and said you asked him to meet you here I let him in. He looked so pale, poor man. I just couldn't make him wait down here. I tried to tell you when you came in, but you went upstairs so fast I didn't have the chance. Sometimes I think you avoid me, Mr. Remington, you bad boy. Anyway, I knew he would be waiting when you went in, so you would find him."

Big Sam Remington's mind would not seem to focus. There seemed to be a certain haze inside his head. He had the distinct impression that something very unpleasant was happening to him.

"Colyer didn't come out with Remington?" Captain Balsam said.

"Oh no," Mrs. Billington said. "In fact, that's odd. Now that you mention it I never did see Mr. Colyer leave. Isn't that strange? I mean, I saw Mr. Remington go out, and I went up to clean, and Mr. Colyer wasn't there. Perhaps he went out the back way. I did hear some noise at the back door just before Mr. Remington came down. Oh, Mr. Remington, whatever happened to your dirty clothes hamper? I noticed it was missing."

The hamper, of course, was still in Big Sam's car. They would find it now. Of course, Big Sam thought, it was quite clear now. Colyer had come to kill him, Big Sam. Big Sam felt detached, calm, warm in a certain haze. Colyer had been afraid. The welsher had come to get out of his trouble by killing Big Sam. And Colyer had had a heart attack and died. A heart attack, or a coronary, or a stroke, it did not seem to matter much exactly what.

"His wife reported him missing," Lieutenant Fife was saying. "She said he left his house with his gun, and he called her from here, from your apartment. That was about four o'clock. He ain't been seen since."

Big Sam felt himself nodding agreeably. Yes, that was the way it was. Colyer had used the telephone. Colyer had checked the back door to prevent a surprise. No marks on the body. The gun on the floor

unfired. The sirens that did not seem to come any closer. It was all quite logical now.

"He came to get you," Captain Balsam said. "He came here and then he vanished. We found his gun out at Constantine's place. Paoli has an alibi and ten people saw you out there last night. Tell us where the body is, Sam?"

Big Sam smiled weakly at the Captain. "The body?"

"You killed him, Sam," the Captain said. "You were after him. You killed him and got the body out the back way in that hamper, right? Where is the body, Sam. We'll find it sooner or later."

Big Sam had an irresistable urge to laugh. Or was it to cry? It seemed, at that moment, an interesting problem.

"He was dead," Big Sam explained. "When I came in he was dead. I thought it was a frame-up. You see? He must have been so scared he died of a heart attack. Yes, he had a heart attack. But I thought . . . so you see . . ."

"Heart attack?" Captain Balsam said. "Okay, where's the body? We can run an autopsy now and . . ."

It was just about then that Big Sam Remington began to feel himself falling into small pieces. He felt exactly like a large brick wall that was crumbling into a thousand small, irregular pieces. In a way it was an interesting sensation, Big Sam decided. He seemed to watch himself crumble with a certain detached interest. After all, what else could he do now?

"I burnt it," Big Sam said. "Ashes and bones. In the big incinerator out at the Dump. Ashes and bones. That's all there is, just ashes and bones. You see, I thought it was a frame-up, and . . ."

Mrs. Billington was still smiling like some small old bird. Paoli Constantine began to laugh. He laughed very loudly. The two detectives stared at Big Sam. Lieutenant Fife had his hand on his gun. The two detectives stepped up to Big Sam. They each held one of Big Sam's arms.

"You can call your lawyer," Captain Balsam said.

"Maybe he'll even believe you," Lieutenant Fife said.

There are some days, and fortunately they do not recur weekly, when it's hardly worth getting up and going down to the bank. Take our story, for instance.

Requiem

MR. DENNIS O'HARA, the bank guard, recalled that it was just before 12 o'clock when he saw her enter the 42nd Street branch of the First Federal.

"Yes, it was almost noon when the little, old, grayhaired lady walked in. We were getting ready for our usual Friday rush. You know how it is with people getting pay checks in the morning and wanting to cash them on their lunch hour. Well, we didn't have too many customers in the bank just yet, so I noticed her. Sweet, harmless thing, she looked. No, I never saw her before.

"She went right over to one of the writing desks, took out a form from one of the cubby holes and began writing. That's when the first of the lunch hour crowd started coming in, and I didn't pay any more attention to Grandma."

Miss Sylvia Vogel, bank teller, picked up the story.

"I guess I was the next one to see her. Things had been slow all morning, but I knew that I would be busy as all get-out in a couple of minutes when the check cashers started lining up. So, I was tidying up my cage, checking the cash drawer and things like that. I didn't look up until I heard voices at the front door and saw some of the girls from the insurance company upstairs in the building coming in. They were talking and laughing. You know how it is when a bunch of girls have some money and are going out to have a nice lunch.

"When I looked out the front of my cage, there she was—just standing and waiting for me to notice her. She smiled at me so nicely and said, 'Good morning'. I was awfully embarrassed about keeping such a sweet old lady waiting, so I apologized and asked what I could do for her. Still smiling, she pushed a withdrawal slip under the grille.

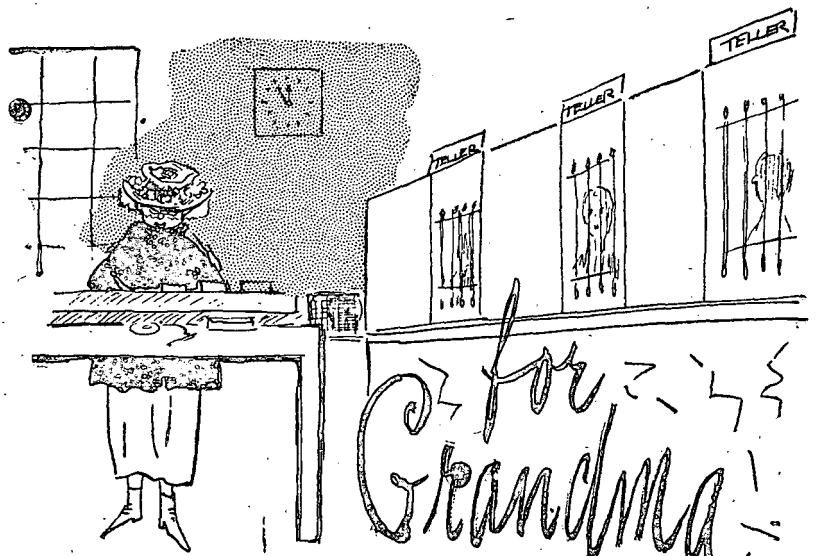
When I picked it up and read it, I couldn't believe my eyes. It said, 'Put $5,000 in a bank envelope quickly. Don't make a sound or I will shoot'.

"I looked at her to see if it was some sort of a joke, but when I saw the gun, I knew it wasn't. Her right arm was lying on the counter in front of the grille. She had pulled her hand back inside the arm of her coat, and I could see it holding a large black gun aimed right at me. Just the tip of the gun barrel was exposed, so no one else could see it.

"Well, I almost passed out. That's when she said, 'Don't panic, dearie. Just do like the note says and nothing will happen. Nothing, hear?'

"What do you do in a situation like that? I know the bank tells us to step on the alarm button and drop to the floor, but I just couldn't. I was almost paralyzed with fright. I couldn't think too clearly. And no one else in the bank was paying any attention to us. So, I began counting out $5,000 in hundreds as fast as my numbed fingers would move.

"I had just finished and was put-



for Grandma

By Marvin Karp

ting the money in an envelope when one of the girls from the insurance company got in line behind Grandma. I passed the envelope under the grille, and Grandma put it in her coat pocket with her left hand. Then, she said to me in a half-whisper, 'Just so you don't do anything foolish, I'm going to take a hostage with me'.

"She turned around and stepped right up against the girl behind her. I saw her right arm push into the girl, and she said something to her. The girl's eyes opened wide, and her mouth gaped as though she was trying to answer. I could see she was scared to death. Grandma took her arm, turned her around, and they started to walk slowly out of the bank. I could have set off the alarm then, but I didn't want to get that girl killed. The last I saw of them was when they went out the front door."

Miss Sally Bain, clerk-typist for the Great Mutual Insurance Company, now recovered from her attack of hysterics, gave her account.

"It was awful, I mean really awful. I came into the bank with some of my girl friends from the insurance company just like we do every Friday. On pay day, we like to eat lunch out somewhere, like a celebration, I guess. We all went to those desks where you can endorse your check and write out a deposit slip if you want to put some of the money in the bank. Well, I needed all the money for some shopping, so I just signed my check.

"The other girls were still writing, so I decided to go over to the teller's window ahead of them. There was just one old lady standing in front of this particular window, and she looked like she was almost finished, so I stood behind her. I saw her take an envelope from the teller and put it in her pocket. The next thing I knew, she turned around and walked right into me. I started to step aside but she pushed something hard into my stomach. Then, she said, 'I have a gun pointed at you. Don't make a sound. Just turn around and walk quietly out of here with me'.

"I started to say something nasty to her, but I could feel this object pushing into me. I looked down and saw a small, black pipe coming out of her coat sleeve. Everything seemed to get mixed up then. My head felt dizzy, and I couldn't make a sound, not a single, solitary squeak.

"She took my arm and turned me towards the door, and I couldn't stop her. It was like I had become a puppet or a dummy. We started walking out, and my girl friends didn't even notice us. They were still busy talking and writing at the

desks. I was too scared to scream.

"When we got to the sidewalk, Grandma steered me to the corner of 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue. I could feel myself getting dizzier and dizzier. No one paid any attention to us. It was like they couldn't see us, like we didn't even exist. At the corner, Grandma started to take me across the avenue. Suddenly a policeman blew his whistle a couple of times and began walking towards us. Grandma pulled me in front of her and took out the gun. That's when I finally fainted."

Patrolman Donald Burke, badge #30875, assigned to the 102nd Precinct on traffic patrol, reported from his bed in General Hospital.

"Yes, sir, I was working my regular post, directing traffic at the intersection of 42nd and Eighth. Traffic was extra heavy at that time, so when I saw the old lady and the girl start to cross the avenue, I knew I had to act fast. I blew my whistle a couple of times to attract their attention, but they kept going. So, I started to walk towards them. Suddenly, the girl keeled over as though she had been pole-axed. The next thing I knew, Grandma had a pistol in her hand and was blasting away at me.

"She hit me once in the left shoulder and knocked me down. I barely had enough strength to draw my revolver and get off one shot. I saw her crumple to the roadway. I managed to get back on my feet and stagger over to her and the girl. Traffic had stopped and a crowd was gathering. Then, I saw something I could hardly believe. When she fell, the old lady must have accidentally knocked her hat and hairpiece loose. And what do you know! She was wearing a wig. When I pulled it off, I discovered that she wasn't even a lady. She was Maxie the Actor, wanted in three states for bank robbery.

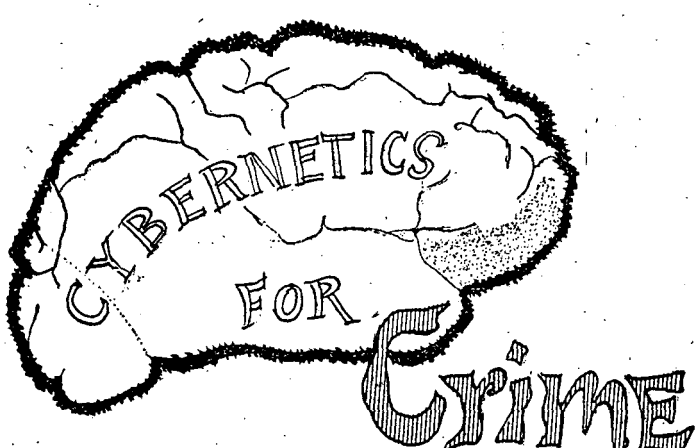
"How did I know he had just robbed the First Federal, you ask? Well, I've got to admit that I didn't know it. He would have gotten away with it if he hadn't tried to cross Eighth Avenue just as the light turned against him. When I walked towards the old lady and the girl, I was only trying to warn them about jaywalking."

Every Friday

The new television show ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS is one hour long, and may be seen on Friday evenings at 9:30 PM on the CBS network.

Much outcry has been made over machines that think like people. But people, attempting to think like machines, may find intervening mechanical difficulties.

IT WAS not surprising that the two of them bumped into each other. On chilly November mornings pedestrians often met head-on at this windy dusty intersection. But the consequences were unusual, perhaps because he was such a heavy man, and she, though wondrously contoured, such a very slight girl. She went spinning off her feet, striking her head, as she fell, against the stone coping of the old office building that bordered the sidewalk.



They made an odd pair as he helped her up, the girl in her black toreador pants and cheap plaid jacket, the tall portly man in his lamb-collared car-coat and carelessly expensive felt hat. The girl seemed dazed by the blow on her head, and a drop of blood showed on her lower lip where a tooth had cut through the sensitive skin.

"I'm *terribly* sorry," said the man. "Did you tear your jacket? Well, you'd better get a new one. Here, now—" He reached into an inner pocket for his wallet. "This ought to take care of it," he said. He handed her a twenty dollar bill. The girl took the bill and held it

in her fingers, saying nothing, still looking dazed. "Well, now," said the man, "perhaps I'd better make it a little more." He took another twenty from the wallet and gave it to her. As he fumbled the wallet back through the folds of his topcoat a card fell from it and fluttered, seemingly unnoticed by him, to the sidewalk. "I'm really terribly sorry," he said, "but I'm late and I shall have to hurry on." He turned and strode away down the broad sidewalk, disappearing among the hordes of office-goers.

A knot of people had started to form.

"What happened, dearie?" asked a woman.

"He knocked me down," said the girl. She lifted her hand to wipe away the blood that she felt on her lip, and for the first time she saw the money she was holding.

"For Pete's sake!" she said. She fingered the bills. "For Pete's sake! What did he give me all this dough for?"

A man stooped and picked up the card that had fallen to the sidewalk.

"Hell," he said, "he can afford it. He's vice president of the City Trust Company."

"You ought to get a lawyer, dearie," said the woman.

Almost as if on cue, a short swarthy man who had just come out of the office building paused and turned toward the group.

"What's that?" he said. "I'm an attorney. What's all this about?"

by

Fred S. Tobey

When Attorney John Galliani was ushered in to see Vice President Kenyon Perry of the City Trust Company he thought again, as he had thought a number of times before, how perfectly Perry fitted the public image of the successful banker: tall and self-confident, just a little portly, the well-shaped head topped by a generous shock of iron-grey hair, the cold gimlet eyes alert to bore into those deep recesses where a man's undisclosed debts lie hidden. Perry probably was fifty-five.

"Good afternoon, John," he said. The tone was neither cold nor cordial, but as neutral as thirty years of practise had taught him how to make it. He motioned Galliani to a chair. "I have a conference in a few minutes but I thought we might get your business out of the way first. You've come for an answer on the Plaza loan?"

"Well, yes—in a way," said Galliani.

"John, I think I gave you a pretty good idea on the phone yesterday what the answer would have to be, and what the reasons are. We simply are not in a position right at this moment to finance a project of that magnitude, with the other commitments we have taken on recently." He smiled a thin concluding smile.

"Now I wonder, Mr. Perry," said Galliani, not looking at the smile, "if there isn't still some room for discussion. Because—"

Perry cut him off. "Unfortunately, no, I'm afraid," he said. He glanced at his watch.

Galliani leaned close and spoke in confidential tones.

"Mr. Perry," he said, "I am getting an exceptionally large fee in this matter. I am only the attorney but I am getting a really very large fee because of my good banking connections. It is a contingent arrangement, Mr. Perry. If there is no loan there will not be any fee."

Indignantly, Perry started to rise from his chair. "This is quite improper," he began, but at that moment his phone rang and he sank back and reached to answer it.

"Kenyon Perry," he said. There was a long pause. "I haven't any idea what you're talking about, madam. You've reached the wrong person, I'm afraid. What's that? . . . My business card? Well that's most peculiar. If this is some sort of joke, I—" He glanced suddenly at Galliani. "Look, madam, I shall have to call you back," he said. "Please give your name and phone number to my secretary and I'll call you back shortly. There's a ridiculous mistake of some sort." He clicked the phone, spoke briefly to his secretary, and hung up.

"Some crackpot girl," he said, turning back to Galliani, "or a joke." He looked thoughtful. "But it's strange, she says I dropped my business card."

"Then it must have been Candice Arnold," said Galliani.

"Arnold? She did say her name was Arnold. Do you mean you know the girl?"

"In a professional way only," said Galliani. "I told her to call you. I'm her attorney."

"You are?" Perry looked genuinely puzzled. "She sounded quite young. What's this crazy story about me bumping into her up on Fremont Street this morning?"

"I was going to mention it, of course," said Galliani, "but we hadn't got through talking about the loan."

"But it's not true," said Perry. "There was no such—" He paused and looked at his visitor closely. "I don't know what you're up to, Galliani," he finished, "but if it's more than a joke it will get you

nothing but trouble. Bad trouble."

The unsubtle charge from the familiar 'John' to his surname was not lost on Galliani. He rose from his chair.

"Come across the street and have a cup of coffee," he said.

"I have no time—" Perry began.

"Oh, come on," Galliani interrupted. "There's always time for a cup of coffee. And this one could mean a lot to you, Mr. Perry." He turned and walked out into the lobby of the bank.

After a moment's hesitation, Perry, looking very thoughtful, rose and followed him.

Galliani went to a corner booth of the coffee shop and sat with his back to the wall, so he could see if anyone came near. Perry dropped into the seat opposite him.

"This had better be good, Galliani," Perry began, "because—"

"Look, Mr. Perry," Galliani cut in. He leaned across the table toward Perry and spoke softly, so the sound of his voice would not carry outside the booth. "I'll make it as quick as I can, because maybe you do have a conference. First I want to make it plain just how important this Plaza loan is to me, because that's what is going to make it important to you.

"I moved to this stinking city and its stinking climate eight years ago, Mr. Perry, because I thought it was the kind of a place where I could make money enough so I could quit and go somewhere I would really like. I'm fifty-nine and I've got sinus trouble, Mr. Perry. You know what sinus trouble is like in this stinking climate? I've got to get out of it, Mr. Perry. The doctor says I ought to be in some place like Arizona, or maybe the West Indies.

"That's why I've got to get your O.K. on this Plaza loan, Mr. Perry, and I've got to get it fast. It's like, you might say, a matter of life and death with me. My principals are weakening on this deal, they're wondering if maybe they should be investing their money in some other city, where it would be appreciated. I can't even risk another week's delay, Mr. Perry."

A waitress approached to take their order, and Galliani broke off. He and Perry both ordered black coffee. When the waitress had left, Perry spoke up before Galliani could resume.

"I know something about your principals and the money that's back of them," he said. "We're not going to get mixed up with the rackets, Galliani."

"Oh, now, Mr. Perry," said Galliani, "the people in the front of this thing are respectable enough, you know that, and besides you also know this Plaza loan is only to

trigger the rest of the deal. If my group gets the blessing on the Plaza from old conservative City Trust, the high-finance boys will fall in line with the really big money for the city center complex and the office buildings and when that happens the Plaza property will be worth five or six times what it is now. That's why my group can afford to pay me so much to arrange this loan, Mr. Perry."

The waitress arrived with the coffee and there was another pause. As soon as she was out of hearing again, Perry spoke.

"I don't know what you're leading up to," he said. "But you're getting nowhere. "There's racketeering money in this Plaza thing and I want no part of it. Not on any terms whatsoever. And I don't propose to talk about it any more." He started to rise.

"Please," said Galliani mildly, not moving. "I do hope you will listen just one minute longer, because it will save trouble for both of us."

Perry settled back. "Well?" he said.

"What I'm going to say now is what I didn't want to say in your office. I'm going to be very, very, frank, Mr. Perry, and you might have a tape recorder in your desk over there, for all I know.

"I'm pretty sure I've figured the real reason you don't want to approve the Plaza loan. It may surprise you, but I know you expect to get elected president of City Trust next month, when the old man retires because of that heart attack he had about ten days ago. And you just want everything to coast nice and quiet between now and then. You don't want to do anything at all that might make any of the directors question your judgment.

"I also know that Kingman, the bank's attorney, thinks he's the one that ought to be president, and some of the directors might agree with him. Kingman is a damn good lawyer and he knows how to fight a case for himself. He'll pounce on anything he can find that might help him. You're afraid if this Plaza loan goes through he'll start snooping around the same as you did and find out there are a couple of racketeers mixed up in it, and use that as an excuse to rake you over and question your judgment and maybe even run a special audit to see if he couldn't dredge up any kind of mistakes or irregularities to make you look a little less like a perfect candidate. Even if they didn't find anything at all, Mr. Perry, I think you're afraid all that uproar might make a couple of directors wonder if your background is just right for the top executive of the City Trust.

That's the way I've figured out your recent attitude on this loan, Mr. Perry, and I think I'm pretty close to right.

"Well, Mr. Perry, I think you really ought to have a little more courage and confidence, because I'm sure it will be better for you to approve the loan, considering what you stand to lose if you don't."

There was silence for a moment. When Perry spoke at last, a mounting tension was noticeable under his controlled tones.

"It sounds to me, Galliani," he said, "as if you were offering, or were going to offer, a bribe. If I am right about that—"

"No, no! Please!" said Galliani, professing horrified indignation. "I'm sure you would never put enough trust in anyone to accept a bribe, Mr. Perry. This image of honesty that you have created has got to be maintained at all costs. I know that and I respect it, Mr. Perry. You certainly have made something out of yourself for a boy whose father was a part time carpenter and a full time drunk."

It took a second for the words to sink in, and when they did Perry started out of his seat, hands flat on the table, as if he were about to vault across it and seize the little lawyer, but Galliani did not move except to hold up one hand, palm outward, placatingly.

"Please, Mr. Perry," he said, "look, my old man was drunk all the time, too, and besides so was my old lady; at least you didn't have that. I am just trying to show you that I have learned a lot about you in the five years I have been negotiating loans with your bank. I know you got your college degree from a diploma mill that folded up when the state cracked down on it a while afterwards. Even that school, you had to work your way through, being a kind of a janitor and rent-collector for a real estate company. So what's wrong with working your way through school? Not a thing. It's just too bad it was such a lousy school it folded up, that's all, and it's nice if nobody is reminded.

"I know you started at the City Trust as an assistant teller, and ever since there has been just one thing on your mind: some day the kid whose old man used to divide his time between the saloons and the county jail was going to be the president of that bank, a place full of Ivy League graduates and social register people.

"I have got to hand it to you, Mr. Perry, you have done a marvelous job. You are just about perfect. There is nobody in this city that looks and acts more like a bank president than you do, and I do not see how the directors can

do anything but elect you next month; that is, if nothing happens to break up the image. I think the image will have a better chance to stay whole if you approve the Plaza loan, Mr. Perry."

A trace of the thin smile revisited Perry's lips.

"Galliani," he said, almost tolerantly, "you not only will not get the Plaza loan, but you will be lucky if you ever get another loan anywhere in this city. There isn't a single director in my bank that doesn't know the unfortunate story of my early life, and every one of them respects me for what I've been able to do in spite of it. If you think you can harm me by raking up old stories of my boyhood—"

"No, no, Mr. Perry, I would not be so foolish!" Galliani broke in. "But haven't you forgotten about that girl you knocked down this morning?"

Perry *had* forgotten about her. He had become so engrossed in Galliani's effrontery that he had forgotten about her completely. The shock of being reminded betrayed him into raising his voice.

"What is this nonsense about knocking down a girl?" he demanded.

The waitress responded. "Did you want me?" she said. "More coffee?"

"No, thanks," said Perry. Galliani shook his head, then went on:

"You were making a decision before you had all the data, Mr. Perry," said Galliani when the waitress was out of earshot. "It's like that big computer you've got over at the bank, that does all your bookkeeping. The answers you get out of it are only as good as the data you put in, right? If there's some data missing you get a wrong answer. So now I'd like to fill you in on the rest of the data."

"The girl, Galliani. I can do without the cybernetics."

"Without the what?"

"Never mind, for heaven's sake! What about the girl?"

"The girl—right! Mr. Perry, that girl was a lucky break for me. You see, I haven't been able to find out what your secret vice is, though I'm sure you have one to make up for that holy sober front you put up all the time. I knew another man something like you, nice family, deacon in the church, and I found out he had a stableful of very fancy dolls. I suspect it's women with you, too, Mr. Perry, but I don't have any leads. So as I say, it was a lucky break for me when you knocked that girl down on Fremont Street this morning."

"I did not knock a girl down on Fremont Street this morning, or any morning."

"Well," said Galliani, of course

I couldn't testify to it because I wasn't there till after it happened, but the witnesses describe a man that looked like you, wearing a coat and hat just like yours. This man walked around the corner where my office building is, just about the time you usually go by there from the station, and he went slam into this girl, so hard she fell down and cut her face. He picked her up and handed her forty bucks, and then he made off. When he took the money out of his wallet one of his cards fell out. It was your card, Mr. Perry. I happened to come out of the building, going out for coffee, just after this man left, and when this young girl seemed to need a lawyer I offered her my services, naturally."

"Naturally," said Perry dryly. "You probably hired her, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, no, Mr. Perry, this girl is absolutely sincere, and so are the witnesses. Don't make any mistake about that. On the other hand, if you weren't there, as you say, I could make a guess at what happened. Shall I do that?"

"Go right ahead."

"This is all speculation, of course, but let's say there was somebody who had a reason to make it seem that it was you knocked this girl down."

"Somebody like you, perhaps?"

"Let's keep it impersonal, Mr. Perry. This person would get one of your business cards somehow—that wouldn't be difficult—and he would hire a man that looked something like you, somebody that didn't mind doing shady little jobs for cash. He would dress this man up in clothes just like yours and have him wait in a doorway on Fremont Street till you had gone past, and then when the Arnold girl came along he would have him step out and walk into her. Then the man would give her some money and drop your business card and run along."

"And the purpose behind all this tomfoolery?"

"I guess it would be to bring some kind of pressure to bear on you, Mr. Perry."

"What's so serious about bumping into somebody on the sidewalk? It happens all the time."

"Sure it does, but the circumstances are a little unusual this time, Mr. Perry. For one thing, a man doesn't always give a girl forty dollars and run away after he bumps into her. Another thing, it almost seems as if this girl Candice Arnold was picked for the part. She walks by that corner every morning on her way to work in a tailor shop. She is reported to be very fond of money and I understand this has had a terrible effect

on her morals. They tell me she will do almost anything for money.

"Now I don't think it has occurred to her yet that she might get a lot of money out of this thing. For instance, if you were to offer her as little as a hundred dollars right now I'll bet she would sign a release. What worries me is what a girl like that might take it into her head to do if somebody starts giving her big ideas.

"For instance, she might claim it wasn't an accident that you knocked her down. She might say she knew you in some kind of an immoral way, and you hit her and then gave her that money to shut her up. If she did swear to some story like that, of course as her attorney I would have to follow through on it until something was proved one way or another. I'm afraid there would be a terrible scandal in the newspapers. You know how some reporters are. I wouldn't even put it past them to go way back to your childhood and talk about what a tough kid you were and how your old man used to beat up your old lady when he was loaded. Especially if somebody called it to these reporters' attention. Also about your alma mater being shut down by the education department. Put it all together with a nice sexy picture of Candice Arnold—what a name, Mr Perry, Candice!—along with a couple of things she might say about you, and it would make one hell of a story for the tabloids.

"Mr. Perry, I just don't know how you would make out if they printed a story like that. Even if you proved you don't know this girl, I'll bet you would have about as much chance to be president of City Trust Company as you have got to be Miss America. The way the facts of life work in business, Mr. Perry, you might not even keep on being vice president very long."

Galliani leaned closer to Perry across the table and dropped his voice to a confidential whisper.

"I'm only an attorney, Mr. Perry, doing my best to represent my clients in a perfectly legal way. But I would like to urge you, just as strongly as I know how, to get a signed release from this girl right away, before somebody puts ideas like that in her head. If you tell me to offer her a nominal sum, like a hundred dollars, I feel sure I can persuade her to take it and sign a release."

The two men looked at each other, eyes steady and unblinking, for a long moment. Then Perry spoke.

"How long will it take you to settle with the girl and get the release?"

"I could do it this afternoon, Mr. Perry. I'd say it wouldn't take any longer than for you to write a commitment letter for me on the Plaza loan."

"That's the deal, is it? You call the girl off and I approve the loan?"

"Look, Mr. Perry, I'm not even asking you to do anything dishonest. Suppose there is a little shady money mixed in with the Plaza deal. It's real money."

"Try foreclosing a loan on people that are backed by racketeers, Galliani. Or facing a bank attorney who knows you approved such a loan."

"He'll probably never look beyond the front men. Besides, look at the bonus you get—you get rid of me for good. I wasn't kidding about getting the hell away from this climate."

"All right. I'll approve the loan."

Galliani settled back and smiled.

"I was sure you would, Mr. Perry." He tapped his head with a forefinger. "I try to think like that computer of yours over in the bank. I admire that big thinking machine. Based on all the data, my mental computer told me you would approve this loan."

"What's the timing?"

"Well, this is Friday, and my people are coming in from New York this weekend to stay at my place and get their answer. I'll have to have something in writing today."

"I have a busy afternoon ahead," said Perry. "There's a meeting with the directors. Look, I was planning to work late anyhow. If you want to stay in town I can see you after dinner and have the commitment letter for you, and the loan application for your principals to sign."

"Great," said Galliani. "I'll see you at the bank tonight, then? What time?"

"Don't come to the bank after hours," said Perry. "I don't want anyone to get the idea there's anything unusual about this loan. Suppose I stop off at your office with the papers on my way home, about 7:30." He rose to his feet and Galliani followed suit.

"O.K.," said Galliani as they walked toward the door. "If the downstairs door is locked, ring the bell and I'll come down and let you in. Being Friday, everybody runs out at five o'clock like off a sinking ship. But there's a bell you can hear all through the building."

"All right," said Perry. "See you tonight—John."

When the door of his office opened, Galliani looked up from his desk in mild surprise.

"I thought I heard the elevator," he said, "but how'd you get in

without ringing the doorbell?"

"A couple of men were just coming out," said Perry.

"Well—what's the word?"

Perry removed his gloves and drew an envelope from his pocket.

"Here's the commitment letter," he said, "and the loan application, ready for signatures."

Galliani withdrew the letter from the envelope and read it quickly. He signed his approval.

"Great," he said. "Great. This will do it."

"You understand my board still has to pass on this?"

"I do, Mr. Perry. That's why I wrote a conditional clause into this release that Candice Arnold signed. The young lady doesn't know the clause is in there, and she never will know it if your board clears the loan application at next Tuesday's meeting—as I'm sure they will. The board doesn't turn down your commitments, Mr. Perry, not unless you give them reason to."

"John, aren't you afraid somebody might mistake you for a rat some time, and shoot you?"

Galliani, who had been looking at his desk, glanced quickly at Perry's face and there was just a brief flicker of fear in his eyes before he saw Perry's smile and responded with a grin.

"Somebody like *you,* Mr. Perry?" He shook his head slowly, then tapped it with a forefinger. "My mental computer says no. There's nothing in the data that says you'd risk a murder rap for the difference between vice president and president."

"I'll have to admit your computer is in good shape, John. It must be nice to have one that's so reliable."

"What was that word you used this afternoon? Cyber—what?"

"Cybernetics. Comparison of the human brain and computing machines."

"Spell it for me?"

Perry spelled it and Galliani wrote it down.

"That's a real interesting word. I can use it. You've studied this thing, too, I can see."

"It's almost a business with me, John. Now may I have the Arnold girl's release?"

"Why not, Mr. Perry? It's yours." He handed Perry the release. Perry glanced through it and put it in his pocket.

"I'll say good night, John. I'll have to hurry if I'm going to catch the eight-twenty five."

Galliani got up and walked out of the office and down the corridor with Perry. The banker seemed willing enough to be friendly again, in his detached way, now that the decision was past.

"You're not a comfortable man

to do business with John," he said as they reached the elevator, "so perhaps this experience was worth while, as you say, just to get rid of you." He turned, unexpectedly offering his hand to Galliani. "Let's quit fighting till you leave for Arizona, or wherever it is you're going that there isn't any sinus trouble."

A little surprised, Galliani nevertheless extended his own hand in response. As he felt Perry's bigger one close over it with powerful cordiality he became aware that Perry was sliding the door to the elevator back with his other hand. If this was not alarming, the lack of light from the open door certainly was, for it seemed to indicate that the elevator was not there at all, an indication which was confirmed when Perry, with a quick irresistable pull of his muscular right arm, sent the little lawyer hurtling into the black void where the elevator should have been. Perry heard Galliani's body thump resoundingly against the opposite side of the well before it began its swift unhindered flight to destruction on the concrete eleven floors below.

Perry left the sliding door open to show how Galliani must have stumbled to his death, but he pocketed the paper match pack that he had jammed into the antiquated safety lock so the door could be opened whether the elevator was there or not. Oh, there'd be an inquiry, but people had fallen down elevator shafts before. Wasn't Galliani nearsighted? And wasn't he always going out for coffee?

Perry left the elevator where it was, on the twelfth floor where he had finally got out of it. He left the lights on in Galliani's office and the office door unlocked, but picked up the commitment letter and loan application that he had typed. He took the slip on which Galliani had written "cybernetics," and he cautiously kept his gloves on all the while.

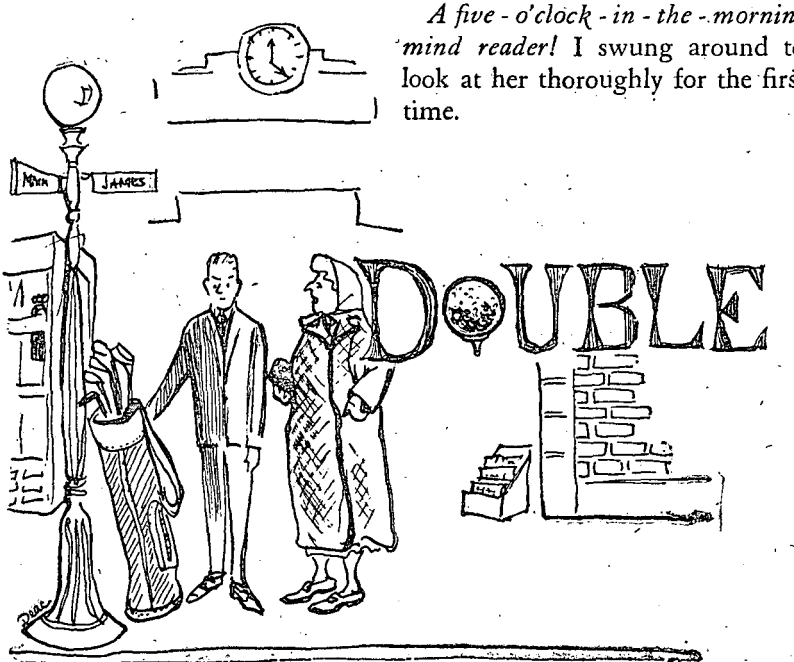
Walking down eleven flights to the deserted back alley, Perry had time for a few random thoughts. He thought how good it would be to relax on the train after standing since five o'clock in a broom closet so he wouldn't have to ring for Galliani to let him in. And he thought how right Galliani had been about almost everything. For instance, about Perry having a vice to balance his spurious righteousness. And about computers. Galliani had said the most reliable computer was no better than the data you fed into it, and didn't his own death prove how right he was? His mental computer, as he called it, had lacked one essential bit of data: Perry couldn't possibly risk a special audit just now, because his vice was embezzling money from his bank.

Among sports enthusiasts, the golfer is the man who is most prone to real addiction. Once exposed to the narcotic effect of that little white ball, no obstacle will disrupt his pursuit of the game.

I NOTICED her casually at first, the way you notice someone ahead of you in the cafeteria lineup, or someone who shares a doorway with you in the rain, waiting for a bus. In this instance, we were both standing on the pavement under the clock at the corner of Main and James at five a.m. on a chilly Tuesday morning, peering up and down the deserted streets. I, for one, was getting pretty impatient waiting for my friend, Red. I kicked at my golf bag and swore under my breath.

"Temper, temper, young man!" Her voice laughed at me.

A five - o'clock - in - the - morning mind reader! I swung around to look at her thoroughly for the first time.



She was a peculiar combination; a portly figure bundled in a too-large tweed coat, sloppy flat shoes, and on top, surprisingly, smoothly waved grey hair under a chiffon scarf, and a carefully made-up-middle aged face with a smile on it. She looked like she might have been halfway dressed for a party when something caused her to throw on just any old thing and rush out into the street. But from the quiet way she was standing, she wasn't in a hurry now.

I was in no mood for chitchat. Damn Red, anyway. Why was he taking so long?

"All things come to him who waits," she quoted, and again I heard the amusement in her voice. All right! Maybe I did look pretty silly, waiting in the cold with a golf

bag, but who was she to laugh at me? Smug, know-it-all. I hated the type.

I couldn't go and stand on another corner, where Red wouldn't find me, so I leaned the bag against a public telephone booth there on the sidewalk and moved into the entrance to the bank, where there was a news rack. I bent over to read the morning headlines.

She came to stand beside me. "I heard it on the midnight news," she said. "Somebody escaped from Carnoven. Homicidal, they say. That type shouldn't be in a rest home at all, if you ask me. Behind bars, that's where they belong." She wasn't laughing now. She was passing judgment.

"There are bars at Carnoven," I said, and, when she looked at me quickly, "you can see them, driving by. On every window."

"Well, there can't be enough. Or that wouldn't happen." She waved a hand at the paper. "And I think calling a lunatic 'mentally disturbed' is ridiculous. Just plain crazy is more like it." We stood side by side, looking at the headlines and the picture of the patient. It was blurred and fuzzy, might have been anybody. In fact, with all that hair on the forehead, it might have been a woman. I wished I had a nickel, to buy a paper and read the story.

"Putting nuts like that where

they can get out and frighten us all," she muttered. She didn't look frightened; she looked like she was building up a good mad. I wouldn't argue with her. I've met a lot of people like that, people who talk so much they haven't got time to listen. And I just get furious, pounding at them. It never does any good.

So I moved back beside the telephone booth and looked up and down the street again. A car or two went by, and a workman with a lunch pail under his arm and his eyes half closed; but still no Red. I checked the clock, and looked back at the woman. She was standing by the news rack, mooning over the headlines. Maybe she didn't have a nickel either, to buy a paper and read the story.

The morning was grey, not too promising. I went back to look at the weather forecast on the front page. *Cloudy, with showers.* I might have known. I wished Red would show up.

"You might as well stop stamping up and down, young man." I looked at her in surprise. "The busses don't start running until five-thirty."

I opened my mouth to say I wasn't waiting for a bus, and then snapped it shut. I didn't want to talk to her, didn't want to get involved. She would make me mad, I knew it. Full of smug phrases and pat sayings. People who think they know everything. She reminded me of my aunt. I looked at her shiny eyes and hated her.

"Don't I know you?" she said. "You look familiar."

She was determined to talk to me. I was frightened. I didn't want to start the day in a rage.

"Maybe you eat in the Koffee Kup once in a while?" She looked right into my face. "I know I've seen you."

Now I knew why she was dressed like that; she was a waitress. All made up for work, and just having to put on her uniform and white shoes when she got there. I knew the Koffee Kup, too—a joint down on lower James Street. I had been in there once or twice, a long time ago, but I didn't remember her.

"Yes," I said. "I've been there." Maybe that would satisfy her.

"I'm glad I figured it out," she said. "It worries me, not to be able to place a face. Stays on my mind until I work it out."

A man came around the corner then, and she turned her attention to him. I was watching her face, and when I saw her eyes widen and her mouth make a funny little 'O', I looked at him too. I guess my face took on the same expression as hers, because I could feel my mouth pursing up.

He was a caricature. Tall, miles tall; and thin, like the india-rubber man at the Fair; and wearing the oddest clothes. His coat was too short, so that his wrists hung out of the sleeves and his shirt billowed at the waist. His ankles showed bright red wool sox for about six inches between his pants and shoes. He looked like he might have lifted the whole outfit from a clothesline someplace. Or maybe it was a cheap suit and he had been standing out in the rain in it. His face was thin too, with long lines running from eyes to mouth. He smiled at us.

"Good morning, fellow creatures," he said. "Do you think I might persuade one of you to give me a dime for a cup of coffee?"

The woman's face settled into smug lines, and I remembered how my aunt had enjoyed turning away tramps who came to her back door for a handout during the depression. "Why don't you work for it?" the woman said. My aunt used to say that too, but it wasn't a fair question when there was no work.

The india-rubber man bowed gravely. "Madam," he said, "that will be my last resort. When the generous nature of man falters and fails, no doubt I will give the prospect serious thought. In the meantime . . ." he swung on me "how about you, my friend? Could you spare a small gratuity?"

I liked him. He was certainly a different kind of tramp. "I wish I could," I said. "But I haven't a cent."

"Ah, well," he lifted his hands philosophically, "such is my fortune today. I can see this early I should have stayed in bed . . . if I had a bed." He smiled. I was embarrassed for him, because I had had to turn him down.

"People like you," the woman put in, "are a disgrace to the city. We ought to run you out. You give the place a bad name."

"Madame," he looked her over, "I can think of any number of bad names to give you." For a moment it looked like he might be going to do it, too. Then he winked at me and strolled away.

Well, she swelled up with outraged dignity until her tweed coat wasn't too big for her anymore. I thought she might burst, and while I wanted to see it, I knew even then what it was going to do to me. I looked up and down the street. *Hurry up, Red,* I prayed. *Figure out where I'll be waiting . . .*

Suddenly she rushed over to the news rack and snatched up a paper. "It could be him," she said. "You can't tell anything from a picture. A dirty old tramp, talking to a decent, hard-working woman like that! I'll just bet he's that looney!"

I kept my voice calm. "I don't think . . ."

"What do *you* know?" Scornful, like my aunt. I could hear her shouting "Who do you think *you* are?" Why did they have to send me to stay with her when my mother died?

The woman started for the telephone booth. "I'm going to call the police. I'll show him!"

"You can't . . ."

"You keep out of this," she shouted. "Talking to me like that. I'll teach him a lesson!" She was digging into her purse for a dime.

Desperately I looked around at the deserted streets, and at the man, half a block away now, sauntering like he didn't have a care in the world. I couldn't let her do it to him. He had winked at me, taken me into a conspiracy against her and all stuffy, self-righteous women like her . . .

And then, far away up the street I saw the hospital van coming, and knew that Red would help me. If I could only hold her back for a few minutes . . . I put my hand on her arm.

"You damn little squirt," she screamed, "Who do you think you are?"

You see? She was beyond listening. Like my aunt, when I told her I hadn't stolen money out of her purse; like Red, when I said I would be perfectly happy there in the hospital if they would only get me my golf clubs . . .

So I snatched up my nine iron, and hit her over the head with it, again . . . and again.

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 5425
Sherman Oaks, California

Whispering trees and softly sighing winds have heretofore been the bane of romantic poets, but seldom have the whispers made suggestions of murder.

"Then I take it," said Frank Holcomb, "that you don't really feel you have a mental illness, or you'd seek a psychiatrist instead of a private detective."

"I have a psychiatrist," the young woman said. "If these are hallucinations, then I think you may be able to help me save the last of my sanity."

"You blame your mother-in-law," Frank said.

She nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Well, Mrs. Fisher, I'm going to be blunt. I'm no expert on these things, but isn't it quite common for mental patients to blame someone else for their condition? Isn't that, in fact, part of the illness?"

Again she nodded. "Yes. For the last month of his life, my husband could not stand the sight of me. He blamed me. It was a textbook classic of the persecution complex—I was spraying him with anthrax germs, I was reporting on him to the FBI, even on the telephone I was firing a death-ray at him. I realize fully that I may be in the

Rhythm

by John Reese

exact same condition, right now."

He studied her carefully as she talked. Melinda Fisher, widow, age twenty-six. Not beautiful, but she had been pretty before she got this taut, frightened pallor and that staring apprehension in her eyes. Normal, no—not now. But one could be abnormal without being mad.

"These hallucinations—what form do they take, Mrs. Fisher?" he said.

"Rhythm," she said.

He hoped he did not look as startled as he felt. "You'll have to be more specific," he said. "I wouldn't know how to go about protecting you against rhythm."

"And it is very hard to be specific. I only know that since my husband's death, I have been acutely conscious of strange rhythms all around me. Footsteps on the sidewalk outside—they have a rhythm, and if they go on long enough, I hear words to fit them. The ticking of a clock—that becomes a poem, a pattern of words as complex as Poe's *The Raven*. The rhythm is there all the time. Normal people are used to it and never notice it, but I hear words to fit it. Is that clear?"

He felt creepy, but he controlled himself. "Not quite, I'm afraid," he said. "But you're paying for this, so I'll ask you for an example."

She nodded vigorously. "That's easy! On the bus coming down, and this was less than an hour ago, there was some kind of bump or patch or something on one of the tires. I'm sure you've heard the wheels of a car beat rhythm like that, haven't you? That's normal. The rhythm is there. But did you ever play hide-and-seek, as a boy?"

She leaned over to imitate the rhythm of the bus wheels with her knuckles, on the desk. "That's the beat. To me, before we got downtown, that rhythm had become a voice repeating, over and over, *'Bushel of wheat, bushel of rye, all who ain't ready, holler I!'*"

Frank gulped down something dry. "I see. This happens frequently?"

"Yes. I had a good night's sleep last night. I woke up feeling much calmer than usual, much calmer! But then, while we were at breakfast, the canary began singing, the same pattern of notes, over and over. To me she was singing, *'Fourscore and seven years ago, fourscore and seven years ago!'*"

"You've discussed this with your psychiatrist?"

"Dr. Maxey? Yes. All he can do is prescribe sedation—you know, tranquillizers—and meanwhile probe for whatever dreadful, inner conflict is responsible. The medication doesn't help and so far, neither has analysis. And I'm afraid I know why."

"Your mother-in-law."

"Yes. She's continuously rapping with her knuckles, tapping her feet, gritting her teeth—rhythm, rhythm, rhythm, endlessly, deliberately, maliciously. Mr. Holcomb, there is absolutely no escape from it around her!"

"Let's assume you're right," he said, uneasily. "Why should she do this, unless she's crazy herself?"

"Money," said Melinda Fisher. "Crazy or not—and I'm not forgetting that my husband died in a mental hospital, and that it may have been inherited—crazy or not, as I say, around a hundred thousand dollars is at stake."

"Your husband's estate, I assume."

"Yes. We were married less than six months before he cracked up. It would be impossible to go back now, and prove that he was mentally incompetent to contract a marriage or make a will at the time. He did make a will, the day after we were married, dividing his money between his mother and myself. That will is now being probated.

"But if I prove to be insane now, even if she can't invalidate the marriage, she could have me committed and take charge of my share of the money. I have no other relatives."

"She might have a little trouble doing that if she were a victim of mental illness too," Frank said.

"Not necessarily. She is a remarkable woman, an attractive and apparently kind and sweet and generous old lady. It would be hard for me to make a defense by saying she's crazy too."

"Just what is it you want of me?"

"I want you to come live at the house. Please!" the young woman said. "We've rented the front bed room ever since Judd, my husband, went to the hospital. We needed the money. It's vacant now. There's a sign on the door. You could put the rent on your expense account."

"What you really want, isn't it, is a witness who can testify to your sanity?"

"Partly. But if she's insane, I need protection. My nerves are shot. I doubt I could handle her if she attacked me. I keep a pistol under my pillow, but—"

"Get rid of it. If your nerves are shot, you have no business with a gun, Mrs. Fisher."

"If I do, will you come protect me?"

"I'll be there today, but I'll tell you frankly, I think it's a waste of money. I think your psychiatrist would tell you the same thing. But just in case you're right, I'll be there."

Now, why did I take on this nut? he thought, when she had left. This was a wild one, and what

puzzled him was that the name was somehow familiar to him. Fisher, Fisher, what Fishers did he know?

It came to him suddenly. He leaped up and almost ran out to the reception desk. Frank Holcomb was assistant manager of an agency with a big staff, one specializing in insurance frauds and jewel thefts. There were nine operatives and two girl stenographers, one of whom also acted as receptionist and telephone operator.

"Sugar, haven't I got another appointment this morning?" he said to the switchboard girl.

"You certainly have. Eleven o'clock, Mr. Holcomb," she replied. "Mrs. Fisher, Mrs. Peggy Fisher."

"What address?"

He did not have to check the address against the one Mrs. Melinda Fisher had given him. No questions about it, same address, same name; this was the mother-in-law.

The elder Mrs. Fisher turned out to be a rather attractive woman, despite her thin, haggard look, dressed smartly and in good taste, but not expensively. He had already heard the background story, but he listened to it again because he could hardly say, "Let's skip that, the other party was just in here." Her son had died a few months ago, in a mental hospital. She and her daughter-in-law, Melinda, lived together in a house that had been her son's property.

"And what is it you want me to do?" he said.

"I want you to come there and live," she said. "You can rent the front bedroom. My daughter-in-law will have no suspicion because we've rented it before and have a sign up now. I want a witness, Mr. Holcomb, and I want protection!"

"Let's take this one thing at a time," he said. "A witness to what?"

"My sanity." Crisply, tersely, she explained that her son's will, dividing everything between herself and her daughter-in-law, was then in probate court. "If she can prove I'm mentally incompetent, or indeed if she can induce insanity in me, she'll have the whole estate. She'll have my guardianship while I live, but I'm an old woman and I won't live forever. I have no heirs and if I'm insane I can't make a will. She'll come into everything!"

"And protection against what?"

The woman hesitated. She rubbed her gloved hands nervously together, and looked out of the window. "Rhythm," she said.

He had to take a tight grip on his own nerves. "Rhythm, I see. Will you explain that?"

"If I can. I lived a great many years, Mr. Holcomb, without ever being aware that we are surround-

ed by rhythms. Very few things are stationary. Even the leaves on the trees move, in regular, repetitive patterns of motion and sound. Sound especially! What would you think, Mr. Holcomb, if someone suddenly asked you what the leaves were saying?"

"I'm not sure. Was that question asked of you?"

She smiled grimly. "Indeed it was, by my daughter-in-law. I'm going back to the first instance. In that case, I thought nothing of it. I believe I said that all I heard was a swish-swish-swish. It is an elm tree with heavy foliage, and it's just outside my bedroom window. What is one to expect of foliage, other than a swishing sound when the wind blows?"

She leaned forward, from the same chair and exactly in the same position as her daughter-in-law, to imitate the rhythm of the leaves on the desk, with her gloved knuckles. "It's very soft and quiet and regular, like that," she said. "One branch rubs lightly against the house. It could be quite a soothing sound, except that to me, suddenly, it was a voice saying, *'Heinie Manush to play today, Heinie Manush to play today!'*

"When one begins hearing voices, it's time to do something! Now I have my own bathroom, and not long after that I noticed a leak in the shower, a drip if you please. It had been there a long time, one gets used to such things, but then suddenly it kept me awake all one night, saying, *'Heinie Manush, two-eighty-nine, Heinie Manush, two-eighty-nine!'* That kind of gobbledy-gook is pathological, Mr. Holcomb. I don't think there's any question but that I'm in an abnormal mental condition. My only question is, what caused it?"

"I see. Mrs. Fisher, were you ever closely associated with a baseball fan?"

"Oh yes, my husband was dedicated to baseball."

"And he is dead?"

"Twenty-one years now."

"Heinie Manush was a great player of some thirty years ago. Two-eighty-nine sounds like a batting average. One's subconscious—"

She snapped, "I don't need my subconscious mind explained, although I suppose you're right; that's where I got Heinie Manush. What I need is protection. I don't want Heinie Manush coming out of the trees and my shower. We are surrounded by rhythms, Mr. Holcomb, and that's all right with me, so long as they stay properly in the background. But if, as I think, I am deliberately being driven insane by a younger, stronger woman, I want a man in the house! I keep a gun under my pillow—"

"Get rid of it!" he broke in. "I will do nothing of the sort!"

"You want me to come live there, don't you? You are in doubt of your own sanity, aren't you? Mrs. Fisher, I am not going to sleep in a house when a woman who suspects her own sanity sleeps with a loaded pistol. If I take this assignment, will you give me that gun?"

She drew a long breath, thinking it over as she looked out of the window. "All right," she said. "One has to trust someone. You may have the gun."

"I'll be there in two hours."

"I'll contrive to slip the gun under your own pillow when I make up the bed," she said, rising. "If I am insane, then I suppose I should be put away. But so long as there is a vestige of hope that I can remain mentally competent, I want a chance."

"We'll do the best we can," he promised.

They were both there when he called at the house to rent the room. He expected this and, as he thought, it only made it easier to pretend he was a stranger to both. It was a pleasant house, not quite new, in a good district. Four small bedrooms, fair-sized lot, worth around $30,000, probably. The bedroom they gave him was the best one, on the second floor, overlooking the street.

It could have been a pleasant house indeed, except for the clammy atmosphere he sensed the moment he stepped inside the door. If ever two women were on the verge of screaming hysteria, it was the two Mrs. Fishers, and their fear and suspicion of each other made them so jittery that he found himself on edge. He had a chance to talk to each woman alone for a moment that afternoon, and he had talked to them together. Either, he decided, could be perfectly sane—or completely mad.

He had given them a purposely vague story about being the new assistant manager of a chain finance company. The story did not matter, both women were prepared to accept it. He stood it as long as he could, but to remain in this house in broad daylight when he did not have to was above and beyond the call of duty. At about five, he could take it no longer.

"I believe I'll run downtown and get some dinner," he said.

"I can fix you something here," the younger Mrs. Fisher said, eagerly. "There are steaks in the freezer, or if you just want a snack, I could scramble some eggs."

"It's too early to eat anyway," said the older woman.

One thing was sure, he decided. They were both scared stiff. Either or both could be insane, but insane

people could be scared too. All he knew was that if he sat around between them much longer, he'd be listening for voices too. For this house was full of them. There were muttering rhythms everywhere, no matter which woman was in the room with him.

He made his lame but stubborn excuses and left. When he returned, a little after ten that night, both women were still awake. They were not reading or watching television or knitting. They were just sitting there where they could watch each other, listening for voices and swaying in their chairs to secret rhythms.

He went straight to bed, finding under his pillow a .38 automatic. In the drawer of his dresser was a short-barreled .38 revolver. At least, he thought, I have both guns.

But it was well after midnight before he went to sleep. At first he did not know what had awakened him, or what time it was. A glance at the bedside alarm clock showed him that it was 3:50. It was still pitch dark. He sat up and put his bare feet on the floor, as quietly as possible. The rhythmic ticking of the clock reminded him of where he was, and why. *Rhythm,* he thought, *rhythm. . . .*

But why was he awake? He had prepared himself for the clock when he went to bed the night before. A real rhythm, he thought, might be an antidote to the ones these strange, tense women heard talking to them. No, it was something else. His own subconscious, working even in his sleep, had alerted him to—something.

Then he heard it, the faraway clack of a train, not merely a rhythm but an accelerating one that grew louder with each split-second. *Rattety-tat, tat-rattey-tat, tat-rattey-tat,* it said.

At least, that was all it said to him. This train passed through every morning at this hour, just before daylight. What would it be saying to Peggy and Melinda Fisher?

He slipped on his robe as swiftly and quietly as he could. He opened his bedroom door and stepped out into the short hall at the top of the stairs. He heard two soft, stifled shrieks, one on either side of him. He reached back into his bedroom to turn on the lights.

The illumination from the doorway showed him both women. They were at their bedroom doors, in robes too, and both had armed themselves. The older Mrs. Fisher had the poker from the fireplace. Melinda Fisher had a butcher knife.

"All right, drop it, both of you," he said. "You know I can take them away from you."

Peggy Fisher threw the poker on the floor. "I wasn't afraid of you,"

she said. "So long as you're awake, I don't need that."

Melinda handed him the knife. "It's all right, I guess," she said lifelessly. "I didn't know you were awake. I thought—I thought that *she* was after me."

The train swooped through town, *ta-rattey-tat,* heading for the yards on the other side of the city. Its rhythm filled the house to bursting for a moment and then leaked out swiftly. "Quick, what was it saying to you?" Frank snapped, looking at the older woman.

"'She'll kill you tonight, she'll kill you tonight!'"

The old woman shuddered and covered her face with her hands. Frank looked at Melinda Fisher—so young, so numb, so frightened. "And you?" he barked.

"'This is the moment, this is the moment, this is the moment,'" she quoted, in the same lifeless voice.

The train had gone out of hearing now. "Moment for what?" Frank said.

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know. I only knew that it hadn't done any good to get rid of the gun. It's no use, Mr. Holcomb. I'm afraid I'm too far gone. It's I who am crazy. I shouldn't have bothered you."

He said slowly, "I don't think either of you is crazy. I think you're both being methodically, scientifically driven out of your minds, but I don't think either of you is to blame. Come downstairs. Let's sit down and talk this over frankly, shall we?"

They so needed a friend; they were so helpless and hopeless that they obeyed almost like zombies. When he got them down in the living room, when he had talked soothingly a few minutes, but put-

ting a certain firmness and assurance in his voice, they seemed to relax. It took a little time to make them understand what had happened, that each had retained him to stand guard against the other. But after all it was not illogical. His was the biggest and best investigative agency in the city, and coincidence had stretched farther than this within his own knowledge.

"But if we are being driven insane, and we're not doing it to each other, who is doing it?" Melinda Fisher cried, when finally her tired, fearful, overwrought mind had grasped the truth.

"I don't think there's any question about it," he replied. "Who is your psychiatrist?"

"Dr. H. LeRoy Maxey," replied Peggy Fisher. "But that's nonsense, Mr. Holcomb! He's one of the truly distinguished men in the profession.

"All right then. You tell me who it is. He took care of your son, and for all I know, drove him crazy too. You're both taking analysis with him. He is the only possible person who fits in."

"But what could he hope to gain by it?" Melinda exclaimed.

"Money?" said Frank.

The mother-in-law shook her head vigorously. "No. The moment you mentioned him, I asked myself that. He's getting fifty dollars an hour from me now. Should he drive me insane, and I'm committed, my bills would go up to include hospitalization. But his would go down. He would lose money."

"That's true," said the daughter-in-law.

"There is no way he would get control of the estate, if you both became incompetent?"

"None!" both women said, em-

phatically. And Melinda added, "Anyway, he has so much money now that often he doesn't even send out bills. You're right about one thing. He's the only person close to all three of us—Judd, Mother Fisher, and myself. But I can think of no possible explanation for him doing a thing like this!"

"I believe I can," said Frank, "but we'll have to wait until daylight, when I can see him, to find out if I'm right."

He had the elder Mrs. Fisher call Dr. Maxey's office and make the appointment. She had got her nerve back faster, and could stage a better act with Dr. Maxey's rather extensive staff. She recommended Mr. Holcomb to Dr. Maxey's attentions as a tired businessman, under incessant strain for a long time, and now in a continuously depressed and morbid state of mind.

As a result, Mr. Holcomb, tired businessman, got the first appointment of the day at 8:45 a.m. He found Dr. Maxey and a staff of five girls ensconced in a suite on the ninth floor of a downtown building. A sympathetic and tactful girl escorted him into the big, pleasant office which was the doctor's consulting room. Dr. Maxey, in person, was a healthy-looking athlete of about fifty, with a warm smile and a kindly and reassuring manner.

"I suppose what seems new and terrible to me is probably pretty old stuff to you, doctor," Frank said.

"Well, probably," Dr. Maxey said. "The human mind is complex, but disease is somewhat more comprehensible. We are far more familiar with anomalies than we are with the complexity of the normal mind."

"I can understand that," Frank said, nodding. "What seems to me a hideous thing is to you merely an anomaly, eh? Well, that's comforting."

"Then much of your battle is already won. Fear is your worst enemy, Mr. Holcomb."

"I believe I can see that now."

"Good! You see how important it is that you and I start off by liking and trusting each other."

"I do indeed. I find this a soothing atmosphere, doctor. I don't know when I've felt so relaxed!"

The doctor smiled gently. "That, of course, is important. I feel it too, which is even more important. I feel you are a strong man; we have an empathy, you trust me and I trust you. Isn't that the way it should be?"

"Right! A feeling of mutual trust."

The doctor leaned back in his chair. "We are off to a good start, Mr. Holcomb. Now, suppose you just begin by telling me about it in

your own choice of words, eh?"

Frank leaned back too, and put the tips of his fingers together. He and the doctor smiled at each other a moment, and then Frank said, gently and compassionately, "Just how long have you had this problem, do you think?"

The doctor's smile became fixed. He relaxed a little more. "About three years, more or less."

"I see. Now, if we're going to trust each other, we must be perfectly frank. Remember—nothing said here is going to go out of this room."

"I understand that," said Dr. Maxey. "Go on."

"Well, that's fine," Frank said, keeping his voice low and gentle. "That's fine. Now, we want to get down to something that may be a little painful, but I think you understand that we have to touch a sore spot now and then, don't you?"

"I understand. Go on."

"Now let's name names. There's somebody you don't trust, isn't there?"

The doctor's smile widened. "That's right."

"That's the name I want. Who is it?"

"Everybody!"

"I see." Frank controlled the creepy feeling with difficulty. "Everybody is after you."

"That's right, everybody that comes in here does it to me."

"I see. What is it they do to you?"

"They make me hear rhythms," the doctor said.

"Rhythms?"

"Yes. I never realized it until about three years ago, but we are constantly surrounded by rhythms. Almost everything on earth moves. The earth itself moves in the most gigantic pattern of rhythm of all, the sidereal system. The clouds are formed by physical rhythms of mass and motion. People are formed by the rhythm of reproduction. Why are music and poetry so soothing to the cultivated human being?"

"You tell me."

"Because they are patterns of rhythm that appeal to the rhythm that is in all of us! I know that all of this is normal, but it's when people come in here and tell me there are voices in rhythms that my problem begins. They all hear voices saying crazy things. A man walks down the street, *clippity-clop, clippety-clop,* and people try to tell me it's a voice saying, *'Harvard and Yale, Harvard and Yale.'* Now isn't that devilish?"

"Devilish," said Frank. He licked his lips but kept his fingertips together. "And tell me, what steps have you taken to protect yourself against all these devilish people?"

"This!"

The doctor opened his desk drawer and took out a .45 revolver. Frank knew what was coming, and was across the desk and in the doctor's lap before he could bring up the gun. The doctor screamed. Frank took the gun away from him and tried to silence his screaming with more soothing words, but the empathy had been broken.

There was no motive. There never is, in such cases. Had he shot Frank, it would have been only one more unmotivated killing—not murder, under the Rule of McNaughton. Because Dr. H. LeRoy Maxey definitely was not competent to know right from wrong. All he knew was that the young policeman who led him away was a mental case. "Your reactions are slow, young man," he said. "When your eyes change focus, the time lag is significant, yes, very significant. You had better have analysis before it's too late!"

"You bet, doctor," the young officer said. "I'll make an appointment first thing in the morning."

"Do, by all means," the doctor said, smilingly. "We can help you. Your problem isn't half as serious as it probably seems to you."

Frank called the two Mrs. Fishers and told them, on the phone, what had happened. No motive. They were both so overwrought that it was hard for them to believe the long ordeal was over, and they wanted to hear everything. Besides, he had two days' fees to collect, and at $100 a day, it was worth making another trip out to the house of rhythms to collect that package.

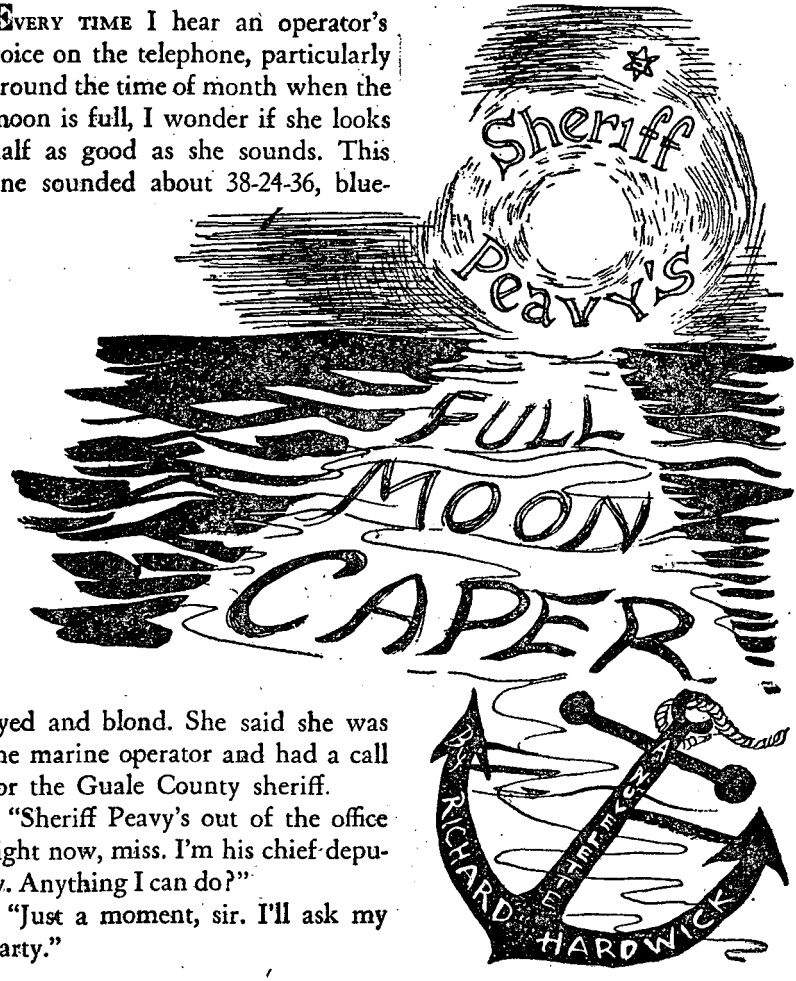
He was halfway there when he pulled into a filling station and said to the attendant, "How long will it take you to change a fan belt?"

"About ten minutes," the man said. He lifted the hood. "Say, this thing must have been flapping for quite a while, Mac!"

"Yes, a couple of weeks," Frank replied. But it had been only in the last few minutes that the damned thing started saying, *National Carloading, up three-eighths, National Carloading, up three-eights.* . . . A thing like that could drive a man crazy.

We expect the life of a wealthy playboy to be rather scandalous, but it is surprising when his death occurs under equally curious circumstances.

Sheriff Peavy's FULL MOON CAPER



EVERY TIME I hear an operator's voice on the telephone, particularly around the time of month when the moon is full, I wonder if she looks half as good as she sounds. This one sounded about 38-24-36, blue-eyed and blond. She said she was the marine operator and had a call for the Guale County sheriff.

"Sheriff Peavy's out of the office right now, miss. I'm his chief deputy. Anything I can do?"

"Just a moment, sir. I'll ask my party."

I started to tell her she could just call me Pete, but the line began to hum and I knew she was gone. A few seconds later she came back.

"Sir, the captain of the yacht *Matilda J.* will speak with you. Go ahead *Matilda J.*"

Somebody cleared his throat with a raucous sound. "Hello? Hello? Cap'n Paget here!"

"Deputy Pete Miller here," I rejoined.

"Yes! Trouble aboard ship, sir. Be tying up at a place called Swensen's Marina in about an hour. Like to have you meet us there. Know the place? Over."

"Right, Cap'n, I know the place. What sort of trouble have you got?"

"Tell you when we meet you. In an hour, sir! *Matilda J.* out!"

The line clicked and the captain was gone. "Hello?" I said. I jiggled the phone a few times. "Hello?"

"Your party has gone off the air, sir," the operator said.

"Thanks." I dropped the phone on its cradle and leaned back in the chair. Now what was that all about, I wondered. Outside I heard the swish of tires, then the slam of a car door. Sheriff Dan Peavy came in and spun his hat toward the rack, missing it by three feet.

"Anything happening, Pete?"

I told him about the call from the yacht. "The guy wouldn't tell me what was wrong."

Dan glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was one-thirty. "Well, let's go over to the Bon Air and get some lunch, then we'll run out to Swensen's."

Fifty minutes later I was trying to digest a blue plate special while gunning the county's car out the beach road. At the Intracoastal Waterway bridge I swung right on the turn-off to Swensen's. A faint whorl of white dust trailed us into the parking area. Dan and I went inside and found Swensen at his desk.

"Has a boat named the *Matilda J.* come in yet?" I asked him.

Swen shook his head. He turned and looked out the window. "That might be her coming now," he said, pointing. I went around the desk and took a look. About two hundred yards south of the marina a big white yacht was headed our way.

The three of us went out onto the dock and waited. The boat drew closer.

"She's a big 'un," said Dan.

Swen nodded. "Good hundred feet."

A little fellow in a white jacket stood at the bow, a line in his hands. High up in the wheelhouse I could see a khaki-clad helmsman lining the boat up just right. Another man stood toward the stern, also with dock lines in his hands. On the broad, awning-shaded fantail, a group of people sat in white wicker

chairs. One of them lifted a glass and took a deep swallow.

The boat was warped alongside the dock; and when she was secure, the man in the wheelhouse leaned out. "Ahoy down there! You people from the sheriff's office?"

Dan nodded to him and the man came scuttling down the stairs to the main deck. The two who had handled the lines placed a gangway to the dock and Dan and I went aboard.

"Cap'n Paget," the man from the wheelhouse informed us. He was not more than five-foot six, but he was the same in every dimension. His face had the appearance of having been soaked in brine for a number of weeks and his eyes were squeezed into a sort of Teddy Roosevelt squint so that hardly any of the eyeball was visible.

Dan and I introduced ourselves. "Now, Capt. Paget, what's the trouble here?" the sheriff asked.

"Blasted trouble! All there ever is aboard this blasted ship! Never did like a trouble ship! Not even in the old days aboard the—"

"Just what kind of trouble did you call us about?" Dan interrupted.

"What? Oh. Man's dead. Owner. Been shot." Paget gave a violent twist to his head. "Never liked trouble—"

"Where's the body?" I asked him.

"Body . . . yes. Stateroom. This way." Paget spun around and went through a door into the cabin. We followed down a flight of stairs, and along a deep-piled carpeted corridor past a number of closed doors. At the end of the corridor we came to another door, except this one had obviously been battered down. It hung askew on one hinge.

"Had to break in," the captain said. "Can't figure it out. How the devil—Well, you see for yourself!"

We went into the stateroom. I never saw any place quite like it. On the wall opposite the door was a mural, one of the impressionistic things, but somehow you got the message right away without understanding it at all. I could feel myself blushing a little. To the left there was a small bar and a settee with a large low table before it. A hi-fi outfit stood beyond that. There were three portholes, two of them closed and dogged, and the one in the middle standing open. To our right, against the opposite wall, there was a dresser and a tremendous bed, which was neatly made up. A pair of silk pajamas was laid out on the side of the bed. The three portholes there were all closed.

Just to the left of the smashed door there was another door. It was open.

"In there," the captain nodded.

"In the bath. Blasted if I can figure it out!"

We stepped into the bathroom. There were the usual fixtures, but they were nothing at all like the ones in the bathroom at the end of the hall in the boarding house where I hang my hat on off-hours. The handles were gold. The water didn't come out of faucets, but out of the mouths of grinning gold gargoyles. There was a sunken bathtub, and propped in the far corner sat a man dressed in an ornate Oriental bathrobe. There was a neat little round hole in the center of his forehead. The hole wouldn't be so neat in the back of the head, judging from the spattered tile wall behind him.

"Well," said Captain Paget. "There he is. Mr. Elliot Hocking Jenner!"

I turned and stared at the captain. "Elliot Hocking—" I looked around at the body. "The—the *play*boy?"

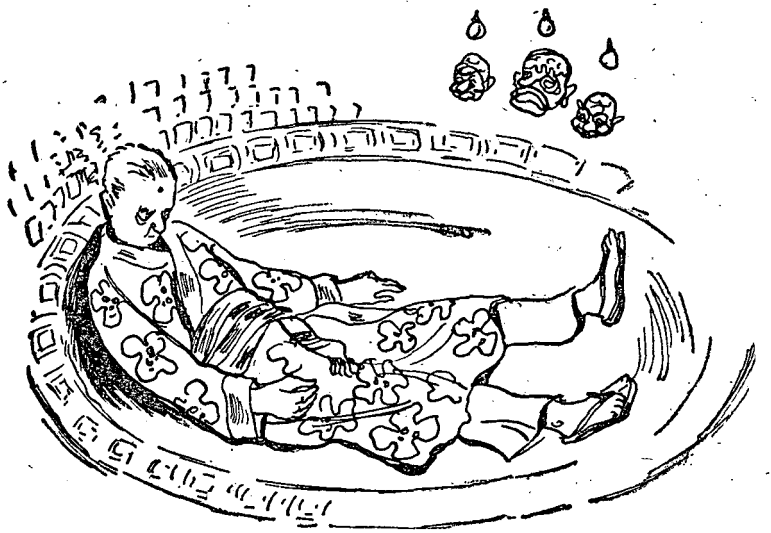
The captain sighed with a sound like a punctured tire. "Been called that, among other things."

Dan Peavy's eyebrows lifted.

"You know this fella, Pete?"

"Are you kiddin'? I don't *know* him, but I know *of* him! My gosh, Dan, everybody's heard of this guy!"

Dan Peavy moved slowly to the side of the tub and squatted down. He took his bulbous nose between thumb and forefinger and gave it a gentle tug. "Not everybody, Pete.



I ain't ever heard of him before."

Where do you start telling someone about a man like Elliot Hocking Jenner, married a dozen or more times, apparently still going full steam ahead in his fifties or sixties, thrower of fabulous parties, leading man in a score of scandals. I briefed Dan as well as I could from my memory of newspaper items I had read over the years, and was pleased to see Capt. Paget give a curt nod of approval when I was done.

"More, of course," the captain added, "but that, sir, is the gist of it."

"Quite a fella," Dan mused. "Don't reckon it's too surprisin' for him to end up this way."

"Just it!" rasped Paget. "What the hell happened? Door locked from inside and Mr. Jenner's key still hanging there on that chain around his neck! Cabinboy and myself looked around, no gun we could see!" He waved a stubby finger into the main cabin. "Blasted midget couldn't get through the open porthole in yonder."

"Looks like he was shot right here, and judgin' from them powder burns, from close up," said Dan. "Besides, that porthole is four or five feet outta line with the body. Woulda had to shoot a curve to hit him here." He turned to Paget. "Say that's the only key?"

The captain nodded. "And it takes the key to lock the door from the inside or the outside."

"How'd you happen to break in here and find him?"

Paget sighed and one eye pried open an eighth of an inch. "Never kept anything like regular hours, you understand. Usually count on him putting in an appearance by noon, though. Anchored last night in Kenston Sound, just off that old lighthouse on Bird Island. Mr. Jenner and his guests went ashore. Big party on the beach till the wee hours. Party every blasted night with this crowd! Anyhow, at 1300 hours today I decided to come down, see what orders he had. Stay at the blasted anchorage or sail!"

"1300 hours . . . ?" Dan started.

"That's one in the afternoon," I informed him.

"No answer to my knocking," the captain went on. "Made inquiries among the guests, nobody had seen him since they turned in around 0200 or 0300—"

"Two or three in the morning," I said in an aside to Dan.

"Knocked some more. Nothing. Then lowered the cabinboy over the side for a peek in the portholes. He reported he couldn't see Mr. Jenner, and that the bed didn't look like it had been slept in." Paget shrugged.

"Only choice as captain was to force entry. Found this. Called you."

"How many people aboard the boat?" said Dan.

"Eight, if you count Mr. Jenner."

"That's includin' the crew?"

He gave a nod. "Mr. Jenner, four guests, myself, Sewell, who's engineer and deck hand, and Sammy, cabinboy and cook. Eight, all told." He looked at the dead man. "Seven now!"

"Pete," Dan said, "call the office and tell Jerry to get out here, and tell him to bring Doc Stebbins with him. Me and the captain'll meet you back there where we saw them other folks."

I went to Swensen's office, made the call, and hurried back to the yacht. Dan and the captain had just gotten to the fantail. Two men and two women were sitting. A short, thin, rat-faced fellow in a white jacket was standing to one side, and next to him a stoop-shouldered man wearing a tee-shirt and dungarees, and whose eyes and general appearance gave the impression of his being in the throes of a monumental hangover.

"Sheriff Peavy," Captain Paget was saying, "this is Miss Liles." He indicated a small, dark-haired woman who seemed to be in her late twenties or low thirties. She nodded and Paget continued. "Mr. Blakely." The man sitting next to her was fifty or fifty-five, I guessed, and his expression was about what you would expect to see if he had just had a straight shot of lemon juice. "And Miss Mellon—"

The blond cut Paget off, with word and action. She gave Dan a smile that would have melted an iron ingot. I had the odd feeling that she was *jiggling*, even though she was sitting perfectly still. I also thought I recognized her from some place. "You can just call me Honey, Sheriff. Maybe you've heard of me? Honey du Mellon? If you never saw my dance act, maybe you've seen my picture? I've had my picture in lots of magazines, the arty kind, you know?"

I swallowed hard. *Now* I recognized her. I'd seen quite a few pictures of her the last time I thumbed through the adults-only shelf of the magazine rack at the bus station. And I'd seen practically all of her, from pretty nearly all angles. None of those curves under that outfit were store-bought, I could vouch for that.

"Isn't this just terrible?" she went on, a frown passing cloud-like over her face. "You know, Poopsy and me were going to get married as soon as we got to Miami. He got his divorce just last week." She sniffled and pulled a lacey handkerchief from, well, from where properly built women carry handkerchieves, and daubed her eyes. "It's—it's like being a widow before

the honeymoon, don't you know?"

The man sitting to her right concurred. "Terrible! Elliot was the best friend I ever had!"

"The best damned soft touch you ever had!" Blakely snapped.

"I resent that, Irving! I definitely *resent* that!"

"Mr. Kruger," the captain said by way of introducing the second man.

"Eric Kruger," the man added, nodding to Dan. Then he turned his gaze on the blond. "For heaven's sake, Honey, will you please stop referring to Elliot as—as *Poopsy*? It sounds undignified, especially now that he's dead!"

"Wherever he is," she sniffed, casting a baleful glance up at the blue, blue sky, "he will always be Poopsy to me!" And she began to cry, great mascara-laden tears coursing down her creamy cheeks.

Eric Kruger sighed and shook his head. I took him to be somewhere in the mid-forties. He was immaculately dressed in white yachting shoes, duck trousers, and a lightweight turtle-necked shirt. There was no paunch about him. In fact, he seemed in excellent physical condition, almost like a man who works out regularly with weights.

The captain indicated the remaining two who stood toward the side. "Sewell," he said, nodding toward the dungaree-clad sailor. "And Sammy, the cabinboy and cook."

"Steward and cook, sir," the rat-faced little fellow grinned.

"Blasted cabinboy!" muttered Paget.

"Can Sammy get us fresh drinks now, Sheriff?" asked Blakely.

"I guess that can wait for a while. Now, as all of you know, Mr. Jenner's dead. Can anybody shed any light on what might have happened?"

There was a moment of complete silence, after which Honey du Mellon smeared her mascara further with her handkerchief and said,"We had a kind of beach party last night, you know? Poopsy made the boat stop last night because I wasn't feeling too good. I kept thinking I was going to get real sick and I told him I just *had* to get on land!"

"That's right," the captain put in grimly. "Steaming along smoothly when Mr. Jenner ordered me to pull in to shore. Said there was a good anchorage in Kenston Sound just off Bird Island. Would have been nearly to Miami by now!"

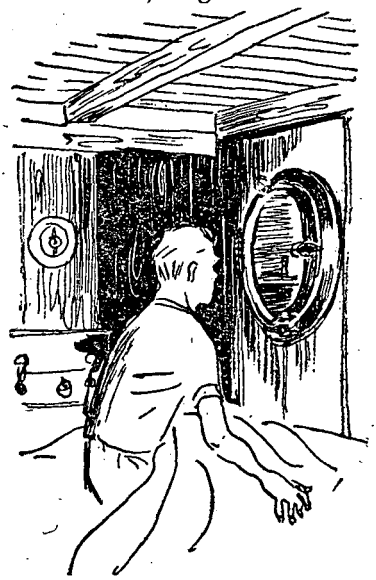
"Anyhow," the blond went on, "we had this party on the beach last night and it was real late, around 2 or 3, when we got back to the boat. I went to my room and went right to sleep. I didn't hear anything."

"Afraid I had a few too many scotches last night myself, Sheriff," Eric Kruger said. "Didn't hear a

peep till Sammy came knocking at my door around eleven with a little pick-me-up. Great concoction Sammy has! Tastes as though there might be a touch of tabasco in it."

"Worcestershire, sir," Sammy grinned proudly. "Also a pinch of—

"If we can just get on with the



investigation?" Dan said. "How about it? Anybody hear anything at all? Anything that might have sounded like a shot?"

I looked around at the blank faces. Miss Liles shook her head. Blakely mumbled something negative.

Sammy cleared his throat. "I—I'm not sure, sir," he said hesitantly. "I was in my bunk up forward. It was about four o'clock—" He glanced guiltily at Capt. Paget "—I mean, it was around 0400 hours. The night was quiet. No wind. I thought I heard something outside in the water. I sat up and looked out the porthole. It was just about full moon last night—"

"The moon was absolutely the most marvelous *thing* last night!" Honey du Mellon burst in. "I wish we hadn't stayed on that old island so long so I could have had my—"

"Please, Miss Mellon?" Dan said wearily.

Sammy nodded and went on. "The moon was already pretty far down and I couldn't see too well. It was a kind of splashing out there, like somebody swimming." He stopped and rubbed the back of his hand across his nose. I suddenly realized that everybody was leaning forward, waiting to hear him tell what he saw. "I could see the old lighthouse standing among the trees on shore."

"Is that all?" I asked him.

"I—I can't be real sure. I think I saw something in the water about halfway to the beach. "Course, I could be wrong. The moon was down, like I said." He shrugged. "I just couldn't be sure."

I turned away. In the direction of the causeway I saw a plume of white dust. Suddenly, the sound of a siren split the air. That had to be Deputy Jerry Sealey, arriving on the scene.

The siren dropped off into a mournful note as the car slid to a stop. The lean, lanky form of Deputy Sealey bounded out one door and came down the dock on the run. Trailing at a much lesser pace, black bag in hand, was the bald and somewhat roundish figure of Doc Stebbins, Guale County's coroner and medical examiner.

Dan and I went forward and met Jerry at the gangplank. He stopped short, gazed around at the yacht, and finally settled a serious gaze on the sheriff. "Murder case, eh? How's it look?"

"You go back there and keep an eye on those folks," Dan told him. "Let the cabinboy get 'em whatever they want, but nobody goes ashore."

"How—" Jerry started.

But Doc Stebbins had reached the boat and Dan and Doc and myself went inside the boat and down to the stateroom. Doc examined the body.

"About how long you think he's been dead?" Dan asked.

"Autopsy'll tell closer, but I'd say, judging from what's available, that he ain't been dead more than, oh, twelve hours."

"He was seen alive about twelve hours ago," I told him.

"The bullet went through his head," Doc went on. "Looks like he was sitting right there where he is when he was shot. Bullet hit the wall tile right back of his head."

"That's what I figured," Dan said, scratching his chin. "Then it's simple," I put in. "Somebody else has a key to this cabin."

Doc snorted. "Seems to me if anybody did have one, you'd have one heck of a time getting 'em to admit it!" He faced around to Dan Peavy. "You ready for me to get the body outta here?"

"Soon as we mark it and get pictures."

A check with the seven survivors on board the *Matilda J.* substantiated Doc Stebbins' observation. If anyone had a key, there was no admission of it.

"I knew Elliot," Blakely said. "He was a peculiar chap in a lot of ways. I think he was always afraid of something like this, don't ask me why. He wouldn't have given his own mother a key to his stateroom."

Dan's head nodded slowly. "'Course, there's a chance somebody coulda had one made without Jenner knowin' about it."

And if so, I said to myself, that key is somewhere out there on the bottom of Kenston Sound.

"Wouldn't say that was likely," Capt. Paget rasped. "Mr. Jenner always had that chain around his neck, awake or asleep. When he was asleep, he was locked in."

"He sure didn't shoot himself through the head, and then throw

the gun away!" Jerry exclaimed.

Dan motioned to me and Jerry and the three of us stepped to one side of the deck. "I'm going in town to check the newspaper files on Jenner," Dan said. "I want you boys to go over this boat from one end to the other. Ain't much chance of findin' anything, but do it anyhow. Paget can show you around." He turned back to the group. "All you folks stay out here while my deputies search the boat. Nobody goes ashore till I give the word."

"See here, Sheriff!" Blakely puffed up. "I've done nothing—"

"You do what the sheriff tells you, Irving Blakely!" Honey du Mellon snapped, eyes flashing. "If he's going to find out who killed poor Poopsy, then we have to mind him!"

Blakely sighed and picked up his glass.

It was after seven o'clock when we finished the search. A half dozen assorted keys were found in the various staterooms, but none of them came close to fitting the lock on Jenner's door. Also, we turned up three pistols in the wheelhouse, which Capt. Paget assured us were there on Jenner's orders and, to the best of his knowledge, had never been fired.

Dan Peavy got back from town just as we were finishing our search on the little deck on top of the wheelhouse. The only thing above us at that point was the topmast. I told him about the pistols. "None of 'em seems to have been fired any time recently, and even if one of 'em was, it would have waked up everybody on the boat."

"Stands to reason," Jerry added, "that the killer would toss all the evidence overboard. Now how would you find a key and a pistol between here and the other side of Kenston Sound?"

The face of Sammy, the cabinboy, appeared over the edge of the canvas siding of the small top deck. "Cap'n Paget? They're getting hungry. Is it okay if I start fixing dinner?"

The captain gave Dan Peavy a questioning look, and Dan nodded. The cabinboy disappeared and we started to follow him.

"Just remembered something!" Paget said suddenly. "Don't know why I didn't think of it before. The money. And the jewelry!"

"What money and jewelry?"

"Safe. Wall safe in Mr. Jenner's stateroom."

"Let's go," said Dan.

The reason Jerry and I hadn't discovered any wall safe during our search, we soon found out, was because the thing was behind a small sliding panel located in the mural on the rear wall.

Paget pushed a finger against something that looked like a big red

eye in the mural, and a little door sprung open. Dan Peavy peered into the hole in the wall. I looked over his shoulder. A round steel door was just inside the opening, and Dan took out his handkerchief and gingerly took hold of the handle. The steel door swung out smoothly.

"He always leave it unlocked?" Dan said.

"Unlocked?" the captain poked his head between us. "Blasted thing *is* unlocked!"

"What'd he usually keep in there?" I asked him.

"Fifty to a hundred thousand, plus odd bits of jewelry. Mr. Jenner depended on jewelry quite a bit in his . . . ah, romancing."

Jerry's eyes bugged out. "Fifty to a hundred thousand . . . *dollars?*"

"Whatever was in there," Dan Peavy said, "ain't in there now."

"I can't understand it!" Blakely said. He picked up another sandwich from the tray Sammy had brought into the main deck saloon and took a big bite. "How could somebody get into Elliot's stateroom without a key, shoot him without anybody hearing the shot, get into a safe that only Elliot knew the combination to, and get away with fifty to a hundred thousand dollars, plus whatever jewelry was in there, without leaving a trace?"

"Is it alright if I play some records?" Honey du Mellon said. "Everything is so awfully de*press*ing, you know?"

"Just don't play that abominable stuff you've been playing ever since we sailed!" Penny Liles said.

"Poopsy liked it!" She whirled around and looked straight at me. "Do you like to twist, Mr. Miller . . . Pete? I'll bet you're a good twister!"

She flipped a switch on the hi-fi and it began blaring. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dan Peavy wince noticeably. "Not quite so loud, Miss Mellon," he said. He motioned to me. "Pete, we'll question these folks one at a time." He glanced toward Honey du Mellon who was gyrating wildly. "Up in the wheelhouse. Maybe we can't hear it up there."

Capt. Paget took his seat at the helm and waited for the sheriff to begin.

"How long have you been runnin' this boat for Jenner?" Dan said.

"Little more than five years. Looks like a soft berth from the outside, but believe me, it isn't! Never know what to expect! *Never!*"

"I see. Now this trip, what can you tell us about it? And why were these particular people on the boat?"

Paget put one hand on the wheel. "Usual trip this time of year to Florida. Mr. Jenner has . . . *had*

interests down there. Always took along guests. One big party all the way. Every year. Same thing, maybe a few different faces, but same blasted thing!"

"Who are the different faces this trip?" I asked him.

"Different faces . . . let me see . . ." Paget closed his eyes even tighter. Even the slits vanished. "Kruger's been along for the last three or four years. Blakely was with us last year. Miss Liles—she was the ninth . . . or was it the tenth . . . Mrs. Jenner, you know."

I stared at him in surprise.

"I found that out this afternoon," Dan said.

"Well," Paget went on, "she was on the trip the year they were married. Mr. Jenner did that quite often, took his fiance on the Florida trip, sort of feel her out." He cleared his throat. "Didn't mean it exactly the way it sounded."

"I think we see what you mean," Dan smiled.

"Miss Mellon, this is her first time aboard. Extremely, er, vivacious young woman! Extremely!"

"And what about the crew?" I asked him.

"Well, Sewell was here when I took the berth. The man's a drunk! Been up to me I'd have put him on the beach the day I came on board! But Mr. Jenner seemed to like him . . ." The captain shrugged. "As for that blasted cabinboy, Sammy, Mr. Jenner hired him three years ago."

Dan nodded, then quietly he said, "Cap'n, you got any idea who mighta wanted Jenner dead?"

Paget pulled himself up and stared straight at Dan Peavy. "Sir, I am the master of this ship! However, the private lives of those aboard are not my business—"

"The private lives are your responsibility, Cap'n. A man's been killed."

Paget's jaw knotted and after a moment he slumped back down on the helmsman seat. "Blasted jinx ship!" he muttered. "Blasted fools! Idiots! A scheming lot, Sheriff Peavy! Every blasted one of them!"

"Let's start with Eric Kruger, what about him?"

"Leech! Plain and simple! Mr. Jenner took a fancy to him and he's been riding free ever since."

"If Jenner had showed any signs of getting rid of him," I said, "do you think that might have caused Kruger to kill him?"

"Could be the case," said Paget. "Especially since the safe was looted."

"But we're not sure there *was* anything in that safe, are we, Cap'n?" Dan mused.

The captain gave him a puzzled look, then shook his head. "No sir. We are not."

Another fifteen minutes brought

out Paget's opinion that it could also have been any of the other three.

Eric Kruger shook a cigarette out of the pack. "I— I suppose I should have told you this right away, Sheriff. Yesterday . . ." He paused, clicked his lighter and touched the flame to the cigarette. "Yesterday, Elliot told me that he was afraid someone aboard might try something."

"Might try what?" Dan Peavy frowned.

Kruger took a deep drag on the cigarette. "That's . . . that's all he said. Just that he was afraid someone might try something."

"You got any idea who he mighta been talking about?" I asked.

Kruger shook his head. "I never . . . well, you couldn't question Elliot, if you see what I mean. He was . . ."

"The goose that laid the golden eggs?" I put in.

"Now, look here Miller! I don't have to take that kind of talk!"

"That'll be enough, Pete," Dan said. "Mr. Kruger, how long had you been a friend of Jenner's?"

"Eight or ten years, I'd guess."

"What line of work are you in?" I asked him.

"Work?" he said, a look of distaste clouding his features. "I don't *work*, Miller. My position is that of Elliot's personal secretary, but I definitely do not physically *work!*"

Penny Liles made herself comfortable. "Yes, I was married to Elliot. If you want to go by number, I was number ten. We were married, let me see, twenty-eight months ago. I lived with Elliot for ten weeks."

"What happened?" Dan inquired.

"I was framed into a cozy little scene, and Elliot divorced me."

"Framed?"

She nodded. "I never was quite sure whether it was Elliot or that crony of his, Eric Kruger.

"I've been in and out of court ever since for some kind of settlement. I've given Elliot a run for his money!"

Dan frowned and ran a hand through his hair. "I ain't sure I understand this, Miss Liles. If you was one of Jenner's wives, and he's just got divorced again, and this Miss Mellon was set to marry him, and you was suin' him, then how come . . . What I mean is . . ."

"Why am I on this boat?" she said. She smiled and shook her head. "I'm not at all sure myself. Elliot phoned me about a week ago. He said he was about to sail for Florida and wanted me to come along. He said he had been feeling a little guilty about our divorce, and hinted that he might be persuaded to come up with a little financial set-

tlement to get it off his conscience. The only trouble with that, was that it didn't sound in character with Elliot Jenner. At least, not the way I knew him."

Dan's frown was deeper than before. After a moment he said, "Did he say anything more about that?"

She hesitated. "I—Elliot told me yesterday he had changed his mind. He . . . told me I'd never see a dime of his."

Dan scratched one ear. "I reckon that'll be all for now, Miss Liles."

When she was gone I closed the wheelhouse door and turned to Dan. "People have been killed for a lot less than that. Maybe she decided if she couldn't have his money, he couldn't either."

"I'm wondering how come she even *told* us that," Dan mused.

"It could be that somebody else knew she knew it," I said.

Dan cocked his head. "Could be, at that. Well, let's see what this Blakely has got to say."

From the look on his face, and the way his hand shook when he lit his cigarette, Irving Blakely was obviously a worried man.

"Sheriff . . ." he said. He ground the cigarette out after his first puff. "Sheriff, I can tell you right now I didn't have a thing to do with this, but I know it's not going to look good for me! It's some kind of attempt to frame me!" He shook out another cigarette, then narrowed his gaze at Dan Peavy. "Don't let 'em pull the wool over your eyes, *they're* not so damned innocent as they try to appear! You take that leech, Eric Kruger, lives off Elliot's money and all the time he's playing footsie with—" He cut off abruptly and attempted to light the cigarette.

"Playin' footsie with who, Blakely?" Dan said.

"I can't prove it, so why make the accusation?"

"We'll just keep in mind that you can't prove it. Now who was it?"

"Currently, that blond who calls herself Honey du Mellon. She's not the first, however. I wouldn't be surprised if Elliot hadn't planned to toss the both of them out on their ears!"

"What's this about somebody trying to frame you?" I asked him.

Blakely seemed to be having trouble breathing. He took a couple of deep breaths and said, "I was handling some of Elliott's affairs, a real estate development deal in Florida. Elliot isn't, rather, *wasn't*, much for doing his own work. Recently, he called me to New York, and when I got there he said it had come to his attention I was . . . was falsifying certain records. He said he wanted to hear my side of it."

"What was your side?" Dan said.

Blakely shrugged. "I *had* made a . . . a small loan from the com-

pany. I took a setback in the stock market and was having some difficulty repaying the money. But it was *good!* Good as gold!"

"Did Jenner know about this loan when you borrowed the money?"

Blakely stared out the window at the darkness, his face drained of all expression. After a few seconds he shook his head.

"Why were you on the boat?" Dan said.

"He told me to come along, that maybe we could work it out on the way south."

"And did you?"

"No. No, but I think we *could* have if . . . if *this* hadn't happened."

As soon as the door closed behind Blakely I turned toward Dan Peavy. "And maybe he and Jenner couldn't work it out and Blakely killed him," I said.

"There's something screwy here," Dan said, pulling on the end of his nose. "Instead of makin' alibis, all these people are darn near incriminatin' themselves."

"Maybe they have to admit what they have. If it got to us from some other source, it'd make 'em look worse."

Dan closed his eyes and slowly rubbed his forehead. After a while he looked up at me. "Go get that Mellon girl and let's see what she's got to say about all this."

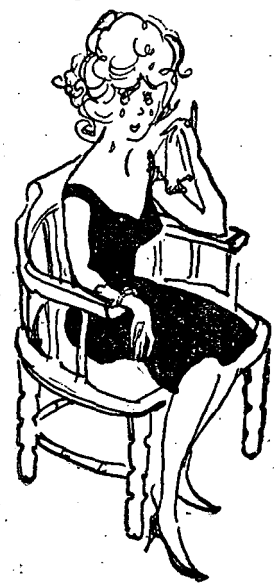
I brightened. "Yeah, let's see!"

Since I last saw her, Honey du Mellon had changed clothes. She wore a form-fitting black dress which, if it had been cut a quarter inch lower, could have gotten her into legal trouble sitting there before two officers sworn to uphold the law.

"This was part of my trousseau," she said, smoothing the dress over her lap. "But it's the only black thing I've got, and I thought I ought to wear it now . . . now that Poopsy's gone, you know?"

Dan cleared his throat officiously. "You and Poopsy . . . you and *Jenner* were goin' to get married when you got to Miami, is that right?"

She hung her head and nodded



demurely, silently acquiescing.

"Did anything happen since you all left New York?"

"I don't understand what you mean, Sheriff."

"Anything between you and Jenner," I said. "Anything that might have upset the wedding plans?"

She bit her bottom lip. Her eyes went from Dan to me and back to Dan again, as if trying to say it wasn't fair to ask that. "Well," she began, "I guess somebody else would tell you if I didn't. Yes, we *did* have an argument."

"What was it about?"

"Poopsy was so *jea*lous! Why, if another man even looked at me he was fit to be tied! He—well, Eric was kissing me goodnight, just a friendly kiss, you know? Poopsy saw us and got *fur*ious! I tried to explain, but he simply wouldn't listen."

"He say anything about callin' off the weddin'?" said Dan.

She shook her head. "No."

"Who else heard what happened? I mean, beside you and Kruger?" I asked her.

"That funny little man that helps run the boat, the one that stays about half drunk all the time, you know?"

"Sewell?"

"Uh huh. I think that's his name. He came out of the cabin while Poopsy was calling me and Eric all sorts of horrible names. But Poopsy didn't really mean any of it. I could have made everything all right if . . . if *this* hadn't happened . . ."

Watching the tears gather in those big eyes, I knew she could have made everything all right. She could make mass murder all right, given the proper conditions, such as an all-male jury.

"Miss Mellon," Dan said slowly. "Is that your real name?"

The tears vanished and the eyes widened. "Why, *sure* it is! 'Course, it wasn't always. My folks called me Rose. Rose Hobson." She smiled seductively. "Now who'd ever come to see anybody named Rose Hobson dance?"

What's in a name, I thought. I let my eyes drift freely from the tousled blond hair, down over the well-filled black mourning dress, to the neatly-turned ankles. A rose is a rose is a Honey.

Dan Peavy cut quite a figure standing there at the mahogany wheel of the yacht, wrinkled khaki pants and shirt, unruly white hair, a face like a relief map of the Bad Lands. He stared at the moon that had just come up over the trees on the other side of the river, then he turned around toward me.

"This is a tough one, Pete."

I didn't want to say it, but I had to. "It could have been her, Dan.

Her and Kruger together. If Jenner caught 'em necking he could have given the axe to both of 'em."

"But what would they gain by that?"

"Well, that safe was unlocked and empty. Could have taken what was in it. Fifty to a hundred grand certainly ain't peanuts, plus the jewelry Paget said he carried in there."

"Maybe. Well, let's talk to Sewell and that cabinboy, Sammy, and then call it a night."

Neither of them added anything new. Sewell said he had witnessed the argument between Jenner, Kruger, and Honey. Sammy told us he was positive nobody else ever had a key to Jenner's stateroom.

After we finished with them, Jerry came in and gave us the benefit of his views.

"You're too *trustin'*, Dan!" Jerry said, waving his hands. "Here's how I figure this thing! They're all in on it, every last one of 'em! They busted that door down before Jenner was shot, they blasted him there in the tub, throwed the gun overboard, then called you! It's plain as the nose on your face!"

Dan Peavy checked his nose absently. The cabin door opened and Doc Stebbins stepped in. "I drove out here to let you know there's a damn poor joke on *some*body," he said.

"Whatdya mean?"

"This fella, Jenner, he didn't have more'n three or four months to live. Had cancer."

We all stared at Doc. "Are you plumb *sure?*" Dan said.

Doc took the question for what it was, a simple statement of surprise, and just nodded his head.

"Dan," I said. "Maybe Jenner knew this. Maybe he wanted out and didn't have the nerve to do it himself. And maybe he had one of his friends do it for him—"

"Or *all* of 'em," Jerry put in.

"It don't make sense to me," Dan Peavy said. "For one thing, if it was like that, why did they pull in and anchor? How come they wouldn't have killed Jenner while they were at sea, and just dumped his body overboard. That way there wouldn't be a murder investigation goin' on."

Jerry scratched his head. "Yeah. I see what you mean. So somebody musta murdered him, not knowin' the guy was gonna die soon anyhow."

Dan lifted his arm and glanced at his watch. "I wanta check out a few more things in town. Pete, you and Jerry stay here on the boat tonight. Don't let anybody on or off till you hear from me."

There was a knock at the door. I opened it and Captain Paget came in.

"Cap'n," Dan said. "First thing in the morning I'd like you to run this

boat back to where you was anchored in Kenston Sound. You think you can put her right where she was?"

"Yes sir," said Paget.

Dan nodded. "And I'd like the name of Jenner's doctor."

Dan instructed the passengers aboard the *Matilda J.* that they were to stay in their cabins for the rest of the night, except for the necessities. Each cabin had a button that would buzz the steward's quarters, and Sammy was told to check with me or Jerry before answering a call.

It was a fine night, warm and clear with hardly any breeze. Across the river in the woods I could hear crickets chirping and every now and then a fish would splash in the river. About eleven o'clock Jerry and I flipped a coin to see who would sleep first. I won.

"I'll be on that sofa back there on the fantail if you need me," I told him.

"Okay," Jerry agreed. "I'll take it till about three o'clock and you take it the rest of the night."

Dan Peavy arrived at the boat at seven o'clock and half an hour later the big yacht was headed south on the Intracoastal Waterway in the direction of Kenston Sound and Bird Island.

Dan took a cup of the black coffee Sammy brought to the saloon. "Me and Doc Stebbins got hold of Jenner's doctor in New York. He said he told Jenner about his condition a couple of months ago. Said Jenner took it as well as a man can, but he seemed to think that Jenner didn't tell anybody else about it. He gave us the name o' Jenner's lawyers, too, and we called one o' them. Seems Jenner drew up a new will about a month ago. The fella was home when we talked to him, but when we told him who was on the boat he said every one of 'em was in the will. Fifty thousand apiece for Miss Mellon, Kruger, Blakely, and Miss Liles. And there was pensions for Paget, Sewell, and that cabinboy, Sammy."

"It just don't make sense!" Jerry exploded. He stopped short and snapped his fingers. "I got it! One of 'em heard about the will, then had a fallin' out with Jenner and killed him before he could change the will! You told me he caught Miss Mellon and Kruger doin' a little neckin'. Well, maybe they done it!"

I looked at Dan Peavy. "You didn't tell us what we're going out to Kenston Sound this morning for."

"The scene o' the crime, Pete. A detective always takes a look at the scene o' the crime."

It was about eight-thirty when we reached the abandoned lighthouse at Bird Island on the south shore of

Kenston Sound. Dan told Capt. Paget to anchor as close as he could to the spot they were anchored the night Jenner was killed. Paget jockeyed the big boat around, lining up on the lighthouse, and when he was satisfied, down went the anchor.

"Now," said Dan, "I want everybody to go ashore and let's take this thing right from the time you all got here."

"Miss Mellon's still in bed, Sheriff," Sammy quickly volunteered.

"At this time o' day?"

The cabinboy smiled ruefully. "To her, eight-thirty in the morning is just late at night."

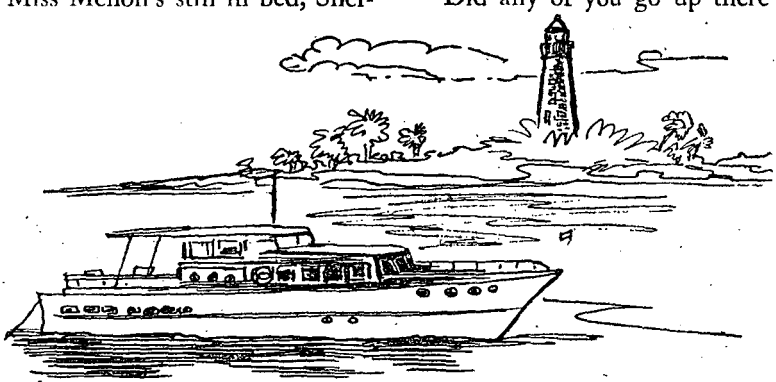
The captain and the engineer-deckhand, Bud Sewell, lowered the motor launch, and, after Honey du Mellon had been wakened and had her coffee, everybody piled into the small boat and we went ashore.

Paget nosed the boat onto the beach and Sewell tossed the anchor out.

"We stopped right here, Sheriff," Blakely said. "The five of us came ashore here, took a swim in the surf a little further down, and Sammy charcoaled steaks for us right here on the beach in front of the lighthouse. There was a good bit of drinking after we ate, and then we went back to the boat and to bed."

The others agreed with his version.

"Did any of you go up there to the lighthouse, or anywhere except right here on the beach?" Dan inquired.



"Not to my knowledge," said Blakely.

"No," Kruger said. "I think Sammy ran the girls back to the yacht a couple of times, but that's the only time anybody left the beach."

Sammy corroborated the statement.

Dan Peavy walked to the high water mark and began to pace slowly along, looking down in-

tently at the sand. He had gone only about fifty feet when he stopped. Then he turned to his right and started walking up toward the dunes. "Come here, Pete," he called.

I joined him, the others following along.

"Somebody walked up this way. These footprints are fresh. Wasn't any wind yesterday or last night to cover 'em up."

We followed the single set of footprints through the dunes to a spot about a dozen yards from the base of the lighthouse. There they stopped, and the sandy soil looked as if it had been dug and then brushed over with something in an effort to hide the place.

"Well, now," said Dan. He looked around at the little knot of people standing behind him. "I wonder what happened here?"

"I'd say somebody dug a hole and buried something!" Jerry remarked. He got down on his knees and began pulling away the loosely packed sand. About twelve inches down he unearthed a plastic raincoat which was wrapped about something. He lifted it up and placed it on the ground beside the hole.

"What the devil is *that?*" exclaimed Capt. Paget.

"My guess is it's the stuff outta Jenner's safe," said Dan Peavy. He squatted down and carefully untied the string holding it together. The raincoat fell open revealing several packs of currency, and about a dozen pieces of jewelry, including strings of pearls, diamond brooches, rings, and a bracelet.

"Elliot must have put it here himself," Kruger said. "That's the only way it could have happened!"

"Ought to be some good fingerprints on that plastic," Dan drawled. "We can tell soon enough when we get it back to town." He looked around at the blank faces. " 'Course, we'll have to take you folks' prints —"

Kruger was standing about three feet to my right, and before I knew what happened he had taken a jump in my direction and whipped my revolver out of the holster. "He *told* me to do it! Elliot told me to bring that stuff up here last night and hide it! He said he was afraid of someone on board the yacht, and didn't want them to have the stuff!"

"If that's what happened, then how come you waited till now to tell us?" Dan said.

"I—when we found out he was dead, I figured nobody knew about this. I didn't see the harm of leaving it, and coming back here later and digging it up. I *swear* that's the truth!"

"Your only chance 'o havin' anybody believe you is to give me that gun," Dan Peavy said.

Kruger's eyes narrowed. A muscle twitched in his lean jaw. "What chance would I have now? Nobody'd believe me!"

"You plan to shoot all of us? If you run off in the little boat where are you gonna go? Where can you hide?"

"I know what this looks like—" Kruger started. Dan had done what he set out to do, he had gotten Kruger's attention. I chopped my hand down hard on his wrist and the revolver dropped down into the sand.

I leaned quickly to scoop up the gun, but Kruger's left fist met me half way, catching me squarely on the side of the head. I tried to keep from falling, but not a muscle in my body would heed the brain waves, and down I went, right on top of the revolver.

"Get him!" I heard somebody yell.

"Catch the blasted murderer!" Paget rasped.

"He killed Poopsy!" wailed Honey du Mellon.

I felt the muscles slowly reviving, and I pushed myself up just in time to see Jerry and the cabinboy, in a joint flying tackle, bring the fleeing Kruger to earth.

Vehemently protesting his innocence, Eric Kruger was taken back to the ship and locked in his cabin.

"We did it again!" Jerry announced proudly. "I figured it was him from the minute I laid eyes on him! Shifty lookin'!"

"You were looking for what you found on shore?" I asked Dan.

"The cabinboy told us he thought he saw something or somebody swimmin' toward shore. The safe was open and you didn't find anything when you searched the boat. It was the only thing that made sense."

Jerry rocked back on his heels. "I figure it this way. Kruger was down in the cabin arguing with Jenner. The safe was open. He seen his chance, shot Jenner, grabbed the loot, swam ashore, buried it, and come back and went to bed."

"How'd he shoot him without anybody hearin' the shot?" I asked.

"How'd he . . ." Jerry rocked forward. "Gun had a silencer! Simple!"

"If that's the case, Dan," I said, "then the thing must have been premeditated! Kruger would have had to bring a gun with a silencer along with him from the start of the trip!"

Dan ran one hand through his thick white hair. "I don't believe this Kruger done it. I think he was tellin' the truth back there at the lighthouse."

"Didn't *do* it!" Jerry squealed. "It's the open and shuttest case we ever had! Whadya mean he didn't *do* it?"

"Pete," Dan said quietly, ignoring

the outburst. "Get on that radio phone and call a couple of them boys in that skin divin' club back in town. Tell 'em to get out here as soon as they can. We'll put 'em on the county payroll for the rest o' the day."

"Dan," Jerry pleaded. "Dan, just you let me in there with Kruger by myself for fifteen minutes! I'll get a confession outta him!"

Dan Peavy chuckled. "We put you in there with Kruger by yourself, Jerry, and we'd sure enough have a murder case against him!"

It was almost noon when we saw the outboard cutting across the sound in our direction. It eased alongside the yacht. In it were two boys and half a dozen scuba cylinders. They came aboard and asked Dan what was up.

"It ain't up," he said wryly. "It's down. At least, I think it is. I want you boys to search the bottom all around this boat. I'm lookin' for a pistol, and maybe something else."

"Water's clear today," one of them said. "Ought to be pretty good visibility. Sand bottom, too. If it's down there, Sheriff Peavy, we'll get it for you."

As we watched the bubbles coming up a few minutes later, Jerry said, "Dan, the killer, even if it ain't Kruger, might not of tossed the gun overboard here. The thing could be anywhere between here and Swensen's dock, and a million of them frogmen couldn't find it!"

"If my figurin' is right, Jerry, then the gun's right here," Dan said, his eyes intent on the bubbles that moved in a search pattern across the water.

It was some time later when the two divers popped to the surface. One of them took hold of the ladder, removed the aqualung mouthpiece from between his teeth, and looked up at the group lining the yacht's rail. He shook his head. "Ain't no gun within a hundred yards in any direction of this boat, sheriff. We could have found a pin down there. Wasn't nothing there."

Dan scratched his head for several seconds. "You boys *real* sure of that? I mean you couldn't of missed it?"

"No sir, Sheriff Peavy," said the other boy. "We use a search pattern. It overlaps, and with the visibility good as it is, and a clean sand bottom, well we just couldn't a missed a pistol. 'Course, the tide could of covered it over, but that ain't likely."

Dan shook his head slowly, then suddenly he staightened up, a broad grin spreading over the weathered face. "The dang *tide!*"

"You think it's covered up?" I asked.

He looked around at Capt. Paget. "What time was it when you folks

dropped anchor here the other day?"

"Made a notation in the log. It was exactly 2031 hours—"

"Speak English, man!"

"That's about half past eight at night, Dan," I said.

"You got a tide table, Pete?"

I nodded and pulled out my billfold. I always carried a tide table in case I could get in a little fishing. I handed it to Dan.

He ran his finger down the columns of figures. "Let's see, high tide was one ought-three night before last. Low tide was six-twenty-nine. If you dropped your anchor here at eight-thirty, the tide musta been comin' in."

"Just like it's doing now," Jerry said.

"Right." Dan raised his eyes. He was smiling. "Now—" he consulted the tide table again"—if Jenner was killed before the next low tide at seven-thirty-two, then the tide was goin' *out.*"

It hit me. "And the boat was swung around the other way!"

Dan Peavy nodded. "And Jenner's cabin is right in the rear end o' the boat—"

"Plus the length of the anchor line—"

"—would put the thing a pretty good ways to the east o' where we been lookin'," Dan finished.

Less than an hour later, the two divers stood on the fantail of the *Matilda J.* and handed Dan what they had found. There was a revolver, with a silencer on the end of the barrel. The gun was wrapped in a towel with only the trigger and the end of the barrel showing, and the towel was tied tightly with twine. About twenty feet of light manila rope ran from the trigger guard to the other thing they had brought up, an iron sash weight.

"What in the devil is all *that?*" Irving Blakely said.

"It's the gun that killed Jenner," Dan Peavy said.

Honey du Mellon parted ruby lips. "But . . . how . . . ?"

Dan Peavy hefted the padded revolver. "Mr. Jenner shot himself."

Penny Liles shook her head. "I don't see *how!*"

"Let's all go down to Jenner's cabin," Dan drawled. "And, Jerry, let Kruger out."

Everybody, including the two scuba divers, trooped inside the yacht and down the corridor. Dan Peavy went to the porthole we had found open. He put the weight through and let it hang outside. Keeping the rope tight, he went into the bathroom and stepped into the tub. When he sat down in the spot where we had found Jenner, the line reached exactly. Dan held the gun in front of him, with the barrel aimed at his own forehead.

"I figure Jenner did this. Holding

the gun just tight enough so's it wouldn't slip away from him, he pushed the trigger with his thumb, and when the bullet hit him, the gun dropped—"

He turned the thing loose. It went like a blue darter across the bathroom, hit the jamb of the door, changed direction, picked up speed across the carpet in the stateroom, leaped up the wall, and vanished out the porthole with hardly a sound except for a little splash outside.

"Well, I'll be *damned* . . ." murmured Deputy Sealey.

Honey du Mellon began to sniffle. "Then . . . Poopsy shot himself so he wouldn't have to marry me? Is that it?"

"I don't think that was it," Dan assured her. "We found out Jenner only had a few months to live, and it's my guess that he was playing a right serious little game with a few people he thought had been out to take advantage of him. Oh, he was fair about it. You either paid, or you got paid."

"What's that mean?" said Penny Liles.

"You'll find out when his will's read," I told her enigmatically.

Kruger passed a hand slowly back and forth over his throat. "But . . . but it could have been the other way, couldn't it . . . ?"

Dan Peavy nodded. "Somebody could have had a murder charge tacked on 'em, with a pretty good chance of bein' found guilty." He turned to the two scuba divers. "You boys mind goin' down there again for that gun? We'll need it to wind up the case."

One of the boys grinned and shook his head admiringly. "This one's on us, Sheriff!"

There was little conversation as everyone traipsed out of the stateroom and headed topside. I followed along behind Honey du Mellon, watching that action that is universally admired by males from twelve to a hundred and twelve. The moon would be fine again that night, and maybe I'd be doing her a dis-service if I didn't tell her about that little beach I knew where the moonlight is like no other place I ever saw. Of course, she couldn't find it by herself. I'd have to show her how to get there . . .