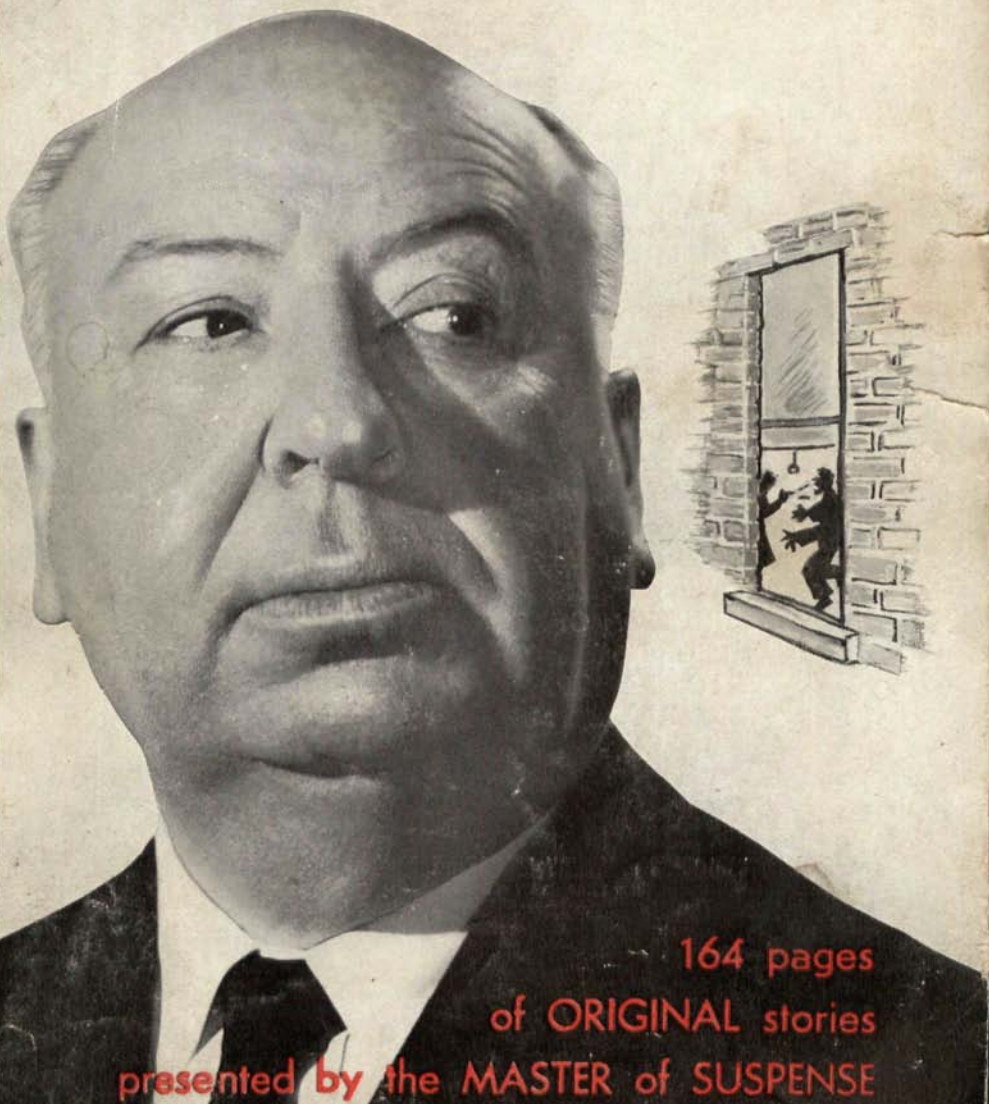


ALFRED

FEBRUARY 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



164 pages
of ORIGINAL stories
presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE



Dear Friends:

My infrangible resolutions for 1964 were completely forgotten in the excitement of getting out the new, expanded edition of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine which you now hold in your hands, and which made its bow last month. Even forgotten was my determination never, but never, to top my baked potatoes with sour cream. A real sacrifice, I might add. So intent was I on aiding and abetting the addition of thirty-two pages to my popular little magazine I was carried editorially, so to speak, right past the calorie cutting caper into the homing laboratory for Machiavellian misadventures. Therefore, I point with pride to such sleep defying departures as **SECOND VERDICT** by Henry Slesar, Arthur Porges' Professor Middlebie in **BLOOD WILL TELL**, and **THE BABY** by Jonathan Craig, as well as many others in this issue, all of them mystery-masters.

Before you delve into this super-scarey line-up I'd like to call your attention to the **VERY SPECIAL SUBSCRIPTION OFFER** contained in these pages. It is a wonderful offer which includes a copy of **ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS STORIES MY MOTHER NEVER TOLD ME**, an incomparable chiller-diller.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Art Beilock Jr.

VOLUME 9, No. 2

FEBRUARY 1964

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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We continue to be amused by the plight of the fellow "so unlucky that he runs into accidents which started out to happen to somebody else". Unfortunately, most accidents, unlike miracles, are not deemed propitious.



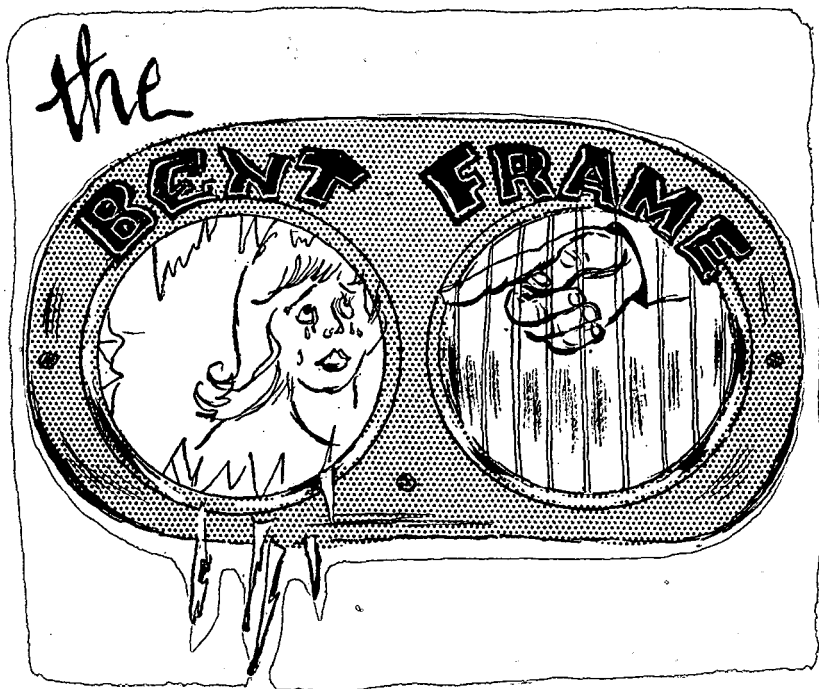
THE SERGEANT from the traffic squad was a dour and brooding man named Farha. He took Joe Kerrigan upstairs and told him to wait in the little room outside the chief's office.

"When do I see my wife?" Joe asked worriedly.

"You'll have to wait," Farha said.

A uniformed officer came out of the chief's office, and left the door ajar. Joe caught a brief glimpse of Toni sitting nervously on the edge of a wooden chair beyond the chief's desk. Toni looked small and scared, and her dark eyes held terror as she recognized Joe.

"I didn't do it, Joel" Toni's



strained voice was a stricken cry. Farha swore softly, slammed the door.

Joe Kerrigan was a tall, bronzed young man of twenty-three, and while nobody could accuse him of being a mouse, he was, like many law-abiding men, slightly in awe of the police. But the memory of Toni's frightened face brought on a sudden outburst.

"What're you trying to pull, Farha?" Joe shouted. "You walk in on me when I'm working late at the

get the license number, but had described the hit-and-run car as a light colored Jetflite Eight. Joe remembered that detail because he and Toni owned a brand new Jetflite Eight.

"A sliver of glass from one of the headlights punctured the boy's throat," Farha said grimly. "The boy just died."

Joe Kerrigan began to tremble. He sensed what Farha was trying to tell him, yet his brain refused to accept it.

by Duane Larnell



office. You tell me my wife's in a little trouble. You act like it's no worse than a traffic ticket—then I see her face—"

"Okay," Farha conceded. "So I held out on you. The kind of news I had for you is the kind no cop likes to break." Farha studied Joe from behind bristly brows, and after a moment he added, "You were listening to a newscast when I walked in on you tonight."

Joe remembered. He always listened to the ten o'clock news, even when his boss, Sam Gruber, kept him working late.

Tonight, at twenty after eight, a six-year-old boy had been struck by a car. A witness had failed to

"Your wife's a knockout," Farha mused. "She could put arsenic in your soup and a jury might free her. But no jury will free a dame who leaves a kid dying on the street."

Joe felt numb. Toni might accidentally hit a child, but she'd never flee the accident scene. Joe stared uneasily at Farha's uncompromising face.

"Sergeant, you guys have made an awful mistake."

"Let's see what we've got," Farha said wearily.

They went downstairs to the big vault of a room that was the police garage. Two young technicians were working near the front of

Joe's pale blue Jetflite Eight. Their undershirts clung to them in the lingering, late-summer heat.

The twin headlights on the right front side were held in place by a chrome frame. The frame was slightly bent and the outer lens was broken. Most of the glass had fallen out, although part of the lens had remained in the frame.

One of the technicians nodded at Farha. "We've checked it out, Sergeant. This is the car."

"Can you prove it in court?"

"Take a look for yourself."

Farha took a thin, knife-shaped sliver of glass from a towel-draped tray and, as he held it up, Joe Kerrigan felt a deepening sickness. The lethal looking sliver was tinged with a dark stain.

"The surgeons took this from the dead boy's throat," Farha said. There was more anger than triumph in his voice. "Watch closely, Kerrigan."

Farha eased the bloodstained sliver into the chrome frame where it fitted perfectly against the piece of lens that had remained in place.

There was a great roaring in Joe Kerrigan's ears, a deep and frightening emptiness in his chest. "It was my car that hit the boy," he finally admitted. "But that doesn't mean that Toni was driving."

Farha shook his head pityingly. "Let's go back upstairs," he said.

They returned in silence to the little room outside the chief's office. Farha made Joe wait while he went inside. The walls were sound-proof, but now and then Joe heard the muted rumble of voices raised in anger. Now and then he heard the ragged edge of a frightened sob.

As Joe Kerrigan waited, his fear grew. The heat wilted his sports shirt until it hung like a limp rag across his lank shoulders. Fear and worry congealed the bronzed planes of his young face until he could have passed for a man of fifty.

It was twenty after eleven when the door opened again. The chief stalked out first, then two uniformed cops, then Farha. The sergeant stared hard at Joe.

"See if you can talk some sense into her," he said bitterly. "She's got nothing to gain by holding out."

Joe went into the office, closed the door.

Toni was a small, slender girl and as she stared at him her great smoky eyes held an expression of raw terror. He pulled her gently to him, but she shivered in his arms and her body was cold and without response.

"It's going to be all right, baby," he said.

"Oh, Joe, Joe," she sobbed. "I

didn't do it." She lifted a frightened face and he watched tears gather heavily at the tips of long curved lashes, then spill down washed-out cheeks.

"Tell me about it, baby," he said.

She said brokenly, "I didn't hit that little boy!"

"I know you didn't, Toni. But someone did. Someone who was driving our car at exactly twenty past eight tonight."

She said, a little wildly, "But I was driving, Joe. I left the house at eight tonight and I was parking beside that little store where I buy magazines when I heard sirens over on Elm Street."

Joe groaned. Toni admitted being behind the wheel at the time of the accident. She admitted being at a little store which was less than a mile from the accident scene. He hated himself for thinking it, but when Toni wanted a magazine, she always used the Elm Street shortcut. *If she'd hit that little boy tonight, she'd have had just enough time to reach the store by the time the police cars converged on the accident scene.*

"Toni," he said tautly, "did you drive up Elm tonight?"

Her eyes turned dull. "The police claim I did. But tonight I drove to the little store by way of Ryan Boulevard."

"But you've never gone that way

before—" his voice broke. He couldn't go on, not with Toni staring at him that way, her eyes wounded and hurt.

"You don't believe me, either."

"But our car did it, Toni. Look, maybe you didn't feel the bump—"

"I don't care what anyone says," she cried. "I was driving our car at eight-twenty tonight and I wasn't near Elm Street." Her young mouth began to tremble and the rest came in a broken sob. "I'd bought my magazine and I was on my way home when the police stopped me at a roadblock. They were looking for a new Jetflite Eight with a broken headlight. I don't know how our headlight got broken."

He stared at this lovely girl who was his wife and he found himself remembering something she'd once told him. . . .

He'd met Toni on a blind date shortly after he'd gone to work for Sam Gruber's firm of consulting engineers. For both of them, love had come quickly. Yet, happy as he was those days, something about Toni puzzled him. Whenever he'd mention her past, she'd turn the question aside. Finally, convinced that she must be hiding something, he'd demanded an explanation.

Suddenly, her eyes filled with tears and her slim shoulders

sagged. "I thought I could lie my way to the kind of life I've always wanted, Joe. But I'm getting too tired to go on lying."

The story she'd told of her past was far from pretty. She'd been born in the slums and she'd lived in a thrice-broken home. An older brother had been killed in the wreckage of a stolen car. A half-sister had married a hoodlum. Finally, at sixteen, she'd dropped out of school, no longer able to face her schoolmates. She'd lied about her age to enter a beauty contest, and with the prizes, which she'd pawned, she'd gained enough to take the business course that had qualified her for a secretarial job. Because of her past, she'd lied whenever it had seemed prudent.

When he'd heard her story through, he looked deeply into her eyes and he told himself that he'd trust this girl with his life. A week later, they were married. And until this night, the marriage had seemed the kind that could happen to a man maybe once in a thousand years.

Now, though, as he stared woodenly at Toni, he found himself remembering that she'd once been willing to lie about anything if it meant getting away from something disagreeable. And he wondered if it could be happening again.

"You still don't believe me," she said in a dead voice.

He was trying to frame an answer when Sam Gruber rushed into the office. Gruber was a big, ruddy man who'd started as a cat-skinners thirty years ago. Gruber had parlayed an intuitive understanding of engineering and considerable brashness into a firm of consulting engineers second to none in the entire state.

One look at Gruber's pale, brooding eyes and Joe knew that his boss had already heard all there was to hear. Sam Gruber was a wheel in this town and he had a grapevine all his own.

"I came as soon as I could, Joe," Gruber said.

"Thanks, Sam."

"I've already talked to Franklin Allis."

Joe nodded. Franklin Allis headed the law firm that handled Sam Gruber's myriad affairs. In the legal profession, Allis had a reputation for never being wrong about anything.

"Allis is worried," Gruber fumed. "This can get pretty messy. You see the angle, Joe?"

Again, Joe Kerrigan nodded.

Gruber's firm of consulting engineers was intricately involved with the city administration. The opposition party, hoping to get back into office, would grasp at any

kind of scandal, no matter how indirect in an effort to embarrass the administration.

"If I didn't need you to see that pipeline project through," Gruber muttered, "I'd fire you and the devil with it—" He paused, then turned to Toni, his expression still grim. "Look, doll, you want to save Joe's job, don't you?"

Toni said, "Y-yes. Of course."

"Then we'll have to play it cute. I know a doctor who's in a crack and he needs a favor. I'll get him to say he's been treating you for blackouts. Now get this, doll. Tonight, you visited him and he gave you a pill or something—we'll work out the details after I've bailed you out and we've talked to Allis. You could have killed this kid, but you don't remember it, see? You were having a blackout at the time."

Joe felt revulsion as he weighed the plan. He waited bleakly for Toni to agree. A story of this kind, skillfully told, might make a jury forget she'd left a small boy dying on a dark street.

He sensed, somehow, that she'd take this way out. She'd done it before, hadn't she? When she'd found it prudent, she'd often lied rather than face the bitterness of truth.

But when he glanced at Toni, she was shrinking away from Sam

Gruber and her eyes were dark, vacant discs. She bit her lip, buried her face in trembling hands.

"I . . . I can't do it," she whispered. "Not even for Joe."

Something began to swell inside Joe Kerrigan's chest. He forgot the offer Sam Gruber had made, forgot everything but this young wife of his who'd refused to voice the one lie that might save her skin. Gently, tenderly, he touched Toni's cheek.

"Baby," he said in a voice filled with wonder, "I almost blew it back there."

Toni watched him uncertainly. "You . . . you mean you believe me, Joe?"

He nodded, a lump in his throat. Everything was against his believing her. Toni's past, her improbable story about her movements tonight, the sliver of glass Farha had shown him. Yet in one shining moment, Toni had washed away the last of his lingering doubts. He didn't know how the little boy had died, but one thing was certain; Toni hadn't killed him.

He turned to Sam Gruber. A young engineer could use a man like Gruber in his corner. A job with Gruber meant prestige, and with it, a split-level home, a Jet-flite Eight, and many other things. But as he glimpsed the glow in Toni's eyes, he knew there were

finer rewards than the things Gruber could give him.

Joe said, "We'll play it her way, Sam."

The big man's pale eyes narrowed, then his anger gave way to pity. Sam Gruber shook his head, sighed, then turned away. His mouth was working silently, as if he were already planning the speech he'd make to the press about how he'd had to fire this man whose wife had brought such discredit to his firm's proud name. Gruber had a gambler's instinct for turning a liability into an asset.

When they were alone again, Joe held Toni close in his arms. After a moment, he said, "Let's go over it, Toni. Somewhere along the line, the cops have overlooked something important."

Her red mouth softened in gratitude. "I left the house at eight, Joe. I remember because I'd just watched a quiz show."

He tried to hide his disappointment. "You must be wrong about the time, baby. I think someone must have stolen the car, hit that boy, panicked, then returned it without you knowing. . . ."

"No, Joe," she broke in. "I'm certain of the time. You weren't coming home until late and I was restless. I left the house at eight, drove along Ryan Boulevard for awhile, then decided to buy a mag-

azine to have something to read."

"And as you parked beside the little store, you heard the sirens over on Elm Street? Maybe there were two accidents over there. That could explain how you were wrong about the time."

Toni shook her head. "No, Joe. The police say not. And they've checked with the owner of the store. He heard the sirens, too. They've pretty well pinpointed the time. They say I had just enough time to . . . to kill the little boy, then stop at the store."

Again Joe Kerrigan tried to hide his disappointment. "Then what, baby?"

She said, "I was the last customer in the store. Mr. Kettrick was getting ready to close up. We talked for about five minutes, then I left. As I came outside, I met a woman who was looking for a lost kitten. She was a redhead, around twenty-five, and from the white evening dress she wore, I suppose she was getting ready for a dance. She asked me if I'd seen her missing kitten. I hadn't, but she described it to me anyway, and then she practically broke down in tears as she told me how her daughter was going to miss it. We must have talked for five or six minutes, then I went around to the side of the store and got into the car. A few minutes later, the police stopped

me and brought me in with them."

Joe was baffled, but he couldn't let Toni know it. He was trying to think of something reassuring to say when Sergeant Farha came in, sparing him the effort.

"She ready to talk, Kerrigan?"

"She's already told you the truth," Joe said.

Farha said, coldly, "We've got her six ways from Sunday, and we've done some fast checking. She's got a sister married to Georgie Andrews, a two-bit punk with a record as long as your arm. We can probably dig up more. Put her on the stand and the D. A. will rip her to shreds. A confession and a guilty plea could stop all that."

Joe watched horror come into Toni's dusky eyes, and for a moment he misread it. Then she said in a voice heavy with anguish, "Joe, it doesn't matter what they do to me. You're the one who'll have to suffer. Why don't you leave me, Joe?"

"Then what?" he asked raggedly.

"Then I'll fight this thing alone," she said. "But you won't have to get hurt."

He felt suddenly warm again. He squeezed Toni's waist, then turned to Farha. "I'm ready to put up bond," he began. "I . . ."

"Bond?" Farha shouted. "Listen, in this state, we can hold a suspect

for twenty hours before we file. In this case, it'll be a pleasure. Don't even mention bond to me for another seventeen hours."

Joe looked down at Toni. Another seventeen hours of merciless hammering and she might be shoved beyond the breaking point. His only chance was to clear her, to get her out of here. Somehow, he made himself smile.

"Don't worry, baby," he said. "I'll have you out of here in no time." Fleeting, he watched hope flare in her eyes, and he turned quickly away, sorry that he'd aroused a hope he might be unable to deliver.

Farha followed Joe outside, and when Joe asked for the release of his car, Farha shook his head.

Joe shrugged. "I can always rent a car."

Farha watched him closely. "A word of warning. If you want to believe your wife, it's none of my business. But don't start acting like a cop—"

"It's about time someone around here started acting like one," Joe growled.

When he saw Farha's angering face, he knew he'd made no friends tonight. But something had happened to Joe Kerrigan in the brief hours since Farha had first brought him here. Joe's respect for the law was still undiminished, but he'd

definitely lost his awe of cops.

He walked two blocks, rented a late-model car. It was midnight as he drove away, and it was ten past midnight when he parked in front of the little store where Toni bought her magazines.

The store was dark and the street, filled with second-rate rooming houses, was silent and empty. Joe stood for a moment before the store. The single front window was so clogged with crepe paper displays that it was impossible to see inside. As he stood there, he decided that Toni must have stood in almost that same spot while she listened to the redhead discuss her lost kitten.

Then he walked around the building to the narrow side street where Toni had parked the car. He struck a match and moved along the gutter until something glittered under the glare. He bent and picked up a small piece of glass and he knew, with a kind of sickness in him, that it was a part of the broken lens that had fallen from the bent frame when Toni had parked there earlier tonight.

For a fleeting moment, his faith in Toni wavered, then he felt ashamed for having doubted. A man had to believe in something, and if not in his wife, then what was left?

As he returned to the store, he

realized that something was bothering him. At the time Toni had told him about the redhead who'd lost a kitten, the story had sounded logical. But was it sensible for a woman to spend five or six minutes discussing a lost kitten with a stranger who had already said she hadn't seen it? Would a woman waste time that might better be spent searching?

He walked two blocks in each direction from the store. Wherever he saw a light burning, he stopped to ask two questions: First, had anyone heard a woman calling a kitten? Second, did anyone know an attractive redhead who lived in this neighborhood? The answer to both questions was always negative.

Returning to his rented car, he sat behind the wheel and stared broodingly into the darkness. The redhead had lied to Toni tonight. But why? People didn't go out of their way to lie unless there was a good reason. Joe Kerrigan tried to find meaning in the redhead's lie, but if meaning was there, it escaped him.

An attractive redhead, Toni had said, dressed for a dance.

Joe Kerrigan drove the rented car over to Ryan Boulevard, two blocks distant. That section of the city was dotted with night clubs, the most obvious place for Joe to begin his search.

He talked to scores of bartenders and waiters, to doormen and parking attendants. But the answers they gave him were always the same. None had seen the woman Joe described.

By a quarter to two, he knew the clubs would soon be closing. There were still half a dozen or so to be visited, and he'd never make them all. It was with a feeling of futility that he parked beside the next club, a small, neon-lighted place called *The Boulevard Grotto*.

He nodded at the doorman, stepped wearily inside.

A woman in a white evening dress sat at a rear table. She was young, somewhere in her mid-twenties, and she wore her coppery hair in closely cropped ringlets. She had a dazzling figure and while she could have been the one Toni had described, he realized there might be a dozen white-gowned redheads doing the town tonight.

Her escort was a man in his thirties, a tall, swarthy man impeccably dressed, and, somehow, vaguely familiar. Joe hesitated, then quickly crossed the room.

Both of them looked up curiously as he pulled out a chair and sat down. Joe ignored the man, turned to the redhead.

"Did you find your kitten?" he asked softly.

Her lovely forehead showed a

slight frown, and there was bewilderment in the shape of her lush red mouth. Yet, fleetingly, he was certain that he saw a hint of uneasiness in her wide green eyes before she hid it behind throaty laughter.

"You've got the wrong person," she said.

The swarthy man, too, looked faintly amused, although there was a wariness about him that Joe found hard to explain.

"I'm talking about the kitten you lost outside the store off Ryan Boulevard. You told my wife about it tonight."

The redhead started to answer, but the man stopped her.

"I'll handle this, Frieda," he said. He leaned across the table. Joe felt a little shiver as he realized where he'd seen this man's face before. He'd seen these same cold eyes staring from a newspaper photo less than two weeks ago. The man was Marty Duncan, an underworld character often arrested but never convicted. A few days back, police had reluctantly released him after two witnesses had mysteriously disappeared.

Joe Kerrigan gazed into this man's cold eyes and he felt a little flicker of fear. Then he thought of Toni and of a promise he'd made that had to be kept.

"Blow, friend," Marty Duncan

said with his deceptive softness.

"Not until I know why the red-head lied to my wife."

Joe's voice had risen and people were beginning to stare. A big man in a dress suit came silently across the room and he frowned down at Joe from an imposing height.

"This guy bothering you, Marty?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

A hand dug into Joe's shoulder. He tried to slap it away, but his wrist was suddenly locked painfully behind him and he was being propelled toward the back door.

Joe Kerrigan landed on hands and knees in the crushed shell parking lot behind the building. He picked himself up slowly, angrily. He dusted himself off, started back inside, then prudently changed his mind. He'd see Marty Duncan again, but next time there'd be no bouncer around.

He walked along the line of cars, wondering which belonged to Marty Duncan. He passed a pale green Jetflite Eight, then stopped dead still, breath rattling in his throat.

The right front headlight was in place, but just below it, the chrome grille was slightly dented from some kind of hard blow. Something flicked through Joe's mind. He moved excitedly around the car, opened the front door. His fingers

shook a little as he searched the unlocked glove compartment. He found a pair of pliers, a screwdriver kit, a packet of matches and a pair of sun glasses. Then he looked up and Marty Duncan was sliding into the seat beside him, bumping him with his hip, threatening him with a small and deadly palm-sized gun.

"So you finally got it," Marty Duncan said.

"Yeah," Joe said. "I finally did."

And it was suddenly all too clear.

Tonight, this thug and his red-headed girl friend had been speeding up Elm Street when their car had struck a little boy. Marty Duncan had stopped long enough to see that his headlight lens had been broken and he'd known the cops would soon be looking for such a car.

But Marty Duncan had seen a way out. If only he could locate another Jetflite Eight, he could switch his damaged lens and chrome frame for an undamaged set. The switch required the removal of only four small screws and would take but a few minutes.

Near Ryan Boulevard, he'd spotted Toni's car parked beside the small store. And while Marty Duncan had made the quick exchange on the dark side street, the redhead had delayed Toni by telling a story about a supposedly lost kitten. The misdirection had been perfect.

Now, the redhead, Frieda, slid in under the wheel from the other side. Joe Kerrigan, caught between them, covered by the gun held in Marty Duncan's lap, felt sickness rise up inside him.

Frieda drove slowly along the side of the night club. A taxi had parked under the canvas entryway and the driver leaned against a supporting post as he waited for his fare to come out.

The cab was just to the left of the Jetflite Eight. Joe Kerrigan knew in his soul that once they reached Ryan Boulevard, he'd be on his way to oblivion. He took a quick, shaky breath, then suddenly reached across the wheel and jerked it hard left.

The Jetflite Eight smashed into the cab. Metal crunched as the left fender came hard against the tire. The Jetflite ground to an abrupt halt. Frieda screamed and Marty Duncan swore.

Joe turned swiftly, chopped a hard left hand into Marty Duncan's face. The gun fell to the floor. Joe put a quick headlock around Marty Duncan. An angry cab driver

jerked open the right hand door and Joe and Marty fell out, the headlock still unbroken.

"You've got a radio in the cab," Joe panted. "Get the cops quick. I've got a guy they want. . . ."

Joe Kerrigan still held the headlock when the cops drove up, moments later.

At the station, the technicians from the traffic squad lab found Marty Duncan's fingerprints inside the bent chrome headlight frame on Joe's new Jetflite Eight. Then Frieda talked and it was all but over. Marty Duncan was jailed and a happy Toni was released.

Sergeant Farha drove them home and, as he pulled into the drive, he said sheepishly, "I really blew this one, kids. Sorry if I gave you a hard time."

"Forget it," Joe said. It surprised him that he really meant it.

"I'll have the headlights switched again," Farha said. "You'll have your car in the morning."

They waved goodbye to Farha, then walked up the drive, pale moonlight spreading a soft quicksilver halo around them.



We have often heard the phrase: "like drawing blood from a turnip!" As difficult as this may sound, relieving a suspected murderer of the same precious—and possibly incriminating—fluid, may have more complications.

"**B**REATHES there a cop with hide so tough, he thinks four amendments aren't enough!"

Ulysses Price Middlebie, Professor Emeritus of the History and Philosophy of Science, and sometime consultant in criminology, smiled tightly at Sergeant Black's doggerel. "The Fifth Amendment," he said solemnly, "is a splendid conception, designed to prevent the taking of evidence under torture. It is no more to be blamed for being misused than the morphine which, instead of helping a cancer

that one rule so ludicrously thin."

Middlebie sank deeper into his old leather armchair, and fixed luminous grey eyes on the young detective.

"I'm not a lawyer," he said, "so it's not at all plain to me what you expect here. In the purely scientific matters of crime detection, I've been able to help you out on several occasions. But if you're looking for loopholes in the Fifth Amendment, I must plead a total incapacity to offer advice."

"You have a point," Black ad-

BLOOD

WILL

victim, gives some young fool a thrill."

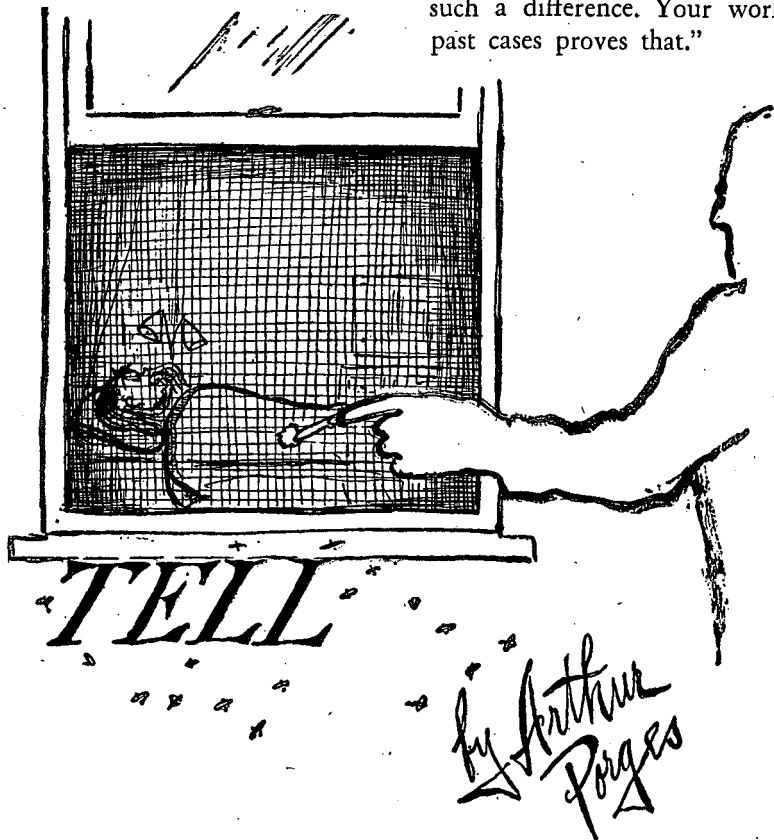
"I know," Black said. "I was just letting off steam. It's damned frustrating to see a murderer get off scot-free, no matter how noble the Fifth Amendment itself might be. Besides, it isn't always clear to us cops just how the lawyers spread

mitted. "It's just that you are a problem-solver, and even though a legal aspect is involved, there may be some other approach I can't visualize. You might be able to succeed, judging from past performance. In any case, I'd like to discuss the situation with you—okay?"

"By all means. Your cases are usually quite interesting. Or possibly you don't bring me the other kind."

"That's right, I don't. I come to

I know it wasn't crime consultations, but more of a PhD Doctor—a man who could help almost any young research student over a bad block in his project. There isn't such a difference. Your work on past cases proves that."



you only when I'm in a bind. I'm a pretty good detective," he added, without false modesty, "but you've made a specialty of logical deduction, and have fifty years of experience in practicing what you preach.

"Thanks," Middlebie said drily. "But any more butter, and I'll need a serum cholesterol test!" Then he smiled in a way that removed any sting from the reproach. "I know you meant that as a sincere com-

pliment, but it's difficult for an old curmudgeon like me to accept praise gracefully. Now, about the case—or rather," he punned outrageously, "the fifth!"

"Well, it's basically a simple matter. There's a skunk by the name of Carleton Chambers Dell—at least, that's his current one—who has almost certainly disposed of three wives for their insurance and possessions. They were murdered in other states, by the way. Now he's killed a fourth one here, and luckily for us, got a little careless. It seems that wife number four got in a good swing at his nose, which is hard to miss, and he spilled several ounces of blood at the scene of the crime. It was meant to look like an accident, but he goofed, and the death was called murder."

He paused, and Middlebie asked: "Where does the Fifth Amendment come in? It would seem to be a clear case of First Degree Homicide."

"Ordinarily, yes, but Dell has the luck of the Devil. There are several possible suspects he didn't know existed, but we turned them up—not with any intention of helping him, you can bet! Just part of the routine investigation before we even knew about Dell's past record. In other words, we don't have a sure case against him—one that will really stand up in court, and

against his lawyer, who's about the best around. As to the Fifth Amendment, did you know that it applies in this state to a blood test? That is, we can't force Dell to give us a sample of his blood. That pool near the victim undoubtedly came from his nose, which was known to be red and bruised the morning after the murder. It's the rarest type, the police lab says, and if we could state in court that Dell's blood is a match, I think we'd have him, because the other suspects are all different."

"I should think the elimination ought to be enough," Middlebie said.

"Not with Parks, his lawyer. He'll ring in another unknown killer and confuse the issue. Mrs. Dell was a weird one, and had a lot of off-beat friends. One of them *might* have done it."

"Are you sure it didn't happen that way?"

"Morally, yes, because of his past record. But we can't use that during the trial; that's never permitted. Plus the fact that he's obviously scared to death about giving any blood. He's claimed everything from religious objections—and he has about as much religion as the late Stalin—down to the Fifth Amendment. That did it. The court has warned us not to touch his sacred veins, or else."

"I suppose," Middlebie said, a wicked glint in his eyes, "you couldn't manage to have somebody, quite casually, punch his nose in public?"

"I thought of that," Black admitted ruefully. "But we'd be crucified in court. They'd make a martyr out of Dell. Too many complaints about abuse of police power these days. Some of it is justified," he added hastily, "but cops are human, and they like shortcuts as well as the next guy. When you see some punk sneering at the law, and practically daring you to make something stick, it's hard to remember civil liberties. That's not an excuse; just an explanation."

"We should all be careful about criticizing anybody until we've worn his shoes a few days," Middlebie said. "But surely Dell must have an army record, complete with blood type."

"Not that we can find. My guess is he ducked that one just as easily as he's ducked the law. Hid out in Mexico, faked a disease, or got an 'essential' job through bribery or pull—who knows?"

"What about hospitalization?"

"Nothing. Either he's in perfect health, or, more likely, used a phony name. So you see what I'm up against. No blood, no solid case. Either I let him go without bringing a murder charge, or pull him

in, and risk losing in court because there's no proof that blood came from his big, bunged-up nose."

Middlebie was silent for a moment, his eyes blank. After a few moments he said: "Then I take it that if—and mind you I only say 'if'; I don't know how it could be done—but if you could get some of his blood without violence, even through fraud, you'd have your case."

"Provided we could prove in court our sample really came from Dell. Which means good, dependable medical evidence in the form of some reputable doctor." Black's face was grim. "It's a hopeless problem. Blood without violence. He's so cautious now that if Albert Schweitzer wanted to nick him for any reason, Dell would refuse automatically. Nobody's going to get any of his blood voluntarily, that's certain. And we can't take it by force. So I guess I've bent your ear for nothing. The problem can't have a solution."

"At the moment, I'd have to agree," the professor said. "But let me sleep on it. Occasionally an impossible problem has an obvious answer."

Black looked at him in wonder.

"You mean there might be a chance?" He shook his head several times. "You never say 'die', do

you? Well, I know better than to bet against you, but I can't see a way out of this mess." He paused at the door. "Here's hoping I hear from you tomorrow."

"Wonderful stuff, blood," Middlebie said absently. "No wonder so many people hate the idea of losing any. I don't mean criminals, like Dell," he added. Then, with more resolution in his voice, "We can't let this wife-killer get away with only a punch in the nose!"

"He will, if you don't stop him," Black retorted, and left.

When he was gone, the professor prepared a swig of his pet drink, a loathsome brew made up of bourbon, brown sugar, and bock beer. He sipped this with relish while reading a long article on the subject of blood. It told him more than he wanted to know, and none of the information promised to be of use in Black's dilemma. Until the part about sporozoan parasites. . . .

Late the next night, Middlebie, Sergeant Black, and a small, round querulous man, known the world over as an authority on tropical medicine, moved with the air of conspirators up to the rear window of a certain motel apartment.

"This is the one," Black whispered,

"You're sure?" Middlebie

husked in his very low monotone.

"Positive. Dell's asleep in there right now. You ready, Dr. Forrest?"

The small man said in a deep, frog-like croak, "Of course, I'm ready. But if anybody except Middlebie asked me to participate in such a fool's trick—and in the middle of the night!" His voice faded away in an irritable mutter.

Quietly, with almost surgical skill, Black made a hole in the screen. It was a warm night, and the window was up several inches. A word from Middlebie, and Forrest held something over the hole. When he removed it some moments later, the sergeant stuffed cotton into the opening. Then the three men retreated.

"Two detectives will watch the place until morning," Black said, as they got to the car. "As soon as it's light, I'll pick Dell up and, of course, I need you there too. My men can prove nobody else went into the room, but you'll have to vouch for the rest. It's going to work," he said gleefully. "It's got to!"

FROM THE TRIAL RECORD:

The State Vs.

Carleton Chambers Dell

State's Attorney Brand: Please tell the court, in your own words, Professor Middlebie, just what happened on the night of June

18. Be as explicit as possible. Middlebie: Dr. Forrest, Sergeant Black, and myself went to the Sea Foam Motel, found the rear window of the defendant's apartment, and cut a small hole in the screen. Through it, Dr. Forrest released fifty common mosquitoes, all with empty stomachs, and all dyed bright yellow with a harmless chemical pigment.

Brand: Would you explain those points—about the empty stomachs, and the dye?

Middlebie: Certainly. These female mosquitoes—the only kind that bite—were raised in the laboratory, in wire cages, for Dr. Forrest's work in parasitology. Consequently, any blood found in their stomachs in the morning must necessarily have come from the one warm-blooded inhabitant of that motel room. As for the dye, that insured our using only those insects released by us. That is, there was no chance of our capturing any—ah—mavericks that might have brought blood from somebody other than the defendant.

Brand: I see. And in the morning, you did subsequently recapture some of the dyed mosquitoes?

Middlebie: Yes, from the walls of the motel room. The blood in their stomachs was typed, both by Dr. Forrest and police technicians.

Brand: As to that, further testimony will show the blood to be of the relatively rare type spilled by the murderer in the victim's room. . . .

"I never saw a more surprised man than Dell," Black said later. "The jury was flabbergasted enough, but Dell—I almost felt sorry for him. The jury couldn't disregard the words of men like Middlebie and Forrest. And how could *we* be blamed for the mosquitoes' 'force and violence'?"

"There's a certain subtle justice you may have overlooked," Professor Middlebie said. "Not only did Dell have a miserable night, what with fifty starved mosquitoes in that small place, but all his torture and the murder conviction—came from the females of the species."



Life, growth, and death have often been described as voyages in the unknown. Though some critics maintain that the trip is bound by shallow seas, I submit that some destinations are surprisingly deep.

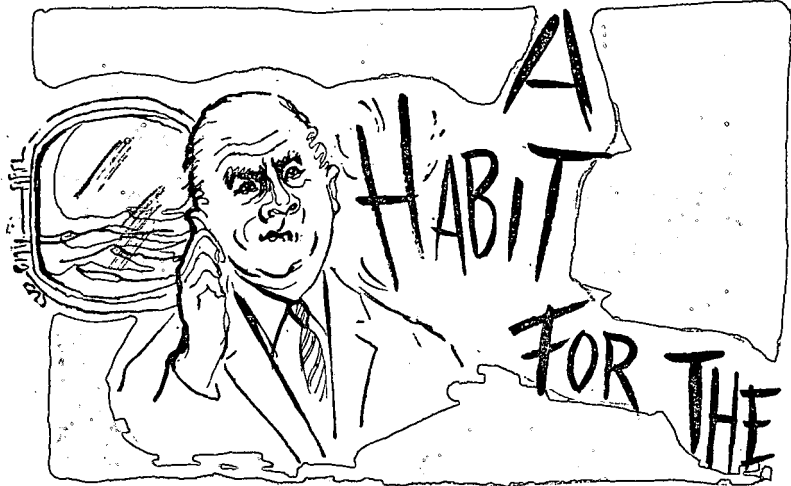
THE MOMENT Krueger stepped aboard the steamer he was aware of a vague sense of something gone wrong. He had never understood the atavism behind these instinctive warnings, but he had had them before and usually he had been right.

He paused at the head of the gangplank, standing stockstill on the little bit of railed deck over-

De Segunda Clase with Krueger's shabby suitcase in his hand. He looked back at Krueger with an air of incurious impatience.

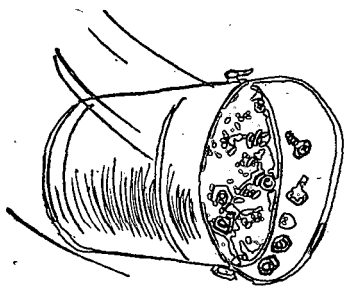
Krueger took a last look around, saw nothing out of the ordinary, and stepped across the deck to follow the steward.

It came again—a last split-second premonition of danger—so sharply



looking the after well deck. Down in the well, the Brazilian stevedores were just finishing with the last of the cargo. The steward was standing just inside a door marked

that he actually flinched. Then, as a black blurred mass hurtled by his vision, he threw himself to one side, and the object, whatever it was, smacked the deck with an



appalling crash, right at his feet.

He shot but one glance at it—a metal deck bucket filled to the brim with nuts and bolts and other nameless, greasy odds and ends. He moved again, stepping quickly to the right, rooting his hand under and around to the back of his raincoat to get at the snub-nosed pistol in his right hip-pocket, staring upward at the shadowy promenade deck just above him and at

the railed edge of the boat deck above that.

He couldn't see anyone. Nothing moved up there.

The steward was coming back with a look of shocked disbelief.

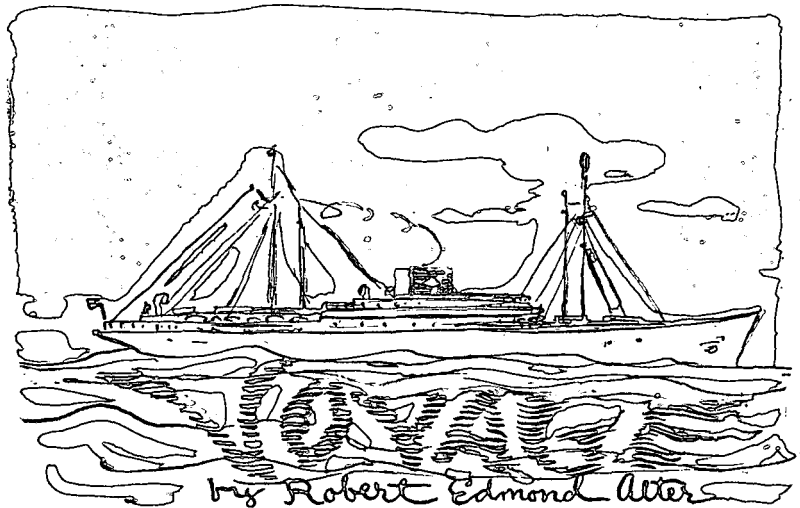
"Nombre de Dios, señor! Que pasa?"

Krueger realized that the stevedores were also watching him from below. He quickly withdrew his empty hand from under his coat.

"Some idiot almost killed me with that bucket! That's what happened!"

The steward stared at the loaded bucket wonderingly. "Those deck-hands are careless dogs."

Krueger was getting back his breath. The steward was right; it had been an accident, of course.



Krueger was a linguist. He felt perfectly at home with seven languages; it was important in his business. He said, "*Llevene usted a mi camarote.*" The steward nodded and led him down a sickly-lit corridor to his second class stateroom.

It was on the starboard and there wasn't much to it. A verdigris-crusted porthole, a sink on the right, a wardrobe on the left, and one uncomfortable looking bunk. That was that.

Krueger gave the steward a moderate tip and sat down on the bunk with a sigh, as though prepared to relax and enjoy his voyage. He always maintained a calm, bland air in front of the serving class. Stewards, pursers, waiters and desk clerks had an annoying way of being able to recall certain little mannerisms about you when questioned later.

The steward said, "*Gracias señor*", and closed the door after himself. Krueger stayed where he was for a moment, then he got up and went over to bolt the door. But there was no bolt. He could see the holes where the screws had once been driven into the woodwork of the door, but the bolt had been removed.

That was the trouble with second class travel. Nothing was ever in its entirety; nothing ever func-

tioned properly. The bunks were lumpy, the hot-water tap ran lukewarm, the portholes always stuck. Krueger had had to put up with this nonsense all his life. The Party's rigorous belief that a penny saved was a penny earned was frequently an annoying pain in the neck to Krueger. Still—they were his best clients.

He took a paper matchbook from his pocket and wedged it under the door. It just did the trick. He opened his case and got out a roll of adhesive tape, cut four 8-inch strips, then got down on his knees and placed his pistol up underneath the sink and taped it there. Second class stewards also had a bad habit of going through your things when you were out of your compartment.

He never relied upon a firearm for his work. It was messy, and much too obvious. He was a man who arranged innocent-looking accidents. The pistol was purely a weapon of self-defense, in case there was a hitch and he had to fight his way out, which had happened more than once in his checkered career.

He was fifty-three, balding, inclined to be stout, and had a face as bland as a third-rate stockbroker's, unless you looked close at his eyes, which he seldom allowed anyone to do. He had worked at

his trade for thirty years. He was an assassin.

He sat back in his bunk and thought about the man he was going to kill aboard this ship.

Unconsciously his right hand went up to his ear and he began to tug at the lobe gently. Catching himself at it, he hurriedly snatched his hand away. That was a bad habit with him, one that he had to watch. They were dangerous in his line of work, bad habits, exceedingly dangerous. They pinpointed you, gave you away, gave an enemy agent a chance to spot you. It was like walking around in public wearing a sign reading: *I Am Krueger, The Assassin!*

He remembered only too vividly what had happened to his old friend Delchev. *He* had unconsciously developed a bad habit—the simple, involuntary gesture of tugging his tieknot and collar away from his Adam's apple with his forefinger. Through the years the word had gotten around; the habit had been noted and renoted. It went into all the dossiers on Delchev in all of the world's many secret service files. He was earmarked by his habit. No matter what alias or disguise or cover he adopted, sooner or later his habit gave him away. And they had nailed him in the end.

Krueger had known of another

agent who used to break cigarettes in half, and still another who picked his ear, always the same ear. Both dead now—by arranged accidents.

And there was one colorful fellow who went by so many aliases that he was simply referred to by those in the business as Mister M. Krueger had always felt that he could have tracked M down within six months, had someone offered to make it worth his while. Because there was a notation in the dossiers on M of a bad habit that simply screamed for attention. M always tabbed himself by marking paper matchbooks with his thumbnail, orderly-spaced little indentations all up and down the four edges.

Well, at least tugging your earlobe wasn't that bad. But it was bad enough and Krueger knew it. He must be more attentive to his idiosyncracies in the future. He had to weed all mannerisms out of his character until he became as bland as a mud wall.

The distant clang of a ship's bell reached him. The deck began to vibrate. Then the engines went astern with a rattle that he felt up his spine. A pause and then the engines went ahead, throbbing peacefully.

All right. Time to go to work. Time to view the future victim.

The dining room adjoined the saloon and they were both very dingy affairs. Cramped, too. And you could see rust streaks down the white walls at the corners of the windows. It all added up to greasy, over-seasoned, poorly-prepared food. But Krueger remained calm and benign; never call attention to yourself by being a complainer.

He sandwiched himself between a fat lady and a Latin priest, picked up his napkin and started to tuck it in his collar, but caught himself in time and put it on his lap instead.

Watch it; watch that sort of thing. You were the napkin-in-the-collar type on the last assignment. Never repeat the same mannerisms! He smiled at the man across the table, saying, "Pass the menu if you will, please."

The man addressed was an ineffectual looking little fellow of about forty, with thinning hair and spectacles. His name was Amos Bicker and he was slated for a fatal accident—arranged by Krueger.

Krueger studied him surreptitiously. He certainly didn't look like the sort who needed killing. He had that civil service employee aspect. However, some way or another, innocent or not, he must have placed himself in this posi-

tion of jeopardy by getting in the Party's path. Krueger's instructions had called for Immediate Elimination. So be it. Now for the means. . . .

He caught his hand halfway to his ear. *Dammit!* He carried the gesture through, switching its course to scratch the back of his neck. Then he studied the menu. Two of his favorites were there: oyster cocktail and New York cut. He ordered them, then turned to the priest, trying him first in Spanish, which worked. Actually he was thinking about the man across the table, Bicker, and the permanent removal of same.

Krueger always favored obvious accidents. So, when aboard ships, man overboard. This could be handled in a variety of ways. One, make friends with the victim, suggest a late stroll along the promenade deck; then a quick judo blow and. . . . Two, again make friends and (if the victim were a drinking man) drink him under the table, and then. . . . Or three, (and this method had great appeal to Krueger, because it eliminated public observance of his contact with the victim) slip into the victim's room in the wee hours of the morning, and jab him with a small syringe which induced quick and total unconsciousness, and after that . . . well, what fol-

lowed was simple enough. Man overboard.

The steward brought Krueger his oyster cocktail. Krueger reached for his small fork and gave a start. Something was rubbing his left leg under the table. He leaned back in his chair and raised the cloth. A mangy looking old cat—ship's cat probably—was busy stropping himself against Krueger's thick leg.

"Kitty kitty," Krueger said. He loved animals. Had he led a more sedentary life, he would have had a home, and the home would have been filled with pets. And a wife too, of course.

A minor ship's officer appeared in the starboard doorway. "*Donde esta Senor Werfel?*" he asked at large.

"Here!" Krueger called. That was one thing he never slipped on; he could pick up and drop an alias like the snap of fingers.

"The captain wishes to see you for a moment, *Senor*."

A multitude of *why's* came clamoring alive in Krueger's brain. Then he caught the obvious answer and stood up, smiling. That accident with the bucket. It was annoying because the incident called undue attention to him—the steward, the stevedores, this officer, all the passengers, and now the captain.

He met the captain on the starboard wing of the flying bridge. The captain, originally some conglomeration of Mediterranean blood, was profuse in his apologies regarding the accident. Krueger laughed it off. It was nothing, truly. Those things happened. He wished the captain would put it out of his mind, really. He shook the captain's hand, he accepted the captain's cigar. He even allowed the captain to allow him to inspect the bridge.

He returned to the dining room wearing his professional bland smile. But something had happened during his absence.

The passengers were against the walls. The cook and his assistants and the steward formed a more central ring. But the star of the scene was on the floor in the exact center of the room. It was the ship's cat and it was stretched out to an incredible length and going through the most grotesque mouth-foaming convulsions.

"*Ohh, Mr. Werfel!*" the fat lady who had been seated next to Krueger cried. "I did a terrible thing! No! Come to think of it, it was fortunate that I did! Certainly fortunate for *you!*"

"What?" Krueger said sharply, his eyes fixed on the convulsed cat. "What did you do?"

"That *poor* little dear jumped

up on your seat after you left. He wanted your oysters! Of course I held him off, but you were so long in returning, and there are so many flies in here, you know."

"You gave him my oysters," Krueger said.

"Yes! I finally did! And before any of us knew it, the poor little thing went into those awful . . ."

"I'd better put the poor thing out of its misery," the priest said, coming forward. No one offered to help him.

Krueger stalled for an interval, until the passengers had thinned out, then he led the steward aside. "What was wrong with those oysters?" he demanded.

The steward seemed utterly flabbergasted. "*Senor*, I don't know! Ptomaine, you think? They were canned, of course."

"Let's see the can," Krueger said.

There was a faint scent of taint to the can—if held close to a sensitive nose. Krueger put it down and looked at the steward.

"Anyone else order oysters?"

"No, *Senor*. Only yourself."

Krueger forced up a smile.

"Well, accidents will happen." But he certainly wished there were some way he could have had that can, more especially the dead cat, analyzed. He returned to his

stateroom more angry than shaken.

Well, that had been close. Too close. Look at it either way you wanted to, he had been a very lucky man. Of course it *could* have been ptomaine . . . those things happened . . . but when you coupled it with the business about the bucket. . . .

He went over to the sink and reached under for his gun.

It wasn't there. The tape was there, neatly, but not the gun.

Now wait, he warned himself, pulling at his earlobe. A sailor could have kicked over the bucket by accident. Bolts are frequently missing from doors in rumdum ships like this. Ptomaine does occur in carelessly canned meats. And stewards do rifle compartments.

But the combination still spelled suspicion. Yet, supposing his suspicions were right, what could he do about it? He couldn't disprove that the bucket and food poisoning were accidents; and if questioned about the missing pistol, the steward would appear to be the epitome of innocence.

I must tread carefully, he thought. Very, very carefully, until this business is over. It's just possible that the Party slipped up somewhere on this assignment. Or was it possible that the Party. . . .

No! That was absurd. He had

always given them faithful service; they *knew* that. And they knew, too, that he was one of the best in the business. No. No. Tugging furiously at his ear. Absurd.

He replaced the matchfolder under the door and, not satisfied with that, put his suitcase before it, flat, and, using the adhesive tape again, taped it to the deck. A man could get in, yes, but he would make a lot of noise doing it. He turned out the light and undressed and got into his bunk.

At first he thought it must be the wool blanket scratching him. Then he remembered that he had a sheet between his body and the blanket. Then he was really sure that it wasn't the blanket, because it moved when he didn't!

He felt the soft rasp of straggly fuzz across his bare belly, crawling sluggishly under the weight of the blanket, as a thing gorged with food. He started to raise the upper edge of the blanket and the thing, whatever it was, scabbled anxiously toward his navel. He froze, sucking his breath, scared to move a muscle.

It stopped, too, as if waiting for the man to make the first decisive move. He could feel it on his naked stomach, squatting there, poised expectantly. It was alive, whatever it was . . . it started moving again, he could feel the

tiny feet (many of them) scuttling up toward his ribcage, the dry hairy fat little legs tickling his goose-fleshed skin which rippled with loathsome revulsion.

He'd had it. With movements perfectly coordinated out of pure terror, he threw the blanket and sheet aside with his left and took a sweeping thrust across his stomach with his right forearm—as he rolled from the bunk to the deck.

He was up instantly and frantically fumbling for the light switch.

The thing scurried across the



white desert of the bottom sheet—a thick-legged tarantula species, hideous, its furry body as fat as a bird's. Krueger snatched up a shoe and beat the thing over and over, and because of the give of the mattress the spider died the long, slow, frenziedly wiggly way.

Krueger threw the shoe aside and went to the sink to wash the clammy sweat from his face.

There was no call-button in the

stateroom. He unbarricaded his door and shouted, "*Camarero!*"

A few minutes later the steward looked in with a sleepy smile. "*Si, Senor? Que desea usted?*"

Krueger pointed at the crushed spider on his bed. The steward came over and looked at it. He made a face and grunted. He didn't seem overly surprised.

"*Si, it happens. It is the cargo, Senor. The bananas. They come aboard in the fruit. Some of these diablos find their way amidships.*"

It was the kind of answer Krueger had expected, a reasonable explanation that left no room for argument. But it was getting to be too much. The tarantula was the last straw. He took his hand away from his earlobe and started getting into his clothes.

"*Quisiera hablar con el capitan,*" he said flatly.

The steward shrugged fatalistically. If the unreasonable gringo wanted to bother the captain at this time of night, it was none of his concern.

Krueger shoved by the steward rudely, saying, "I won't need you to find him. You're about as much help as a third leg." He was starting to forget all of his rules.

The captain was no help at all. He repeated all of the old sad-apple excuses: clumsy seamen,

careless canning, the bothersome little hazards of shipping on a cargo steamer hauling bananas. . . .

"Now look here, Captain," Krueger said, angrily pulling at his ear. "I'm a reasonable man and I'll go along with every-day accidents, as long as they stay within the limits of probability. But all of these accidents have happened to me. Within one day."

"What is it that you're trying to say, Mr. Werfel? Surely you're not implying that someone aboard this ship is trying to kill you, are you? You don't have enemies, do you?"

Krueger balked at that. It was a subject that he wanted to stay away from. To get into it would be wading into a thick sea of endless, embarrassing explanations. He hedged.

"I said no such thing, Captain. All I'm saying is that these things keep happening to me aboard your ship, and I expect you to protect me from them."

"Certainly, Mr. Werfel. Let me see . . . yes! I can give you your choice of any of my officers' cabins. My own included. I can even assign a competent man to stay by your—"

"No, no, no!" Krueger said hastily. "That isn't at all necessary, Captain. I don't intend to act like a prisoner aboard this ship. Just assign me to a new cabin, one

with a lock and bolt on the door."

Leaving the navigation deck, Krueger decided that he needed a drink. He would go down and see if the saloon was still open. His nerves were getting out of hand, and no wonder! The whole game was going very badly, turning sour on him. He was breaking all his time-tested rules, calling more attention to himself than a brass band.

He paused on the companion-way overlooking the dark, gusty boat deck. Someone was down there on the deck, someone familiar, leaning at the rail just to the stern of Number One starboard lifeboat.

Krueger took a quick swipe at his face, wiping away the tiny, moist needle-fingers of the sea mist, and came down another step . . . but quietly, ever so quietly. The man on the boat deck was Amos Bicker. He was mooning out at the black rambling sea, his forearms cocked up on the damp rail, his thin back to Krueger.

Krueger came down another quiet step, his narrowed eyes quickly checking out the points of professional interest.

Bicker had taken a position just inside the aft boat davit, to stand in the sheltering lee of the lifeboat's stern. He was leaning about

a yard from the extreme corner of the rail; beyond that was nothing. There weren't even guard-chains, only the vacant space through which the davits swung the lifeboat. Below was the open sea.

Made to order. Krueger could finish the business here and now. Then he could concentrate all his wits on his own survival, guard himself against those recurring accidents . . . if that's what they were.

He came down the last step and put both feet on the boat deck.

Krueger and the victim were quite alone in the whispering sea-running night. And the unsuspecting victim thought that he was all alone. It wouldn't take much; just a sudden short rush and a bit of a push, catching Bicker on his side, and propelling him sideways right out into that empty waiting space.

Grinning tightly, Krueger broke into a cat-footed, avid rush.

All the lifeboats had returned and the captain had received their reports. Shaking his head, he re-entered his office and went behind his desk and resumed his seat.

"Well," he said, "this is certainly a sorry business. Unfortunate that you had to be subjected to it, Mr. Bicker."

Amos Bicker was sitting

hunched and drawn in his chair facing the desk. The first mate had given him a shot of whisky but it didn't seem to be doing him much good. He was obviously in a bad state of nerves. His hands trembled, his voice too.

"You didn't recover the—uh—"

"Not a sign," the captain said. "Must have gone down like a stone. But please, Mr. Bicker, please do not let it prey upon you. You couldn't have done more than you did. You cried *man overboard* the moment it happened, and you even had the presence of mind to throw over a life-ring. You behaved admirably."

Mr. Bicker shivered and wrapped both hands about the empty shot glass. It was just possible, the captain thought, that he was going into shock. "Have a smoke, Mr. Bicker," he offered solicitously, passing over a cigarette box and matches.

Mr. Bicker had trouble lighting up, his hands shook so.

"He must have been mad—deranged," he said finally, hoarsely.

"I didn't know the man, had never seen him except in the dining room this evening. I was just standing there at the rail minding my own business, watching the sea without a thought in my head, and—and then I heard a—a movement, a sort of quiet rushing motion, and I looked around and there he was. Coming right at me! And the look on his face!"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Bicker," the captain said sympathetically, "We quite understand. There's no doubt in anyone's mind that there was something—well, odd, in Mr. Werfel's behavior. I have reason to believe that the poor devil actually thought that someone aboard this ship was trying to kill him. Mental delusion. Lucky for you that you reacted by stepping backwards instead of sideways or he might have taken you over with him."

Mr. Bicker nodded, staring at the carpets. One of his thumbnails absent-mindedly was making orderly-spaced little indentations down one edge of the captain's paper matchbook.



I am informed, by other men's wives, that a woman most appreciates a "man around the house" when there are chores to be done. Indeed, some tasks seem literally to cry out for a strong masculine hand.



ED PIPER sat on the front board seat of the boat. The Gulf was choppy and Crane Island looked too far away for comfort. The small outboard chattered along and Piper, not too fond of salt water in his eyes, twisted around to face the old man behind him.

"How many times you made this trip to the island?" Piper



by Thomasina Weber

asked his guide with curiosity.

The old man, his hand on the rudder, chewed thoughtfully. Then, taking into account wind speed and direction, he spit accurately over the side. "More'n once," he replied.

"You got a lot of faith in this rowboat."

"It ain't no commercial ferry, Mister." He stared straight ahead, squinting against the spray and the sunlight. "You got business on the island?"

"They advertised for a handyman. I just got to town this morning, so I figured I'd look into it."

"I guess the work piled up on Miss Hutchins since the accident. They's some things a woman just can't do."

"You mean it's a woman I'd be working for?"

"Yup."

Piper frowned. October had turned cold in Michigan and he'd shoved off for Florida to look for work. He had worked his way all over the country since he got out of the Army, following the sun and stopping where and when he pleased. He had worked for all kinds of men, and he had yet to find the one he couldn't handle. But a woman was a different matter. A woman rich enough to live on a Florida island wasn't Piper's idea of the perfect employer. She

probably wore long trailing skirts and carried a cane. Well, he didn't have to take the job if he didn't want it.

"Their boat blowed up 'bout six months ago," the old man was saying. "Killed the old woman and darn near her husband."

"What old woman?"

"Miss Hutchins' aunt. Killed the young feller, too."

"But isn't that a cruiser at their dock?"

"They had two. The little one blowed."

The boat eased forward like a flea sidling up to a Saint Bernard. Piper looked at the tall white side of the cruiser. Maybe he could put up with the long skirts and the cane.

"Want I should wait?" asked the old man as Piper stepped onto the dock.

The narrow beach was fenced with lush green jungle. A white shell path cut cleanly through it to the house, a two-storied structure of gray weathered cypress sheltered by pine trees. As he watched, the door opened. She was too far away for her features to be distinct, but the tight pullover, white shorts and long tanned legs didn't resemble his picture of the boss at all.

"No, you go on back," he said over his shoulder. "I've got the

job." He smiled with confidence.

She waited on the porch and he moved easily toward her, conscious of his athletic stride, his well-developed muscles responding in smooth coordination.

"Miss Hutchins?" She inclined her head but didn't smile. Her hair was heavy and black and pulled back off her face to hang in a swaying ponytail. Her eyes were a cool brown and she was evenly and deeply tanned. He judged her to be about twenty-three or twenty-four. "Ed Piper. I saw your ad for a handyman."

Her eyes went beyond him and he knew she was watching the small boat chugging back to the mainland. "You seem rather sure of the job, Mr. Piper." Her voice was low and melodic as he knew it would be.

He smiled and started up the porch steps. "I'm about the handiest man you'll find."

"We'll see." She turned and entered the house. He caught the screen door before it slammed.

He could think of worse ways to spend the winter than alone on an island with a beautiful girl. He watched her step behind the small bar. "What will you have?" she asked.

"Ginger ale."

She looked at him in astonishment. "You're kidding."

"Ginger ale," he repeated, smiling. "I've got all the vices but drinking."

She shrugged as she put ice into a tall glass. "Everyone to his own taste."

The house was clean and airy with all the windows open. The outdoor smell of clear green water and tall waving pines permeated the room. He liked this place. His eyes took in the simple, comfortable furnishings, the silvery driftwood panelling, the sleek, lithe girl seated in the deep chair with a frosty glass. She was looking him over carefully. Yes, he liked this place very much indeed.

"There's a comfortable apartment above the garage," she said. "You'll find everything you need there."

"Aren't you afraid to stay in this big house all alone?"

"I'm not alone," she said, turning her glass in her hand and studying the clear moist prints her fingers left. "Uncle is here."

Piper didn't let his smile fade. Hooray for Uncle. But Piper was somewhat of an expert on uncles. And irate fathers and chivalrous brothers and meddlesome mothers.

"Where's Uncle now?" he asked.

"He takes a nap every afternoon. He hasn't been well since the accident."

"I heard about that. I'm sorry."

"It could have been worse. I could have lost Uncle, too."

"We should always count our blessings," he said gravely.

She gave him a strange look as she got to her feet and walked to the bar, setting down her empty glass. Turning to face him, she leaned back on one elbow and looked at him steadily. "There's a lot of upkeep to a place like this, Mr. Piper. I can do most of it myself, but there are some things that require a man. I'm pretty good with boats and I handle the housework and cooking myself. Uncle's hospital bills ran quite high, so I have to cut corners where I can. The best I can do is thirty dollars a week and your room and board. You'll have a lot of free time to spend as you wish. The boat is at your disposal."

Piper relaxed. Uncle notwithstanding, he would gladly have stayed without pay. "Sounds fair enough," he said casually. "You got yourself a handyman."

"There's one more thing . . . Ed," she said, coming closer and lowering her voice. "Since the accident, Uncle hasn't been quite right. I mean, he gets queer spells." She averted her eyes. "Once or twice he's tried to . . . well, grab hold of me. He's very strong when he's in one of these

spells, but afterwards he doesn't remember anything about it. That's another reason I want someone out here. Actually, it's the main reason." She put her hands behind her back and looked up at him. "I hope I haven't given you the wrong impression of Uncle. Most of the time he's sweet and gentle as a kitten. I love him very much."

"I understand, Miss Hutchins. You need me, you just holler."

"Good. Dinner's at seven. I like to get it over with so I can enjoy the evenings. They're much too nice to spend in the kitchen."

"I'll be here."

Piper's apartment had a good bed, comfortable chairs and a portable TV set. The front windows looked out over the water and the curtains kept active in the breeze.

Uncle didn't appear for dinner. "He always eats in his room," explained Miss Hutchins. "He likes to sit by the window and watch the sunset."

"You're a good cook, Miss Hutchins."

"Call me Stella, Ed. I don't believe in formality."

"Suits me, Stella. You can't be very formal on an island, anyway."

"Tomorrow morning we'll take the boat to the mainland for paint. I'd like to have you start on the

kitchen. I could have done it myself, but I abhor painting."

"That's what I'm here for," he said, grinning.

He helped Stella with the dishes in anticipation of helping her enjoy the evening. But whatever plans she had, they didn't include him. "See you in the morning, Ed," she said, putting away the last plate. "Good night."

Well, he had plenty of time, Ed told himself as he switched on the TV and stretched out on his bed. Plenty of time and plenty of opportunity.

The cruiser covered the stretch to the mainland considerably faster than yesterday's rowboat. She sure was a honey and Piper couldn't wait till he could take it outside. He hoped he could persuade Stella to go with him. After all, the poor girl probably needed some recreation, stuck here on an island with all that work and an invalid uncle. He clucked softly. Poor little old thing.

"How's your uncle, Miss Stella?" said the proprietor of the hardware store as they entered. "I haven't seen you for quite a spell."

"He's much better, Mr. Morton. The paralysis is gone. He's getting quite frisky." She laughed, rather nervously, Ed thought.

"You don't say! Well, that's

mighty good news. The Doc'll be glad to hear it. He didn't much like it when you told him he didn't have to call any more."

"I didn't think it was necessary, Mr. Morton. I've followed his instructions to the letter and Uncle has improved steadily."

"I guess one of these days I'll be seeing him out fishing again."

"It's possible," said Stella. "And now, I need some paint for my kitchen."

The kitchen required several days of preparation and Stella insisted on helping him. She was the only woman he had ever seen who could paint without getting any on herself. "You said you hated painting, Stella. Why don't you let me do it myself?"

"I don't mind as long as I don't have the whole job to do myself," she replied. "And I like having someone to talk to."

"Uncle doesn't like to talk?"

"He likes to be by himself. You've been here a week now and you haven't seen him yet."

"I know. I sort of wondered why."

"He knows you're here. I told him. I didn't want him to see you because—" She hesitated and looked up at him. Her eyes were dark brown and they seemed to smolder with promise.

"Why didn't you want him to

see me? I still don't get it, Stella."

"He's very jealous. I'm sure he'd like our handyman to be a little wizened relic of a man with no teeth and water on the knee."

Piper laughed. "Now, Stella, you wouldn't be exaggerating?"

"Not a bit, Ed. He wouldn't approve of a man like you. You're too—well, he wouldn't approve." She turned quickly away.

"Stella—"

"I'd better get some more turpentine." The screen door banged as she almost ran outside.

Ed felt quite pleased with himself that night as he lay looking at TV. Stella showed signs of being human after all. An island with no connection with the rest of the world except the telephone, which hadn't rung once since he arrived.

An isolated island and a beautiful girl. A boat and a beach. Moonlight on the sand. And then a thought that had been tapping at him ever since his arrival finally grew strong enough to get his attention. This would sure be an ideal setup for a tourist resort. It would be exclusive. The commercial droned on as Piper sat up, all thoughts of relaxation gone. The house could be the center of a sprawling cottage colony, a sort of community building. They could put a salt water swimming pool behind it and set up a first class

bar. Why, this place could make a fortune without half trying! Didn't the girl know she had a potential goldmine here? Didn't Uncle know it? He wondered about Uncle. Didn't he ever come out of his room? Didn't he ever walk on the beach or sit in the surf? Stella said his room was his world, that the sight, sound and smell of the surf as they came through his window were sufficient. But you'd think if he didn't like the outdoors he wouldn't have retired to his island in the first place. Piper filed the resort idea under Project To Be Worked On.

By the next afternoon the kitchen was finished. "It's a relief to get everything back in order again," sighed Stella. "I can't stand a jumble."

Piper smiled at her. She seemed to have forgotten all about yesterday's episode. He didn't think she would require much reminding.

"Let's celebrate by taking the boat out after dinner," she said brightly.

"How about Uncle?"

"He goes to bed early. He'll be all right."

Piper wasn't going to argue.

She was wearing blue shorts and a matching pullover, and she had loosened her hair so that it hung in soft waves on her shoul-

ders. She headed for open water, cutting across the path of the moon.

"What are you going to do with your life?" asked Piper.

She was silent, as if thinking over her answer. Finally she spoke, her voice hesitant. "I suppose I'll do just what I'm doing now."

"Do you like this island living?"

"I don't have much choice, do I? Aunt and Uncle raised me and put me through college, so the least I can do is see that Uncle is cared for the rest of his days."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"About liking life on the island? Sometimes I think I would like to live in the city."

"Why don't you bring the city here?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "What do you mean?"

He came to stand behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Stella, kill the engine and let's drift. It's easier to talk that way." She did so and he went on. "Have you ever realized that your island would make an ideal tourist resort?"

"A tourist resort?" She turned to face him.

"Yes." And he told her what he had been thinking the night before. "How does that sound to you, Stella?"

"It sounds fine, but Uncle would never hear of it. This is his island hideaway and he'd never consider opening it to the public."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so. There's a developer in Miami who's had the same idea for several years. He was out here before the accident trying again to talk Uncle into selling. Uncle got very upset. He almost threw him down the stairs."

He reached for a strand of her hair and began to twine it around his fingers. "How do you put up with it? This is no life for a lovely young girl like you."

"It could be worse."

"And it could be better." He pulled her into his arms. "Much better." He kissed her gently, lingeringly. She didn't resist. "How old is Uncle?" he breathed against her hair.

She pulled away slightly and looked at him in surprise. "Why, I don't know exactly. Close to seventy, I'd say."

Piper nodded. "He's lived his life, don't you think?" She didn't answer. "I mean, why should he live your life, too?"

"Please, Ed, it isn't easy for me. Don't make it more difficult."

"There's an easy way out, Stella. Haven't you ever thought of it?"

She pulled out of his arms. "We'd better start back. There's a

pretty strong wind coming up now."

Stella said nothing more. Piper watched her handling the boat as if she were born to it. He wasn't discouraged. She hadn't said no. When they parted at the dock, she was cool and polite.

Piper didn't go to bed. Instead he seated himself by the window, relishing the sea breeze on his face. The moon traveled slowly across the sky and he thought of the silvered water and the quiet power of the cruiser and the warmth and softness of Stella in his arms. He felt he could persuade her to see things his way. As the owner of an exclusive resort on a tropical island, Piper would have it made. All he'd have to do would be to sit back and watch the money roll in. Of course, he'd have to marry Stella to make this dream come true. He grinned in the darkness. That was like telling a little boy he'd have to eat all the frosting if he wanted the cake.

Suddenly a door slammed and Piper saw a mist of light chiffon blow down the porch steps like a small whirlwind. It was Stella and she was running up the driveway toward the garage, the long filmy folds gathered up in her hands. As she drew closer, he could hear her sobbing. He met her on the stairs and put his arm around her shaking body as he

anxiously brought her to his room.

"Stella! What happened?"

She collapsed in a chair, her face in her hands. The lamp he turned on showed the sheer negligee, torn and hanging off one shoulder. Her hair was wild and one slipper was gone.

"Uncle woke while we were out in the boat. He was calling for me and he had himself worked into a rage by the time I got home." She lifted her head and her long slender fingers tugged self-consciously at the torn negligee, trying to draw it closed across the lowcut nightgown.

"I gave him some hot milk and explained that I had been out on the boat. Alone, I told him. He seemed to grow calmer, so I left him. I was already in bed when he called me again. I—I went in and he was—waiting for me. He was behind the door and when I came in—he grabbed me." She pressed her fist to her mouth.

He pulled her into his arms. "Don't cry, sweet. You're all right now." Her shoulder was warm and trembling beneath the thin fabric. He took his hand away. "What did you do then?" he asked.

"I'm ashamed to tell you," she whispered.

His throat felt dry. "It's all right. You can tell me."

"There was a lamp by the door. I—I picked it up and swung it at him. He fell. I thought I'd killed him!" She picked at a fold of the negligee. "I—I must have hit the right spot, because he collapsed. I got him back on the bed and covered him up. His pulse was steady."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I wasn't thinking. I was so worried over Uncle that I didn't even have time to be afraid for myself. It wasn't until I left his room that I realized what had happened and all at once I was crying and running to you like—like a big baby!"

He cradled her head against his chest and stroked her hair. "You should have called me. He might have hurt you." As she gradually quieted down, he felt a suffocating tightness in his throat. "Something's got to be done, baby," he murmured. "You can't go on like this." She shook her head against his chest. "Look, you say he's unconscious. Suppose I load him in the boat and go outside and—well, people fall off boats every day, don't they?" She continued to shake her head. "Look, Stella, be sensible, will you? You can't throw your life away on an old man! You have to think of yourself." She tried to push away, but he held her. He let his hand slide

down over her back. He waited. Finally she raised her eyes to his. There was no sign of tears.

"He might regain consciousness on the boat," she said quietly. "He's small and wiry, but extremely strong when he's aroused. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you, Ed."

He tried to hide his jubilation. "I'll be careful."

"I have a better idea," she said. "He's in bed unconscious. Your hands are so strong. It would be better—and then you could put the body on the boat and—you'll be safe."

"Okay, Stella, we do it your way. Do you want to stay here?"

"I'll go back to the house and change. I'm going with you."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"I'm going, anyway. I couldn't just sit here. I'm not the waiting type."

They went back to the house and while Stella went to her room to dress, Piper approached Uncle's door. He opened it soundlessly, prepared for anything. A small night light showed the old man in his bed, his slight form hardly showing under the sheet. Piper crept closer, taking no chances. Uncle wouldn't be the first one who had ever played possum. But Uncle didn't stir. His breathing was shallow and even.

Piper looked down at the frail head, the skin white and taut over high cheekbones, the hair fine and sparse over the pale scalp. You wouldn't think that only a little while ago—but closed lids could conceal conniving eyes. His hands found the scrawny throat. It didn't take long.

He slung the body over his shoulder and left the room. Stella in dark levis and dark sweater was just coming into the hallway, pulling her ponytail out of the sweater and straightening it on her body. It sure took a woman a long time to get dressed, he thought wryly.

Together they left the house and boarded the cruiser. Piper laid the body on the deck while Stella tried to start the engine.

"What's wrong?" he asked when it failed to catch.

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

"Well, keep trying." Piper found it hard not to look at the body at his feet. He was beginning to sweat.

"It was all right when we took it out earlier," she said.

"I know it! Why can't you start it now?"

"I'm doing the best I can. Maybe you—"

"Move over." He pushed her aside, but he had no better luck with it.

Stella left his side and moved to the stern of the boat. "I'm not helping any breathing down your neck," she said. He gritted his teeth and tried again and again. The sweat was running down his face and stinging his eyes.

And then he was aware of the outboard with no lights which was settling to a stop beside the cruiser. The beam of a searchlight found him where he stood.

"Hold it right there!" said a voice.

Piper watched the Sheriff and his deputy board the cruiser, guns in hand. "We got here as quick as we could, Miss Stella," he said, pointing his gun at Piper. "You did a good job of stallin'. Jones and me, we were just about to leave for home when your call came."

Piper looked from one to the other in bewilderment. "What call?" he asked Stella. She only smiled.

"Miss Stella, here, she called 'bout fifteen minutes ago and said as how you'd killed her uncle and was fixin' to dump him."

Piper turned to Stella. "He's lying!"

Stella's smile faded and the tears came. "Poor Uncle, he never had a chance! He strangled him in his bed."

Piper's mind snapped out of its

stupor. He was beginning to see the light. "I did it, sure," he said, "but it wasn't that way at all! The old man attacked Stella and she screamed for help and I came running. He was like a madman. It was him or me."

The Sheriff turned to Stella. "I didn't know your uncle was frisky *that* way. When you said in town his paralysis was gone and he was feelin' pretty good, didn't nobody think he felt that good." Stella stared at him. "Sorry, Miss Stella, guess that wasn't so funny."

"No, it wasn't," agreed Stella, "because Uncle's paralysis wasn't gone at all. He's been in bed ever since the accident."

"But you said in town last week—"

"Ed made me say it. He'd heard about that Miami developer wanting this island and he came here planning to kill Uncle and get the property through me—one way or another. He had self-defense in mind in case he couldn't get rid of the body."

Piper dropped to the seat, his knees too weak to support his

weight. Piper, the fall guy. Sure, she "sometimes thought she'd like to live in the city." She wanted out so bad she could scream. And lie. And kill. She'd live long and high on the money she'd get for the island.

The Sheriff was helping Stella into his boat. Jones, who hadn't said a word the whole time, had Piper covered now. Jones was small and young and he looked uncomfortable and embarrassed. He cleared his throat. "Miss Stella sure has hard luck with the handymen she hires," he said.

"How do you mean?" asked Piper.

"Well, the last one was on the boat with her aunt and uncle when it blew up. If a fisherman hadn't been passing, her uncle probably would have drowned."

So that's who the "young feller" on the boat had been. Piper looked back across their wake at the dark hulk of the island as they neared the mainland. A tropical island, a moon and a beautiful woman. Piper sighed, but he wasn't dreaming.

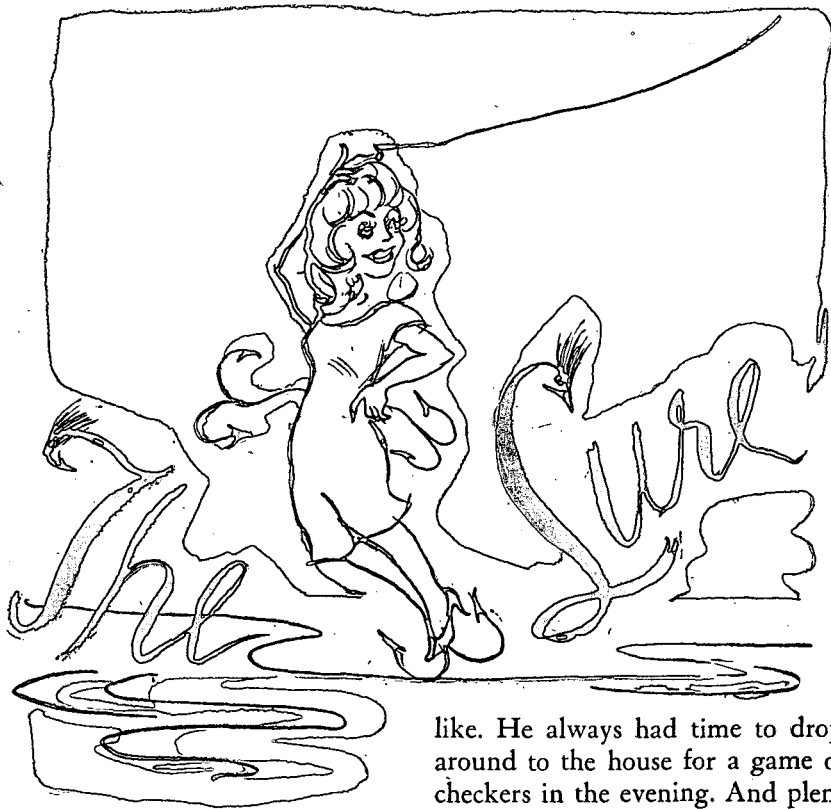


A law officer, in more ways than one, is kin to the fisherman, whether the analogy be drawn in terms of line, lure or nets. Herein, we must fish in troubled waters before we complete our catch.

SOME MEN was just plum born to be bachelors. Take Dave Garner for instance. In all the years I been sheriff in these parts, I never known a more likeable, easy-goin'

feller. He run the sports-store in Cripple's Bend, caterin' to the city folks as flock around in the huntin' and fishin' season.

Dave never took to work serious-

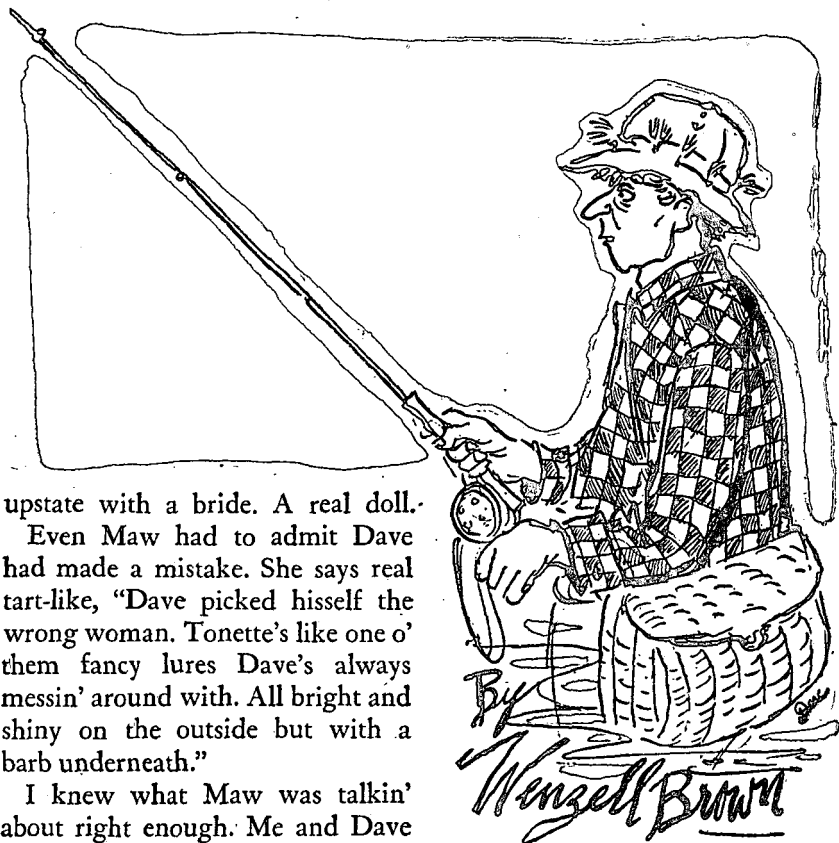


like. He always had time to drop around to the house for a game o' checkers in the evening. And plenty a times when the trout was run-

nin', he'd just up and leave the shop for three, four days at a stretch, leavin' Little Kenny Stuart, his assistant, in charge.

Now don't get me wrong, I ain't against marryin'. Me and Maw's hit it off fine for nigh on to thirty years and she'd skin the hide off me if I claimed different. I'm just a-sayin' that Dave warn't the marryin' kind. So it was pretty much of a shock when he came back from a trip

was always arguin' how to set about catchin' trout. Me, I say an earthworm wrigglin' on a hook is just about the best bait there is. But Dave wouldn't have nothin' that simple. Ever since he was knee-high to a grasshopper, Dave was strictly a fly fisherman. He made his own lures, imitatin' insects and such and he wouldn't use nothin' else. What's more, he had a display board of 'em in the back of his



upstate with a bride. A real doll.

Even Maw had to admit Dave had made a mistake. She says real tart-like, "Dave picked hisself the wrong woman. Tonette's like one o' them fancy lures Dave's always messin' around with. All bright and shiny on the outside but with a barb underneath."

I knew what Maw was talkin' about right enough. Me and Dave

shop. Whenever he sold one of his hand-made lures to the city folk it made him proud as all get-out.

Tonette Garner was about the prettiest woman as ever come to live in Cripple's Bend. Hair the color of horse chestnuts and skin with a fine rich bloom to it, she was on the plumpish side but that's the way men around here like their women. Tonette come from St. Onge up on the border. Good French-Canadian stock and there ain't no gettin' around that.

First off it looked like Dave and Tonette was goin' to make a go of it. They lived in an old farmhouse on the edge of town. The place was pretty rundown, but they worked miracles sprucin' it up until it looked right nice.

Ain't much social life in a town the size o' Cripple's Bend. A church supper on Tuesday night and mebbe a dance at the Fireman's Hall come Saturday. That's about it. Dave was never much of a hand for dancin' but he'd bring Tonette along and watch from the sidelines. She never had to worry none about partners, except how to make 'em wait their turn.

Mert Simon, who was a widower and president of the local bank, could hardly keep his eyes off her. Some say as Mert was the richest man in town and the meanest too but I wouldn't want to comment

on that. Then there was Little Kenny Stuart followin' her around like a Spaniel pup, his tongue practically hangin' out.

I reckon Tonette didn't give a hang for fishin' but she was a good sport. When Dave would head out for the trout streams up country, she'd tag along too, even though it meant campin' out in a pup tent and comin' back with her face all swole up with skeeter bites and her arms scratched with briers.

There warn't no real trouble 'til Nick Gulden showed up in Cripple's Bend. Nick was sellin' farm machinery and such out of Portland and it looked like he was doin' right good at it. He owned a snappy new roadster and was always dressed fit to kill. Me, I couldn't stomach Nick Gulden with his curly black hair and his movie hero profile, but the ladies went for him in a big way. One thing I'll have to admit about Nick, he was the best dancer to ever put in an appearance at Fireman's Hall. Right off the bat he and Tonette teamed up together. When they went on the floor, the other couples would drop out and stand around watchin' and clappin'.

It warn't long afore Dave got his fill of Nick Gulden. They met in the parkin' lot one night and passed some hot words that ended up with them tradin' a few punches. Dave

was big but he was slow and, like I said, he was naturally easy-goin'. Nick was shifty on his feet and he was givin' better than he was takin'. Course it was my job as sheriff to break things up but I might not have been so quick about it if Dave had been putting up a better show. I wouldn't have minded seein' Nick Gulden scootin' away with his tail between his legs.

Tonette was burned up with Dave, claimin' as how he started the ruckus. She flounces off and gets into Nick Gulden's car. There ain't no way for me to stop 'em from drivin' off except by main force.

After that the marriage just collapses. Susie Chipman who lives down the road a piece from the Garner farm tells me Dave and Tonette are goin' at it hammer and tongs all the time.

A couple of months pass and Dave moves out and rents a room at Cripple's Inn. Tonette files suit for divorce on grounds of desertion and Dave don't contest. He gives her the farm and a cash settlement and they split up real friendly like. Dave even drops around to the farmhouse off and on to do odd jobs too heavy for Tonette to handle.

He steers clear of the farm after nightfall though and perhaps it's just as well because, accordin' to

Susie Chipman, Tonette ain't lackin' male company after dark. Seems like most every night a car's parked in her driveway. Weekends it's mostly Nick Gulden's flashy roadster. Other times it's a big black sedan and it ain't hard for Susie to reckon out who's callin', seein' as Mert Simon owns the only one in town. Now and then there's a third car, a battered old model, and it nigh drives Susie crazy tryin' to find out who's up there then. Susie ain't one to give up easy. She sneaks out one night and jots down the number. Seems it belongs to Little Kenny Stuart's sister over in Barrow and that once in a while she lends him the use of it.

That's the way things was standin' when Tonette's younger sister, Cecile, decides to get married. Tonette's got her faults but she's real punctilious-like about family matters and she's dead set to attend the weddin'. Trouble is there ain't no train or bus service up to St. Onge, less you want to change about a half dozen times. Tonette ain't got a car and wouldn't know how to drive it if she had one.

Comes Friday morning before the weddin' and Tonette walks into Dave's sports shop brassy as you please. Dave's in back o' the shop workin' on his lures like he does so often.

Tonette flounces past Kenny Stu-

art and faces Dave, tellin' him how she's got to get up to St. Onge and askin' him to drive her there.

"Nope," says Dave. "I got me a fishin' trip all planned for the weekend. Sorry, Tonette, but that's the way it stands."

Tonette flares up, her voice risin' shrill and mean. "You and your trout! You always cared more about fishin' than me. But I don't need to worry. There's plenty of others will be glad to drive me to St. Onge. All I have to do is ask."

Dave shrugs. "You just do that, Tonette, and don't come around botherin' me no more."

Tonette blasts off at him but he don't so much as blink an eye, so she stamps out o' the store.

Friday, around noon, Dave sets off on his fishin' trip. It's wild country up where he's goin' and he don't like to take his car and leave it on the roadside overnight. Instead, he takes the bus and cuts across country on foot to reach the trout streams. That way he can catch the bus back a couple days later.

Dave gets Kenny Stuart to drive him to the bus station and tells him to park the Olds at the rear of the store until he gets back. Kenny hangs around the bus stop and waves goodbye to Dave before headin' back for the store.

That night, as soon as it gets

dark, Susie Chipman sees the headlights of a car drivin' up in front of the Garner farmhouse. But instead of parkin' in the drive as usual, it goes right up to the front door where a big chestnut tree casts a shadow over it. Pretty soon the lights in the house go off. Susie, standin' at her window, catches a glimpse of Tonette silhouetted in the glare of the headlights, carryin' a suitcase. The door slams, the motor roars and the car takes off like greased lightning. Susie don't have the slightest idea what kind it is and that burns her up because, while she claims she's not nosey, she does like to know what's goin' on.

Happens I'm down at the cross-



roads when Dave jumps off the bus on Sunday afternoon. He grins like a tomcat when he shows me the six fat trout in his wicker basket. They're beauties too. Makes my mouth water just to look at 'em.

He claps me on the shoulder and says, "How about you and Clara sharin' 'em with me?"

"Sure," I says. "You take 'em down to Maw and she'll clean and gut 'em for you."

So that's the way it was. Dave comes around to the house about six o'clock and the three of us have supper. And those trout was mighty tasty fare, I don't mind tellin' you.

Afterward we set up the checker board and me and Dave have a game or two. We're still playin' when the telephone rings. It's Tonette's mother, Mrs. Catteau, from St. Onge. She's worried because Tonette ain't showed up for the weddin'. She can't raise nobody at the farm and she can't imagine what's happened.

I tell Dave and he seems pretty upset. "It ain't like Tonette to miss a weddin'," he says. "Specially not Cecile's, seein' as how she and Tonette was so close."

We decided to go out to the farm and look around. 'Tain't long afore Susie Chipman joins us and tells us her story. Dave looks over Tonette's clothes and says as how he thinks there's quite a few missin' but he

can't rightly say what she took.

Susie pipes up and says, "Maybe she's eloped." Then she claps her palm over her mouth and looks at Dave sort of guiltylike.

But Dave just says, "That's her privilege if she wants to. I ain't got no strings tied to her no more."

For the next few weeks there ain't much I can do, even though Mrs. Catteau's pesterin' the pants off me for word of her daughter, and hollerin' to high heaven about foul play. Nick Gulden ain't showed up in Cripple's Bend since Tonette's disappeared. I got my own ideas about him and Tonette but I don't see no percentage in shootin' off my mouth without any proof.

Mert Simon's still around and I drop over to the bank to have a few words with him. He claims Tonette tried to enveigle him into takin' her to St. Onge but he wasn't havin' none of it. He was leery of gettin' too involved with her. Reckoned if he didn't shy clear of her, she'd be leadin' him up to the altar. That wasn't what he had in mind.

Then just as I was gettin' downright worried about Tonette, her mother calls up all bright and cheery. She's got a letter from Tonette postmarked in Portland, tellin' about how she's got married again but not statin' her new husband's name. Not that I need more than one guess. Who else could it be but

Nick Gulden, the dancin' salesman?

Just to be on the safe side I asked Mrs. Catteau if she recognizes Tonette's writing.

"Of course," she says. "Nobody else writes with all those flourishes and curly-cues."

I ask her to send the letter along to me just to make things real tidy. When it comes, I show it to Dave.

"Looks like her handwritin' to me," he says. "Though I wouldn't swear to it. That's her stationery though, with the violets on top. It's some I give her for her birthday last year."

Well, there ain't no law against a grass widder tryin' her luck a second time and I got no call to stick my nose into Tonette's business without bein' asked. Then toward the end of August everything changes. It starts one morning when Tommy Raines and Joey Smith come rushin' into my office. They're a pair of twelve year olds and they're both gibberin' like crazy and white as sheets. It takes awhile to get a story out of them but finally they calm down enough to tell me. Seems like they been fishin' for eels in the old abandoned ice pond along the Backwater Road. The summer's been hot and dry and the pond's pretty nigh dried up. So that's how they happen to see a woman's body lyin' face down in the dryin' mud.

I hustle over there as fast as I can. I'm a-hopin' the boys' imaginations have run away with them. But the body's right where they said. It's pretty badly decomposed but from the clothes and such there ain't no doubt in my mind that it's Tonette Garner.

There ain't no doubt about the cause of her death neither. Her skull's been cracked wide open. I don't have to look around much for the murder weapon. It's lyin' right beside her in the mud. An old tire iron such as you might find in any car. Later Doc Ruggles performs an autopsy on her but he only confirms what I already guessed. Tonette was dead before her body was weighted and dumped in the pond.

Telling Dave the news is the roughest part of the deal, but he takes it pretty good all things considerin'. He grows sort of pale and rubs the back of his hand over his lips the way I seen him do lots o' times when he's upset.

He says, "I reckon Tonette's been dead to me for a long time now. But mebbe that was my fault as much as hers. Leastwise she didn't deserve nothin' like this. I hope you catch the swine as did it to her."

Just then the door of the shop slams and we both look up, expectin' a customer. But we're

wrong. It's Little Kenny Stuart lightin' out of the shop like somebody's put salt on his tail. I see him walkin' fast, almost runnin', along the main street. His head is down and his narrow shoulders is hunched together. Looks to me like he's bawlin' and tryin' to hide his face so nobody'll notice.

Dave says sort of reproachful, "I wish you hadn't blurted that out about Tonette in front o' Kenny. The kid's had a crush on her for a long time and it was sort of pathetic because, while she was feedin' him a line, he never had a chance to get to first base."

I wasn't so sure but I didn't say nothin', just made a mental note to have a chat with Kenny sometime soon.

But first things come first, and the man I want to lay my hands on right now is Nick Gulden. Nobody seen hair nor hide of him since Tonette's disappeared and now it looks like maybe he had good reason for makin' himself scarce. First off I think of phoning through to the Portland police to detain him, but then I reckon I want to be in on the kill. If I take him by surprise he won't have no way of knowin' that Tonette's body's been found and he may do or say something to give himself away.

So I jump into the county car and head for Portland. I arrive too

late to do any checkin' that night but I'm waitin' bright and early the next morning when the branch office of Tomkins and Lawrence opens up. That's the firm for which Gulden works and I aim to ask a few questions about him before I take him into custody.

The first person I meet up with is a receptionist. She's got a fancy sign on her desk sayin' as how she's Miss Barton. She's a pretty little thing and I reckon if Nick Gulden's in the vicinity he'll be right in there pitchin' her some woo. From what I seen of Nick he never misses a bet.

When I ask about Nick, Miss Barton jerks her head up in a startled sort o' way but she's cool as a cucumber when she speaks.

"Mr. Gulden isn't with us any more. Is there any way I can be of service?"

"Well, it's sort of personal, Miss. Can you tell me how I can locate him?"

"If you could state the nature of your business—" Her voice trails off.

I know when I'm gettin' the run-around and I don't like it, not even when the girl's got big soulful eyes like Miss Barton. I clamps down hard. I tell her who I am and that I want all the information I can get about Nick Gulden and I want it fast. She could see I mean it.

She flushes up and it makes her look prettier than ever. She says, "You don't have to jump down my throat. I'm just obeying orders."

"Never mind that. Just tell me where I can find Nick Gulden."

She gives her head a toss. "You'd have to go to a cemetery for that. Mr. Gulden is dead."

That really sets me back on my heels the way I guess she meant for it to. "How did he die," I ask. "And when?"

"He was killed in an automobile accident on May second."

I'm thinkin' fast. If what she tells me is straight, it don't rule Nick out as a murderer, but it does mean that forged letter from Tonette was mailed from Portland six days after he was dead. And why should anyone but the killer want to confuse issues like that?

"Are you sure about that date, Miss Barton?"

"Certainly I am. I don't make mistakes on matters of importance. But if you doubt my word, you'd better speak to Mr. Clarke. He's just come in."

She leads me into the manager's office. Clarke's a gruff sort of man with no nonsense about him. He confirms what Miss Barton's told me. Playin' around in the back of my mind is some idea that Nick's fakin' his death to cover up his murder of Tonette Garner. But

there ain't a ghost of a chance of any hankypanky. Nick was killed instantly in a traffic accident. Clarke identified the body and attended the funeral.

Just to make doubly sure I check with the police. After that I drive around to the roomin' house where Nick lived for a chat with his landlady. Mrs. Everett is plump and white-haired and sort of makes me think of Maw. She's willin' enough to let me see his room but everything's been cleaned out and sent to his mother in Florida.

I'm biddin' goodbye to Mrs. Everett on the porch when her two grandchildren come home. The little girl's about nine or ten and the boy's a year or so younger. They listen wide-eyed to what we're sayin' and Mrs. Everett's got a pleading expression on her face like she don't want me to talk about the dead man in front of them.

But the warning comes too late. The little girl pipes up, "Is he asking about Nick, too?"

Before Mrs. Everett can interrupt, I jumps in. "Was someone else askin' about him?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

"The day Granny was away helping with the church supper. Ronnie and I were all alone. The man asked lots of questions and he

wouldn't believe me when I told him Nick had gone away and didn't live here any more. He scared me."

"How did he scare you?"

"He didn't leave. He went out and sat in his car. He just sat there for the longest time."

"What did he look like?"

"I didn't see him very well. I didn't dare open the screen door. Granny told me not to while she was away."

"Did you notice what kind of a car he had?"

The little girl shook her head but Ronnie was jumping up and down in excitement.

"I did. I did," he crowed. "It was a blue Olds. I even snuck out and got the number 'cause I was playing 'tective that day."

"What was it?"

"That's easy. It was KC 12345."

Mrs. Everett is growing impatient. She sends the children into the house and stands in front of me, her face all puckered up in a frown.

She says, "Really, Sheriff, was it necessary to question the children? They do get over-excited, you know."

"They been a big help. But why did the little girl say Nick had gone away? Didn't she know he'd been killed?"

"No. I tried to shield her from

that knowledge. She's too young to know about death. Now if you'll excuse me, please."

"Just one more question," I plead. "Can you set the date when this man was here?"

Her lips purse. "That shouldn't be too hard. It was the afternoon of the church supper. That would be a Tuesday. Let me check it on my calendar."

She ducks inside but is back in a minute with the information. The date is May 8, the same day the forged letter was mailed from Portland.

I don't like the thoughts I'm thinkin' while I'm drivin' back to Cripple's Bend. Nick Gulden is dead and Dave Garner's blue Olds was in Portland the very day the decoy letter was sent.

I get home late and I reckon I'm sort of grumpy with Maw, but I don't want to tell her about my suspicions, knowin' how fond she is of Dave.

The next morning I go by his shop. "When was you in Portland last, Dave?"

He gives me a blank look. "Why, I dunno. Must be runnin' up to three years."

"Don't lie to me, Dave."

His big fists double up into knots and I think for a minute he's going to attack me but he relaxes and says real quiet, "I ain't lyin' to you."

What makes you think I would?"

"Your car was seen there on May 8th."

The breath goes out of him and he sets down hard on a straight-back chair. "My car, maybe. But not me."

I can see him looking toward the front of the shop where Little Kenny Stuart is standin' behind the counter listenin'. Kenny says, "That's true. I was driving Dave's car that day."

"And checkin' on Nick Gulden?"

Kenny's face twisted. "Yes, that too. I reckoned if I could find Nick, he'd lead me to Tonette. I didn't believe they were married. I thought if I could talk to Tonette that—that—" He broke off, looking miserably at Dave.

"Do you know that Nick Gulden is dead?"

His head jerks up. "Dead! The little girl told me he'd gone away. I thought he and Tonette were together until they found her. Nick killed Tonette, didn't he, Sheriff?"

"I can't say. But sure as shootin' he didn't mail that letter that was supposed to be from Tonette."

"Who did?"

"You did, Kenny. It had to be you."

"No. No. I swear it."

His forehead was broken out with sweat and his eyes were wild.

I could smell the fear in him and I knew he was lying. But I didn't tell him so because I didn't have any proof. I didn't want him to get the wind up too soon and make a run for it.

I had a lot of heavy ponderin' to do and I always think best on a full stomach. So I decide the next step is to load up on flapjacks and maple syrup in Gimpy's Diner down the street.

I'm just polishin' off my flapjacks when Lily Peterson sidles on to the stool beside me. Lily's a good healthy girl and she ain't hard to look at, but I'll have to admit she couldn't never hold a candle to Tonette. A time back she and Kenny Stuart was going steady but they busted up when Kenny started makin' sheep's-eyes at Tonette. Still, I guess everybody knew Lily was still holdin' a torch for him.

Lily's got a job in the bank, workin' as Mert Simon's secretary. I can tell by the nervous way she orders her coffee and just sets there stirrin' and stirrin' it without even takin' a sip that she's got something on her mind.

I don't press her none, just wait until she's good and ready to spill. Finally she blurts out, "I just been talkin' to Kenny. You think he killed Tonette, don't you?"

"That's puttin' it mighty strong.

Let's just say there's some suspicious circumstances pointin' toward Kenny."

She snaps back real perky. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Sheriff. Kenny wasn't with Tonette the night she disappeared."

"You sound mighty certain o' that."

"I am. I know Mert Simon had a date with her. I was in his office when Tonette came there begging him to take her to St. Onge. Mert stalled around for a time but in the end he agreed to be at her place at eight o'clock."

"Why didn't you tell me this before, Lily?"

She flushes up 'til her cheeks are bright red. "A good secretary doesn't pry into her boss' private affairs. I never would have told you except that Kenny's in danger."

She gets up real quick and hurries away.

There's nothin' to do but question Mert Simon again and this time to make it clear I know he's been lyin' to me.

I catch him in his office with Lily right there, sittin' at her desk in the corner. Mert tends to be pretty stuffy and self-righteous, but I ride him hard.

I guess he reckons Lily must have told me the truth because after awhile he gives a big phony laugh and his manner grows ful-

some in a man-to-man way that gets my dander up.

He spreads his hands in a mock gesture of surrender and says, "All right, Sheriff. I'll come clean. Tonette did barge in on me that day. She did ask me to take her to St. Onge. I tried to stall her and she started to make a scene. Now that sort of thing looks bad in a bank and Tonette knew it. I might even say there was an element of blackmail in her demands. I'd already decided to make a break with her and now I knew the sooner I did it the better. But I didn't want to risk her throwing hysterics all over the place so I agreed to meet her that night. But about seven o'clock I called her up and told her she'd have to find some other way to get to St. Onge. She was pretty nasty about it, but I just hung up. That's the last I ever heard from her."

"What did you do that night, Mert?"

"I fixed myself some supper, read for awhile, listened to the radio and went to bed."

"You got any witnesses?"

"Nary a one. It looks like you'll just have to take my word, Sheriff."

I don't bother to remind him his word ain't been too good in the past. Instead I snap at him, "Where were you on May 8th?"

He flips through a red leather appointment book and comes up

with the answer, "I was in Boston attending a convention. I've a couple of hundred witnesses because I made a speech there."

"Did you stop over in Portland?"

"I passed through on my way down."

"Did you mail any letters from there?"

He looks puzzled but he answers real steady, "No, Sheriff. I didn't."

I ain't any more satisfied with Mert Simon's story than I am with Kenny Stuart's and, to tell the truth, I don't know which way to turn.

When I get back to my office, Lieutenant Buck, of the State Crime Laboratory in Augusta, is waitin' for me. I'd sent the decoy letter along with some samples of Tonette's handwriting up there. Buck tells me what I already know, that it's a forgery. He adds that all the curly-cues and flourishes make it easier to imitate than more simple handwriting.

That ain't much help but what he tells me next has me sittin' up straight in my chair. Seems there's a handwriting expert up at the state university who's a wizard. He claims that no matter how a person tries to disguise his handwriting he can spot it every time 'cause there's little mannerisms that give him away, and he recognizes them.

Lieutenant Buck says, "Have you got any suspicions as to who might have written that letter?"

I opine as I got a couple of likely suspects and I don't know which looks the more guilty.

Lieutenant Buck says, "I tell you what to do. You ask both suspects to copy this letter. Then you shoot the specimens up to Prof. Leighton and I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts he'll pick out your man."

After he goes, I stew around for awhile. I got a feeling Tonette's murder ain't going to be solved as easy as all that and that there's a piece missin' somewhere. All the same I amble over to Dave's shop. Kenny Stuart's there all alone and I tell him what I want him to do.

Kenny's so flustered and jittery he can hardly hold the pen. He makes a couple of blots on the paper and, all the time he's writin', he keeps lickin' his lips and lookin' at me like a dog that's scared he's goin' to taste the whip.

He hands me the paper like he's passin' over his life.

I says, "Kenny, if you got somethin' on your mind, you better tell me."

"I ain't sayin' nothin', Sheriff, except that I didn't kill Tonette."

I have to let it go at that.

The bank's closed so I drive out to Mert Simon's house. He's good

and mad and starts blusterin' about his rights. But when I point out he's actin' mighty suspicious, he clamps his jaws together, sits down at a desk and dashes off the note in his clipped, neat handwriting.

That night Maw's got creamed finnan haddie for supper with Indian puddin' for desert. They're my favorites but I don't enjoy my food much. When we're finished, Maw comes and puts her hand on my shoulder.

"Paw," she says, "you're eatin' mighty pecky. I never known you to turn down seconds on my Indian puddin' before."

When Maw's in the mood there ain't no sense in tryin' to hold nothin' back from her. So I tells her what I been doin' and why.

Maw purses her lips in' and out while I'm talkin' and then she takes off her glasses and polishes 'em. When she speaks her voice is real soft and gentle.

"I know what's gnawin' at you, Paw. You're afraid that Dave Garner killed his wife, but you don't want to admit it. Not even to yourself."

"He couldn't have," I yells. "I know them trout streams where he was fishin'. He couldn't have got there and caught himself a batch of speckled trout and come back in time to kill Tonette. Besides he warn't anywhere near Portland

when that forged letter was sent."

"Then you ain't got nothin' to worry about. So why don't you drop over and see Dave?"

I don't like it but I know Maw's right. As long as I'm sheriff, I can't play favorites with a murderer at large.

Dave's in his room at Cripple's Inn, layin' on his bed with a half dozen empty beer cans spewed around. He acts right glad to see me and that hurts worst of all. I explain to him why I've come. He gets a serious expression on his face but he's just as friendly as ever.

He writes out the first half dozen words easy enough, then the pen drops out of his hand and he just sits there starin' at the paper.

After a minute or so he looks up with a travesty of a grin and says, "I guess it ain't no use to hold out any longer. I reckon I'll feel better if I confess."

Then he blurts out his story. Seems like all the time he's been pretendin' that he don't give a tinker's dam about bein' washed up with Tonette, he's been eatin' out his heart with jealousy.

After they separate he can't leave well enough alone. He keeps traipsin' back to the farm at night to spy on her. He sees Nick Gulden, Mert Simon and even Little Kenny Stuart cuddlin' up to her. Looks like she'll give herself to any

man but him. He tells himself, if he spies on her long enough, he'll get disgusted with her. But it don't work that way. Pretty soon he's half 'crazy thinkin' of her in some other man's arms.

That Friday, when she come to his shop and asked him to take her to St. Onge, his pride made him turn her down, especially as Kenny Stuart was lookin' on. So he starts off on his fishin' trip but he don't get far. When the bus reaches Bradley's Corner, he jumps off and walks back across the fields to town. It's dark by then. His car's in back of the shop where he's told Kenny to leave it. He gets in and drives to the farm.

Tonette was all packed and ready to go when Mert Simon stood her up. As far as she's concerned, Dave's a godsend. She jumps into his car and off they go.

But Dave ain't aimin' to take her to St. Onge unless she agrees to marry him again. He stops down the road a stretch and tells her so.

Tonette just laughs at him. She says if she ever remarries it's going to be to a man with some life in him, not a stupid hayseed who can't think about nothing but trout fishin' and makin' fancy lures.

One word leads to another. It ain't long before they're yellin' at each other. Tonette slaps Dave across the face and leaps out o' the

car, sayin' she'd rather walk home than spend another minute with him.

Dave sees red. There's a tire iron in the car and he picks it up and takes off after Tonette. He claims he just means to give her a scare but, when he lifts the iron over his head, she sneers at him and tells him he ain't got the guts to strike her.

The next thing he knows she's lyin' at his feet with her skull crushed. He kneels beside her and knows she's dead and that he's a murderer.

All the fire washes out of him and nothin's left but the cold fear of goin' to prison. For a man who loves the outdoors like Dave, the thought of bein' cooped up in a cell is worse than death. His instinct for self-preservation takes over and he deliberately kills every other emotion.

He backs the car alongside o' Tonette's body and lifts her into the front seat. He just drives around for awhile at random, stickin' to the back roads so nobody'll see him. He ain't got no plan in mind but when he sees the abandoned ice pond, it comes to him that's about the safest place to hide Tonette. He drags her into the water and piles some stones on top of her. Then he drives his car back to the store and leaves it just the way

Kenny had parked it, in a hurry.

He lets himself into the rear of the store. Blood's splattered all over his chest so he gets a fresh khaki shirt and a lumber-jacket, such as he's been wearin', from his stock and puts them on. He hides the blood-stained clothes in a closet to destroy later. He sponges the front seat of the car and then he sets out across country on foot.

The next morning he picks up the bus at Bradley's Corner and heads for the trout streams. He's lost the better part of a day but he still reckons a batch of trout will give him an alibi.

Trouble is his luck's against him, or maybe he's just too much on edge to have the patience you need to catch trout. Anyway when it's time to go back, he's caught himself nary a fish. He's got the wind up because he don't dare show up in Cripple's Bend empty-handed.

He's feelin' desperate when he runs across an old codger sittin' on the bank of the stream with a full catch. Ten dollars changes hands and Dave's got himself as pretty a basket of trout as you'd hope to see.

As luck would have it, he bumps into me when he jumps off the bus at Cripple's Bend and he reckons that sharin' the trout with me and Maw is really going to hammer home his alibi. He did just that.

After that he ain't too worried 'til Tonette's mother starts raisin' a ruckus about her disappearin'. He knows the gossips around Cripple's Bend are sayin' as how Tonette's run away with Nick Gulden, so the idea comes to him that a letter announcin' her marriage will stop Mrs. Catteau's questions.

Dave practices Tonette's writing until he reckons he's well-nigh perfect. The next problem is how to mail the letter. He don't dare send it from Cripple's Bend or anywhere near, and it's too dangerous to leave town at the time it's mailed.

The answer comes to him when Kenny Stuart asks to borrow the Olds. He fixes up a stack of business letters and sticks the envelope to Mrs. Catteau in the middle of it. He asks Kenny to mail the lot in Portland, knowin' Kenny ain't the nosey kind who'll look over the addresses.

His plan works out all right until I come around makin' accusations against Kenny.

Dave takes a long breath and says, "I guess I would have tried to bluff it out if it warn't for Kenny. He must have guessed the trick I played on him but he was too loyal to spill."

After that me and Dave just sit lookin' at each other for a long time. Both of us know what I got to do and how much I hate doin'

it. When I get up Dave follows me out of the room and we go downstairs together. Secin' as how there ain't no jail in Cripple's Bend, I drive him to the police barracks over in Barrow and leave him there.

It's past midnight when I get back home but Maw's sittin' up in the front room waitin' for me.

She looks at my face and don't ask no questions, just bustles around fixin' up some hot coffee.

I says, "Maw, you knew it was Dave all the time. You was holdin' out on me."

Maw sort of dabs at her eyes and says, "I can't rightly say as how I knew Dave killed Tonette, but sure as God made green apples he never caught them trout."

"How'd you know?" I ask.

"I cleaned and gutted them fish. The hook had snapped off in a couple of 'em and there was earthworms on them hooks. There was pieces of sliced earthworms in the gullets of the others. Now you know Dave wouldn't be caught dead usin' nothin' but a lure."

I'm doin' a slow burn, thinkin' how Maw's made a fool of me and how I'd probably never got Dave's confession if it hadn't been for her. But I don't want her to know what I'm thinkin' so I says real peevishlike, "I always told Dave them fancy lures of his wouldn't bring him nothin' but bad luck."

But Maw has the last word like she always does. She snaps back at me, "The real lure was that fancy woman he picked up, with her smooth and wicked ways. Dave didn't have no more brains than a trout or he would of seen she was enticin' him on to no good. He should have took a lesson from you and married a plain ugly woman with no frilly trimmin's."

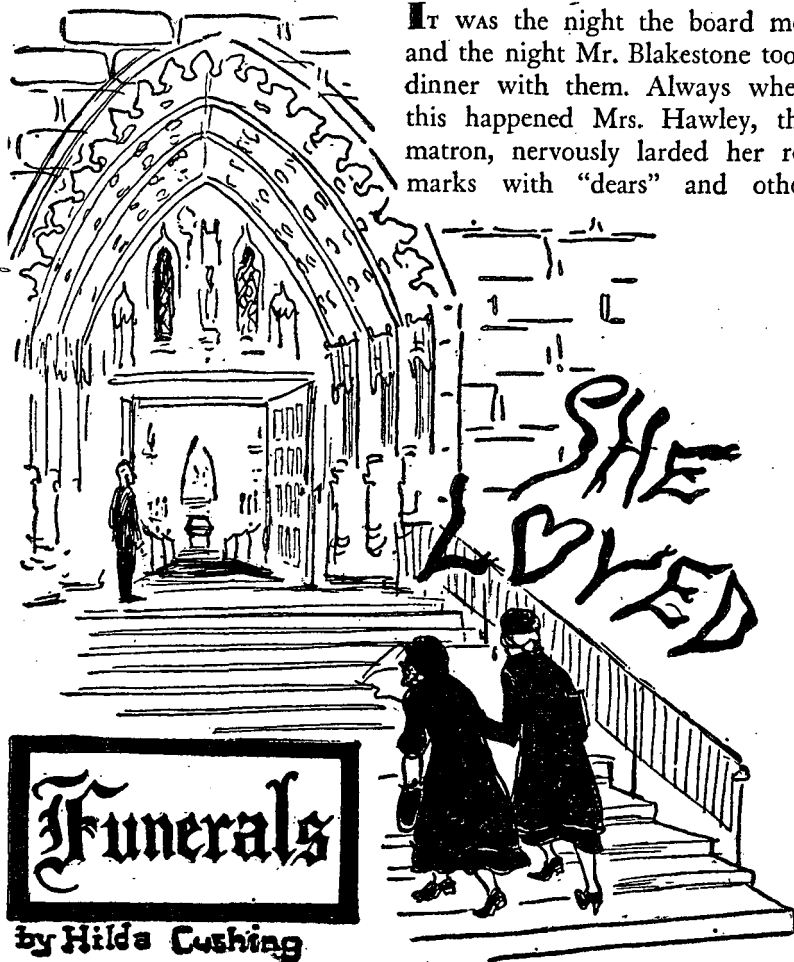
There warn't no answer to that and I warn't fool enough to make one. I just finish my coffee and amble up to the bedroom.

I'm feelin' right low about the way things turned out for Dave but there ain't no use broodin'. Anyway, I perk up a mite when I hear Maw's footsteps climbin' the stairs.



A funeral, despite its gravity, may contain some elements of pleasure. The security and complacency that accompany elaborate ceremonies is a sentiment often anticipated, and sometimes even precipitated.

IT WAS the night the board met and the night Mr. Blakestone took dinner with them. Always when this happened Mrs. Hawley, the matron, nervously larded her remarks with "dears" and other



such nonsense when she addressed the ladies. And usually Miss Amy Merriwether ate through the meal in disdainful silence, but tonight she had to know the answer before she went to bed and Mr. Blakestone's presence might help.

If Mrs. Hawley refused to let her go to Fannie's funeral she didn't know how she could stand it. Fannie's would probably be the last. Amy had outlived all her old friends.

As she waited for Mrs. Hawley's answer she looked around at the other eleven ladies who made up the Prescott Home for Elderly Women. Not one over seventy-five—not one a native of the town of Prescott. Carpet-baggers every one! They were looking at their plates as though the discussion embarrassed them. She knew they could not understand why she wanted to go to Fannie's funeral. They all avoided even the mention of death as though by ignoring it they could eliminate it.

They were like frightened sheep. Even a short excursion into the shopping center of the town had to be planned with the utmost caution. They always went in threes or fours and clung to each other as though they were forever on the brink of a yawning precipice or attempting the Matterhorn dur-

ing a whirling, blinding blizzard!

Amy stirred in her chair as Mrs. Hawley spoke dubiously, "Don't you think it might be just a teeny-weeny bit too much for you, dear Miss Merriwether? You were so fond of her and all? You did collapse when it happened, you know. And there are all those steps again at the church."

She was going to refuse. Too much for her to go to Fannie's funeral? How ridiculous! But she couldn't admit now that she had only pretended to faint after she called Mrs. Brown, Fannie's housekeeper. And she knew she could never explain how she felt about funerals.

It wasn't only that it was Fannie who would lie in that casket before the church altar. It was everything else, too—the solemnity, the music, the sonorous tones of white-haired Dr. Barbour, the measured steps and the obsequious concern of the morticians. It was everything—the whole atmosphere! She loved funerals.

The ladies still looked at their plates but Mr. Blakestone paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. The wedge of lemon meringue pie poised perilously. It was his favorite desert and the only time pie was served at the evening meal.

Mrs. Hawley often intimated

that she thought him too young but the ladies liked him. They all knew the ritual of his having meeting night dinner with them was in order to get their complaints first hand. Although he was only in his forties even Mrs. Hawley had to admit, if grudgingly, that he took his position as chairman seriously.

He looked now at Amy with deep admiration. "She looks strong enough to me to take a trip around the world. When I reach that age I hope I'll be half as lively." He shook his head in wonder and placed the lemon meringue neatly in his mouth.

Even though Mrs. Hawley was obviously going to soften, she had to offer one more objection. "Well," she said slowly. "That's just it. We're going to be ninety next week and we don't want to spend our birthday in bed, now do we?"

Before Amy could answer this nonsense Martha Roman interrupted in her bold way, "Pardon me, Mrs. Hawley, but if I went with her wouldn't it be all right? It's at my church and I'm quite used to the steps."

Mrs. Hawley smiled. "That would be very nice. Miss Merriwether, wouldn't that be nice, dear, to have Mrs. Roman go with you? She will be such nice com-

pany, and knows the ritual.

If that was the only way she could get to Fannie's funeral, all right, but that sly Martha Roman needn't think she could weasel into a friendship with her afterwards. She was much too pushy. What did anyone know about her anyway except that she was the youngest member of the home and had been here only a month!

Mrs. Hawley in her way was just as objectionable. Mustn't spend "our" ninetieth birthday in bed—indeed! Why ninety was hardly old at all by Merriwether lights. Mama lived to be ninety-eight and papa passed the century mark by a good year and a half. With all these new medicines she wouldn't be at all surprised if she did better than either of them.

But, of course, there were drawbacks, coming from a long-lived family. Caring for her parents in the manner to which they were accustomed had exhausted the Merriwether money. There had just been the house left and that sold for barely enough to pay Amy's way into the home. At that time it was considered *the* place for the retirement of Prescott's gentlewomen after they reached the age of sixty-five.

But with the growth of the town the home had declined. Amy felt the members were becoming more

common with each passing year. Only her undisputed seniority made her life there bearable. Of course, there had been Fannie who still lived in the old mansion on the other side of town. But the little trips by taxi to visit Fannie had palled lately. Her friend was getting disgustingly old and feeble. It was depressing and irritating. She wasn't sorry she was dead. She was five years younger than Amy and it served her right letting herself go like that. Besides now there would be the funeral.

The next afternoon, typically April, was sunny and cool. One of the nice young assistants came gallantly down the dozen and a half or so church steps to help her and Mrs. Roman to the top. She could have done it easily without either of them but the attention pleased her. Then, inside the door, Mr. Dillworth himself took her from the young man murmuring, "Close friend," and escorted them personally down the aisle to place them in a pew directly behind those reserved for the relatives.

No one could even approach Mr. Dillworth when it came to funerals, she thought comfortably as she settled herself. There were never any gauche incidents such as at Mabelle Worthington's last year when that new mortician brought some latecomers down the aisle

after the family was seated. Or several years ago when Mr. Johnson, her father's lawyer, was buried from the church near the corner. That time crude Mr. Jacklin, thank goodness, he didn't last long! had forgotten to save seats for the bearers. Because of the crowd they had to stand at the rear of the church and it wasn't until the newspaper came out the next day that Amy or anyone else was sure who they were.

Mrs. Roman disturbed her reverie. "Too far down front," she hissed.

Amy looked at her with distaste. "Respect—almost family," she answered shortly in a less audible tone.

"Like to see people come in," insisted Mrs. Roman, "Although there certainly aren't many here."

That was true. Fannie had outlived most of her friends, too. But the number of mourners wouldn't bother Amy. She herself wanted a church funeral. To make sure of it she had voiced her wish at dinner when Mr. Blakestone was there. As long as he remained chairman she knew she needn't worry. She deplored the new fashion of using funeral homes. The several she had been to, the funerals of children, nieces and nephews of departed friends, had not seemed the same. It didn't matter to her if only Mr. Blakestone and Mrs. Hawley or

if no one attended. She still wanted a church funeral.

She remembered back to her grandfather's death when she was twelve. It was before the time of calling hours, as such, and her mother led her into the front parlor where he lay cold and remote in a dark casket. She was badly frightened. However, later during the funeral at the church fear left her and from that time on she thoroughly enjoyed every one she attended.

"Wake up!" Mrs. Roman dug her in the ribs. "Here comes the family!"

"Not asleep!" was her furious whisper as she opened her eyes to behold Jonathan, Fannie's grandchild and a handful of distant relatives who were all that remained to mourn her death and divide the estate.

Jonathan, who worked in the family bank, gave her a wink before he sat down. Luckily Mrs. Roman didn't seem to notice. Her hand was clutching Amy's arm as she said in her penetrating whisper. "It's that nice Reverend Dix."

A young curly haired curate stood before the pulpit. Mrs. Roman was still whispering, "Doctor Barbour is planning to retire. Mr. Dix preaches even the Sunday sermons now."

Know it all, thought Amy fum-

ing. Then gradually her disappointment turned to interest. The assistant had a flair for the dramatic and, although Amy was surprised at herself, she enjoyed the change from the old ministers heavy sing-song delivery. He was saying some very nice things about Fannie. He must have visited her during these past few years while she was growing so feeble. She had never mentioned him but her memory wasn't too good lately. She had been vague about so many things.

It was only three days ago that the housekeeper had served the tea in Fannie's second floor sitting room. They had been discussing the many changes in the town.

"I don't enjoy going downtown these days," Amy had said. "I never meet anyone I know anymore."

"Not even in the bank?" Fannie's voice was almost a quaver.

"Not even in the bank." Fannie should know better, thought Amy as she said bluntly, "There's no reason for me to go to the bank. There's no more money. You know that, Fannie!"

"No more money?" Her friend became agitated. "No more money in the bank? Has it failed? Why didn't Jonathan tell me? What shall I do—"

Amy had had enough. She rose. "The bank is all right," she said distinctly, "and I'm going back to

the home. Don't bother Mrs. Brown. I don't want the elevator. I'd rather take the stairs."

Fannie had walked out with her, leaning heavily on her cane. As she paused at the top of the stairs Fannie said anxiously, "Do you think you ought to try the stairs, Amy. They're so steep. I never use them any more."

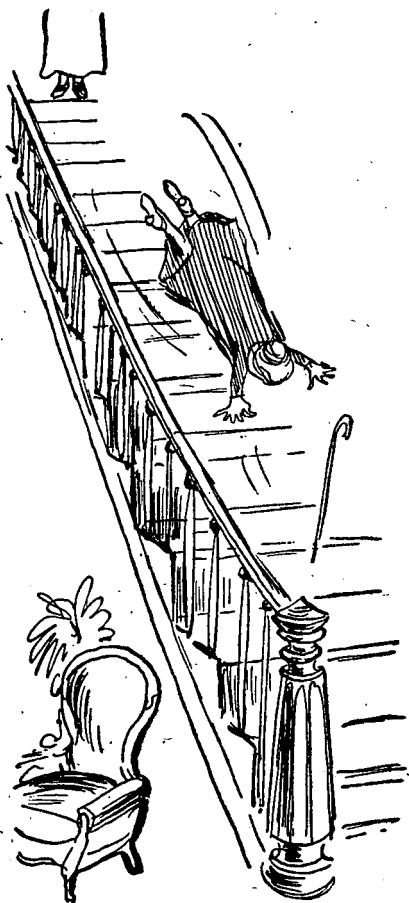
Amy's patience snapped. "You should. You have no business giving up like this: If you don't use your legs pretty soon you won't have any!" And with an irritated gesture she swung her handbag to indicate her disgust.

To her horror the bag slipped out of her hand and hit the cane, knocking it from Fannie's grasp. The woman's weight must have been full upon it for without a sound she pitched down the stairs to land in a heap on the floor below. It was then, after calling Mrs. Brown, that Amy decided to faint. After she apparently came to she was asked very few questions. There was no doubt it was an accident and that Amy's only involvement was that she had the misfortune to witness it.

Well it happened and there certainly was nothing she could do about it now. That young minister was conducting a beautiful service. Granted he didn't make Fannie the utterly noble character Dr. Barbour

would have, he still painted a picture that was suitable and attractive.

It was too bad, Amy thought, for people to outlive their old friends. She, Amy, had outlived not only her own generation but many in the next one. She was sure Mrs. Hawley would refuse to let her attend just any funeral.



Of course, there were the members of the home. But they were all still young and, despite their craven attitudes, in excellent health. Besides, she wouldn't be at all surprised if they all wound up in funeral parlors. That was the trend today unless one left explicit instructions with someone trustworthy.

Come to think of it, the next time Mr. Blakestone came to dinner she had better tell him how much she admired the Reverend Mr. Dix. And perhaps she should start going to church again on Sunday mornings. Not that it would be the same but in that way she might get to know him. He might even call on her and she could tell him how much she enjoyed today.

She frowned. No, she couldn't do that. This was Mrs. Roman's church, too. It would mean her company again and she was having plenty of her today. She did wish she would stop jabbing her in the side and making sibilant comments.

She was doing it now and in her loud whisper. "I do like a good church funeral, don't you? I have it in my will that I want mine right here when my time comes."

Well, that was one thing in her favor, thought Amy grimly. She turned to give her a thoughtful look but then she shook her head. She would never live to go to her

funeral. Martha Roman was too young and much too healthy. She gave her attention again to the pulpit. But her thoughts were only half with the handsome curate.

When the service was over Mr. Dillworth left them until the last, along with the family. This time young Jonathan held out his arm for her to take and, squeezing hers close to his side, bundled her up the aisle as though she were his best girl. "How about a date to-night?" he murmured as he unhanded her near the big church door. She started to rebuke him but somehow it was difficult to be cross with Jonathan. Besides, she knew he had been fond of Fannie and, despite his brashness, had been her favorite.

She was about to say something suitable to the occasion when she felt Mrs. Roman's knuckles in her back. "Are you going to the cemetery?" The woman's voice was eager.

Amy shook her head irritably. She never went to the cemetery. The few times she had in the past had shaken her from the comfortable feeling she had when she left the church. There was usually a long wait and if it was chilly like today the feeling dissipated even more quickly.

Mrs. Roman was obviously disappointed. "It doesn't seem com-

plete, somehow, without going to the cemetery," she said petulantly.

"You do as you please," said Amy curtly, knowing that the woman had been urged by Mrs. Hawley to stay close.

At that moment Mr. Dillworth, who was standing near the open doors, caught her eye. He came to her and clasped her hand in both of his. "My dear Miss Merriwether," he said with grave courtesy. "As soon as the cars going to the cemetery have left I'll be happy to send you both home in my own car."

Dear Mr. Dillworth. How well he knew her and how kind he was. Now they would not have to wait for a capricious taxi. She moved through the doors to the top step and watched the cluster of family mourners as they entered the two limousines that waited on the street before the church. The sight of the sleek black vehicles filled her with discontent. She couldn't bear to think that this was the last time she might attend such a lovely service.

She felt Mrs. Roman at her left

side. The woman still muttered querulously. Suddenly Amy thought of Fannie. Not Fannie as she lay in the casket before the altar but Fannie as she tumbled down the front stairs of her musty old house. A pure and simple accident. And here was an equally steep flight of stairs. Could she bring it off again, this time with intent, and still have it appear an accident?

She stood absolutely still, scarcely breathing. The few people who stood about were looking curiously at the limousines as they jockeyed for position behind the hearse. There was no one behind them at the church doors. She drew closer to Mrs. Roman who turned an aggrieved eye upon her.

"Let's go down to the street to wait," suggested Amy softly as she tried to maneuver herself slightly behind the younger woman.

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Roman, "Let me help you."

And before Amy could flex her knee she felt the insistent pressure on her left shoulder blade and felt herself falling down the steps—and then Amy felt nothing more—ever.

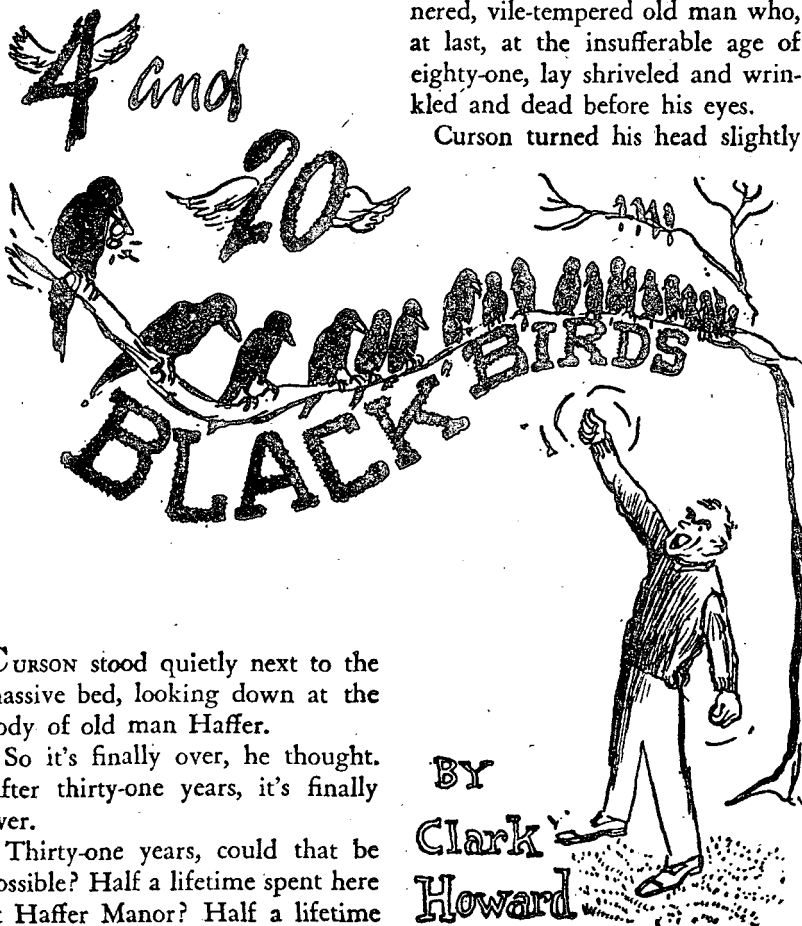


I believe that I have already made my point as to the disreputable characters found among our feathered "friends". Some persons, however, simply refuse to accept my warnings.



spent in servitude to this ill-mannered, vile-tempered old man who, at last, at the insufferable age of eighty-one, lay shriveled and wrinkled and dead before his eyes.

Curson turned his head slightly



CURSON stood quietly next to the massive bed, looking down at the body of old man Haffer.

So it's finally over, he thought. After thirty-one years, it's finally over.

Thirty-one years, could that be possible? Half a lifetime spent here at Haffer Manor? Half a lifetime

and looked in the large mirror over the old man's bureau. He, James Curson, had been a boy only fifteen, when he came down out of the north of Ireland to serve this despicable old despot. Had he ever really been young Jamie Curson, rosy-cheeked, wide-eyed and eager? Looking at his face now, he saw no wide eyes, no eagerness, nothing at all of youth. He saw only a ruddy, weather-touched face with narrowed eyelids over a cold, flat gaze.

You did poorly by me, old man, he thought, looking back at the corpse. Poorly, indeed. I'm as cruel of face as you were, and as dark and brooding of mind too. I'm far from the man my grandfather wanted me to be when he sent me to you from his deathbed. Granddad only remembered you as the fine Major Haffer he had served during the war on the continent; luckily he never saw you—how you became—after the war, after your wife, after the whisky began to take hold. And luckily he's not lived to see me either. Look at me: six years past forty, no woman, no children, no money, and now no place to go.

A wetness glistened in Curson's eyes. Why did I stay? Am I not a man, free to go as I choose? Aye, that I am—but I wasn't always. Once I was just Jamie, a boy. And as I grew older in age, thanks to

his iron will I stayed a boy in spirit. Haffer Estate became my prison; the lord of the manor my keeper.

Curson wiped his eyes and stepped back to the open patio door through which he had entered only moments before. He had been walking past the patio on his way to feed the blackbirds when the old man called out to him.

"Cur—!" the phlegmy voice had gasped.

Cur—the only name the old man had ever called him since the day he arrived at Haffer Estate as Jamie, the boy.

"So you're old Vincent Moriarty's grandson, are you?" the robust, fifty-year-old, black mustached lord of the land had said, looming over him.

"Well, a raggedy, shaggy sight you are, too! And your name's Curson, is it? All right, since you look like a mongrel pup, I'll just shorten your name to Cur. Now, Cur, yonder beyond the house you'll find where the horses are kept. You'll begin as stable boy, and you'll sleep there with the animals as befits your station. Now begone, Cur!"

So Cur it had begun that day, and Cur it stayed. Even in death, even as the old man was choking on his own thick blood from the ruptured artery in his chest, it was still Cur. He shook his head sadly

and thought, 'In the last seconds of his life, when he saw me walking past the patio and knew I was the last mortal he would ever look upon, you'd think he would have hailed me just once as Jamie. Or James. Or even Curson. Anything but Cur.'

Thirty-one years a mongrel dog, he thought bitterly as he stood in the patio doorway and looked at the rising sun reflecting off the layer of dew on the east turf. The vast grounds fell in a gentle slope down to the surrounding woods, and Curson was reminded by those woods that the blackbirds would be waiting for their breakfast. This thought brought a sly smile through his bitterness. At least that was one thing he had put over on the old man. For years he had been stealing from the pantry, taking poppy seed and wheat and rye to feed the blackbirds. He had three handsful stuffed in a paper sack in his pocket this very moment. Penance, he called it from a wicked old tyrant who killed birds for sport.

Sighing heavily, Curson turned back to the bed for a final look at the *late* Sir Malcolm Haffer. Aye, that sounded good! Never again to hear the name Cur—for no one else on the estate would dare call him that. The other servants were afraid of him, and they had nothing at all to do with him. They all worked

in the manor, while he was the groundsman and rarely ever entered the big house nowadays except to steal from the pantry. So there was little need to have truck with the other help. Some of them who had been there for ten years he did not even know by name. As a matter of fact, now that he thought of it, he had not one single friend, not here or anywhere. At least, not a friend of the human variety. He had only the two dozen blackbirds.

That is your fault too, you old devil, he thought, looking down at the corpse. A sudden cold fury overcame him for a moment and he almost reached out to slap the dead man's face. But old Haffer's eyes were open and staring up at him, and the sight of them stopped his hand in mid-air. He felt a spark of the old familiar fear of Haffer that had lived inside him for so long. It was short-lived, this fear, and though it squelched the courage he needed actually to strike the body, it did allow Curson a hateful smirk and a curse.

As he turned to go, he noticed the ring. Gold and rectangular-faced, it was tooled in the coat-of-arms of Haffer's former regiment. In its center, representing the globe upon which the British Empire's sun never set, was a large blood ruby.

"Pretty, isn't it boy?" Haffer had said to him one day twenty

years earlier. "It's a perfect thirty carat stone, good for a thousand pounds sterling for every carat. And it's flawless too, worth twice its weight in diamonds. I took it off a maharajah's turban just after I ran my sword through his gullet. That was in the days when the elephant worshippers were giving Her Majesty an itch in India. Ah, that was one glorious war! But you wouldn't know about such things, would you, boy? Only the English respect glory, and you're Irish, aren't you, boy? Yes, you're Irish, all right. Go on, get back to the stable—Curl!"

Curson's eyes narrowed as he stared at the ring. Thirty carats. Perfect. Flawless. A thousand pounds per carat. Thirty thousand sterling!

A short time after Haffer had told him of the stone's origin, he had been with his master in London on errands, waiting in the foyer of a custom jeweler's establishment while Haffer spoke to the proprietor in a private office. The door had been ajar slightly and Curson had heard the conversation.

"I want an imitation duplicate made of this ring," Haffer had ordered, "to wear when I'm riding and shooting. I'm afraid I might nick the ruby during some of my activities."

"Certainly, sir," the jeweler replied, "I can make up a body of

gold plate with a stone of synthetic corundum for approximately one hundred pounds."

"Done," said Haffer.

Several times in the years that followed, Curson had seen the two rings side by side in a leather case in the top drawer of his master's bureau. Once when he returned Haffer's freshly polished riding boots, he had seen him prepare for the ride by removing the ring he was wearing and placing it in the right-hand section of the box. He took its duplicate from the left-hand section and placed it on the same finger. Curson remembered the conversation he had overheard about damaging the real ruby while riding, and he deduced that the imitation was kept in the left of the box, the genuine in the right. For some reason he never forgot that fact.

As far as he knew, no one but himself had any knowledge of the duplicate ring. Oh, the jeweler, of course, but he was probably dead by now. None of the other servants, certainly. They would not dare to prowl through Sir Malcolm's bureau. Some of his friends, perhaps? Hardly. The old devil would never have admitted wearing a cheap imitation, even for caution's sake.

In all probability then, Curson decided, no one else knew of the

second ring. And no one knew yet that the master was dead, or that he, Curson, was at that moment in Haffer's room. It was still early morning; the servants were busy in the kitchen house out back. No one had seen him take the feed for the blackbirds and walk along the east grounds on his way to the woods.

Yes, he thought quickly, eagerly. Yes! In payment for thirty-one years of being a cur dog! And not bad payment, either: nearly a carat of flawless ruby for every miserable, stinking year!

Sudden abounding courage surged through his veins, and he grabbed the body's right hand and roughly forced the ring off an already stiffening finger. He held it close to his face and examined its cool beauty. Blood red it was, with a profuse interlacing of minute rutile needles forming a tiny star at their common peak. Lovely, Curson thought—

Then an idea struck him: suppose this was not the genuine stone? You fool, he cursed himself, you might very well be standing here like an idiot admiring a piece of glass!

He stepped quickly to Haffer's bureau and removed the leather box. Lifting its lid, he smiled, seeing the other ring in the left-hand section where the imitation was

kept. Of course, of course, he chided himself, this was only further proof that he had been correct in his original deduction. There would be no reason for the old man not to go to bed with the real ruby on; he could not hurt it in his sleep.

Curson grinned nervously at the ring he was holding and put it carefully into his pocket. He took the duplicate from its box and replaced the box in the bureau. Going back to the bed, he overcame the dread that crept up his spine at the thought of doing it and, quickly as possible, pushed the imitation ring onto Haffer's finger.

There, he thought, rubbing his palms on his coatfront to wipe away the touch of the man. There, now we're done, Sir Malcolm Haffer. After all these bloody years, we're done—at last!

Shoving a hand into his pocket, he clutched his treasure in trembling fingers and hurried out the patio door.

Curson walked close to the house for as far as it went, then took a diagonal path across the turf to the edge of the grounds. He did not feel altogether good until he got into the woods ringing the manor lawns. Then his spirits began to lift and the tremor in his fingers subsided to a gentle caress of the wealth they held. It's back to the

north of Ireland for me, he thought merrily—after, of course, a short visit with some discreet jewelsmith in London. Aye, back then to the good country and for the rest of his life he'd be known as *Squire* Curson.

He laughed aloud, the sound of it giving an unnatural substance to the usual solitude of the thick-treed, mossy forest he had come to know so well over the years. It was here that he had escaped the harshness of Haffer Manor, here he had found the moments of physical peace so necessary to sustain him against the ever increasing weight of his own lack of manhood, his utter uselessness to all save the despicable Haffer. And it was here that he first came to know the blackbirds.

There had been only one of them in the beginning, a sleek, pink-billed one with eyes perfectly round and piercing, and feathers as black as the moonless, starless night sky. Curson had walked into the woods and sat down on a log to eat some biscuits and cold beef he had pilfered from the kitchen. The bird had lighted nearby and stood watching him. Curson ignored it and went on eating. Presently it hopped closer. Curson broke off some crumbs of biscuit and tossed them toward the bird, but, before they had struck the ground, the

bird had taken wing and soared off. Curson grunted and went back to his dinner.

A few moments later he glanced over and saw that the bird had returned and was pecking at the crumbs. When it had eaten all that was there, Curson broke off some more and tossed them over. Again the bird took flight, startled by the sudden movement of Curson's arm. But again it came back a few moments later to eat some more. Curson made no move to frighten it after that, but merely continued his own meal.

When he was done, he stood up and, seeing the bird fly quickly off, walked over to where it had been and dropped the rest of the crumbs on the ground. As he headed back toward the manor grounds, he glanced over his shoulder and saw—as he had expected—the bird return once more to eat.

Several times after that, whenever he would go into the woods to eat, Curson would be visited by the same blackbird. For awhile it still took to wing when he raised his arm to toss crumbs, but after a few times, when Curson learned not to make sudden moves, it would merely back off a way; then finally it did not move at all, nor show any other sign of being frightened of its benefactor.

The day came when Curson was

in the manor's pantry and hit upon the idea of taking grain to the bird. He scooped a handful of barley into his pocket and later when he went to the woods, cleared a space on the ground and sprinkled it out in a little mound. Before he was halfway to the log to sit down, the bird was there, feasting. And before Curson's own meal was over, two other birds, both as black and pink-billed as the first, had joined it.

The following day a few more came, and still others after that. Soon there were twelve, fifteen, then twenty. Now, as near as Curson had been able to count, what with their incessant hopping about, there were twenty-four of them. And there was no longer any wariness between bird and man; they flocked around his feet, these wild blackbirds, just as tame pigeons might, and Curson fed them daily, always careful to move slowly, casually, never suddenly.

Nearing his log as he walked through the woods now, he stopped laughing lest the blackbirds become frightened at the strange sound. They had never heard him laugh. Neither, for that matter, had anyone else, he thought, not in the many years since he came to Haffer Estate. But that's in the past now, he told himself happily. When I'm *Squire* Cur-

son there'll be no black days for me. Just Irish whisky, Irish women and Irish song—thanks to this little pretty.

He took the ring out of his pocket and polished its ruby on his coat-front. Shine, beauty, he thought. Shine like thirty thousands sterling. Shine like a grand manor in the north of Ireland. Shine like the lone star that a boy named Jamie had once wished upon. Shine, shine, shine!

Reaching the log, Curson sat down. He held the ring up to different directions of light, watching it capture the illumination and spread it inside its magical curves. Ah, the wonder of a thing no larger than the tip of his thumb, yet worth enough to change a cur into a king.

Curson sensed some movement near him and looked around sharply. On the ground a few feet away were three blackbirds, watching him. He grinned and put the ring down on the log beside him. He took from his coat the paper bag half filled with mixed poppy seed and rye and wheat. Pouring some of it in his palm, he held out his hand and the blackbirds hopped up and began eating. Their beaks made little tingles of sharpness run up through his wrist.

"Ah, hungry, are you?" Curson whispered softly. Several other

birds lighted nearby and hopped over with their bouncy, joggy little movements. Curson reached into the bag with his other hand and sprinkled more feed on the ground for the new arrivals. Others glided in and soon there was a small horde of them around his feet, hopping over one another to get at the grains of food. Curson sprinkled another handful over them and instinctively fell into his old game of trying to count them.

"—thirteen—fourteen—fifteen—no, I counted that one—let's see, fifteen—sixteen—four there makes twenty—twenty-one—two more is twenty-three—hmmm?"

He was certain there had been an even two dozen of late, but now there seemed to be one missing. He started to look around for the absentee, then glanced slightly to his right and down at the log—and there was the missing blackbird. Hopping away toward the end of the log. All black and pink-billed. Cute as could be. With the ruby ring in its beak.

Curson's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. For the briefest instant his knees trembled. Then, purely on instinct and completely lacking in intelligent thought, he made a fatal move. He leaped like a madman at the retreating bird and landed in a sprawled fashion right on his face

as the little black thief and its twenty-three peers all took to the air in a burst of startled wing-flapping.

"Oh, no!" Curson said weakly.

He rolled over and got to his knees. Careful, he warned himself. Easy now. They'll come back. Just move slowly. There's more feed in the bag; you can lure them back.

Curson straightened slowly and looked up and around. On a limb twenty feet above his head he saw them standing in a line watching him. He smiled, as if they could interpret such an expression, and retrieved the bag of grain. Slowly he began sprinkling it liberally around on the ground, all the while his eyes darting from bird to bird, counting, searching—

And then he saw the ring. The very last bird in the line had it. Gold and shiny—and flashing blood red—the little beast was holding it firmly clenched in its beak. And all two dozen of them were staring at him in a quiet, almost ominous manner.

"Here, birdies," Curson whined softly, spreading the seed around at random. "Nice birdies—here, birdies—nice food for birdies—"

The first blackbird in line broke into flight. The second followed suit. And the third. Curson watched them climb toward the treetops, toward the sky. . . .

"No—oh, no—" Curson pleaded. The fourth, fifth, sixth—up and away.

"No, please—nice birdies—here, birdies—"

Seven, eight, nine, ten—one by one, in near precise formation, they left the limb and sought the free open air. One by one—until there were only a scant few left.

"No!" Curson screamed in rage. "You dirty, dirty little. . . !"

He grabbed a large stick from the ground and hurled it at the limb just as the next to the last blackbird soared off. The stick sailed past the last bird, missing it by three feet. The bird did not move, did not flutter or flinch, merely stayed perfectly still exactly where it was. A spark of hope came alive in Curson's heart.

"No—no—I'm sorry, little bird—please—here, birdie."

The last of the blackbirds stared coldly at Curson for a brief moment. Then, with the ring still in its beak, it flew gracefully away, following the others.

Curson stood mute, his face turning ashen grey, staring at the

airborne birds as they slowly grew smaller far above him. He was still staring at the sky a long time after they disappeared.

A few days later, all the servants gathered in the great study of Hafer Hall for the reading of the old master's will.

"—to my faithful servant and groundskeeper, James Curson," the barrister read, "for his unflinching loyalty to me over many years in the face of my consistently worsening ill temper and abuse, I leave my most cherished single earthly possession in the form of my military signet ring bearing a red ruby in a gold setting—"

Curson approached the desk where the barrister and trustee sat, and took legal title to and possession of the old man's leather box containing the other ring.

When it was over, he went to his quarters and packed his belongings. There was an early bus for London and he wanted to be sure and catch it. He only hoped the imitation ring would still be worth a hundred pounds.

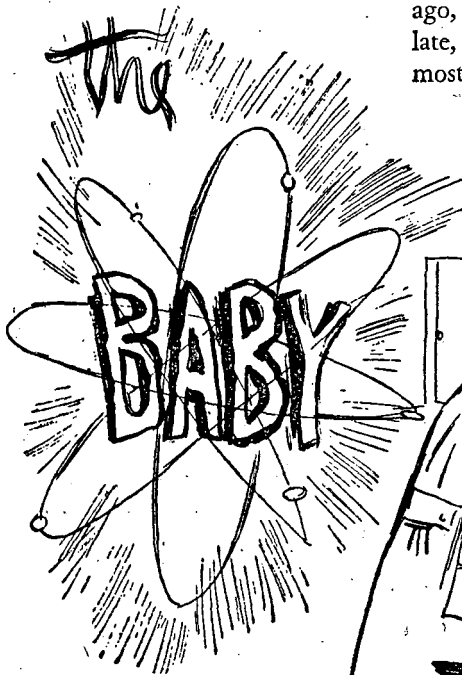


In this day of aspiring spacemen and atomic wonders, it is wise to keep in mind that "Rock-a-bye, baby" may not always be in reference to the nursery.



IT HAD to be tonight, Harry Cogan knew. He'd lost his nerve last night and the night before, but tomorrow would be Vince Miller's last day in the lab before Vince and Susan left for Europe, and so it had to be tonight.

He glanced across the wide lab to the bench where Vince was cleaning up after his last experiment, getting ready to call it a day. Everyone else in the Radiobiology Section of Barth & Embick, Research Consultants, had left hours ago, but he and Vince had worked late, as usual, and it was now almost seven.



by JONATHAN

Harry stilled the tiny tremor in his hands, dried the damp palms on the sides of his knee-length lab coat, and got to his feet. The time had come; if he hesitated a few minutes longer, it would be too late.

"Don't forget to put the baby to bed," Vince said pleasantly as Harry passed him on his way to the lounge. "Tuck the little baby into its little bed and put it in its little house."

Harry smiled. "The baby's already in bed and asleep," he said. It was a ritual, a standing reminder and reply that had been used in the lab as long as Harry could remember. The baby was a piece of radium half the size of an aspirin tablet; its bed was the small lead box in which it was kept; and its house was the lead-lined safe in which it and other radioactive materials were locked when not in use.

Just now, the baby was in its bed, but the bed itself was not in its house. It was in the right-hand pocket of Harry Cogan's trousers. It weighed two pounds, and felt like ten.

A very handsome man, Harry reflected as he entered the lounge.

Too handsome. That was Vince Miller's big trouble. Too handsome and too brilliant. Before Vince had come to work there, Harry had been engaged to Susan, and their apparent to the Chief of Section. Now, only seven months later, it was Vince Miller who was engaged to Susan, who was going to marry her next Saturday and leave with her for a honeymoon in Paris. And it was Vince Miller who had become Chief of Section.

Harry walked to the row of lockers against the far wall, trying not to think, not to feel. It was at this point that he'd had the failure of nerve last night and the night before; if he started thinking, started feeling, it might happen again. The chance of his being found out, he reminded himself, actually was almost nonexistent. Vince wouldn't notice any symptoms for at least two or three weeks, perhaps longer. By then, Vince and Susan would be in Paris, and there would be no reason for anyone to suspect that Vince's radium poisoning had been anything but accidental, the result of a risk recognized and assumed by all persons who worked with radioactive materials, as Vince and Harry did.

Once in Vince's clothing, next to his body, the baby would start him on a slow and horrible road to death. For radiogenic poisoning

CRAIG

there was no antidote, no cure. By the time Vince had carried the baby home and back again, he would be doomed.

For Vince himself, Harry had no concern. No more concern than Vince had had for Harry when he stole his fiancé and his promotion. Harry had worked for two years to win Susan, and for eight years to win the promotion, only to have Vince deprive him of both in seven short months.

It was just too bad about Vince, Harry reflected as he took the small lead box from his pocket and opened it; just too bad. Trembling, he lifted the tiny wafer of radium from the box with forceps, and with his other hand opened Vince's locker. A moment later the baby was deep in the inside breast pocket of Vince's suit coat. No matter how many times Vince might reach into that pocket, the chance that his fingers would delve all the way to the bottom had to be reckoned in the thousands.

Harry closed the locker door soundlessly, wiped the sweat from his face with a paper towel, and walked back into the lab.

"Still working on that paper on radiothermics, Vince?" he asked as he crossed to his bench.

Vince nodded, pushed back his chair, and started for the lounge. "Still at it, Harry," he said. "Maybe

I'll be able to finish it up tonight. I'm going to give it a good try, anyhow."

"Maybe it'll make you famous," Harry said.

Vince laughed. "Oh, sure," he said. "Well, good night, Harry. See you in the morning."

Harry watched the broad back beneath the white lab coat disappear through the door, and then he sank down at his bench and sat very still, listening to the grate and clang of Vince's locker being opened and shut, and then the sound of Vince's footsteps fading rapidly down the long corridor that led to the street.

When Harry reached his apartment that night, he made a pitcher of martinis, put a Bartok album on the hi-fi, and sat down in the big leather chair Susan had given him for Christmas a year ago. A lot had happened this year, he thought. A lot more was going to happen before it was out.

Sipping his martini slowly, he tried for the hundredth time to discover any possible hitch, anything that could conceivably go wrong. But there was no possible hitch, nothing that could go wrong. True, Vince Miller might wear a different suit tomorrow. But that was no problem. Harry would be attending Vince's bachelor party tomorrow night at Vince's apartment, and

with bachelor parties being what they were, finding an opportunity to visit Vince's closet and remove the baby from Vince's pocket would be simple indeed. Neither would the baby be missed tomorrow in the lab, because there was an identical baby in the next section, which Harry could 'borrow' for the day.

Before the pitcher of martinis was half empty, Harry felt better than he had at any time since Vince Miller came to work at Barth & Embick. It wasn't the alcohol, he knew; it was the feeling that he had triumphed over Vince after all, that in a few short weeks, the promotion he deserved, and someday perhaps even Susan, would be his.

Half an hour later he felt an irresistible desire to call Vince up and talk with him. It would be good to sit here with his martini, knowing that Vince was doomed and that Vince didn't know it, making small talk with him while he enjoyed the secret wonder of having been the man who had doomed him. He smiled to himself, lifted the phone from the coffee table, and dialed Vince's number.

"Hello?" Vince's voice said.

"Harry, Vince."

"Oh, hello, Harry. What's up?"

"Nothing much. I was just sitting here thinking about you and Susan."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I just wanted you to know that there are no hard feelings."

"Because of Susan and me, you mean?"

"Yes. And the promotion, too, of course. I've written them off completely, Vince. The best man won, and I'm the first to admit it."

Vince laughed, a little uncertainly. "That's good to know, Harry," he said. "You'd already told me as much, but I'm glad to hear you say so again, just the same." He paused. "Was there anything else, Harry?"

"Only that I want to wish you and Susan all the luck in the world. I mean it, Vince."

"Well, thanks, Harry. Are you . . . sure there wasn't anything else?"

"No, nothing else," Harry said. "Just felt like giving you a call, that's all."

"Glad you did," Vince said. "See you tomorrow, then?"

"Right," Harry said. "Good night, Vince." He hung up, sat smiling down at the phone in his lap for a long moment, and then put it back on the coffee table. Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow. For seven months he'd dreaded each tomorrow. Now, he could scarcely wait for tomorrow to come.

When, finally, tomorrow came, and Harry walked into the lounge,

he found he had the place entirely to himself. It was unusual for this time of morning, and he lost no time in making the most of it. Even before he exchanged his suit jacket for one of the white lab coats, he opened Vince Miller's locker, smiled when he saw that the suit coat hanging there was the same one Vince had worn yesterday, and reached down into the inside breast pocket for the baby.

It wasn't there.

Harry swore softly, probing hard into first one corner and then the other.

"Looking for something, Harry?" Vince Miller's voice asked from the doorway.

Harry felt something cold surge up through his body. It took all his strength to turn toward Vince, and when he spoke, his voice sounded like a stranger's.

"I was looking for a match," he said, forcing a grin he knew was as sickly as his lie. "I seem to have misplaced my lighter."

Vince nodded, reached into his pocket, and handed Harry a folder of matches. He laughed. "Now if you only had a cigarette, you could have yourself a smoke."

Harry laughed too. In his ears, it sounded like a death rattle. He took the pack from his shirt pocket, fumbled a cigarette to his mouth, and glanced at Vince. "Care for one,

Vince? They're your own brand."

"No, thanks," Vince said, smiling. "I guess that's what happened last night," he said. "I mean, you must have been looking for matches then, too."

Harry made two attempts to light his cigarette, failed both times, and finally put both the cigarette and the folder of matches in his pocket. "Last night?" he said.

"Yes. While you were out here in the lounge, just before I went home. I had to put something in the safe, and I noticed the baby wasn't there. You'd just got through telling me you'd put it to bed, so I thought I'd better call it to your attention."

"You mean you came . . .?" Harry began. "You came out here in the lounge, Vince?"

"Well, not quite *in* the lounge," Vince said, smiling. "I got only as far as the door. And then . . . I don't know, I guess marrying Susan and going to Paris and all has sort of put me in a fog lately, Harry. Anyhow, I got as far as the door, and then suddenly, for *some* reason, I forgot about mentioning the baby to you." His smile widened. "Odd, wasn't it?"

Slowly, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on Vince's face, Harry sank down on the bench in front of the row of lockers.

"You look a little pale, Harry,"

Vince said. "Is it the baby you're concerned about? Listen, don't let it worry you. It'll turn up, all right—probably in the last place you would expect to find it." He stood smiling down at Harry, his lips pursed, whistling almost soundlessly.

As Harry stared up at Vince in mounting horror, and his hand strayed involuntarily toward his inside jacket pocket, he could almost see the way Vince's face must have looked as he stood at the door of the lounge and watched the baby being placed in his coat. And then later, on his way out, Vince had

merely switched the baby from his own pocket to Harry's.

Vince walked to the door, then paused, and turned back toward Harry. "I appreciated your calling me last night, old man," he said. "It's good to know there aren't any hard feelings."

Harry tried to take his eyes from Vince's face, but he could not. He ran his tongue across his upper lip. It was dry and numb.

"I'll drop you a card from Paris," Vince said, turning toward the door again. "And you must write me, too, Harry. Just a line or so—to let me know how you're feeling."



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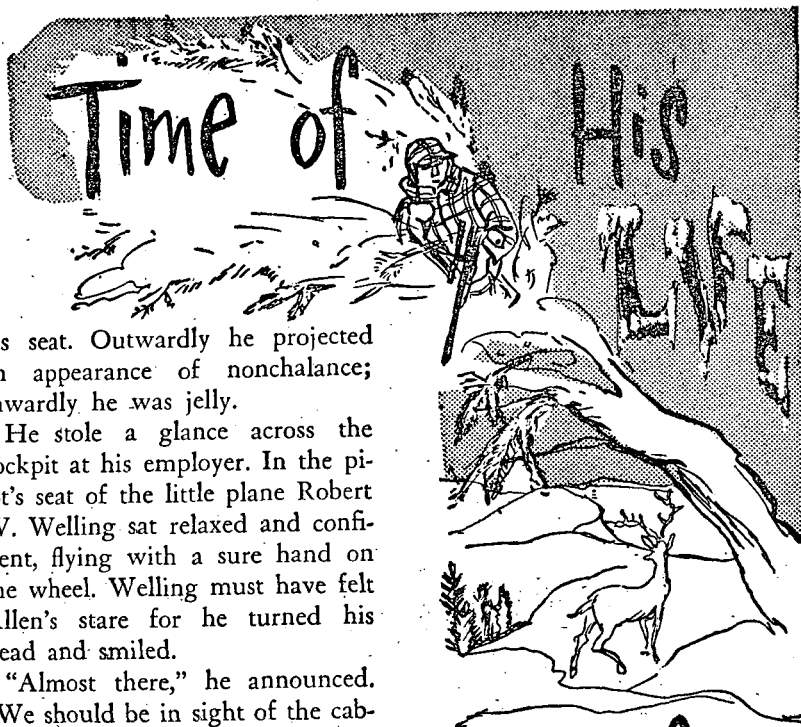
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The woods, we are told, were made for the hunters of dreams. However, other hunters also prowl the hills, and not all of these can be safely regarded as sportsmen.

ALLEN TIPTON was afraid. True, he had always been frightened of airplanes, but now it was more than the altitude that froze him to

"Best hunting site on the North River," Welling continued. "You're going to have the time of your life."



his seat. Outwardly he projected an appearance of nonchalance; inwardly he was jelly.

He stole a glance across the cockpit at his employer. In the pilot's seat of the little plane Robert W. Welling sat relaxed and confident, flying with a sure hand on the wheel. Welling must have felt Allen's stare for he turned his head and smiled.

"Almost there," he announced. "We should be in sight of the cabin in five or ten minutes. Allen felt thankful. At least he would have his feet on the ground when it came.

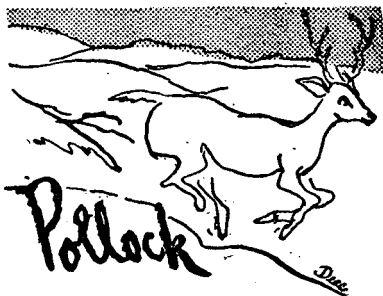
by Gene

"I'm certainly looking forward to it," Allen lied. If there was anything he definitely was not looking forward to, this was it. For five years, ever since he came to work for United Electronics, Robert W. Welling, president, had easily managed to ignore Allen Tipton. Then abruptly, without warning, without reason came a personal invitation to go hunting. Welling knew, or suspected! But Welling's invitation had to be Allen's command.

"There it is," said Welling, pointing down.

Allen forced himself to look over the side. For as far as he could see the earth was pristine white, broken only occasionally by scrubby jack pines, and cruelly gashed by the frozen river. Directly below, half hidden by a clump of spruce, he could see the cabin.

"It's large enough to accommodate five or six easily, but I didn't feel up to a big party this trip,"



explained Welling, "so I thought it best to cancel the others out."

Allen thought he could guess why, and that wasn't it.

"With a big party there's too much card playing, drinking, staying up late. . . . I just want to do a little unwinding. Things can get a little tough when you're at the top. The pack's always at your heels, trying to drag you down."

"I can imagine," answered Allen even though he couldn't. He had never been faced with such a situation.

"Hold on to your hat," Welling suggested with an apologetic laugh, "we're going down."

Allen struggled to hide his fear, but when Welling cut the throttle and the comforting roar of the engine died to a whining cough, he grabbed desperately for the sides of his seat. Fortunately Welling was busy with his landing and didn't notice, or if he did, he gave no indication. Allen tried to close his eyes and shut out the rapidly approaching ground but man's age-old fascination with death, particularly his own, forced his eyes open and kept his attention glued to the hoary blur passing beneath the wings. The plane's skis touched, sending blinding spray to either side. Allen exhaled deeply, his grip relaxed, and he smiled.

Welling taxied up close to the cabin and cut the engine.

"I'll tie her down while you unload," he said as he threw open the door. He had to bend almost double to get out of the cockpit. Tall, large boned and heavy, he still moved with a power and grace that Allen was forced to admire.

Allen scrambled awkwardly into the snow. The bitter cold forced a shudder through his body. He beat his arms against his sides and munched around to the baggage compartment.

He had been working hard for minutes when he felt watched. He looked up to see Welling standing by the wing staring at him. A gasp escaped his lips.

"Sorry I startled you," Welling said.

"Took me by surprise," Allen explained lamely.

"I'll take the butane and get it connected," said Welling. "There's no reason we shouldn't have a nice hot meal and a warm cabin tonight. You can get the bags inside."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Welling," he replied.

"Cut out that Mr. Welling. While we're hunting partners just call me Bob."

"Yes, sir, Bob. I understand."

"You can cut out the sir, too."

"Okay, Bob," Allen obeyed; he could go along.

That night, after a good hot meal, excellently prepared by Welling, they discussed United Electronics. Allen tried to be bright but he couldn't seem to concentrate.

"But we didn't come up here to talk business," Welling said eventually. "Help yourself to the bourbon. I'm going to bed." He stood, stretched, and crossed to the gunrack. He took down his rifle.

"Might as well oil this baby; may get a chance to use it tomorrow," he said as he crossed to his bedroom and closed the door.

Allen poured himself a shot of bourbon. Across the room Alice Welling smiled at him from an 8 by 10 photograph sitting on the huge granite mantel. Allen walked over and lifted his glass.

"Well, little Alice in Wonderland, here's to what we had," he said softly and downed the whisky. Alice continued to smile.

She could well afford to smile. Her husband, the president of United Electronics, was very devoted to his young and beautiful wife. He was also very generous. Only yesterday he had seen her off to Europe on an extended vacation. The same day he had suggested that Allen Tipton might

like to spend the weekend at his hunting lodge.

Allen poured a second shot and splashed in a little water. His hands shook as he raised the glass, then a strange sound stopped him mid-drink. He glanced cautiously over his shoulder. It was almost a minute before he identified the sound; Welling was snoring loudly in the next room.

Allen put down his drink. He needed sleep, not alcohol. Welling intended to kill him and make it look like an accident. If he was going to live, he would need all his wits. The man in the next room was an excellent hunter, these were his stomping grounds, and Allen had to let him make the first move; after all, he might be mistaken.

Allen took his rifle out of the rack and loaded it. He went into his room. There was no key in the door but there was a heavy bolt. He slid it closed. The room was stuffy and he went to the window to open it a crack. He was annoyed to discover that the window was closed permanently, a double thickness of plate glass with an air-pocket for insulation. He turned down the gas heater, a poor substitute for fresh air but his only recourse.

He undressed rapidly and climbed between the sheets. He

lay in the darkness thinking. He was not a coward but he was afraid. He didn't want to die, not just yet anyway. Life was sweet, he was earning a good salary as head accountant for United, he had a nice apartment, a sport car . . . and women. Not many, but enough. He had let his foot slip only once, with Welling's wife.

Allen felt as if he had just dozed off when Welling's knock awakened him.

"Rise and shine," Welling called. "I've got the bacon in the pan."

Allen groaned, sat up, and tried to shake the sleep out of his eyes. The heavy odor of frying meat seeped into his nostrils. Mustering his courage against the cold, he swung his feet to the floor, hopped quickly to the heater and turned up the flame. He dressed hurriedly in the semi-darkness and moved to the door. He tried to slide the bolt open silently but his numb fingers betrayed him. It slammed open with a bang. When he stepped out of the room Welling was looking at him with lifted eyebrows.

"Here, drink this down; it'll wake you up," he ordered after a moment, pouring steaming coffee into a cup.

Allen sucked at the bitter liquid and his head began to clear. "It's

still dark out. What time is it?" he asked.

"You've got to get into the woods early, Allen," Welling explained. "You want to get on your stand by daybreak for the best shooting."

"Yeah, I guess so," replied Allen.

"Put these eggs under your belt and you'll feel better," suggested Welling.

After breakfast they started out, the host leading off through the darkness. Allen had to stay close to keep from getting lost. He looked at the broad back ahead of him. The temptation to shoot was strong, but murder had to be a last resort. Suppose he were wrong? What if Welling didn't know about him and Alice?

Dawn was a faint grey streak in the east when Welling called a halt. "I'll leave you here," he said, "You continue along this path and when you find good cover, take it. If we haven't any luck by say, ten o'clock, we'll go back to the cabin, thaw out, and try again this afternoon." Welling walked away into the gloom. Twenty yards away he was a dim shadow, at fifty yards he was lost in the darkness.

Allen trembled. The hunt was on. He remembered vaguely reading a story once about a man who

hunted other men for pleasure. He hurried through the dawn. The trees, ghostly with snow, hovered over him. He could see his breath hanging in frosty puffs in front of his nose. He paused, turned abruptly right angle to the trail and started off at a run. He glanced hurriedly behind him and realized that he was leaving a trail an amateur could follow. Welling was obviously no beginner.

To his left and above him there was an outcropping of rock. He climbed up. When he reached the overhang he moved along carefully, staying on the bare spots where the wind had blown away the snow. Five minutes later he saw what he wanted, a fallen tree. He leaped from boulder to tree and made his way up the trunk into the branches. He hunkered down where the branches had grown the thickest and settled in to wait. He had a commanding view of the surrounding terrain.

He kept a sharp lookout in all directions. Now that he had stopped moving, a numbing cold seeped through his clothing and attacked his body. The sun was full up when Allen saw his first buck. The big fellow came stalking into the open not a hundred yards away and before he realized what he was doing he had thrown his rifle to his shoulder and begun

carefully to squeeze the trigger.

He lowered the gun slowly. What was he trying to do, be an accessory to his own murder? One shot would tell Welling exactly where he was.

The deer stalked majestically down the side of the ravine and across the valley floor. It was thirty minutes later when he heard Welling's shot. Allen glanced at his watch. Seven. He settled back to wait, muscles tense, senses alert.

The morning passed slowly. Three more buck passed within range but Allen paid them scant attention. His feet ached from the cold and he blew on his hands to keep them warm. Every few minutes he glanced at his watch. It was nine forty-five when Welling spoke from behind him.

"That's a nice stand you're in," he said, and Allen whirled in alarm. Welling was sitting on the tree trunk, his rifle pointing almost directly at Allen. "You must be a better hunter than I thought."

"It just looked like a nice spot," Allen said. How had Welling approached so close without being seen or heard?

"Did you see anything?" asked Welling.

"No, but I heard a shot," answered Allen.

"Oh, that was me. I got a shot at a running buck but it was a clean

miss. We might as well get back to the cabin and grab a bit of lunch."

Allen scrambled from his hiding place and Welling rose to his feet. On the trip back Welling managed to stay just a step or two behind him. A sense of impending doom settled over Allen and he couldn't shake it. The man was toying with him, cat and mouse. Welling wanted to see him break, suffer.

When the time came for the afternoon hunt Allen excused himself with a headache. He needed time to think. Welling accepted his excuse reluctantly, but gracefully, and went cheerfully off after his "buck".

Allen watched from the front window as Welling disappeared into the spruce. As soon as the man was out of sight he made a hurried search of the cabin. He couldn't go back into the woods, this morning proved that; he would have to kill Welling some time during the night. The question was, how? He returned to the livingroom, having discovered nothing that would help him with his problem.

Could he simply throw open the door and shoot the man as he lay in bed? The room would be dark, what if he missed? The man snored, he must be a sound sleeper. Could he sneak up on him

in the darkness and stab him with a knife?—His flesh crawled at the thought.

Allen took down his rifle, kicked a chair next to the fireplace and sat down to wait, his back to the granite mantel. He wouldn't be taken by surprise this time. He waited all afternoon. It was after dark before Welling came through the kitchen door.

"Didn't see a thing," Welling announced. He stood in the door, his rifle in the crook of his arm. "How's your headache?"

"It's better," replied Allen.

"Good, then I hope you won't mind cooking tonight. I'm beat."

"I can try," said Allen, gingerly laying down his rifle.

He fried potatoes, broiled steaks, and opened a can of string beans. Welling ate ravenously. Allen picked at his beans, keeping up a steady stream of light, nervous chatter. Welling answered politely but talked little.

"That was a fine steak," praised Welling afterwards. "Now I think I'll dash off a letter to Alice and hit the hay. I'd like to get an early start tomorrow morning and fly back to the city later. I still have hopes of getting you your first buck."

"Maybe we'll have better luck tomorrow," answered Allen.

"I hope so," replied Welling as

he rose from the table. He picked up his rifle and crossed to his bedroom. He paused at the door and gave Allen a puzzled look. "Good-night, Allen." He entered his room and Allen heard the bolt slide closed.

He took down the bourbon bottle and poured himself a double. He sipped his drink slowly, all the time watching the little crack of light escaping from under Welling's door. In a few minutes, about the time it takes to write a letter, the light went out. Twenty minutes later the sounds of regular breathing seeped through the door.

Allen tried to think. Every thought made its circuitous way through his brain, eventually to return to the bolted door. He could discover no way past it. Whatever he did it must look like an accident. If he fired the cabin Welling might escape. Besides, he might freeze to death himself before being rescued. He certainly couldn't fly out in the plane. No, there must be a better way. He shivered, cold. He walked over to the heater and leaned down to turn up the flame.

He hesitated, fascinated he stared at the fire. Instead of turning up the gas he cut it off. He went into his room and cut off the heater there. He walked quiet-

ly to the kitchen door and let himself out into the night.

A new moon helped him find the butane tank on the ground beside the back door. He reached down and cut off the gas for two seconds, just long enough for the flame to go out in Welling's heater. He turned the gas back on and returned to the house. He walked softly to Welling's door. The snores were joined with another sound, gas escaping from open jets. Allen carried the bourbon bottle to bed with him. That would be his heat for the night.

He lay in bed and sipped on his bottle; he could hear faint snores and escaping gas through the wall. If the odor of the butane didn't wake Welling, he had it made, the perfect crime. Tomorrow morning he would discover his employer dead in his bed, accidentally killed by a blockage in his gas heater. He would sit tight until rescued and that would be that.

He took another drink. He could still hear the regular snores from the next room. He tried to ignore the sounds but they seemed to grow louder. He put his pillow over his head; the sound penetrated into his brain. He sat up. What did he care about Welling anyway? Hadn't he been out to kill him? Let him stew in his own

juice! But in the end Allen could stand it no longer. He leaped from his bed and ran into the kitchen, grabbed up an axe, ran to Welling's door and swung. On his fourth chop the door swung open and butane swirled around him.

He backed into the livingroom and allowed the gas to escape. He covered his face with his handkerchief before entering the room. Welling was lying on the bed. He looked as if he were sleeping peacefully, but there were no snores. Allen covered the dead man's head with the sheet.

He was about to leave the room when he noticed the letter on Welling's desk:

Dearest Alice,

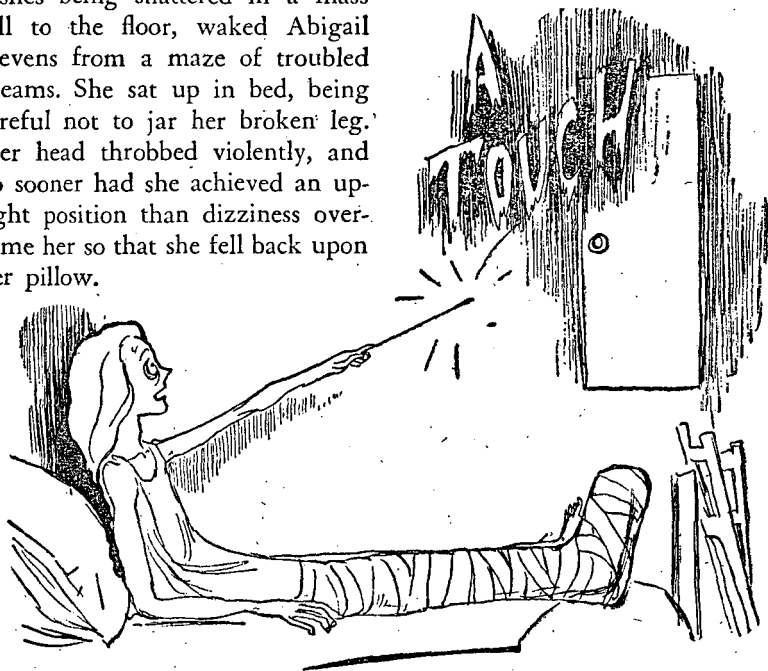
You were right, my dear. The Tipton fellow is the one for the vice presidency. We're up here at the cabin as you suggested, and I've had a chance to observe him first hand. Allen's scared to death of planes and he's not a very good hunter, but he's certainly game for anything. He may never go hunting again in his life, but when the time comes to make a tough decision I'm betting my job that he can do it.

I miss you very much, and I wish. . . .

But the rest is not important.

Despite our present day immersion in scientific gadgetry, we respond emotionally to all sorts of phenomena that remain outside our jargon of proof. For some persons, this may be a very fortunate incongruity.

A CRASH from downstairs, as of dishes being shattered in a mass fall to the floor, waked Abigail Stevens from a maze of troubled dreams. She sat up in bed, being careful not to jar her broken leg. Her head throbbed violently, and no sooner had she achieved an upright position than dizziness overcame her so that she fell back upon her pillow.



They drugged me again, she realized bitterly. Spent by weeks of terror and physical pain, she lay weakly, eyes closed, trying not to think, not to feel. In the beginning she had wept and pleaded wildly, fervently promising all she possessed in return for her free-

dom. Their response had been laughter and jeers, for they knew Bella would inherit everything when she died. That would be soon. They were only waiting for her thirtieth birthday, when she would come into the considerable estate left her by her grandfather.

When she heard footsteps outside her room, Abigail gathered her remaining strength and began to breathe audibly with a measured rhythm, opening her mouth a little to add to the effect of deep slumber. A key turned in the lock and the door opened. They crossed the room and stood together beside her bed.



"Still dead to the world," Ralph said complacently. "She doesn't give us much trouble lately, does she? Goes out like a light and sleeps around the clock. We should have thought of it sooner."

"I think you gave her an overdose," Bella said testily. "Do you want her to die before July eleventh and have Princeton get the old man's money?" Bella was leaning so close that a stray wisp

of her hair brushed Abigail's forehead and it was with difficulty that she kept her eyelids from twitching. "Look how thin and blueish she is, Ralph," Bella said now, and there was a note of alarm in her sharp voice. "I hadn't noticed before. Maybe we'd better lay off the dope for awhile and feed her more often. It's still only May, you know."

"Whatever you think best," Ralph said agreeably. Abigail could remember when the married life of Ralph and Bella had been a constant struggle for supremacy, and she had felt pity for her half-sister for being tied to so tyrannical and overbearing a spouse as Ralph Stoddard. But nowadays Ralph was sickeningly deferential in all things. "Just as you say, Bella." "You decide, dear." "If that's what you want, it's what I want, baby."

And probably all the time he's plotting to put her out of the way, too, and have all the money for himself, Abigail thought suddenly, although the idea hadn't occurred to her before. In that case Bella hadn't much longer to live than she herself had. Perhaps they would meet in the next world soon after July eleventh, and she would say to Bella, Well, what else could you expect? As ye sow ye shall reap, and he who lives by the sword

must some day die by the sword.

Abigail continued to lie very still and breathe as if in deep sleep, but she turned this idea of Bella's early demise over and over in her mind. It was the first thing that had given her pleasure in nearly two months. It also gave her a strange sense of excitement, and—for no logical reason—a faint feeling of hope. Perhaps I gave up too easily, she thought now. The shock of Bella's perfidy threw me off balance, and breaking my leg was the last straw and rendered me completely vulnerable. I didn't even try to find a way out.

As if her thought had suddenly transferred itself to her half-sister, Bella said worriedly to Ralph, "It has been a comfort, keeping her under most of the time. We'll have to watch her constantly if we let her stay awake."

"You worry too much," Ralph said easily. "What could she do, with a broken leg? You can be sure she wouldn't try to jump again, even if she got the chance. And she can't even manage her crutches decently. With the door locked and her windows painted shut, she's here till they carry her out feet first."

"Yes, I know," Bella said. "Still . . . oh, I realize this sounds silly under the circumstances, but I've always been a little bit afraid of

Abigail. Even when we were small. She was different from the rest of us. I thought she had some power, some gift—well, a touch of magic, I guess."

"That's because she was older than you," Ralph said. "Little kids often feel that way."

"No-o, it wasn't that," Bella said. "She used to say odd things, predict things you'd think couldn't possibly come true, and then they did."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, she was always entering contests, in newspapers and radio programs, and she would say quite calmly that she would win first prize. And she did. Once she won a huge box filled with hundreds of candy bars, and was the envy of the entire neighborhood. Father was very proud of her and called her 'The Brain'. Mother said Abigail wasn't any smarter than the rest of us, but she was lucky. Abigail said it wasn't either brains or luck. She said it was just that she wanted the prizes more than anyone else did, and so she willed them to come to her."

"It could have been a combination of brains and luck, but it certainly wasn't magic," Ralph said.

Bella said, "She looks terrible. Except for that noisy breathing I'd think she was dead. Come, help me rouse her—and I hope we can."

Abigail let them work over her for a long time before she gave any signs of reviving. When at last she opened languid eyes, she saw that Bella and Ralph had had a bad fright. That pleased Abigail and gave her added hope. She vowed to herself to shake off her defeatist attitude and give the murderous wretches a run for their money. *Their money? My own money!* she thought with a touch of wry humor.

The next morning, after finishing a better-than-usual breakfast, Abigail said softly, as if speaking her thoughts to herself, "Lousos will be visiting me any day now. She always comes around the end of May or the first of June."

Bella, half-way to the door with the breakfast tray, wheeled around, a startled expression on her sharp face.

"Who's Lousos?" she demanded.

"My roommate at college, and a very dear friend," Abigail said.

"Well, she won't be visiting here this year," Bella said decisively. "I'll write her today and explain that you've had a complete mental breakdown and can't see anyone outside the family."

"Oh, that won't keep Lousos away," Abigail said confidently. "She will feel she should be with me if I'm in that bad shape."

"Then she's as stupid as her

name," said Bella, who had never inconvenienced herself for another human being in her life. "Who ever heard of anyone named Lousos? And how do you spell it, anyway?"

Abigail spelled it. "It was her mother's maiden name," she said. "Her mother came of a very distinguished family."

Bella, whose family was in no way distinguished, and who had always felt bitter toward Abigail for having a rich grandfather, snorted derisively as she left the room with the tray, slamming the door behind her.

Abigail knew that wasn't the end of the subject, and she didn't want it to be. Sure enough, in a very short time Bella was back, bearing stationery and a pen.

"Now, you write a letter to this Lousos person and tell her she can't come this year. Tell her you've been very sick and your sister and brother-in-law are taking you abroad right away to see a famous doctor."

Abigail shook her head weakly. "I can't write a sensible letter today. I feel queer, and my mind wanders."

"So much the better," Bella said. "If you wrote too good a letter, this Lousos might think you're all right. Just say what I told you to, and anything else that comes to

mind to fill up a page or so. It doesn't matter what the rest sounds like. Get at it, so I can mail it when I go to the supermarket. I don't want her trying to barge in just because we didn't head her off in time."

Abigail also wanted to get the letter off as quickly as possible. Ralph was out of the house at the moment, and she knew it would be safer for her if he didn't see the letter. Ralph's mind was quicker than Bella's. His intellect was not of a high order, but he possessed a certain animal cunning that stood him in good stead against any adversary. She was just finishing the note when Bella returned, dressed for her walk to the nearby store. Bella took it from her and read it carefully.

Dear Lousos:

I've been ill for a long time and my mind wanders. So my sister Jerene and her husband are going to take me to a doctor overseas. We are leaving right away and might be gone a long time. I shall miss your visit very much, Lousos, for I always look forward to it.

There is a big bird on the lawn and I think he is singing Lousos, Lousos, Lousos!

How I wish you were here.

Affectionately,

Abigail.

"Who's Jerene?" Bella demanded.

"Jerene?" Abigail looked vague. "I don't think I know any Jerene, do you?"

"Oh, never mind," Bella said. "If you don't remember your own sister's name, she'll know you're off your rocker. And this bird business: you couldn't hear a bird on the lawn away up here with the windows shut tight, no matter what it sang. And it wouldn't be 'Lousos, Lousos, Lousos!' Well, so much the better. You did just fine, Abigail."

Smiling grimly to herself, Bella folded the letter into the envelope, sealed and stamped it. Abigail scarcely breathed until, watching from the window, supported by her crutches, she saw Bella drop the letter in the corner mailbox and continue on her way to the supermarket. She had been so afraid Ralph might return before the letter was safely mailed, and ask to see it.

Two days later the Misses Meadows, Catherine and Louise, were enjoying the late-spring sunshine on the east side of the old-fashioned porch of their comfortable house in a suburb of Minneapolis, when the postman delivered a letter to Louise.

"It's from Abigail, praise be!" she

exclaimed, and eagerly tore the envelope. "I've written her several times this spring without getting a word in reply, and that isn't like her at all."

She read the letter, then read it again, a puzzled crease between her eyebrows.

"Cathy, this is the strangest note," she said. "Poor Abigail must be entirely out of her mind to write this way." She handed the letter to Catherine.

Catherine also read and reread the peculiar epistle.

"Why does she call you Lousos? I mean, is it some joke you have between you—something like that?"

"She never called me that before," Louise said. "She always calls me Lou. Also, her half-sister's name is Bella, and Abigail never referred to her as her sister. They weren't friendly, and kept out of each other's way, which wasn't difficult with Bella living in California and Abigail in New York. Oh, poor Abigail—whatever her illness is, it has certainly affected her mind. I'm so worried about her, Cathy. I wish she'd written earlier. Even if I started for New York today, I'd probably miss her. She says they're leaving right away."

Catherine was reading the letter again.

"Look, Lou, you don't suppose this is written in a sort of—of *code*, do you? That Abigail's in trouble, and is asking for help, but has to be secretive about it because she's sick and helpless and can't keep her half-sister from reading her mail?"

"Cathy, what an idea!"

"Well, look at the letters she has added to your name, not once, but six times: s, o, and s. Lou, that's a cry for help—S.O.S.—Send Out Succor!"

"Oh, Cathy, what a fantastic idea! Why, Abigail has the most devoted housekeeper in the world, who's been in the family for years. Abigail would give her letters to Nelly to mail, and turn to Nelly for whatever she needed. Not to Bella, certainly."

"Perhaps Nelly has died, or the half-sister dismissed her when Abigail was too ill to assert herself," Cathy persisted.

Louise was silent for a moment, turning her sister's words carefully over in her mind. Then she shook her head.

"You see too much television, Cathy," she said. "If it were only the extra letters poor Abigail has added to my name, I might give some credence to your idea that she's in trouble. But the whole letter is preposterous, and so unlike Abigail. She's definitely unbal-

anced, to forget Bella's name. Besides, in her right mind she would never go abroad with Bella and her husband. She actually loathed Ralph Stoddard, and even pitied Bella for having married him, much as she disliked Bella. Oh, poor Abigail!"

Louise got up hurriedly and went into the house, and Catherine did not follow her, knowing she wanted to be alone. But Abigail's letter had been left behind, and Catherine read it for the fourth time.

Somewhere in the back of her mind the name Jerene rang a faint bell. Where had she heard it before? It was not a usual name, and she was sure she had never personally known anyone who bore it. Still, it seemed to have some meaning for her. . . .

After a time she gave herself a brisk mental shake. Lou was probably right, and Abigail's letter was merely the product of a deranged mind. After all, Abigail was Lou's friend. Lou was in a better position to form an opinion in the situation than she herself could possibly be.

She put the letter back in its envelope and turned her mind resolutely to other matters. After a time she went into the house and began energetically to straighten the pantry shelves, although they were very neat and well arranged

as they were. She could hear the sound of weeping from Louise's room, and when she had withstood it as long as she could, she went upstairs and knocked at her sister's door. Louise was lying across her bed, sobbing softly and clutching something in her hand — a key through which was threaded a crumpled blue ribbon.

"Abigail and I exchanged door-keys the day we graduated from college," she explained brokenly. "She gave me this and said, 'My home is your home, Lou, and whether I'm there or not I want you always to make use of it when you're in the vicinity.' So then I gave her a key to our house, too, and said I hoped she would use it often."

"Well, and so she has," Catherine said briskly.

"But I'm afraid all that is behind us now," Louise said. "Oh, poor, poor Abigail!" She broke into renewed weeping.

Catherine reached toward her sister, intending to give her a loving pat, but in her state of agitation she struck the bedside lamp and toppled it over on the pillow, just missing Louise's head. Louise, startled, sat up quickly. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but did not speak. Instead, she and Catherine stared at each other in sudden enlightenment, then

spoke together, saying the same thing: "Well, Jerene!"

"I'd entirely forgotten," Louise said softly.

"So had I, although I knew the name had some sort of significance," Catherine said. "When you came back home after college you used to say that whenever anyone accidentally bumped into you or hurt you in any way. Jerene Something-or-other . . . wasn't she a murderess?"

"Jerene Watson. She was a cleaning woman, right there in our college town. She worked at night in office buildings. Every once in a while they would find the body of someone who had worked late, slumped over a desk, his head bashed in. Or her head. She killed three men and a woman before anyone suspected her. She was such a meek-appearing little creature. When they caught her, she said she had nothing against the people she murdered. She just felt she had to have some excitement in her humdrum life. Her name became a sort of by-word among the girls at college. When any of us got hit by a door or had her foot stepped on, she'd say scathingly to the offender, 'Well, Jerene!' As if she had narrowly escaped being murdered."

Abigail asked her half-sister, "Bella, do you ever read the Bi-

ble?" She did not look at Bella as she spoke, but stared intently at the wall on the far side of the room.

"No, I don't," Bella answered shortly, "and if this is the start of an appeal to my better nature, save your breath. You read the Bible, and where has it got you? Right now I'm in much better shape than you are."

"Oh, the Bible is a very interesting book, Abigail said dreamily. "I should think even an absolute atheist would find it so. It is filled with little-known truths that can open up fascinating vistas of thought. Most of us go through life closing our eyes to everything but the obvious, when if we only reached out and let our imaginations run free, and had the faith to match, we could learn to grasp all the beautiful things that now elude us because we stupidly limit our reach. We could turn miracles into everyday happenings."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I'm sure you don't, either," Bella said in a hard voice. But she felt uneasy and, reluctant as she was to pursue this conversation with Abigail, she had a nervous feeling that perhaps she'd better. So she asked sarcastically, "What beautiful miracles have you performed recently?"

Abigail did not answer, apparently not having heard the ques-

tion. She sat staring wide-eyed at the wall, an expectant smile curving her lips, her breath coming in quick, excited little gasps. Seeing her so gave Bella a distinct chill along the length of her spine.

"What are you staring at?" she asked, her tone between fear and petulance. She had to repeat the question twice before Abigail roused herself to answer.

"Bella," she said softly, then, "when you look at that wall, what do you see?"

"I see a wall, of course," Bella said, "a plain bedroom wall, painted beige. That's all I see, and that's all you see, too."

"Oh, no, Bella. I see something else. . . . A door. I've been working at it for weeks, and there it is. I said to myself, *If I want a door in that wall, and want it hard enough, I will look up one day and find it there.* And I did, just now. One moment there was a plain bedroom wall, as you said. But while I looked, willing a door to be there, the door appeared."

"You're crazy," Bella said angrily, "or else you're trying to drive me crazy. There's no door there and you know it."

Abigail looked at her pityingly. "Poor Bella, you limit yourself so. All the lovely things will forever be out of your reach."

Bella hurried downstairs to re-

port this conversation to Ralph, who laughed heartily as if at a great joke.

"I wish you wouldn't stay away so much," Bella said accusingly. "I'm afraid, all alone with her."

"Baby, be your age," Ralph said. "What is there to be afraid of? Nobody could be more helpless than Abigail. I can't stay home all the time. I'm the kind of guy who has to keep circulating. But there's no reason why you should be cooped up, either. Just make sure everything's locked, and then go out and stay as long as you please. We only have to stick around a few weeks more, anyway. After that, plenty of money and the wide world to spend it in!" He spread his arms in a wide gesture, and his face beamed with joyous anticipation.

"I guess you're right, and I certainly need a change," Bella said. "I think I'll make the rounds of New York's fancy jewelry stores this afternoon, and get some ideas of what to buy when I have the price. I've always longed for a pear-shaped diamond pendant on a platinum chain. A big diamond. About five carats. And a lot of other jewels."

Bella spent a pleasant, unhurried afternoon in the Fifth Avenue shops, and reached home later than she'd intended. When she entered the front door and stepped into the

hall, she heard Ralph's restless footsteps pacing the living room and knew he was impatient for his dinner. *Well, let him wait*, Bella thought with vindictive satisfaction. She knew he wouldn't complain. Ralph could get his hands on the money only through her. Feeling smug and important, she called an airy hello as she went upstairs to change her clothes.

A moment later she came flying down again as if shot from a cannon, gasping his name in a hoarse voice, her face a plaster-white mask of terror.

"What on earth?" Ralph demanded. "You look as if—"

"She's gone!" Bella shrieked wildly. "Abigail—she's disappeared! I unlocked her door and stepped in, just to check, and she isn't there!"

"Nonsense," Ralph said sharply. "Of course she's there. Where else could she be?" But he started up the stairs, taking them two at a time, Bella following at his heels. Together they hurried into the large bedroom, flooded with light now from the setting sun. The door to the adjoining bath was open, and from where they stood they could look into every inch of both rooms. Abigail was definitely not there.

Suddenly Bella pointed a shaking finger at one of the walls, and be-

gan to cry and babble incoherently.

"Look, look—her crutches! There was a door, just as she said, and she went through it. I couldn't see it, but it was there. She didn't need the crutches after she went through the door. She walked right to it, and then left them there."

Ralph looked where she pointed, and saw the crutches lying, crossed, on the floor close to the baseboard.

"She was right, don't you see?" Bella babbled on. "She saw the door and went through it. Ralph, where do you think she is now? Ralph?"

Ralph turned to her with an ugly oath, his face livid with rage. "You tell me," he said harshly. "I'm not buying this fairy tale about a door in the wall. I know you cooked the whole thing up. You thought you'd pull the wool over my eyes, didn't you? Telling me those tales about her supernatural powers, and then spiriting her away this afternoon while I was gone? If you think you're going to freeze me out and keep all the money for yourself, you're as crazy as Abigail. All right, now—start talking!"

"Ralph, I don't know where Abigail is. I swear it! I left the house right after you did, and she was here then. I locked all the doors when I went—"

He struck her a blow that sent her reeling against the wall, and

when she began to scream shrilly his hands closed about her throat.

"Now let's hear what really happened. One more lie and it'll be the last you'll ever get a chance to tell."

Bella struggled wildly in his grasp. She tried frantically to reason with him, but she wasn't saying what Ralph wanted to hear. In spite of the difficulty under which she attempted to communicate with him, Ralph understood enough to know that she was sticking to her preposterous tale of an invisible door in the wall, and as his rage mounted his hands continued to tighten around Bella's throat. At last, exhausted, she fell limply to the floor.

Ralph stood for a moment looking down at her lifeless body. Then he lunged heavily into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Gone, all gone!" he wept. He wasn't referring to Bella. It was the lost fortune he mourned. It had come so close, almost into his eager, itching hands, and now it had passed forever beyond his reach. He would have to find a job and go back to work, always being an underling, taking orders from smarter, more capable men, to the end of his days. Completely undone by the combination of rage, frustration, and self-pity, he howled like a child in his tantrum.

He did not hear the doorbell, nor the tread of feet to the room where he sat, with Bella's inert body on the floor beside his chair. It was the weight of a heavy hand on his shoulder that made him spring to his feet in alarm and face three men who stood before him.

"We're from police headquarters," said the spokesman. "We came on complaint of Miss Abigail Stevens, to remove you and your wife from her home, to charge you with holding her prisoner, denying her the services of a doctor, and plotting against her life. But it is evident that there is an even more serious charge against you now. . . ."

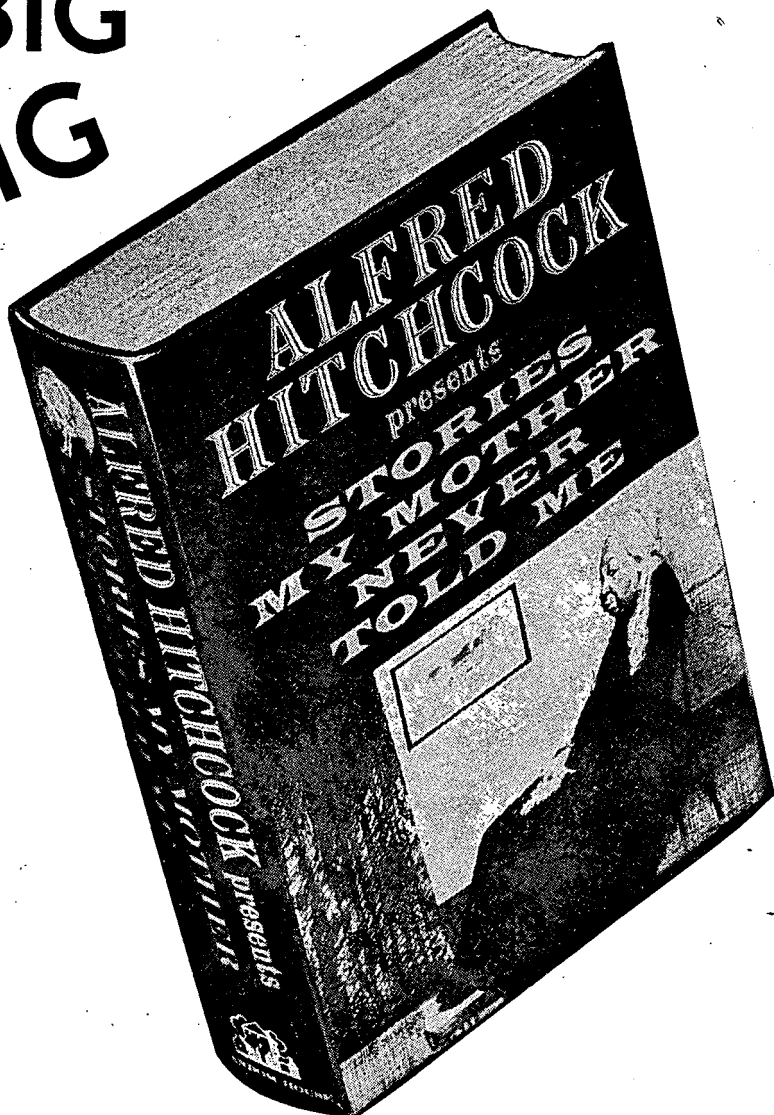
Ralph Stoddard listened dully. When they fastened the handcuffs upon his wrists and gave him a forward shove, he went meekly.

But as he was about to leave the room he turned his head and gazed curiously at the expanse of wall above the crossed crutches. He had been mistaken about Bella. She would never have set Abigail free. And Abigail was free, since she had sent the police. But how could she have made her escape? Was there an invisible door, after all? Did Abigail indeed have a touch of magic, as Bella had feared?

As he shuffled along with the policemen, he shook his head slowly in complete bafflement.

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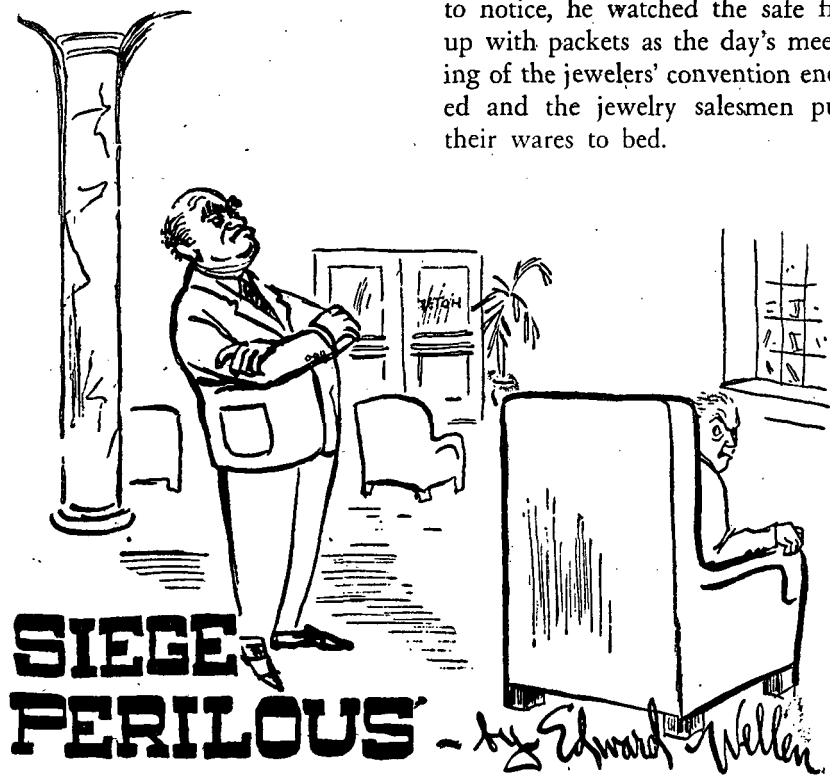
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THIS OFFER is good in any country which has mail service.

This brief commentary reveals more about the condition of modern banditry than can often be said in whole volumes.

ALLAN MOORE strode into the hotel lobby as though he belonged there. He carried a glossy-new dispatch case. The case was empty, but he held it as if it bore a burden of crucial documents. He took possession of a chair that gave him a

good, though not too obvious, view of the hotel safe. He set the dispatch case on his knees. He waited. Frequent unseeing glances at his wristwatch established that he was waiting to keep a momentous appointment. Without seeming to notice, he watched the safe fill up with packets as the day's meeting of the jewelers' convention ended and the jewelry salesmen put their wares to bed.



A man came out of the elevator like a ball of gum from a slot machine, nodded familiarly to guests and bellhops, and headed Moore's way. He stopped short, frowning. He started up again but veered out of Moore's field of vision. Moore waited a moment, then looked around as though seeking the nearest ash tray.

Behind his chair, and to one side, the man stood, chins telescoped, crossed arms resting on round chest, palms cupping elbows, eyes gazing piercingly at Moore.

The unsmiling regard made Moore's flesh creep. Moore lit a cigarette, forcing his hands steady. The dispatch case slid forward. He raised his legs on vibrating toes to keep it from falling off. Out of the tail of his eye he saw the man trade a meaningful look with a passing bellhop. The bellhop cast a glance Moore's way and went out of sight, with a wink at the man and a grin. Moore faced forward, his ears burning.

Trying not to show he was doing so, he scanned himself from the shining toes of his shoes to the tight knot in his tie. He couldn't spot anything wrong with the way he looked. He turned casually as though seeking to check his wrist-watch against the hotel clock. The man stood still staring at him.

The man seemed sort of old to be

a hotel dick. But that didn't have to mean anything. Moore was new to crime, and its obverse law, but he understood lots of hotel dicks were ex-cops working part-time to eke out civil service pensions. Even so, the old guy didn't look like Moore's idea of a hotel dick. But then that was part of his job, wasn't it now? Care to be in the background. Then why was the old guy making it so plain he had his eye on Moore? But that too was part of their job, wasn't it now? Care not to be too far in the background to help forestall wrongdoing.

Minutes had passed with no more packets going into the safe. If Moore was to move it should be now. The longer he waited, the more he would lose of the keyed-up feeling he needed to pull this off quickly and smoothly. Moore would take the old man before he could unfold his fat arms, march him behind the desk. Moore grew cold. He sat still. His mind raced.

Only one reason for the old man to be careless of showing his vigilance. He'd already notified the law. Hadn't that exchange of looks with the bellhop been the tip-off?

But what had given Moore away? The gun under Moore's arm seemed suddenly to shout its presence.

Moore's vision of himself making off with his dispatch case full of diamonds carbonized like cigarette

smoke. The cops were on their way, would be all around any instant. The old guy was probably sadistically hoping he'd try to shoot it out so he'd get the hot seat.

He would get up casually. He rose stiffly, caught the dispatch case in time. He would walk out as if he had no more time to waste waiting for someone so unbusiness-like as to be late for a momentous appointment. In spite of himself, he hurried his step as though he himself were late for some appointment. He had given up the stickup, but they could still get him on a charge of carrying a concealed weapon. He thought he could hear sirens. Any instant now, before he could cross the moat, the drawbridge would go up. By the time he reached the revolving door he was in a sweating panic. He spun

out on the sidewalk and ran to get to the other side.

Brakes screamed. The dispatch case whirled into the air.

In anger and triumph the old man made himself comfortable. He found the seat still warm. For the moment he was too churned up to give the life of the lobby the attention it deserved. Inside this microcosm, with its tense hush of comings and goings, the world outside was always a vague chaos that did not count. He had not heard the scream outside in the street or the police whistle, and even when the ambulance siren sounded in its lost cause he did not hear that, his mind still too full of triumph and anger.

He sucked a lozenge, settling himself in his accustomed seat.

"Nerve of the young fool, taking my chair."

~~~~~

*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:*

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*Most sincerely,*

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*Sherman Oaks, California*

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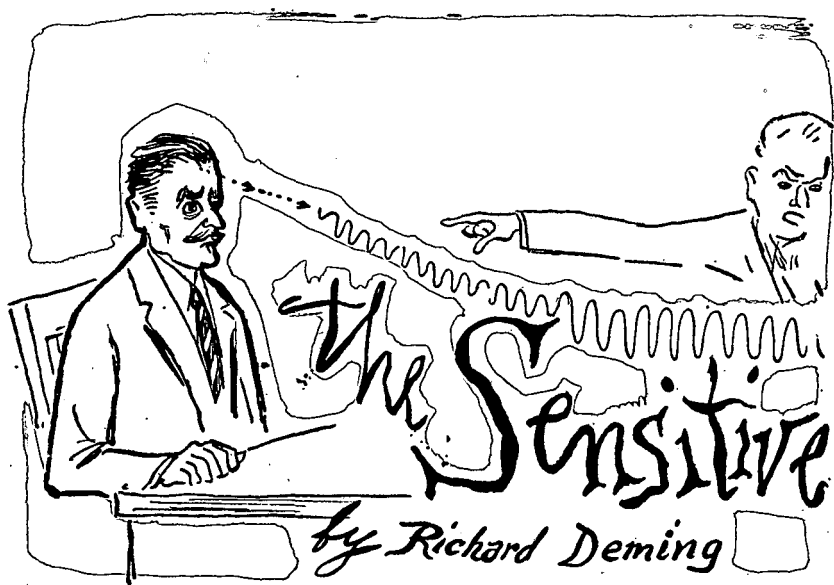
*When we speak of one who possesses a sensitive mind, we are ordinarily referring to a quality of intelligence. Occasionally though, we may find more apt usage for the phrase.*

**T**HE PANEL members had been instructed not to discuss the case among themselves while waiting their turns to be called to the stand and questioned to determine their suitability to sit as jurors. But since the whole thing had been in the papers, they all no doubt had already formed opinions.

Plump, middle-aged Jennifer Hamilton was convinced of Jonas Will's guilt long before the bailiff

stuck his head into the panel room and called, "Miss Jennifer Hamilton."

As she followed the bailiff up the hallways to the courtroom door, and then the length of the courtroom to the stand, she forgot the defendant completely. With the gaze of every spectator on her, she could think of nothing but whether her hair was still in place and whether the long wait for her turn had allowed her new spring



suit to wrinkle. She wished desperately that she had possessed enough sense to ask permission to go to the ladies' room and check her appearance in the mirror before she was called.

When she took the stand after being sworn in, she held her knees tightly together and primly tugged her skirt down over them. It was the first time in her forty-four years that she had ever faced an audience.

The district attorney was a red-faced man of middle age with a hoarse but kindly voice.

He said, "State your name, please."

"Jennifer Hamilton," she said in a nearly inaudible voice.

"Will you speak a little louder, please, so the judge can hear you?"

"Jennifer Hamilton," she managed more distinctly.

"Is that Miss or Mrs.?"

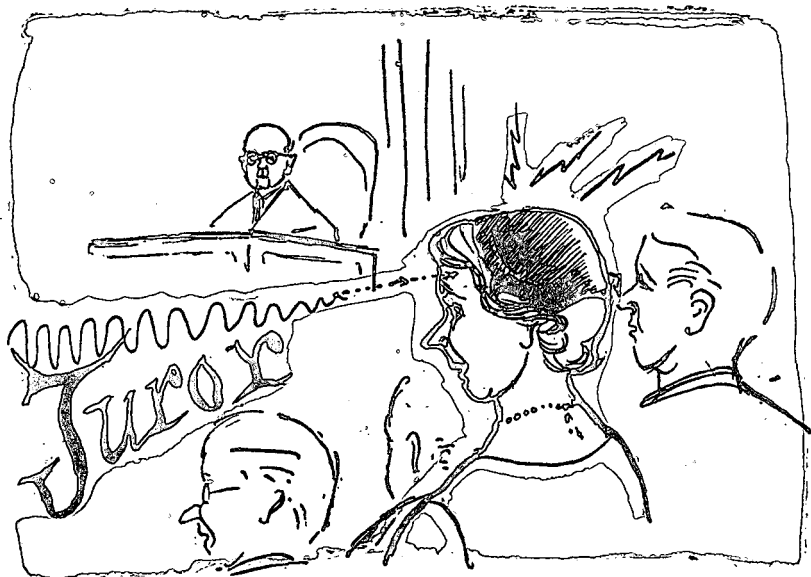
"Miss," she said. "I have never been married."

"What is your work, Miss Hamilton?"

"I am a bookkeeper for the Bond Trust Company."

"How long have you been a resident of New York City?"

She had to think about that, and was appalled to realize how long it had been since she had come to the city bubbling with youth and ready for adventure. Now the bubble of youth was gone and she had yet to find the



hoped-for adventure. Perhaps she hadn't been as lucky as she thought when she obtained a job with the Bond Trust Company on the day she arrived in town. For all the adventure to be found in a bookkeeping department that employed only women, she might as well have remained in the small Missouri town where she was born.

"Twenty-five years," she said in a low voice.

"Will you speak louder, please?"

"Twenty-five years," she repeated defiantly.

"Hmm. Now, Miss Hamilton, you are aware that this is to be a trial for first-degree murder, and if convicted, the accused may be sentenced to death in the electric chair. Do you have any religious or moral objections to capital punishment which might influence your verdict?"

"No, sir."

"Are you personally acquainted with or related to the accused, Miss Hamilton?"

Jennifer glanced over at the defense table for the first time. Jonas Will was a tall, lean, personable man of about fifty-five, with wavy, prematurely white hair which contrasted sharply with his healthily tanned features. He was much more handsome than his newspaper pictures. "Why, how

distinguished he looks," she thought with astonishment. She had expected to see someone more sinister. Could a gentleman of such obvious breeding be a wife murderer?

"No," she said.

"Were you acquainted with the deceased Mrs. Edna Will, or with any of her or the accused's relatives, or in any way do you have a relationship with either the accused or the deceased, however distant, which might prejudice your verdict?"

"I never heard of them before I read the newspapers."

That brought on the next question. "This case, unfortunately, has received considerable publicity. As a result of what you have read or heard, have you formed any opinion of the accused's innocence or guilt which might make you unable to render an impartial verdict?"

Jennifer glanced at the defendant again. He was gazing at her intently, and there was something deep in his clear gray eyes which unexpectedly touched her. She was surprised at how honest and straightforward his gaze seemed. There was nothing pleading in it, yet he seemed to be saying to her, "My life may be in your hands. I ask no favors, but I am entitled to a fair judgment, unbiased by what

you have read or heard of me."

She said quite honestly, "I would not let what I already know of the case influence me. I am sure I could render a verdict based entirely on the evidence presented here." She was a little surprised at her own words, for ten minutes earlier she had been convinced of the man's guilt. Now, after one look at him, she suddenly had an open mind.

The district attorney seemed pleased by her answer. He had only one further question. He asked if she were acquainted with, or had ever had professional dealings with either himself or the defense attorney. When she said no, he turned her over to the counsel for the defense.

The defense attorney was a thin, suave man named Martin Bowling.

Approaching her with a smile, he said, "Miss Hamilton, you are an attractive, well-groomed woman of considerable charm. Yet you say you have never been married. I can hardly believe you have never been asked. I hope I'm not touching an old wound, but was there, perhaps, a tragedy in your life at one time? Perhaps a deceased lover you have never forgotten?"

As a matter of fact Jennifer never had been asked to marry, but

she wasn't going to admit that. Blushing furiously, she said, "No, he didn't die," leaving the implication that there had been a lover she was unable to forget, but something other than death had parted them.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you," Bowling said in a kindly voice. "I merely wanted to make sure your single state doesn't indicate a general dislike of men. You are not then, I take it, what is generally known as a 'man-hater'?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I like men very much. I mean—" Her blush deepened and she paused in confusion.

"Mr. Right just hasn't yet come along, eh?" the lawyer said with a charming smile. He turned to the district attorney. "Miss Hamilton is acceptable to the defense if she is to the prosecution."

"No objection," the district attorney said. "You may step down and take seat number eight in the jury box, Miss Hamilton."

Jonas Will was charged with the premeditated murder of his wife in order to obtain control of her assets. The state took a full week to build its case, and it was a damning one. Through a series of witnesses and documentary exhibits the prosecution established the following series of events:

Jonas Will had married wid-

owed Edna Barnes in New York City the previous December and the couple had set up housekeeping in a brownstone house his bride owned in upper Manhattan. A week after the wedding Will appeared at his wife's bank with a power of attorney and closed out her account of some twenty-four hundred dollars. The following day he disposed of some stocks and bond in her name, totalling an additional three thousand dollars. He then put the house up for quick sale and let it go for seventy-five hundred dollars, about half its real value.

Meantime, the new bride had not been seen by neighbors since a few days after the wedding. Will's explanation was that his work required a move to the west coast and that his wife had gone ahead to locate a new home while he wound up their affairs here.

Sixty days after the wedding Will left town with all the woman's assets converted to cash.

There had been some gossip among neighbors about the strange disappearance of the new Mrs. Will, and the new owner of the brownstone house became suspicious of a fresh cement patch in the basement. Digging it up, he discovered a grave containing a female body which had been partially destroyed by sulphuric acid.

Too much of the body had been consumed by acid for positive identification, but pathologists established that the woman had been the age and size of Edna Barnes Will. They further established that death had resulted from a blow on the head, and had occurred at approximately the time Edna was last seen by neighbors.

Police investigation turned up that a five-gallon carboy of sulphuric acid had been purchased by a man answering Jonas Will's description four days after the wedding.

The prosecution stressed that the woman's body had been toothless, and that Edna Barnes Will had worn a full set of dentures.

A week after discovery of the body, Jonas Will had been located and arrested in San Francisco. After waiving extradition, he had been returned to New York to face the charge of first-degree murder.

The defense took another week to present its case.

Jonas Will's explanation was that his wife actually had gone ahead to San Francisco to locate a home there. As evidence, he produced a telegram from that city reading: ARRIVED SAFELY. LOVE, EDNA. A San Francisco hotel manager testified that a wire



reserving a room in the name of Mrs. Edna Will had been received from New York several days prior to the time the telegram to Jonas was dated, but the reservation had never been claimed. The defense contended that Edna had arrived in San Francisco by train, had sent the wire from the railway station, and had disappeared en route to the hotel.

Jonas Will's rather lame explanation to the prosecution's question as to why he had instituted no investigation after nearly two months passed with no word from his wife after the initial wire, was that he knew she was a poor correspondent, and he had been busy winding up their local affairs. He claimed to have been completely mystified when he arrived in San Francisco and discovered she had never checked into the hotel.

It was established that he had inquired after his wife at the hotel and subsequently had made a report of her disappearance to the San Francisco police.

The defense contended that the body buried in the basement of the brownstone house was not that of Edna Barnes Will. Attorney Martin Bowling suggested that the woman had been murdered and buried prior to the marriage of Jonas and Edna, implying

that the victim, whoever she was, had been murdered by Edna. To substantiate his theory, he produced a building supply dealer who testified he had delivered a sack of cement and some sand to the address in November, several weeks before Jonas moved into the house.

The defense had no theory as to the reason for Edna's disappearance between the rail station and hotel in San Francisco, merely pointing out that hundreds of similarly mysterious disappearances occur in different parts of the country each year.

It had been widely reported in the newspapers that Jones Will had only a year previously been acquitted of a similar charge of wife murder, but neither the prosecution nor defense mentioned this. In his instructions to the jury the judge, in obvious reference to this previous trial, cautioned that nothing the jurors had read or heard about the defendant outside of the courtroom should be considered in reaching a verdict.

Jennifer listened attentively to everything said during the trial. But most of the time her eyes were on the defendant instead of on the attorney or witness speaking. And quite often she found his gaze fixed on her too. Perhaps she imagined it, but sometimes

there seemed to be a strange sort of telepathic communication between them.

"I am innocent," she kept imagining his mind saying over and over to hers. "Don't let them convict an innocent man."

As the trial progressed, she found herself paying more and more attention to this secret voice and less and less to the evidence. She began to resent it when the prosecution made a telling point, and to offer up a silent cheer whenever the defense scored.

By the time the jury finally filed out to consider a verdict, she was convinced of Jonas Will's innocence.

There were nine men and three women on the jury. The foreman was a scholarly appearing man of about Jennifer's age whom she had overheard tell one of the men that he was a science teacher at an industrial high school.

When they were all seated around the long table in the jury-room, the foreman said, "Does anyone want to discuss the case before we take a ballot? Or shall we have a vote first and save discussion until we find out if there is any disagreement?"

One of the women, a slim housewife of about thirty, said, "I don't see that there's anything to discuss. Let's take a vote."

When there was general assent, the foreman passed out slips of paper to serve as ballots. Each juror wrote down his verdict, folded the paper and passed it back.

After opening all the slips, the foreman announced, "Eleven guilty, one not guilty."

"How could anyone vote not guilty?" the woman who had requested the vote exploded. "This is the *second* wife he's killed!"

Jennifer was usually silent in any sort of a group discussion, but then she had never before sat in a group discussion where she had any sort of strong opinion one way or the other.

She found herself saying diffidently, "We're not supposed to consider that previous case. Anyway, he was acquitted, so he must have been innocent."

"Innocent!" the slim housewife said. "He just had a jury of idiots. His wife was found buried and he'd made off with her money, just like this time. It was all in the paper."

Jennifer's tone became more firm. "We can't even discuss that case. We took an oath to consider only the evidence presented in court. I, for one, don't think the dead woman was Edna Will. I think she was someone Edna Will murdered before she married the defendant, and that's why Edna

disappeared. She's hiding somewhere to escape punishment for her crime."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" the slim woman said with disgust.

The foreman said, "I think we had better open the floor to general discussion. And since we are eleven to one for conviction, we'll let the recalcitrant lady give her reasons for differing with the rest of us, then start at my left and move right around the table, giving each person a chance for rebuttal."

With all eyes on her, Jennifer was momentarily overwhelmed. But finally she managed in a shaking but stubborn voice, "The judge said if we felt reasonable doubt of guilt, we must find the defendant innocent. And they never even proved the dead woman was Edna Will. How about that telegram making a room reservation, and the one from her in San Francisco to her husband here?"

The man to the foreman's left said, "Anybody can send a telegram. He could have had a confederate out there, or even have flown there and back himself. You can make it round trip by jet in about eight hours."

"You can't consider remote possibilities," Jennifer protested. "The prosecution never proved anyone other than Edna Will sent either telegram, so we have to assume

she did. That wasn't disproved."

"I don't have to assume it," the man second from the foreman said. "He sent those telegrams, or had them sent, just so he'd have some defense if anything went wrong. For the same reason, he inquired at the hotel, and made a report to missing persons in San Francisco. But for the two months she was supposedly in San Francisco locating a house, he never wrote or wondered why she didn't write. Does that sound like the normal behavior of newlyweds?"

"They were mature people," Jennifer said a trifle shakily. "They both had been married before. It wasn't like young love."

The third woman, a middle-aged stenographer who wore a wedding band but no diamond, said, "This whole discussion is ridiculous. He killed her, stole her money, and that's all there is to it."

But the discussion went on, and for the first time in her life Jennifer had a lot to say. She was hardly eloquent, but she put up such a persistent and stubborn argument that eventually she won over one of the men. The jury had filed out at one P.M. After four hours of Jennifer's championship, the vote stood at ten for conviction, two voting not guilty.

By seven P.M., when the bailiff brought in their dinner and they

took a half-hour break, she had won four more converts and the jury was evenly divided. Four of the men and both the other women were still holdouts.

By ten P.M. the vote had swung to ten to two, with only the slim housewife and the middle-aged stenographer still holding out for a guilty verdict.

At ten thirty the foreman said, "I think we have reached an impasse. I'll take one more vote; then I suggest we inform the court we're hopelessly deadlocked."

"That will mean a whole new trial," one of the men growled. "All this waste of time and money."

The stenographer said grumpily, "I'm not going to be the cause of making them do this all over again. I still think he's guilty, but I'll go along with the rest of you rather than have it declared a mistrial."

The slim housewife didn't have the moral stamina to stand all alone. Deserted by the last of her supporters, she threw in the towel too.

"All right," she snapped. "We'll turn him loose to kill a few more wives."

It was just a week after the trial that Jennifer came home from work one day to find a visitor wait-

ing in the hall outside her apartment door. It gave her quite a start to recognize the tall, distinguished figure.

Jonas. Will was already holding his hat in his hand. He inclined his body slightly in a bow which had a touch of old-world flavor. He said, "I hope you won't think I'm presumptuous for dropping by, Miss Hamilton. But I felt I had to."

"Of course not, Mr. Will," she said, flustered. "Won't you come in?"

She tried to put the key in the lock upside down, laughed nervously, and managed to get the door open on the second try. Inside she flicked her gaze around the front room and was relieved to note it was in its usual immaculate condi-



tion, with everything in its proper place.

"Won't you sit down?" she said. "May I take your hat?"

"I won't be long enough for you to bother hanging it up," he said, smiling.

He seated himself in an easy chair and held the hat in his lap. Laying her bag on an end table, she sank onto the sofa and looked at him inquiringly.

"I looked up your address in the phone book," he said. "I hope you don't mind. I felt I had to come by and thank you."

She blushed. "I merely voted as I thought was right, Mr. Will. I was only one of twelve."

"The twelve deliberated for nine hours," he said dryly. "There must have been considerable disagreement. I think perhaps I owe my life to you."

Jennifer felt her blush deepen. "You owe your life to your innocence, Mr. Will. I assure you that, if I had thought you guilty, I would have voted with the rest, and we wouldn't have been out five minutes."

His clear gray eyes studied her face. "So it *was* only you on the first vote. I sensed it. Did you know I was watching you throughout the trial?"

"You were?" she said in simulated surprise.

"Don't pretend," he said quietly. "Of course you knew. I recognized you as a sensitive the moment you stepped on the stand."

"As a what?" she asked with raised brows.

"A sensitive. A person capable of receiving telepathic communication. I can't, unfortunately. I can only transmit."

She looked at him in astonishment. "Do you mean those were actual thought transmissions? I wasn't imagining it?"

He smiled. "You weren't imagining it, Miss Hamilton. I have always been able to transmit to a limited number of people. Very few have the sensitive receptivity to receive thought waves from a telepathist. And, of course, even if they have, it doesn't mean anything unless we're on the same wave length. It requires a particular type of mind to become a sensitive, the receptive mind of a person more interested in listening than in thinking of what to say next. It has to be a mind uncluttered by self-centered thoughts."

"You mean an empty mind?"

His smile broadened. "You have a sense of humor as well as a receptive mind." Rising to his feet, he said, "Well, I won't take up any more of your time, Miss Hamilton. I just wanted to thank you for what you did."

At the same time, his mind spoke to her almost as clearly as his voice, "You are a charming woman, and I'd like to stay longer, but I can't with decency intrude on you any longer."

Her heart began to thump. It was a totally new experience to feel that a man had any opinion of her at all, let alone to get the impression he considered her charming. Had she actually again read his mind, or was it merely imagination combined with wishful thinking?

She decided that, imagination or not, she would give him a chance to stay longer if he wished.

She said, "Are you just going to walk in, excite my curiosity by telling me I'm some kind of mind reader, then walk out again without further explanation? I usually have a cocktail when I come home from work. Would you like to join me and tell me a little more about this while we're having it?"

He hesitated before saying, "If it won't be an imposition, I'd enjoy it."

He ended up by staying for dinner.

That was the beginning of it. During the next few weeks Jonas Will gradually became a nightly companion. At first he appeared only at intervals of several days, but finally he fell into the habit of pick-

ing her up after work daily and taking her somewhere for a cocktail. Afterward, they would sometimes have dinner at her apartment; sometimes they would dine out and then attend a movie. On the whole their evenings were very quiet, but compared to Jennifer's previous recreational activity, they were riotous. She felt as though she had suddenly been swept from her humdrum life into one of glamorous adventure.

While they eventually got to the point where she was calling him Jonas and he was calling her Jennifer, he was always circumspect; never even taking such a liberty as squeezing her hand in the darkness of a movie. Yet she sensed in him a growing romantic interest which made her heart flutter. It was nothing he said or did, but occasionally she continued to get momentary glimpses of his thoughts, or at least to imagine she did. And when this happened, it was always some warm and admiring thought she felt pulsing from his mind to hers.

They had much discussion about this apparent extra-sensory ability of hers, for the subject fascinated her. She had never before experienced it with anyone else, and she strove for an explanation of why and how her latent ability to read minds had suddenly developed.

"Not minds," he said, smiling. "Just one mind. It's not an uncommon phenomenon, particularly among married couples who have unusually close relationships. Psychologists don't know much about it, but there's one theory that the minds of certain so-called 'sensitives' act much as radio receivers tuned to a single narrow band. The theory is that such minds are able to receive thought waves transmitted at a precise frequency. A latent sensitive may go through life without ever encountering a telepathist who transmits on the proper wave length. I'm probably the first you ever met exactly attuned to you."

It pleased her to know the phenomenon was something common among married couples with unusually close relationships. Although Jonas hadn't even suggested any feeling for her deeper than friendship, it gave a romantic touch to their relationship. She began to dream a little.

The dream was shattered one night as they sat in the front room of her apartment. Jonas announced that he probably would be leaving town in a week or two.

In a way it wasn't a complete shock, for she knew he had been searching for an out-of-town position. He had explained that the sales job he had moved to San

Francisco to take had gone up in smoke the moment he was arrested for murder. And there was too much scandal attached to his name for him to get anything in New York. He had a few-thousand-dollar reserve, he had told her, but he couldn't live on it forever. He wanted to move to some new place where he was unknown and try to rebuild his life under another name.

"I've been a bit limited as to the jobs I could apply for," he said. "I've been applying under the name of Henry Gunner, so I had to pick jobs where I figured they wouldn't bother to check references. This is only a car sales job on straight commission, but if I make good in it, eventually I can apply for a better job and have a ready-made reference under my new name."

"Where is it?" she asked.

"St. Louis. It isn't definite yet, but it looks good. I have to fly down there Monday for a personal interview."

"I hope you get it," she said in a voice she managed to keep steady. "But St. Louis is a long way off. I don't suppose we'll cross paths very often."

"There's one way they could cross daily," he said.

The shattered parts of her dream began to come together again in

her mind and her heart began to thump. "What way is that, Jonas?"

"If we were married."

She gazed at him, her heart now beating wildly. She was utterly unable to speak.

"Of course there's a difficulty there," he said. "It's quite possible Edna's still alive."

The thought jolted her. As certain as she was that the body discovered in the basement of the brownstone house wasn't that of Edna Barnes Will, she hadn't given a thought to the possible whereabouts of Edna Will since the day Jonas appeared at her door.

"Of course it wouldn't mean anything to me from a moral point of view if she were," Jonas said. "If she's still alive, she must have known I was on trial for her murder, because everyone in the country knew. I'd hardly want to return to a wife who deliberately intended to let me die for something she knew I didn't do."

Jennifer remained silent.

"The State of New York has declared her dead," Jonas went on. "So I don't believe I could be arrested for bigamy if she ever turned up. I'm merely thinking of you. I would hate to have you undergo the distress of discovering you had been living in sin, perhaps ten years after our marriage."

Jennifer blurted out, "Suppose I

was willing to take the chance?"

He smiled at her. "I hoped you'd say that. It isn't really much of a chance, because we'll be starting a new life under a new name, and it's unlikely she could find us, even if she did eventually reappear. At worst, it would mean a quick trip to Reno for me and then our remarriage. One of our U.S. presidents was once confronted by the same problem and surmounted it without scandal."

Searching back into her memory for her high school knowledge of history, she nodded. "Andrew Jackson. But there was a little scandal, wasn't there? Didn't he challenge someone to a duel for making a remark about his living in sin with his wife?"

"Attitudes have changed since then, my dear. No one will condemn us if it ever comes to necessary legal action. It will be accepted as an honest error, easily straightened out. But it's up to you."

"I'll marry you," she said, before he could change his mind.

She had been sitting on the sofa and he in an easy chair. Rising, he crossed over and kissed her for the first time.

This was on Saturday, June twenty-ninth. Monday morning Jonas flew to St. Louis. At four P.M. he phoned her long-distance at her office.



"I got the job," he said jubilantly. "I start Monday, July fifteenth. I'm going to stay here a few days to try to get us some place to live, but I'll be back Friday. We'll be married Saturday and start for St. Louis in my car about Tuesday, July ninth."

"So soon?" she said, both appalled and delighted at the short time remaining before she would be a married woman. "I'll have to give notice, and there's an apartment lease, and. . . ."

"Then you'd better start hustling," he said cheerfully. "We're leaving for St. Louis just a week from tomorrow."

When she hung up, she went right in and gave her notice to her boss. After her quarter century of service he was very understanding. He waived the usual two-week requirement and told her she could just finish out that week.

She was in a flurry of activity all the rest of that week. She managed to find a woman willing to buy up the rest of her apartment lease and also take the furniture off her hands, though she had to let the latter go for about a fourth of its value. There were also utility services to be terminated, charge accounts to close, and packing to do.

The last was the biggest problem, for Jonas phoned again on Wednesday and, when she men-

tioned her packing job, he limited her to two suitcases to take in the car. Everything else had to be expressed to St. Louis to be held until called for.

She managed to get everything accomplished but the closing out of her bank accounts by the time Jonas got back on Friday.

He came in on a morning plane and picked her up at her office at noon. They spent her lunch hour getting blood tests and the license, as New York had a twenty-four-hour waiting period, and this had to be accomplished if they expected to get married the next day.

Jonas registered his name on the license as Henry Gunner. Jennifer was a little dubious about this until he explained that a marriage was legal under any name, as long as the proper persons went through the ceremony. It would hardly be feasible to use his real name, Jonas said. In the first place it would be front-page news if it leaked out that a man twice acquitted of wife murder was remarrying, and neither of them wanted that type of publicity. More important, since they would be living under the names of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Gunner in St. Louis, it would certainly be more convenient to have that name on their marriage certificate.

Jennifer agreed he was right.

They were married by a justice of the peace Saturday evening. Jonas, who had been living in a furnished room, gave it up and moved into Jennifer's apartment.

In the excitement of preparing for the wedding and the move, there had been no time to discuss financial affairs with Jonas. And of course that was the farthest thing from her mind on her wedding night. But at breakfast the next morning she decided to bring it up.

"Will we be able to live on what you earn as a car salesman, Jonas?" she asked him. "Or will you want me to get a job too when we get to St. Louis?"

"Let's see how I make out first," he suggested. "I have about four thousand dollars to carry us for a while."

"I have some money too," she said. "Tomorrow I planned to close out my checking account and get traveler's checks for it. There's only a couple of hundred dollars in it. But what should I do about my savings account? Just leave it here, and have the bank where we open an account in St. Louis handle the transfer?"

"Why don't you get a bank draft for it, made out to Jennifer Gunner? That will be as safe as traveler's checks, and you can just deposit it in a savings account when

we get to St. Louis. As a matter of fact, have the balance in your checking account included in the single bank draft too. I have enough traveler's checks to carry us."

So that was what she did. Jonas hadn't asked her how large her savings account was and she hadn't told him, wanting to save it as a pleasant surprise. For twenty-five years she had been regularly saving a part of her salary. The bank draft she got was for seventeen thousand, two hundred and forty-eight dollars.

They left for St. Louis early Tuesday morning. Jonas did all the driving, as she had no license. They were in no hurry, since he had until the following Monday to report to work. They took three days and made a honeymoon trip out of it. It was early Friday evening when they drove over MacArthur Bridge into St. Louis and stopped for dinner before driving on.

Jonas had told her he had rented a "summer cottage sort of place" for a month, to serve as a temporary base while they did serious house hunting. It was some distance from town, he explained, but he would take her in with him each day when he drove to work, and drop her at some real estate office to spend the day looking at

houses which might prove suitable.

She hadn't realized it would be so far from town, though. The cottage was on the Meramec River, a good ten miles from the extreme south edge of town, and probably twenty miles from the downtown district. It was all by itself on a stretch of clay and gravel beach, not even in sight of any other cottage. It was raised on stilts to keep it above flood waters, and boards had been nailed to the stilts on two sides to form a rough, open carport beneath the building. A wooden stairway led upward from the carport to the cottage.

Inside, it was much more pleasant than its outside appearance had indicated, Jennifer was gratified to find. There was a big front room full of rustic furniture, a large kitchen, and a bedroom and bath. The furnishings were old but adequate. She decided that after a thorough cleaning it would be livable for the short time they planned to be there.

Friday night they retired early, tired from the long trip. Saturday morning Jonas took her shopping at a plaza on the highway, and she stocked up with groceries and cleaning supplies. The rest of that day and all day Sunday she scrubbed and cleaned until the three rooms glistened.

Sunday evening after dinner, as

they sat in the front room, Jonas said, "Tomorrow I start to work. How will you spend the day, dear?"

She looked at him in surprise. "I thought you were taking me in to start house hunting."

"Not tomorrow," he said. "I wouldn't know where to drop you. I'll pick up a St. Louis paper and tomorrow night we'll make a list of real estate companies that advertise rentals. Then I'll take you in the next day. You could use one day of rest before you start hunting."

"All right," she said agreeably. "I suppose there isn't that much rush."

"I may as well open your savings account for you while I'm in town tomorrow, if you want to endorse that bank draft and give it to me."

"Our savings account," she corrected, with a smile. "We're not going to have the kind of marriage where we keep everything separate, are we?"

"Ours then," he said, smiling back. "Anyway, you better endorse the draft while you're thinking of it."

She went into the bedroom to get the bank draft from her bag, turned it over and endorsed it on the dresser. It gave her a pleasantly warm feeling to write, "Mrs. Jen-

nifer Gunner". It was the first time she had had occasion to write her new name.

When she carried the draft back into the front room and handed it to Jonas, he merely glanced at it, then folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Aren't you a little surprised at the amount?" she asked with pride.

"Not really," he said. "You'd been working for years and your tastes are simple. I assumed you'd have a tidy sum tucked away."

She frowned, a little hurt by his casual acceptance of the amount. "I thought you'd be proud of me."

"Oh, I am," he assured her. "I'm just not surprised."

She examined him dubiously, and suddenly something from the trial popped into her mind. She couldn't imagine why she recalled it at that precise moment, but all at once she remembered the handwriting expert testifying that it was actually Edna Will's signature on the power of attorney which had given Jonas control of his wife's assets. All her assets were contained in the bank draft she had

just handed him, she realized, and her actual signature was on it.

"Did you know Edna long before you married her?" she asked abruptly.

He gave her an odd look. "That's a peculiar question, right out of the blue. Not very long."

"How'd you meet her, Jonas?"

He gazed at her for a moment before saying casually, "She was on the jury at my first trial."

Almost on top of the words she caught a vagrant thought from him, and this time she knew it wasn't imagination. As clearly as though he had spoken aloud she heard his mind saying, "I always try to find one sensitive in the jury box."

She gazed at him with growing horror, and he stared back at her with a sudden sadness in his clear gray eyes.

"I let the wrong thought slip, didn't I?" he said. "I meant to let it last one more night, but of course I can't now. That's the trouble with picking sensitives. You always have to keep a curb on your thoughts."

## 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.*

*A policeman's lot frequently is not a happy one, but we do expect him to bear up under the strain. When and if he does not, our sympathies can be quickly overtaxed.*

**T**HE WEATHER turned foul late in the afternoon, blowing cold with intermittent rain squalls, but Gannon hardly noticed the elements. His mood had been grimly detached all day, ever since Captain Heisler had given him the assignment and the first seed of possible action had been planted.

Tooling the unmarked police car from headquarters garage, Gannon drove across town slowly, mechanically. His gaze was almost vacant as he scanned the homeward bound traffic, and when a sudden wet gust sprinkled the windshield he switched on the wipers absently. He was still thinking about the



money. Twenty-three thousand. Twenty-three thousand dollars in hard, cold cash which might be his if he hit upon a stroke of luck, and had the nerve to follow it through.

"It's a long shot, I know," Captain Heisler had told him that morning, "but Denver gave us help on that Ascot embezzlement, and I'd like to reciprocate. I know you're tied up in court this morning, but make the Kirsch girl's place this afternoon. Check her out."

Paula Kirsch, erstwhile girl friend of Leo Sills, gunman and heist artist whose latest exploit involved holding up a Denver building and loan office and killing a misguided clerk who had tried to be a hero.

Gannon almost overran a stoplight. He braked hard, cursing the potential opportunity and the gnawing dilemma of indecision his assignment had spawned. Sills had made good his escape with twenty-three thousand, was still at large. Suppose he *was* at Paula Kirsch's home, lying low until the heat died down? A smart cop—a cop fed to the teeth with routine and regulations, unmarried, with no strings and a growing desire to cut out, really live—could take Sills *and* that twenty-three grand.

The light went green and Gannon toed the gas pedal. His palms

were slick on the wheel as his thoughts churned. Twenty-three thousand was no fortune but it could carry a man far. Canada, Mexico, one of those South American countries with no extradition. Only could it carry him far enough to forget he was a common thief, a crooked cop?

*What do you care what you are? This is a lousy rat race. The only idea is to live, and twenty-three G's will buy you plenty of living.*

Gannon got a cigarette going, inhaled deeply, letting the acrid smoke bite his lungs. What was he stewing about? The whole idea was academic anyway. The odds were a thousand to one against Sills seeking out the Kirsch girl after two years. Captain Heisler had intimated as much in his briefing.

"This Paula Kirsch, Sir," Gannon had said. "She's Sills' woman?"

The captain had shaken his head. "Hardly. I understand Sills took up with her when he was operating around here a couple of years ago, probably just for kicks."

"Sir?"

"Not his type, actually," Heisler said. "Quiet, reserved sort. Works as a cocktail waitress, but doesn't go in for the bright lights bit after hours. Not too many friends. When Sills was squiring her, she lived with her widowed mother. Mrs. Kirsch was an invalid who died

six months ago, but Paula didn't give up the house. She still lives there alone, apparently doesn't go out much."

Gannon considered his chief's remarks. "I can't figure either Sills or the Kirsch girl becoming interested in each other," he said.

Heisler smiled briefly. "Nor I," he agreed, "except that opposites sometimes attract. Anyway, Sills did know the girl, and it's worth a check." He pencilled a notation on a flyer bearing Sills' likeness.

"There's the address. And Gannon . . ."

"Sir?"

The captain's brief smile was gone. "I don't have to tell you that Sills is dangerous. This may be routine, but don't operate on that basis."

*Oil, man, oil. You're just a name on the city payroll. Get a bullet in you and you're replaced the next day. Collect that twenty-three grand and they can keep their phony solicitude.*

Gannon flipped away the cigarette butt, his pulse picking up as he reviewed the morning's discussion. *If Sills was at the girl's place, how would the gunman play it? Because he might very well take a fatal slug in a shooting exchange, he'd first keep out of sight, have the girl put on an act. If that failed . . . Not if. When. A shrewd cop*

could be set for that precise moment.

He had cleared the heavy traffic now, and was driving into the city's suburban area. Checking a corner sign, Gannon swung the car into a side avenue, drove a short distance before making another turn, pulling up before a white frame bungalow at the end of the street.

*This is it. If Sills is inside, what do you do?*

Gannon ran sweaty palms along his thighs. He didn't know. After a long moment, he drew a breath, checked the gun in his belt holster, climbed from the car. His chest tightened as he approached the bungalow, thumbed the bell.

There was a perceptible wait before a thin-faced girl with yellow hair, set in a severe coiffure, answered.

"Yes?"

"Miss Paula Kirsch?"

"Yes."

Gannon showed his ID card. "Sergeant Gannon, police headquarters. I'd like to talk to you a moment, Miss Kirsch."

The girl had light gray eyes. Gannon detected a slight flicker in their pale depths before she stepped back. "Certainly. Come in."

The bungalow was small. What appeared to be a single bedroom was directly beyond the living room. The bedroom door was

closed, inciting his frank curiosity.

"Sit down, Sergeant. What is this all about?"

Gannon declined the invitation. His gaze swiftly appraised his surroundings, centered on that closed door. He shifted position to be out of direct line.

"I'm checking on a gunman named Léo Sills. I understand you knew him several years ago?"

Again that tiny flicker. "That's right."

"You went around with him?"

"Yes."

"Despite the fact he was a gunman?"

Paula Kirsch smiled without humor. "Our association lasted only as long as I considered Leo attractive in a hard, flashy way. When I learned what he really was, I stopped seeing him."

Fact? Or fiction? Studying the girl, Gannon couldn't decide. Paula Kirsch might be attractive to some men, but not many. Certainly not the lush type a man like Leo Sills might be expected to favor.

On the other hand, just as certainly the introverted sort likely to have few friends, go few places, and who could have been attracted to a flashy operator like Sills, until knowledge of his true character pulled her back into her shell. Or until the man had tired of the kicks bit, and jilted her.

"That was just two years ago?"

"Yes."

"And you haven't seen him since?"

"No."

Gannon said, "Sills killed a clerk in Denver, Miss Kirsch, and is still at large. We have reason to believe he'd seek help hiding out." He let the implication hang.

The girl met his gaze directly. "I haven't seen Leo Sills in two years, Sergeant."

"Or heard from him?"

"Or heard from him."

Gannon shot another quick glance at the bedroom door. His throat was constricted now, along with his chest, but he managed to hold his tone casual as he made an encompassing gesture. "You don't mind if I make a routine check for my report?"

She might have hesitated. Gannon couldn't be sure. But her voice was even enough. "Go ahead."

Gannon swallowed. He ought to stall, make up his mind exactly what he intended to do, but there was no more time. He whirled, whipping free his gun, lunged against the bedroom door.

The door slammed back against the wall. Bent low, Gannon lurched into the room, gun out thrust, gaze swivelling. An involuntary oath escaped him as he pulled up.

The room was empty. So was



the single closet. But resting beside the bed was a hat box and an overnight bag strapped, ready to go.

*She's been snowing you! Maybe she hasn't seen Sills yet, but he's phoned her. He's headed here and she'll hide him and after a couple of days they'll make a break together. With that twenty-three thousand!*

Gannon's mind was racing. Perhaps he'd been uncertain before, but he wasn't now. No man—cop or other—had a chance like this tossed in his lap twice. Sills expected a safe haven, but he sure wouldn't get it. He and the girl would get slugged, and they'd lose that money.

Gannon made a perfunctory check of the kitchen and breakfast nook, returned to the girl. "Thank you, Miss Kirsch," he said soberly. "If Sills should contact you, just phone headquarters. We'll take it from there."

Her mien matched his. "I will, Sergeant," she told him, somberly straight-faced.

Back in the car, Gannon's thoughts kept their fever pitch. Once he'd taken care of Sills and Paula Kirsch, grabbed the money, he'd make his break. A wanted killer and his accomplice girl friend could hardly yell for the police. Even if they tried an anonymous tip, he'd be miles away, out of the

country before the wind was really up.

Would Sills show tonight? The girl's veiled nervousness, her false aura of normalcy strongly pointed to the gunman's imminent arrival.

*Play it that way! What have you got to lose?*

Driving off, Gannon circled the block, parked at the head of the street on the cross avenue where his view of the bungalow was unrestricted. A street lamp midblock would give sufficient illumination after dark.

A residential section, there was no volume of traffic. Several cars turned into driveways or parked before homes as their owners returned from work. It began to darken; lights went on in many of the houses, including the front room of Paula Kirsch's bungalow.

Gannon chain-smoked, gaze centered down-street. Just this one chance, that's all he needed. . . .

Abruptly, he spat out the cigarette. A late model sedan, bearing out-of-state plates, turned into the street, rolled swiftly down the block. Approaching the Kirsch girl's bungalow, it braked, swung in to the opposite curb.

It was now quite dark. Gannon had been unable to match the lone male driver's features with the flyer in his pocket, but the action which followed suggested such identifica-

tion was unnecessary. The sedan's lights blinked off, but the driver made no move to leave the car. A minute passed. Two. Suddenly the man slipped out of the sedan, darted swiftly across the street—carrying a small money satchel?—and was almost lost in the shadows. The door of the bungalow opened, and he eased inside.

For all the night's chill, Gannon felt burning satisfaction. His hunch had paid off. Sills was there. Sills and twenty-three grand. The man was a killer. He'd shot down one man, wouldn't hesitate to blast another.

Grimly, Gannon lit a final smoke. He wasn't backing down now. He'd give them five or ten minutes to settle, then play it out. He still thought Sills would remain hidden, let the girl act her innocence until the last possible moment. That would give a determined cop the opening he needed.

Driving back to the bungalow, Gannon slammed the car door loudly, openly strode up the walk. There was a slight delay before Paula Kirsch answered his ring. When she did, Gannon flashed a wry smile, tapped his breast pocket self-consciously. "My ID card, Miss Kirsch," he explained. "I believe I jolted it from my pocket when I barged into the bedroom. Would you mind looking?"

The glitter in her narrowed gray eyes told him she didn't believe him, but under the normal circumstances she was feigning she could hardly refuse. "Of course not," she said evenly. "One moment, Sergeant."

She turned then, moving toward the closed bedroom door, obviously intending Gannon should remain where he was.

He didn't. Stepping silently in the girl's wake with drawn gun, Gannon shoved her aside just as her hand touched the knob, once again stormed suddenly into the bedroom.

The move was a calculated risk. It could have succeeded the first time, had Sills been in the room. It could have succeeded now except that Sills was flat on his back with a blood-oozing bullet hole in the center of his chest.

*You figured wrong! It's Paula Kirsch who'll kill twice. Paula's a bitter, jilted, tied-down girl, but she's grabbing her big chance now. She's planned the same solo caper for that money you did!*

Realization rocketed through Gannon's brain in the one split second when he recognized Sills. He tried to recover his equilibrium before Paula could squeeze the trigger of her silenced revolver. Gannon never made it. The slug tore off the top of his head.

*Multiple-family living, increasing in proportion to our mushrooming elderly population, offers financial advantages to both parties. Don't overlook the fact, however, that it may also engender some murderous situations.*

**M**RS. HARDY KNEW beyond the shadow of a doubt that Doreen, her new daughter-in-law, was plotting to kill her. She realized, being confined to a wheelchair, a victim of arthritis, asthma, and a chroni-

cally weak heart, that she was hardly a prize to have around the house. She could even understand Doreen's wish to turn her room into a nursery, especially since a baby was expected in about five

# The Vision

of  
Mrs Hardy

By  
Bernice Balfour



months. Nevertheless, she didn't believe either her afflictions or the coming infant warranted her murder.

The problem now was how to make her son Charles aware of her vision of doom, for Charles was blinded by Doreen's superficial assets, her striking beauty and hypnotic charm, qualities apt to be overwhelming for a plain, sincere boy who had lived alone with an invalid mother for a number of years.

When Mrs. Hardy's husband had died ten years ago, Charles was only fifteen, and the tragedy had left him shaken, insecure, and rather morbidly bound to his mother. Although Charles' father had provided generously for them in his will, leaving his wife the house and considerable stock, the boy nevertheless had felt it his duty through the years to look after his mother and take care of many of her needs. Because of this, an affinity, rather touching in its implications, had grown up between mother and son. Charles wouldn't even listen to their family physician, Dr. McKay, who, in recent years, once advised a rest home for Mrs. Hardy. "As long as I'm alive, my mother is going to have a *real* home," had been Charles' belligerent declaration. Thus, the matter had been considered closed—until the unex-

pected advent of his wife, Doreen.

Until Doreen came into his life, everyone had assumed that Charles would never marry, so devoted was he to his ailing mother. "Charles marry?" the very idea had been laughable to those who knew him. But it was Charles who enjoyed the final laugh, for not only did he marry and thus partially shatter the theory that he was "Mama's boy," but he also managed to capture a prize worthy of a giant. In fairness to Charles, it must be noted that he was not altogether a dud. In fact, he was rather good looking, in a quiet way, intelligent, and held a position of some importance in an accounting firm. Although there was speculation as to why Doreen had chosen Charles, the simplest answer seemed to be that she loved him. They had met at a dinner party given by mutual friends and had been almost inseparable companions until their marriage.

Actually, during the courtship period, Charles had related very little about Doreen to his mother. While Mrs. Hardy had tried, at least in the beginning, not to interfere too openly, it was apparent to Charles that his mother disapproved of the relationship. She had implied that a girl of Doreen's sophistication must surely have ulterior motives in choosing someone

as unworldly as Charles. On the few occasions when Doreen came to the house to visit, Mrs. Hardy usually managed to find something about the girl to criticize. Then, one night a few weeks before the marriage, alone with her son in the privacy of her room, she had let her defenses fall.

"What's to become of me if you and Doreen marry? Am I going to be carted off to an institution?"

Quickly, Charles had assured her that no such action was contemplated.

"No, you wouldn't do it, but what about her? She'll want to get rid of me."

At the time, Charles had pooh-poohed her sentiments, but a short while after the wedding, he finally confessed to his mother that there might be a grain of truth to her fears. Doreen, he had explained, believed in "modern marriage," where the newlyweds live alone rather than with parents or relatives.

A few months following this conversation, however, shortly after Charles learned he was going to be a father, a rather surprising development occurred. Charles informed his mother that Doreen had experienced a change of heart and felt differently about Mrs. Hardy living with them. In fact, she would not hear of Charles' mother *ever*

going to a rest home. "She wants you to stay just as much as I do, Mother," Charles said proudly. "Now that she's going to be a mother herself, she's become more understanding."

After revealing this somewhat puzzling news to Mrs. Hardy, Charles, casually, had brought up the matter of a will, suggesting that his mother draw one up without further procrastination.

At this point, Mrs. Hardy became uneasy.

"Was the will your idea?" she had questioned Charles.

"Well, no," he'd admitted. "Doreen brought it up. She was shocked to learn you still didn't have one." Then, noting that his mother's face had whitened, he hastily added, "Really, Mother, it's just a sensible precaution for everyone. Doreen even suggested that I see my lawyer soon. It can be pretty messy if a person suddenly dies without leaving a will; his beloved kin can turn into a pack of vultures."

Mrs. Hardy started to reply, but a sharp pain shooting through her back caused her to cry out instead. Then her breath began to come in short quick gasps, and Charles recognized the start of an asthma attack. Rushing to her bedside table, he grabbed her adrenalin inhaler and put it to her mouth. After a few moments, she stopped

wheezing and leaned back in her chair.

"I'm sorry, dear." Mrs. Hardy sighed, and smiled wearily at Charles. "I've been feeling too tense lately. Perhaps a few days in the hospital might be wise. I'm not feeling up to par, and the rest would do me good."

Charles had thoroughly agreed, and they both decided that discussion of the will could await her return. Mrs. Hardy then made arrangements with Dr. McKay to enter a neighborhood hospital for a week or two.

During her hospital stay, Charles' mother almost managed to dispel the hideous notion that Doreen was planning to kill her. At times it almost seemed like an absurdity in this strangely comforting environment, with its good food and service, to say nothing of the professional medical care. When Charles and Doreen came to visit her, she indicated that she felt better not only physically, but mentally as well. After ten days, she told Dr. McKay she was ready to go home.

Home again once more, seated in the familiar wheelchair in her bedroom, Mrs. Hardy busily wheeled herself about the room, making minor changes and adjustments. Although they had capable maid service—a domestic agency

sent professional help almost every day—Mrs. Hardy was never quite satisfied with the appearance of the house. Often, she'd found herself thinking that if only she had Doreen's youth, her able body and fine strong hands, there never would be a need for outside help. But, of course, Doreen was not much use around the house, and even before her pregnancy did little more than a minimal share of domestic chores.

As she wheeled herself over to the mahogany bureau, Mrs. Hardy noted a thin veil of dust on its top, and, shaking her head, made a mental note to bring this to Doreen's attention. Apparently her room had been neglected during her hospital stay, and in view of her dust allergy and related asthma, this was hardly forgivable.

She opened the top drawer and observed that everything appeared to be in place. She reached into the middle drawer, where she kept her underclothes, and felt the comforting presence of the pistol hidden there. Charles had purchased the gun for her protection in the rather unlikely event of burglary or housebreaking when she was at home alone. Although these acts were never really anticipated, the mere presence of the weapon had been a comfort to her. Then she opened her purse and took out the

small key to her jewelry box which rested on top of the bureau. Gazing at her beautiful jewels, especially an old family heirloom, a diamond necklace of considerable value, always gave Mrs. Hardy pleasure. But now, as she opened the box, she noticed immediately a great void. The necklace was missing.

Frantically, she pulled open the top bureau drawer and rummaged through the contents. She searched futilely through the middle drawer next, her hand brushing several times against the pistol that lay nestled between items of lingerie. Nor did the necklace appear anywhere in the bottom drawer.

Then, slowly, she began to recall snatches of a recent conversation with her son and Doreen. One evening she had worn the necklace and Doreen had complimented her on it. Mrs. Hardy, pleased at the time, had explained that it was a priceless heirloom, passed on to female blood members of the family for generations. Next in line to receive it, after her death, was her sister's oldest daughter. Doreen had appeared only mildly interested in this information, but Mrs. Hardy had noticed that her daughter-in-law kept her eyes glued to the necklace the rest of the evening. She had forgotten the incident until just now. Of course, of course!

Mrs. Hardy shook her head knowingly as the entire picture became clear. First, Doreen's change of heart about Mrs. Hardy going to a rest home. Then Doreen suggesting to Charles that his mother hurry up and make out a will. And now the necklace missing, the necklace which Doreen knew could never be willed to her. It was all too obvious. She wondered how she ever could have doubted her intuitions. They were always right! The only knowledge which Mrs. Hardy lacked was the method. How did Doreen plan to kill her?

Just then she heard Charles' footsteps outside the door, and quickly made an effort to compose herself. Nevertheless, there would have to be a showdown. Charles would have to know.

"Hello, Mother." Charles briskly strode to his mother's chair and pecked her on the cheek as always.

"Hello, son," Mrs. Hardy replied hoarsely, a slight quaver to her voice. "Shut the door and sit down, will you?"

Charles obediently closed the door and pulled up a chair facing his mother. "Is anything wrong?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Then, calmly, without wasting words, she related her fears about Doreen, concluding with her current suspicion that the girl must have had a duplicate key made for the jewelry box

and had stolen the necklace, which she was probably planning to sell, if she had not already done so.

At first Charles appeared stunned and speechless. Finally he spoke.

"Mother, surely you can't be serious?"

"I am quite serious." Mrs. Hardy met her son's gaze with determination.

"Mother—" Charles shook his head helplessly. "Why—why would Doreen want to kill you?"

"Because I'm in the way, and she hates me for it. Because she knows I plan to will you the house and stock." Mrs. Hardy paused and wet her lips. "People have killed for less."

Again, Charles shook his head. "Mother, this is incredible! Doreen could never do such things—plot to kill you—steal your necklace! You're simply confused and upset tonight. You don't know what you're saying." He paused momentarily to allow a note of finality to enter his voice. "We'll just forget all about this conversation. You'll feel better in a day or so."

As Charles arose to leave, there was a knock on the door, and without waiting for Charles to open it, Doreen entered the room. Charles bent over to kiss her. "Hello, dear. I was just leaving." He turned then to his mother. "I'll explain to Doreen about the—

missing item, and we'll be on the lookout."

Mrs. Hardy nodded dumbly, her face a distorted image of despair.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mother?" Doreen smiled sweetly at her mother-in-law.

Mrs. Hardy shook her head. She wished they both would leave.

"Well, dinner will be ready shortly. I'll bring you your tray at six." Doreen rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Don't you think, Mother, you might have coffee instead of tea tonight—just this once?"

Mrs. Hardy nodded weakly. "Yes, coffee will be all right. But don't fuss about my dinner tonight, Doreen. I'm—I'm not hungry."

"Why, Mother!" Doreen pretended to be piqued. "And after I spent all afternoon preparing a roast for your homecoming."

Yes, Mrs. Hardy thought, that would be a major undertaking for you. She started to reply, but Charles cut her off.

"I'm sure Mother appreciates your efforts, dear, but she's tired tonight. Just serve her a light portion."

"Well, all right." Doreen took her husband's arm, and Mrs. Hardy watched the couple depart.

"It's her manner which is so disarming," she thought to herself. "If only I could find some way to break it down, to reveal her as she



really is." She pursed her lips determinedly, knowing she soon would have to find a way.

Several days after this rather bleak homecoming, Mrs. Hardy awoke with a strange foreboding. She had experienced a somewhat garbled dream the night before, leaving her feeling restless and uneasy, even though she remembered little of the dream except that one part of it concerned Doreen and herself. Doreen had been wheeling her in her chair, but when Mrs. Hardy had turned to tell the girl something, there was no one behind her, yet her chair kept moving. Frightened, she remembered calling for Doreen, but no answer came.

Mrs. Hardy shook her head vigorously, as though trying to rid herself of her vaguely disturbing mood. She reached for the buzzer by her bed, and in a few moments Charles' wife appeared. She smiled pleasantly at Mrs. Hardy, who noticed that her daughter-in-law was finally wearing maternity clothes. The baby would arrive in less than five months.

"Good morning, Mother, how do you feel?"

"Not so good. My back is stiff."

"Oh, dear. Well, perhaps we'll phone Dr. McKay later if it doesn't improve." Doreen automatically helped Mrs. Hardy to her

chair and got her robe. "Charles just left for the office. I'll have breakfast for you in a short while."

Mrs. Hardy looked up, something in Doreen's tone making her wary. "You have some help today, don't you?"

"No—. I told the agency we wouldn't need anyone for a few days. We're well caught up on the housework, and the few remaining chores I can handle."

"But—my dear, is that wise with you pregnant and me on your hands?" Mrs. Hardy's growing anxiety had reached the breaking point. "I—I honestly feel, Doreen, that we'd all be better off if I did go to a rest home as Dr. McKay once suggested."

"Nonsense!" Doreen's expression told Mrs. Hardy the subject was closed. When the girl left a moment later to prepare breakfast, Mrs. Hardy tried to take stock of her disturbing sense of impending doom. Throughout the day she became more and more immersed in her thoughts, so that she hardly noticed the tempting dishes Doreen had managed to prepare for her. She remembered how, in the past, her remarkable intuitive powers foretold everything from an oncoming storm to Great Uncle Harry's death. "A lady of vision" she was called in her younger days, because somehow she always man-

aged to be right in her predictions.

She glanced at her watch. 3:30 p.m. Past her naptime, but today she would forget about that. Today she must be prepared for any eventuality. Then she heard Doreen's soft footsteps approaching, and she knew the time had come. The old lady was hardly surprised when she saw the sly look on the girl's face as she entered the room.

"I have a *surprise* for you, Mother," Doreen said, and without further ado, walked quickly behind Mrs. Hardy's chair. When Mrs. Hardy felt Doreen's strong hands on her neck, the last remaining link in her knowledge was supplied. Now Mrs. Hardy knew the method. Doreen was going to choke off her air, bring on a fatal attack, and the doctor's reports would simply say death from natural causes, from chronic asthma and a weak heart.

"No, no!" Mrs. Hardy suddenly screamed, and like a flash, tore away from Doreen's grasp, and wheeling madly to the bureau, reached inside her lingerie drawer for the gun.

"You stole the necklace, but you didn't know where I had the gun hidden, did you?" Mrs. Hardy shouted at Doreen's startled figure. "No, no, I was too smart for you," the old woman cried, and before Doreen could utter a word, a shattering explosion rocked the room.

The dull thud of Doreen's body on the floor told Mrs. Hardy that it was all over, and, miraculously, she had escaped death, thanks to her uncanny foresight.

So engrossed was she in the events of the moment that she was scarcely aware of her son throwing open the door and dashing into the room.

"Doreen! Where's Doreen? I heard a shot." Charles glanced momentarily at his mother, and then saw his wife's crumpled figure on the floor. He reached over and felt her pulse, but he had known from the way her body was lying. He stood up then and faced his mother.

"I had to, son," she said tearfully, dropping the gun to the floor. "She tried to strangle me."

Charles' burdened voice came slowly. "Doreen called me at the office about an hour ago and asked me to come home early. She wanted to celebrate because she had a surprise for you." Charles walked over to Doreen's body and removed the diamond necklace, still clutched in the dead woman's hand.

"She was going to put the necklace on you, not strangle you," he said quietly. "She found it tucked in a side pocket of your suitcase—the one you had with you at the hospital."

*Ironically, when "liberty plucks justice by the nose", the verdict may rebound to haunt the principals of the case.*



**T**HEY were coming back. I didn't try to read the verdict in their faces, not even when I caught the split-second smile from Juror Num-

ber Eight, the lady with the silver-blue hair who had paid so much motherly attention to my summation. I guessed that she was in my



pocket from the third day of the trial, but I couldn't be sure if her smile was one of reassurance or maternal sympathy. Anyway, what was the use of speculating? Another thirty seconds and Rydell was either free or dead. I turned my eyes to the Judge's bench.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury . . ."

On the seat beside me, a chip came off Rydell's stony composure. I tried to imagine what he was feeling, what it was like to stare out of his eyes at the puckered lips of the jury foreman, to hear with his ears the throat-clearing hack and the slow-spoken words that would promise him—what? The right to breathe, sleep late in the morning, drink cold beer, walk in the park? Or a shaved skull, a slit in the trousers, a last shuffling walk down a gray corridor? No, I couldn't imagine what Rydell was feeling. Nobody could. All I knew about was the throb in my own chest. Let it be all right, I thought; please God, let me have this one, I need it bad. A lawyer who loses two to the hangman doesn't need his name on the door, because nobody's going to knock. Call me hardhearted, but that's what I felt right then, facing a jury that had made up its mind.

"You will please read your verdict to the court."

Please, God, I thought. I will be kind to animals, generous to charity, and never, never take another drink.

"We find the defendant, Lewis Rydell, not guilty."

Well, hardly ever.

I was spun around by the arm, first by Schwartz, the assistant counsel, who wanted to shake my hand, and then by old man Ostrim who must have leaped the railing to get at me. Everybody was whooping and hollering in my ear, and I could see Rydell's lips moving but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I swear I thought Ostrim was going to kiss me out of pure exultation, but that was a privilege reserved for his daughter. Karen had stayed home, but there would be plenty of time for private felicitations later. I got a kiss anyway, from Rydell's wife, and for a guy who was supposed to have killed for jealousy, Rydell took it like a sport. But maybe the biggest boot of all came from the Judge himself. I'd known Judge Lincoln Arthur since I was a kid, when my late father had been Linc's benchmate on the First Circuit. Not that it ever made any difference in a courtroom, because Linc was as hidebound as a law library and never played favorites. Nevertheless, I caught his congratulatory wink.



The five of us left the courtroom together, but we lost Schwartz in the corridor. Ostrim went next, pumping my hand again and reminding me about the victory celebration he had scheduled for that evening; then he vanished into the rear seat of his car and chauffeured off. That left the Rydells, and Lew Rydell said:

"I suppose we ought to settle up now, Mr. Murray, huh? Shall we go back to your office?"

"No hurry," I grinned. "If I were in your shoes, all I'd want to do is get drunk. Not that I'm recommending it."

"Lew doesn't drink," Melanie Rydell said coolly. "Lew doesn't have any vices, do you, Lew?"

"I'd like to settle this fee business," Rydell said. "I'd just as soon do it now, Mr. Murray, if it's okay with you."

"Sure," I said. "If that's what you want."

"We'll drop you off at the house," Rydell said to his wife. "You look tired."

"I *am* tired," Melanie said, but she didn't look tired. She looked beautiful. Melanie was one of those lynx-eyed blondes who couldn't ask for the time of day without making it sound like an invitation. Just the way she stood or sat or walked made men look at her lingeringly. It wasn't any mystery why Lew Rydell might have suffered jealous pangs at times.

I hailed a cab, and we dropped Melanie off at the Morton Street brownstone where the Rydells had spent the two years of their marriage, where a wide-eyed young grocery clerk named Yost had ended his life at the bottom of a flight of cellar steps, his thin neck twisted and broken . . .

"I'll be home in a couple of hours," Rydell said. "We'll go out to dinner, huh? Lasagna and wine and everything. We've got a lot of celebrating to do, Melanie."

"Sure," she said wearily, and kissed him on the cheek. Then we drove downtown to the offices of Ostrim, Wright and Morgan, Attorneys-at-Law.

For some reason, my own office, two doors down the hall from Ostrim's, seemed peculiarly small. Its single window was dirty, and the desk surface was insufficient to

hold the stacks of documents and reports accumulated there. It hadn't looked so small to me at the conclusion of my last case. I'd come back from the court that day with the foreman's "guilty" ringing in my ears, and felt grateful for the smug security of that little room. But it seemed too small now, no question. I'd have to tell Ostrim that.

"I've been thinking over your suggestion," Rydell said, "about the method of payment. I figured out that I can pay a hundred and fifty a month until the debt's settled. Would that be okay?"

"I'm sure that would be fine."

"You want me to sign a paper or anything?"

"That's not necessary," I said. "We didn't have to come to the office to settle that. I told you so in the cab."

"I wanted to come here," Rydell said. "I guess I just didn't want to face Melanie for a couple of hours. I needed an excuse to get away. Do you understand?"

"Sure," I said, and looking at his drawn, ashy face I discovered that I did. Rydell was a plain-looking man who might have had some boyish charm ten years ago, but had lost too much hair and gained too many creases since. He had a dead-flesh look, except for his eyes, bulbous eyes with an oily shine.

"How about that drink?" I said quietly. "I keep a bottle here."

"Swell," he said. "I'd like a drink now."

I poured one for both of us and proposed a toast to something innocuous, like happy times. Rydell suggested that we toast Melanie and I agreed. He knocked back the whiskey in nothing flat, and the effect of the lubricant seemed to make his eyes glow brighter than before.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" he said.

"Mrs. Rydell? Yes, a very lovely woman."

"She can't help herself, you know, the way men bother her all the time. They look at her and get the wrong idea. It's not her fault."

"No," I said.

"She's not bright about it, she doesn't know the way men think. Like the way she answers the door sometimes, in that sloppy housecoat of hers. She gives people ideas, like that kid Yost. I feel sorry for that kid, you know that?"

"I know you do," I said. "It's just too bad he had to get himself mugged the day after you threw him out of the house. You wouldn't have gone through all this."

Rydell got his own second drink. He sipped it this time, brooding into the glass.

"Yeah, I feel sorry for him. But I'd do the same thing again, that's the way I am. I get a red fire in my brain and I can't stop myself." His head came up slowly. "I owe you a lot, Mr. Murray. More than money."

"Forget it. Just learn to keep your temper."

"I really killed that boy, you know."

I put down my glass. A buzzer went off in my head and the taste of whiskey in my mouth went sour.

"Yes, I did," Rydell said, smiling sadly. "I waited for him the next day and grabbed him. He was a scrawny kid; it was like wringing the neck of a chicken. I took all his money just to make it look like a robbery. It's funny, you know? I couldn't bring myself to spend that money, I threw it away, every nickel. . . ."

"Shut up!" I yelled. "For heaven's sake, shut up!"

"I'll do the same thing again, if I have to. These men who bother my wife, they've got to learn. . . ." He stood up. "I better go now," he said. "Melanie's expecting me."

I beat him to the door.

"You lied to me," I said. "Every stinking word you told me was a lie!"

"I couldn't tell you the truth, could I?" He was still smiling,

only the sadness was gone and he was enjoying my anger. "You were supposed to get me off, Mr. Murray. That's what you were hired for, and that's what you did."

"What do you think I am? You think I would have let you plead innocent when—"

"No, of course, you wouldn't." Rydell said reasonably. "So you see how right I was, don't you?"

"Look, Rydell—"

"I have to go now, Mr. Murray."

"You think it's that simple?" My hand became a fist and I wanted to smash that smiling, oily-eyed face. "You think you can just walk out of here and—"

"Melanie's waiting for me," he said. "She likes to eat dinner early, Mr. Murray, I really have to go."

I couldn't think of anything to do but step aside. Rydell opened the door and went out. I could hear his footsteps in the corridor, the slow, measured tread of a man who wasn't in any hurry.

I was sorry I hadn't hit him. The release of anger would have been better than what I was feeling now. It had been a long drop from that height of elation, and I damned the compulsion that had made Rydell tell the truth. It was bad enough that he lied to me, bad enough that I had defended a killer and rescued him from the vengeance of the law.

But why did he have to *tell* me?"

I went to Ostrim's party anyhow. Don't ask me why. My first thought was to call the old man and claim that I was sick, exhausted, running a fever. I didn't want my victory celebrated. I couldn't stand that much irony. But I went, mostly because Karen was there and I needed to see her.

Ostrim's fancy duplex was filled with fancy-looking people, men in evening clothes and women in satiny dresses with pearl and diamond accents. It was a peculiar slice of society. Except for a few personal friends, and a handful of lawyers—they were the ones in the dark blue suits, looking sheepish and mumbling to each other in the corners—the guests were clients and ex-clients. Some couldn't make the party, of course; they were too busy serving time in state or federal prisons. Those attending were the lucky ones. I wondered how many were "lucky" the way Rydell had been.

Ostrim's houseboy took my coat and hat and grinned a couple of inches wider to let me know that he recognized me as the guest of honor. The old man bellowed happily when he saw me, and grabbed me by the nape of the neck. "Hold it, everybody, hold it," he announced. "Here's the man we've

been waiting for. Ned Murray, folks, greatest trial lawyer since Clarence . . . no, since Harry Ostrim!"

They laughed and cheered and applauded, and I hated myself for being stupid enough to lap it up. Somebody shoved a drink in my hand and I was quickly surrounded by well-wishers. I got thumped on the back a dozen times, and the women rustled about me with adoring smiles as if I were a movie star after a successful premiere. I tossed off that first drink in a hurry and was promptly handed another. It was funny how soon the memory of Rydell's office visit was obliterated, how simple it seemed to forget everything but the triumph. I was exhilarated again. I told myself that, guilty or innocent, I had done the job I was hired for, and done it well. I had earned all this; I deserved it.

Then Karen pushed her way through the crowd and gave them all a demonstration of her prerogative. She slipped her arms around me, and in the center of that laughing circle, we kissed. I stopped hearing their whistles and applause. For me, this was the only congratulatory message that meant a thing.

After a while, they left us alone and Karen steered me off into a corner.



"Father says you were terrific," she told me. "He says you were everything he used to be in a courtroom. And there's no higher praise than that, coming from him." She giggled.

"Let's forget about it," I said. "The trial's over."

"I don't want to forget about it. I'm proud of you, Ned. You know how guilty that man seemed to be, and yet—"

"There's too much fuss about it. Rydell wasn't anybody special."

"He was special to Father. Father said if you could win this case you could do anything, that it meant a lot in business to the firm. Do you know what I think? He's not going to wait on that promise, about the junior partnership. I think it's going to be sooner than you expect."

That was what I wanted. I couldn't be blamed for the way my pulse speeded up when Karen said that.

She put her lips next to my ear. "You'll have to stop making excuses pretty soon, lover. You'll have to name the day."

Ten minutes later, Tony Eigo came in. I'd never seen Tony at Ostrim's before. He didn't like parties. Tony's tailor was probably better than Ostrim's, but he didn't look comfortable in his evening suit. He kept smoothing his hand

over the crinkly gray hairs at his temple, and looking around nervously as if hoping to find a friendly face. He spotted mine, and his tanned features lit up with a white-toothed grin.

"Hey, Ned," he said. "You still shake hands with ordinary people? Big celebrity like you?"

"Knock it off," I said. "Karen, you know Tony Eigo."

"Yes," she said, with a frozen smile. "Excuse me, I'd better hostess a little." She got up and left. That was one thing about Karen; college and everything, her manners weren't the best. Tony didn't notice, or pretended not to. He sat down in the seat she had vacated.

"I was in court today," Tony said. "I been there the last four days. Bet you didn't even notice, hah?"

"No," I said. "That's nice of you, Tony, a busy man like you."

"I got a personal interest," he said. That embarrassed him, and he lit a cigarette. "How do you get a drink in this joint?"

I went over to the bar and got him one. I saw Ostrim looking at me sideways, and not with approval. He didn't like Tony Eigo, even if he always invited him, trusting to Tony's sense of propriety to keep him away. Well, Tony didn't want to keep away this night, and that was all right

with me. Tony was more than an ex-client; he was my friend. I never boasted about the fact, but it was true.

I met him in 1959, my first year at Ostrim, Wright and Morgan. He wasn't the kind of client they welcomed, an entrepreneur of the underworld, a man who couldn't see the dividing line between criminal enterprise and legitimate business. Sometimes that line gets hazy, and the law steps in to define it.

In '59 he was threatened with more than a rap on the knuckles. He was indicted for murder. Only Tony was innocent. He proved it to me, and I proved it to the court. I think even Ostrim was surprised. He'd foreseen a fat fee, and a guilty verdict, and no loss of reputation. I was the new boy, and I could afford to absorb the licking.

But I didn't. I got Tony off, and Tony wouldn't forget it, not if he lived to be a hundred.

I brought Tony his drink and he saluted me with it.

"Here's health," he said. "That guy Rydell was lucky having you."

"Thanks," I said.

"My wife, Angie, she didn't like him. She didn't like the look of him."

"How's Angie feeling these days?"

"Good, fine." Tony squinted at me. "What's the matter, Ned?"

"Matter?" I grinned. "Nothing."

"Come on, I got eyes. For a guy who just won a case, you look like a loser. You look like somebody just dropped a four-horse parley."

"I'm tired, I guess. The strain of the whole thing."

"Yeah, sure," Tony said. "Look, I'm sorry I scared your girl away. I can drift off and you catch up to her."

"Plenty of time for that. I haven't seen you in months, Tony."

"Yeah, that's right." He blew smoke between his knees and shielded his eyes. "Look, Ned, you remember what I told you once, huh? You got any troubles you can't handle, I want to hear about them. You got a favor coming from me, and it bothers me not to pay off."

"That was a long time ago, Tony. You don't owe me a thing."

"I keep good books," he said. "Don't tell me who I owe what." He punched my arm, and grinned. "Go on, find that girl of yours. Maybe she can cheer you up."

I was all right until the party was over, until I didn't have people around to tell me what a great guy I was, and what a smashing victory I had won. When I was alone with myself, standing at the wall kitchen in my one-and-a-half

rooms and warming a glass of milk, I couldn't remember the words of praise and congratulations. All I could recall was Lew Rydell's voice.

*I really killed that boy, you know.*

And I let him walk out. Easy as that. Rydell must have enjoyed himself, telling me that, knowing how it would make me feel. Maybe he was proud of it secretly, needing to boast of it, as long as he was out of danger. . . .

Yes, he was out of danger. I suppose he realized that. The law of double jeopardy protected him from another trial; he couldn't be charged twice with the same crime. Technically, I wouldn't accomplish much by putting his confession on the desk of the district attorney. I couldn't prove it, anyway. Hadn't I just gone to court to prove the opposite?

No, I had to forget it. It was the only thing that made sense, a convenient case of amnesia.

*I'll do the same thing again if I have to. These men who bother my wife, they've got to learn. . . .*

That was the real problem. Yost, the grocery boy, nothing would put the roses back in his cheeks or the whistle back on his lips. But Melanie was still a beautiful woman, and there would be other men who might read the wrong idea in

her violet eyes, as the boy had.

I had trouble falling asleep. The idea that finally permitted sleep to come was a resolution to see Melanie Rydell the next day.

"Come in," she said. "Lew isn't home, you know. He went to see Mr. Fleming about going back to the company. You don't think he'll have any trouble, do you?"

"I knew he wasn't home," I said.

I took a seat without removing my topcoat. The apartment was in disorder, and so was Melanie. There was one curler still hanging limply from the back of her hair.

"Do you think they'll give him his job back?" she said, her eyes worried. "He was their best salesman before . . . before the trouble. They won't hold it against him, will they?"

"I don't know," I said, "I don't think they will."

"We're running awful short of money." She bit her lip, perhaps recognizing me as a creditor. "Can I get you a soft drink or something? There isn't any whiskey."

"I don't want anything. Would you sit down, Mrs. Rydell? I want to ask you a few things."

"Sure," she said.

I'd rehearsed my questions on the way up, but now I didn't feel very glib.

"Mrs. Rydell, before the trial, you

told me that your husband was the jealous type, didn't you?"

"Yes. Lew's funny that way, I told you."

"But there was never any reason for his jealousy?"

She stiffened. "Look, I don't see why we have to go through all that again. The trial's over, isn't it?"

"Please," I said. "It's more important than you think. This delivery boy, Yost. . . . I tried to underplay Lew's anger about him in court, but Lew was really pretty sore about that pass he made, wasn't he?"

"But I told you all that! Yes, Lew was sore. He went absolutely crazy, that's how he is. I didn't even want him to *know* about what the kid did, I was afraid he'd —" She pursed her lips. "Well, do what he did. Rough up the kid."

I chose my next words carefully.

"Mrs. Rydell, the trial's over, just as you said. Nobody could charge Lew with the crime again; that's the law in this state. So you've got nothing to lose by telling me the absolute truth."

"What do you mean?"

"Lew did kill that boy, didn't he?"

I watched her face. It looked as if I'd just slapped it.

"That's a dirty *lie*. How could you of all people—"

"All right, maybe you didn't know the truth. But please understand what I'm telling you now. *Lew murdered Yost*. His anger got the better of him, and that's what happened."

"Get out of here!"

"Please sit down, I'm not through. The reason I'm so sure about this is because Lew told me himself. Yesterday, in my office. I don't know why he decided to tell me the truth, but he did."

"You're a damned liar!" Melanie's eyes filled, and she pointed a finger at the door. You get out of here, Mr. Murray, you get out and don't come back."

"I asked you to please *sit down!*"

She must have been a little bit afraid of me. She sat down, slowly, and watched me like I was a snake coiling to strike.

"I don't enjoy telling you this," I said. "When your husband told me, I wanted to shut my ears just the way you do now. But it's too late. We know the truth and we have to face it." I leaned towards her. "The important thing is this. He's not going to change because of the trial. He's an insanely jealous man, and he might very well do the same thing all over again."

The tears spilled, but she made no sound.

"That's why I had to see you. I had to let you know how it is

with Lew. He got away with murder, and that makes me sick to my stomach, but there's not much I can do about it. Maybe you can do something about it the next time."

"The next time?" Her voice shook.

"You've got to be careful. Do you understand? You know him better than anybody, and you know what he's capable of. You've got to make sure he doesn't have any reason to be jealous."

"Listen! If you think I—"

"I don't think anything. But if Lew thinks you're playing around, even if he misunderstands your behavior, somebody else might get

killed. It might even be easier for him the next time. He got away with it once."

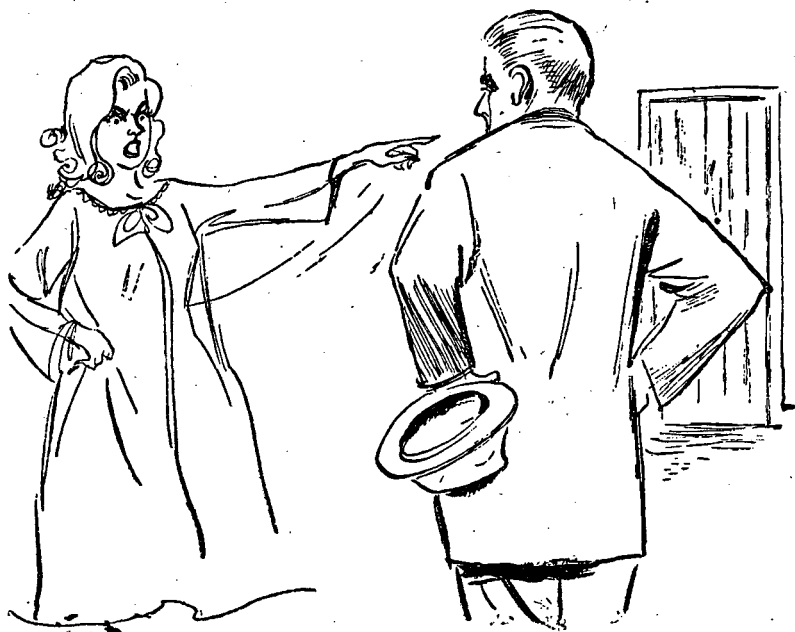
"I'd never do a thing like that! I love Lew—"

"Sure," I said. "Sure you do. And that's why I thought I'd warn you, Mrs. Rydell. If you love Lew, then be careful. That's all I wanted to say."

I stood up and went to the door. I looked back at her and she wasn't moving, not a hair.

I let myself out, feeling a little bit better about the way things were.

I came into the office the next



morning and found a message on my desk.

*Mr. Ostrim would like to see you. L.*

I went into the old man's office and found the window blinds drawn, all six of them. Ostrim was behind the desk, looking like a thundercloud. The leather chair in front was filled by Lew Rydell, his topcoat in his lap and a cigarette in his hand.

"Sit down, Ned," Ostrim said.

I sat down, without looking at Rydell. Just the sight of him knotted my stomach.

"Mr. Rydell's told me something I find hard to believe. I said he must be mistaken, but he swears it's true. Did you go to see Mrs. Rydell yesterday?"

"Yes," I said.

I heard Rydell breathe out smoke or relief, I didn't know which.

"Why did you think it necessary to see Mrs. Rydell?"

"I had something to tell her," I said. "It was strictly an unofficial visit."

"You told her I was guilty," Rydell said hoarsely. "You went up there deliberately, just to frighten her. I ought to sue you for what you did, Mr. Murray, lawyer or no lawyer."

Ostrim's eyes were almost pleading. "What kind of nonsense is this, Ned? You didn't say any such

thing, did you? I can't believe it."

"Yes, sir, I did. I didn't go there to frighten her, just to warn her. Right after the trial, Mr. Rydell here obliged me with a nice little confession. A little late," I added bitterly.

"A confession? What are you talking about?"

"It's a lie," Rydell said. "I don't know what you've got against me, Mr. Murray. I never heard of a lawyer behaving like this. I didn't kill that boy. The jury said so. You've got no right to persecute me or my wife."

"Ned," Ostrim said plaintively. "Ned, please, don't make a mess of things now. If Mr. Rydell said something foolish, something that led you to believe—"

"Mr. Rydell put it bluntly. He said he killed Yost. He said he'd kill again if another Yost came along. That's the way it was, Mr. Ostrim. You think I didn't feel like two cents? I was ready to go to the district attorney—"

Now Rydell was on his feet, his dead-flesh face momentarily activated by anger, his oily eyes popping. "It's over! The trial's over! They can't put me through that again, they can't!"

"No, no," Ostrim soothed, "of course they can't, Mr. Rydell, there's nothing to get excited about. Mr. Murray just misunder-

stood you, that's all," he assured.

"I read him loud and clear," I said. "I knew I couldn't get him back in a courtroom if I went to the D.A., not for killing Yost. But he'd be a lot more careful with his hands the next time."

"I'll sue you!" Rydell screamed. He whirled on Ostrim and shook his finger as if scolding a child. "You hear me, Mr. Ostrim? You don't stop him from talking that way, I'll sue this firm for slander!"

"Please, Ned." Ostrim brushed sweat from his wide forehead. "Apologize to Mr. Rydell, tell him you didn't mean it."

"Apologize? Yes, I should apologize. To the state, for saving his skin—"

Ostrim came out from behind the desk and planted himself in front of me. The thundercloud was a storm now.

"Now you listen to me," he said, in a threatening rumble. "I don't know what went on between you and this man, and I don't care. But he's a client, understand, *my* client, even if you handled the case. Anything you do reflects on me, on the way I run this firm. Mr. Rydell got a fair trial—"

"Better than fair," I said.

"Yes, and the jury acquitted him, that's all we have to know. You don't have any right to violate any confidences he made to you, I don't

care what they were. Didn't they teach you that in law school?"

"They taught me something —else," I said. "They taught me that a lawyer's main concern was for justice."

Ostrim let me see his teeth. "You young cub! Are you trying to tell me about justice? What gives you the right to lecture *me*?"

"I didn't mean it that way—"

"What do you think I'm operating here, some two-bit shyster club? Is that how you think I built this business?"

"Look, Mr. Ostrim—"

"You talk about justice, huh? Go talk to that hoodlum buddy of yours, that Tony Eigo. If there was *justice*, you think that crook would be walking around loose?"

My cheeks were burning, all the hotter because I could see Rydell's face, and there was a grin on it a mile wide.

"All right," I said. "I wasn't trying to needle you, Mr. Ostrim. But what I told you was the truth."

"I don't care what you told me."

I turned on my heel and went to the door. I didn't want to see the faces I left behind me. I heard Ostrim bellow, "*Ned!*" but that didn't stop me either. I went down the hall, past my own office, past my secretary's bewildered stare, and left the building.

I was in the livingroom, working on the second third of the bottle, when the doorbell rang. I'd already hung up on three phone calls, one from Schwartz and two from Ostrim himself, but I should have known they wouldn't let it go at that. This time, they sent a personal emissary, and the best they had.

"Hello, Ned," Karen said. "Look what I brought you."

She handed me a small oblong package, and I looked at it stupidly. "What is it?" I asked, my tongue thick. I hadn't had lunch, and the whiskey was numbing me nicely.

"Open it," she said. "It's that pipe you told me you were so crazy about, the one with the ivory carving. I was saving it for some special occasion, but your birthday isn't for six months."

I went back into the room, fumbling with the package. Karen took it from me with a smile, and removed the pipe. Then she went over to the birchwood humidor I kept on my desk and filled it carefully.

"I know how to do this," she said. "Pack a little tighter on the bottom, looser on top. I used to do it for Father all the time, even when I was a little girl."

She brought the pipe to me on the sofa, and I said, "Forget it,

Karen. If you're going to bribe me, I prefer cash."

"Really?" She slid down the sofa arm into my lap. "I thought I'd use my sex appeal. I understand that's sure-fire."

I kissed her, because I wanted to. Then I pushed her away and went to get another drink. She watched me, and then she started to laugh.

"What's funny?" I said.

"The whole thing. You. Father. He told me about that scene in the office. I wish I could have been there. It must have been like Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan."

"It wasn't," I growled. "It was stupid and childish. And all because of that—"

"Yes, all because of that silly little man with the pop eyes. Men! Honestly! All that fuss over nothing at all." She tucked her legs under her. "But don't misunderstand me, darling. I think Father was just as much to blame, and I told him so. He feels just awful about the whole thing."

"I'll bet he does."

"For heaven's sake, Ned, why would you want to spoil things *now*? All right, so maybe that idiotic man *did* kill the grocery boy, I'm not saying he didn't. You don't think it's the first time that a guilty man has—"

I slammed my glass down so



hard that ice cubes flew. "It's the first time for *me*! That's all I care about!"

"But was it, darling? Was it really? That man Eigo—"

"Tony was innocent! I defended an innocent man."

"Innocent of *that* crime, maybe. But what about all the others? He might have killed a dozen men, or had them killed."

"He wasn't being tried for killing a dozen men, only one. And he was innocent of that."

The amusement went out of her.

"I should know better than to talk to you when you're drinking. Your stubborn streak just gets calcified."

"Did your father ask you to come here?"

"It was my own idea."

"Why?" I said. "Did you think you could change my mind? I'm going to the D.A. tomorrow, Karen. Even if it doesn't do a bit of good, I'll feel better for it."

"Do you know what the D.A. will say? He'll say you're a fool. That's what everybody will say."

"I don't care."

"You haven't got a shred of proof, not a shred. And all the proof in the world wouldn't put Rydell back on the stand. You know that, don't you?"

"I know it. Like your father says, Karen, I went to law school."

"Do you know what else he says? He says that if you go to the D.A. tomorrow you can find yourself another connection."

Drunk or sober, that stopped me.

"And what about you?" I asked.

"What about the connection between you and me?"

She swung her feet to the floor, and looked at her pointed toes.

"I waited long enough for you to get serious about me, Ned. I can wait a little longer, until you come to your senses."

"That's the real bribe, isn't it?" I sneered. "That's what Daddy told you to say, huh?"

She flared up like a cheap match.

"He didn't have to tell me what to say, counselor. I make up my own speeches. So put that in your pipe and smoke it."

She picked up her wrap from the armchair and threw it over her shoulders. I'd seen Karen in a temper before, and you might as well try to stop a locomotive. She went out of the apartment at full steam, slamming the door.

I went to work on the second third in that bottle, because it seemed like the logical thing to do. An angry drunk is the worst kind, and the next thing I remembered was looking down at the white ivory pipe on the floor and wondering how it got there. When I bent down to pick it up, I saw

the patent leather shoes and knife-like creases of Tony Eigo's trousers. I didn't know how Tony had gotten there either, or why he was sitting in the opposite chair with that small patient smile on his brown, Mediterranean face.

"That's a nice pipe," he said softly. "You shouldn't treat it that way, Ned."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm an invited guest, remember?" He chuckled. "No, I guess maybe you don't. You called me about half an hour ago, said to come up and have a drink with you. Well, here I am. You want me to cut out?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said blearily. "Have a drink, Tony. Here's to crime." I fumbled for my glass. There wasn't anything in it but flavored ice.

"I don't think I'll join you," Tony said. "You're too far ahead of me. You want to start fresh, okay. I'll put on some coffee and we'll talk about it."

"You know what?" I said. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Fifteen minutes later, Tony had a steaming cup of coffee under my nose.

"Celebration's going on a long time, Ned. What's the matter?"

"Through celebrating," I said. "Now I'm commiserating. That's the word, right? Com-mis-erating."

With that poor slob Yost, that dumb kid from the grocery store."

My eyes were just coming into focus, and I could read the puzzlement on Tony's face. It was the friendliest face I knew right then, maybe the only face that would react the right way to the story I had to tell.

So I told it. I told him about Lew Rydell, the popeyed crazy jealous killer who couldn't keep his mouth shut. I told him about our little meeting in the office, about Rydell's lie and Ostrim's threats, and the kiss from Karen that was really a kiss-off. I was right. Tony's face was understanding. His eyes reflected the pain I was feeling, and his mouth tightened in sympathetic indignation.

"And they can't get him?" he said bitterly. "They can't nail this crumb?"

"Double jeopardy, Tony, you know how it goes. One trial to a customer."

"They've hung better guys than him. And he walks out free as air."

"That's how it is. That's the law."

"The law," Tony said dryly.

"That statue of Justice, Tony, you know what's wrong with her? She ought to be bending over a little backwards, that's how she should look. We bent over so far



backward that Rydell's out on the street, just waiting to wring some other sucker's neck."

"He ought to be stopped," Tony said. "A guy like that."

"Sure, you tell me how."

"He ought to pay the penalty. Like everybody else."

"It's too late," I said, shaking my head. "Too late, Tony."

"Too late for the law, maybe."

I didn't know what he was thinking. I was too fuzzy to comprehend the process of logic going on in his head. I just sat there, sipping the hot coffee and feeling sorry for myself.

Then Tony said, "I been waiting a long time, Ned. I never figured out what I could do for you, what kind of favor might be important. Now I know.

"What's that? How do you mean, favor?"

"It won't be just for you," he smiled. "I guess I'd be doing everybody a favor, the whole state. Only I mean it for you, Ned, remember that."

I heard his footsteps, and realized that he was on his way out. I got off the chair as fast as my aching head would allow me to move, and went to intercept him.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" I said. "What the heck did you just say, Tony? What's on your mind?"

"Nothing, kid, nothing." He smiled sleepily. "Come on, I did my good deed for today. Let me out of here now."

"Tony, where are you going?"

"On my rounds, where else?"

You know I'm a busy guy. I always got people to see and things to do." He slapped my arm. "You get to bed. You'll need your strength for that hangover tomorrow."

"I want to know what you mean by a favor."

I looked him in the eyes, and I knew.

"You're thinking of killing Rydell . . ."

"You see too many movies, kid."

"Tony, don't be crazy! I don't want that kind of favor, understand?"

"Yeah, sure. Just let him loose, huh? So what if he gets away with murder. Plenty of guys do that. You told me yourself, a nut like Rydell, he's a sure thing to try it again—"

"Killing him's no answer!"

"Sure, so let some other slob get knocked off, huh? That's better?"

"I didn't mean all those things I said, Tony. You got the wrong idea!"

"This guy didn't just kill a grocery boy. He's killing you too, buddy, and that's what I care about. You don't have to worry. Nothing's going to rub off on you." He grinned lopsidedly. "I know my business, Ned, just like you know yours."

"Tony!"

But he was out the door, and

down the hall, and into the elevator before he could hear another protest.

I looked at my watch, and it said twenty minutes past seven. It was a long day.

I flopped into a chair and kneaded my pulsing temples with my thumbs. I went into the bathroom, shook three aspirins into my hand, and swallowed them.

I saw myself in the mirror of the medicine cabinet, and was shocked by the placid face that looked back at me. Eyes a little red-rimmed, hair mussed, but not the face I should have seen. It should have been drawn and haggard, suffering the pains of an anguished conscience.

But the face was placid, and I began to wonder how my conscience really worked.

"You can't let him do this," I said aloud.

My face looked back at me, and silently it answered, "Why not?"

Angrily, I switched off the light so I couldn't see myself. Then I went back into the living room and headed for the telephone. I had alternatives. I didn't have to let things stand this way. Not the police, that was out. I wasn't going to sacrifice Tony for Rydell, not for anything. Ostrim? I knew what he thought of Tony.

The only sensible course was to

call Rydell himself. A warning. I wouldn't have to explain it, I wouldn't even have to identify myself . . . But would he believe me, identified or anonymous?

I picked up the phone, and put it right down again.

But maybe Tony was right. It wasn't murder, it was an execution, the carrying out of a delayed sentence. It wasn't a meaningless killing, it was preventative war . . .

Suddenly, I knew the man I wanted to call. The only one I could talk to, who would give me the answer I wanted.

I dialed information.

"I want the number of Mr. Lincoln Arthur, 14 East Hamil Street."

Linc wasn't judgelike outside of a courtroom. In his billowing black robes, supported by desk and gavel, it was easy to conjure up a stern visage and indomitable jaw. Actually, he was round-faced and plump-jowled, more like a gentle schoolmaster than a dispenser of justice. He made me feel like a schoolboy, too, the way I was fumbling with my remarks like a kid who hadn't done his homework.

"Let's slow it down," he said quietly, leaning back in his study chair. "I can't follow this story of yours, Ned. Is it a parable or what?"

"It's more like a riddle," I said

glumly. "A legal riddle. Only I already know the answer."

"All right," he smiled. "Let's see if I know it."

I took a deep breath.

"It's about a lawyer," I said. "A criminal lawyer, who defends somebody for murder and does it successfully. He's convinced of his client's innocence, understand, and his own conviction helps him in getting the acquittal. But right after the verdict, he makes a discovery. His client's guilty, see?"

"How does he make this discovery?"

"Is that important?"

"It might be. Was it on evidence that had appeared in the trial? Evidence he had misinterpreted, or concealed unknowingly?"

"No," I said. "It was a confession."

"How does he obtain this confession?"

"It's given to him, unsolicited, by his client."

"Why?" Linc asked bluntly.

"I don't know why! But there he is. He knows the truth about his client, and he knows something worse. That the man is more than capable of committing a similar crime, and he boasts of the possibility almost gleefully . . ."

"Any witnesses to this confession?"

"No. And when he's confronted

with it, the client denies having ever made it."

Linc rubbed his chin. "You're not asking a legal question, Ned. I'm sure you know where your—hypothetical lawyer stands legally. In the middle of nowhere. Is this a moral question?"

"You might say that. If you were that lawyer, Judge, what would you do?"

It had begun to rain, the first swollen drops thumping against the window behind the Judge's desk. Linc stood up creakily and went to secure the latch. I'd forgotten what an old man he had become. I began to regret having bothered him with questions that couldn't be answered.

"If I were that lawyer," he said, after sitting down again, "and if I were your age, I suppose I'd do what you're doing now, Ned. I'd get angry, with my client, with myself, even with the law. But if I were practicing now, I think I'd feel different."

"How different?"

"I wouldn't feel anger. Only pity."

I couldn't help showing my disgust. "Pity? For a man like that?"

"Yes, exactly for that kind of man. A man who feels a compulsion to confess must have felt a similar compulsion to kill. They are symptoms of the same disease.

And if there's one thing the law's learned in this century, it's the ability to feel compassion for the sick."

"He's sick, all right, but that doesn't—"

"Ned!" He spoke so sharply that I looked into his face and saw courtroom sternness in his eyes. "This parable of yours. Are you talking about Rydell?"

"Yes," I said.

"He told you that he murdered Yost?"

"He did, Judge, I swear it. In my own office, the same day of the verdict. I think he got a kick out of it."

"Yes," Linc said. "I suppose he did."

"He knew he was safe enough, that he couldn't be indicted again—"

"The rationale of the irrational . . ."

"What?"

"For God's sake, Ned, use your brains! Can't you see the man's mentally ill? Everything points to it. He killed a boy just for putting an arm around his wife. He confesses when there's no need to confess. Is it worthwhile venting all this anger against a sick man?"

"But he's dangerous! He'll do this again, Judge, if a man just looks cross-eyed at his wife it'll be another excuse for murder!"

"If he had confessed to you be-

fore the trial was over, if he had been found guilty—”

“Yes, if! Then he’d be where he belonged. In the death house . . .”

“You’re forgetting something, Ned. I was the Judge at the trial. It was my prerogative to pass sentence, not yours.”

“It was first-degree murder! Premeditated!”

“Do you think that would make any difference? There isn’t any automatic death sentence. The right to determine the penalty was mine.”

“You mean you wouldn’t have —”

Linc stood up behind his desk, and suddenly, even without benefit of robes, he was the Judge again.

“No,” he said quietly. “If the jury had brought me a guilty verdict, Ned, I wouldn’t have sent Rydell to his death. I know just what I would have done. I would have recommended psychiatric examination with a view to confinement in an institution for the criminally insane. . . .”

I felt nothing when Linc spoke. No pang of regret or flush of guilt. I didn’t feel the floor under my feet or the pressure of my hands on the arm of my chair. I sat there, staring blankly at Linc’s face, suspended in a vacuum of emotion, unwilling to come out of it and face my thoughts. I had gotten

the answer I was looking for, from the only man qualified to give it. But there was another man, a smiling, brown-faced man carrying a burden of gratitude that would make Linc’s judgment meaningless. . . .

“I have to go,” I said, forcing myself out of the chair. “Thanks, Judge,” I mumbled. “Thanks a lot.”

“Ned, you shouldn’t let this upset you so much.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “There’s something I have to do.”

The rain had become a downpour, and the streets of the city were black and glossy. Now that I knew what I had to do, it was as if God and the taxi company had conspired to prevent my doing it. I stood on the corner, whistling shrilly at cabs that, empty or occupied, rolled by heedlessly. I didn’t know the neighborhood, didn’t understand the intricacies of the local subway or bus lines, and the place I had to be was forty city blocks away. I thought of telephoning Rydell again, trying to frame the words that would convince him of his peril. I thought of calling Tony, too, but nobody reached Tony after nightfall. Those were his working hours. I walked through the wet streets, praying that Tony wouldn’t be working tonight, not on the job he had prom-

ised to do. I crossed my fingers.

I stepped off the pavement at an intersection and a cab almost ran me down. A woman got out, shrieked at what the rain was doing to her hair and ran for shelter. I grabbed the door handle and jumped into the back seat, shouting the address of Lew Rydell's brownstone.

I was cold and miserable, and I was in no mood for cab driver conversation. But he was a talkative one, and I had to listen to the complaints: Friday night traffic, the weather, the tipping habits of dames, the shortage of power hitters on the local ball club. I wanted to say, shut up, buddy, you want to hear troubles? I could tell you some.

We hit every light. We ran into a construction muddle in midtown that slowed us down to a crawl. Every tick of the meter was like a heartbeat. I kept thinking; maybe Tony won't do it. Maybe he was bluffing. Maybe it wouldn't be tonight, and there would still be time. . . .

We headed crosstown at last. I leaned close to the streets, counting off the blocks.

Then we were there, at Morton Street, and my first thought was: *Too late!*

"Hey, what's goin' on?" the driver said. "Somethin' must have

happened, huh? Look at the cops."

There were two police cars flanking the entrance to Lew Rydell's brownstone, and an ambulance was parked across the street. Even in the rain a crowd had collected, pushing each other, jockeying for views, desperately trying for closer looks at whatever tragedy was available.

I dropped two bills in the driver's lap and slammed out of the taxi. The crowd resisted my attempts to reach the entrance; they weren't giving up their vantage points. I tried to flag the attention of the patrolman holding back the spectators, but I was just another face in the crowd to him. Then I spotted Dov Gerhart of Homicide West, and yelled at him. Dov ought to remember me, maybe not with pleasure, but he knew me. I shouted his name until he turned and looked in my direction.

"Wait a minute," Dov said, coming toward me. "It's okay, Phil, you can let this one through."

"Thanks," I said. "Listen, Dov —"

But Dov wasn't listening. He turned to look at the open doorway of the building, at the white-coated stretcher bearers bringing out the night's victim. They weren't in a hurry, and it was understandable. The sheet went all the way.



"Dov, listen to me—" I repeated.

The detective grimaced, and said: "Yeah, I'll be glad to, Ned. He was your pal, wasn't he? Deepest sympathies."

"My pal?"

"Tony Eigo." He turned, and watched them load the ambulance with the corpse. "That's something, all right. Probably a dozen guys wanted Tony Eigo knocked off, and how does he get it? From a jealous husband . . ."

"Tony?" I said. "Tony dead?"

"Your ex-client did it," Dov said grimly. "That guy Rydell. He caught Tony hanging around the building, watching the place. Rydell claims he was after his wife. You know anything about that, Ned?"

"It's not true," I said, shaking my head. "He didn't know the woman, Dov. I swear he didn't. Rydell was crazy—"

"That's the word for it, all right. When Tony came into the hallway, Rydell came downstairs and shot him dead. Fired five bullets

into him, screaming like a banshee."

"Where is he?" I said numbly.

"Where's Rydell?"

"Upstairs, answering questions. He won't get away, not like last time, counselor." He looked at me, his mouth twisted. "You think he can? Think you can spring him a second time?"

I started up the steps, and Dov put his hand on my arm.

"Wait a minute. Where do you think you're going?"

"I want to see him, Dov. He's entitled to talk to a lawyer, isn't he?"

"You must be nuts yourself. Half a dozen witnesses saw him do it—"

"Can I go up?"

He pushed his hat back from his forehead. "You mean you'll defend that screwball again? He's out of his mind, don't you know that?"

"I know it," I said. "That's what I'll try and prove."

Dov took his hand off my arm, and I went upstairs to see my client.





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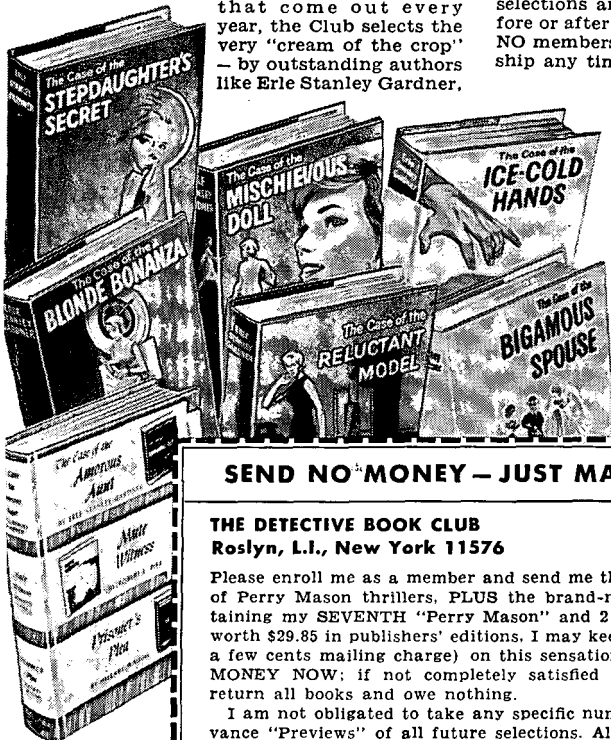
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