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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

I must confess to a qualified prejudice that physical action is necessarily inhibited in a small, foreign car. After reading this story, however, I find there are possibilities that even I did not anticipate.

AT 8:10 A.M. on a cold November day, a truckdriver named Gus Jardin, sleepy from the overnight haul, pulled his rig off the highway to a broadened shoulder designated as a Rest Area. He climbed down from the cab, yawning, and stretched aching arms above his head. He breathed deeply of the dewy air, removed his leather cap and rubbed a balding scalp. He half-squatted and kneaded his stiff thighs. Then, walking toward a sandy path that divided the creosoted guide rails, he lit a cigarette.

This was a familiar routine for Gus Jardin whenever a shipment took him along this route. It helped him to open his eyes before entering the city. He liked this place. It was as close to country-

side as a city dweller ever came. He thought of it as somehow his own place, especially the sandy path that led downward, under an arch of white birches, to a clean-running brook. It was a quiet place, a stone's throw away from the roar of traffic, and always private.

But on this particular morning

the path was blocked a third of the way down by a small foreign car. The front seat was empty. The back seat was occupied by a woman reclining, her eyes open but sightless.

At 8:23 Jardin called the police from a gas station a mile down the highway. He was told to stay there until further notice. He was wide awake now.

At 8:35 two uniformed policemen in a cruiser picked up the truckdriver at the gas station and drove him to the Rest Area. Trampling back the underbrush that hugged the little car, the officers opened the doors on either side.

In a moment they had ascertained that the woman was dead. She had been shot through the side of the head just behind the right ear.

At 8:58 another police cruiser arrived on the scene. It was driven by a uniformed sergeant who was accompanied by a man in a well-cut gray suit. This man, though younger than any of the others now present, immediately took charge.

"Who opened the car doors?" he asked.

"Well, we both did, Jim and me," said one of the officers.

"Did you use handkerchiefs?"

"No, sir. We thought she might still be alive. Sorry."

"You'll be sorrier when the captain hears about it. Now get up there on the radio and notify the medical examiner and the lab."

"Yes, sir," said the officers in swift unison.

Next, the man in the gray suit turned his attention to Gus Jardin. "I guess you're the truckdriver. I'm Lieutenant Bergeron. Tell me all you know about this matter, starting with your reason for stopping here."

At 9:30 a waitress in Maloof's Restaurant approached a secluded table where two men were enjoy-

ing a breakfast, rather lateish for both of them, of sugarless black coffee and heavily buttered and marmaladed English muffins. The younger of the two men was Captain Thomas McFate, the cold-eyed head of the city's homicide division; the other, somewhere in his seventies, was A. B. C. Damroth, executive director of a famous scientific research foundation.

The waitress addressed McFate. "A phone call for you, Captain."

When McFate returned to the table, a figuration of thought intensified the lines of his sallow face. He did not sit down. He said, "Back to the mill for me, Doctor. One of those things has come up again."

Damroth now stood up, a tall courtly old man, thin as a rope. "I'm tempted to join you, Captain. In fact, I would find an invitation irresistible."

McFate's smile was tightlipped from an habitual effort to conceal a gold front tooth. "Play hookey from the Foundation again?"

"I'd confess it to nobody but you, Captain."

"Then let's pay up and get our hats."

"By all means. But first let me notify my office that I'm engaged in—ah—some field research."

During the short drive to headquarters Damroth lighted one of his honey-colored cigarillos and asked happily, "What is the general aspect of the matter at hand, Captain?"

"Murder. A woman. Found in the back seat of her own car shot through the head. That's all I know so far. Bergeron will have more on it. He's coming in."

"This is an amateur's question but I always ask it. Who made the discovery?"

"A truckdriver."

Speaking softly to the cigarillo, Damroth said, "I wonder what exactly went through his mind at that critical moment. It would have no bearing on the case, of course, but it might shed light on the truckdriver's personality. And, as you know, Captain, I am always interested in personalities. That's one of the reasons I find you a constant source of fascination."

"Thanks," said McFate.

At 9:48 Damroth was relaxing his long lean frame as best he could on an austere metal chair in McFate's cramped and cluttered office while the captain elicited some preliminary facts from Lieutenant Bergeron who stood very close to attention.

"You're sure this is her name? Florence Lambert?"

"No reason to doubt it, sir. The purse there was in the car. Under

her, in fact. And it contained that driver's license, those letters, the airplane ticket . . ."

"*Under* her? You mean she was sitting on the purse?"

"That's right, sir."

"Deduce anything from that, Bergeron?"

"Well, Captain, yes. A woman never sits on her purse under any conditions. I came to the conclusion she was not in the back seat when she was shot."

"Nor in the front seat either. Do you agree?"

"I think I see what you mean."

"Then tell me what I mean."

The lieutenant cleared his throat. "The way I see it, sir, is like this. She couldn't have been shot in the car at all. The back seat is out because of the unnatural position of the purse. If the shooting had taken place in the front seat, at the location where we found the car, she would have been left in the front seat. Why move her to the back seat? No logic in it."

"Yes?"

"And one other thing that clinches it—so far we haven't turned up any blood stains in the car."

"It clinches it all right. I think we can be pretty sure that this woman was killed some distance from where you found the car and then was transported there." McFate tilted back in his swivel chair. "Do we know how long she's been dead?"

"Not definitely yet. Doc Cosgrove guesses about four days."

McFate tilted forward and studied the driver's license on the desk. "Florence Lambert, 202 Pericles Circle, eyes brown, hair black, age thirty-six—" He stopped muttering and looked up alertly. "Get me the daily ditto for the last month. I filed my own copies in the wastebasket yesterday."

When Bergeron withdrew, Damroth remarked, "You're quite to the point, Captain. I was particularly intrigued by the presence of the purse *under* the victim."

"Do you see more in it than I see?" McFate was engaged in checking the contents of that purse now littering his desk.

"I think not," said Damroth. "I see it contained money."

McFate finished counting the money. "Two hundred and sixty dollars exactly. Plus five hundred dollars in American Express checks."

"Robbery wasn't the motive."

"No, Doctor, it wasn't."

"Then the purse was planted with the unfortunate woman, I'd say."

"I'd agree."

"I wonder why?" mused Dam-

roth. "There must be a reason."

"Well," said McFate, "I think there are some items here that we were meant to find with the body. These letters, for instance, seem to be a clue." He took from his desk one of four identical envelopes and extracted a single sheet of paper and scanned it silently for a moment.

"Judging from the stationery, they are personal rather than business."

McFate nodded slowly as he read the contents of the other envelopes. "Very personal, Doctor. As the newspaper boys would say, passionate."

"Ah," said Damroth, smiling. "Dated and signed?"

"Signed by somebody named Fred, but not dated. However, the postmarks show they were sent over an interval of three months."

"Was the murder weapon found in the car?"

McFate raised his eyes to look at the old man with faint surprise. "Matter of fact, it was. In the glove compartment of the car. A twenty-two Colt Woodsman automatic. Magazine loaded with hollow-point ammunition, lacking one bullet. The lab's working on it now. What made you say that, Doctor?"

Damroth daintily licked the tip of a fresh cigarillo. "If you were meant to find the purse with all its candid contents, including an airplane ticket, I feel you were meant to find that most incriminating bit of evidence—the gun. By the way, where would that ticket have taken the woman if she had lived to use it?"

"To Reno, Nevada," said McFate.

"Too perfect. Just too perfect for words."

Bergeron returned with a sheaf of flimsy paper. The captain took it without a word and began to go through it with the speed of a man who knows precisely what he expects to find. About two-thirds through the sheaf, he stopped and grinned tightly. He said, "Edgar Lambert, an insurance broker, reported that his wife, Florence, was missing. According to this, she left home four days ago to visit her sister in Atlanta. When she failed to wire or phone that she had arrived safely, Lambert phoned the sister and learned that Mrs. Lambert had never arrived. Then he came here for help. Are you onto this, Bergeron?"

The lieutenant nearly blushed. "I'm afraid we haven't gotten that far yet, sir."

"Then you better get cracking." He glanced at his wristwatch. "I'm going out and take a look at the scene. I'll be back after lunch.

Meanwhile bring in this Edgar Lambert. And also some guy named Fred, the one who wrote these letters. I'm pretty sure Lambert will be able to tell you who he is. And that truckdriver—what's his name?"

"Jardin, Gus Jardin."

"Keep him on tap too. I want 'em all here at one o'clock sharp. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," snapped Bergeron in a most military fashion.

"He was a sergeant in the Marines," McFate told Damroth after the lieutenant left. "Good man."

At 11:15 the oddly assorted pair, tall courtly old Damroth with his smile of intelligent amusement, and lean blunt McFate with no smile at all, joined the two policemen on guard at the Rest Area on the outskirts of the city. The captain wasted no time. He walked down the sandy path to see the car and examined it inside and out. Damroth, smoking a cigarillo, viewed the proceedings with mild interest for awhile, then wandered farther down the path to the brook which held such an appeal for Gus Jardin. Because of a gentle curve in the path hedged by the humming white birches, the small car was not now visible to the old man. He was alone, secluded. Except for the crackle of twigs under McFate's feet as he moved about in his meticulous examination of the foreign car, the world was screened off. Damroth affixed a pince-nez and began his own investigation.

A few minutes later he called out to McFate, and presently the two men were crouched near the brook. The immediate object of their concerted attention was an oil slick that lay across a clump of grass. Next they studied tire tracks that were visible in the hardpacked clay. After a moment McFate took a lock-top measuring tape from his pocket and offered the ringed end of it to Damroth.

"Hold it to the inside of that tire mark," he said.

Damroth complied.

When McFate, unrolling the tape, touched the inside of the opposite tire mark, he nearly smiled. We'll double check it with the car, but it's pretty sure to be the wheelbase of that car."

"Then the car was originally down here?"

McFate nodded. "That's my guess."

"And was later backed up the path to where it now stands?"

"So it seems."

Damroth removed the pince-nez and returned it to the breast pocket of his coat. "I wonder why, Captain?"

"When we know the answer to that we'll be a little smarter than we are now."

"I daresay," said Damroth, smiling.

At 12:15, on the way back to the city, they stopped at a drive-in and lunched in the car off cheeseburgers and root beer. They did not talk much. McFate by nature was taciturn, and Damroth appeared to be thinking of something. They arrived back at headquarters at 12:45 where the waiting Lieutenant Bergeron brought his boss up to date.

"We've confirmed that the gun in the glove compartment of the car was the weapon used. Ballistics says the bullet taken from the woman's head was fired from it. Death occurred approximately four days ago."

"Fingerprints?"

"Well, we got Lambert in here a half hour ago and printed him. It's not final yet, but it looks like a partial thumb print lifted from the gun is his. We're waiting now for the photo enlargements."

McFate moistened his thin lips. "Was the gun registered?"

"Yes, sir. In the name of Edgar Lambert."

"Have you questioned him on it?"

"I have. He said he bought it a month ago for his wife's protection. She was quite apprehensive."

"Protection from what?"

"From a prowler. A peeper. One night when he was working late at his office, somebody was looking through the windows of his house. His wife saw the face. It checks out too. She reported it to us and we sent a couple of men out there. The record shows that they found footprints in a floral border outside the livingroom window."

McFate said, "How about this love-letter guy, this Fred? You got anything on him yet?"

"Yes, sir. He's here now. A slicker named Fred Haines. He makes no bones about his connection with Mrs. Lambert, but he says it was all over a couple of months ago."

McFate nodded. "Probably so. The postmark on the last letter . . . ," he sorted it from the papers on the desk and gave it an impatient glance, ". . . is August something or other. That's three months ago, but maybe after that he didn't have time to put it in writing."

"Something else," said Bergeron. "Looks like he found something more to his liking, Captain. More in his league, or at least the league he would like to play in."

"Go on. I'm listening."

"Well, you know how Boylan's

always reading the society section in the newspapers?"

"I'm well aware of Boylan's peculiarities, Bergeron."

"Yes, sir. Well, anyway, when he heard that we were bringing in this Fred Haines, he remembered the name. Had read it somewhere in the society news. So he dug around in his desk and came up with that section of the *Register*. Day before yesterday's edition. And there was Haines' name all right, as well as a picture of the girl he's going to marry, Miss Danian Russell."

"A relative of J. D. Russell?"

"His daughter, his *only* daughter."

"Haines is climbing high," said McFate, "but so much for that. Now send in Edgar Lambert. Oh, yes, and get me that copy of Boylan's paper before he files it in the city archives."

Damroth cleared his throat gently after Bergeron departed. McFate looked across at him with an inquiring eye.

"I'm in a most speculative mood," said Damroth. "About the weather."

"It's a great subject," said McFate.

"Do you mind if I think aloud upon it?"

"Not at all."

"If my septuagenarian mind serves me right, McFate, we had nearly thirty-six hours of steady rain recently. I believe it began Monday morning just before my usual breakfast time at eight, for I distinctly recall that my cleaning woman, who always arrives on that day as I am finishing my second cup of coffee, appeared with her usual punctuality carrying a large umbrella that was unusually wet. She placed it, still open, upside down in the kitchen sink. I remember drawing her attention to the umbrella stand in the hallway as being a more suitable receptacle. So the rain started on Monday morning and continued until Tuesday night. Today is Friday, and it hasn't rained since." The old man smiled hopefully. "Would you say that these statements are substantially correct, Captain?"

"Aside from the umbrella business, yes. That's the way I remember it, Doctor." His eyes brightened with a hunter's alertness. "And I see what you've got there. That car was moved from the brook area *after* the rain stopped."

"It would seem so. Otherwise, I'm afraid, we would not have had the tire marks and that tiny oil slick to look at."

At that moment Edgar Lambert preceded Bergeron into the room. If Florence Lambert was thirty-six at the time of her death, then the

husband was at least twenty years her senior. Not that age had treated him unkindly, except for stealing most of his hair. To the contrary, there was a well-groomed, unwrinkled look about him that Damroth regarded as "bland" and McFate saw as "baby-faced".

McFate got right to the point. "Your name is Edgar Lambert?"

"That's right." The man's voice was surprisingly deep coming from such a smoothly pink face.

"You live at 202 Pericles Circle?"

"I do."

"You have been taken to the morgue to view the body of a woman?"

"My wife's body, yes."

"Then you do identify that body as that of Florence Lambert, your wife."

"As I told the officer who accompanied me, I do." The man was speaking calmly, with no visible effort at self-control.

McFate placed elbows on the desk and asked coldly, "What reason did you have for murdering your wife, Lambert?"

"None, Captain." He didn't bat an eye.

"Then maybe we can find a couple of excellent reasons."

"That's your job."

"Damned right it's my job, Lambert, and I think today I'm doing it pretty well. Now once again. Why did you shoot your wife four days ago, drive her to a deserted woods, and then report her missing?"

"You're assuming quite a bit, Captain. Do you have any evidence to back up what you're implying?"

"We have your fingerprints on the gun and all over the steering wheel of the car. Just as a starter."

"That's possible. I must have handled the gun a few times, and sometimes I drove Florence's car."

"We have a pretty good motive for you too. Jealousy."

Lambert said primly, "I loved my wife, Captain. I loved her very much."

"So did somebody else—for awhile. A much younger man, younger even than your wife. Tough competition, Lambert. Fertile ground for murderous jealousy."

The pink-faced man seemed to accede. "You've got a point, Captain. I knew about her affair with Fred Haines, but only after it was all over. And there were a couple of days then when I was in a murderous mood. But my anger was directed at Haines, not Florence. If I were a violent man, I might have killed *him* then. But I didn't. I hardly knew him by sight, and so finally I dismissed him from my mind as just an unfortunate shad-

ow that had come between us for a short time."

"Why was your wife going to Reno?"

For the first time Lambert looked uncertain. "She was going to Atlanta. Or that's what she told me. Reno? What makes you say Reno?"

"Because we found a plane ticket to Reno in her purse. A one-way ticket, Lambert. And no ticket to Atlanta, one-way or round-trip."

Lambert pursed his mouth dolefully. "This is all news to me. I can't understand it, under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"I guess I'd better show you this letter." From his inside breast pocket he took an envelope identical in size and shape with the four *billet-doux*-bearing envelopes on McFate's desk. "This arrived two days before my wife decided to go to Atlanta. She showed it to me as proof that her infatuation for Haines was finished, from his standpoint as well as hers. Well, you may read it."

McFate read it closely, then passed it over to Damroth. The letter said, in effect, that the fun had been good while it lasted, but now it was at an end. Old Fred (the letter's signatory) was finally casting his freedom to the winds and himself entering the deadly state of wedlock. He knew that Florence would understand and send him, if not best wishes, at least condolences.

"Very interesting," murmured Damroth.

Lambert inquired hesitantly, "Do you think that letter was written to fool me, to throw me off the track?"

"What do *you* think, Mr. Lambert?" asked McFate.

"I hardly know what to think now."

"Bergeron," snapped McFate. "Have you got Boylan's social section there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Be kind enough to hand it to Mr. Lambert. Take him outside and let him read the relevant story. It should prove that Haines, whatever else he is, is on the way to wedlock. And send the lover boy in here while you're about it."

After the door closed Damroth moistened the tip of a fresh cigarillo. "The sequence of letters written by Haines presents a partial clue, doesn't it?"

"If it does," said McFate grimly, "I don't see it yet."

"Well, let's add them up. Five letters in approximately six months, hardly a prolific output. The first four were written in a three-month period; they professed passion, sexual attraction. Then aft-

er a three-month interval, the fifth and last letter is a flippant farewell. What happened in that three-month interval between the fourth and the fifth when there were, so far as we know, no letters at all?"

"That's what I plan to ask Haines," said McFate.

And Haines was now there, with Bergeron as escort, looking darkly handsome and defiant and ready to stand upon his rights as a citizen, taxpayer and imminent bridegroom. "If this makes the newspapers," he told McFate without preliminary, "I'll sue the city. So help me I'll sue. I'm supposed to be getting married tomorrow morning. I have a million things to do. And here I'm spending all this valuable time hanging around a police station."

"Calm down," said McFate, "or you may have to spend your honeymoon here."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Haines looked wildly at Damroth. "If old J. D. Russell ever hears that I've been connected with Florence Lambert, he'll jump all over me. He'll stop the wedding. And besides, I haven't seen Florence in weeks; more like months. Not since I met Danian. That's the girl I'm going to marry tomorrow. I hope," he concluded with a sigh.

"Is that why you killed the Lambert woman?" asked McFate.

"So that's what you're driving at. All this beating around the bush, and now it comes out. You guys can't be serious. Why should *I* kill her? I got nothing against her."

"Maybe she had something against you, Haines."

"Like what?"

"Like abandonment of the old flame for a new one. Maybe she was going to throw a wrench in your matrimonial plans by telling the facts of your life to J. D. Russell."

"That's a big maybe, mister. She had as much to lose as I. After all, she was married to a guy who isn't exactly broke. No, you didn't know Florence. She liked to play both sides of the street. But just play, I mean."

"When did you see her last?"

"Oh, a month or so ago. Downtown. Bumped into each other and had a drink. That's all."

"You haven't talked to her since?"

"Well, yeah. She was sort of a pest on the phone. So I talked to her. But I didn't *see* her after that."

"You wrote her a letter about your plans to marry?"

"Why, sure. To get her off my neck. Clear the air, sort of."

"Can you account for your movements since you wrote that last letter?"

"Account? How do you mean

account? I been around places."

"Where?"

"Here, there. I don't keep a diary. I just got back from New York this morning when your men picked me up."

"How long were you in New York?"

"Today's Friday. Let's see. Since Wednesday afternoon."

"Can you prove it?"

"Just ask Danian. No, don't ask her, but she was with me. We were making arrangements for the trip. We're sailing to Jamaica tomorrow night."

"All right, Haines. Take him away, Bergeron. I'll let you know what to do with him later."

Damroth added softly, "I believe, Captain, that you have a good question to ask that truckdriver now."

McFate's eyebrows lifted. "I do? Well, send him in, Bergeron." Then, as the door closed: "What do you have in mind, Doctor?"

"An inverse ratio," said Damroth, smiling. "We have here a case where seeming innocence is a sign of guilt or where seeming guilt is a sign of innocence."

"I follow you like a blind man," said McFate glumly.

The door opened a crack and then a few inches more.

"Come in, come in," said McFate.

Gus Jardin, cap in hand, entered with reverence.

"He's all yours, Doctor," McFate said, lounging back in his chair. "I'm retiring for the day."

The old man got to his feet and introduced himself to Jardin simply as Damroth and offered him the vacated chair, which the truckdriver warily refused.

"You don't mind answering a few questions, do you?"

"Nope, I don't, sir."

"Why did you stop your truck this morning at that particular Rest Area?"

"Well, to sort of stretch before coming into the city."

"But that particular place, why?"

"Well, I always stop there when I'm on this run. Nobody else ever does, I guess, so it's private, kind of, and—you know—quiet and peaceful."

"What do you do while you're there?"

"Well, I walk around a little and go down to the brook and wash my face. Wake myself up."

"How often are you on this run?"

"Sometimes two or three days together. Sometimes not for a coupla weeks."

"When was the last time you stopped there?"

"Just yesterday morning."

McFate's chair creaked as he sat

forward, and Damroth said, "Ah, now, that raises a nice point. When you were there yesterday morning, why didn't you report the presence of that car? It was there, you know."

"I didn't see it, sir," said Jardin. "If it was there, I sure didn't see it yesterday."

"I wonder why not?"

"You got me there. Maybe because I didn't go down to the brook yesterday. I was running a little late."

"But you didn't go down to the brook today either, did you?"

"Well, no, because I saw the . . ." Jardin's afterthought caught up with his words. "I tell you, mister, if that little car was there yesterday, I would have seen it, whether I went down to the brook or not. I remember looking down the path and looking at my watch and deciding I didn't have the time to spare. And that little car was not there yesterday morning, I swear."

"And you're right, Mr. Jardin. Thanks very much. That should be all, for me at least."

"And for me too," said McFate. "You're free to go back to work, Jardin."

Damroth sat down and crossed his lean legs. After a long moment of silence, McFate said, "Well, we know now when the car was moved, don't we? Some time yesterday or last night. And that lets Haines off, if his New York alibi stands up."

"I'm certain that it will stand up," said Damroth.

"Then Lambert is our man."

"My unscientific intuition whispered as much to me earlier, Captain."

"Inverse ratio? That sort of stuff?"

"Inverted personalities, like Lambert, often ratiocinate inversely," said Damroth, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "I felt he was that sort of person when you were questioning him."

"But good heavens, man, if he murdered his wife, why did he leave so many clues pointing to himself? And why did he move the car last night?"

"He was bound to be the prime suspect, in any case. He knew this. The secondary suspect was going to be Haines. So I imagine Lambert reasoned that brazen clues indicating his guilt, such as fingerprints on the gun and on the steering wheel of the car, could inversely be construed as signs of innocence. They might even lead a shrewd police officer to believe he was framed by Haines. As for the moving of the car, Lambert wanted his wife's body to be found two or three days ago, I should guess. Un-

fortunately, he hid the car too well. When the police failed to discover it, he moved it to a less concealed location last night."

"But why last night?"

"To destroy the matrimonial plans of Mr. Haines and Miss Russell. The wedding takes place tomorrow, you know. After that, his vengeance would go unabated. Another thing, I believe an investigation at the airline terminal might possibly produce the fact that Lambert himself bought the ticket to Reno that was found in his wife's purse."

McFate wearily massaged his temples. "All this just because he hated his wife and a black-haired gigolo."

"On the contrary, I think he loved his wife. I believe he is the type of man who could easily have forgiven her infidelity. But he was incapable of forgiving Haines for casting her aside. I believe he murdered her, Captain, to prevent her from suffering the injury of rebuff."

"Why, that's the darnedest thing I ever heard of, Doctor. What makes you go off half cocked like that?"

"The intercepted letter," said Damroth smoothly.

"*What* intercepted letter?"

"The one Lambert gave us, the one in which Haines said farewell to the lady. Obviously Lambert intercepted it and never showed it to his wife. He loved her enough to spare her that, and he killed her to spare her the sight of the wedding announcement that would later appear in the newspapers."

"How do you know that letter was intercepted, Doctor?"

"Oh, hadn't you noticed? I'm sorry, I thought you had. If you'll look at the four love letters on your desk, you will notice that the envelopes were opened by tearing off the sides. A feminine characteristic. The fifth envelope, however, was opened by the insertion of a letter opener under the flap, as is the common practice in a business office."

"We'll see about this," said McFate, reaching for the phone.

"I think you should," said Damroth.

Blackmail, a tribute anciently exacted for immunity from pillage, was first declared a felony in 1601. Since then, for both blackmailer and his victim, things have gone from bad to worse.

THERE is something peculiarly frustrating about a blackmailer, as compared with other criminals. Unlike a thief, a swindler, or a sex-fiend, he is just as dangerous behind bars as when free. He sells something a dozen times, but still

retains a clear title to it. If the victim buys a negative, he may be sure copies have been made, so that the transaction settles exactly nothing. And when information is peddled, the situation is even less satisfactory, since such a commodity can pass to a hundred people without leaving the blackmailer's possession at all. It is still his to sell again—for life.

For life—only in that phrase lies the criminal's vulnerability. Dead men tell no tales. Not in person, but no blackmailer worth his salt ever puts his own life on the line. Always there is a letter, left in a safety deposit box, or with a friend, and marked: To be opened in case of my death. It is made quite plain to the victim that by killing his tormentor, he gains

nothing whatever. At worst, exposure; at best, a new leech to deal with.

Gene Sinclair was a blackmailer, and one of the best. He paid well, himself, for secrets, and then put on the squeeze. He bought from people too timid or inexperienced to use the knowledge themselves: maids, cooks, hairdressers, and the like. He picked his victims

with great care. They had to have money above all. A wealthy man or woman with a place in society to protect—that was always good. Better still, if they had children to shield from some terrible truth. Occasionally, but not often, you could even find a child willing to be blackmailed in order to protect his parents, especially if they were old and sick, and still thought of a forty-year-old man as their baby.

Sinclair was not just an ordinary

blackmailer, that is to say, a grubby, small-souled person capable only of this most cowardly crime. He was intelligent, witty, personable, well-read, and even loveable to those who didn't probe very deeply. In fact, he had no soul at all, and nerves of brass. He lived well, tipped generously, and subsidized young blondes who liked convertibles, furs, and gambling at Las Vegas. It was nothing but the best for Gene Sinclair. And, contrary to all the homilies ever written, he slept ten dreamless hours each night.

At this moment he was making a collection at one of his best sources. The young woman who sat facing him in the livingroom of the big house had a pinched look about her nostrils. He had always admired her eyes, which were large and the blue of woodsmoke. The rest of her wasn't bad, either, Sinclair reflected, not for the first time. A slim figure, but rounded in the best places; long legs that didn't sprawl, as they often seemed to on the Las Vegas blondes; and a look of well-scrubbed elegance that came from generations of money.

"You told me last time I'd not be bothered again for a month," she said bitterly.

"And I meant it," he assured her, showing white teeth in a killing smile. "But roulette just isn't my game, and yet I always succumb."

"So I must finance your gambling."

"I'm afraid so. Right now you're my only client with sufficient cash."

"You're quite wrong. I have no money left. Maybe next month—"

"Let's not waste time. Your father is the best neuro-surgeon in the country. Why, that operation on Prince Fuad must have netted

him at least five thousand dollars, and probably more."

"I can't ask him for any more. I just can't."

"Would you rather I went to your fiancé? I'm sure he'd like to know that his bride-to-be had an illegitimate child at the age of fifteen. His parents would be even more interested; I understand they think of the Cabots and Lodges as upstarts."

The blue eyes flashed.

"If George knew about you, he'd beat you to death."

"Oh, he could do it, easily enough. A top athlete," Sinclair said thoughtfully. "Not that I'm a weakling; but he's in fine condition, no doubt, while I've been dissipating. Blondes and gambling are not exactly muscle-builders. But dear George would never be so foolish, would he? You know my ground rules. Give me any trouble, and my charges go up in proportion."

"He'd kill you!"

"That would be twice as silly. I've left a letter with a friend, telling him just where to find my secret files. It's to be opened in case of my death, a very obvious precaution."

Her shoulders slumped in defeat. It was inevitable, yet always gave him pleasure. The worm twisted and writhed, but invariably found itself under the boot-heel.

"Unless you get me some cash in a hurry, Lisa, honey, I'll have to charge for overtime."

"All right; you win. I don't know how I'll explain it to my father . . ." Her voice trailed off in a sob.

"That won't be necessary."

She turned with a cry, and Sinclair stiffened.

"Dad! I thought you were at the hospital."

The tall man, slightly stooped, gave her a reassuring smile, but his eyes, a much colder blue than hers, remained fixed on the blackmailer.

"I've always known about my daughter's mistake," he said evenly. "She was only a child at the time. Possibly George's parents would understand, too, but I can't risk it."

She stared at him in amazement.

"But all these years—you never said—"

"Why should I? I knew your visit to Marilyn was not just a vacation; remember, *I'm* a doctor. It seemed best to let you think the secret was your own. Why do you suppose the adoption went through so smoothly and without publicity?"

"Still," Sinclair drawled, "you let her pay me. Very sensible. Now why not save the heart-to-heart

talk until I've left. Just pay up, and I'll intrude no longer."

"I think not," the doctor said, his eyes glacial in their stare. "I didn't put in this rather melodramatic appearance just to act as paymaster. You are finished, Sinclair."

The blackmailer's lips narrowed, and he gave a grimace of distaste that was almost comical in its emphasis.

"Do I have to spell it out again? How can people be so stupid? I don't just carry information here" —he tapped his head—"but always leave a letter with somebody. So if you're thinking of killing me, just forget it. The moment my death is known, no matter what the cause, my friend will open that letter. And then he'll either spill the beans, or take over where I left off."

"I've no intention of killing you," the surgeon said calmly. "As you've pointed out, that's no solution."

His daughter was watching him in bewilderment.

"But, Dad. I don't see how—"

"Leave it to me, Lisa."

He pulled a gun from his pocket. The muzzle pointed squarely at Sinclair. The blackmailer shook his head in disbelief.

"I really ought to print a little booklet," he said irritably. "Didn't I just explain the situation? You can't kill me, and I don't want to hurt you; I never carry a gun. So put that thing away; it makes me nervous."

"I wouldn't take your word for anything," the doctor said. "Go over to the wall, and assume the position. I'm sure you know what it is; they use it on all the TV programs. Move!" he added sharply, waving the gun. "Hands against the wall, feet away from it; you know what I mean."

Sinclair looked at the grim face again; the eyes seemed filmed with ice. It was almost certain the old boy didn't mean to shoot, but if pushed, who could tell? The blackmailer knew character, and this surgeon could be dangerous. Maybe he had some idea of killing him and hiding the body. Conrad wouldn't open the letter if Sinclair merely vanished. But the doctor wouldn't know that; besides, not even he could dispose of a body that easily. Assuming an expression of bored tolerance, the blackmailer went to the wall.

Cautiously, the old man searched him, finding no weapon.

"Just stay put," he ordered, and went to a large secretary. He unlocked a door, and as Lisa watched wide-eyed, took out two pairs of handcuffs. Deftly, with his surgeon's fingers, he cuffed

Sinclair's hands behind him. "Feet together, now," he directed, and when the command was obeyed, used the other pair of cuffs on the man's ankles.

"This is all very silly," Sinclair said angrily, conscious now that no matter what happened, Dollie would have left the Eagle Bar in a huff. Pity; she was a tasty dish. "It's just going to cost you extra."

"There are other ways of shutting a man up besides killing him," the surgeon said.

"What d'you mean? Gonna cut my tongue out? I can write, you know!"

"I assumed as much. And even if completely paralyzed, you could work out a code with your eyelids, or something. You see, I've given quite a bit of thought to you."

Sinclair felt his neck-hairs tingle, and his back was suddenly cold.

"You mean you thought of deliberately paralyzing me! That would be inhuman!"

Even as he said it, and before the doctor's ironic chuckle, he realized the fatuity of the remark.

"A ruthless animal like you," the surgeon said, "never understands that some day, some place, he'll meet an even more ruthless animal—and one with greater ingenuity. As for being inhuman, let me tell you something, Sinclair. This morning I had to blind a four-year-old girl. She had a glioma, a brain tumor, and if it stayed in, she would die. It was her optic nerve or her life. Do you know what that poor child said when she came out of the anesthetic? She cried: 'Mommy! Mommy! I can't wake up!' She doesn't even know what blindness is. Now what do you think your life means in comparison with hers? Damn little, believe me; damn little."

"What are you talking about? Blinding me won't solve anything, you old fool!"

"You missed the point. Who said anything about blinding you? I was commenting on the relative value of life; no matter what people say, it's not an absolute. No, I'm not going to hurt your sight. A blackmailer lives by his memory."

"Dad!" Lisa exclaimed, her face chalk white. "You can't!"

"Oh, but I can; I must; and I will. Why, it might even make a decent fellow out of him!"

Thoroughly alarmed, Sinclair attempted to get to the door, but the hobbles made him take a crashing fall. He lay there half-stunned, and the old doctor, moving like a panther, closed in, hypo in hand. Before the blackmailer could resist, the needle jabbed

relentlessly home into his arm.

"Just relax now," he said in an ironic tone. "You won't feel a thing. But when you come to, your memory will be gone."

"No, don't!" Sinclair begged. "I'll go away! I'll never bother you again!"

"Of course, your word is good enough for me," was the quietly savage reply.

"They'll find out what you did! You'll go to prison."

"Not likely. Assuming a thorough investigation, a good man might spot the brain damage, but it'll never be traced to me. I'll keep you in my private surgery here until the very small wound is healed. It takes only a long needle through a corner of the eye-socket to do the business, you know. And if I slip a little, you may have some other minor disabilities—say a dragging leg, a few tics, a touch of muscular dystrophy, but it won't be malicious—just an unfortunate accident.

"The letter!" Sinclair gasped, fighting to remain conscious.

"Ah, yes, the letter giving the location of your secret files. I wonder where they might be? A small office in some quiet business neighborhood; or maybe you prefer a big and busy building, where nobody can meddle. No matter; you'll tell me where they are."

"Look, let's make a deal. I'll take you to the files. You can destroy the birth certificate, all the papers."

"Sorry," the doctor said. "Not when your real files are in your head."

"Sooner or later my friend will open that letter. You can't win against me."

"You're wrong. I'm going to put enough scopalomine into you to make the sphinx talk. You picked the wrong man to keep secrets from, Sinclair. Truth serum and a spot of hypnosis will do the job nicely. Sweet dreams! He's gone under, Lisa."

"Dad," the girl said shakily. "Are you really going to operate?"

"You can't beat a blackmailer by using kid gloves. Remember Mike Garrity, the one they say is the cleverest thief alive?"

"Yes. He had that simply beautiful child. Janie, wasn't it?"

"Right. When I saved her life, I made a friend. After Sinclair talks —and he will—I can depend on Garrity to get to those files and clean 'em out. And he'd die before telling anybody about it."

A chilly smile touched his lips.

"In a way, we're helping Sinclair, too; giving him needed therapy. After all, was anybody more in need of a massive personality change?"

Faint heart never won fair lady, it has been said, nor—we might add—does it contribute to our subject's composure when such a fair one requests professional services.

THE DOUBLE CORNER

LENNIE HILL was a quiet and undistinguished person. He would not stand out in a crowd, not even a small crowd. He was average in size, neither tall nor short, thin nor fat. His features were quite ordinary, the eyes dark but not too dark, the nose just a nose, the mouth just a mouth, the hair mouse colored and straight. In general he seemed a little timid, one of the herd, certainly no one of importance. Actually, he was a jewel thief, and one of the best in the country.

He knew it, but no one else knew it. In his dozen years of operations, he had set no pattern which could be distinguished. There was a pattern, of course, which he followed, but it was too ordinary to be noticed, too simple to be analyzed. He always worked alone. He worked very carefully. He fit his operations into the normal background of everyday living. He never made any great, outstanding success. He never hit the top brackets, but he did very well. In the course of a normal year he might clean up fifty to sixty thousand dollars, net profit. He made no income tax returns. So far as the Bureau of Internal Revenue was

concerned, Lennie Hill did not exist. There was no such person.

The range of his operations extended from Seattle to San Diego, from Miami to Boston, and a score of places in between. He kept on the move. He might stay in one town three months, handle three jobs, then move on to another town. One of his real problems was selling the jewels he picked up. He took a beating there. He realized about fifty percent of the discount value of the jewels he took, and very carefully, what he picked up in Boston, he would fence in Chicago. He was one of the most cautious in the business. He never carried a gun in his life. He was afraid of guns. Never, on the job, did he hurt anyone. Of course the people he robbed might cry to the Heavens that they had been hurt, but he would not have considered this

worthy of notice. His theory was that the rich could afford to replace the jewels he took and, in a sense, his thievery was not evil—it hurt no one.

Lennie had a goal in life, a rather modest goal. He wanted to save a million dollars. With that much money he could retire and live as a gentleman for the rest of his life. He could travel, see the world. He might even get interested in some attractive girl. At the present time, he couldn't. Just as he avoided guns, he avoided women. A woman might learn too much about him, then she might talk. He had one other aversion—liquor. In his profession, clear thinking was essential. With respect to his goal he had a long distance still to go, but at least he was a quarter of the way there. In a number of savings banks he had an accumulation of better than three hundred thousand dollars. Not a bad start.

He was in a new town, and his first job, as he outlined it in his mind, was one of his old, standby routines. He used it several times a year, in different places, under different guises. This time, he decided, he would pose as a telephone repairman. A typical old uniform was not hard to find. He cleaned it himself, repaired it. He wanted to be neat, but not too neat. He would appear respectful, but he would not overdo it. He had already picked out the apartment house he would try. It was one of the new ones, exclusive enough so that only the wealthy could afford to stay here. He chose a corner apartment on

one of the top floors in the back.

He selected Thursday as a good day for his venture. Thursday, quite often, was the servants' day off. He picked eleven o'cock in the morning as the best hour. If an apartment was vacant at eleven o'clock in the morning, it would often be vacant until late in the afternoon. He needed less time but he liked to feel safe.

Lennie entered the apartment building by one of the rear doors left open for deliveries. He found the service elevator, rode it to the top floor, the seventeenth floor. There was no one in the corridor. Thus far he had met no one in the apartment building, but that was typical. In the average such place people did not throng the hallways. He walked briskly to one of the corner apartments, rang the bell, and waited.

A woman answered. She was fat, unattractive and about fifty. Lennie touched his cap, smiled, and said, "Madame, I'm from the telephone company. We are re-wiring some of the lines. I wonder if you will test your telephone and see if you can hear the dial tone."

"The—the dial tone?" the woman said.

"Yes, the buzzing sound you hear just before you dial. We have had to cut off some of the telephones. I must see if yours has been affected and is out of order.

"Oh, the buzzing sound," the woman said, and disappeared.

Lennie waited patiently in the hallway.

After a time the woman returned. "I can hear the buzzing sound. I mean, the dial tone."

"Good," Lennie said. "Then your telephone has not been cut off. I am sorry I bothered you."

"That's all right," the woman said.

Lennie walked to the other end of the corridor, tried another corner apartment. A rather young and attractive woman, dressed in a light robe, came to the door. Lennie went through the same routine about the dial tone. The woman assured him that the telephone sounded right.

Lennie walked down to the sixteenth floor, rang the bell at one of the front corner apartments. He rang, and rang, and rang, but got no answer. Then, as quietly as he could, and as swiftly as possible, he got busy at the lock. Lennie was a wizard at locks. He knew what they were like, inside, no matter what the brand. In less than three minutes, the door was open. He stepped inside. His heart beat had picked up just a bit. This was an old game to him, but it was still exciting. It gave him a charge to do a thing like this. It was much bet-

ter than a routine job, and much more profitable.

This was a nice apartment, well carpeted, well furnished, and artistically decorated; he had entered a hundred which were very much the same. They whispered to him of wealth, of affluence. Money and jewels would be around—possibly loose in a jewelcase in the bedroom —or in a wall safe not well hidden. A wall safe was always a challenge. A few had baffled him, but not many. The average wall safe might hold him up ten minutes. Most were ridiculously easy to open.

Lennie made a quick search of the apartment. No one seemed to be home. He spent a little time in the bedroom, found a jewel case in a bottom drawer, glanced through it. Most of what he found was costume jewelry, but he noticed several items which might have been of value. These pieces he dropped into his pocket. He hunted for the wall safe, found it, and laughed softly. It was a typical wall safe, beautiful to look at and safe from the prying fingers of a maid or a butler, but any man with only a fair amount of knowledge about locks could have opened it with little trouble.

He twisted the dial, listened, and suddenly he stiffened and caught his breath. A woman's voice startled him, and there was a caustic sound in what she was saying. "Try eleven, nine, one, starting to the left."

He lowered his hands, took a quick look over his shoulder. The woman stood just outside one of the clothes closets. She was young, slender, unsmiling, and she was holding a gun in her hand. The gun was pointed straight at him.

Lennie stood silent, numb. On several occasions during his nefarious career he had been nearly caught. A number of times he had been in serious danger. But never in his life had anything like this happened. Never had he been forced to look at the muzzle of a gun. The gun the woman was holding was not large, but there was death in it. He could sense it, could almost smell it.

"I am very good with a gun" she said quietly. "If I have to, I will shoot you. I am quite sure the police won't blame me."

Lennie knew that too well. He had already started to rob the apartment. In his pockets were jewels which did not belong to him. More than that, some of the tools of his profession were in his pockets. He was a trespasser, caught with his fingers dirty. He could be shot right here; the woman would never be blamed.

"Did you hear me?" the woman said.

He nodded slowly. "I—I heard you."

"Turn and face me. Very carefully, reach for your gun—toss it to the bed."

He turned toward her but shook his head. "I don't have a gun."

"You don't have a gun?"

"I never carry one."

"But you've done this before."

Lennie bit his lips. He hated to make such an admission, but he might as well. Once the police searched him they would know what his profession was.

"I said, you've done this before," the woman repeated.

"I—yes, I have."

"What's your name?" she asked.

Again he hesitated, was silent.

"You might as well tell me," the woman said. "I intend to find out."

He looked toward the door. He could dive that way, but he knew he would never make it. He could lunge at her, only he would not get that far. He could already feel the chill of a prison cell.

"What's your name?" the woman repeated.

"Lennie Hill."

Her lips twisted crookedly. "My name is Mrs. Bernice Garfield. I live here with my husband. When I heard you at the door I thought it was he. He fumbles with his key, especially after he's been drinking, which is all the time. I'm not very fond of him, but don't make any mistakes. Come any closer and I'll kill you, just like that." She snapped the fingers of her free hand.

"I won't come any closer," Lennie said.

"Good," Bernice said. She pointed with the gun. "Open the safe."

"What?"

"Open the safe. I told you the combination. Start to the left, eleven, nine, one."

"But why . . ."

"You wanted to look inside, didn't you? Go ahead."

"I don't want to look inside

now. I don't think I should."

"But I want you to. Go ahead."

The cold, chilly look in her eyes made him shiver. Something about her was frightening. She was not just a woman defending her home. There was an aura of evil about her. She was small, slender, but there was strength in her too, and a sense of purpose.

Her words slapped out like blows. "Lennie, open the safe!"

He turned toward the safe, worked the combination, pulled open the door, and he thought, *I'll get it now—a bullet in the back. I'll never get away from here.* But he was wrong. There was no shooting. He looked around at Bernice.

"Notice the money," she was saying. "There's ten thousand dollars in there. Ten thousand dollars in unmarked bills. A very nice haul, don't you think?"

"I . . . I don't know," Lennie said.

"Did you expect more?"

"I . . . Why don't you call the police?"

She shook her head. "I don't want the police. Of course, if I have to I will call the police, but if I do that, you will be on the floor—very dead. I don't want to shoot you if I don't have to."

"You mean you're going to let me go?" Lennie gasped.

"Ummmm, not exactly. Don't you want the money in the safe? It's yours, if you'll do something for me."

There was the hook, and honestly, he was not surprised at the way things were developing. He mumbled his answer. "What do you want me to do?"

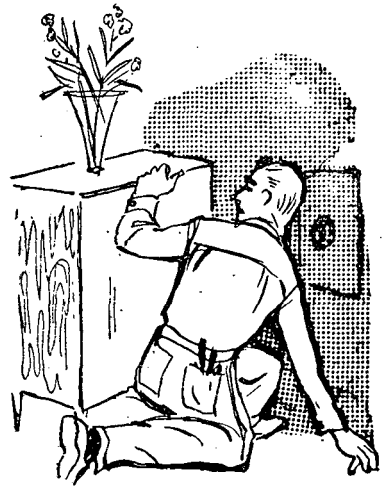
"Steal something."

She smiled as she said that, but it was a hard smile, thin, tight, sardonic. There was a warning in it. His skin got clammy. He said, "Steal something?"

"That's your business, isn't it? I'm not asking you to do anything unusual."

He frowned at her. "What do you want me to steal?"

"Some papers. That's all. They are in a wall safe which is much



like this one. Do you think you could open it?"

"I might be able to." He was thinking quickly. What she was asking looked very easy. Too easy. There would be a complication somewhere along the line. He could see it ahead, vague and undefined, but definitely a problem. He had the intuitive feeling that nothing she told him would be true.

"Where are the papers?" he asked slowly.

"Half way across town, in an apartment house like this."

"How will I get in?"

"You got in here."

He was still frowning. "Whose apartment is it?"

"My mother-in-law's."

"Your mother-in-law's? I don't think I understand."

She laughed briefly. "You don't have to understand. All you have to do is gain entrance to the apartment, open a wall safe, and take out some papers you'll find there, give them to me. It's as simple as that."

"Nothing in this business is simple," Lennie said, and he definitely meant it.

"I doubt if we'll have any trouble," Bernice said. "Shall we go?"

"You mean now?"

"Why not?"

"And you are going with me?"

"Of course I am, but before we go, empty your pockets. You took some jewelry. I don't think that was nice."

Lennie moved to the side of the bed. He emptied his pockets, then leaving the jewelry on the bed, he put the other things back into his pocket. From the other side of the bed, Bernice watched him narrowly.

"All right," she said, nodding. "Now, pick up the jewelry and put it in the safe, then close and lock the safe."

Lennie reached for the jewelry. "You said I could have the money in the safe."

"That comes later—after we finish at my mother-in-law's," Bernice said, and her eyes were mocking him.

He put the jewelry in the safe, closed it and locked it, and he knew he would never get his hands on this safe again. This woman was not the kind to give up even a half dollar. If there were ten thousand dollars in the safe, she would keep it there. She had shown it only as bait.

"I'll slip on a coat, then we'll go," Bernice said.

"That gun . . ." Lennie started.

"It will be in my pocket."

"If I promise. . . ."

She shook her head and laughed. "I don't want any promises. I want performance, and I'll get it. You

see, I'm not afraid of guns. If you try anything . . . but you won't, will you Lennie?"

"Put the gun in your pocket and leave it there," he muttered. "I'll do the job you want."

They left her apartment, and this time he wished someone had seen them together. They took the service elevator to the basement garage, walked to her car. An attendant noticed her from a distance. He came no closer after she called to him and said they were taking the car. She ordered Lennie to drive.

He drove the car in the direction she suggested, stopped and parked it when she told him to. They got out and walked about two blocks. He was not surprised when Bernice said, "We'll take the servants' entrance and the service elevator. There's no point in being noticed."

"You learn too quickly," he answered gruffly.

She shrugged. "I'm not a nice person—or maybe you've guessed."

They took the elevator to the ninth floor and stopped at a door marked 9-C. Lennie pressed the buzzer. There was no answer. He tried it again, then again.

"She's not home," Bernice said. "I told you on the way here that she was away."

"A man's got to be sure," he muttered, and then he got busy on the lock. It took him less than two minutes.

"Wonderful," Bernice said, as they stepped into the apartment. "Maybe I'll keep you around. This is fun." Her eyes were bright, excited.

He could sense the tension that gripped her. "Where's the safe?" he asked bluntly.

"In the bedroom. I'll show you."

He closed and locked the door to the corridor, then followed her to the bedroom. She moved the picture which hid the wall safe. She was breathing fast. She was even perspiring.

Lennie walked toward the wall safe, looked at it, recognized the type and make. It was one that he could open very easily. He wondered what was going to happen after he opened the safe. That was a rough question. If Bernice wanted to, she could shoot him the moment he opened the safe, then she could take the papers she wanted and disappear. His death might be a mystery to the police, but that offered him little comfort.

"Hurry up, Lennie," Bernice ordered. "Hurry up. Open the safe."

He nodded, started working on it, and in less than two minutes he had solved it. But he did not try the door. He was not yet ready.

"Hurry up, Lennie," Bernice whispered.

"I'm trying," he growled. "Give me more time."

"Hurry up."

He looked around at her. "What happens . . . after I open the safe?"

"Nothing. You can go."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that, unless you want to go home with me and collect your ten thousand. I'm playing square with you, Lennie."

He was silent for a moment. Maybe she meant it. He hesitated for a moment, then twisted the dial, pulled the door open.

"You've done it, Lennie. You've done it." She was unquestionably excited. "Reach inside. See if you can find a Manila envelope with my name on it."

He reached into the safe, found the Manila envelope. He held it out toward her.

Her face was glowing. "This is it, Lennie. It's worth everything to me. I'm awfully glad you showed up this morning. I was feeling desperate. Now, if you could do one more thing for me."

Lennie shook his head instantly. "Never. I've done what you asked. Now I want to go."

Her smile was not very good. "Just one more thing for me."

"No."

She reached into her pocket, drew out her gun. Her eyes had hardened. "Just one thing, Lennie. It's a must. It can't be helped. Sit down on the edge of the bed."

He watched the gun, every muscle in his body tensed. He didn't want to sit down on the edge of the bed. He was thinking again—*Here it comes! I'll never get away from here. I'm a dead man—as dead as they come.*

Bernice pointed once more to the bed. "Sit down, Lennie. We have to wait for Alice. That's my mother-in-law. She is a very unpleasant woman. You won't like her any more than I do."

"I don't want to know her," Lennie said.

"Then what we have to do will be easier."

A shudder ran over his frame. "You mean—"

"Of course, Lennie." There was a harsh note in her voice. "That's been in my mind since I met you. We had to get the papers first, and now we have them. If Alice isn't around. . . ."

"I . . . I can't do it," Lennie cried.

Her smile made his skin turn clammy. "I think you can. We'll see. Isn't that a sound from the hall door?"

He waited, rigid, almost holding his breath. He watched the bedroom door, terribly afraid of what was ahead.

Footsteps brushed along the carpeted hallway. A moment later a woman stepped into the doorway. She was older than Bernice, and rather small, but she stood very straight—and she did not seem frightened at what she found in the bedroom. Her face tightened. She glared at him, then turned her attention to Bernice.

"Hello, Alice," Bernice said. "We waited for you. You told me this morning you would be home by one o'clock. It's just one o'clock."

She pointed at Lennie. "Who's he?"

"I think you might call him a safebreaker," Bernice said. "Really, he's very good."

"Then . . . you've been in my safe?"

Bernice waved the Manila envelope. "Yes. Here are all the horrible records about me. You should have showed them to your son long ago. Now, I'm afraid it's too late."

"The records can be drawn up again."

"But not if you're not here."

Alice frowned. "You would really kill me? I knew you were bad, but not that bad."

"You forced my hand," Bernice said. "You tried to make me leave your son. Why should I do that? When he dies I will be very well situated. I am looking forward to that. You could spoil it for me."

"So you mean to kill me."

"No. Lennie will do it."

He shook his head quickly. He had gone as far as he would go. Let them call in the police if they wanted to. A prison cell would not be pleasant but it was much more preferable than a trip to the gas chamber. Murder! He had never considered such a thing, never in his life.

Bernice spoke again and her voice was high, sharp, commanding. "Go ahead, Lennie. She's not very large, not very strong. I think I would carry her to the bed, hold a pillow over her head. Are you listening, Lennie?"

"I . . . I can't do it," Lennie said.

"You've got to."

"I can't."

"Then I'll have to kill you both—make it look as though you were robbing the apartment. Too bad, Lennie. Is that the way you want it?"

He shuddered, tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He took a quick look at Bernice. She was as hard as she sounded. If she had to, she would do just what she had said, shoot them both. He took a glance at the other woman, Alice. There was nothing soft about her. Her face had hard angles, deep buried eyes. She probably was not

much nicer than Bernice, but if he had to make a choice, he would turn to her.

"Lennie, I'm waiting." Bernice snapped the words at him.

He gulped, moistened his lips. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, Lennie."

He had to circle the foot of the bed where Bernice was standing, and he circled behind her, toward Alice. But he did not go that far. He stopped as he was passing Bernice. He reached up and closed both hands around her throat. She uttered a gasping cry, then she started struggling, and it was not easy to hold her. She was wiry, strong, and she almost got away. But she didn't. Eventually she grew silent.

They were on the floor by this time and, when Lennie let her go, she did not move. Her face was blotched, ugly to look at.

"I am afraid she is dead," Alice said, "And I can't say that I'm sorry. She has just been waiting for my son to die."

Lennie sat up. He was glad of the choice he had made—Bernice instead of Alice, but this was a horrible experience. It would take him a long time to get over it.

Alice picked up the gun Bernice had dropped. She was examining it curiously. "I couldn't get away from her," Lennie said. "She made me come here. She threatened to call the police. I had to do what she told me to."

"Yes. I know." Alice said. "You didn't have a chance. You still don't."

Lennie's eyes widened. "I . . . I don't know what you mean?"

"This has to be explained to the police," Alice said. "In some way or other I have to account for a dead body—Bernice. The easiest way is like this." She was pointing the gun at him, straight at him, and she was not smiling. She looked quite serious.

"Wait!" Lennie cried. "Wait. I didn't. . . ."

"I'm sorry, but it has to be this way," Alice said. She pulled the trigger.

It was rather strange but, as she was firing the gun, she looked very much like Bernice.

The older we grow, the more difficult it becomes to appreciate the simple joys and the primitive cruelties of childhood. We are reduced, eventually, to conceding that "boys will be boys".

Guessing Game

By Rose Healey

THE LITTLE BOY with the round, innocent face and fair hair sat swinging his legs and watching Martha work.

"Don't you want to know what I've got in here?" he asked her.

Martha didn't turn from her dusting, nor did she bother to answer him. It was the first time they'd been alone together, Martha and Mrs. B.'s grandson. Martha didn't care for him much. If she'd known about him, she thought, maybe she wouldn't have taken the job. Sighing, Martha bent her knees and applied her dustrag to the piano legs. It wasn't that she didn't like children; she'd had two of her own, hadn't she, and might be a grandmother herself if it hadn't been for the War taking John Joseph, and the Lord not blessing Young Martha with the looks to get a husband. No, it wasn't a coldness toward children in general, she told herself, slowly rising and flecking the keyboard daintily with

her duster. But there was something about little Jeffrey that upset her and made her ill at ease. He wasn't like other boys, and that was a fact. He was quiet, but that wasn't it. Boys don't necessarily have to be rowdy. It wasn't that he was impudent, either. "I could handle a scamp easily," she thought. Something for which there was no name, or at least not one that Martha knew, was wrong with Jeffrey Belton III. He had a way of regarding you with a narrow-eyed stare when he thought you weren't noticing. There would be a faint smile on his lips that somehow wasn't the sweet thing a smile on a child's face should be.

Martha whirled around to see if she could surprise that look on his face now. He wasn't looking at her at all but at a small cardboard box he held in his lap.

Feeling her gaze, he glanced up. "Bet you'll never guess," he said, "what I've got in here."

He held the box up and shook it invitingly. Something rattled back and forth inside.

Martha tried to answer pleasantly. After all, he was only a baby.

"What do I win, if I guess right?" she asked.

The little boy regarded her solemnly. "You never will. Never in a million, trillion years," he told her.

"But if I do?"

"I'll give you my allowance for next week," Jeffrey promised, after a moment's hesitation.

Martha flushed. "No, no, I don't want your money," she said. "I tell you what—" she pushed a vase aside on the mantelpiece and dusted carefully. "If I guess, you help me dry the dishes tomorrow morning. If I don't guess, I'll give you something nice."

"What?" the little boy asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Something nice."

"Will you give me what I ask for?"

"That depends," Martha told him, running her cloth over the gilt-framed mirror.

"On what? What does it depend on?"

"Whether I have what you ask for or not."

"Oh, you have it," Jeffrey assured her. "Is it a deal?"

Martha smiled. He was like other children, really; just harder to know. Playing the game, she hedged: "Well, hold on now. Not so fast. What is this something I have that you might win?"

"I can't tell you," the little boy said, as she had been sure he would.

"Is it something I won't mind giving up?"

"You shouldn't mind," he said. "You have plenty of others."

One of the toy automobiles her son had collected when he was young, Martha thought. She had shown them to Jeffrey during her first week in the house in an attempt to win his affection. They hadn't seemed to impress him at the time, but she should have realized he was shy. Well, one car out of so many wouldn't matter. And, besides, what had she kept them for but to make other little boys happy?

"Is it a deal?" Jeffrey demanded again.

"Yes, yes," Martha replied. "A deal."

"You promise?"

"Certainly."

"Say it."

"I promise," Martha said. She caught the little boy's reflection in the mirror. His eyes were slits of pale blue, and a suggestion of a smile played about his mouth.

With an effort, Martha forced herself to say heartily, "Now, then, what can it be? What *can* it be?" She faced the little boy and looked down at the box he clutched with both hands. "Is it a—"

"Wait!" Jeffrey commanded. He scrambled off the chair. "How many guesses do you get?"

"That's right," Martha said. "There should be a limit. How many do you think I should have?"

"Three. Like in the story books."

Martha patted the blonde head. He drew away instantly, then came back. "You can pat my hair if you want to, Martha," he murmured in a purring tone.

Suddenly, Martha didn't want to. She pretended not to hear him. Looking around the room, she said: "Looks as if I'm finished in here. Better get busy in the bedrooms."

"Why don't you do the kitchen?" the little boy suggested. "I can drink my milk while you're guessing," he added slyly.

It wasn't easy to make him drink milk, she knew; Martha obediently led the way to the kitchen.

The child perched himself on the table in the middle of the room. From there he had a good view of Martha wherever she might go. Uneasy under his gaze, Martha poured the milk and handed it to him. As she turned from him, she stumbled slightly, and the boy laughed.

"Clumsy Martha. Clumsy Martha," he sang out in a clear, happy treble.

He liked to see people uncomfortable or hurt. She had noticed that before. It made her shudder.

At the sink she started the breakfast dishes. Hoping to end the game as quickly as possible, so Jeffrey would leave her to play in the living-room with his jig-saw puz-

zle or outside on his swing, she said, "Is it a toy?"

"No, no, no!" the boy yelled triumphantly.

"Am I warm?" she asked.

"You're not a bit warm. You're icy, icy cold. Brr. I'm shivering, you're so cold! Guess again."

Martha shook the soap flakes into a pan.

"Is it—" she tried to think of any articles she'd seen him carrying around. For some reason, she really did want to win the game. It wasn't the car; she'd give him that anyway. But somehow she felt she should try hard to win. To refresh her mind on the size of the box, she glanced over her shoulder at the boy. He was staring at her again, and with such an expression of cruel anticipation she almost dropped the saucer she held.

"Go on. Guess," the boy urged.

The box was about two inches wide and four inches long. It was probably three inches deep. A number of things ran through Martha's mind and were rejected: a deck of cards, a scarf, stamps from his stamp collection? But it rattled. Whatever was inside rattled. Martha bit her lips.

"Well?" the boy said.

"I'm thinking," Martha snapped. She could sense his satisfaction at having upset her, and with difficulty she calmed herself.

"Let me hold the box," she suggested.

"Why?" the little boy asked. He scooted back on the table away from her.

"I want to see how heavy it is," Martha explained.

The boy seemed to weigh his decision carefully. "No," he answered at last.

"Why not?"

"Your hands are all wet," he pointed out, "and, besides, when we started to play, that wasn't in the rules."

Martha felt a keen pang of disappointment. "It's not fair," she said, returning to her dishes. "How can I possibly guess if I haven't any hint?"

"Oh, I'll give you a hint"

"You will?" Martha knew her eagerness was silly. She knew she was being much too serious about a guessing game with a child, but she couldn't help it.

"I'll give you three questions," Jeffrey announced magnanimously, and Martha felt a surge of hope.

"How big is it?" she asked.

"As big as—" the boy lolled his head back and rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "As big as your finger," he said, and grinned at some private joke.

Martha thought: a match-box, a stick of candy, a pencil? "What color is it?"

The boy considered the question, frowning. Then he smiled. "It *was* pink," he told Martha.

Absently, Martha scrubbed the oatmeal pan. Beads, a lipstick, oh, why couldn't she get it? Stalling for time, she asked: "You weren't fibbing, were you? It definitely isn't a toy?"

Jeffrey looked shocked. "I don't tell fibs," he said. Impatiently, he demanded: "Why don't you guess?"

"It's a—a penny," Martha blurted desperately, and the boy danced with joy.

"Wrong!" he screamed. "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!"

He jumped to the floor and ran up and down wagging his head from side to side and saying: "Wrong, wrong, wrong," until Martha told him sharply to stop it.

Obediently he stood still beside her at the sink. He leaned against the sideboard panting, and she could look down at the clean little scalp and the fine hair and the downy little neck. She almost regained her perspective. Almost.

Then he spoke in a breathy whisper: "You just have one guess left, Martha."

The warning sounded vaguely sinister.

The pit of Martha's stomach turned cold.

"It's a foolish game. I don't want to play any more. Run along outside."

Instead of the protest Martha had expected, the little boy remained silent. He pulled a drying towel from the rack near the stove and, shifting his box under his arm, began drying the silverware.

Finally Martha couldn't stand the quiet any longer.

"Have I ever seen one?" Martha asked.

Without looking at her, his eyes riveted on the knife he held, Jeffrey commented: "That's your last question."

Martha had the sensation of seeing the final lifeboat lowered while she stood on a sinking ship.

"You've seen one," he said. "In fact, you have some. In fact, it's what I want from you, if I win."

"But you said it's *not* a toy!" Martha exclaimed.

"It isn't," the little boy said, still twisting and turning the knife in his hand. He had abandoned all pretense of drying it. The sunlight glinted on it, and Martha stood mesmerized, staring at it as it glistened and grew dark, then gleamed again.

The little boy started talking in a low monotone. "It's got a nail, the thing that I have in the box, but the nail's not to keep it together. And it used to be pink, but now it's all gray and purplish. I got it

from Lilian. She worked here before you."

Martha swallowed. "What is it?"

"You have to guess."

"I can't. I don't know."

"Don't you really know?" He looked directly at her. "Martha, you have such nice hands. You shouldn't get them all red with dish-washing. You ought to wear rubber gloves."

The little boy moved as if to touch her hand, and Martha stepped away from him, hiding her wet hands in her apron.

"What's in the box?" she asked.

Jeffrey's gaze traveled to her hidden hands. "You know," he said.

"I don't believe you," Martha managed at last.

"Lilian didn't, either. And she said I'd never do it. She said I couldn't. But one day, when she was asleep in her room, and Grandmother was away—"

"What do you have in that box?" Martha demanded.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," the child teased softly.

Martha lunged at the box. The knife in Jeffrey's hand slipped. There was blood on Martha's hand, and she screamed at the sight. Grasping the boy's shoulders, she said: "What's in there? What do you have in there?"

The knife clattered to the floor, and the box crumpled beneath the weight of the boy's arm as he clamped it tightly to his side.

"Show me what you have in there. Open that box. Open it!"

"Martha!"

Mrs. Belton stood in the doorway. She looked trim and smart in her tailored suit. Her silver hair was newly washed and set. She carried a few small parcels. Her expression was changing from puzzlement to anger, when Martha looked up at her.

"What *are* you doing, Martha?" Mrs. Belton asked.

Martha sat back on her heels and looked dazedly around. She found she was kneeling in front of the little boy, clutching his shoulders and peering into his face like a crazy woman.

As if on cue, the little boy began to cry. Two huge tears crawled down his cheeks, and he shook free of Martha. Running to his grandmother, he wailed: "Oh, Mamman, she's so mean. So scarey. So mean."

Mrs. Belton stooped to the child who grabbed her skirt and whimpered pitifully.

"What is this all about, Martha?" Mrs. Belton asked in the tone of someone trying hard to be reasonable and fair-minded.

"I—he—oh, Mrs. Belton," Martha gasped.

"I come home and find you mis-

treating Jeffrey. Have you a reason? Was he naughty?"

"I wasn't naughty. I didn't do anything to her," the little boy protested, snuggling his nose close to his grandmother's thigh.

Mrs. Belton stroked his hair.

"Well, Martha?" she questioned with a lift of her arched eyebrows.

"Ask him what he has in that box," Martha said. "Make him show you."

"What earthly difference can it make—"

"Just make him show you, that's all," Martha said, rising laboriously. "Make him open it up."

Holding her grandson away from her slightly, Mrs. Belton asked, "Jeffrey?"

The little boy looked up innocently at his grandmother. "Yes, Mamman?" he said.

"What have you in there?"

"Nothing, Mamman."

"He's not telling the truth," Martha said. "Make him open it."

Her frown deepening, Mrs. Belton looked first at the child and then at Martha. She put out her hand, and Jeffrey slowly, oh, so very slowly gave her his box.

As the older woman removed the crushed lid, Martha held her breath. She waited for the exclamation of disgust and horror. It didn't come. Surprised, Martha looked at Mrs. Belton whose eyes rose to meet and to question her own.

"The box is empty," Mrs. Belton said.

"It can't be!" Martha rushed across the room and took the box into her own hands. A cardboard box. Empty. "But it rattled," she said. "It rattled."

She looked up to see Mrs. Belton regarding her strangely.

"I'm afraid I'll have to let you go, Martha."

Martha drew in her breath sharply at the injustice. "But I'm not to blame," she protested. "The box—"

"You can see for yourself, there is nothing in it."

"Then he—he emptied it, while we weren't watching him. Look in his pockets," Martha insisted.

The little boy moved back involuntarily, and Martha saw the movement.

"Search him!" she demanded loudly. "Search him!"

Mrs. Belton stiffened. She placed herself between Martha and the little boy.

"Control yourself," she told Martha. "I must ask that you leave at once."

"I—"

"That's enough," Mrs. Belton said. Her voice was gentle but firm.

An hour later, Martha's bags were packed, and she was standing

beside Mrs. Belton's desk receiving her final check.

"I'm sorry about this," Mrs. Belton said.

"So am I."

"I can't understand what could have possessed you. It's not as if Jeffrey's a worrisome boy. He's a model. Never gives me a moment's trouble."

"No ma'am," Martha said. She had made up her mind to say no more about the matter. What was the use? Besides, there was the possibility that she had been wrong. Perhaps she was getting old and fanciful. Perhaps children did make her nervous.

"Such a dear, sweet boy," Mrs. Belton was saying. "He's given me all the love he had for both his parents before they died. Sometimes I'm afraid he loves me too much. He just wants to be alone with me all the time. He said to me only last night, 'Mamman," he said, 'I wish I could be with you alone forever and ever. You're the only one in the whole world who loves me'. Does that sound like a bad boy?"

"I guess he's going to get his wish," Martha said, ignoring the question. She folded the check and put it into her purse.

Mrs. Belton's jaw tightened at the obvious rebuff. She had wanted Martha to admit her error. A vague uneasiness flickered in her eyes. She glanced out the window at her grandson as he swung back and forth in the garden swing. The sun shining on his yellow hair reassured her.

At the door, Martha paused. "Why did the woman before me leave?" she asked on impulse.

"Lilian?" Mrs. Belton mused. "She had an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"The Hari Kari sword my son brought home from Japan fell off the wall in her room and cut her finger. Severed it completely in fact. She became quite hysterical, ran away like a mad thing. It was all very regrettable. I was sorry to lose her."

In the garden swing, the little boy glided to and fro—in the shadow and out, like a darting, golden fish.

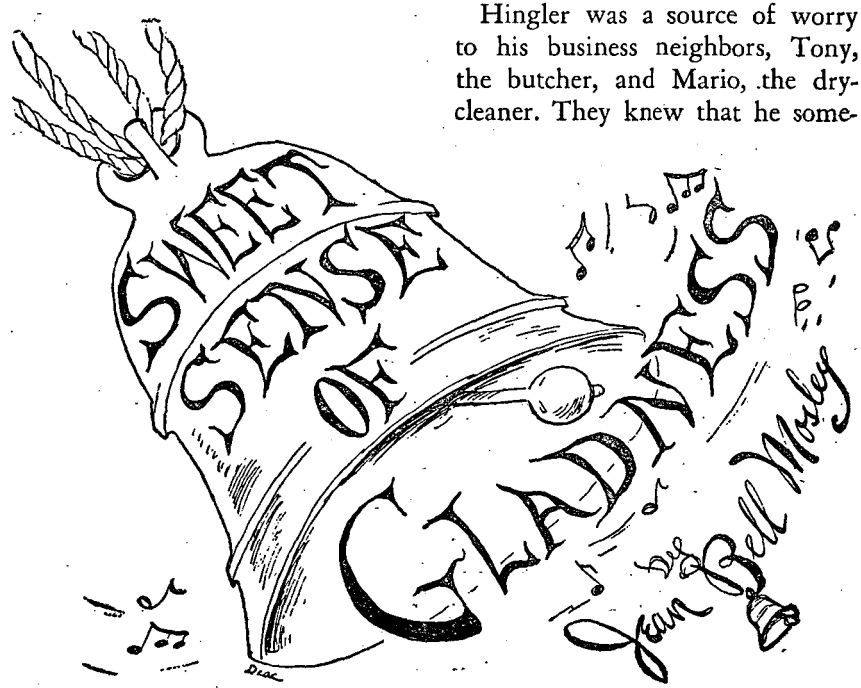
In this day of automation and standardization, it is indeed refreshing to meet a master craftsman, albeit his craft is somewhat obsolete and susceptibly sentimental.

SWEET SENSE OF GLADNESS

by Jean Bell Mosley

EVERYTHING in Hingler's Shoe Repair shop seemed to accentuate the law of gravity. Floorboards gave beneath the lightest of treads, springs in the customer's chair bulged downward, and long looping spiderwebs, grown heavy with oily dust, hung like black portieres from the ceiling. Even old Hingler himself seemed to sag. His clothes drooped, waistcoat buttons dangled, and old-fashioned, steel-rimmed glasses seemed forever in danger of sliding from his rather beak-like nose. Time had whitened his hair and wrested the elasticity from his once plump face and neck, leaving loose scallops of flesh that trembled and flapped when he pounded with hammer and awl.

Hingler was a source of worry to his business neighbors, Tony, the butcher, and Mario, the dry-cleaner. They knew that he some-



times closed his shop and was gone two, three, maybe six months at a stretch, trying to retire, only to come back and wearily resume his trade. "Just can't make it," they said to each other and wondered if, when such time came for them, they'd find their own savings and resources so inadequate. Their anxiety was further compounded by the knowledge that the cobbler seemed a most learned man, capable of filling any number of more remunerative positions for which there was always a demand in as large a city as Cape Haven. If Hingler couldn't make it, what in the name of Mercy might they expect?

It was true, Hingler was a learned man. In fact, through the years, his business had suffered because of his seemingly insatiable thirst for knowledge. Absentmindedly he put on rubber heel tips when leather had been requested, left out insoles, smeared dye, and shoes promised on Friday might not be ready until Monday if he was deep in Seneca, Aristotle, or just his latest periodical which might be anything from *Tahiti Times* to *Taxidermy*.

A customer sat in the lumpy chair right now, waiting for Hingler to look up from the morning paper. Hingler let him wait. Not only was the article he was reading of absorbing interest, he despised these meek who sat so still and waited. Like dumb, plodding, dull-witted oxen, he thought. Deliberately he finished his reading, tore out the item, poked it into a pocket for further perusal and methodically laid the newspaper on the stack used for wrapping. Then, fixing his small blue eyes on the customer, said, "Yes? Oh, it's you, Greene?" He puttered amongst the clutter of his dusty shelves, found Greene's brogans, registered the fee for re-soling and bid Greene a hasty good-day lest the rheumy-eyed dull-wit tarry to inquire of his health or make clichés about the weather.

That afternoon when Mario went out for coffee he saw that the shades of Hingler's shop were pulled and the yellowed sign proclaiming the place "Closed" was again in the window.

Three days later, half way across the continent, an elderly well-dressed gentleman, wearing a black bowler stepped from a bus in the small town of Engelberg located in a valley of the Central Highlands. Pushing his steel-rimmed glasses into position, he looked up and down the elm lined street, consulted a great gold pocket watch, and started off at a brisk pace down the shady sidewalk,

swinging an elegant ebony cane.

Walt Singer, the station manager, was watching. It wasn't every day a man wearing a bowler got off at Engelberg. In case this one wasn't staying but merely taking a leg-stretch, he called a warning reminder, "Only a five minute stop-over, sir." Walt's voice was thick with the accent and inflection peculiar to the people of that hilly region, people honed to the harsh realities of the human predicament, yet ever ready and willing, yea, eager, to offer what alleviations they could, be it cures for sties, warts, moles, recipes for attracting good luck, banishing bad luck, or simple friendly reminders such as Walt had just dispensed.

"Thank you," returned the stranger, quickening his pace.

When he wasn't back near reloading time, Walt sent Little Noah Avery to find him, a poor choice, for Little Noah got distracted by beetles, butterflies and old sidewalk hopscotch marks.

The bus driver, at Walt's worried request, waited a few minutes, then went on, muttering that schedules were schedules.

"Keep the coffee hot, Mabel," Walt advised the blond-haired

waitress officiating at the snack counter. "A cup of coffee can sometimes dampen down a temper fire." He hoped the stranded traveler wouldn't stir himself into a frothin' fit. One thing he hated was having to cope with a frothin' fit.

Thirty minutes later, Little Noah sauntered up with the stranger in tow.

"Sorry, Mister. I held the bus long as I could," Walt explained, tensing for the possible flareup.

"Missed it, did I?" the stranger laughed. "Never did have a sense of time." He dug out the great watch, held it to his ear. "Stopped on me again." He smiled tolerantly as if forgiving some old friend. "Well, I want you to know, sir, that I wouldn't have missed walking down the pleasant streets of this village for anything in the world. Although brief, it was a delight impossible to convey, a feeling as if —." He broke off and looked around at Walt, Mabel and Little Noah diffidently, almost apologetically as though he might, in poor taste, be revealing too much of himself too soon, then continued, "—as if I'd suddenly come home at last. So quiet here, so lovely. I sensed some hard twisty knot inside of me beginning to unravel as the peace and serenity of this place began to enfold me within its quiescent embrace."

There was a short silence during which Walt and Mabel managed to close their mouths and Little Noah, as a small moth drawn to a warm flame, laid his downy head against the gentleman's arm.

"What's the name of this place?" the stranger inquired. "It seems so dearly familiar."

"Engelberg, sir," Walt said, his relief at not having to cope so great he felt suddenly full of peace himself. Following the stranger's gaze down Main Street, he noticed, as one with new eyes for an old scene, that the interlocking branches of the bordering elms made a sort of shady tunnel through town, and the western hills, rising sharply at the end had that faint blue haze which one of his long-ago teachers had likened to the bloom on a plum. It was still a shock to Walt not to see the church standing out so white against the backdrop of the hills. He felt compelled to explain this hole in the landscape. "Church down there burned a couple of weeks ago."

At this the old gentleman held his hat to his heart and observed a respectful silence before repeating, as if to call up some elusive memory, "Engelberg? Engelberg?" He shook his head in puzzlement. "No, I'm sure I've never been here. Guess it just looks like the

place of my dreams. We all have our mental images of Tranquility's abode, don't we?" Then, as one reluctantly called away from the periphery of Paradise to grapple with reality, he thrust out his hand and said, "Oh, I have not introduced myself. My name is Hinkel. A. J. Hinkel."

"Walt Singer here," Walt said, with vast good will. "And this is Mrs. Mabel Donahue. Guess you've already met Little Noah."

Mr. Hinkel took Mabel's hesitant hand, held it lightly, bowed extremely low. "Madam, I see there are other flowers besides the dooryard roses to lend their charm to this enchanted village. And pray do not think me bold if I say this is quite the loveliest star sapphire I've ever seen."

Mabel smiled uncertainly and, sensing that her standard quip to such passing strangers was out of order, said nothing. It was good to have her ring noted and admired. A warm glow spread over her body. She smoothed her hair, straightened her belt and gave Little Noah a doughnut.

"Won't be another bus for twenty-four hours," Walt said. "There's a motel yonder, or Widow Patmore's boarding house around the corner. Enola Patmore is pretty good at frying chicken."

"Little Noah, show me the way to the fried chicken," said Mr. Hinkel at once, proving he understood a recommendation when he heard it.

"Have some coffee first?" Mabel invited. "On the house."

"And your luggage, sir?" Walt questioned. "Want me to phone on ahead and have them leave it until you catch up?"

"Thank you, madam." Again the courteous bow. "You are most gracious, and as for luggage, no problem there, Mr. Singer. I make it a point to travel light. To find the joys of the open road, one must travel without a load."

"Road, toad, te-allego load. Tee-legged, tie-legged, bow-legged road," sang Little Noah, spinning around on one foot and dissolving into helpless laughter for no reason at all except that it was turning out to be such a bright dazzle of a day.

By the time the citizens' meeting for discussion of the rebuilding of the church was called, most everyone in town knew that an elderly gentleman had missed his bus one day recently and was now thinking of making Engelberg his home. "Isn't it funny how things work out?" marveled the Engelbergians.

"We need a man like him," said the minister. "An asset to the

town," agreed the mayor. "A well-read man who can help us banish the doubts and fears that corrode our lives," described the librarian who liked pretty phrases herself. The loungers at the barber shop welcomed the supply of new jokes he had brought and the merchants admired his insistence on paying cash.

"I declare, I never had a guest the likes of him," Enola Patmore had told her friends at their Garden Club meeting. "There's something about him that's so—well, so dignified and restful." Enola was a small neat woman who never had much to say. Her plain face, lined by time and trouble, had flushed softly with unusual enthusiasm.

Coming from Enola the women were impressed with the compliment.

"What's his business, Enola?" the mayor's wife inquired.

"He's retired now, but before that he was in the shoe business, and in his youth, back in the Old Country, a bell caster."

"The Old Country!" exclaimed some, delighted with this cosmopolitan touch, while others demanded more vociferously, "A what?"

"A bell caster," Enola repeated. "You know, one who makes bells."

"I supposed bells were made in factories," said the doctor's wife.

"Oh, most of them are now," Enola explained, "but in olden times they were hand-made, right on the spot where they were to be used. Especially church bells. Mr. Hinkel says he is still haunted by the memory of a bell he made for a little church in Switzerland. Seems he'd been trying for years to cast a bell with a maiden peal. That's one that turns out with perfect pitch. It doesn't happen often." Suddenly abashed at her wordiness, Enola paused and might have stopped altogether had not the doctor's wife urged her on. Emboldened by the request, she continued, "Well, just as Mr. Hinkel was ready to put his metals into his melting furnace—he had some sort of portable furnace—a member of that community, one mired in the blackest of sins, came running to him, wild-eyed and shaking and said that he'd had a dream, and in this dream he'd been promised forgiveness of every last one of his sins if he would have his most valuable and treasured possession melted into the bell metal. Mr. Hinkel said he didn't want to take it, but that—"

"What was it?" came the unanimous demand.

"Oh, yes. I get ahead of myself," Enola apologized. "Well, it was a gold brooch, set with diamonds. An heirloom. Mr. Hinkel didn't

want to take it, not only on account of its great value but because melting it into the bell metal might have made a flaw that would cause the bell to crack, but he said there was such a look of pleading in the old sinner's eyes he simply could not turn him down. So, crossing their hearts in hope-to-die secrecy, in it went, and never, never in all his life, so Mr. Hinkel says, has he heard a bell that had a sweeter sound than that one. Oh, I wish you could hear him describe it. I can't use the words he does, something like 'wild and quivery that all but pulled his soul out of him'."

"And the old sinner?" someone prodded.

"He became a most godly man," Enola went on, "and told Mr. Hinkel that every time that bell rang it spoke most secretly to him, saying, *Thy sins are forgiven,* and that such a strange sweet sense of inexpressible gladness and physical well-being spread over his body he was as one intoxicated with joy."

A shiver passed over the librarian and the doctor's wife smoothed away the sudden gooseflesh of her arms.

"Those last words, *inexpressible gladness* and *intoxicated with joy,* are Mr. Hinkel's exactly," Enola explained. "Because they were so pretty, I went right away and set them down. You all know that I couldn't talk that way myself." Now, quite flustered and overcome, Enola lapsed into silence and busied herself with the contents of her purse.

Half filled cups of coffee grew cold. Teacakes were left uneaten. A strange, tender quietness descended upon the roomful of women, as if en masse, at Enola's telling, they had had a glimpse of glory, where, at least for one person, the harsh realities of life had been alleviated forever, a thing they always knew to be quite possible if one could but find the thing that worked. They went away subdued and thoughtful.

Since Mr. Hinkel was considering making Engelberg his home, he had been invited to the town meeting. As behooving a newcomer, he sat quietly and listened. From time to time, some of the planners called upon him for an opinion as one could call upon a respected peer, but he politely refused, rising only once to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm sure you who have lived here through the years to make Engelberg the jewel that it is, are quite capable of making the wisest of decisions without help from a brash Johnny-come-lately." He raised a hand to quiet the good-mannered objection to such self-styled status. "There is

only one point upon which I feel qualified to offer advice, and that is a minor one. I note that the subject of a new bell has been mentioned. In the interest of economy, if that is a point here, or in the interest of those who become attached to things they have known since childhood, things even their fathers and great-grandfathers knew, I might suggest that the old bell, cracked and broken as it was in its firey fall, can be melted and re-cast."

"Is that a fact?" the chairman exclaimed, having to rap his gavel repeatedly to quiet the outburst of delight.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Hinkel assured. "I'm sure you all have heard of Big Ben?"

A ripple of affirmation, noisier than needful, confirmed their sophistication on this point.

"What everyone doesn't know, although perhaps most of you here do," Mr. Hinkel complimented, "is that Big Ben was cracked before ever it was hung and was melted and re-cast."

Walt Singer sprang to his foot. "Mr. Chairman, I move that the old bell be re-cast. Not only for the sake of economy, but because that bell is part and parcel of this town." Another lusty applause was followed by a second to the motion, a vote of approval, committee appointments, and adjournment.

Ensuing summer days in Engelberg slid by lazily. When he was not helping in the few ways that he could with the erection of the new church, Mr. Hinkel went fishing with Walt and Little Noah, browsed through magazines at the library, or tended Mrs. Patmore's marigolds. He spoke to the men's Service Club and to the women's Garden Club, his talks generously sprinkled with bell legends, techniques of bell-making and histories of famous bells, confirming the opinion of all that here, indeed, was a man who had known his craft from A to Z. He was weeding the marigolds one afternoon when a delegation of women officially designated as the Church Bell Committee emerged from Enola's house and descended upon him.

"Mr. Hinkel," said the banker's wife, coming right to the point, "we want *you* to re-cast our old church bell."

"Oh, my dear ladies." Mr. Hinkel threw up his hands in a gesture of genuine pleasure, but at the same time shook his head in sorrowful protest.

"Couldn't you, Mr. Hinkel?" the mayor's wife said, suddenly, feeling they had rushed in where angels shouldn't.

"I'm afraid not, my gracious

ones. It has been years since I have done anything like that. Not that a person ever forgets such a trade," he added hastily. Then, as if allowing himself the privilege of at least thinking of it, he spread his hands and looked at them critically, flexed the joints, smiled encouragingly. Moments of silence fraught with suspense stretched out. The ladies held their breath.

"No, no, it is quite impossible," Mr. Hinkel decided. "I have no portable furnace as in the old days. It takes quite a hot fire, you know. A foundry fire, in fact. If there was a foundry close—?"

"There's a foundry over at New Weiden. Only fifteen miles," said the mayor's wife, beaming.

"There is?" Mr. Hinkel was full of wonderment at this handy happenstance. Here was something not to be brushed off lightly. "Sometimes things just seem to point the way, don't they?" he said, more to himself, but loud enough to be heard. The ladies smiled. Yes, they were aware of such mysterious interrelations. They leaned forward, waiting.

At last, as if minting his words from some vast fund of emotional experience, Mr. Hinkel spoke, "I shall consider it a great honor to re-cast the bell of Engelberg." Removing a handkerchief from his pocket, he quite unashamedly wiped some tears from his eyes.

At the same moment, many miles away in Cape Haven, almost as if there were some mystical interrelation, Leon Greene paused to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. It was hot and humid in the big city. Shifting his package of shoes from one arm to the other he continued his plodding journey up Water Street to Hingler's Shoe Repair shop. Seeing the place was still closed, he turned around and wearily retraced his steps. He'd been coming to the shop every day for weeks and weeks. Mario and Tony had noticed. "No telling when old Hingler will be back," they'd told Greene. "Why don't you take your shoes somewhere else to be fixed?"

"Oh, they're already fixed," Greene had explained. "And they're not mine. That is, one of them isn't. Hingler made a mistake."

"I'd go on and wear them anyway if they fit," Mario advised.

"Both left-footed," Greene further explained. His worried countenance had brightened momentarily at the joke of the thing. "But I sure do need my shoes," he told them. "You don't happen to know where he lives, or where he went so's I could get in touch?"

"Oh, he lives back of his shop,

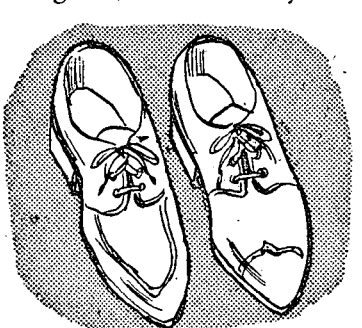
but he's gone. He goes away like this," said Tony.

"I know," Greene had agreed. "But I sure do need my shoes."

On his way back home, Greene met his policeman friend, Al, and laid the problem before him. "Is there any way I could get into the shop and get my matching shoe, Al?"

"Nope, that would be breaking and entering," Al warned. "Think back, did Hingler say anything to indicate where he might be going? You could write him, maybe."

"Not a thing," said Greene, shaking his head in dismay at the



whole big frustrating puzzle.

"Well, keep thinking," Al advised.

So, plodding along home, Greene kept thinking. Off and on all summer he'd been thinking. He remembered how the cobbler had made him wait that day until he had finished reading his paper, had torn something out of it, laid the paper on the stack, got his shoes, wrapped them, come to think of it, in the paper he'd been reading, the very paper, come to think of it again, in which the shoes were still wrapped. Some days new things like this did pop up, but little good they did in getting his shoes back. Still, as Al had suggested, he'd keep thinking. In the meantime maybe Hingler would return.

Walt Singer drove Mr. Hinkel back and forth to New Weiden as part of his contribution and reported the daily progress of the bell-making to his friends. The doctor's wife, the mayor's wife, Mabel, and the librarian, happening to pass through New Weiden at separate times, stopped to look in on the project. These visits slowed the work, for Mr. Hinkel was ever gracious and willing to explain all the various steps. But, eventually, a tentative day was set for the casting. Tentative, because Mr. Hinkel was suffering from a slight sprain of his right arm and had decided to rest it a while. "Anyway, no use in hurrying such a project until all possible details are attended to," he'd told Enola.

He was sitting in the porch swing of the boarding house on an early autumn evening when Enola

came out to join him. She did not take her accustomed chair but chose one closer to the swing. Mr. Hinkel, cognizant of little things that usually preceded drama, stopped the swing and waited.

At length, Enola spoke. "Mr. Hinkel, remember the bell you made with the old sinner's most precious possession melted into it?"

"Yes, Enola, how could I ever forget?" He spoke softly, using her first name as tried and true friends would. "Perhaps I should not have divulged the secret, but it is all so far away now."

"Oh, I do not blame you for that," Enola rushed on as if to banish small talk and do what she had to do quickly. "Mr. Hinkel, I want you to take this." She leaned forward and pressed something into his hand. "I wish this to be melted into the bell."

"Oh, my dear," Mr. Hinkel protested, whispering now. "I cannot let you do this. I know not what I hold, but assume it is of great value, is it not?"

"It is the pendant from an old lavalier, set with rubies and diamonds, a thing which could have made my life easier at times, had I so chosen. You know, I have seen better days, but, well, I have a living. Please, Mr. Hinkel," she pleaded, "do not deny me the possibility of hearing the bell speak to me. I grow old, as you can see. There are few pleasures left. I long to feel the inexpressible gladness, the intoxicating joy."

Mr. Hinkel's hand closed over the small pendant, his fingers exploring the jewels as if to ascertain the true depth of Enola's longing. His heart leaped. "When you put it that way, how can I deny you?"

"Oh, thank you, thank you." Enola's voice broke with emotion.

"Just one thing. Should it cause an imperfection necessitating still another casting, it would be well if no one knew."

"Oh, I give you my undying secrecy," Enola hastened to pledge.

"And I give you mine."

The day of the bell's dedication was one that would be long remembered in Engelberg. Not since the ending of the war had citizens turned out one hundred percent. There was an atmosphere of mingled gaiety and warm fellowship. Hearts pounded with expectancy. Eyes were bright with a curious joy.

The church was not finished, but it would not have held everyone anyway. Seating arrangements had been made on the church lawn. The bell was mounted in a temporary stand, its clapper carefully wrapped, lest someone acci-

dentally set off a sound before the proper moment. The backdrop of the hills looked especially painted for the occasion. "As if a rainbow had melted and run all over," said Walt's old school teacher who had come back for the event, as had many of Engelberg's former citizens.

The air had that special invigorating crispness of early fall, yet there was a warm caressing gentleness in the sunshine. The doctor's wife, tingling with anticipation, had decided on her knit suit rather than the good black dress with which she usually wore her diamond clip. The mayor's wife, devoid of all baubles, looked lovely in green plaid. Enola had made over her last year's outfit most becomingly. Little Noah, uncomfortable in his Sunday clothes, soon discovered that he could see himself in the shine of Walt Singer's shoes, and made all manner of faces at himself to alleviate his condition. Mr. Hinkel, although offered a seat on the platform with other dignitaries, had refused any such honor, preferring, as he said, to sit near the back with his old friends, Walt and Little Noah.

In the midst of the opening hymn, Little Noah, tired of making faces, turned to see who the latecomers were in the standing crowd at the rear. Impressed with some uniforms and shiny badges, he nudged Walt who turned to see and whispered to Little Noah that it was the sheriff and his deputy. Walt was much pleased that officials would come over from the county seat for Engelberg's big day.

Curiosity satisfied, Little Noah turned his attention to Mr. Hinkel. He hoped Mr. Hinkel wasn't getting old. Granny Avery's hands had shook like that because she was old. Mr. Hinkel was changing color too, just like Granny had when she'd died. Frightened, Little Noah alerted Walt again.

"Are you sick, sir?" Walt whispered, full of concern.

"No," Mr. Hinkel assured. "Just a bit overcome with excitement."

Walt understood. He was a bit tightened up himself and when Mr. Hinkel whispered that he believed he'd take a little stretch, Walt had half a notion to go with him, not only to calm himself, but to be of help just in case Mr. Hinkel was sick. However, seeing that the officers had noted and were keeping an eye on his friend, Walt turned his full-throated attention to the song.

Mr. Hinkel quickly availed himself of the back streets, wishing very much to be alone. When he heard footsteps approaching from around a corner, he decided to go

through the vacant filling station and out the back door. From there, through various back alleys, he gained the street that led to his boarding house. Upstairs in his room he stepped to the window and saw with dismay that this circuitous route had been in vain. Reflections of sunshine on approaching shiny badges caught his eyes. His shoulders sagged. The loose flesh overlapping his collar shook. At a knock on the downstairs door he looked dangerously near that frothin' fit Walt so hated. With shaking hand he dug the huge watch from his pocket, pressed open the lid, and from the cotton lined cavity, quite devoid of time-telling mechanisms, took a jewel-studded lavalier, the diamond clip of the mayor's wife, the emerald brooch of the doctor's wife, the gold, diamond-set locket of the librarian, Mabel's star sapphire, or was it the librarian's sapphire and Mabel's clip? What difference? All dull-witted cows. Dull-witted gullible cows.

Stepping quickly to the bathroom, one by one, to prevent clogging, Mr. Hinkel flushed the trinkets away. A summer's work literally down the drain. Oh, to get his hands on the cow that had bawled.

Descending the stairs, somewhat cheered by his cunning disposal of evidence, he opened the door and stepped onto the porch.

"Good morning," greeted the sheriff. "We're sorry to bother you, but everyone else seems to be at the meeting. We saw you leave and followed. Do you, by chance, know a Mr. Hingler who might be here in Engelberg?"

"I am Hingler," Mr. Hinkle readily confessed. After all, the evidence was gone and if ensuing circumstances required, he could quite easily be Hinkel again. An old man couldn't be expected to have such good hearing.

"You are Hingler?" the sheriff asked, turning to his deputy in amazement. "Well, By George, if this isn't something to write home about."

The deputy felt it necessary to remove his hat in respect for the way things sometimes happened. "You see we were only hoping to inquire if you knew him, and here you are!"

Mr. Hinkel withstood what he thought to be a cat-and-mouse approach with stoicism, although his loathing for such amateur tactics made him a bit sick at his stomach.

"Mr. Hingler, do you own a shoe repair shop in Cape Haven?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is a picayunish matter, but we always try to be helpful when and where we can. It

seems you made a mistake in delivery to one of your customers, a Mr. Greene, I believe. He is most anxious to obtain his correct pair of shoes and asked us, if by some extraordinary chance we could locate you, if you were coming back soon, or if not, you'd provide some way for him to enter your shop and get the shoes?"

Hinkel, incredulous, stood choking.

"Sir, are you sick?" questioned the deputy.

"Sick?" Hinkel repeated, vacantly. "Yes, quite. Such a stupid mistake."

It was the sheriff's and deputy's turn to be incredulous. They could not imagine such dismay over so small a mistake.

"Well, I wouldn't let it worry me that much," said the sheriff.

When Hinkel spoke again there was a definite fuzziness to his words. "How did Greene know where to find me?"

"It seems you tore an item from a paper datelined from Engelberg telling of the burning of the church and wrapped Greene's shoes in the paper," the sheriff explained, wondering if the vague old man was capable of following. "Greene ran down the missing article and, on a hunch, said he thought you might be here, maybe this was an old home town or something. He wrote the authorities at the county seat, who asked us to look into it whenever we were over this way. Seems we chose a busy day to drop in and check. What's the big deal here today?"

"A bell dedication," said Hinkel, hoarsely.

At that moment, a joyous ringing broke the stillness of the autumn air. Sweet and clear the golden rings of sound curved through the air, mounting higher and higher until a canopy of glorious music seemed to spread protectingly over the town.

Enola Patmore sat as one entranced. At the first peal of the bell she had had a fleeting thought that it was not much different, but as she shut out the world and brought all the powers of her mind to a point of burning intensity, the inexpressible joy was not long in coming. Suddenly, it was as if all the sounds in the universe had melted into one great harmony and she was floating, soft and warm and silky, upwards and upwards where she perceived the whole wonderful order of the cosmos. The sun on her shoulders was infinitely gentle. The wind that stirred the grass at her feet was a part of a great rhythm. A bird sang. It did so, she thought, at its appointed place in the meas-

ured beat of things. A maple leaf drifted down and settled in her lap. She picked it up, tenderly, marveled at its shape and color. Really, she had never noticed the beauty of a leaf before, the intricate veining, the superb grace. Never had she seemed so clear-headed, so, yes, so intoxicated with gladness. She looked at her friends. Could it be possible they were experiencing the same ecstasy? If not, she hoped she would be able to describe it to them. A lifetime would not be long enough for her to try to describe this wonderful experience.

Enola tried to tell Mr. Hinkel of it. She had found him sitting in the porch swing, dull of eye and livid of countenance. In her excitement, the portent of these things were lost on her at first, and she began to tell of her experience. Not until he started gibbering unintelligibly about her being a bawling cow did she know that something was terribly wrong.

There was a fine article in the Engelberg paper about the new bell. At the county seat, the sheriff read it and shook his head sadly over the fact that the bell caster, A. J. Hinkel, had become seriously ill on the very day of the bell's dedication. "Hinkel? Hinkel?" he repeated aloud. "What was the name of that gentleman we spoke to over there that day?" he asked his deputy.

"Hingler," replied the deputy, having a penchant for remembering names.

"Oh, yes, Hingler," agreed the sheriff, turning his attention to the next item of news.

At the moment, in Cape Haven, Mario and Tony were returning from coffee break. Seeing Leon Greene, Tony asked, "Anything new?"

"Yes, sir. Funniest darn thing," Greene said. "I met a fellow in front of Hingler's shop today who said old Hingler had given him a wrong shoe too. On a hunch we opened our packages and now we both got our right shoes." Greene shook his head in amazement at the way things sometimes worked out, given enough time.

Our ladies, bless them, in seeking feminine embellishments at their favorite beauty salon, may not always find the "extras" here depicted.

The Beautiful

By Maeva Park

ISABEL WILLIAMS pressed the "3" button on the automatic elevator of Simpson's Department Store. In the semi-trance to which she had carefully trained herself these past weeks, she rode to the third floor and stepped off onto the soft carpeting. She went toward the Beauty Nook, which was off to the right, just beyond the chic Custom Dress Salon.

The svelte young blonde just ahead of her evoked a pang of envy in Isabel. If she could look like that again . . . perhaps Gerald would forget his plans. She closed her eyes. His plans to leave her.

The young woman with the pale-gold hair stopped at the high desk and murmured something. The receptionist, her lacquered black hair piled high on her head,

checked her appointment book and nodded graciously. "You may go right in, Miss Farrell. Booth Seven. Miss Joanne is expecting you."

Isabel's operator was "Miss Carla". Everyone in these shops was called Miss Somebody or Mr. Someone. Last names were outmoded in the beauty-business.

Isabel followed the blonde past the rows of dryers, with the rows of women beneath them, down the

left-hand aisle of glass-enclosed booths. The blonde turned in at No. 7, and Isabel saw "Miss Joanne", a pretty, vivid brunette in a white nylon uniform, waiting smilingly for her already-beautiful client.

Isabel went into the next booth, No. 9. "How are you today, Mrs. Williams?" Carla asked briskly, whisking the big apron around her neck, tucking in the tissue to keep her dress dry. She lifted a lock of Isabel's hair with her fingers and looked at it appraisingly.

"Miss Carla" was a grandmother by any standards, Isabel thought dispassionately, looking at the woman's carefully covered crows' feet, at the frankly hennaed hair. But she was a good hairdresser, well worth following from the more convenient neighborhood shop where Isabel was accustomed to going.

"You could stand a good oil treatment," she said to Isabel, "and what about a color touch-up? There are a few grey hairs here, dear."

"Yes, I know," said Isabel. Then, smiling a little desperately, "Give it the works, Carla!" She could see herself plainly enough in the merciless mirror, her face thin and drawn, her hair, once a true red-blonde, now faded to a pale fawn color. The older woman tilted the chair and started a stream of water running over Isabel's hair, then began lathering it with firm fingers.

Isabel relaxed under Carla's ministering hands, letting unhappiness wash over her as the water washed over her scalp.

It still seemed incredible that she had suspected nothing, all these months. For it must have taken months, surely, for Gerald to have become so enamored of this other woman that he was prepared to leave his fine position as vice-president of Packard Paper Boxes and go off to Mexico, into exile, as it were.

If she hadn't found the plane reservations hidden in the secret

compartment of his billfold, the day she'd been looking for the car registration, she might never have suspected the reason for Gerald's nights out, the unexplained phone calls, the change of attitude toward her. Now, looking back, she realized that he had been preparing for months to clear up his business affairs, to leave everything neat and tidy. And still she hadn't mustered the courage to talk to him about it.

Tonight she would do it, bolstered by the new hairdo and a beautiful, expensive dress. She couldn't afford to wait much longer; the ticket reservations were for two weeks hence.

The hot water ran into Isabel's ear, and she shook her head almost frantically. I am so fearful, she thought. No wonder he's grown tired of me.

Then she felt again the familiar surge of hard, cold anger. What right had Gerald Williams to grow tired of his wife? It had been her father's money which had started Gerald in business; her own social prestige had eased his path to success. Now, after all these years, he planned to throw her aside, to go off with some younger woman, no doubt, to live in the lush, exotic atmosphere of Mexico City, while Isabel was left alone to face their friends.

Her parents were dead now, and her father had left virtually nothing; but the fact remained that it was her father's company which had given Gerald his start. . . .

"I'm sorry," Carla was saying, drying Isabel's ears with a soft towel. "You can sit up now."

She began to dab the acrid-smelling permanent waving lotion onto the hair, and to snap the rollers on. She put the big plastic cap on Isabel's head and handed her a fashion magazine.

"You'll have to sit while this cooks," she said. "I'll go and comb out my other permanent now."

Isabel let the magazine rest idly in her lap while her mind went scurrying again over the past weeks. It was a little while before she realized what she was hearing.

With the water turned off, with Carla's ceaseless chatter gone, she could hear nearly every word being said in Booth No. 7. There was a thin, underlying strain of music, piped-in, the distant hum of conversation and hair dryers; but the voices cut cleanly and sharply over the opaque glass partition.

"Yes," said the voice liltingly, "we're leaving for Mexico City tonight. Gerald will get a divorce in Mexico, if his wife refuses to get one here. He says this is the best way. He'll sever all connection with the firm. After all, his wife's

grandfather founded the company. He could hardly expect to go on there, after he leaves Isabel. But Gerald has enough money to start over again somewhere. Paper boxes aren't very romantic, anyway!"

There was no answer from Miss Joanne. Apparently she let her clients spill out their troubles freely; and obviously she knew this particular patron well.

Isabel pressed her hands to her ears, and the crackle of the plastic cap was like the roar of an enormous seashell.

That striking blonde with her confident walk and her undeniable youth and beauty, was the girl with whom Gerald planned to run away! The fact that fate had set them side by side, in adjoining booths at the beauty parlor, was so wonderfully providential that Isabel had to press her palms against her mouth now, so that she would not laugh aloud.

She knew, of course, what she must do; and the knowledge was somehow a relief, after all the weeks of wondering and crying, of total and useless despair.

Carla came back, and her voice, rapid and gritty, drowned out the cozy, intimate chatter next door.

"I'll put you under the dryer now," she said, after she had removed the curlers and washed and set the hair, her thin fingers moving rapidly and expertly through Isabel's now-blonde hair.

Carla steered Isabel toward the dryer and established her with a handful of fashion magazines. In a few minutes she was back with a cup of tea, and Isabel drank it gratefully. The hot beverage cleared her head, and she was able to think again.

Fretfully she felt of the curls under the big hood, but they were still damp, and she knew full well that Carla wouldn't allow her to leave the shop with her hair wet and uncombed.

With a sigh of relief, she saw the blonde walk in, pick up some magazines, and settle herself under the dryer. There would be time enough.

The hair looked very nice when it was done, and Isabel was pleased. This new, young woman in the glass was a much more suitable wife for a handsome man like Gerald than was the drab, pinched-looking person who had entered the shop.

She paid Carla quickly, and while she was gathering up her belongings, she heard the mingled goodbyes from the little cubicle next door, heard the blonde call, "Goodbye, Joanne," and heard the quick, "Goodbye, Liz."

Isabel sighed in relief. There was no real need to follow her rival,

after all. Surely she could track her down now that she knew her full name. Liz Farrell. Elizabeth Farrell.

She went into the powder room and stepped quickly into the phone booth. Whipping frantically through the telephone book, she came at last to the page she sought, then finally to the name, Elizabeth Farrell, and the address, 107-A Willow Apartments.

The print, actually so small and black, leapt out at her, blazed out at her. Standing there in the hot, bright telephone booth, she committed the address to memory, her lips moving silently, as though in prayer.

Then she went down in the elevator and through the crowded, lighted store. Everywhere, as she passed, her new, sleek reflection peeped at her, blonde and chic and utterly strange. The store was hot and bright and filled with a kind of excitement. She couldn't remember when she'd felt this excited, this alive. The faces of the shoppers were filled with mystery.

It was Shakespeare, she thought triumphantly, who had said, "Take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them."

That was what she was doing—reducing her sea of troubles to a little pond of misery—because even with her rival gone, there remained the fact that Gerald no longer loved her, or thought he didn't.

Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she got her car from the underground garage and drove up the winding path to the street.

Willow Apartments was easy to find, a rambling brick structure on Easton Court, one of the city's nicest streets. Isabel parked the car neatly, a block away from the apartments, and walked unobtrusively down the street to 107-A.

The courtyard was quiet and expensive, with potted palms in little rows, and a tiny fountain splashing gently. Isabel noted with relief that there was no central lobby, and no doorman. The apartments were self-contained, each with its own private entrance. Isabel's mind darted away from the notion that Gerald might be paying for all this opulence.

Pressing a finger on the bell, she waited quietly until Liz Farrell opened the door. There was not the slightest doubt in her mind that her rival would be at home; this was meant to be.

"I'm Mrs. Williams," she said, and caught the faint flicker of surprise on the cameo-perfect features. "May I come in?"

"Yes, of course."

Liz Farrell stood aside to let Isabel enter.

From her bag, in which she had been carrying it these past weeks, trying to decide whether to use it on Gerald or herself, Isabel drew out the tiny revolver her father had given her, years ago.

"I'm not about to give up my husband to someone like you," she said calmly, and shot Elizabeth Farrell straight through the heart. Her father had taught her to take accurate aim.

Still with the comical surprised sort of look on her face, Liz Farrell slumped to the floor.

The voices of children at play, the sound of a far-off record-player came dimly to Isabel's ears. The crack of the gun still rang in the room, but apparently no one else had heard. The silencer which her efficient father had put on the revolver had done its work well.

Isabel dropped the little weapon back into her handbag. She touched Elizabeth Farrell with one gloved hand. Her mouth was puckered with distaste, but she satisfied herself that the younger woman was dead.

Then she went to the window, made certain that no one was near 107-A, and let herself out quietly. The lock snapped in place, and Isabel walked away without a backward glance.

Back home, she let herself in, paid Alberta, the cleaning woman, and responded smilingly to the exclamation, "Mrs. Williams, you look just wonderful! Takes ten years off you, that hair does."

Quickly Isabel went up the broad, curving stairway, her thin little heels soundless on the thick carpeting. In her room, spacious and sunny, with its fine furniture and beautiful draperies, she took off her things, hiding the gloves and the gun in the secret drawer of the antique French escritoire.

She took a shower, washing away all the grime and squalor of the day, and put on the new cocktail dress which she had bought earlier in the week. It was artfully cut, bringing out all the best points of her small, compact figure. She brushed the new hairdo carefully, and clasped a sparkling necklace round her throat.

The effect, in the big plate-glass mirror over the dressing-table, was wonderfully effective. That blonde, with the hair puffed and shining over the small face, was the kind men turned to look at on the street, the kind to whom they gravitated in bars.

She waited until she heard Gerald's key in the lock, then descended the staircase slowly. He was standing there in the foyer, lost in thought, his coat and hat still on, briefcase in hand. He looked unbearably handsome, and Isabel

felt a swift, exultant thrill, because she hadn't lost him after all.

"Hello, Gerald," she said calmly.

He looked up at her, and she was rewarded for the efforts of the entire afternoon by the look of amazement on his face.

"Isabel!" he said. "I scarcely knew you! You look lovely, and very—different."

It's working! she thought, and went down the stairs toward him.

"I'll mix you a drink," she said, kissing him lightly on the cheek, and saw once again the look of astonishment. It had been a long time since they'd kissed or chatted together like friends, or behaved in any way like a normal married couple. They didn't even quarrel.

Measuring the gin and vermouth, adding the ice, she wondered what had happened to them. Perhaps it was her timidity, her secret feeling of unworthiness. Her big, successful, domineering father had made her feel inferior, from earliest childhood; and when Gerald had asked her to marry him, she had accepted, but she had always wondered if it was not his fierce, driving ambition which had made him choose the boss' daughter for a mate.

She dropped the olives into the glasses almost gaily. No more! she thought. Today I've not only changed physically; I've taken a tremendous, positive step. I've taken arms against a sea of troubles . . .

"Why are you wearing your coat?" she asked in surprise, as Gerald entered the livingroom.

He had his briefcase in one hand and a sheaf of papers in the other. He put down the briefcase and accepted the martini. "I'm not staying for dinner," he said, and drank the cocktail in one quick swallow.

The little hand of fear clutched at her throat, and she waited numbly for the inevitable words.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Isabel," he said pityingly, "but I've found someone else."

I know, she thought, while her eyes remained fixed steadily on his.

He put the sheaf of papers into his briefcase, snapped it shut and locked it. She could smell the good, expensive aroma of tanned leather, an odor irrevocably associated with Gerald. There was an instant's swift pang, while she thought of what life might have been like, from tonight onward, without Gerald—if she had not taken matters into her own hands and saved their marriage.

"I had planned to leave in two weeks," he said, "but today the company decided to send me to the Coast for a conference, so I decided I'd better leave right away."

He looked at her almost kindly. "Perhaps it's better this way.

There'll be no time for tears nor recriminations. I've left you comfortably fixed, Isabel. Everything is arranged with my attorney. I hope you'll agree to a nice, quiet divorce."

When she did not answer, he said quietly, as if determined to make her understand, "We're leaving on the ten o'clock plane."

That's what you think, she thought exultantly. She wished she could be there when he found his lady-love, slain by a prowler, so the police would think. Gerald would never suspect her, of course, since he assumed she had been unaware of the very existence of Liz Farrell.

"Well," he said awkwardly, "Goodbye, Isabel." He touched her cheek lightly with cold lips.

She stood stiff as a ramrod, unspeaking, while he shrugged into his topcoat and put on the grey bowler hat which made him look so handsome and so distinguished.

"I'll—I'll write to you," he added lamely. "No reason why we shouldn't remain friends."

Isabel put her hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter, but it was plain that Gerald thought the gesture was meant to halt her tears.

He said hastily, "Please don't make a scene, Isabel. If you're honest with yourself, you'll face the fact that we've meant nothing to each other for a long time. You'll see; you'll make a new life for yourself after awhile. You're looking just lovely tonight, you know."

He put his hand on the doorknob as though anxious to be away.

Go, then, she thought; you'll be back soon enough.

He turned to her once again and said apologetically, but with the flushed face of a young boy in love, "I must get to the airport now. Joanne will be waiting for me."

The room spun about Isabel, and she was scarcely conscious of the door's closing, the sound of footsteps on the brick steps, as Gerald left to meet Joanne.

Miss Joanne, Booth 7. The beautiful blonde's pretty little brunette hairdresser. The beautiful *dead* blonde's hairdresser.

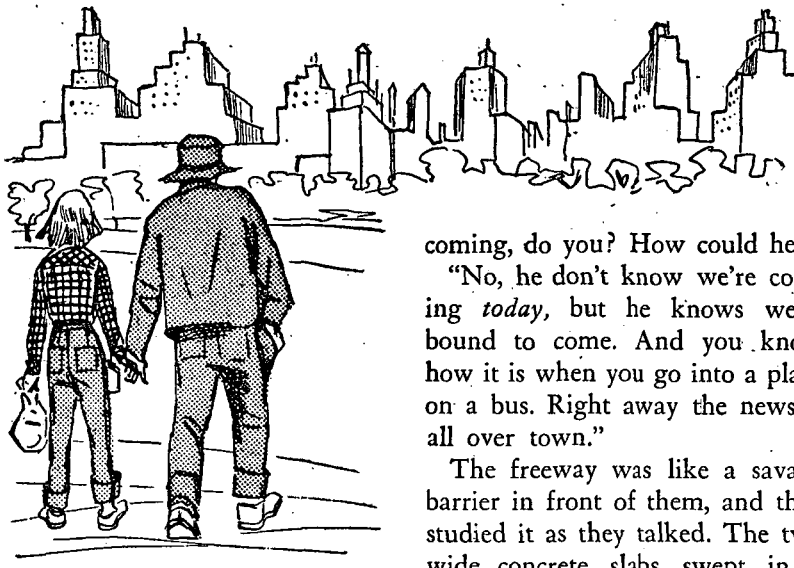
Every Friday

The television show ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS is one hour long, and may be seen on Friday evenings on the CBS network. Check your local television listing for time.

Perhaps the most disturbing factor about a feud is the tendency of participants to multiply more rapidly than grievances. Late starters inevitably face formidable odds.

THEY stopped at the freeway and stood uncertainly, watching the heavy traffic zoom by and peering directly across it where the skyline of the city rose in the smog two miles away. The man was old, maybe seventy. A big, bony nose dominated his face. His shoulders were hunched, hawk-like, under a loose blue denim shirt. The right front pocket of his baggy overalls bulged and swung with his movement, as if it contained a piece of iron.

His companion was a young girl, maybe fourteen, dressed in a



red cotton blouse tucked into blue jeans. Her hair was brown, short and straight. She carried a paper sack in one hand, swinging it by its wadded top, and in the other hand a black patent leather purse. Her breasts were beginning to swell under the blouse, but the blue eyes she turned to the old man were those of a trusting child. "Grandpap," she said, "you think we should of taken the bus clear into town?"

He thought it over carefully before he answered. "No, Angie Baby, like I said, we don't know but what Amos Bearden might have a spy at the bus station. He probably don't, but we don't know."

"You don't think he knows we're coming, do you? How could he?"

"No, he don't know we're coming *today,* but he knows we're bound to come. And you know how it is when you go into a place on a bus. Right away the news is all over town."

The freeway was like a savage barrier in front of them, and they studied it as they talked. The two wide concrete slabs swept in a great arc, the slabs separated and bordered by tailored strips of grass. The old man would pick up a roaring diesel truck with his eyes far to the left and follow it until it disappeared to the right.

The girl said, "I believe this is the damndest road I ever saw, Grandpap. Don't you think so?"

"Don't say 'damndest', Angie Baby, even if you hear me say it." He dreamed a minute, then went on, "Here of late it seems like I keep remembering things that happened a long time ago. You know what this road puts me in mind of?"

"What, Grandpap?"

"Well, a time when I was littler than you. Maybe I was eight or

ten. It was about the time they had that war when Teddy Roosevelt was in the newspaper. Anyway, it was the first long hunt I went on with my pap; that was your great-grandpap, Angie Baby. We came to Dead Squaw Crik and it was flooded away out of its banks and we couldn't cross over, but Pap said, 'We're in no hurry; we'll figure out some way to get across.' So he stuck a stick up in the mud at the edge of the water, and we watched it maybe three hours, and sure enough the water was falling. We camped there four days until the water went down, then we rolled up our britches and loaded our gear on our backs and waded on across."

"You think if we set down here and wait the cars might slow down?"

"They might. Anyway, we can see." He sat down carefully on the grass, with much grunting as he arranged his old bones. "Come set around on this side, Angie Baby. I'm going to load up my gun. We're running into lots of people, and we can't ever tell when we might meet Amos Bearden."

When she had sat down beside him, he took from his pocket a heavy single-action .45 revolver, hiding it down between them. The gun was pitted with rust on the outside, but the action clicked smoothly as he pulled the trigger twice, then swung out the cylinder. From another pocket he took a box of cartridges and shook six into his lap. The heavy shells looked small in his big bony hand. He slipped them one by one into the cylinder, clicked the gun shut, and put it back in his deep overalls pocket.

"Grandpap, you want me to carry that in my purse?"

"No, it's all right, Angie Baby."

"You want me to carry the return bus tickets in my purse?"

"No, I'll carry them, Angie Baby."

"Well, you let me carry the bread and meat and the newspaper picture of Amos Bearden, and you let me carry ten dollars. Why don't you want me to carry the return bus tickets?"

"I'll carry them, Angie Baby. You want to carry some more money besides the ten dollars?"

"No, I don't guess so."

They sat in silence watching the traffic going sixty. The trucks snarled like animals. They could feel the wind whip from the big vans. "I believe one of them big trucks would run over you and never know it," he said. "If anybody was going to live in a town like this all the time, that's what he would need to go around in, one of them big trucks, or a bus."

"You wouldn't get run over," she agreed, "but you would have to learn to drive it."

He chuckled, "I believe anybody would have to be nearly crazy to learn to drive one."

"I believe anybody would have to be nearly crazy even to live around a big town like this."

"Well, me and you will get where we're going on foot. We've been over many a hill on foot, haven't we, Angie Baby?"

"Yes, and mountains too."

The traffic was less heavy. They rose and stood nearer the concrete slab. He bent down over her to be heard above the noise. "It's thinning out some, all right. Now, Angie Baby, when I say 'go' you run for that grass in the middle. Don't stop and don't look back at me." He judged the vehicles carefully, then just as a red truck whizzed in front of their noses, he yelled, "Go!"

She made it to the dividing strip and turned. The old man was barely missed by a blue sedan, the driver of which yelled something. They made it in the same manner across the other half of the freeway.

They came down the grassy bank and into an area spotted with big warehouses. They kept their direction by the skyline of the city rising dimly in the smog. Some of the streets were dirt and some paved.

"Grandpap," she said, "it's going to be hard to find Amos Bearden, there are so many people."

"We'll have to keep our eyes open."

"It may take us a week to find him, there are so many people and so many places to hide."

"We'll find him, Angie Baby, if it takes a month. Me and you are Tuckers, and we don't give up because something takes a month, or longer than that. I won't live forever, and me and you are going to finish it while we got the advantage. Then we can have peace of mind, and our folks that's sleeping, they can rest in peace. I don't aim to pass away and leave you alone with a Bearden still alive in the world."

They came to a street that led in nearly the right direction. Along it were tourist courts, filling stations, garages, and stores, with signs of all kinds, wooden and tin, and flashing red and green and yellow neon. The cars did not go so fast but there was more weaving and crowding and honking of horns and screeching of brakes.

"Angie Baby," he said, "would you like to stop some place and drink a glass of milk?"

"We still got plenty of bread and meat," she said, holding up the paper sack.

"Well, we got money if you want

milk. I'd like to go in some place, anyway. I aim to ask around about Amos Bearden if I get a good chance."

"All right, I would like to have some milk."

They went into a small cafe. There were three tables and a row of stools along a counter. The man behind the counter looked pleasant. He had no other customers. When they sat down on two stools, he wiped the counter with a large towel and gave them two glasses of water. The girl put her purse and sack in her lap.

The old man took a cup of coffee, and after they were served he looked around carefully again to make sure no one else had come in, before he spoke. "Mister, do you know Amos Bearden?"

"Bearden. Bearden. No, can't say I do, old timer. Wait, what you say that first name was?"

"Amos. Amos Bearden."

"Amos Bearden! You don't mean him! You must be thinking about somebody else from who I am."

"Show him the newspaper, Angie Baby."

She opened her purse and unfolded the top half of a newspaper front page. There was a two-column picture of a man and under it the caption "Indicted". "We found it on the railroad track a week ago," she said. "Grandpap thinks it probably blew out of a train."

The cafe man frowned and asked the old man, "You know him, do you?"

"We know him."

"Well, he's not indicted any more. He beat that rap like he did all the others."

"Whereabouts does he live?"

The cafe man frowned and looked from one to the other. "Look, I don't know anything about him. I just don't want any trouble." He began to wipe on the counter with the towel, then he moved down to the end and began washing glasses.

The old man asked with irritation, "How can anybody find their way around in this town if people won't answer a plain question?"

Without looking up the cafe man said, "I got city maps up in the rack. Twenty-five cents."

She went up and found the folded map and brought it to the old man. He put it in the top front pocket of his overalls.

The cafe man frowned and studied them when they paid him. As they opened the door he said, "Look, old timer, I didn't mean to be impolite. But if you want some good advice, stay away from Amos Bearden."

"How come?"

"He runs the rackets in this

town. He won't cause you nothing but grief."

"How come?"

"If you don't know 'how come' you sure better stay away from him. He's got nothing around him but hoods and bodyguards."

They went on down the street and the old man snorted in disgust. "Stay away from him! I aim to stay away from him, about six feet! I knew his pappy and his grandpappy! They made the rottenest whisky for twenty miles, and all of them was cowards, uncles and cousins and all!"

The busy street was angling away from the direction they wanted to go, so they turned off. On a quiet street they sat on the curb and unfolded the map. It was just a maze of lines. She read some of the street names off to him, but they did not find their own location.

They walked on toward the city skyline and she asked, "Grandpap, how come it all to start in the first place?"

"How come what to start, Angie Baby?"

"The feud."

"Oh, it was just them Beardens, Angie Baby."

"I mean, was there any certain thing that happened right at the first?"

He rubbed his chin. "Let me see. I did know, Angie Baby, but seems like it's slipped my mind. I guess it was just because them Beardens was always like they was."

They came to an area where the streets were not paved but were covered with lumps and mudholes. The small unpainted houses crowded against each other and left no room for sidewalks, so they walked in the sorry street. Small children with bare feet ran among the houses and fought with each other and cried, and women stuck their heads out of the windows and screamed orders at the children: "Shut up that crying!" "Get in this house!" "Stay out of that mud!"

On a bench at a city bus stop, a woman sat with folded arms. The old man approached her. "Mam, me and Angie here are strangers in town and we're looking for a man, but we don't know where he lives. What would be the best way to find him?"

"Look him up in a phone book."

The old man and his granddaughter looked at each other. "We don't have a phone book, Mam."

The woman shrugged. "You don't think I've got one, do you? Go to a drugstore or some place there's a public telephone."

They thanked her and went on. The crowded houses gave way to factories; at first the buildings were of corrugated sheet iron, then they were of brick with green-

painted windows. The smoke stacks spouted smoke.

"Grandpap," she said, "don't you think it smells awful in this town?"

"Smells like a coal oil stove turned up too high and not drawing enough air," he said.

They went through the open gate of a chain-link fence and passed beside a long brick building. On the other side of them half a block full of automobiles were lined up waiting. When they had come to about the middle of the factory, without warning the doors burst open and men poured out, coming fast.

She took hold of the old man's left hand and they stopped. Back the way they had come was no retreat, for the whole side of the building had erupted with hurrying men. They stood close together, and the old man's hand hovered over the deep overalls pocket where the .45 revolver lay. The crowd came around them as water around a stone in a stream. The automobiles began to start and move. One came directly toward them honking. They took refuge by a telephone pole and waited.

The rush of men and cars was over as suddenly as it had come. "Let's get out of this place, Angie Baby," he said.

They went on past the long building and out through a gate in the chain-link fence. Then they turned down a street with sidewalks. The skyline of the city was spreading out as they drew near it. On the corner they found a public telephone booth.

The old man could not read, but the girl was sure that she could find the name. She spread out the thick book on the little shelf and leafed through it. When she found it, her heart became like a weight in her chest. He was wrong. There were many Beardens. Bearden, A.C.; Bearden, Amos; Bearden Beauty Salon . . . She looked up to see that he was not watching and then counted them: sixty-three Beardens.

"Can you find him, Angie Baby? Does it say where he lives?"

She looked back at Bearden, Amos. "Yes, Grandpap, 2217 Hickory Avenue."

He repeated the address two or three times. They opened the map and found Hickory Avenue, but did not know their own location.

As they walked on, she carried a burden such as she had never felt before. If she told him about the sixty-three Beardens, what could he do? He could only feel the same disappointment. He had always before known what they should do and he had always been right. Now he was so sure—and so wrong. For the first time she

saw that he was old and she couldn't share a burden with him. It wouldn't make it less for her but would double it, because he had to bear it too.

"Grandpap," she said, "I don't like it around this big town very well, do you?"

"No, I don't, Angie Baby. Don't like it at all. When we get our business took care of, we'll get on that bus and go back to the hills where we belong."

"Well, Grandpap, how do you think it would be if we just let Amos Bearden stay here? It would be good enough for him."

He thought it over carefully. "No, he may be used to it and like it. He may have him a big truck to go around in."

They came to a place where the streets met to make a large circle. The cars went around the circle, then turned off. She remembered the circle on the map and they spread it out. They were four blocks from Hickory Avenue.

As they turned down the avenue, checking by the numbers to see that they were going in the right direction, the sun dropped behind the houses. It had been a dim sun all day, like one seen through a thin cloud. They found the number. The house at 2217 was two-story stone like the others. In front of it sat a low, shiny black car. In the garage were two more long black cars. They walked past the house. Across the street and past three more houses was a drugstore on the corner; here the old man took the girl.

"Now you stay right here, Angie Baby," he cautioned, with more authority than usual. "Here. You better hold my pocketbook." He fished it out of his hip pocket. It was of worn leather, curved from long contact with the curve of his buttocks. "Now, you wait right here, and your grandpap will take care of it."

She stood in the door of the drugstore clutching the pocketbook in the same hand with her patent-leather purse, watching him go back to the house. He was on the porch a minute, then he went inside with his right hand in his big overalls pocket.

It was two or three minutes before the first shot, a loud *BAM* that could have come from no gun except the heavy old .45 revolver. It was followed by a second shot from the same gun, then by the *crack* and *spit* of other guns interspersed with the unmistakable *BAM* of the big revolver, more shots altogether than she could count. People began to run out of the house and out of other houses.

She felt that she might cry without meaning to, and the idea 'I am

a Tucker' ran through her mind. She went into the public telephone booth in the corner and closed the door to hide herself from the eyes of the people on the stools and the man in the white cap. She put her things on the floor and opened the thick book thinking, "Maybe it's not true. Maybe I made a mistake before." But it was true. There they were still: Bearden, A.C.; Bearden, Amos; Bearden Beauty Salon; all sixty-three of them. She was not really hunting as she turned further in the book, but only keeping her hands busy. There were so many people. Then she came to the place where her name would have been if it were in the book, and it seemed for a moment that she must have forgotten how to spell it. She said the letters softly to check, "T,U,C,K,E,R."

The pages were large and the names small, and there were more than two whole columns of Tuckers. She counted three-hundred and twenty-seven and dwelt lovingly on their first names: Albert Tucker, Amy Tucker, Charles, Emma, Jesse K., Lloyd, Melvin, Mary Lee. When she came out, feeling less alone than before, the policemen were there. They talked to her in a friendly manner and were very kind.

At the police station they took the pocketbook from her and examined the contents in front of her. They found a dozen old pictures, some of people she knew, some of people she didn't. One showed Grandpap in the woods standing behind a dead bear, and holding a long-barrel gun in the crook of his arm. They found a flour ration stamp issued in 1918 and a dollar bill, folded in creases that seemed to have been in it a half century, issued by the Confederate States of America, with writing across its face in ink that was faded brown and illegible.

In the main pouch of the pocketbook they found twenty-eight dollars in good money and the return half of one round-trip bus ticket.

"Is there another ticket?" she asked the sergeant.

He looked again, then smiled at her serious face. "No, miss. But one is all you'll need."

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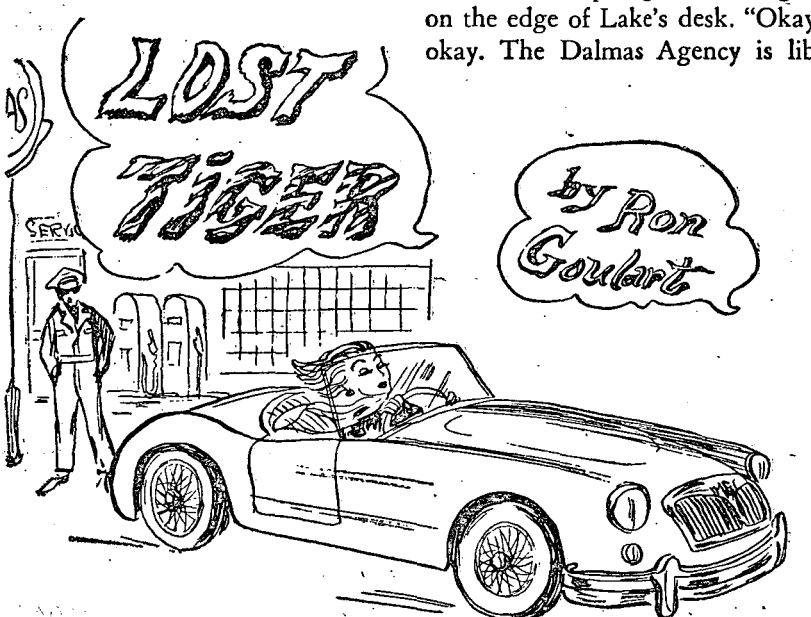
It is a sad fact that all those happy and fanciful comic strip characters must somewhere have their roots in reality. Sadder yet, once the caricature is born, the model becomes unnecessary.

LOST TIES

by Ron Goulart



THE Chief's scowl seemed to come into the room a few seconds before he did. As the office door slammed behind him he said, "Got one for you, Lake. So get on out to Pacific Palisades."

Dan Lake swung his feet down off the half open desk drawer he'd been resting them on. "Any particular address? Or is the whole place in trouble and needing help?"

Frowning, The Chief said, "You've still got it."

"Got what?"

"That silly moustache," said The Chief. He was a small taut man, clean shaven and crewcut.

Lake was tall and sharpedged, with a thick brown moustache. "It makes me look older."

The Chief pronged his fingers on the edge of Lake's desk. "Okay, okay. The Dalmas Agency is lib-

eral enough to let you get away with it. Okay."

"What about our client in Pacific Palisades?"

The Chief squinted. "Let me look the other way. I can't concentrate when I see that ridiculous hairpiece." He moved to the window that looked down on Wilshire and locked his hands behind his back. "You have to be very careful with this. We don't want any publicity. Our client is Alex Sigal."

"The cartoonist?" asked Lake. "Guy who draws *Tiny Tiger*."

"Him. Worth some $300,000 a year," said The Chief. He started to turn around and then stopped. "Wants us to locate somebody for him."

"Who?"

"Tiny Tiger."

Lake put his feet back on the open drawer. "You don't have to come in here and pull these things because you feel strangely about my moustache."

"I'm not kidding. You know he based that strip on his own little daughter. I hate all that lovable brat stuff but who can argue with the public. $300,000 every year."

"The girl's been kidnapped?"

"No," said The Chief. "She took off in her MG five days ago and hasn't been seen since."

"That's right," said Lake. "That strip is ten years old or more. The girl must be—how old is she now?"

"Nineteen," said The Chief. He finally looked at Lake. "Would you shave it off for a raise of $25 a week?"

"No."

The Chief fished a 5 by 7 photo out of his breast pocket. "Here's what she looks like now."

Lake studied the picture. The girl in it was standing in front of a white stucco wall, surrounded by palms and ferns. She was a pretty, slim girl, brunette, frowning into the sun. "She doesn't look like this in the funnies."

"People don't want them to grow up in the papers," said The Chief. "Like that scientist who wants to make kittens that'll stay kittens. The public will love that guy."

"What's the girl's name?"

The Chief found a memo in his suit pocket. "Here."

"Kerry Sigal, age 19. Five feet five. 110 pounds. Dark brown hair, brown eyes. No scars," read Lake. "That's good. Nobody wants a girl with scars."

"If she had one it would help us identify the body."

"Sigal thinks she's dead?"

"He thinks seven or eight separate things," said The Chief. "The kid's run off now and then before. There's no mother. Divorce about six years ago. The girl usually

shows up within a couple of days and Sigal is able to keep it quiet. This time no word for almost a week. So he's worried."

"Is he here?"

"No," said The Chief. "The picture is from my files. The rest of this was set up by phone. Sigal's apparently a couple weeks behind his deadlines and is working around the clock to catch up. That's why he didn't come in. Why he doesn't take off himself to track the girl."

"Does he have an idea where she went?"

"Lots of them," said The Chief. "You go see him and pick a few of the best ones. Then find that girl." He dropped another memo on Lake's desk. "Address. I told him you'd be there in about an hour. That way there's time for a shave."

Lake stood up. "Where I go, the moustache goes."

"Well," said The Chief. "Maybe he'll think it's a disguise."

Lake signed out an agency car and went down to the parking lot.

Alex Sigal was a tall tanned man in his late forties. He was wearing a looseknit pullover and a pair of tan shorts. His natural expression seemed to be a puzzled smile. "We can talk out by the pool," he said to Dan Lake after the maid had brought them together in a long silent living room.

"Fine," said Lake.

Sigal stopped, snapping his fingers. "Where is it? Oh, yeah." He picked up an ice bucket off a marble topped coffee table. "You carry this, Lake." From a sideboard he rescued a half finished drink. "Scotch, okay?" Sigal tucked a fresh bottle of prime scotch under his arm. "Get yourself a glass here someplace."

"I don't drink. Thanks."

"Good idea," said Sigal, leading Lake down a long, deep shadowed corridor to the pool area in the back of the big Spanish style house.

Nailed to an old wicker stool was a hand lettered sign. "No swimming. Pool being fixed."

"Filter is fouled up," said Sigal. "Nice lettering on the sign, huh? I can still do that pretty well."

"Would you rather talk in your studio?" said Lake. "I understand you've got a deadline to meet."

Sigal grinned and stretched out in a green and gold deck chair. "I told your boss that. See, I needed a reason why I couldn't handle my own family problems." He took a few seconds too long to open the scotch and fill his glass. Dropping in a new ice cube, Sigal said, "I'm afraid to go look for Kerry any more. You have to be clearheaded for that sort of thing."

Lake sat down on the leg rest of the chair next to Sigal. "How long has Kerry been gone?"

Sigal sipped his drink. "Today's Wednesday. She skipped out early Saturday. We have little quarrels sometimes. But it can't be stopped now."

"What can't?"

"The lousy strip. *Tiny Tiger.* Wherever we were when Kerry was a kid somebody in her crowd would find out who she was. Kerry's a very sensitive girl." He poured a little more scotch in his glass. "I should have known it would upset her. Being kidded every day in a strip that runs in over 450 newspapers. All across the country. But by the end of the second year I was getting nearly $100,000 from the thing. We just had to convince Kerry we really loved her. Lots of kids would have taken to publicity like a fish to the ocean. Not Kerry. Very sensitive young lady. Almost some sort of Victorian about it. But I am sorry." The puzzled smile stopped for a moment. "She runs away a lot. Especially during the summer like this. Thank heaven there hasn't been much bad publicity as a result."

"Does she run off with anyone. Or to see anyone?"

Sigal nodded. "Sometimes, yeah. I've checked all the people she's visited before. Let me explain one thing, Lake. Kerry isn't involved with a guy or anything. Usually she just drives around for a day or so and then stops someplace for the night and comes on home. This time, though, it's five days now."

"Could you give me a list of these friends she usually stays with?"

"I can," said Sigal. "As I say, I've already called all of them and none of them says she's been there. She's got one girl friend down in San Achilles. I even called down there."

Lake said, "I can check around in person. Sometimes that turns things up. Can you also give me a description of her car and the license number?"

"Sure," said Sigal. "I'll get that list of people and the car information. Wait here. I think the list of names is in my studio." Sigal grinned. "My studio. Actually it's theirs, too. I've got two guys, one's a Chinese boy, doing *Tiny Tiger* for me. They get paid and they don't care how Kerry feels about the thing." He got up and started around the pool. "Wait a minute. My prop." He came back for the bottle.

San Achilles is a medium sized beach town, down the coast almost to San Diego. The questioning of

Kerry's other friends had turned up nothing. Neither had The Chief's quiet check of the morgues and hospitals in the Los Angeles area. Kerry Sigal had a friend named Barbara McCabe who lived in San Achilles. Nothing else was turning up so Lake decided to drive down and talk to her. She had a small beach house outside of town. A shingle and lattices sort of place, slanted on a hill that dropped down to the ocean.

Lake got to the place at about eight that evening.

"Just in time for the sunset," said the tall, almost thin, blonde girl who opened the door to his knock.

"I'm Dan Lake," Lake said. "With the Dalmas Detective Agency in Los Angeles. I'd like to talk to you about Kerry Sigal."

"Thank goodness," said the girl. She held out one long-fingered hand. "IDs please."

Lake showed her his assortment of licenses. "Okay?"

"You look better without the moustache," she said, tapping the picture on his driver's license.

Lake closed his wallet. "You have seen Kerry Sigal then?"

"Come on in," Barbara said. Inside the front door a burlap covered ramp led down into a half sunk living room filled with stark functional furniture. "I was going to call Mr. Sigal tonight anyway." She sat down on a black legged chair and motioned at one four feet opposite it. "When he called a couple days ago I covered for Kerry. Now I'm worried myself."

Lake nudged the chair out of line so he wouldn't look like the partner in a pair of bookends if he sat across from the girl. "Was she staying with you?"

"Yes," said Barbara. "Since Saturday afternoon."

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"Sunday. In the morning. Kerry drove down to Tijuana. It's hardly a drive to Mexico from here."

"She go alone?"

The girl shook her head. "Not really. I'm pretty sure there's some fellow she knows in San Achilles."

"She drove down with him?"

"No," said Barbara. "It's a little subtler than that. Maybe this fellow is married. Anyway, Kerry's done this a few times before. She'll stay with me a day or so. Then spend a day or two in Mexico. Usually no further in than Tijuana or Ensenada. She drives down alone. Meets the fellow there."

"Couldn't it be somebody who's living in Mexico?"

"I don't think so. I got that much out of Kerry. The man's from around here. And they spend time together down in Mexico every so often."

"Why are you worried this time?"

"For one thing, Kerry's never been gone this long. Although, that's something that could happen. The other thing is, she called me Monday night from here in San Achilles. That's why when Mr. Sigal called I said I hadn't seen her. I figured she was on her way back. She never showed up here at my place again."

"Where'd she call you from?"

"A gas station someplace," said Barbara. "Usually Kerry'd stay with me after one of her jaunts across the border, too."

"What did she say this time?"

"That she'd had some car trouble on the highway and it had delayed her several hours. She'd tried to call me then and I was out. So she called me when she hit town. She said she'd see me either late that night or early the next morning."

"She was going to see this guy again back here in San Achilles then."

"Probably. But that was two days ago and I haven't heard anything." Barbara shook her head. "I don't think they were in any position to elope."

"You don't know the name of the guy she's been spending her time with?"

The girl shook her head. "Kerry's a complicated girl. If you've met her father I guess you know some of the reasons why. And it's tough being a walking character out of the funny papers. She keeps quiet about large sections of her life." Barbara stood. "Would you like a drink or something?"

"Coffee maybe."

"How about a beer?"

"No, thanks."

"A shame."

"Why?"

"I get a kick out of watching a man with a bushy moustache drink beer."

Lake stood as Barbara wandered out of the living room and into the kitchen. "You work in San Achilles?"

"See the painting over the hi-fi?" she called.

"Yeah."

"By me. I turn out that sort of stuff. Make a living at it."

The painting showed a thin little girl looking toward the sea. "Make a nice souvenir."

"I do a dozen a month," the girl said, coming back into the room. "Junk sure. People like them. Funny thing. Kerry hates any kind of commercial artist, cartoonists especially. But me she considers a serious painter. One of the reasons for our friendship." She shrugged with one shoulder. "I am, after all, a half dozen years older than Kerry.

Roughly your age I would guess."

"I'm thirty-two," said Lake. "That's why I grew the moustache."

"You have nice facial bones anyway," said Barbara.

"How much later than she'd expected to be was Kerry?"

"Wait," said Barbara, running to the kitchen. A coffee pot sputtered and hissed and then stopped. "Caught it. I always turn the lousy gas up too high. Kerry was four or five hours behind schedule according to her."

"If she was meeting somebody back here he might be a little worried."

"Possibly," said the girl, gingerly coming back with two cups of smoking coffee.

"If the guy was somebody she couldn't call directly maybe she wanted you to know she was held up so you could pass on the information."

Barbara put the cups on brass colored coasters and said, "Nobody called about her that night. In fact, I got only one other phone call and that was from my aunt in Long Beach."

"Nobody phoned. Did anybody come here asking for her?"

"Nobody," said Barbara, taking the black legged chair again. "Hey, now. Wait. Two people did come by."

"Who were they?" Lake prodded.

"Some seedy guy selling the Wonder Book of Condensed Knowledge," said Barbara. "And somebody who wanted to buy my cottage here. Which my aunt in Long Beach owns anyway."

"You know either of these men?"

"The real estate one I've seen around town. I have to go to Jr. Chamber of Commerce functions now and then to plug my art work. I think his name is Arlen Gillis."

"Didn't he say what it was?"

"Well, when he came to the door I said hello there, Mr. Gillis, what a pleasant surprise or some such thing. And then he said hi there back at me and would I like to sell the cottage because he thought he had a buyer."

Lake poked his finger into the grip of his coffee cup. "Either one of them ask about Kerry?"

"No," said Barbara. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, what's his name, Gillis, did in a way," she said. "He made small talk about my living alone and I said I wasn't exactly alone and I mentioned I had a house guest. I didn't know. Maybe he was planning to come back later and try something. So I did say that Kerry, not mentioning her by name, did say she had been de-

layed and was heading back to my place here shortly."

"Then he left?"

"Yes, shortly."

"Arlen Gillis," said Lake. "I'll talk to him."

"Seems to me his office is in The Plaza. Downtown in San Achilles. Around General Patton Square."

"Know what gas station Kerry called you from?"

"No. One on the south end of town I imagine. There are about a half dozen there as you come into town off the coast highway."

Lake drank his coffee down fast. "I'll check them first and then maybe talk to Gillis."

"I'm up till all hours. Come back for another cup of coffee if you want," said Barbara, walking side by side with him up the ramp to the front door. "At least let me know if you find out anything about Kerry."

"I will," said Lake.

There was little fog tonight and the sky was dark and clear, speckled with stars. Lake got in the agency car and headed for the south of town.

Lake found out something at the third station he checked.

The night man was a short freckled man who looked something like an out of training Fitzsimmons. "You the official law?" he asked when Lake showed him the photo of Kerry.

"Private," said Lake, leaning against the fender of his car.

"I thought so. Cops don't have moustaches." The man studied the picture, holding it out a foot in front of him so that it caught the glow of the station's neon. "My name's Pederson. With a D in the middle not a T."

"Dan Lake."

Pederson shook hands. "And an O and not an E at the end. I saw this girl. Seen her in here on several various occasions."

"How about Monday night?"

"This Monday just past?"

"Yeah," said Lake.

Pederson nodded. "Saw her this Monday. She's even prettier than this in real life. I always remember the pretty ones. A gas station is a lonely place at night. I've often thought of having a book printed about it."

"What time was this girl in here Monday?"

"I come on at eight. She drove in in her cute little red MG around nine or so," said Pederson. "Did it ever strike you that some pretty little cars remind you of girls. I think about things like that in the lonely stretches."

"She buy gas or what?"

"Filled the MG up with Super. Had the water and oil checked.

Made a phone call at the booth over there."

They both looked across the harshly lit black grounds to the single phone booth standing dark near the street. "One call or several?" Lake asked.

"Just one as far as I noticed," said Pederson. "And I kept a good eye on her."

"Did she say anything to you?"

"No," said Pederson. "Except to ask for gas and so on. I was rather shy with her. Is this girl missing or anything?"

"I'm checking on her movements for the last few days."

"Maybe somebody kidnapped her."

Lake looked at the little attendant. "What makes you say that? Was anyone following her?"

"No," said Pederson. "She was alone and no other cars came by for a good ten minutes after she left. Nobody followed her from the street either."

"You didn't maybe do something?"

Pederson shook his head. "No, not me. But a pretty girl at night in an open car like that. Things do happen."

"In the course of your observation of her," said Lake, taking back the photo, "did you notice which way she headed from here?"

"Yes," said Pederson. "She drove up two blocks and picked up the old Fish Hill Road."

"How'd you see that?"

"From the lube room back window I can see up hill for blocks. I hopped in there to get a last fleeting glimpse. She turned up Fish Hill Road." Pederson's head bobbed twice.

"Where's Fish Hill Road lead to?"

"Nowhere much," said Pederson. "There's a roadhouse about six miles out. The Live Oak. And a guest ranch near that. Nothing much else. That old housing development that never caught on is out there, too. Fish Hill Estates, they called it. Only built a couple model houses. Who'd want to live in a place called Fish Hill Estates?"

"Not me," said Lake, getting back into the car.

"You got a bad fan belt in there, by the way," said Pederson as Lake started the motor. "You can hear it. When you complete your pursuit come back and I'll put in a new one."

Lake drove out of the station and found Fish Hill Road where Pederson had said it was.

The road narrowed and darkened as it climbed and twisted through the tree covered hills. Lake had decided to drive all the way

out to the roadhouse. About three miles up the road he passed a large billboard. It was unlit and Lake hardly made out the words. He, in fact, drove several yards beyond the sign and then his foot did a take and stopped the car. Carefully Lake backed.

"What the heck," he said, leaning across the seat to squint at the sign.

Live Out Your Life With Fun And Sun! Have The Ocean And The Mountains, Too! Fish Hill Estates. See Our Model Homes! The Arlen Gillis Realty Company, Exclusive Agents.

Lake eased the car off the road and parked it in among three shadowy oaks. He got his .38 detective special from under the glove compartment.

He got out and followed the signs. "A coincidence that Arlen Gillis was at Barbara McCabe's Monday night," he said half aloud. "Check it anyway."

Just over a rise was a realtor's cottage and behind that dark flat acres. Fish Hill Estates was unbuilt and undeveloped. But clustered together a hundred yards beyond the cottage were four model homes. Each a variation on the basic quick built tract house.

Lake tucked his revolver into his belt and watched the silent houses from in among the trees. There was no sign of movement. All around him he became aware of the crickets singing and the frogs calling. Way off, something that might have been fireflies flickered.

Two of the houses had car ports. The bigger two had whole garages. Lake moved slowly through the trees that circled the place. In the first garage he looked into he saw the red MG. His eyes were used to the darkness now and he didn't need a flashlight.

Lake opened the side door of the garage and waited. He had unbuttoned his coat and his right hand hovered over the revolver butt. There was a calm silence coming from the garage, the kind of silence that only an absolutely empty room gives off at night. Lake went in.

The license number checked. This was Kerry Sigal's car. There was no sign of an accident or a struggle. The two bucket seats were empty. And, except for the beanbag ashtray's being upside down on the passenger seat, there was nothing out of place or damaged.

Lake stood back from the car. He felt a sourness in his stomach and his face was tightening. "Damnit," he said. "I don't want to find her dead."

He left the garage and broke into the house next to it. He tried the light switch inside the front

door. The power was still turned on and the place lit up.

Lake looked around the room. He sniffed. It didn't seem as though there was a body around here. There was no one in the whole house. He checked all the rooms, all the closets, under everything. No sign of Kerry Sigal. But there was evidence that the place had been lived in now and then. Food in the icebox and liquor and groceries in a cabinet. Cigarette butts in the ashtrays.

Lake went out into the back patio and looked at the house. Just under the roof there was a small shuttered window. "Did I miss an attic?" He went back into the kitchen.

In the ceiling of the broom closet he spotted a trap door. "Smart Lake," he said. "Missed it the first time." Carefully he slid the bolt. The door dropped down.

Something rustled.

Lake looked up at the dark hole. He slid a stool in under the opening.

Kerry Sigal was there. Wedged between two beams, tied with her hands and feet behind her and gagged with adhesive. She moved a fraction, though. Lake let out his breath. "Take it easy," he said. "I'm on your side."

He almost fell through the ceiling but he got the girl, she was light, down out of the place and into the kitchen. He untied her and yanked the tape off.

The girl's face was pale, yellowish. There was a yellow-purple bruise below one eye and her lips were bleeding slightly. "Ouch," she said finally.

"I'm Dan Lake. A detective sent to find you. Are you okay?" He rubbed first her wrists and then her ankles.

"Pins and needles," the girl said.

Finally he helped her up. "Okay?"

"Somewhat," she said. "Bathroom's off in there. Can you help me get there?"

"Sure."

Lake waited for her in the living room.

In ten minutes she was back. "In a little while I'd like a sand-

wich or something. I'm famished."

"Exactly what's happened?"

"Listen," the girl said, "what day is this?"

"Wednesday."

"Lord," said Kerry. "I was only up in that hole for two days. That's enough but it seemed like so much longer."

"Is Arlen Gillis involved in this?"

The girl let herself down slowly into a fat leatherette armchair. "Yes." She tilted her head slightly and studied Lake. "My father hire you or did Barbara McCabe?"

"Your father."

"Wait till the publicity on this breaks," Kerry said. "He'll wish he stayed out of it."

"Where is Gillis, by the way?"

"I don't know."

"He did this to you?"

"Yes," said the girl. She shook her head. "It's ridiculous. But then, most of my life is. You know who I am. Tiny Tiger and all that."

"I don't read the funnies much."

"Well, that's great. That makes us buddies right off." The girl rubbed her arm roughly. "I've been seeing Arlen for six months. I met him at an outdoor festival in San Achilles. Of course, he's married. Whenever I'd have trouble with father I'd take off, usually ending up down here. I never called Arlen or anything. What I'd do is simply drive by his office. If he was in he'd spot me and then think up some excuse to give his wife. Nine times out of ten we could get together. Finally he got the idea of our meeting out here. As you may have noticed Fish Hill Estates never caught on. Arlen keeps the lights and gas turned on in case he wants to make a last ditch try at selling some of these turkeys."

"What about Mexico?"

"His wife is used to his making trips there," said Kerry. "For all I know she doesn't even care what he does and all this sneaky stuff is just something Arlen does to amuse himself. Anyway, we took to driving down to Tijuana. Each in his own car. Go down to the bullfights and all. Then we'd drive back separately, paying no attention to each other and we'd meet back here if we could."

"This time you were five hours late?"

Kerry said, "Yes. My generator went all flooey. Took three hours for a garage man in San Paulo to dig up a new one. Arlen was meantime ignoring me and driving happily back to San Achilles. He flipped when I didn't turn up."

"He went to Barbara's to check on you."

"I thought so," the girl said. "He was really worked up."

"With concern for you?"

"Sure," said Kerry. "So I thought. But when I turned up here he was more interested in the MG. Told me to freshen up while he looked at it, to make sure it was okay now. I don't know. I got curious and I sneaked out to see what he was so anxious about. And he did this funny thing."

"What?"

"He had another ashtray just like mine," she said. "He switched them. Put the one that had been in my car in his pocket."

"When you asked him about it he hit you."

"He knocked me cold. When I came to I was trussed and stuffed away in that black hole."

Lake walked to the window and looked out at the dark land. "Has he showed an interest in your car like this before?"

"I thought about it while I was up there. Yes, he has," said Kerry. She grinned carefully. "I thought all this hanky panky was part of the adventure I was having. All Arlen was really interested in was what was in that beanbag ashtray."

"Have you figured that out, too?"

"Yes. What would fit nice and unobtrusively into that little plaid sack under the metal part of the ashtray? Narcotics probably. I'm so sweet and innocent looking they're not about to take my car apart at the border."

"Mexico provides lots of narcotics to us California folks," said Lake. "Quite a bit of it comes across the border at Tijuana with innocent looking people the guards are too rushed to check."

"I never suspected," the girl said. "Though I should have. Arlen sure wasn't making much of a living from the real estate business."

"He must have taken the stuff from here into Los Angeles maybe. Your being so late panicked him. He's probably afraid of the guys he delivers to."

"I keep wondering."

"What he was eventually going to do with you?"

"Yes," the girl said. "I thought you were him at first, when you found me."

"The thing to do now is locate Arlen Gillis," said Lake.

The living room window exploded into fragments and the far wall erupted in a spray of plaster.

Lake yanked Kerry Sigal down onto the floor. "I should have pulled the drapes."

"At least we know where Arlen is."

"Duck behind that chair and keep quiet," said Lake. He pulled out his detective special and rolled over to the door.

"Don't do anything foolish,"

whispered Kerry as he left her.

Lake jumped up and yanked open the front door. "Hey, Gillis," he yelled, diving out into the darkness.

Two shots came at him. One messed up the half opened door and the other got the rest of the glass in the front window.

Lake braced himself on the front lawn and fired three times at the flashes of Gillis' gun. Then he rolled away into the shrubs.

Gillis screamed.

Lake waited. The smell of gunpowder faded away and there were no more shots from Gillis.

Lake found him flat on his back on the one stretch of finished sidewalk in Fish Hill Estates. Gillis was still alive. Only one of Lake's shots had hit him.

The Chief backed into Lake's office. "Do you still have it?"

"The moustache? Yes."

The Chief hunched his shoulders and turned to look at Lake. "It's always worse than I expect, even though I steel myself."

"I see by the papers they even caught a couple of Gillis' associates," said Lake.

"Smallchange boys, but it's something," said The Chief. "I got a thing here for you. Sigal sent it over. He's decided he's glad you found Kerry even if it did get him some odd space in the papers." The Chief took a short mailing tube out of his pocket. "Here."

"Funny way to send a bonus."

"It's not money," said The Chief. "I made sure."

A piece of paper was rolled up inside the cardboard tube. Lake worked the paper out. It was a letter sized sheet of drawing paper. On it was a drawing of Tiny Tiger. In a balloon over the little girl's head were the words. "Thanks from the Sigal family!"

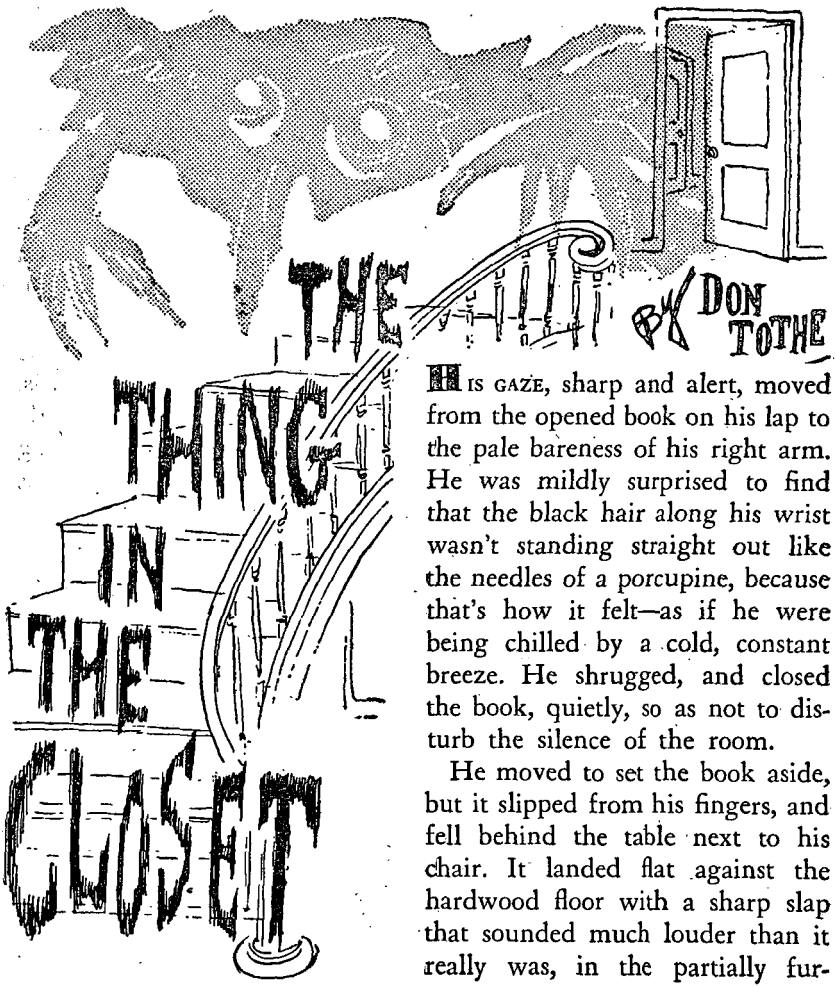
Lake dropped the drawing down on his desk and rubbed his forehead. "Great."

"I'll treat you to a frame for it."

Lake stood up. "Never mind," he said. "If anyone wants me say I'm at the barber shop."

"Fine," said The Chief. He smiled hopefully as Lake walked out of the office.

The amazing human brain, with its capacity for imaginative abstraction and reasoned recollection, is the definitive characteristic of man. Yet even this trait can be undermined for the weapon is double-edged.



THE THING IN THE CLOSET

BY DON TOTHE

HIS GAZE, sharp and alert, moved from the opened book on his lap to the pale bareness of his right arm. He was mildly surprised to find that the black hair along his wrist wasn't standing straight out like the needles of a porcupine, because that's how it felt—as if he were being chilled by a cold, constant breeze. He shrugged, and closed the book, quietly, so as not to disturb the silence of the room.

He moved to set the book aside, but it slipped from his fingers, and fell behind the table next to his chair. It landed flat against the hardwood floor with a sharp slap that sounded much louder than it really was, in the partially fur-

nished house. Then it was still.

A disturbed frown crossed his face, pulling his dark eyebrows closer together and down toward his nose, changing his expression from one of quiet seriousness to one of steadily growing anxiety. He slouched farther into the old-fashioned stuffed chair, trying to relax, but failing to shut from his ears the pumplike sound of his own heavy breathing, cushioned only slightly by the worn padding around him. Like blue steel balls drawn toward a strong magnet, his eyes turned to the unlighted staircase across the room.

Something had been picking, all day, at the back of his mind, like a hungry sparrow grubbing for worms in a plot of damp soil, until now it was a powerful throb behind his eyeballs, a steady pounding that quickened the beat of his pulse, causing the large vein on the side of his neck to bulge with an ever-increasing pressure.

He realized, with a start, what that something had been. Rod Evers recognized the active gremlin at work in his mind. *The closet.* The closet in Bobbie's room was the thing which had stirred subconscious feelings of unrest that had gradually intensified, had moved to the upper surface of his awareness, and finally, now, had blossomed into this dreadful foreshadowing of danger that dominated his thoughts.

He was alone in the big house. If anyone could ever really be alone in an ancient two-story house that hasn't been occupied for five years—with its tired beams and sagging rafters groaning, occasionally, under the timeless strain; with the thousands of crawling insects that lived under the floors and moved about within the walls; the pigeons with their mating nests in the attic; the mice—yes, he'd already trapped three of them in the two days he'd been there—that scurried about in the damp cellar; the untrimmed shrubbery that noisily scratched against dirty windows and decaying screens and the wind that whispered under warped doors and caused a draft that filtered a penetrating coldness into every nook and corner.

He stared across the living room, through the wide archlike doorway, his gaze falling on the ornate mirror hanging on the dining room wall. His reflection, in the shadows, was that of a stranger, a lonely man. Serious. A waiting man. Tense. Alert to the infinitesimal sounds that made the house seem alive, especially at night.

Everything had happened so fast, with the swiftness of a surprise summer storm. Aunt Vi deciding to let them rent the house

for practically nothing. Packing. Moving. Hardly beginning to get settled when Julie's mother had telephoned with the news about her father.

Poor Julie! She'd spent all of yesterday, working like a horse, unpacking, trying to clean up the run-down, long neglected place, and trying to keep Bobbie out of mischief, all at the same time. She'd been so exhausted when they'd retired, that she hadn't responded to Bobbie's first scream, an hour after they had fallen asleep. With his second shrill, demanding cry, though, both of them had jumped up.

Rod closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, his chest quivering as he remembered how Bobbie had looked, sitting up in his bed, in the small bedroom next to theirs, and pointing toward the closet they hadn't even opened yet. He could almost hear the frightened high-pitched voice again, resounding through the house.

"Daddy! Daddy! The monster's coming to get me! The monster!"

Julie had reached out to touch the boy.

"Don't," he'd warned her, "it's bad to wake him up too quickly."

The screams again, breaking the tomblike silence of the house, echoing with a tone of absolute panic along the upper hallway and blasting down through the walls to the darkened rooms below.

"The monster's in there!" Bobbie's eyes wide, glaring, unseeing —yet seeing *something* beyond the closet door. There was genuine terror on his small face, glistening from the tears running down his cheeks. Julie, herself frightened, pressing her cheek against Bobbie's. The boy slowly quieting down.

Rod remembered every moment, every detail.

Bobbie slipping into bed with them. The phone ringing, and Julie sobbing, dressing, leaving, in a cab, at three o'clock in the morning, to go to her father's side for his remaining minutes.

The night itself had been a nightmare.

Bobbie, before he had fallen asleep, had told him all about the monster in the closet. After that, Rod had been unable to close his eyes. A burning question filled his mind—*How could his son describe, with such accurate detail, the same dream he himself had been having for as long as he could remember?*

Like a giant bird, the boy had breathlessly told him. With dark feathers. And bright tiny eyes, like little pebbles of fire. And sharp claws, too.

Was it coincidence? Or could

there really be something to it.

In the morning he'd taken Bobbie into the closet, had shown him how empty, how harmless, the room actually was. But the boy had insisted that monsters came out only when it was very dark, when everyone was sound asleep in their beds.

Rod had finally taken his son to Uncle Joe's house to spend a few days, returning alone.

He opened his eyes, hoping the action would automatically make the whole affair seem foolish, would return everything to its proper perspective. But nothing changed. The tenseness remained in the air, closing in on him like a choking vapor

He had refused to admit it but Julie had been right all along—the house did have an eerie atmosphere.

And the stairs—he hadn't told his doctor, yet, about them. No climbing, no lifting, no physical exertion of any kind—those had been the orders for the past year-and-a-half. But sometimes he thought this business about his heart was a lot of baloney. Doctors *had* been known to mix up the test results of their patients.

But come to think of it, right then, his heart was pounding as if someone, something, were there inside him, trying to escape by breaking through the thin-wall prison of his chest, just as he was inside this old wood-concrete-and-glass body that surrounded him and held him in its grasp, like the dark dungeon that was the whale's belly had trapped a helpless Jonah.

He looked at the boxes piled on the dining room table, waiting to be unpacked, and he glanced at the rug that was still rolled up and pushed against the wall. There was much work yet to be done, but the main pieces were in place, the beds were assembled, the dressers were filled, if not tidily, and the appliances were connected. Tonight, he had found it necessary to take it easy, so he'd done very little around the house after returning from dinner at a nearby cafe. The book had temporarily diverted his thoughts, but the last week had been hectic and he'd found it difficult not to think about its events.

He forced himself to relax, once again closing his eyes. Many minutes passed before his mind began to turn inward. The silence pressed down on him like an invisible blanket that carried the combined weight of all the air that had passed through the house during its fifty years of existence.

Finally, he slept. Rather, a fitfull drowsiness overcame him. And, as though inevitable, the winged devil returned, with its orange fiery eyes

and the sharp fang. It tormented him, smothered him by forcing its giant fuzzy breast against his mouth. He tried to escape the choking, musty feathers by tossing his head from side to side until his neck ached. He tried to hold the beast off, but it kept coming, coming until he managed to gasp himself awake. He blinked, wildly, and wiped the sweat from his forehead as he looked, dizzily, around the room.

His body tensed until he thought his legs would cramp. His ears hurt from the strain of listening for the merest trace of a sound. His eyes darted from one mysterious corner of the room to another, but always returned to the bottom of the stairway.

A car door slammed, somewhere up the street, and it was a battering ram against the wall of his fluttering heart. He listened to the muffled cooing of pigeons in some distant corner of the attic. The clock above the mantle gave out with a steady ticking that grew unbearably loud, so loud and overpowering that his own system tuned itself to the same beat. The wind rattled a loose screen on one of the side windows.

He knew, he told himself, something had to be done before the night was over, or the torture would go on forever, disturbing his dreams, tearing his sanity to shreds.

He stood up, and moved like a robot toward the stairway.

A sharp line on the rug divided the warm safe light of the living room from the cold sinister darkness of the shaft that led up to the second floor world, silent, suddenly dangerous, waiting there above his head.

He began the tortuous ascent, breathless as though he were climbing into the rarified air of a high mountain. The stairs squeaked with each step upward. The oak railing, worn smooth by the rub of a thousand searching hands, moaned under his grip. He heard, felt, the static brush of his shoes against the carpeted stairs, like the muffled whispers of conspirators.

The door to Bobbie's room was ajar, and he looked into a blackness that reminded him of a well. He paused on the fourth step from the top, squinting until his eyes grew accustomed to the intense darkness.

Again his thoughts strayed to a well. *The well!* He hadn't thought about the well for at least twenty-five years.

He felt as if his body were suddenly immersed in a tub of ice-cold water.

He was looking up at the tiny circle of blue, at the end of the dark

funnel, and the top of the well was as far away as the pale daytime moon that hung in the sky. His mother was screaming his name, and her cries reverberated up and down the well shaft. The water wasn't deep and the fall hadn't broken any bones—as far as he could tell. He stood up, and the water only came to his chest. He reached out for an empty space, a foothold, along the slimy brick wall. The air was dank, burning his nostrils with a sharpness that brought tears to his eyes. No sooner had he found a break in the wall when clawed feet scampered across the back of his hand. A black form leaped out at his face, and shrieked into his ear as it passed. His heart stopped, and skipped a series of beats. His throat convulsed in a desperate attempt to cry out in surprise as the shock threw him backwards into the water. The bird, with its wings he suddenly wished belonged to him, flew up out of the shaft and disappeared in the sky, leaving him alone and terrified.

A ray of moonlight cut across the room, reflecting from the brass knob on the closet door.

He wanted to turn and run down the stairs, flee from the house. But his legs turned to rubber, like the time he'd collapsed at the office, when he'd first found out about his heart. His fingers throbbed, ached, almost as if they had a mind of their own and were trying to tell him not to touch that doorknob. The skin tightened on his chest, became a vice that squeezed his lungs and piled on his ribs the weight of his lifetime of nightmares.

His first steps into the room were slow, experimental, cautious.

But then, as he stared at the door, a wavering shadow formed at its center, taking the evil shape of something alive, with wings that swayed and feathers that ruffled, with burning orange eyes that became hot coals pressing against his own staring pupils with the heat of rising panic, pushing him back, yet at the same time pulling him farther into the room.

He hurried then, in a frenzy, across the room, grunting, sobbing, as he moved. The shadow moved with him, grew larger, until it covered the entire wall.

His hand reached out, twisted the handle. He jerked open the door.

For an instant, the air was deathly still. Disturbed particles of dust tickled his nostrils, almost making him sneeze. He wanted to laugh—because the room was empty, because he'd been so ridiculous, so childish.

He sighed, and leaned back against the door jamb.

A movement jerked his attention to the upper right corner of the ceiling in the closet. The tiny beads of light started out the size of pin heads. They flared out as they rushed at him. The flutter of wings became an ocean wave rolling over him, pulling him down, down into the water.

He retreated, hastily, stumbling over his own feet. The monster's claws came at his face, scratched his chin. The beak tore at his throat. Feathers brushed his cheek.

He fought. Pushed. Lashed out with his arms, beat with his fists, swatted with open hands. The air rushed from his lungs, and he gasped for breath, until his chest expanded to its limit, his arms grew stiff, paralyzed, and he could struggle no more.

The room exploded into a world of brilliant red. Then yellow. Blue. The colors of the rainbow streaked and faded. Until finally, all was velvet black. And he was falling . . . falling . . . falling . . into a dark, endlessly deep well. . .

The pigeon's head bobbed up and down, jerkily, as it studied with frank curiosity the lifeless form on the cold floor. Its breast puffed in and out, wildly, and a broken wing, drooping to the floor, pulled the bird to one side as it wobbled away from the now-still body. The bird paused, and cocked its head, listening to the muted silence surrounding him. Then it returned to the closet, searching for a way to reach the opening in the distant corner of the ceiling, the opening that led back to the warm safety of its nest.

Dear Fans:

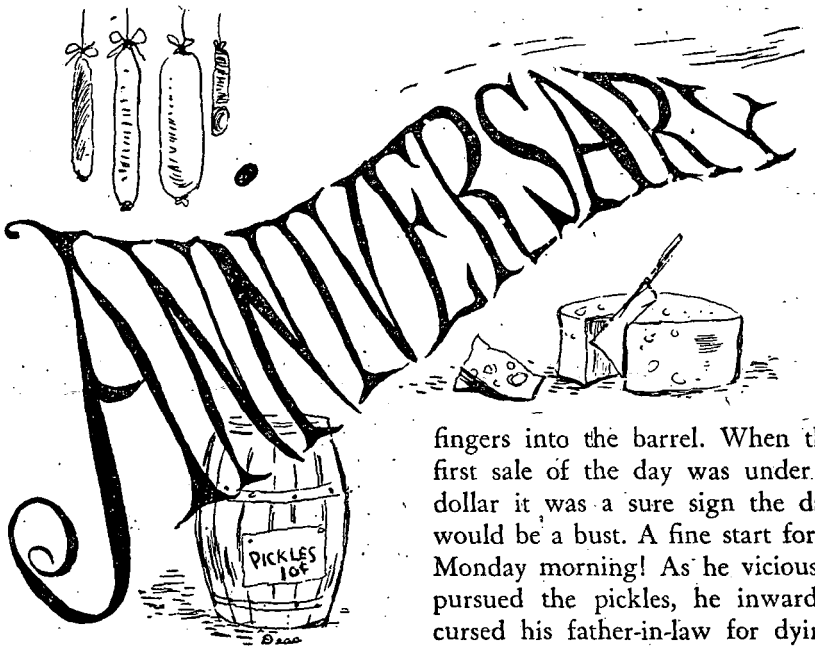
My desk is so weighed down with mail, requesting information about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club, I hope you won't mind if I reply in an open letter. Here are the particulars:

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 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

A man cannot forever be satisfied with secret love beside the pickles and pastrami. There comes a time when, green cheese or no, a man must assert himself.



DAN HENLEY unlocked the front door and stepped into his delicatessen. The stuffy smorgasbord smell wrinkled his nose as it did every morning before he could get the place aired out.

Dan wasn't cut out to be a storekeeper. With his build, stocky and powerful, and his high school record, he should be a professional athlete. He needed to live by his muscle, sweating and straining and shouting in exultation as he forced his opponent to his knees. He needed to feel the triumph of superiority, the fearlessness of the conqueror, the headiness of fame.

"Two dill pickles, and don't slip me a small one again." Dan could feel the shrewd-eyed woman watching him as he came around the counter and plunged his stubby fingers into the barrel. When the first sale of the day was under a dollar it was a sure sign the day would be a bust. A fine start for a Monday morning! As he viciously pursued the pickles, he inwardly cursed his father-in-law for dying.

and leaving the store in his hands. If Dan had only had a job at the time, he would have refused it. But Rita had cried and said Papa had supported her and Mama with the store and Dan should run it until he found a job he could be happy in. And although Dan swore he would dump it within six months, nine years had gone by and the store was still his. It was a challenge of a kind to be able to beat

the suppliers down on price, and Dan had a healthy bank balance that compensated somewhat for the sour taste in his mouth every time he opened the door.

As the customer left, Jane Boland entered, wearing a slim brown skirt and a tan, loose-fitting sweater that didn't conceal a thing.

"Good morning," she greeted him.

"Morning." As he closed the cash register, he heard Jane walk quietly past him toward the small room at the back where she kept the records. That was one thing about Jane; she knew when to talk and when to keep quiet. And if ever he needed quiet, it was this morning.

Two more customers came and went before Dan smelled the coffee perking. He strode toward the back, his heavy step rattling the tobacco cans on the counter. Jane was pouring the coffee when he took the seat beside her desk.

"This should make you feel better," she said.

He touched his lips to the cup. "How long you been cooking this stuff? You couldn't get it this hot in one day."

"That just proves there's something wrong with you this morning. Usually you're swallowing it before it's stopped bubbling. Care to tell me about it?"

Dan set his cup down, the liquid sloshing over the sides and onto the desk. He pushed his fingers through his dark crewcut. "It's Rita again, only this time she really outdid herself."

"How?" asked Jane, dabbing at the puddle with a paper towel.

"Saturday night I was walking home when I saw her car parked

in front of the Green Light Bar. About a week ago she took it to the garage to be tuned up and have the brakes adjusted. I thought they were keeping it an awful long time just to do that, but she told me they were pretty busy and couldn't get to it right away. She said she didn't want to drive it until the brakes were checked. Well, when I saw her car parked in front of that bar, I saw red. I figured that pimply-faced kid who works at the garage was taking his girl out that night in a pink convertible. So I got in and drove it home and parked it in the driveway. Rita was spending the day in Jersey with her mother, so I made myself a cup of coffee and went to bed. Next morning I'm knocked out of bed by the police pounding on the door. They had come to arrest me for stealing the convertible!"

Dan got to his feet and began to pace the tiny office. With his left thumb and forefinger he stroked his nose, as if he were trying to mold it outward to a point. Rita was staring at him, her coffee untouched.

"Anyhow, we got pretty noisy over the whole deal, and then Rita comes downstairs. 'I sold the car last week,' she says, calm as you please. 'You *what*?' I shout. 'I sold it,' she says. Well, you should have seen the looks on the faces of those cops. I just stood there like a dope while she straightened it all out and they left, taking the convertible along with them." He dropped into his chair, pulling out his handkerchief and mopping his forehead. "And that's when she dropped her little bombshell. She's been planning this little surprise that she wasn't going to tell me about until I got so excited over nothing, as she put it. Hell, who wouldn't get excited when his wife pulls a dumb trick like that? I bought her that convertible for our fifth anniversary and she turns around and sells it and not only doesn't tell me about it, but *lies* to me!"

"What was the surprise?" asked Jane.

"It seems we're going to Europe."

"Europe!"

"How about that? She got it in her head that what we need more than anything is a nice second honeymoon in Europe. When I told her we don't have that kind of money, she said she figured a second honeymoon was more important than a car."

"I guess that's her way of trying to save your marriage."

"Yeah. She says she wants to go for our tenth anniversary next week."

"You can't say she isn't trying," said Jane, examining her manicure.

"It would take more than a change of scene to work that little miracle! Five years with a sentimental crybaby that pouted for a week if I didn't kiss her goodbye and hello, and five more with a flat, frigid woman who's so busy serving on committees and fund drives that she doesn't even know I'm alive. She's even too busy to comb her hair or keep her dresses mended. The only other thing she has time for is her aches and pains. Yeah, a second honeymoon. That's just what we need."

"Do you have to go? Can't you get out of it?"

"Got any ideas?"

"You could tell her you can't leave the store."

"She knows you can run it by yourself. Even I could run it alone if I knew anything about bookkeeping."

"I'm glad you don't," said Jane with a smile.

Dan sighed and stared at his coffee. Two weeks of tours and tips and restaurants and hotels where he would be trapped with Rita evening after interminable evening. Two weeks of her migraines and sinuses and all the rest. An empty marriage and an empty-headed wife. Rita was flat and their marriage was flat. She was never happy, never sad, never angry, just flat. She was like one of those pasty-faced, yellow-haired dolls you see at carnivals that sit on a shelf and stare at you with those flat painted eyes while you try to knock the furry cats over with a baseball. Flat and stupid. Mrs. Dan Henley.

"Don't look so glum, Dan," said Jane. "It isn't the end of the world, you know."

"It might be better if it was. Maybe I ought to break a leg or something."

"That's an idea."

He glared at her. "Any more suggestions?"

"Ever hear of divorce?"

"There you go again. How many times do I have to tell you I can't divorce Rita? What would she do without me?"

Jane shook her head. "You're completely impossible!"

"Look Jane, this may be hard for you to understand, but I can't just go off and leave her. She needs me. Why, if she fell in a hole she wouldn't have enough sense to climb out of it."

"So be a babysitter," said Jane, shrugging and turning away from him. "If you're going to be a martyr, the least you can do is stop complaining about it."

"You don't understand at all! All you understand is—"

Jane slid her arms around his neck. "And aren't you glad?"

He bent his head and kissed her. She was an expert at changing the subject.

"There's an answer to everything," she murmured.

"Yeah. And all I have to do is find it."

"It's a shame about Rita," said Jane, pushing gently away from him. "I mean, always being sick like that. Maybe one of these days she'll—succumb."

He took his hands off her arms. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, it's the most natural thing in the world for sick people to—die, isn't it?"

"Are you nuts?"

"No, just slightly tired of waiting for you to make up your mind." She was standing away from him now, her head held high, the smile gone from her lips. "I'm not going to wait any longer."

"Now, Jane—"

"You've got until next week. Your tenth anniversary. That's the day you're going to say goodbye to one of us."

Dan stared at her. "Jane, you can't do this to me! After all these years—what would I do without you?"

"I'm not the only one in the world who knows how to keep books," she replied.

Pulling her roughly into his arms, he held her close. "As if I'm talking about books!" he muttered fiercely. He kissed her, but when she did not respond, he released her and looked down into her cool brown eyes. Her figure was good but nothing extraordinary. Her clothes were conservative and in excellent taste and she knew how to wear them. But as far as Dan Henley was concerned, she was perfect down to the last toenail. The thought of losing her was unthinkable. But so was the alternative.

"You wouldn't leave me," he said, half-pleading.

"Try me."

For a long moment he said nothing. Then, turning sharply, he stepped out of the office and slammed the door behind him. He would have bet five dollars her eyes didn't even blink.

Rita Henley followed her husband to the door and watched him put his suitcase and thermos into the cab. He never went anywhere without his thermos. He even brought it to the table at mealtimes, insisting that the coffee never stayed hot enough in the percolator. If he spent more than five minutes with a person, he was opening the thermos. Rita called him a coffee maniac. But not to his face, of course.

"See you at the airport," he called before leaning forward to speak to the driver.

"One-thirty," she replied, closing the door as the cab pulled away. Tugging the elastic band off her ponytail, she walked into the bedroom, shaking her hair till it swung loose and free around her shoulders, still slightly damp from her shower. Taking off her robe, she began to dress.

It had been a long time since she had cared about her appearance. It had been a long time since she had cared about anything. The community projects she worked on served as an anaesthetic, a time passer, a sanity preserver. But the barren winter passed, as all things must, and spring finally found Rita Henley.

She was fastening the gold chain around her throat when the door chimes sounded. Smoothing the white sheath over her hips and giving a final pat to the chic French roll accented by the gold comb, she stepped to the door.

"Hello, Arnold," she said.

"Hello, Rita." Arnold Potter closed the door behind him. Rita looked up at him, letting her eyes roam over his gentle face, the wide sensitive eyes behind the rimmed glasses, the light hair brushed back in a slight wave. She had never seen such kindness in the face of a man, never before in her life.

"Last night Dan told me you had a migraine," he said. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm afraid that's a habit I'm trying to break."

"Migraines?"

"Imaginary migraines. By the time I realized my physical well-being didn't concern Dan, I already had the habit. You'll have to be patient with me."

"I'm a patient man."

She closed her eyes as she reached on tiptoe for his kiss. "I know," she said.

He moved toward the couch and seated himself on its arm. "I thought you might have changed your mind."

Rita laughed, all the gaiety of youth and love and wonder, so long forgotten, finding voice at last. "Not a chance!"

He smiled, his grave, rather sad smile. "I still feel rotten about this. My conscience is giving me a fit."

"Darling, try to be open-minded instead of concentrating on convention. The University thought enough of your project to finance your year in America so you could research your textbook. I understand a young professor doesn't make much money. There's nothing ungallant about my paying my own way back with you under those circumstances. I haven't used

Dan's money. The car was mine."

"You're missing the point," he said softly. "What I'm referring to is my running off with my neighbor's wife."

She put her fingers over his lips. "Again, the open-minded approach. Why shouldn't two people who love each other spend the rest of their lives together?"

"There are laws and marriage vows—"

Rita bowed her head. "The marriage vows lost their meaning a long time ago. When a man becomes a bully, ignores every effort his wife makes to please him, treats her as though she has robbed him of his freedom, acts resentful, contemptuous and moody—well, when that happens, they no longer have a marriage. So don't feel guilty, my darling, because you are giving me more than you're taking from Dan."

Arnold walked into the hall and picked up the suitcases. "I still can't believe I'm doing this," he said. "I'm afraid I'm the kind of man who doesn't believe a thing until it actually happens. I've had a very cautious upbringing."

"The sober Englishman," said Rita, smiling, "You just can't understand Americans, can you?"

"I can't understand how I can be so lucky. I was beginning to resign myself to a life of bachelorhood." He kissed her on the cheek. "What do you suppose Dan will do when he comes home and finds you gone?"

Rita pulled her gloves on carefully. "I had to tell him." She tried to avoid Arnold's shocked eyes. "Well, I didn't tell him about us," she went on. "He found out I sold the car, so there was nothing else I could do. So I said I was planning the trip as a surprise for our tenth anniversary. He's meeting me at the airport at one-thirty, he thinks."

Arnold let out his breath slowly. "And our plane leaves at twelve-thirty."

"Yes. I told Mama everything and she's given us her blessing. I've written Dan a letter explaining about us and telling him to get a divorce. You and I will be together whatever he decides to do."

"I love you," said Arnold.

It was a slow morning at the delicatessen. Dan sat behind the counter and drummed his fingers. He stroked his nose to a point. He couldn't put his mind to anything. There were shelves to be straightened and dusted, but the thought of it made him twitch. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. Three and a half hours and the plane would leave. He shouldn't even have opened up this morning. He

should have hung out the *Closed* sign last night. Although it wasn't Friday, it was the thirteenth of the month and the thirteenth was never a good day.

He began to pace the floor. As he passed the phone he stopped, then reached for it and dialed swiftly. "Hello, Jane? You ready? What do you mean, 'no'? Suppose I decide to leave early? Okay, okay. I'm doing as much business as the funeral parlor this morning. I'm going to close up at twelve. I'd rather wait at the airport than here. See you."

The coffee began to perk on the hotplate in the office. He took the thermos from the desk drawer and rinsed it carefully. When the coffee was ready, he filled the thermos. Taking the small bottle of Rita's sleeping pills from his pocket, he dropped them into the coffee. Pressing the stopper in firmly, he shook the thermos to dissolve them.

Right up until this morning he had seen no way out of his dilemma. He had been unable to reach a decision one way or the other. It was when he was getting ready to leave the house that he had seen Rita's bottle of sleeping pills. That was a sign if he ever saw one. He slipped the bottle in his pocket. All the way to the store he had tried not to think of it, but subconsciously the plan must have been forming in his mind.

It was a quarter to twelve when he finally hung the *Closed* sign and left the delicatessen. Carrying his suitcase and the thermos, he hailed a cab and gave the driver Jane's address. She had insisted on accompanying him to the airport and had promised to stay out of sight. You'd think she didn't trust him!

"I don't know why you want to go so early," Jane said, climbing in beside him. "We would be much more comfortable waiting upstairs in my apartment."

"Nothing doing. When I've got something on my mind, I can't rest till it's taken care of."

"What are you going to do?"

"We can't talk here," he said, indicating the cab driver with a nod of his head.

They found an empty bench in the terminal where they could watch the entrance. "Why can't we go and have a drink?" asked Jane. "Rita won't be here for at least an hour."

"Look, Jane, I'd rather sit here if you don't mind. The whole plan will blow up if I miss her."

"How are you going to do it?"

"Never mind. It's bad luck to talk about something before you do it. Puts a jinx on it."

"You're too intelligent to be su-

perstitious, my darling," she said.

"I'll give up being superstitious tomorrow. Today I'll indulge myself."

Dan liked the location of the bench. It was partly behind a brick planter. By leaning back, he was completely hidden from anyone entering the terminal.

Dan drummed his fingers silently on his knee. When Rita came in, he would lead her to a bench and insist on having coffee, only pretending to drink his. Then he would tell her he had received a phone call at the store just as he was leaving informing him that her mother had had a stroke. Then, while she was crying, because of course she would cry, he would bundle her into a cab for Pennsylvania Station with instructions to get on the first train for Jersey. He would take care of the cancellations and the baggage here and follow her as soon as possible. He hoped he could get a refund on the tickets. He didn't know where she would be when the pills took effect, but he would be at home waiting to be notified.

He ignored the twinge he felt when he reviewed his plan. Now that he had chosen Jane, he had to deal with Rita in a humane manner. After all, he couldn't turn her loose to fend for herself, could he? It was best this way, but he found himself fighting a rising lump in his throat. He shifted his position. This was no time to start feeling sorry for Rita. What had she ever given him but ten years of nothing? You might even say he was doing her a favor. She'd probably get sick in Europe and have a lousy time.

Twelve-twenty. Would one-thirty never come? He frowned toward the door as if he could will Rita to come through it. He felt a jolt of disbelief when she did, a moment later. Could that be *his* wife? She was all in white, sleek and spotless, with touches of gold at her throat and wrist. Arnold Potter came in behind her. Dan watched them walk toward the desk.

"Too bad she doesn't have a full set of white luggage," said Jane. "That black bag spoils the effect."

Dan's eyes traveled to the bags Arnold set down. The black one was old and had several colored stickers on it. "I forgot Arnold was leaving today," he said, unable to take his eyes off Rita.

"Isn't that a coincidence?" said Jane.

Dan turned slowly toward the girl. She had crossed one leg over the other and her arm was draped across the back of the bench. She was smiling. "What do you mean by that?" Before Jane could an-

swer, the loudspeaker announced their flight. Dan raised his eyes to the clock. "Twelve-thirty?" And he watched Arnold pick up the bags and hurry toward the field with Dan's wife. "Rita told me one-thirty," he heard his voice saying inanely.

"Did she now?"

The thunder of the plane snapped Dan out of his trance. The blood surged into his face. "Why, that no-good, scheming, two-timing tramp! Making me think we were going to Europe together and all the time she was planning to run off with that—that crumpet cruncher!" He jumped to his feet. "And here I was, feeling sorry for her! I'll fix her! I'll fix them both!"

"Now, just a minute," said Jane, putting her hand on his arm. But he shook it off and sprinted for the field. "What are you getting so excited for?" she gasped, catching up with him just as the plane left the ground. "It's better this way. She deserted you."

"She has no right to trick me like this! If there's anything I hate, it's a cheat!"

"A despicable creature, a cheat," said Jane amusedly. The plane grew small in the sky.

"And on our tenth anniversary, too," he mumbled, letting Jane lead him, suddenly exhausted, back into the lobby of the airline terminal.

"You can get a divorce and we'll be married right away," Jane was saying. "I have it all figured out. You'll put your house on the market and we'll get an apartment. When we come back from our honeymoon, we'll sell the store and start a new one in a better neighborhood. We'll expand, find a good manager, and be free to travel and live it up."

They were back at the bench now. Dan was hearing Jane's words, but he couldn't speak. It was as if someone had knocked the wind out of him with a well-aimed blow. "But first things first," Jane was saying, her eyes bright. "The most important item on the agenda is the honeymoon. After all, a trip to Europe takes a lot of planning."

"Europe?" The voice didn't sound like his. "Where would I get the money for a trip to Europe?"

Jane laughed and nuzzled him. "You might be able to fool your wife, but you can't fool your bookkeeper. Now, how about that drink?"

Dan's mouth was dry as he listened to her. He stroked his nose to a point. She had it all figured out, all right. "Will you settle for coffee?" he asked, opening the thermos.

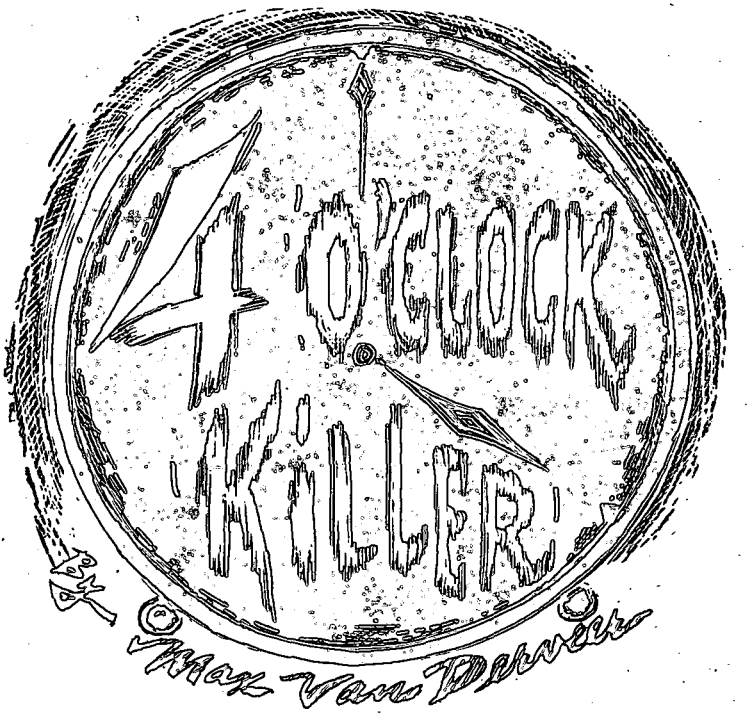
In the respective realms of sport and legality, much is made of the concept of "fair warning". When it comes to murder, however, the police can be singularly ungrateful for unsolicited predictions.

TUESDAY, *November 13, four o'clock in the afternoon*:

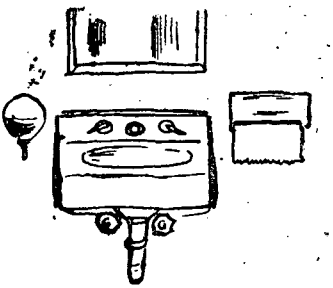
A telephone in the shopworn squad room of Central Police Headquarters jangled demandingly.

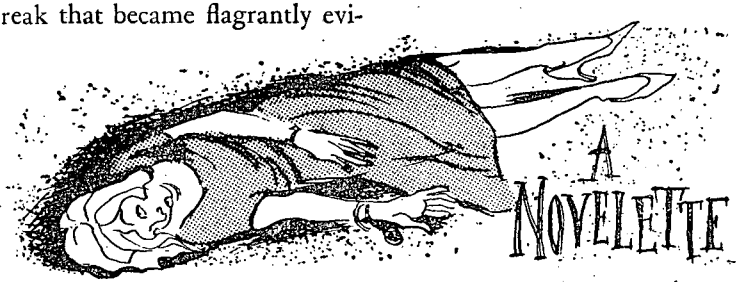
Sergeant Gilbert Crocker, who couldn't remember that he had ever liked winter in all of his forty-seven years, turned his bulk from the smoke-filmed window, his blunt face creased in a scowl that was as bleak as the day. Across the room, a young detective swept up the phone. "Detective Division, Sergeant Pierce."

Hugh Pierce was in shirt sleeves, the sleeves turned up twice from



his massive wrists. Juxtapositioned on the desk in front of him were his constant companions, the paper coffee cups. He was twenty-six, powerfully constructed, and had dark good looks. He had been in the division almost a year. Someday he would be a good detective. But right now there was still a wide streak of adolescence in him, a streak that became flagrantly evi-





A NOVELETTE

dent in the presence of women. Any woman.

Hugh Pierce, benedict of the division, was a hellion with women. And because of this Crocker did not particularly care for him.

"Hey . . . hold on a minute . . ."

Crocker felt the queasy twinge of warning at Pierce's words. "Something?" he asked carefully as Pierce put the phone together slowly.

Pierce was frowning. "A male voice. He said he was going to murder someone."

"Going to?" Crocker grunted as he picked at the seat of his shiny suit pants. "Someone? Not his wife or his sister or . . . Was he drunk?"

"He sounded as if he knew exactly what he was doing and saying."

Crocker phoned downstairs. The call had come in for Pierce personally, the PBX operator said.

Could the call be traced?

Too late.

Crocker dropped the receiver in its cradle. "You didn't recognize the voice, huh?"

Pierce looked disturbed. "No. He used a falsetto."

"He asked for you."

"So?" Pierce said, immediately on the defense. "My name's been in the papers plenty of times."

"Yeah," Crocker said. He sighed heavily. Damn telephones. Some days they were a pain in the neck.

Pierce asked, "What are we going to do?"

Do?

All they were sure of was a guy had said he was going to kill someone.

Crocker belched unceremoniously. "Nothing," he said sourly. "We can't do a damn thing."

Tuesday was an abhorrent night for Crocker. He smoked too many cigarettes, drank too much coffee. He wrestled the nagging suspicion that someone somewhere in the city had died, was dying, or was to die at the hands of a nut who had wanted the police to know he was going to kill—or at least, had wanted Sergeant Pierce to know.

And Wednesday morning came too soon.

The day was soggy and washed-out. It fit his mood. He arrived thirty minutes late at his desk in the squad room. He didn't care. After twenty years he was entitled to be late. He didn't speak to anyone. He lit a cigarette, coughed harshly and grabbed up the telephone.

An hour later, he completed his final call, made his last note on the scratch pad. He was tired, but he felt better inside as he looked up at Lieutenant Gifford, the blintz addict.

"That's it, Giff," Crocker said. "The night's run. Three reported homicides. Three arrests."

"Do you think our boy is one of them?" Gifford asked.

Crocker shrugged. "Could be."

Pierce shook his head. "I don't get it. Why would a guy call in here *before* he had—"

"We've got 'em, Sergeant," Gifford interrupted abruptly. He stood tall and lean. "The nuts, the kooks. Don't ask me what makes 'em tick. That's for the Docs to figure. All I know is, they're rare but we've got 'em. Screwballs with a driving impulse to kill—and the compulsion to confess."

The telephone on Pierce's desk rang. Pierce spoke into it thickly.

Crocker saw him jerk erect, saw his face darken.

"Wait a minute . . ."

Pierce jerked the receiver from his ear, stared at it. *"Him!"*

The pencil in Crocker's fingers snapped into two pieces. "Are you sure?"

"I'd know that voice anywhere! And he . . . laughed!" Pierce looked up at Gifford with disbelief. "He's laughing at us, Lieutenant!"

Gifford's lips were a thin, angry line. "Get to work, Gil," he said

grimly. "It's your package. You and Pierce."

They worked methodically, demandingly. Their requests were blunt. There was no time for compassion or lamenting the inconveniences they wrought. Theirs was a dual goal. To find a killer—and to find a corpse.

The clock hands crawled around to the afternoon hours before they finally called it quits. Crocker felt drained, dog-tired. He inventoried his notes for what seemed the millionth time. There had been the three homicides and three other deaths reported to police between four o'clock Tuesday afternoon and ten o'clock Wednesday morning. The homicides were routine. The fourth victim had been a teenage boy in an automobile smashup. Also routine. The fifth was a pedestrian who had committed the cardinal sin of walking with a green traffic light.

Routine?

It happened almost every day.

The sixth victim:

Hilda Caroline Gold . . . Caucasian . . . age, 28 . . . 4546 Harland Road . . . unmarried . . . unemployed . . . found dead in the rest room of a bar on 84th Street in the Roosevelt Park district . . . cruiser car summoned at four-twenty-four o'clock Tuesday afternoon . . . cause of death? . . . natural . . . probably coronary.

Crocker frowned on the scratch pad.

Hilda Caroline Gold was dead. There wasn't anything he could put his finger on, but Hilda Caroline Gold bothered the hell out of him.

Wednesday, November 14, four o'clock in the afternoon:

A phone jangled in the squad room.

"Detective Division. This is Sergeant Pierce."

Crocker could hear the voice coming through the receiver. He listened hard as Pierce flinched.

"Now take it easy, fella . . ." Pierce pulled in a breath that rattled, clamped the receiver tighter.

"Yes . . . I'm listening . . . I can hear you, okay, but . . . Fella! Don't hang up, fella!"

Crocker sat like a statue for almost thirty seconds, waiting for Pierce to put the phone together. He could hear the buzzing of the broken connection in the receiver. Finally he reached out and took the instrument from Pierce's hand and quieted the buzzing.

"Him?"

"There's to be another today. He's going to kill again."

It was a black Wednesday. It didn't improve. Nor did Thursday

bring palliation. If anything, Thursday morning was blacker.

"The night's tally," Crocker said somberly, reading from his notes. "Seven violent deaths . . . two murders, two arrests . . . three auto fatalities . . . all in one crash . . . two suicides . . . one by gunshot, one by suffocation in a plastic sack. Seven violent deaths—plus a girl found dead in the rest room of a bar in the Roosevelt Park district."

Lieutenant Gifford said in a nail-hard voice, "Run over that one again, Gil."

"Alison Bleeker Wundt . . . Caucasian. . . age, 25 . . . 620 84th Street . . . housewife . . . husband, John James Wundt . . . advertising copywriter . . . Alison Wundt found dead in the rest room of a bar on 84th Street in the Roosevelt Park district . . . cruiser car summoned at four-thirty-two o'clock Wednesday afternoon . . . cause of death? . . . natural . . . probable coronary."

"The Gold girl? Tuesday?" Gifford said.

Crocker nodded significantly. "Found dead in a rest room of a bar on 84th Street in the Roosevelt Park district. Approximately the same hour and—"

"But not the same bar."

"No."

"Get moving. We'll check out the medical information from this end."

Roosevelt Park stretched two blocks along 84th Street. The Jungle Bar was opposite the northwest corner of the park. It was small, dimly-lighted by tiny blue lights blinking through the bamboo decor. Two customers sat at the bar. They didn't pay any attention to Crocker and Pierce. The bartender, a fat, little non compos mentis with a dewlap and wary eyes, happily would have traded places with either customer. He didn't like cops.

And by choice or indifference he had difficulty remembering much about the girl who had died in the rest room Tuesday afternoon.

"But you do remember her?" Crocker asked bluntly.

"Yeah, I remember her. Blonde doll. Kind of a looker."

"Was she a regular customer?"

"Naw."

"Where did she sit?"

"Here at the bar. How comes you guys are askin' all the questions?"

"Was she alone?"

"Well now . . . lemme see. Yeah . . . yeah, she was alone."

"She didn't meet anyone, didn't talk to anyone?"

"There was another dame come in. They talked."

"What about a man? Did she be-

come acquainted with any men while she was sitting here?"

"I dunno."

"You don't remember, or you don't *want* to remember?"

"There was a couple of guys in here, Mac, maybe three or four. I really ain't sure. But I'm damn sure I don't remember if this dame picked up with any or *all four* of 'em."

"All right. Simmer down. Maybe you remember when she went into the rest room."

"Nope. I had to get some bottles out of the back room. These two dames were sitting here when I went back there. They were gone when I got back here. Then about ten minutes later another doll comes out of the rest room squawking her head off about a dead dame."

"Another girl? It wasn't the one who had been sitting here with Hilda Gold?"

"Naw."

"You know her?"

"Nope."

"Get her name?"

"She beat it. She came boltin' out of there like there was a monster after her, and she was bleatin' about this dead doll, and she just kept right on goin', straight out the street door."

"You didn't try to stop her?"

"Man, my problem was back there, not up here by the door."

"You went back there?"

"Hell, yes."

"Who else was in the rest room?"

"Nobody. Just the dead doll."

"So you called for a patrol car?"

"I called for cops. It didn't make a damn to me who you guys sent."

Crocker and Pierce walked east along 84th Street. Crocker was chilled. He could think of several places he'd prefer to be, several things he'd rather be doing. Finding a murderer was tough enough sometimes. But finding a corpse, making sure you had a killer on the loose . . . well, that was for the birds. Especially on a cold November day.

They crossed the intersection and turned into The Lounge. The interior was plain, neat, and warm. Crocker opened his coat. He appreciated the heat. The Lounge wasn't bad, either. No fancy frills, no false trimmings. It looked like a place a guy could buy a drink and sit in comfort.

The pock-marked bartender was cooperative. He pulled thoughtfully at a prominent adam's apple with thumb and forefinger and attempted to recall every minute detail surrounding Alison Bleeker Wundt and her untimely demise in his rest room the previous afternoon.

She had come in with another girl. He had never seen either before. They had sat at the bar and drank vodka martinis. They had conversed as if they had known each other all of their lives. No man had come in with them. No man had joined them. No man had even made a pass at them. They had ordered second martinis. And then he had watched Alison Bleeker Wundt, and her friend go into the rest room. There wasn't any particular reason why he had watched them. Habit, he guessed. He always paid attention to his customers.

Well, Alison Bleeker Wundt's friend had returned to the bar alone and . . .

What was that? She returned alone?

Yes . . . perhaps that is a little unusual. Women who accompany each other to the rest room usually *do* return together, but it certainly wasn't anything to arouse suspicion.

"Okay," Crocker said heavily. "This gal came back to the bar. Then what?"

"She finished her drink and left," the bartender said simply.

"I see. How long was it before you realized everything might not be so very kosher?"

"Oh, I'd say . . . perhaps ten minutes."

"And what made you suspicious?"

"Nothing in particular, except I thought the Wundt girl had been in the rest room a very long time. So when I saw another customer go in I expected her to come out any second and tell me the Wundt girl was ill."

"But she didn't."

"No. In fact, when she finally did come out she said the rest room was empty. It bothered me because there's only the one door and . . . well, anyway, that's when I went in and found her."

"How come this other dame didn't see her?"

"There are enclosed booths with coin operated doors."

"Mrs. Wundt was in one of these?"

"Yes."

From that point on, the death of Alison Bleeker Wundt was a matter of police record and the course of Sergeants Crocker and Pierce was pre-determined. Pierce drove carefully along the snow-packed streets. They didn't talk. Crocker was deep in thought. He didn't like it when he had to disturb the family of a deceased. A family should be allowed solitude in these hours. They should be allowed to adjust and regroup by themselves. They shouldn't be belabored by outsiders and, certainly, not by a

cop with a long and curious nose.

When they arrived at 4546 Harland Road, Crocker sat for a few moments taking in the long, low redwood mansion that had been constructed to cosmic specifications with envious respect. This kind of houses, the people who lived in them—the Other Half—always made him feel like a jealous and jilted lover. He often wondered if any member of the Other Half had ever looked upon him with identical feelings.

The guy had rocks in his head if he did.

Herman and Olga Gold were sick in body and heart. Adhering to Hebrew orthodox belief, their only child had been interred on Wednesday, just twenty-one hours and thirty minutes after she had died. There were some questions?

Unfortunately, there were some questions. It was a matter of completing the record.

The *police* record?

Yes.

But we can be brief?

There's only one or two things, Mr. Gold . . . For instance, do you have any idea why your daughter stopped at the Jungle Bar Tuesday afternoon?

We do not.

Was she in the habit of frequenting bars?

She was not.

But she did enjoy an occasional drink?

Yes.

Do you know of any reason why your daughter might have been in the Roosevelt Park district Tuesday?

Certainly. She loved Roosevelt Park. She often went there to walk.

I see. Er . . . tell me, is it possible she might have been meeting a man there?

Well . . . it is possible, I suppose. But it is not probable. Hilda did not care for men.

Then she didn't date?

Not often. Why? What is this about our Hilda and a man?

Nothing, really, Mr. Gold. Just a couple more questions. I understand your daughter was unemployed.

We provided very well for her.

Yes. Well, do you know if she was acquainted with a woman named Alison Bleeker Wundt?

I am almost certain I have never heard that name until this very instant.

Okay, Mr. Gold. That does it, I guess. I want to thank you for your cooperation at a time of such . . .

Olga and I would like to be alone.

Yes, I understand. We'll just be running along now. Er . . . it's this way out, isn't it? We can find our own way.

"Damn!" Crocker exploded when he had settled in the front seat of the official sedan. "I hate talking to people at a time like this!"

Pierce shrugged complacently. "Where to now, Sergeant? I could stand a cup of coffee."

"John James Wundt," Crocker said sourly. He rattled off the address. "And forget the coffee."

The Wundts lived in a remodeled apartment in a quietly modest neighborhood. And there was a little Wundt. A toddler, perhaps two years old.

An auburn-haired girl who might have been twenty-two, and who was constructed in an interestingly willowy way, took the toddler from the front room of the apartment. But not before she and Sergeant Pierce had exchanged glances during which it was easily discernable that each liked what the other saw.

Crocker felt the pang of dislike for Pierce. What a time to be shooting a pass at a girl.

"My sister, Nadine," Wundt said to neither of them in particular. "She's been helping out here since . . ."

He let the explanation drop.

Crocker jumped into the report routine. There was always a report to be completed when police became involved in a death. Sometimes, like with Wundt, it bothered him when he had to taint the truth a little. But it was necessary. And easier.

Essentially, John James Wundt's opinion of his wife and explanation of her presence in the Roosevelt Park district on Wednesday afternoon paralleled that of Herman Gold's about his daughter. Alison Wundt had enjoyed an occasional drink. She had gone to the Roosevelt Park district Wednesday to shop. She often shopped in that district. And, to his knowledge, she was not acquainted with a Hilda Caroline Gold.

Was it just possible she might have been meeting a man?

"How 'bout you two getting out?"

"Okay, cool down, Wundt. We don't like this any more than you do."

"The hell you don't, Sergeant. You kind of guys *thrive* on—"

"Over there. That picture. Is that your wife?"

"Yes!"

"She's an attractive girl."

"She *was* an attractive girl, Sergeant. She's dead—or don't you remember?"

"Yeah," Crocker said distastefully.

He took in the framed photograph again, fixing the face of the now dead Alison Bleeker Wundt

firmly in his mind. The features were sculpturally fine, the eyes large and deep, the light-colored hair framing what must have been an expressive face.

Briefly, he imagined that face caught in the tide of passion and then he put the image out of his mind quickly.

He thought, what kind of a creep am I? What kind of a ghoul?

Outside, Pierce said, "Nice looking gal, huh?" He made it sound conversational.

"Forget it!"

"What's the matter? All I said was, this Nadine is a nice looking gal."

"Maybe you'd better think about two dead girls."

"I have been, Sergeant. But what do we have? Two dead girls—and that's all."

Yeah, it was all they had. Two girls who had died on successive days in rest rooms of bars on 84th Street in the Roosevelt Park district.

Coincidence?

Maybe the medical reports would turn up something.

But the medical reports had not.

Hilda Caroline Gold. Cause of death: natural.

Alison Bleeker Wundt. Cause of death: natural.

Oh, there had been the usual technical gibberish in the reports. Things only the Docs would understand. But the gist of each had been death attributed to natural causes.

Untimely deaths? Crocker grunted. Yeah. But only the believers in national longevity averages would feel that kick in the pants.

Thursday, November 15:

The minute hand of the ancient wall clock in the squad room clicked loudly. One minute before four o'clock in the afternoon.

No one spoke.

Crocker felt the onerous silence pressing in on him. They were waiting. Gifford, Pierce, Anderson and a guy from the phone com-

pany. Watching the clock, too.

They were waiting for what?

For a killer to call?

Crocker snorted.

Killer? There hadn't been any murders. The Docs, the reports, the investigations *said* there hadn't been any murders.

"Why doesn't he call?" Pierce asked tersely.

"Take it easy," Crocker said with the patience of a man who had been waiting for something all of his life.

Pierce's face was a mask. But the eyes were a give-away. They were mirrors, reflecting the tension, the two day strain of knocking heads with the intangible.

Gifford left the phone official and Anderson to put a hip on the corner of Pierce's desk. He faced Crocker. The telephone was near his thigh. He could have it at his ear in one swooping movement. But Crocker knew that he would not touch the phone.

The call—if there was a call—would belong to Pierce.

"What do you think, Gil?" Gifford asked quietly. "Do we have a chance?"

Crocker met the penetrating look head on. Gifford knew exactly what he thought. They were veterans. Twenty years in the division. And Gifford was an iceberg. Under pressure—like now—he was a regular glacier. So the questions had been idle, something with which to kill seconds of the final minute. No more.

"We always have a chance, Giff," he said.

"I don't like waiting," Pierce said peremptorily.

Crocker said, "Keep him on that phone as long as you can, Sergeant."

Pierce nodded grimly.

Gifford looked at the telephone official. "We need a break, Rogwell. Anything."

Rogwell put a long forefinger against tortoise shell glasses. "We're ready, Lieutenant. The switchboard girl will stall him as long as possible."

"Sergeant Pierce will attempt to give you people extra time."

"Yes. We can use every second."

"And we can use a fix," Gifford said crisply.

Rogwell poked at the glasses again, shifted nervously.

Sergeant Anderson dropped his cigarette, ground it under his heel, dipped into his pocket for another.

Crocker stared down on the bumper of fat around his middle.

They waited.

The minute hand of the clock clicked.

It sounded like a cannon shot.

It was four o'clock, straight up.

The phone on Sergeant Pierce's

desk rang. Startled, he jumped.

"Damnit," Crocker breathed.

Pierce sat like a rock, his jaw set, his fingers poised three inches over the receiver, letting the phone ring.

"Easy," Lieutenant Gifford said tautly. "Give him all the rope you can, Pierce."

Nobody moved. Nobody said a word.

The phone rang again.

"Now!" Gifford hissed.

Pierce swooped up the receiver. His voice crackled. "Sergeant Pierce speaking."

He listened, nodded emphatically, listened again.

"Can you . . ." He yanked the receiver from his ear. "Gone!"

Gifford whirled on the telephone official. "Think your people got it, Rogwell?"

"We might have—"

"Forget it," Pierce said bluntly. "The creep said to try the Antler Room on Finmore."

Crocker lumbered to the huge city map that decorated ten feet of wall space. His fingers traced the guide lines. Finmore Avenue went south from 84th Street! It flanked Roosevelt Park on the east!

Sergeants Crocker, Pierce and Anderson swarmed into the Antler Room that snowy Thursday afternoon. And the seven customers soaking up the villatic atmosphere reacted conformably. They bolted for the street door where they met the imposing bulk of Sergeant Anderson who flipped a cigarette outside and automatically reached into his pocket for another.

The customers jabbered incoherently.

Anderson lit the cigarette, puffed smoke.

And then the bartender graveled, "What is this?"

The voice was rough. He was a big man with a sagging shape, thick in body, coarse in features.

Crocker took him in quickly with a practiced eye and catalogued him. The guy was ready to jump out of his shoes. He snapped, "Everything all right here?"

The bartender's thick lips worked, but no sound came from him. Crocker looked at Pierce, jerked his head. Pierce went to the back of the Antler Room. There were two doors in the rear wall. One was stenciled Bucks, the other Does. Pierce stopped in front of the door marked Does.

Crocker rasped at the bartender, "Anyone in there?"

"I . . . I dunno . . ."

Pierce opened the door and disappeared. He returned immediately. Muscles in his jawline rippled. "We've got another one, Sergeant," he said flatly.

She had been tall. She had been

pretty. Bottled blonde hair was piled on top of her head. Her taste in clothing had been simple, modestly expensive, and fashionable.

Her name was Jan Anne Jones.

Crocker made notes methodically from the possessions in her purse.

Caucasian . . . age, 27 . . . unmarried . . . stenographer . . . residence, Armwood Apartments, 6593 Ridgeway . . . next of kin, B. J. Jones, 98 Orange Lane, Oakmont, California.

The technicians arrived and went about their tasks with quiet efficiency.

Anderson was questioning the customers when Crocker and Pierce returned to the bar. The bartender looked like a man who had been ruthlessly shaken from a world of complete predictability, but he retained enough presence of mind to answer Crocker's questions quickly and bluntly.

"The dead girl a regular customer?"

"So help me, Sergeant, I never saw her before in my life. Never saw her friend, either."

"She and her friend came in together?"

"Tha's right."

"A male friend?"

"A female friend."

Crocker inhaled deeply. Pattern established. "Do you remember when they came in? About what time?"

"Not for sure, but it seems like it was 'round four 'clock."

"They came in and they sat here at the bar."

"Tha's right."

"A man joined them."

"Naw."

Pattern firmly entrenched. But Crocker kept pressing.

"No man talked to them, made a pass at—"

"Oh. I thought you meant, was there a guy with them?"

"Then there *was* a man."

"One guy. That's him sittin' over there at the table with the co . . . er, officer."

"He sat with the two girls here at the bar?"

"Naw. He just asked if he could buy them a round. They told him to get lost."

"Did he get lost?"

"Yeah. He didn't try to make a big issue out of it."

"No other man approached them?"

"None."

"Do you remember when they went to the rest room?"

"I remember the blonde going, yeah. She went first, see. The other dame stayed here at the bar. Then 'bout three or four minutes later, she went back. She wasn't in there long. Just in and out and on out

the front door. Sergeant, you wanna know somethun? I knew this was gonna be a bad day first thing this mornin'. My old lady was harpin' at me before I even got out of bed. And when she begins harpin' that early, it's gonna be a bad day all the way down the line."

"How many days in the week does she harp at you, friend?"

"Every day."

"Maybe you should trade old ladies, huh?"

"It's an idea, Sergeant—a very pleasant idea."

Crocker and Pierce joined Sergeant Anderson at the table. He sat alone now, but he still had reins on the customers. None had left the Antler Room.

They compared notes, matching bartender, customer stories. The notes jibed.

Crocker belched. "Okay. Turn 'em loose."

Anderson butted his cigarette, lit another, and released the customers as the medical examiner came out of the door marked Does.

"How goes it, Doc?" Crocker asked.

"Coronary perhaps."

Crocker shook his head.

"What's the matter, Sergeant?" the medical examiner smiled. "Disappointed?"

"Hell, I'm supposed to be lookin' for a killer, Doc."

"Try cigarettes," the medical examiner said with a significant look at Anderson.

The medical examiner was a non-smoker.

Routine, completion of their reports, and a long session with Lieutenant Gifford completed the office day for Crocker and Pierce. They walked out of the police building at seven o'clock in the evening. It had quit snowing, but the night was wet and raw.

"Where to, Sergeant?" Pierce asked as they went down the wide steps to the sidewalk.

"Home," Crocker grunted. "I'm beat."

"I'll give you a lift."

The city was unusually quiet and Crocker fell under its spell quickly as they drove away from the police building. He sank back against the seat cushion and felt the tension begin to ooze out of his muscles. It didn't return until Pierce said, "You don't like me, do you, Sergeant?"

Crocker said carefully, "Maybe I'm slow making up my mind about people."

Pierce was grinning. "How 'bout a drink? I'd like to have you meet my wife. She's a fine little gal."

Crocker hesitated. What the hell? A couple of drinks might be just the ticket. A couple of drinks might allow him to sleep this

night. Sleep would be a real treat.

"I've got to admit, Pierce, you're reaching me."

Pierce grinned all over the car.

He lived in an apartment building in a modest income neighborhood. They rode the self-service elevator up to the third floor and met a couple coming along the corridor toward them. The man was small, wiry, almost feminine in his movements. He probably was around thirty, but he looked fifty. Tired lines pinched the flesh around his eyes and mouth. The girl was another proposition. She was on the brink of fullblown womanhood. A tawny yellow blonde with a classic Hellenic face and an earth mother's body.

And Crocker noticed how her eyes lit up as she took in Pierce. "Hi, Hugh," she said in a voice that had the huskiness of a debauchee.

The man said flatly, "Pierce."

"Well, hello there, you two," Pierce beamed. He waved a hand between Crocker and the couple. "Sergeant Crocker, Dave and Kim Nile."

Crocker acknowledged the introduction perfunctorily. He was more interested in the perverse look that was passing between his cohort and the girl, and the gelid stare her husband had for Pierce.

"My neighbors," Pierce explained quickly. "They live just next door."

"Just getting home, Hugh?" the girl asked.

"Long day," he smiled.

"Things are tough all over, huh, Pierce?" the man said bluntly.

Pierce ignored his owlishness. "They have been, Dave. Well, see you 'round."

"Sure, Hugh," the girl smiled sunnily.

"Yeah," her husband echoed. His head bobbed at Crocker. "Sergeant."

They walked into the elevator. The door whispered shut on their faces. Pierce was still smiling. "Nice people. Dave's had it a little rough in spots. They lived in Europe for about three years. He was working for the government. The Courier Service. Then he got a break. An uncle died and left him a small nest. That's when he gave up the Service job and they came here. He hasn't worked for almost a year now. Just living it soft for a while."

"The girl is a looker," Crocker said without inflection.

Pierce's grin grew. "Very much a looker, Sergeant."

He put a key in a door and swung the door wide. The girl who appeared across the small front room was also a looker. Firmly voluptuous, with an exotic face, long, dark hair that tumbled to her

shoulders, and skin of fine texture. A fresh ochroid blouse that didn't pretend to disguise the buoyant thrust of her chest and the viridescent Capris left no doubt about the curve of her hips and thighs.

Pierce gathered her against his front possessively. He kissed her hard. And then he grinned at Crocker. "My wife, Nancy."

They had their drinks.

They had four.

Crocker felt loose and mellow when he finally rolled heavily into his own bed.

The woman in the bed next to his snored rhythmically.

He went to sleep with the esoteric image of a beautiful Alison Bleeker Wundt and a voluptuous Nancy Pierce gamboling over him like danseuses as he lay beside a gleaming swimming pool, soaking up a hot Tucson sun.

He was smiling. He was happy.

Friday morning was brilliant and cold. The crisp air stung Crocker's lungs, but he felt remarkably relaxed. Almost bubbly. He'd had a good night's sleep.

He walked into the squad room exactly on time and he spoke to everyone in sight.

The old feeling of the past three days didn't catch up with him until Pierce's phone rang. Pierce was after coffee. Crocker snatched up the phone, somewhat irritated.

"Crocker speaking."

The falsetto voice that filled his ear brought him down to earth.

"Isn't Sergeant Pierce there this morning?"

"Pierce is out of the office."

"Looking for a body, perhaps?"

"Damnit, man—"

"That girl in the Antler Room. Pretty, wasn't she, Sergeant?"

Soft laughter.

Click.

"Hey . . ."

Crocker banged the phone together and was cursing vehemently when Lieutenant Gifford and Sergeant Pierce walked into the squad room.

Friday had become an abortive day.

They spent the remainder of the morning in reconstruction. They pieced together what they had from late Tuesday afternoon to the moment.

Little of it rhymed.

They had a man using a falsetto voice and professing to be a murderer, a man who had called Central Police Headquarters at four o'clock in the afternoon on three consecutive days, asked for Sergeant Pierce, and warned of a killing that was yet to take place. They had the same man repeat his call on three successive mornings, ask if they had found his victims—and

laugh at them; deride them too.

They did not have victims.

Unless you concentrated on three blonde girls . . .

Hilda Caroline Gold. Alison Bleeker Wundt. Jan Anne Jones. One unemployed simply by station in life, one a housewife, one a stenographer. One married. Two celibates. Each a stranger to the other. One who had entered a bar in the Roosevelt Park district alone. Two who had entered bars in the Roosevelt Park district with feminine companions.

Three blondes. Three bars.

The umbilical cord that bound them?

They had died in rest rooms. They had died of . . .

Natural causes?

The medical examiner was disturbed. He stood before them, pulling at his lower lip. "It's beyond doubt, Lieutenant. We found traces of potassium cyanide in the Jones girl. There isn't any more I can tell you at the moment."

"The cyanide could've killed her?" Gifford asked.

"Definitely."

"We have two other girls, Roberts. One already buried. The other to be buried tomorrow. I want autopsies."

"I might not turn up anything. Cyanide is funny. You breathe the vapors, the blood vessels contract, you die in two to three minutes. A short time later the blood vessels expand again and an autop might not tell you a thing."

Gifford looked down on Crocker. "What do you think, Gil?"

"I think some smart creep is three up on us."

Friday became a day of preparation.

Crocker walked into the run-of-the-mill Franklin bar at five minutes before four o'clock in the afternoon while at police headquarters Gifford, Pierce, Anderson and the guy from the phone company were sweating it out again, waiting for the call.

Crocker ordered a beer from the nonentity behind the bar.

He was playing a hunch, anticipating a killer. Hours before, he had mentally placed himself in a strategic spot in Roosevelt Park, and he had looked across the kaleidoscopic glut of traffic on 84th Street. He had taken in the Jungle Bar, moved right a block to The Lounge, swung right again, around a corner and down Finmore to the Antler Room.

Right. Clockwise. It was a pattern.

The next bar in the clockwise course around Roosevelt Park was the Franklin.

You figure it anyway you wanted to, if you could hit the right bar

before the killer, you might be able to put the clamps on him. Steel clamps. Like handcuffs.

So now he was nursing a beer in the Franklin and taking inventory of the customers in the backbar mirror: a man and a girl in a booth who looked like sectarians, three autochthons hunching over a table as if they were charting a course to Venus, a succulent brunette with a libertine look at the bar, and three stools beyond the brunette, an earthy, white blonde.

The minute hand on the wall clock moved past four o'clock. Three minutes. Five minutes. Crocker drank beer, watched, waited. No one in the Franklin moved. He felt the weight of defeat begin to blanket him.

And then the phone on the wall shrilled.

The bartender yanked the receiver against his ear, listened, frowned on Crocker, and shoved the receiver in his direction. "I think this is for you, pal."

Lieutenant Gifford's voice was heavy with resignation. "He called, Gil. We got two bites, but no fish."

Crocker knew what he meant.

There were five public phone booths in Roosevelt Park. This Friday afternoon a detective had each booth under surveillance. A man using a park phone at four o'clock automatically met a restraining hand when he stepped out of the booth.

Two bites, no fish. Two people had used phones in the park at four o'clock, but neither was the man they wanted.

"One was a woman," Gifford said. "And the other—get this, Gil—was Crawford Baines."

Crawford Baines. The philanthropist. And philatelist. A legendary figure.

"Are we gonna get sued?"

"Who knows how a mind capable of netting millions a year works? I don't."

"No activity here, Giff. It was a bum hunch. I'm coming in."

Crocker perfunctorily held the street door of the Franklin open for the dark-haired woman who was entering the bar before he stepped out on to the sidewalk. But it wasn't until he was six blocks out of the Park district that it hit him.

A woman!

Three blondes had died. Three blondes had been in the company of other women just prior to their deaths.

He disregarded the city speed limit as he drove back to the Franklin Bar. The white blonde and a dark-haired woman were leaving stools at the bar when he walked inside. They moved toward the rest room entrance in a darkened

corner. The white blonde had been at the bar earlier. He had held the door for the dark-haired woman as he had been leaving.

He moved in on them quickly. "Just a minute, please."

The blonde turned, frowned on him. The dark-haired woman shot a fist straight into his stomach. The fist rocked him. But he managed to grab her as she leaped past him. He spun her. A fist came up un-

der his jaw. . . . a smashing blow.

He didn't have any sensation of going down, but he knew that he was on his way.

He also knew that the dark-haired woman was not a woman.

Damn! He'd had a killer in his grasp, but had been unable to hold him.

"You're sure it was a man?" Lieutenant Gifford asked. "Our man in the park said—"

"I heard what he said," Crocker snapped truculently. "He saw her come out of the phone booth and he figured she was a dame, but I'm telling you this was a guy decked out *like* a dame."

"It could fit," Gifford conceded thoughtfully. "On the phone, he's a man. But meeting his victims, he's a woman. No questions about striking up a casual conversation, no questions about going into a rest room with another woman."

"Where's Pierce?"

"He cut out over an hour ago."

Crocker had a splitting headache between the eyes when he walked out of headquarters into the cold evening. He'd wanted to talk to Pierce. He'd wanted to go back to the beginning again, retrace everything from that first call Tuesday afternoon. The killer had a reason for calling Pierce every time. Maybe he *had* seen Pierce's name in the newspapers; maybe he *had* picked Pierce at random.

On the other hand, his reason for selecting the young sergeant could be a helluva lot more pointed.

Crocker hailed a cab and took his headache to Pierce's apartment.

Going into the building, he met

Pierce's neighbor, Dave Nile, coming out. Nile passed him with a quick bob of recognition and went outside.

Crocker took the elevator up to the third floor. But it was Nancy Pierce who answered his knock on the door. She smiled with genuine warmth and swung the door wide. "Well, Sergeant, how nice."

He felt that she actually did welcome his presence on their threshold and it was with some reluctance that he asked for her husband. It would be much more pleasant to sit and chat with her over a drink, even if the conversation was idle and inconsequential.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Hugh left just a few minutes ago. He said he had some paper work at the office and—"

"I see," Crocker interrupted. He hesitated. Then, "Can I talk to you for a few minutes, Nancy?"

She swung the door wide. "Certainly. Come in."

"Do you know anyone who might be nursing a grudge against your husband?"

She frowned prettily.

He debated briefly before he put it on the line to her. He knew that she was the kind of girl who would take something like this with understanding calm.

She did.

"Then it's your theory, Sergeant, that the person you want is engaged in a personal vendetta against Hugh?"

"Every time this man has called, he's asked for your husband."

"Well, I'm sure there are people who do not like Hugh. And I'm sure that in his work—"

The knock stopped her.

She stepped around him and opened the door. Dave Nile stood there, looking like a man on the brink of disintegration. He held a gun in his right hand. The gun was pointed straight at Nancy Pierce's face.

Crocker never had seen a gun like it.

Nile pushed inside quickly and rasped, "Where's that lousy husband of yours?"

Nancy was tense, but she spoke with glacial calm. "He isn't here, Dave."

Nile's eyes leaped to Crocker. "Don't!"

Crocker stopped the hand halfway to his coat pocket. "Just getting a cigarette," he said, attempting to make it sound casual.

"You don't have time, Sergeant."

Sergeant.

It crackled through his mind. The phone call he had taken for Pierce that morning. Answering, he had said, "Crocker speaking." He hadn't said, "Sergeant Crocker speaking." And yet a few seconds

later the falsetto voice had called him by his title. And there it had been. Something they had been seeking. A lead. Their killer had inadvertently narrowed the field to individuals who knew that he, like Pierce, was a Sergeant.

Dumb!

Crocker berated himself as he took the crumpled package of cigarettes and the book matches from his pocket.

Nile's eyes jumped to Nancy. "I'll teach that husband of yours to keep his hands off my wife."

"I don't think Hugh has once touched Kim," Nancy said quietly.

Crocker lit a cigarette.

"You don't think so, huh? Then you're blind! You can't see how they talk with their eyes, what they say! They are like craving animals! It's lust! It's—"

Crocker lit the book of matches in his fingers and threw the flame into Nile's face.

Nile howled. Crocker sent Nancy Pierce sprawling out of range. And then he had Nile's gun wrist in his hands. He twisted his body quickly, brought up a leg, and snapped the wrist down hard across his thigh. The gun flipped from Nile's fingers.

They found Dave Nile's wardrobe of women's clothing in his apartment and it was only a matter of time until he broke under their steady questioning. The psychologists would have a clinical explanation for his behavior, a long list of fancy terms that would almost make his killings, his motives, a logical action. But to Lieutenant Gifford and Sergeants Crocker and Pierce it boiled down to some rather simple things.

Nile was a violently jealous man. He had not liked the way Sergeant Pierce always looked at his wife. He had not liked the way his wife always looked at Sergeant Pierce. And somewhere along the line, something inside of him had snapped. And he had sought retaliation. He had set out to break Pierce.

"It sounds crazy," Crocker said, "but all the guy was really trying to do, Pierce, was get you booted from the force. He had it figured that if you got the boot, you'd probably be leaving town, and if you left town, he'd never have to worry about you and his wife again."

"He didn't have anything to worry about in the first place."

"He thought he did."

Pierce drank coffee, looked thoughtful. "I'll say one thing. When he cracked, he really went all to pieces."

"Hell, he panicked. Remember, he clobbered me in the Antler Room this afternoon. When I did-

n't call him by name, he probably was fairly certain I hadn't recognized him in his feminine rig. But when I went up to your place tonight and ran into him, it probably was too much for him. He couldn't be sure why I was in the building. For all he knew, I might've been going up to his apartment to quiz his wife about his whereabouts these last few afternoons."

Pierce shook his head. "When I think about those three girls . . ."

He didn't finish it.

"Three blondes," Crocker said significantly.

"Un-huh. But why did the guy always have to pick a blonde?"

"His wife is blonde, remember?"

Saturday morning was crisp and bright. Crocker faced the cold bravely. It was easier to do, when you weren't burdened. And he arrived in the squad room in an almost carefree frame of mind.

Lieutenant Gifford and the gun in his hand brought him back to reality.

"A gas spray gun," Gifford said soberly. "You may never see one like it again." He held the gun aloft. "A real killer. Load it with a small ampule of poison, point it at a chest and fire. Two or three minutes later the fumes have hatched a corpse. Another few minutes and you can't tell if you have a murder victim or someone who died a natural death."

Crocker grimaced. "Where do you suppose Nile got a thing like that?"

"From a Russian. His wife says he traded a small car for it while he was with the Courier Service in Europe."

Crocker grunted as the phone on his desk jangled. He picked up the receiver. "Detective Division, Sergeant Crocker."

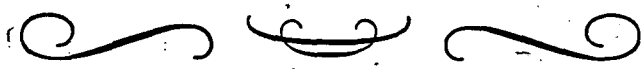
"I want to report a murder," the heavy, lisping voice in his ear said. "It hasn't happened yet."

"Please . . ." he said almost helplessly.

"I'm going to kill a fly!"

Crocker threw the receiver in its cradle.

He knew that in the next thirty days they'd get calls from every screwball in the city!



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