ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

164 pages
of ORIGINAL stories
presented by
the MASTER of SUSPENSE

July 1965

Dear Readers:

I am terrified of sudden noises. This is a lamentable admission for a man of my (supposed) horrific aptitude, but the slamming of a door sets my teeth on edge; the whack-bang of a Fourth of July firecracker (soon upon us) shatters my equanimity. If you are similarly inclined, take heart; many famous heroes suffer from certain minuscule but carefully concealed fears.

As for hiding facts and fears from Sheriff Peavy, in Richard Hardwick's SLOW MOTION MURDER, I'm afraid even a Philadelphia lawyer wouldn't score on this count. In THE FIVE-MINUTE MILLIONAIRE by James Cross we meet a too discerning girl who plays a dual role only to deceive herself.

Wenzell Brown's GALLIVANTIN' WOMAN depicts a hardy New England character who has more courage than she has sense. And, for a display of concern for each other's safety outweighing fear of death itself, read about the couple in LOADED GUNS ARE DANGEROUS, by Richard O. Lewis. A strong story, bearing down on human emotions, you will find in Clark Howard's THE PEREGRINE.

Other outstanding moments of fictional disaster await you within this issue, all of them designed to set your teeth chattering and your spine tingling.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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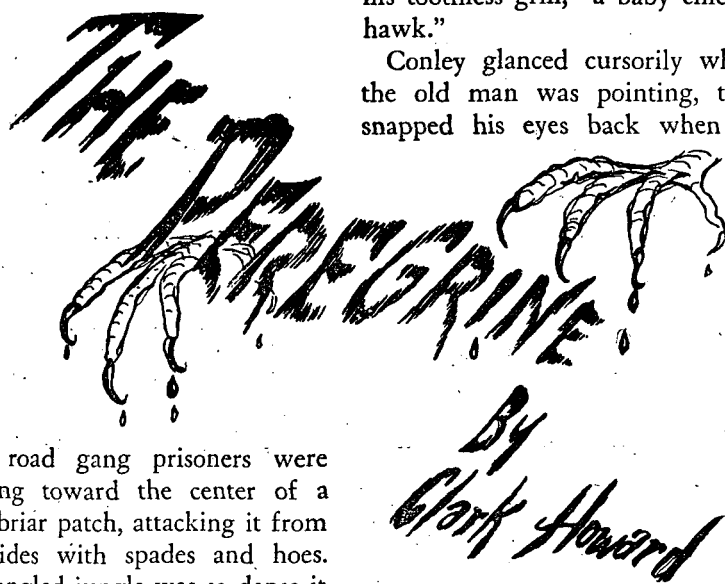
As failure may emerge from overtraining, so may one's reward be circumvented through peregrination.



THE road gang prisoners were working toward the center of a thick briar patch, attacking it from two sides with spades and hoes. The tangled jungle was so dense it would take weeks to clear. The briars, treacherous with thorns, were waisthigh, so that despite the burning Florida sun the men labored clad in denim jackets and harness gloves. They worked in pairs, at intervals of fifteen feet. Conley, as usual, worked with the old man, Beever.

It was Beever who found the peregrine.

"Look there," he said, grinning his toothless grin, "a baby chicken hawk."

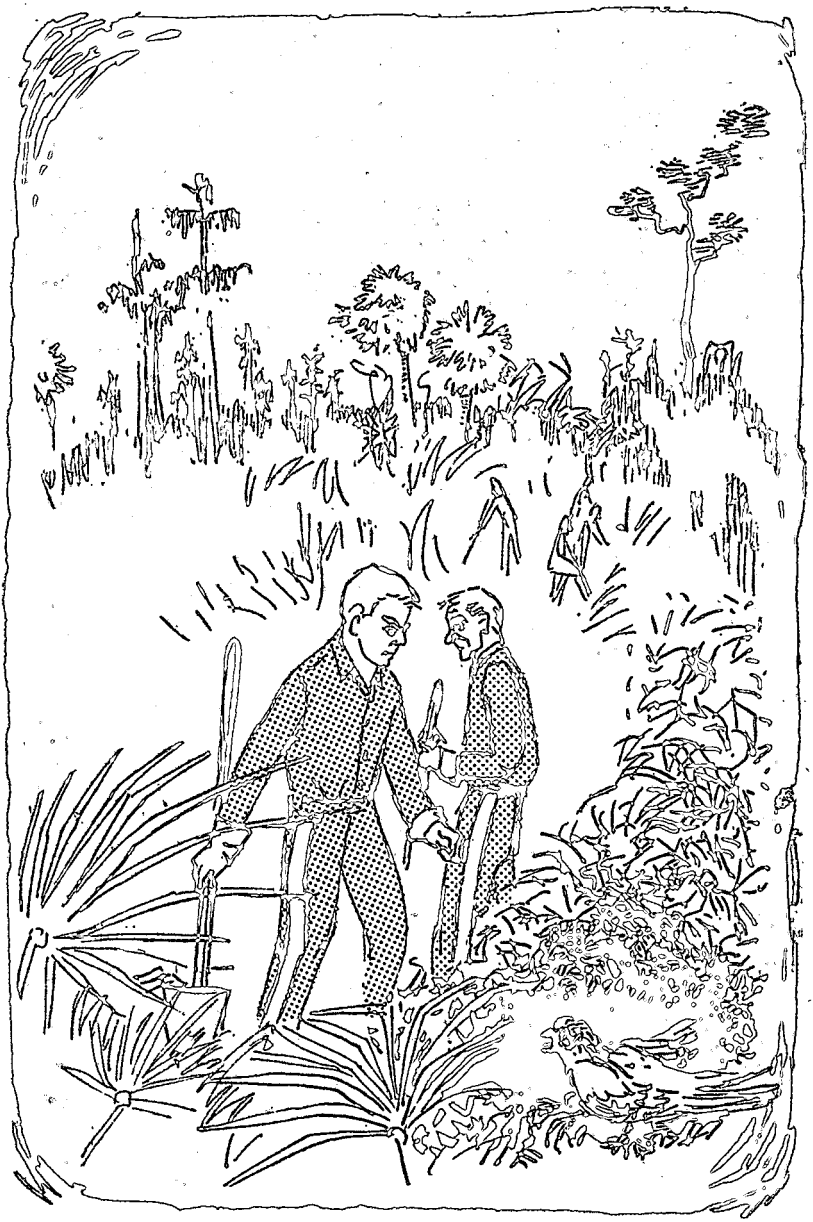
Conley glanced cursorily where the old man was pointing, then snapped his eyes back when he fully realized what he had seen.

"Chicken hawks is bad for farmers," Beever observed. He raised his hoe a few inches to kill it.

"Don't," Conley said urgently. "That isn't a chicken hawk."

"I know a chicken hawk when I see one." Beever moved closer to his prey.

"Don't do it," Conley said evenly, his words now a warning.



Beever stopped and squinted curiously at him. "What's the matter with you? If that there ain't a chicken hawk, I'd like to know what it is."

"I'll tell you what it is," Conley said quietly, his eyes frozen on the bird lying snarled in the thicket. "It's a female peregrine. A falcon."

Conley glanced at the wooden guard shack a hundred years away. Tevis, the road gang guard, sat on a chair in the shade, cradling a double-barreled shotgun across his knees. Fifty feet from the shack a long length of chain was stretched out in the dust. The chain was known as the Deadline; no prisoner was allowed to step beyond the chain when approaching the shack.

"Keep working," Conley said to the old man. "Watch Tevis and warn me if he gets curious."

Conley moved behind and around Beever and inched his way toward the trapped peregrine. The bird fluttered its free wing nervously and opened wide its knife-like hooked beak. Round agate eyes, fluid with fear, watched every move Conley made.

"Easy, bird," Conley whispered in a soothing voice, "easy now." He drew a wrinkled handkerchief from his pocket and folded it lengthwise in eighths. "Nice little falcon, nice baby."

When he was close enough he reached quickly and looped the thick fold of white over the peregrine's head, blindfolding it. The bird fell motionless at once and lay calmly in its briar trap.

"Give me a shoelace," Conley whispered to Beever. The old man's toothless mouth opened to protest, but the cold seriousness of Conley's face, the tightened lips and almost wild eyes, made him reconsider. Beever quickly pulled a lace from one hightopped prison brogan and tossed it to the ground near Conley. The younger man snatched it up and wound it snugly but not tightly around the handkerchief, securing it with an easily removable knot.

"Lie easily now, falcon," he whispered, moving back beside Beever. "How's Tevis doing?" he asked the old man.

"Ain't moved," Beever said. "What'd you do to that there—what'd you call it?"

"Peregrine," Conley said softly. "A peregrine falcon. I blindfolded it. When a falcon can't see, it dozes and rests. I don't want it to hurt its wing until I can untangle it from the thorns." Conley glanced up at Tevis now and saw that the guard was gazing off in another direction. "Listen," he said urgently to Beever, "when we break for the morning water ration, I want

you to get me a piece of rawhide. I'll wander toward the Deadline and attract Tevis' attention. While he's watching me, you snatch a strip off the water bag lashing."

"How'm I gonna cut it?" Beever whined. "I don't have a knife."

"Use the head of the nail it's hanging on," Conley said impatiently.

"I don't know if I can."

"Listen, old man," Conley hissed, "how would you like to get out of this pesthole?"

"Get out?" Beever said dumbly. "Sure. Sure, I would but—"

"Then do what I tell you. Do *just* what I tell you, and a month from now you'll be eating steak and mushrooms in New Orleans." Conley paused for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, if you'd rather stay here and finish your time, I'll find somebody else to throw in with me. Just say so, that's all."

Conley turned and went back to work. Beever stared curiously as the younger man resumed his attack on the thicket. Steak and mushrooms in a month; the mere thought made his mouth water. 'Course, he'd have to get some new teeth first.

The old man grabbed up his hoe and moved quickly to catch up with Conley. "Don't get so uppity," he grinned, showing his gums. "I'll get you the rawhide."

Conley nodded and grunted something inaudible. Beever fell in beside him and the two men worked in silence for the rest of the morning.

That afternoon, Conley used the rawhide strip to fashion a jess, a shackle-like contrivance that kept the falcon's legs too close together for it to fly, with a long, narrow loop trailing behind for leashing purposes. With the falcon thus fettered, Conley carefully and gently untangled its trapped wing from the briars. He examined the bird for injury and was pleased to find none. Smiling, he fed the falcon half the bologna from his noon sandwich, and put it to rest in a clearing he had hoed out.

"We're lucky," he said to Beever, falling in beside him again, "it's a young one."

"Where do you figure it come from?" the old man asked.

"Probably fell out of a migratory flock," Conley said. Beever squinted a frown.

"A what?"

Conley looked at the old man with unconcealed distaste. "Don't you know *anything*? Look, peregrines breed up north—'way up north, in eastern Canada. You've heard of Canada, I presume?"

" 'Course," Beever said stiffly.

"All right," Conley went on.

"When it starts getting cold up there, they fly in groups down the coast to Central America. That's called migrating."

"I seen wild geese flying south," Beever allowed, "but I never seen no birds like that before."

"You never will either. The peregrine, my ignorant friend, is a most exceptional bird. It flies higher than the naked eye can see. It glides about four times as fast as any human can run. And when one of them spots a prey and goes into a dive, it shoots down at about two hundred miles an hour."

"How come you know so much about it?" Beever asked, almost hostile in the face of Conley's superior knowledge.

"I've been around, old man," Conley said mysteriously. "I've seen places, done things that couldn't even be imagined by you and the rest of the dirt farmers and poolroom hoodlums in this filthy gang."

"What are you doing here then," Beever asked arrogantly. "if you're so much better than we are?"

"I am here," Conley said icily, "because a little plan of mine fell through just after a very wealthy, and very gullible, Miami widow had turned over a considerable sum of money for me to, ah—invest for her. An unfortunate stroke of the worst kind of luck, without which, my toothless comrade, I would have been spared this somewhat less than satisfying association with you—" Conley glanced around at the other dirty, sweating convicts, "and your peers."

"Sorry we ain't up to your standards," Beever remarked snidely.

The two men again worked in surly silence for the next few hours. At the midafternoon break, Conley smuggled two inches of water back to the falcon and watched it drink greedily, all the while stroking its sleek black feathers and gently running two fingertips over its flat, smooth crown.

"Nice girl," he cooed, "nice little falcon."

The next morning, sitting on a truckbed while they bumped along the twenty miles to their job, Beever leaned over and whispered in Conley's ear.

"I sneaked a chunk of pork fat for the bird," he said, showing Conley a folded scrap of sack paper with grease rings spotting it. Conley glared at him for an instant before slapping the paper from the old man's hand. Beever's mouth fell open in surprise as he watched the precious piece of meat fly off to the side of the road.

"You fool!" Conley hissed. "If I

catch you feeding that bird, I'll strangle you!"

"I was just trying to help," Beever snorted.

"When I want your help, I'll ask for it! I don't want that falcon to eat anything—*anything*, you understand?—except that putrid bologna they feed us in the field at noon."

"That was a good chunk of meat," Beever complained.

"Oh, shut up!" Conley snarled. "You could have ruined the whole scheme with that filthy piece of pork!" He rolled his eyes upward in exasperation. "What I wouldn't give," he muttered loudly enough for Beever to hear, "to have you replaced by a reasonably intelligent eight-year-old."

When they got to the briar field and were unshackled from the truckbed and issued their hoes and spades, Conley made his way quickly to the area he and Beever had worked in the previous day. He found the peregrine where he had left it, still comfortably blindfolded and jessed.

"Hello, baby bird," Conley cooed, stealing a moment to caress the falcon's crown before lining up with Beever to begin the day's labor.

The sun came early that morning and beat down mercilessly on the convicts, its relentless heat drenching them with sweat and darkening their scratchy denim. As the discomfort of the sun increased, seemingly so did the treachery of the thorns that curved as long as three inches to their brutal points; that jabbed at and sometimes penetrated the harness gloves, pricking open the toughest of callouses, sending a message of sharp pain all the way through wrist and forearm to elbow. Dust, grimy and gritty, rose from the hoe slashes and spade thrusts, settling on parched lips and wet eyelids, clinging like resin. The briar patch was misery personified; a daily hell.

At the morning water break, Conley had Beever smuggle an inch of water back for the falcon, while the water he himself was able to steal he kept in reserve, under a flat rock to prevent its turning to mud from the dust, to give to the bird the last thing before the truck took them back to the prison camp.

"I want half of the bologna from your noon sandwich, too," Conley told the old man, "to feed our little winged friend before we go back tonight."

"Working in this heat on half rations ain't going to be easy," Beever grumbled, scratching his grizzled, dirty face. Conley glared at him.

"How much of your sentence do you still have left to do?" he asked sharply.

"Little better'n three years, I reckon. Why?"

"Well now, wouldn't you rather eat half rations at noon for a month, than full rations for the next three years? I mean, surely you have *that* much sense, Beever."

"Listen," the old man snapped, "I'm getting tired of you always telling me I'm stupid! Don't forget, slicker, it was me that found the bird in the first place!"

"Oh, yes," Conley said lightly, "and you didn't even know what it was. Why, you were so dumb you were going to kill it!"

"Yeah, well it was me that got the rawhide to tie it up, and it's me that helps sneak water and food back to it, an' me that watches Tevis and does the work for both of us while you're down on your knees talking to that damn perry-whatever-it-is—"

"All right, all right," Conley said urgently, "calm down, you fool, before Tevis hears you."

"There you go again!" Beever said in outrage. "You just called me a fool."

"Tevis is going to hear you." Conley hissed nervously.

"I don't care if he does!" Beever's voice grew louder and the convicts on both sides of them paused to see what was the trouble. "We's both convicts here," Beever continued to rant, "both working this here same patch of ground, and I'm getting powerful tired of your high and mighty ways. I'm good as you are, you hear me!"

"All right, Beever, all right," Conley was pleading now as he noticed the fat guard looking their way curiously, the sun gleaming off the polished stock of his scattergun.

"Say it then!" Beever demanded. "Say I'm good as you are!"

"You are," Conley said tightly, forcing the words from his throat, "you're as good as I am, old boy. Now will you please calm down before we both—"

The dreaded shrill of an unscheduled whistle pierced the still, clammy air.

"You two!" a thick voice shouted at them. Every convict in the line had turned to face the big roadgang guard sitting in the shade beyond the Deadline. "You two there," he pointed the shotgun at Conley and Beever, "get over here!"

The two prisoners threw down their tools and doubletimed across the cleared area to the Deadline. With their toes even with the strip of chain, their hands behind their necks, they stood awaiting the

pleasure of their vigilant keeper.

"What's the argument all about, children?" Tevis asked in mock sweetness, his fat lips curled in a cruel smile.

Conley swallowed down a dry throat, trying desperately to think of something to say. Beever, who had been on road gangs before, spoke up at once.

"I said it was my turn to hoe," he lied to Tevis, "and his turn to spade. He said it wasn't."

"That so?" Tevis asked Conley.

"Yes, sir," Conley said quickly.

"Well now," Tevis grinned sadistically, "we can't have no disharmony like that when we're supposed to be doing our work, now can we? It'll distract all the other children out there. Looks like teacher will have to decide. You—" he pointed at Conley, "will hoe, and you, old man, will spade. Can you remember that?"

"Yes, sir," Conley and Beever said in unison.

"All right then, get on back out there."

They turned and started trotting back toward the briars. Before they were halfway there, Tevis blew the whistle again and called them back.

"I near forgot," he said pleasantly. "Drop your gloves there at the Deadline. You two can work with your bare hands for the rest of the day. How do you like that?"

The two prisoners shucked their gloves. They doubletimed back to their tools, hearing Tevis' nasty chuckle behind them, thinking of the thorns and the bloody hands they would have that night.

Later, after the noon break, after Conley had fed the falcon, Beever apologized. "I reckon it was my fault," he allowed meekly. "You just got me riled."

"Forget it," Conley told him shortly.

"You shouldn't rile me like that."

"I won't anymore," Conley promised soberly, feeling another thorn jab into his knuckle. He looked over at Beever and the old man grinned his toothless grin in silent friendship. Conley smiled back at him.

You filthy old scum, Conley thought, still smiling.

During the three weeks that followed, Conley treated the captured peregrine like a newborn prince. When the blindfold was removed, the falcon became nervous and angry, hissing frantically and spreading its razorlike talons threateningly; but Conley, with infinite, controlled patience, plied the bird with bits of bologna and soft, soothing words, until, after a few days, it let the convict feed it by hand instead of using a bramble

twig. Progress was nerve-wrackingly slow, primarily due to the fact that Conley could snatch only brief stolen moments away from the watchful eye of Tevis, the guard; but gradually those moments brought results as a hesitant but definite change took place in the peregrine's personality.

"I can't see how you do it," Beever confessed, awed by Conley's quiet relentlessness in the bird's training.

"With any other kind of peregrine, I probably wouldn't be able to," Conley admitted in a rare moment of civility, "but we are doubly fortunate in that this particular peregrine is a falcon, a female, and a young one to boot. Falcons are the easiest of all to train, and young ones are easier still. Being female, they like to have their food given to them without working for it; and being young, they haven't yet learned to seek out their own food when it isn't given to them."

Beever shook his head, not understanding, and Conley patiently explained it again in the most elementary language he could muster. He exercised an iron control over his personal distaste and carefully avoided losing his temper with the old man again. He needed Beever for the time being, and did not want to risk jeopardizing their relationship by offending him just now in any way.

Slowly, day in and day out, Conley continued to subject the peregrine to his own will; feeding it, caressing it, whispering to it, using the blindfold now only when the bird grew nervous from lack of flying. Soon the falcon began stirring in anticipation when it picked up Conley's scent when the convicts arrived for work. It came to know by instinct when it was time for the morning water, the bologna at noon, the second watering at three o'clock, and the last feeding before the road gang left at night. It came to depend on Conley as its source of existence, its life.

"How come you won't let it eat nothin' but baloney?" Beever wanted to know.

"I'm making it an addict," Conley told him. "I'm conditioning its body solely to bologna; after awhile that's all it will crave, because it won't remember what anything else tastes like. It won't know any other food but bologna."

"What good's that going to do?" Beever asked, puzzled.

"You'll see," Conley promised, "when the time is right."

The day came when Conley was convinced that the peregrine was ready. The young falcon could now detect the scent of bologna a hundred feet away; it was adjust-

ed to two rations daily of the pungent meat; and the only friend it knew in the world was Conley. The time for which Conley had waited so long had arrived.

Conley stopped feeding the falcon. "We're almost ready," he told Beever. "I think it's time we talked about the money, don't you?"

"What money?" Beever said innocently.

"The money you have rolled up in the seam of your shirt," Conley said matter-of-factly. "You aren't going to lie to me about it, are you, us being partners and all?"

Beever eyed Conley warily. "How much you reckon I got?" he challenged.

"I haven't the vaguest idea," Conley admitted. "However much it is, though, I want half of it."

"You ain't even told me yet how we're going to get out," the old man complained. "When do I hear?"

Conley stopped working and wiped the sweat from his neck. "All right, you're entitled to know. Stand up for a minute and take a look around." Conley waited, still stooped over his spade handle, while Beever did as instructed. When the old convict had resumed working position, Conley began to explain.

"We're out here twenty miles from the camp, you and I and the other prisoners, with one guard. That one guard has complete control over us as a group because he has a shotgun and sits behind a Deadline. There's no way to rush him because the moment any one of us or any group of us crosses the Deadline, he can shoot us. With the two barrels on that blaster of his, he can easily cut down ten men at medium range. So there's no possibility in the world of rushing him, right?"

"I reckon," Beever acquiesced.

"All right. Now suppose we could get Tevis out of the way sometime around noon? If we could run away from here at noon, what kind of chance would we have of escaping?"

"Good chance," the old man said. "We'd have a five-hour headstart before the truck comes to take us back. The main highway's 'bout an hour from here. If we was lucky enough to get a ride the first hour or so after we got to the highway, we could prob'ly be across the line in Alabama 'fore they even started looking for us."

"Good," Conley said eagerly. "You give me half the money you've got hoarded up," he offered, "and lead the way to the highway, and I'll take care of Tevis so we can get away."

"How?" said Beever. "With that there bird?"

"Exactly."

"When?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"What if it don't work?" Beever said skeptically.

"It will," Conley assured him, "it will."

Beever squinted his eyes against the sun and speculated the proposition, his gummy mouth gaping open in thought. "I'll take you to the highway," he said craftily, "and we'll divide the money there."

Now it was Conley's turn to ponder. He eyed the old man suspiciously, turning over in his mind all the possibilities of the situation. He did not have much choice in the matter, he concluded. Besides, he was reasonably certain he could handle the old man.

"All right," he said finally, "it's a deal."

The falcon, in its rawhide jess, moved around the briar patch irritably, scratching at the hard-packed dirt, pecking at thorn roots, occasionally hissing quietly but angrily.

"What's the matter with it?" Beever asked. Conley grinned.

"It didn't get fed at noon. It's hungry."

Beever paused in his work for a moment. "If you didn't feed the bird," he asked flatly, "where's the half-a-baloney sandwich I give you?"

"Oh, that," Conley said lightly, picking his teeth with a long thorn, "I was going to give it back to you but I accidentally dropped it in the dirt. I knew a well-bred person like yourself wouldn't want to eat dirty food, so I threw it away."

Beever glared at Conley as the younger man bent to resume working. That's two pieces of meat you done me out of, slicker, he thought hatefully.

"Anyway," Conley went on,

"you can keep your whole sandwich from now on; the falcon won't be eating anymore."

The next day the peregrine was totally indignant. It hissed and spat, ruffled its pointed wings at Conley's scent and chewed furiously at the rawhide shackle that kept it grounded. Late in the day, after the bird had missed its fourth feeding, Conley had to blindfold it again to keep it from injuring itself.

"I pity Tevis tomorrow," he told Beever ominously that night.

On the day of the break, Conley and Beever worked close together. They whispered the morning long about what the afternoon might bring.

"They's gonna be cons all over the woods," Beever predicted. "We won't be the onliest ones taking off."

"No, but we'll be the first to go," Conley said. "The others will be too surprised to do anything very quickly. We'll have a good enough headstart." He turned and looked thoughtfully at the toothless old man. "You never did tell me how much money we have," he reminded.

"I ain't gonna lie to you, son," Beever said, grinning, "us being together in this. We got twenty dollars."

Conley nodded. "That ought to at least buy us some cheap clothes so we can get rid of these dirty things we're wearing."

They worked in silence for awhile, both glancing back at Tevis from time to time, and at the now terribly hungry, terribly angry falcon, then up at the burning sphere of sun that today seemed to move so much more slowly toward its summit. The morning dragged; to Conley it seemed hours before Beever nudged him and whispered urgently.

"There he goes. It's time!"

Tevis, the guard, got up from his chair at exactly twelve o'clock, as was his daily custom. He cradled the shotgun under one arm, dragged a burlap bag from the shack and slung it over his shoulder. He blew his whistle loudly, a signal for the convicts to stand up straight so he could see them all and count them. When he had determined that none of them were close enough to endanger him, he walked over to the Deadline and put the bag down. From it he took a long loaf of prison bread and a brown-wrapped slab of sliced bologna. He spread the burlap out and put the food on it.

Conley and Beever, and now several other prisoners, watched intently as the falcon glided, unseen by the guard, in a slow circle above where Tevis stood. Only seconds

before, when Tevis turned toward the shack for the bag of food, Conley had released the peregrine and thrown it into the air toward the guard shack. Now the starving bird was on the wing again, free to seek its own food; and the heavy summer air, to the falcon's extraordinary sense of smell, was thick with the scent of bologna.

Tevis was bent over the burlap when the falcon dove. It broke its dive only a few feet from the guard's head, it's wings cutting the air silently and lowering it like a helicopter. Its talons sunk deeply into the back of Tevis' neck. The guard screamed in horror, dropping the shotgun from its cradle. Conley and Beever broke ranks and ran.

"How much farther to the highway?" Conley asked, leaning against a tree deep in the swampy woods, panting for breath, with the road gang four miles and fifty minutes behind them.

"Not far," Beever gasped. The old man was sprawled out on the damp marshy grass, his head propped up on a rotting log, chest heaving heavily. " 'Bout a mile, I reckon."

"Straight ahead?" asked Conley. Beever glanced at him suspiciously.

"More or less," he answered slowly.

"Let's get going then." Conley sucked in a last deep breath and pushed away from the tree. "You lead the way."

Beever dragged himself up and started forward. He had taken only three steps when Conley swooped up a smooth hand-sized rock from beside the tree and smashed it against the top of Beever's skull. The old man dropped limply to the ground. The dirty grey hair on the back of his head began to change slowly to crimson.

"There, you dirty old bum," Conley muttered to himself, rolling the limp form over and quickly ripping open the shirt seam. The money was rolled tightly, cigarette-fashion, and had been slipped into the seam through a tiny slit at one end. Conley unrolled the bills and smoothed them out, counting as he did so. There were four ten-dollar bills.

"Why you filthy old cheat!" Conley said outragedly. "You were going to take advantage of me!"

He paused only an instant to kick Beever's still body as hard as he could, then ran off into the marsh, grumbling indignantly at the thought of the old man's dishonor.

Pushing through the brush and slimy wet vines, Conley bore a course as near directly straight as he could determine. The grass under his feet grew mushy, causing his heavy prison brogans to slide precariously. Twice he slipped to his knees, cursing angrily at the slick residue left on his trouser legs. Once he saw a viper, black and threatening, and jumped back in horror, falling on his back in a thick, muddy bog and cursing furiously when some of the foul slush splashed up onto his face. Still he pushed on, clutching Beever's money in one fist.

It seemed to him that a very long time had passed since he had left the dead old man; much more time than should have been required to cover the last mile to the highway. He began to wonder if Beever had lied to him, and spent several minutes cursing his late dishonest partner again.

Soon a tight fear trickled into his mind and gave rise to the terrible suspicion that he might be lost. He stopped, wiping his face with the dry part of one sleeve. Glancing around, he saw that every direction

looked the same, thick with vines, wet scrub, reeds, strange noises, and foreboding. He shivered.

In the wake of near panic came inspiration. Conley turned his face skyward. Some of the trees seemed to be very tall—that one over there, for instance; if he could climb to its top, surely he could see the highway.

He shoved the money deep into a pocket and grasped the green, strange-feeling moss of a low branch. Pulling himself up, he went from limb to limb, pausing on each to peer out over the marshes for a hopeful sight of the highway. Or a road, a shack—anything!

Halfway up the tree, a rotten limb broke. Conley dropped like dead weight, one shoulder careening him off a lower limb and throwing his body out away from the tree. His mind froze in terror at the thought of hitting the ground from such a height.

He landed on one side in a soft, thick bog and struggled frantically to his feet to keep from submerging in the muck. Uncontrollably he laughed, relief surging through him. Made it—made it—made it! he thought gleefully. He forced his legs forward in the thick, muddy scum.

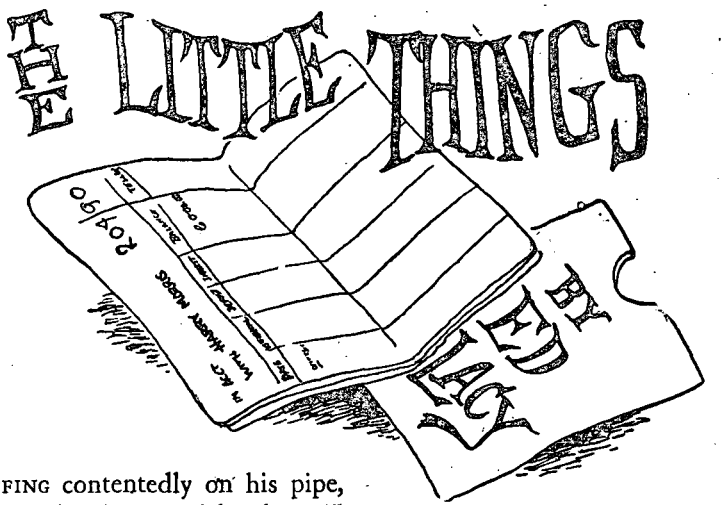
Suddenly something flew past his face, frighteningly close. Conley leaped back and tried to see what it was. It came again, from behind, actually brushing his head this time. He jumped sideways in fright.

Then he saw the peregrine.

Conley could feel the color drain from his face, leaving him white with fear. *It remembers!* he thought. *I stopped feeding it, and it remembers!*

The falcon dove again, straight at his face. Conley pushed back away from it, stumbling awkwardly in the treacherous bog. The peregrine streaked past him, climbed, circled, dove again—and again and again. Always from the front it came now, head-on, and each time Conley was forced to back away from it, each time leaning his body farther into the thick bog, until its demanding mass claimed his waist —his chest—his throat—

While practice in little things may lead to greater, one might weigh carefully Tennyson's counsel, "And after many a summer dies the swan."



PUFFING contentedly on his pipe, Chief Paul Polo waited for the 6:45 p.m. train and for Harry Morris. A large man, now running to middle age lard, Polo barely knew Morris but he felt proud to be waiting for the man.

His interest had nothing to do with the news item; Polo had been a cop for too many years to bother about his name appearing in print. But this was a different crime story. Polo had single-handedly righted a miscarriage of justice, and he was pleased because it confirmed his concept of police work: keep digging and the solution to any crime *has* to appear, even after nearly ten years.

Opening the local paper (the editor was certain the wire services would pick it up, give Polo national fame) he reread the piece:—Carrington Cove. Harry Morris is due home today from State Prison, where he was serving a life sentence for murder. His freedom is

important, of course, but of far greater importance is the tremendous example of police work by our own Chief Paul Polo which this freedom represents.

Due to the rapid growth of your community in the past ten years, few people remember Mr. Morris. When Carrington was merely an unknown fishing village, Harry Morris was the first artist to settle here. Chief Polo recalls him as a ". . . very quiet fellow, almost a hermit. He kept to his shack out in the Cove, working hard at his paintings. We later learned Mr. Morris had quit a good job with an ad agency in New York City to devote himself to his art."

A year after Morris had settled in Carrington, Mrs. Lucy Moore, a striking blonde summer tourist, was found shot to death in her cottage. Mr. Morris readily admitted he had not only struck up a friendship with the striking blonde, but that he had been Mrs. Moore's lover. He claimed he had visited her on the night of the murder, told her that their affair was over, and stated that the break had been peaceful and friendly. Morris then said he had returned to his shack, about a half mile from the Moore cottage, and gone to bed. He denied ever owning a gun. Due to his hermit-like existence, Harry Morris could not prove he had been in his shack at the time of the shooting. Mr. Moore, who was away on a selling trip, had an iron alibi. Chief Polo, then an ordinary officer, arrested Morris, and at his trial Harry Morris was convicted of murder in the first degee on circumstantial evidence, sentenced to life imprisonment. The murder gun was never found.

At the time, Carrington was far from the sophisticated art center it is today, and the fact that Morris had relations with the dead woman convicted him in the eyes of the village. To his credit, Police Officer Polo always felt there was more than a reasonable doubt about Morris' guilt. "Somehow, I couldn't see him as a man of violence. Nor could I believe the State's theory that Mrs. Moore had refused to end the affair, threatened to become a pest, hence Morris shot her."

Over the years, in his own time and with his own money, and unknown to Harry Morris, Chief Polo dug into the case. One year Chief Polo and Mrs. Polo spent their vacation in Los Angeles where the Chief discovered that Lucy Moore had not been married to Mr. Moore but was in fact a Mrs. Donald Jackson.

It took more years for Chief Polo to track down Donald Jackson, who moved about a good deal. Six

months ago, Polo learned Jackson was in a Colorado T.B. hospital. At his own expense Chief Polo flew there and questioned Jackson as to his whereabouts on the night of the murder, nine long years ago. A very sick man, Jackson refused to talk. Chief Polo returned to Carrington, but every week or so he would phone Jackson, reminding him an innocent man was in the state pen. Finally, three weeks ago, shortly before he died, Donald Jackson signed a confession that he had been in a jealous rage at Lucy running off with Mr. Moore, had driven to Carrington on the night of the murder and killed her.

Today, Harry Morris returns to Carrington, thanks to Chief Polo's tireless efforts to see true justice done. In these days, with headlines of police corruption and brutality blaring across our country, Carrington proudly salutes our Police Chief, Paul Polo.

Polo shoved the paper back into his pocket. He'd always worked hard at his job, was proud of his shield, yet the article left him slightly embarrassed. He didn't know any other way of working except to do his best.

The 6:45 came in, and it was easy to spot Harry Morris among all the sunburned tourists. Morris was thin and pale, white hair above a still sensitive face. He held himself lean and erect in the cheap suit, holding a small canvas bag in his left hand.

The two men stared at each other for a moment and grinned. Morris said, the deep voice in contrast to his sickly color, "Well, I don't have to ask who you are. I fully realize how inadequate the words 'Thank you' must sound, but truly I say thank you, Chief."

"Only doing my job," Polo mumbled, more embarrassed than ever. "Look, Morris—Harry, I don't know what your plans are. I guess you'll sue the State for false arrest, but that will take time and . . ."

"No sir, I shall not sue. While I can't honestly say I enjoyed my years of confinement, it did give me a chance to experiment, to evaluate my work. I'm not an oil painter, have no sense of color. But I am a good engraver, an etcher, and I can hardly wait to start work."

"As you'll see, Carrington is far from the little wide-spot-in-the-road you remember. Your house and land were sold long ago for taxes. What I'm saying is, it will take time for you to find a job, and you're welcome to room with me and Maude. For free."

Morris flashed a big smile. "Thank you again, Chief, but that won't be necessary. I had $6000 in the bank at the time of my arrest.

By now, with interest, I have over $9,000. I'll take a room at the hotel for a week, while I find a quiet place to live, then start my work."

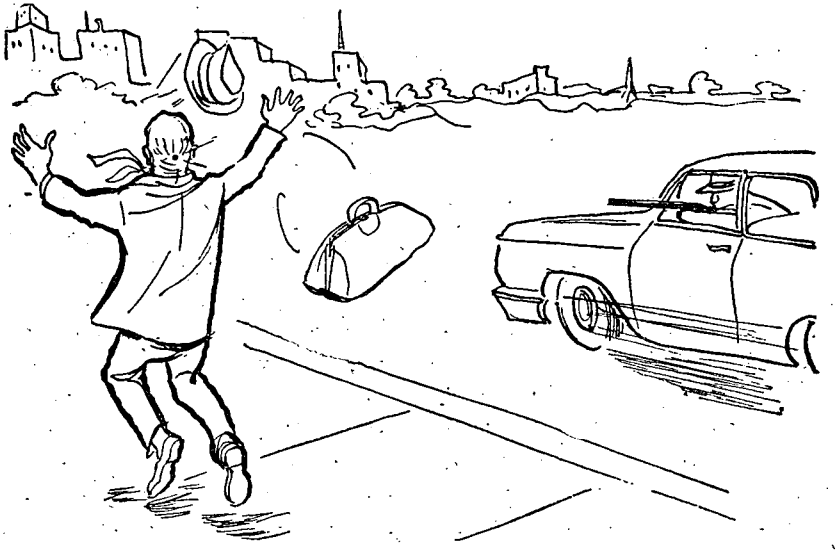
"I have my car. Can I drive you anyplace?"

"Chief, I'd rather walk, see how the town looks. I've been looking forward to this walk for a long time." Morris shook Polo's meaty hand again and then started down the short and lonely stretch of road which met Carrington's main street, coming alive with lights in the twilight.

Harry Morris had almost reached the main street when a car drew alongside, a rifle bullet tore the side of his head open. A young man jumped out and took the cheap canvas bag, quickly ran his hands through the dead man's pockets, then leaped back into the car, and sped away.

Pointing to the supper table, Maude Polo said, "Really, Paul, this is the third night in a row you've only toyed with your supper. I'm too good a cook to be treated this way. You have to stop worrying over Harry Morris' killing."

"It isn't exactly worry," Paul said, poking at the meat before him with his fork. "You know me, I never bring my job home. The thing that bothers me is the unfair-



ness. An innocent man does ten years on a bum rap and before he has a chance to enjoy his freedom, sort of taste it, he's shot down. It sort of makes a fool of justice."

"You are worried or you'd be eating. Paul, you'll find the killers. You'll dig and dig away at the facts until you come up with the guilty one."

"I have been digging, like a frightened mole, and haven't even hit a smell of paydirt. Harry Morris didn't have any relatives, so that rules out a family grudge. The killing was in the old gangland style but at State Prison they insist Harry was a loner, wasn't mixed up with any of the punks in there."

"I've been thinking about it myself," Maude said, starting to put the food away. "He told you he was interested in engraving. Could Harry have been mixed up with counterfeiters?"

Paul shook his rough, gray head. "I checked on that, too. The warden insists he didn't have any cons with a record for queer money in State, said they'd be in a Federal pen. Besides, they kept a special eye on Morris' etchings for that very reason. You mention engraving and everybody thinks of counterfeiting. No, Maude, I've been doing a lot of thinking and sifting of facts, and there are only two ways in which Harry Morris differed from the average man released from jail: he was an artist, which I don't think means anything, far as the killing goes, and he had $9,000 in the bank. Could be the money is the key. There are three banks in Carrington and tomorrow . . ."

"But ten years ago there was only the Carrington Savings Bank," Maude cut in.

"That's right. Well, tomorrow I'll go in and have a talk with Ed Johns. Of course, Harry could have had the money in a big city bank someplace, and there must be a thousand of them. But we'll see. Maybe Harry had a lot more than nine grand."

The next morning Chief Polo sat across the desk from Ed Johns, president of Carrington Savings. Johns was an imposing man, looking like the type who indeed had twice been mayor of Carrington. Polo explained why he was there, and Ed said, "I'll look in the files myself, Paul. I remember Morris. He used to pester me to cash checks for him, now and then. Personal checks on some city bank, maybe New York City. This was a dozen years ago, so I can't recall all the details. But I remember it because I kept after him, at the time, to open an account. We were a small bank then, needed all the

new accounts we could get. Also, putting a check through for Morris meant the bookkeeping of waiting for it to clear. I can't recall if he ever did open an account. But I'll see."

Chief Polo sat back in the neat leather chair, admiring the swank office and how pretty Edith Bloom, Ed's secretary, had grown. Polo remembered her as a baby in her father's grocery store. He said, "You're sure a fine looking gal, Edith. Guess you'll be getting married soon."

"Next June, soon as Mickey Gans graduates Syracuse. He has a job waiting for him out in California and I can hardly wait to move."

"Our Chamber of Commerce would take a dim view of such talk. What's wrong with Carrington?"

Edith grinned. "I love Carrington. It's this job." She lowered her voice. "Of course I expect to work for awhile after I marry Mickey, but I don't want to work here. Old grumpy is a slave driver. Never gives me a second off. Do this, do that, get me this or . . ."

Ed Johns returned, shaking his balding head. "Nothing, Paul. Our records go back eleven years and Harry Morris never had an account. Sorry I can't be of much help. Say, Paul, you haven't been out on my new 45-foot cruiser yet, have you? Great for weekend fun."

"Nope. She's a pretty boat."

"Any weekend you want, we'll go fishing. For the big babies, thirty or forty miles offshore."

"Thanks, Ed. I'm kind of busy now but when I get some free time, I'll take you up on that."

Leaving the office Chief Polo waved at Jed Wert, the guard, nodded to the various tellers as he made for the door. He asked Joe Rogers how the new baby was, winked at Lawrence Henry, who once had been Carrington's sole juvenile delinquent with his habit of "borrowing" rowboats. He stopped to ask Fred Scales, "Think you have a chance in the state drag races?"

"I hope so, Mr. Polo. I just put a Ferrari souped-up engine in my buggy; she can make one hundred miles per hour before I turn on the ignition!"

"Well, be careful," Polo said, going on to the last window to ask Mark Gilutin, "How's your wife doing?"

"She's coming along real fine, Chief, but the docs say it will take another few months in the rest home."

"You've had more than your share of tough luck, Mark. First your poor mama and now your wife. Tell Mary I asked for her."

Back in his own small office Polo

put through a call to the state banking department. When he explained what he wanted he was told, "Legally we can ask for the records of every bank in the state, but have you any idea of what a job that would be? It would keep our entire staff going full time for months. Chief, you'd have to secure a court order to make us do it, and quite frankly we'd fight it. Too expensive."

Picking away at the veal chops that evening he told Maude, "Nobody's interested in *one* man, that's what's wrong with the world today. I even went over to see Judge Haff and he kept saying it would cost the state about $100,000 to go over the records of all the banks for the last ten years. I told him you can't equate justice in terms of money."

"Don't tell me Larry Haff refused to give you the court order?" Maude asked, voice rising.

"Well, not point-blank. He merely tried to talk me out of it. Anyway, I'd have to go to a higher court than his."

Maude said, "Now eat your meat, Paul, I won't heat it up again. It does seem odd Harry Morris wouldn't have kept an account in our bank. I mean, go through all the fuss of having them cash a check on another bank whenever he needed eating money."

"I was thinking the same thing. Larry Haff told me some interesting things about bank accounts. Did you know that if a savings account lies dormant for ten years, no money is ever put into it or withdrawn, it reverts to the State? Of course the owner can always collect his money from the State, if he shows up. Also . . ."

"And Harry Morris spent almost ten years in jail!" Maude put in. "You don't think Ed Johns would have forged Harry's name, withdrawn the money, thinking Morris would be in jail until he died?"

Chief Polo chewed on a mouthful of meat for a few seconds. Then he said, "I don't know. I can't see Ed, with his cars, his boat, his fine house, his standing in the community, I can't see him stealing $9,000. Why he must be worth a hundred thousand, at least. But it could have been one of the tellers; Joe Rogers has four kids now; Lawrence Henry—well, you know his record, maybe he hasn't outgrown his taking ways; Fred Scales said he put an expensive new motor in his hotrod; and Mark Gilutin, saddled with all those hospital bills. Any of them might have withdrawn the money, removed all records of the account. That's why an investigation is so costly. They'd have to audit and balance the books for the last ten years."

"Paul, what are you going to do?"

"Try a bluff. I'm going to let it be known I have the court order for the records of every bank in the state to be examined, see if that flushes anybody out of our Carrington Savings."

The following day Chief Polo was in the bank to cash a small check, casually told the tellers about the time he had securing a court okay to examine the records of every bank in the state, added with a corny wink, "Watch your fingers, fellows, they'll probably start with this one."

Polo also quietly put a roadblock on the one highway leading out of Carrington. He himself kept an eye on the harbor. At 2 a.m. Ed Johns' big sedan, with Fred Scales driving, stopped at the dock. As Fred began unloading suitcases to take on board, Chief Polo stepped out of the shadows. Fred and Ed Johns tried to make a run for the boat, and Polo had to put a shot through the flying bridge windshield before they stopped.

As Polo told the reporters in the morning, "It wasn't only poor Harry Morris' money. They had been looting these dormant accounts for the last five years, confessed to having taken over $80,000. If nobody bothers with an account for ten years, it's a safe guess that the party has died and the account is unknown to any possible heirs. So they were doing okay until they took Harry's account, because they never expected him to be released. But once he presented his bank book, the rest of their stealing would have to come to light, so they murdered him, took the one link to them—his bankbook."

But that night as he sat back in his old chair, comfortably stuffed with a big supper, Maude asked, "Paul, how in the world did you suspect Ed Johns? Since you were watching his boat, you must have been pretty certain he was the one. Ed is a stuffed shirt, but I'd never take him for a crook."

Belching happily, Paul said, "It was being such a stuffed shirt that caused a little thing he did to make me suspicious of him. Ed always said an executive shouldn't move from behind his big desk. Yet when I asked if Morris had an account, Ed went to look up the records himself. That struck me as phony. He probably wanted to make certain no evidence of the account remained." Paul sighed. "You shouldn't have made stew, Maude, you know I can't resist it. And I shouldn't have tackled that last little hunk of pie. Like with Ed Johns, it's always the little things which trip the biggest crooks and gluttons."

I venture that loyalty, accorded under difficult circumstances, may be calibrated in direct proportion to the differential between liking and loving the recipient.

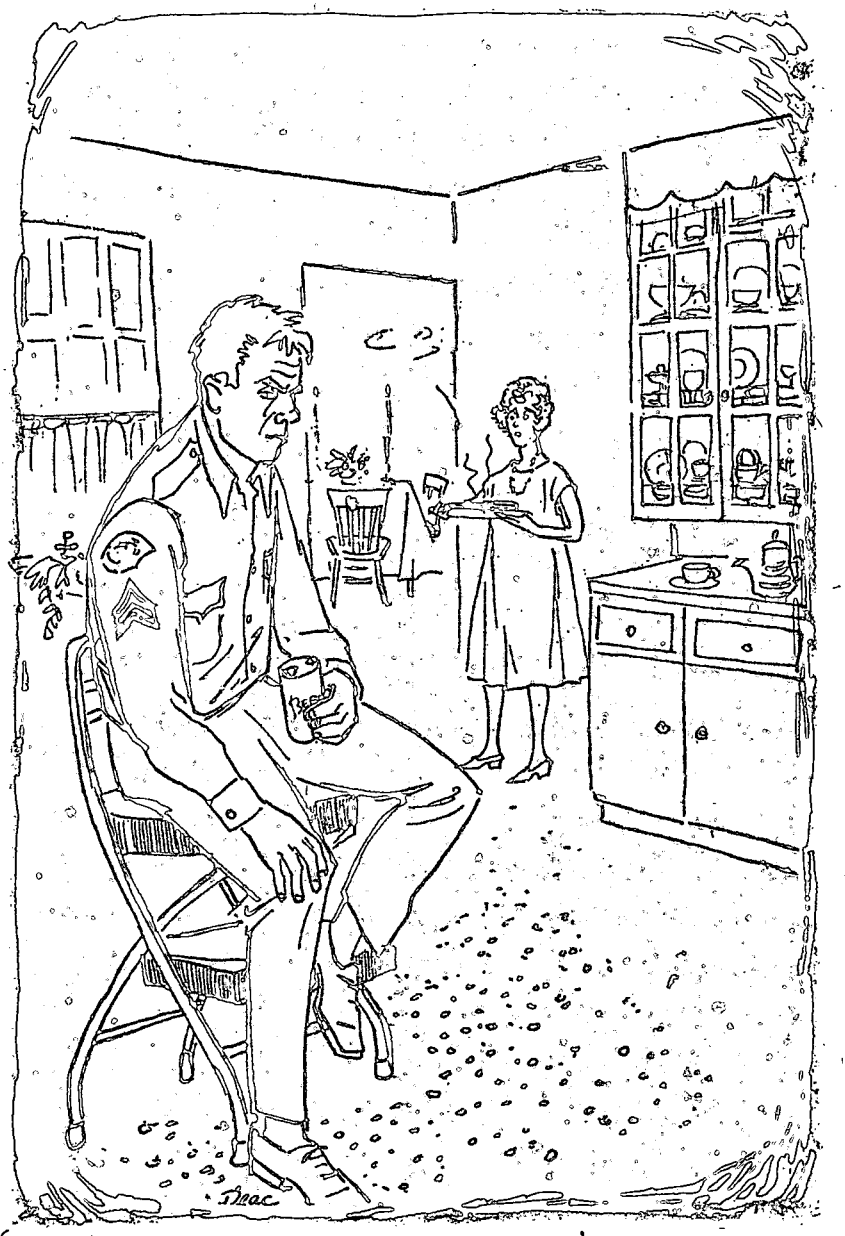
HARDHEADED COP

By D. S. HALACY, Jr.

POLICE Sergeant Dave Hackett climbed out of the old sedan and walked slowly toward the kitchen door. At five-thirty it was still hot, and the back of his blouse was soaked with sweat. Even before he opened the door the smell of steak came to him, but it brought no smile.

Margie was at the stove, a faded apron over the maternity smock, turning thick slices of round that spattered in the grease. She smiled and leaned for his kiss.

He knew she was frowning in disappointment as he pulled away



too soon, but he didn't stop. In the hall, he slid out of his belt and blouse, hanging them in the closet with the door slightly ajar so they would dry quicker. The gun went on the top shelf where Tina, their three-year-old, couldn't reach it. He loosened his tie and then went back into the kitchen.

"Your beer, oh lord and master," Margie said, making a big gesture of handing him the punctured can. "Sit down and cool off while you tell me all about it; the promotion, I mean."

Her hair was as dark and fine as Dave's was red and coarse; stray strands of it were plastered to her cheek with the humidity. She still looked as young and fresh as the day they were married. Plumper, sure, but her skin was smooth and her eyes shining. Margie seemed at her best when she was producing a baby.

The beer can was wet in his hand, frosted with condensation that promised a cooling drink. But he regarded it dully, not lifting his eyes to his wife's as he parked his solid, five-nine frame on the step-stool. Couldn't she tell from the look of his face how it had gone?

"You're still married to a cop, Mrs. Hackett. Jerry Nelson is the new lieutenant." He drank the beer, half draining the can in one angry gulp before he set it down.

"Dave!" Margie's mouth dropped open and she brushed at the strands of hair in a distracted way. "You have two years more seniority than Nelson. Oh, you're teasing me!" She put down the platter of steak and came to him, both arms going around him.

"Why would I tease you?" he asked. He stood, still holding the beer. "Nelson got the job, is all. Frye was sorry, but I'm not the most popular guy in town, especially after I arrested Councilman Henderson's kid last month."

He thought she was going to cry, but she didn't. Instead, she carried the steak into the tiny dining room. The table was already set, with a centerpiece of carnations from the back yard, and the linen napkins her grandmother had sent them from Ireland. It was supposed to be a very festive occasion.

"Dave, I'm so sorry," she said when she came back.

"You think I'm glad?" He dropped the can in the wastebasket under the sink and slammed the doors shut viciously. "I'll call Frye and tell him to forget about cards tonight."

"We can't do that, Dave," she said gently. "I'm sure he couldn't help what happened."

"I think he could."

"Daddy!" a piercing little voice shrieked from the doorway. "Come

swing me!" Tina stood holding the door open for the flies, her jeans muddy and her tee shirt ripped under both arms. She was Margie in miniature, only her name coming from Dave's side of the family.

"Daddy's too tired to swing a great big girl like you!" Margie said briskly. "Besides, it's time to wash up." Tears threatened, but the little girl followed obediently.

Supper was a dandy flop. Tina, trying to liven things up, tipped over her milk, and when Dave impulsively popped her lightly, she wailed and fled to her bedroom. He hated himself and took it out on Margie.

The evening of cards with the Fryes was no better. Wilson Frye was a big redcheeked man in his early forties. He knew everybody in Morriston, and tried with the skill of a wire walker to keep them all happy with his job as police chief. Georgia Frye was a tall, good-natured woman who had taken a real liking to the Hacketts and worshipped Tina. The Fryes were childless.

Margie and Georgia went into the kitchen to fix refreshments when they finished playing pinochle. Frye lit a cigar after Dave refused one, and leaned back on the sofa.

"Margie take it hard?" he asked. Dave dropped the cards into the drawer and slammed it closed.

"No, of course not. She likes being poor," he snapped.

"I'm sorry as the devil, Dave. But Henderson was laying for you."

"Really rubbed my nose in it, didn't you?" Dave asked, still standing. "Nelson has been on the force less time than I have; I know he scores lower on his exams."

"OK. You're the best man I've got, maybe too good. You rub people the wrong way, Dave. And the City Council controls promotions."

"I was hired to do a job. If they want me to do it, there's going to be some rubbing."

"Sure, Dave. But—" Frye broke off as Margie came into the room carrying plates of cake and ice cream. Georgia was back of her with coffee. "That's what we came for, Margie," Frye went on. "Looks delicious!"

Dave managed to stay civil until the company left, much earlier than usual. He and Margie stood on the porch and watched Frye's big sedan move down the block. It was a nice car, seven years nicer than the Hackett's. And it was paid for.

"Georgia was sorry," Margie said tentatively as they did the dishes.

"So am I," Dave said. "Crime isn't the only thing that doesn't pay." He cracked a glass and

swore. "A cop can tell you that."

"It's not like the Army, Dave. You can get out anytime."

"For a nickel I'd do that," he retorted bitterly. There was a long, strained silence afterwards. He went to check on Tina in her room, and when he came back from locking the house Margie was in bed, the spread a bulging mound over her. Usually he made some joking comment, but not tonight. In his pajamas, he flipped out the light and got into bed.

"Dad could still use a man in the office," Margie said in the stillness after he kissed her. "He mentioned it today when I talked to him on the phone."

"Right in there for the kill, isn't he?" Dave asked. "Told me so, and all that."

"Five hundred dollars a month," she went on quietly, ignoring his anger. "And with the town growing like it is, Dad plans to open a branch office in a year or so. You're the only son he's got, Dave."

"What a disappointment that must be," he said sarcastically. But he was mad enough to have cried about it. Five hundred a month for making loans in Tanner Investment Co. was a lot more than four-twenty-five. Civilian suit, and an air-conditioned office too, with his name on the door. No more grief and sweat; no more letdowns like the one he had suffered today.

"Oh, Dave, Dave! I know how much it means to you to be a good police officer. But—"

She didn't finish, and he wondered as he stared at the ceiling how she *could* know what it meant to him. How could anybody know but a hard-headed cop?

In the morning it was cool, and some of the bitterness had faded by the time he got up. Breakfast was quiet, with no mention of last night. Tina, with the cheerfulness of the very young, had forgiven him. He kissed her goodby and left her wrestling her cereal around the table.

Margie walked out to the car with him. She didn't say anything about office jobs, or five hundred dollars a month. All she said was, "I love you," and kissed him hard.

"I love you, too," Dave said guiltily and climbed into the sedan. The starter labored and Margie bit her lip until the motor caught. She was still waving when he turned the corner. Yes, she must love him, all right.

She had stuck it out a long time. First, it had been the Korea business just after they were married. Dave had the idea he should go and he went, though there was a good chance he wouldn't have been called. He still thought it had been the right thing to do.

Then, when he got out he traded a khaki uniform for the blue serge of Morriston's police force. Three-and-a-quarter to start, about what a day laborer got. It was funny, but he'd wanted to be a policeman when he was a kid and never changed his mind.

So these five years hadn't been a picnic. Dave was no diplomat; he knew that. Maybe it was a miracle that he'd made sergeant two years back. People didn't want to be rubbed the wrong way, and that's where the diplomats came in; Nelson, for instance. There were times when it was easier to turn the other way, to wink and let something slide. Not that Nelson wasn't OK. Only Dave Hackett wasn't built that way.

Even after he had rationalized the kick in the teeth about the promotion he thought was his, it was tough on Margie. Pride wore thin when all your friends had nice things and you had nothing but that pride. Dave's face had tightened again by the time he parked back of the station, half an hour before his men would come on duty.

Jerry Nelson looked up from his new desk, self-conscious in the gabardine suit. He was a lean, good-looking guy, handy with the paperwork. He was a good press agent, too. "Show us cops doing favors for people instead of arresting them," Frye was always saying, and Nelson had that knack. Pictures in the papers, the ice cream routine for lost kids, and all the rest of it. And the unwritten agreement with the town to ease up when laws went against the grain too much.

"Morning, Dave. Look, fella—" Nelson was embarrassed.

"Relax," Dave told him. "I've had my cry, forget it. Just take it easy, boy. And congratulations." It nearly stuck in his throat, but he said it and felt better afterwards.

He checked the reports of the previous two shifts. There was nothing important to brief his patrolmen on. He sent them out with a curt word or two; four men, four cruisers. It was bad, but what could you do? Instead of the desirable 1.7 men per thousand population, Morriston had a budget that allowed for just one man. So two men to a car, even at night, was a luxury to dream about. It was dangerous, more ways than one. A cop could get roughed up. And he could get accused of rape when he went in to pick up a female suspect. It was the officer's word against somebody's. No witness.

The town was way behind, and yet a lot of the citizens thought there were too many cops now. Some of the Council thought that, and it was the Council that did the

hiring, instead of an impartial merit system.

It's not the Army, he reminded himself, and climbed into the cruiser. At least the day shift wasn't so bad, except for traffic. He began crisscrossing the town in random fashion. It was quiet, and he was glad for that. At ten-fifteen he picked up a hitchhiker, a boy about fifteen, and brought him in to the station to put a scare into him.

"Ride the bus next time, son," Dave said when he let the boy go, after reading him the statute. "You can afford fifteen cents."

"Big man," the boy said in a surly voice. But Dave figured he'd quit thumbing for a while. Three weeks ago four teenagers had bummed a ride, stolen the car, and robbed and beat the driver. A month before that, a drunk had picked up two sixteen-year-old girls who got tired of walking the mile from school home. They regretted it. But the town forgot things like that in a hurry.

The Chief came into the office as Dave was leaving, prosperous-looking in gray suit and felt hat. Frye made his six hundred a month, and got invited to Rotary and Lions now and then for a free meal to pad the growing bulge under his belt. But even at that, he wasn't too happy in Morriston. It was a strain, and he would have liked something better. Frye hadn't been born in the town. That was the difference between liking people and loving them.

"How goes it, Dave?" he asked, breaking cigar ash into a tray on the dispatcher's desk.

"Fine," Dave said. "Not a single murder this morning."

"No hard feelings?"

Dave shrugged. "Like Margie said, it isn't the Army."

"You go at it like it was," Frye told him, a doleful look on his face. "Your own personal war, Dave."

"I'll see you," Dave said, and went outside and climbed into the cruiser.

It was plenty hot now as he started down Main, and he could feel sweat soaking the back of his shirt. He drove mechanically, taking in everything. He shooed a double-parker from in front of the supermarket, and then spotted a jammed signal light at Seventh, backing up a line of cars. He called for a repair truck, parked, and got out to direct traffic until the maintenance crew showed up.

At twelve-thirty he should have been heading home for lunch. It was a shame he didn't, because then he wouldn't have blundered into trouble.

Dave thought the driver was drunk from the way the coupe weaved onto Main. The car was

doing over fifty when the driver saw the flasher and heard the siren. The coupe screeched to a halt, and the driver was out of the seat and yelling before the cruiser stopped.

"My kid—his hand's cut almost off! I have to get to Mercy fast, buddy!" His eyes were glazed and wide, and Dave sprinted around him to the coupe. A boy about twelve years old was holding a rag tight around his left hand, blood dripping from it onto his clothes and the seat. He was pale and scared, starting to cry when he saw Dave. Nasty, but the kid wasn't going to bleed to death in a matter of minutes.

"I'll give you an escort," Dave told the father, and raced for the cruiser. He left the flasher on, touched the siren occasionally. The limit along Main was twenty-five, and traffic was heavy in the middle of the day. It was seven blocks to the hospital; they could make it easily in about two minutes.

The father must have decided that thirty-five wasn't fast enough. With a shriek of rubber, the coupe tore past Dave like he was backing up. It slammed through the red light at Wembley, barely missed a truck loaded with cases of pop. Dave toed the gas and hit the siren. He should have loaded them both into the cruiser.

The coupe made a green light, and took another red at sixty. There was one more light before the hospital, and blind luck couldn't hold out. The cruiser came abreast at last, and it was more than the weather making Dave sweat as he forced the coupe to the curb, a block or so short of the hospital. In the intersection, a gas truck and trailer pulled across Main; it would have been a sitting duck for the coupe and its wild driver. Dave swore under his breath as he climbed out. He was shaken and not ready for what happened next.

"Damn you!" the panicky father raged. Effectively blocked, he was getting out in a hurry. He swung as soon as he was free of the seat. The blow was wild and missed, but Dave was off balance. He stumbled and fell sidewise against the fender of the coupe. The driver ran around the back of the car, jerked open the door and got the boy out. Swinging him up, he set out at a trot for the hospital.

There was a muttering crowd by the time Dave had taken the license and checked the registration on the coupe. One or two people had seen enough of what they wanted to see, and puffed the thing out of all proportion. Somebody shouted angrily as Dave got back into the cruiser to drive on to the hospital, and he shook his head wearily.

The boy was all right. There would be some bad scars, and he was missing the tip of his little finger, but, at least, he wasn't smashed up. The father was still livid, declaring he had seen no truck and trailer, and that Dave was a poor excuse for a cop.

"You'll hear about this, buddy!" he promised. "You'll hear plenty!"

"Will you sign this citation?" Dave asked, holding the book out to him. "Either that, or I take you down to the judge right now, Mr. Marshall." That worked.

There was a green sedan, with a press sticker on the windshield, parked in front of the station when Dave reported in after lunch. Inside, the despatcher frowned.

"You'd better go see the Chief," he told Dave. "He ain't happy, Sarge."

Frye looked up when Dave came in. There were two men sitting across the desk from him. Dave had tangled with the skinny one before, a reporter named Blaze. The other was a photographer.

"The boys tell me there was a mix-up down at the hospital, Dave," Frye said evenly. "What's the story?"

As briefly and accurately as he could, Dave told him what had happened, including the wild swing. The reporter snorted.

"Kid bleeding to death and you write his old man a traffic ticket," he said indignantly. "I'd have done worse than just swing at you if it had been me, Hackett."

"You try it, friend!" Dave snapped hotly, his face twisting in anger. The photographer picked that moment to snap his picture.

"Take it easy," Frye said calmly. "Both of you. You did write him up then, Dave?"

"Here it is," Dave said. There were two counts, a 693 and a 701, with the notation that the driver failed to cooperate with the officer.

"I didn't mention the assault," Dave said coldly. "He was pretty upset."

"Real decent of you!" Blaze said, smiling thinly. "You got any kids, Hackett? How do you think you'd act under the same circumstances? Kid with his hand cut half off and—"

"A minute or two wasn't going to make any difference," Dave retorted. He wanted to smash his fist into the sharp face. "I checked with the doctor, and the kid was all right."

"You could tell by just looking at him in the car, I suppose?" Blaze taunted. "Why didn't you escort him to the hospital the way you would for some visiting movie star? You—"

"All right, Blaze," Frye said, getting up. "That's enough, I be-

lieve, especially for the papers."

"It's plenty," the reporter said triumphantly. "Thanks, Hackett, thanks a lot."

"Spell it right," Dave shouted after him. "That's two t's!"

"They'll go after you now, Dave," Frye said flatly.

"OK. What was I supposed to do; let that guy pile up? He would have, if I hadn't stopped him. You're not suggesting I tear up this ticket, maybe?"

"Of course not! You know me better than that. But it looks like we can't win in this town. That's all, Dave."

Blaze spelled the name right, even to the initials. It made the front page, along with the picture taken in Frye's office. Contrasted cleverly with one of the Marshall kid in his hospital bed, it made Dave out a raging maniac. The reporter's slanted piece would make readers think the boy was near death when Dave stopped his father.

Margie saw it, but she didn't say anything. Her father wasn't so tactful. "OK, Dave," he said on the phone, "give it up, boy, and come in with me."

The worst of the whole thing was the holdup across town just about the time Dave made his arrest; a successful holdup, in which a lone bandit got away with nearly five hundred dollars from a supermarket safe. The editor of the Sentinel made capital of that, with a "Where Were The Police?" spread on the editorial page telling where at least one of the police was; asininely ticketing a man trying to save the life of his injured son!

In a day or so the letter-to-the-editor column picked it up. One reader mentioned Margie and her condition. "Let us hope this rule-crazed officer will not meet with a similar situation!" It was a field day for the righteously indignant, and Dave decided he was a fool for not accepting his father-in-laws's office job.

There was coolness among his tract neighbors, not that they had ever been especially friendly. A cop on the block was apparently a painful thing. Margie cried about it when Dave wasn't home, and he was thankful that Tina was too young to know what was going on when the kids on the block hooted at her.

Margie laughed off the letters, but it worried Dave. It wouldn't be long until the baby arrived. Tina had been no trouble, and the doctor accused Margie of being disgustingly healthy, but you never knew. What would he do when the chips were down, really down?

A citizens' committee paid the fine for Marshall, and made him a

martyr to police stupidity. Henderson, the councilman whose toes Dave had stepped on, smiled smugly next time they met. The paper kept hammering away at Dave and the police department in general. Even Frye, with his knack for getting along, got his share of lumps. It seemed to bother him for a couple of days, then suddenly the Chief looked years younger. He called Dave in and showed him the reason.

"You know I've been sweating it out," he said, leaning back in his chair. "My contract is about up, and I was on pretty thin ice in Morriston. Well, this came today. Read it, Dave."

It was an offer of a job as chief of police in Rockford, up in the north of the state. The salary was seventy-five more a month; and it was a better town, a town with much less pressure. When Dave finished and looked at his boss, Frye jolted him.

"I told you you were the best man I had, Dave. Now, I'll prove it. I'll need an assistant, and I can pick my own. Come with me. Lieutenant up there makes five hundred. And Margie would get a pension if anything happened to you."

"You're kidding," Dave said thinly. "Or else I'm hearing things."

"You heard me right. Look, maybe I could have fought Henderson and won on your promotion, but I was praying this thing would work out. Maybe I'm a heel, Dave. Maybe I'm just selfish. You don't owe this town anything. It's not the Army; you told me that yourself."

There was a folded copy of the Sentinel on the desk, with a headline, COUNCIL PUTS HEAT ON FRYE. What did Dave owe people like that? He remembered Rockford. It was a nice town, two hundred miles from the temptation of an office job with Tanner Investments. The pay was good, too. But slowly Dave shook his head.

"Thanks, Wilse," he said earnestly. "But no. I guess I'm a knucklehead cop with a one-track mind. I'll stick here."

"Afraid of being called a quitter?" Frye asked, taking back the letter and folding it carefully. "That it, Dave?"

"Yeah. Afraid of being called a quitter by Dave Hackett. This is my town; it's where I belong."

Frye said with an odd, resigned look, "It's nice to have known an idealist. Lots of luck, Dave. You may need it, when the new chief takes over."

The realization worried Dave. For all Frye's shortcomings, the big guy had backed him up. He had been a pretty good boss, and he had been a friend. How could Dave buck the council and an un-

known quantity in the Chief's seat? He would find out shortly.

"Thanks for the offer," he said finally. "And good luck to you. I guess Georgia is happy about it."

"I don't know how she'll get along without Tina," Frye said. "Better think it over."

Dave went home for lunch, dreading telling Margie about the job he had turned down. But he told her, quickly, before she could say anythng.

"You married a nut," he finished up. "There's still time for me to tell—"

"I want you to do what's right," she said, and then bit her lip hard and shut her eyes. "Now maybe you'd better take me to the hospital. Dr. Skinner missed the time a little bit."

They dropped Tina off with Margie's mother. Back in the cruiser, Dave looked at his wife's pained face, and it was a temptation to floor the accelerator and touch the siren. But it wasn't the insinuating letter in the paper that made him drive a safe speed to Mercy.

Just before they reached the hospital the radio sputtered. The dispatcher's voice was tense as he read the APB. Robbery and a shooting, the bandit taking along a girl clerk as hostage. It was a supermarket holdup, and a bell rang in Dave's mind as he wheeled into the hospital. The last holdup had been a supermarket too.

Margie's eyes were shut and Dave swore softly. Of all the times for bedlam to break loose! Reaching for the mike, he called in, telling the dispatcher he had an emergency of his own. Five minutes later, the nurses shooed him out of the labor room so they could get Margie ready.

When they let him go back in, the doctor still wasn't at the hospital and Dave was tense. Margie saw it and smiled up at him as she reached for his hand.

"You'd better get back to work, Sergeant Hackett," she said so softly he wondered if the drugs were already working on her. "Go catch your robber."

"To hell with that!" Dave said, squeezing her hand. "I'll wait right here." Tina had been born with Dave fighting a fire at the paint plant. This time he would be with his wife, where he belonged.

"Even the nurses are better at bringing babies than you are, darling," Margie whispered, her lips moving in a weak smile. "Go on, Dave. I want you to." So he went, and as he ran down the steps out front, Dr. Skinner was running up. He waved pleasantly.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "I'll make it a boy this time."

"Take care of my wife, Doc. I'll

try to beat the baby back here."

Whipping open the car door, he called in to find out how things were shaping up. Instead of the dispatcher, he heard Jerry Nelson's voice. The new lieutenant didn't sound sure of himself.

"This is Lieutenant Nelson, Dave. Our boy fooled us. He got through our inner block, and I'm afraid we've lost him. We've called the state highway patrol; they'll pick him up south of here."

"He took the river road, then?" Dave asked, getting the cruiser rolling. "I'm at Mercy, and I'll try to cut him off."

"Be careful, Dave. This guy is dangerous; probably killed one man and he's got the girl with him. Maybe you'd better—"

"We can do our own laundry," Dave said and hung up the mike. He swung out onto the dirt road and opened the cruiser up. It would have been nice to have another man along.

He was out in the country now, the road dropping towards the river. It joined Highway 95 at the bridge and, by a miracle, he might intercept the bandit. If not, it would be a while before a highway patrol car did the job. A lot could happen in that time. He fought the cruiser around a rutted curve and the bridge came in sight. His dust would show a long way off, but that was a chance he would have to take.

Braking hard, he slid into the cover of the trees on this side of the bridge. If the holdup man was desperate, it wouldn't hurt a bit to have the element of surprise in Dave's favor. He reached for the mike to call in, barely getting the message out when he saw the oncoming car. Moving the gear selector to low range, he waited until the black sedan was on the bridge and then gunned out to block the near end of it.

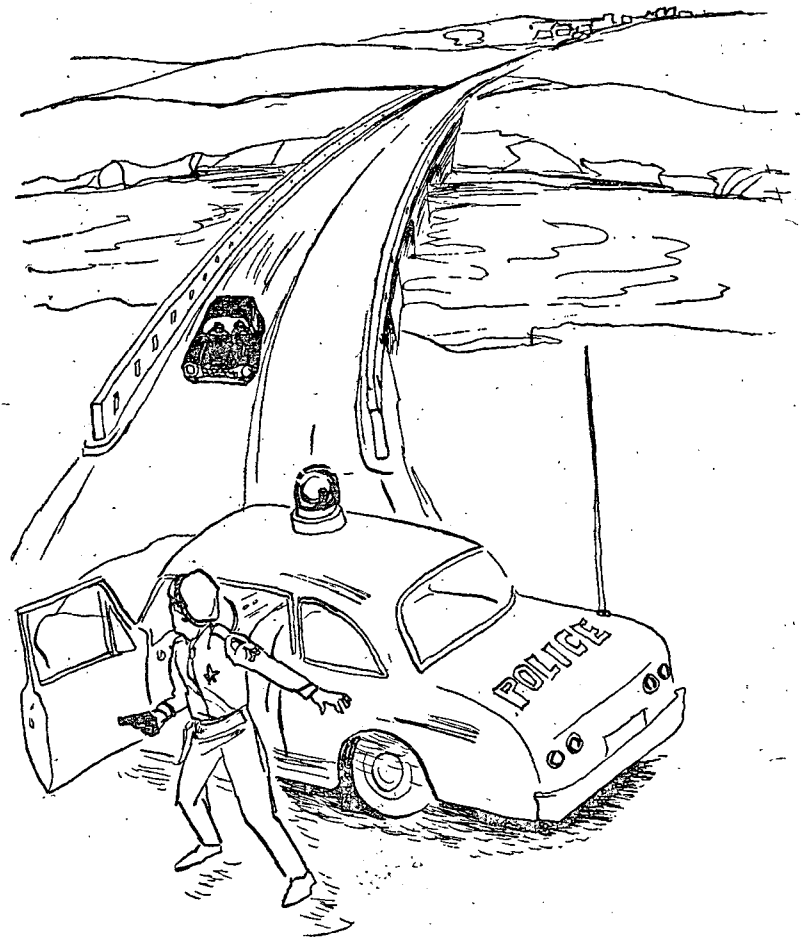
The driver had no choice. He rode the brakes all the way down, to within ten feet of the cruiser, both hands on the wheel fighting a skid. Dave would have felt foolish if this was just a citizen, but he had no reason for apology. Gun drawn, he was out of the police car and waiting when the driver dropped his right hand from the wheel.

There was a hard, glassy look in the man's eyes, and a wide, panicky one in the girl's. It was worry about hitting her that slowed Dave's aim, and the automatic in the bandit's whipping hand fired first. The noise of it seemed to tear at Dave's shoulder, and then his gun smashed back. The girl's thin scream echoed the shots, and the man in the sedan was looking down, open-mouthed, at the red stain on his shirt front. Dave

blinked back the gray fog and handcuffed his man to the wheel. Then he had to hang onto the car for support. He was still hanging on when Frye and Nelson screeched up back of the car.

"You crazy fool!" the Chief said, and he sounded mad. "I went by your place after lunch and found out you took Margie to the hospital. Now I find you out here bleeding like a stuck hog."

"How about waiting until they patch me up to chew me out?" Dave suggested as they helped him into Frye's car.



"OK. But I've got something to tell you before your hero picture comes out in the Sentinel," Frye said, and he had a baffled grin on his red face, "just so you'll know that isn't the reason you got the job. The Council just OK'd my recommendation for the new Chief, Dave. I'm afraid you're in."

"This is a fine time to joke!" Dave said, fighting the fog again. "I can see my pal, Henderson, voting for me."

"Henderson is only one man. Three or four of the others don't go along with all he says, Dave. I guess maybe they woke up, at last. Guilty consciences, or something. Anyway, that's what I stopped by your place to tell you."

When Dave could see again, they were helping him out of the car. Funny how weak a slug in the shoulder could make you, but he wouldn't let them put him on a stretcher. Not yet, anyway. With Frye on one side and an interne on the other, they proceeded along the hall. A door opened and a man backed out of a ward. His face seemed familiar and he colored when he looked at Dave. It was Marshall, the guy whose kid cut his hand.

"Look, Hackett," he said in an embarrassed voice, "I'm sorry as the devil. I thought it over, and—I'm a dumb clown. You want to take a poke at me? When you're OK, I mean? My kid's fine, but if I'd clobbered that truck—"

"Skip it," Dave said, wondering why he felt so good. "You could come see me, and I'll give you a cigar."

He insisted on seeing the baby then. Frye twisted somebody's arm, and a nurse brought out a red-faced little scrap with red fuzz for hair. Dr. Skinner had earned his money; it was a boy.

Margie was in a ward, a screen around the bed, and they left him alone with her for a minute or two. She was half asleep, but he talked to her and she mumbled back, things that didn't make any sense, but it made him feel good all the way down to his toes. It was nice having a wife who was proud of a hardheaded cop. He hoped being Chief wouldn't change any of that.

It has been said, ". . . anything will do so long as he straddles a hobby and rides it hard," but it is a rare occasion when the 'ride' also produces a harvest.

MAN WITH A HOBBY

By Carroll Mayers

EVERYBODY knows it's smart to cultivate an avocation. Any spare-time activity which relaxes, rechannels the thoughts and eases the daily pressures is bound to be beneficial. Aside from a brief spell of cigar band collecting, though, I had never taken up any special hobby in my callow years, and when I settled into the job of chief, and only, deputy to Sheriff Wexler

of Surf City, I never had time for any. (I don't count a little discreet girl watching.)

Sam Hubbard did, however, and that's what this report is all about.

In strict truth, maybe Sam's activity didn't come under the 'hobby' classification. It wasn't a spare-time diversion because time was what he was surfeited with, being a widower who had come down to Surf City on a modest annuity. And it kept him keyed-up and expectant, rather than relaxed. But because it involved collecting of a sort, and gave a point to his daily routine, 'hobby' pegged it as well as anything.

The whole business started the day the sheriff recognized and collared a wanted bad check passer who had been lolling on the beach, emulating my own covert practice of bikini appraising. Nine months of the year, Surf City is a quiet little seaside community of some three thousand citizens. The summer season, though, sees us triple that total, with tourists and vacationers jamming all available facilities. Undoubtedly, the influx includes some of society's less desirable characters, and the opportunity inherent in such a possibility, as evidenced by the sheriff's apprehension of the bad paper artist, abruptly triggered Sam Hubbard's imagination.

In short, Sam became what I can only term a criminal buff. He haunted our office, wheedling copies of flyers of wanted lawbreakers. He made regular stops at the post office, checking notices exhibited there, memorizing features and names. He collected the true detective magazines carrying similar material. The rest of his time was spent in the bus depot or on the boardwalk or beach, scrutinizing faces, checking physical resemblances.

The odds against his duplicating Wexler's fortuitous feat did not deter him. "You're only wasting your time," the sheriff would tell him, but Sam would shake his head and smile confidently. "Maybe so, Sheriff, but you never can tell. I just might be lucky enough to spot some big-time crook who has slipped down here, somebody who is wanted real bad, with a big reward. I could sure use the money, all right."

All of which brings us to the day Sam Hubbard came bustling into the sheriff's office, bursting with importance. It was a hot August morning and Sam, a short, chunky individual with ample girth, was perspiring profusely. Personal discomfort, though, didn't concern him at the moment; he swiped indifferently at his beaded forehead, flashed me a broad grin.

"I've got something this time, Pete," he told me triumphantly. "I know I have."

I grasped his inference, of course, but I wasn't too happy about it. I was holding the fort alone, Sheriff Wexler being upstate at a four-day peace officers' convention. And several of Hubbard's previous 'somethings' had proven somewhat less than fortunate. (A vacationing bank president, whom Sam had suspected of being a notorious numbers racketeer, and a demure little blonde secretary he had erroneously identified as the mistress of a crooked labor czar came immediately to mind.)

"Oh?" My rejoinder was deliberately cool.

He wasn't dissuaded by my lack of enthusiasm. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "Oh, I know I've goofed a couple of times, but I'm positive I've hit on something this time, Pete. Dead positive."

I stifled a sigh. "Somebody you've . . . recognized?"

"Well, not exactly." Sam's admission was reluctant but he immediately played it down with a confident follow-up. "But he's a crook, all right. Real criminal type. Narrow forehead, weak mouth, bad eyes."

I let my sigh burgeon. "There's no real criminal type, Sam. We've already kicked that idea to death. You can't peg a man by his features."

He shook his head, ran a soggy handkerchief around his neckband. "I'm not so sure," he countered doggedly. "Anyway, it's more than that. You'll see when I tell you."

I shot a glance at the clock. Eleven-forty. Another twenty minutes and I would have been out to lunch. The only trouble with that wistful realization was that Sam would have awaited my return, or hunted me up at Millie's Luncheonette.

I tried to get more comfortable in my chair. "All right, go ahead," I surrendered.

Sam perched on the edge of my desk, bent forward earnestly, blue eyes dancing with excitement. "I first noticed the guy yesterday," he said. "At the post office. You know how I go down there—"

"I know, Sam."

"Yes. Well, he was there. Getting a letter from General Delivery. As soon as I spotted him, I knew he was a wrong one . . ."

He stopped, gaze both uncertain and challenging as he again broached his theory. I didn't belabor the point now; I just said, "And?"

"I followed him when he left," Sam said flatly.

For all my restraint, the revelation had a ludicrous aspect. I couldn't

hide my wonderment. "You *followed* him?"

"That's right."

"In heaven's name, *why,* Sam?"

"I just told you," he said, his flushed cheeks reddening still more. "The man's a bad one; I wanted to check on him." Sam wiped his neck again. "After he'd read that letter, he went to the telegraph office, sent a wire. Then he walked back to Millie's, took a table at the front window and sat there over an hour, ordering coffee as an excuse."

At that point in his narrative, Sam stopped again, eyeing me expectantly. Obviously, he considered his account both important and intelligent but he had lost me completely. After a moment, he confirmed the latter.

"You don't get it, do you, Pete?"

I blinked at him. "You might say that," I admitted.

Except that it wasn't his nature, his sudden smile was almost patronizing. "Where is Millie's?" he asked.

I blinked some more. "Eh?"

Sam's stubby forefinger tapped the desk for emphasis. "It's right across the street from the Fidelity Loan Company."

A glimmer of his inference washed over me. I considered the implication, slowly phrased my thoughts. "This character of yours, a heister, comes to Surf City, spots the Fidelity as a likely job. He'll need help, so he writes some associates." I paused, thinking it through. "When he gets word they're interested, he wires them to come ahead. Then he goes back to casing the site some more, checking traffic, the number of customers, slack periods." I gave him a searching look. "That about it, Sam?"

"That's *exactly* it."

I shook my head. "It won't wash," I told him. "Aside from that 'criminal type' bit which we won't go into again, you have no proof. Just because a man gets a letter, sends a telegram, and then spends an hour in a luncheonette opposite a loan company . . ." I gave him an understanding smile. "I know there might be a nice hunk of reward money for nipping a crime in the bud and that you could use it. So could I. But you're letting your imagination run away with you."

He regarded me soberly. "You think that's all it is?"

"I do," I said.

Sam got off my desk. "In that case," he asked me, "how come that just ten minutes ago I tabbed the guy back at the scene? He hasn't got a group with him; just one other man. But the two of them are sitting in a parked car right outside the loan office. And

they're both wearing jackets—in this heat—with bulges under their left arms."

'Mixed emotions' is a catchy phrase, and if ever I'd been in doubt as to the precise connotation, I wasn't now. Irritation at Sam's ploy spurted through me; he had shrewdly assessed my initial reaction, had tailored his account for maximum effect and credence. At the same time, full possibility registering, taut urgency gripped me. If the setup Sam had pictured was correct . . .

"I figure they're waiting for the noon break, when the force will be smaller," Sam said.

I swore softly. Hubbard and his confounded 'hobby' very well could be leading me down the garden path to a big, fat zero. But I could no longer ignore the alternative.

"All right," I said shortly, surging to my feet. "We'll see it through."

Sheriff Wexler had taken upstate the car with the official insignia. The unmarked utility sedan into which I piled with Sam might have given me some slight advantage in reaching the scene unheralded, if indeed such an arrival was desirable.

As it was, my deputy's uniform not only broke the heist wide open, but instantly reduced it to the level of near-farce or downright humor.

Because Sam had been right, a holdup was the action. Even as I skidded the sedan around the corner downblock from our objective, I could see the operation already was under way. The sleek convertible parked in front of the building had its motor running, the curb door swung open. The driver hunched over the wheel, watching a second man pushing through the glass entrance doors of the Fidelity Loan Company.

"Stay here!" I shouted at Sam as I braked with a shriek of rubber. The driver of the convertible might not have heard my cry but he certainly caught the whine of tortured tires. His head jerked around, a look of dismay freezing his features (criminal type?) as he glimpsed my uniform. Then his head snapped back and he gunned the motor, zoomed away from the curb.

As I said, the panicky desertion had its comic touch, but I wasn't smiling then. I had my service revolver out, but only a direct score on one of the convertible's rear tires would have stopped the fleeing heister and I didn't want to risk a ricochet hitting an innocent bystander. I let the car rocket away, sprinted for the loan company.

Again the action was frenetic and quickly decisive. Only two em-

ployees, a youngish fellow and an elderly woman, had remained on duty during the lunch break, and the second bandit already had cowed them with a stubby black automatic, and was rounding the counter toward an open floor safe. At my lunging entrance, the heister whirled, recognized my status and blasted a shot at me, whereupon the lady clerk promptly fainted.

The bandit's slug missed. Mine didn't. The gunman reeled back with lead in his thigh and collapsed. Before he could hunker around for a second crack at me, I had kicked the automatic out of his hand, slapped on the cuffs and it was all over.

The wrapup, though, was equally hectic. As the echoes of the shots faded, the entire area swiftly congested. Pedestrians clotted the sidewalk, babbling, craning their necks. Some of the more venturesome surged into the building to stare, blurt questions. Disregarding my instructions to stay put, Sam Hubbard was one of the latter; the last I saw of him he had wormed his way inside, and was cradling the head of the good woman who had fainted.

By the time I had managed to quiet things down a bit, get an ambulance for the wounded bandit, alert the state police about his escaping associate, and untangle the traffic snarl out front, I had worked up a splitting headache. And my discomfort was destined to increase. Because two hours later, when I had returned to the office and was working on my fifth aspirin, I received a phone call from the loan company manager.

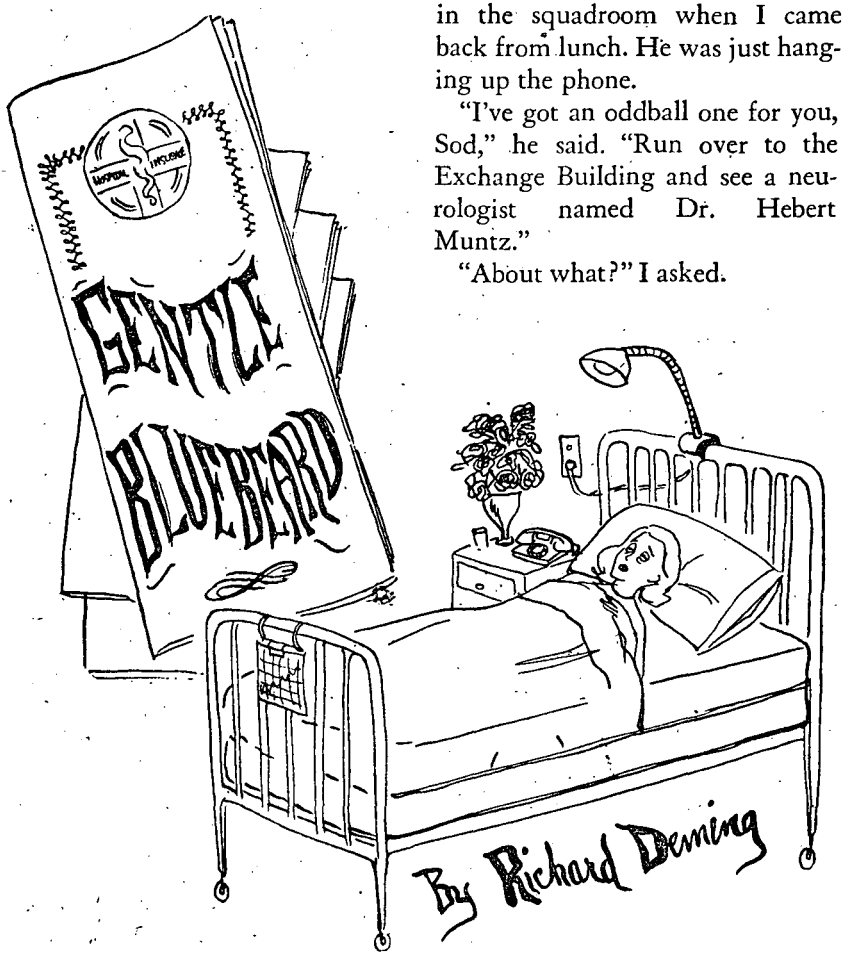
"You'd better get back over here," he told me bluntly. "We've just discovered there's twelve thousand dollars missing."

I'll pass over Sheriff Wexler's more caustic comments about my handling the case, when he returned and learned the details. We've picked up no trace of that twelve grand. Neither have we picked up Sam Hubbard.

Two hours gives you a mighty good head start if you act promptly. Long enough to clear out of town, out of the state, be well on your way to, say, the coast . . . or Mexico . . . or Canada. With simple living, twelve thousand should tide Sam over for the rest of his years, and wherever he is, I imagine he's getting plenty of satisfaction from realizing his 'hobby' finally paid off, after he'd had a sudden stroke of inspiration and simply plucked the money, from the open safe, unnoticed, when everybody was milling around . . .

Myself, I'd just as soon forget the whole affair.

The road (of marriage) reputedly "lies long and straight and dusty to the grave," and little relief attends him who attempts to curtail the route.



THE lieutenant was the only one in the squadroom when I came back from lunch. He was just hanging up the phone.

"I've got an oddball one for you, Sod," he said. "Run over to the Exchange Building and see a neurologist named Dr. Hebert Muntz."

"About what?" I asked.

"He has a patient at St. Luke's he thinks may be a poisoning case. Only he doesn't think anybody tried to kill her."

"You mean a suicide attempt?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "He's satisfied the stuff wasn't self-administered. He thinks somebody fed it to her. But if it's what he thinks it is, it isn't strong enough to kill, only enough to make the patient sick."

"Why would anybody do that?" I inquired.

"That's why you're going to see Dr. Muntz," he told me. "To find out."

The doctor's office was on the third floor of the Exchange Building. Several patients sat in a plush waiting room. There was a pretty redhead in a white uniform behind a counter.

I showed the redhead my badge and said, "Sergeant Sod Harris of Homicide. Dr. Muntz asked for a cop to stop by."

"Oh, yes, sir," she said. "He's with a patient, but he left word to send you right in. You may wait in his office."

She came from behind the counter and opened one of two doors leading off the waiting room. We went down a hall past a couple of closed doors to the doctor's private office. As no one was in it, I assumed the doctor was in one of the other cubicles with his patient.

The receptionist indicated a red leather chair before the desk and left me there.

It was about ten minutes before the doctor appeared. He was a lean, wiry man of about fifty with an air of bouncing energy about him.

When I stood up, he gave me a vigorous handshake. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Sergeant. Sit down."

I resumed my seat and he sank behind his desk. "This is a most peculiar case, Sergeant. I'm almost certain it's a case of deliberate poisoning. But if the drug used is what I think, it's a poor choice for murder, because it's hardly likely to cause death."

"That's what the lieutenant told me," I said. "Who's the patient?"

"A Mrs. Arlene Mosher. She was referred to me a couple of weeks ago by an oculist she'd gone to because she was having trouble with her vision. The oculist couldn't find any organic cause for her trouble, so he sent her along to me. By the time she got to me, she had also begun to experience difficulty swallowing and had developed a shuffling gait."

"These symptoms suggested some kind of poisoning?"

"Oh, no. Poisoning didn't even occur to me. My first thought was

either the onset of multiple sclerosis or a brain tumor, though it could have been any number of other conditions. Contrary to popular conception, neurological diseases seldom have such clearcut symptoms that they can be immediately diagnosed. It usually takes a long series of tests to arrive at a final diagnosis by a process of elimination. I had her hospitalized and began running tests."

"That's when you discovered she'd been poisoned?"

He shook his head. "Don't put words in my mouth, Sergeant. I only strongly suspect poisoning. I couldn't possibly prove it."

"Well, on what do you base your suspicion?"

"Again, symptoms. The patient's physical symptoms increasingly indicated a brain tumor. She suffered from insomnia, had odd tremors, clouded sensorium, drooling and rolling back of the eyes—all classic symptoms of a tumor. However, her blood tests began to show a peculiar thing. First there was agranulocytosis, which is a depression of the number of white corpuscles, then aplastic anemia, which is a similar depression of red corpuscles. This, along with the other symptoms, led me to the incredible suspicion that she quite possibly could be suffering from regular and continuing over-doses of proclorperazine, easily obtained."

"What's that?"

"The generic name of a quite common tranquilizer which, under various brand names, may be purchased without prescription in any drug store."

I looked at him in astonishment. "You mean you can buy stuff that'll do all that to a person?"

"Oh, it's hardly a dangerous drug. As a matter of fact, it's quite useful. It isn't nearly as dangerous as aspirin, for instance, which kills hundreds of people a year through overdoses. Many common drugs which are regarded as safe to dispense without prescription can induce dangerous symptoms if taken irresponsibly. And of course there are clear warnings on the tranquilizer bottles that if symptoms develop, they should immediately be stopped."

After absorbing this, I said, "You asked her if she'd been taking this stuff?"

"Naturally. She said she had never even heard of it. I took some steps to test my suspicion. I forbade her anything except hospital food, such as candy or fruit from outside, barred visitors during mealtime, and administered benztropine, which is an antidote for proclorperazine. Within twenty-four hours she began to improve, and within forty-eight was as good

as new. She could go home now, if I thought it safe to let her."

I regarded him thoughtfully. "When you say you suspected regular and continuing overdoses of this stuff, do you mean even after she entered the hospital?"

"Oh, yes. Right up to the time I laid down the new rules."

"You suspect anyone in particular?"

"Well, her husband was always there during the evening meal. The tranquilizer could have been dropped into her tea. He also brought her fruit and candy a time or two. When I laid down my security rules, I confiscated the last of this and had it analyzed. The results were negative, so if he was dosing her, it must have been during mealtime."

"I see," I said. "But why would he do it, if he knew it wouldn't kill her? It seems all he got out of it was a doctor and hospital bill."

"It's possible he didn't know it wouldn't kill her," the doctor said. "I know nothing about Mr. Mosher except that he's a garage mechanic, but in that occupation it's unlikely he would know much about drugs. Perhaps he thought it would kill her."

"Mmm. I suppose there's no way now to establish that the stuff was actually administered. I mean like testing blood samples, lab tests."

He shook his head. "There's no longer any in her system, if there ever was. And it's only a strong suspicion that proclorperazine caused her symptoms in the first place, not a definite fact."

I rose to my feet. "Well, thanks a lot, Doctor. What room is Mrs. Mosher in at St. Luke's?"

"Three twenty-three. What do you intend to do?"

"Just nose around a bit."

His expression became slightly worried. "You won't confront the husband and tell him I've accused him of anything, will you? Since I can't prove it, I'm not in a very good position to fight a suit for defamation of character."

"I'll be discreet," I assured him. "I won't get you into any trouble."

Afternoon visiting hours, which started at two, were on when I arrived at the hospital. Three twenty-three turned out to be a private room, and no one was visiting the patient.

For some reason, maybe because you don't expect men to attempt the murder of young and pretty wives, I had expected to find Mrs. Arlene Mosher a middle-aged drab. But she wasn't more than twenty-two, and was quite pretty in a slightly too thin sort of way. She had honey blonde hair which framed a baby-doll face, and big

blue eyes. There wasn't a bit of sparkle in her, though. Maybe it was because she had been ill, although I got the impression she just naturally had a dead personality.

She wasn't in bed. She was seated by the window in a robe and slippers. When I came in, she gave me an inquiring look.

"I'm Sergeant Sod Harris of the police, Mrs. Mosher," I said. "You don't look very sick."

"I'm not, but they won't let me go home. What do the police want with me?"

"Just routine. Possible drug poisonings are always reported to the police, and we have to follow up. We got a report that you may have had too many tranquilizers."

"That's ridiculous," she said. "I've never taken a tranquilizer in my life. I told Dr. Muntz that."

"Uh-huh. What do you think was wrong with you?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. And I don't believe the doctor has either. Whatever it was, it seems to be gone."

There were a couple of other chairs in the room, so I took one. Glancing around, I said, "Isn't a private room here kind of expensive?"

"We have Blue Cross and Blue Shield. It pays most of the bill. Harry wanted me to have the best, with no expense spared."

"Harry's your husband?"

She nodded. "We couldn't afford it without hospitalization, of course. With all these lab tests, my bill is running into more than fifty dollars a day. If we had to pay for it ourselves, I'd be in the charity ward. Harry's only a mechanic at the Sutter Repair Garage."

"That big garage on Gravois?" I asked.

She nodded again

"I need a little car work. Is he any good?"

"Oh, he's a very good mechanic. It's funny, because he hates being one. I mean having to work at it. He always loved working on cars, but just as a hobby. He hates having to do it for a living. There's a little snob in my husband."

Before I could comment on this, a pretty young brunette of about the same age as the patient stopped in the doorway. She was wearing a blue spring coat and a premature Easter hat with flowers. Easter was still two weeks off.

"Hello," she said to the blonde Arlene. "You look all recovered."

"I am," the patient said. "Come on in."

I rose as the woman entered the room. Arlene Mosher introduced her as Mrs. Carole Wagner, adding the information that Carole's husband had been best man at her

and Harry's wedding, and Harry had been best man at Walter's and Carole's.

"You were all just recently married?" I asked.

"Oh, no. Walter and Carole were only married this past June, but Harry and I have been married three years. Walter and Harry were fraternity brothers in college."

So Harry was a college man, I thought, wondering why he had to work as a garage mechanic if he had a college education. I decided to ask.

"Can't Harry get a better job than garage mechanic if he's a college man?"

"He only had two years at Washington U.," Carole said before Arlene could answer. "He quit to get married."

Something in her tone suggested a slight resentment that her husband's friend hadn't finished school. I decided it might be interesting to talk to Carole alone.

The brunette took a chair and I resumed my seat. Carole said, "Arlene introduced you as Sergeant Harris. Are you a policeman?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're visiting as a friend, I assume, not in your official capacity."

Arlene said, "He's here on business. That dumb Dr. Muntz reported that I'd had an overdose of tranquilizers. Can you imagine?"

"That you might have had," I corrected. "He was only going by the symptoms. Since you say you've never used them, it looks as though he guessed wrong."

Carole asked curiously, "Whatever made Dr. Muntz think that, Arlene?"

"I don't believe he has any idea what was wrong with me," Arlene said. "But you know how doctors are. When they can't diagnose a case, they make a wild guess."

"Don't malign doctors," Carole said. "Walter's business depends on them."

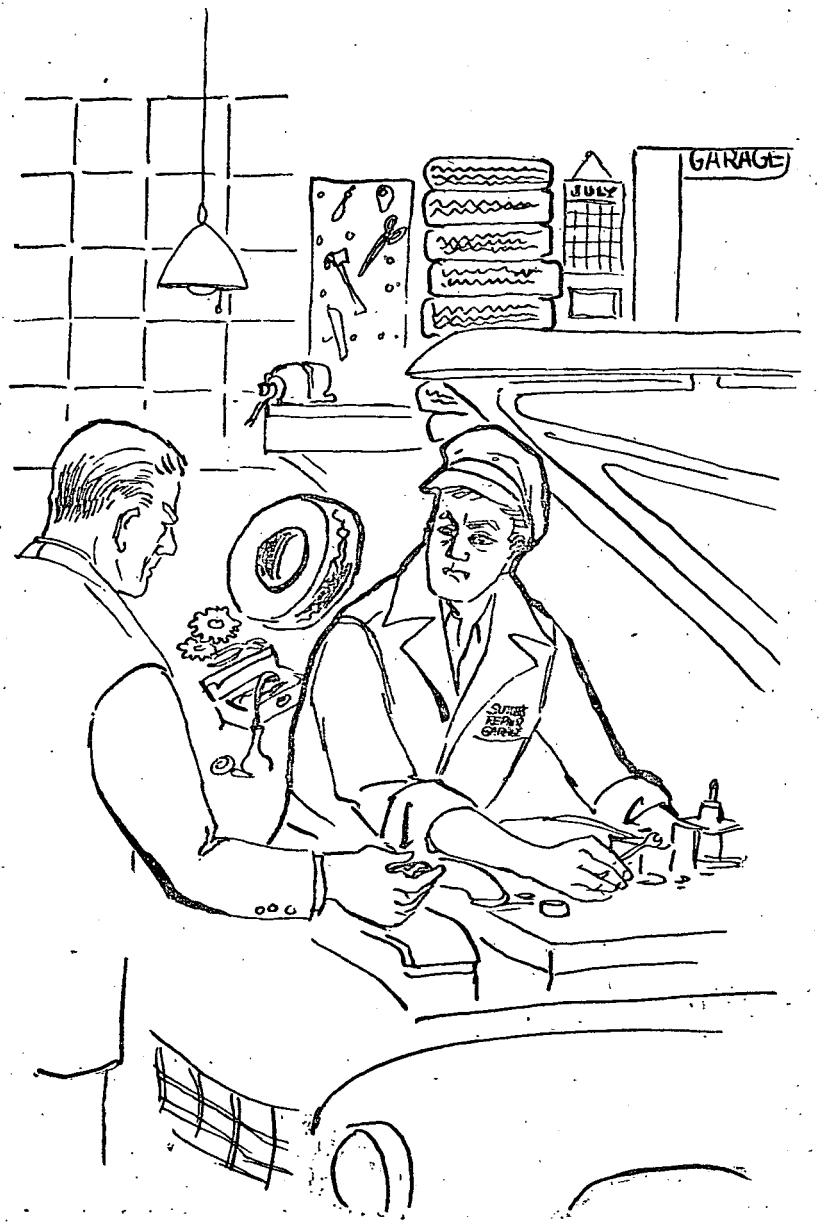
"What business is that?" I inquired.

"He's a pharmacist."

I sat back and let the women talk then. If they wondered why I remained, when presumably my business was finished, they were both too polite to show it. For about fifteen minutes they prattled on about mutual acquaintances, then Carole rose to leave.

I got up too. "I guess I'll run along too, Mrs. Mosher. Sorry to have bothered you about nothing."

"That's all right," she said. "I don't have many visitors afternoons, and time drags. Harry's always here evenings, but he works


GARAGE
JULY

until five, then has his dinner."

It was a few more moments before we got out of the room, because Carole had to ask when Arlene was going home and, when Arlene said she didn't know, speculate on how Harry was getting along at home alone. But finally the brunette and I were walking toward the elevator together.

I asked, "What was Harry studying at Washington U.?"

"The same as my husband. Pharmacy."

That was interesting, I thought. With two years of pharmacy behind him, Harry Mosher would almost certainly have picked some poison more effective than proclorperazine if he had meant to kill his wife. It began to look as though Dr. Herbert Muntz was way out in left field. Perhaps Arlene Mosher's opinion of him was right, and the neurologist had made a wild guess simply because he couldn't diagnose the case.

I decided to mark the record, "No evidence of criminous action," when I got back to headquarters, then forget about it.

We stopped before the elevator and I punched the down button. Just to make conversation, I asked, "How old is Harry Mosher?"

"The same as my husband. Twenty-three."

"So he quit school to get married at twenty, huh?"

"Yes. It was too bad. Walter and I were smart enough to wait until he completed his education. Now Walter has a fine position with the Owl Chain, and in a few years will probably manage his own store. Poor Harry will probably be a garage mechanic all his life."

Again I caught the faint note of resentment. I said, "You think Harry made a mistake, eh?"

"Well, it was so unnecessary. They could have waited. Of course, Harry probably wouldn't have married Arlene if they had. She wasn't in school with us. She worked somewhere as a waitress. I think Harry was just playing around with her and never really was serious."

The elevator door opened and we stepped on. There was a uniformed nurse on the elevator, so our conversation lapsed until we reached the main floor.

As we left the elevator and headed side-by-side toward the main door, I said, "Then why did Harry marry her?"

"She told him she was pregnant," Carole said casually. "By the time he discovered she wasn't, they were already married and he had dropped out of school."

The case suddenly became wide

open again. Here was a motive for murder if I'd ever heard of one. Almost a justifiable motive.

"Didn't that make him a little sore?" I asked.

"Well, she claimed it was an honest mistake. He must have believed her, because they seem to get along all right."

We reached the main door and I held it open for her. As we went down the steps to the sidewalk, I asked, "Was she ever pregnant? I mean, do they have any children?"

"No. Arlene had a miscarriage when they had been married about a year, the time she fell down the stairs and broke her leg."

By now we had reached the sidewalk, and both of us paused.

I said, "This isn't her first time in the hospital then."

She emitted a little laugh. "Arlene? She spends half her time there. This is her fourth trip to the hospital in two years."

"Oh? What was wrong with her aside from a broken leg and this last mysterious illness?"

"Once she had food poisoning, and once some stomach pains which were never diagnosed. The doctor suspected ulcers, but after a couple of weeks of tests and X-rays, they decided nothing at all was wrong. I'm beginning to suspect all her illlnesses, aside from her broken leg and miscarriage, were psychosomatic."

I asked, "Were all her hospitalizations here?"

"Just the last two. The first couple were at Barnes. Why?"

"Just making conversation." I touched my hat brim. "Nice to have met you, Mrs. Wagner."

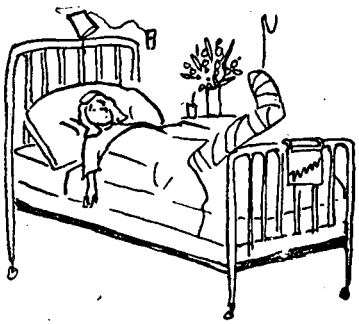
"The same to you, Sergeant."

We moved in opposite directions toward our respective cars.

I was driving a department car. I took it back to headquarters and got my own car from the lot. The automatic choke had been sticking for some time, and I kept meaning to get it adjusted. This seemed like a good time to do it.

It was past four p.m. when I drove in the service entrance of Sutter's Repair Garage. A coveralled man of about fifty came over to see what I wanted.

"My automatic choke's sticking," I said. "If he's not busy, I'd prefer Harry Mosher to work on



it. He was recommended to me."

"Sure," he said. "He's on a job, but he can stop for a simple thing like that, if that's all it is." He directed me to drive into a vacant slot against the far wall, then walked away.

After a wait of a few minutes a tall, good-looking young man with curling blond hair came over. He too wore coveralls. Examining me curiously, he said, "I understand you asked for me personally."

"Uh-huh. I happen to know your wife, and she said you're a good mechanic. My name's Sod Harris."

He pursed his lips. "I don't recall Arlene ever mentioning you. My hands are greasy, so I won't offer to shake hands. What's wrong with the car?"

"The automatic choke sticks."

He lifted the hood and it took him less than five minutes to get the choke working properly. After wiping his hands on a rag and making out a charge ticket, he asked, "How long have you known my wife?"

"Just since today. I visited her at the hospital. It was a routine call. I'm a cop."

His face smoothed of all expression. "Oh?"

"I'm not here as a cop," I said. "I needed the choke fixed and your wife recommended you."

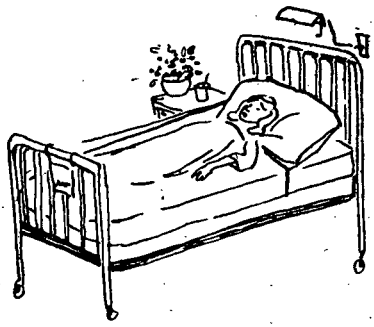
"I see. Why were you making a routine call on her?"

"We always check out reported cases of possible poisoning. You knew the doctor suspected an overdose of tranquilizer, didn't you?"

"He mentioned it. But it couldn't have been that. Arlene doesn't take tranquilizers."

"Yes, she told me. She's been hospitalized several times since you were married, hasn't she?"

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you making some kind of



investigation? Just what is this?"

"I've already made my investigation," I told him. "Right now I'm just making conversation."

For a few moments he studied me thoughtfully. Finally he said, "Yes, she's been hospitalized before. You can pay the bill at the cashier's." He turned his back and walked away.

I wasn't particularly disappointed at getting so little from Harry Mosher. All I had really wanted was a chance to size up the youth. I long ago learned that murderers don't look any different than anyone else, but you can get an impression of character and personality just by talking to a suspect. Despite his coolness to me, Harry Mosher seemed like an average, clean-cut young man who was probably highly regarded by his neighbors and his employer.

That didn't mean he was above killing his wife, because even preachers have been known to do that. But I hoped he wasn't a Bluebeard, because he impressed me as a nice kid.

It was nearing five when I drove away from the garage. There didn't seem to be enough urgency in the case to work overtime. I drove back to headquarters and logged out.

The next morning I was back at St. Luke's by nine o'clock. Only this time I visited the registrar instead of Mrs. Mosher. I learned that Arlene Mosher's previous admission, six months before, had been under the care of a gastro-intestinal specialist, Dr. Norman Gateworth.

Gateworth happened to be in the hospital at the time, so I had him paged. We met in the lobby. He was a plump, benevolent looking man of about sixty.

After identifying myself and shaking hands, I said, "Do you recall a patient named Mrs. Arlene Mosher whom you had in here about six months back?"

He had to tug thoughtfully at an earlobe before he could sort her out from all his other patients, but finally he nodded. "A suspected ulcer case, referred to me by her family physician. We ran tests and took X-rays for about two weeks without finding a thing wrong with her. She had been complaining of an acute burning sensation in the region of her stomach, but the symptom disappeared while she was here. It probably was merely a mild gastritis. That sometimes is cured by the barium meal we give patients when we run a G.I. series."

"Could it possibly have been a poisoning attempt?"

His eyebrows hiked upward. "I suppose it could have been. Any

number of drugs could induce similar symptoms. But she wasn't that sick. She was never in the slightest danger of dying."

As it hardly seemed likely that a man with Harry Mosher's knowledge of drugs would twice pick poisons that wouldn't work, it looked as though my investigation was coming to a dead end. I thanked Dr. Gateworth and left the hospital.

I still wasn't quite ready to give up, though. My wife accuses me of a stubborn streak, and she's probably right. I'm not a particularly brilliant cop, so I have to make up for my lack of genius by being unusually thorough. Even though it looked like my investigation was headed nowhere, I decided to carry it on to the bitter end.

At Barnes Hospital I learned that both Arlene Mosher's admissions had been under the care of a general practitioner named Dr. Arnold Wing, presumably the same family physician who had referred her to Gateworth. She had spent six weeks in the hospital at the time she broke a leg and miscarried, two weeks the time she was admitted for food poisoning.

Dr. Arnold Wing had an office on South Grand. I phoned him for an appointment and dropped in to see him after lunch.

Dr. Wing was a thin, stoop-shouldered, elderly man, apparently without a heavy practice, for no patients were waiting when I arrived. His office and examination room were combined in one big room, and we talked in there.

I asked about the food poisoning first.

"That was about a year and a half ago," he said. "There was nothing unusual about the case, except that we never were able to trace her condition to any particular food she had eaten."

"Had she eaten anything her husband hadn't?"

After thinking, he said. "No, I don't believe she had. I recall that they hadn't been out for dinner anywhere, so It must have been something she prepared herself. Her husband experienced no symptoms, but that doesn't mean much. It's quite possible she merely ate from an improperly washed plate or with an improperly washed fork. Probably more so-called food poisoning cases result from unsanitary utensils than from tainted food."

"Could it have been a deliberate poisoning?" I asked.

He looked startled. "Why do you ask that?"

"Well, except for her miscarriage and broken leg, her illnesses all seem pretty vague. This present

one, for instance. She went into St. Luke's with a suspected brain tumor, but now all symptoms have disappeared. The neurologist treating her suspects an overdose of proclorperazine."

Dr. Wing frowned. "I didn't know she was hospitalized. They must have changed doctors."

"She was referred to the neurologist by her oculist," I said. "She probably bypassed you because her first trouble was with her vision. Anyway, I'm checking back on her previous illnesses to see if they possibly could have stemmed from drugs."

In a slow voice he said, "Any of numerous drugs can cause an upset stomach, of course. However, she couldn't have been given anything very dangerous, because she wasn't sick enough. She was never listed as critical."

Again I felt as though I were wasting my time. It was inconceivable that a pharmacy student would three times choose ineffective poisons if he had murder in mind.

Then my interest perked up when he added in the same slow voice, "However, the time she fell down the stairs, I momentarily suspected a murder attempt."

"Why?"

"She insisted she had tripped over something at the top of the stairs. Her husband just as strongly insisted nothing had been there to trip over. But there was a cut on one shin such as might have been made by a tightly stretched wire. The only thing is that if it was a murder attempt, her husband must have changed his mind after she fell."

"Why do you say that?"

"He was home when it happened. Harry Mosher isn't an unintelligent young man, so if he did rig a wire for his wife to trip over, he must have realized the fall was unlikely to kill her. A tumble downstairs isn't likely to be fatal to a young, healthy woman. My reasoning at the time was that if he had planned murder, he would have finished her off after she fell, hoping no one would suspect the fall hadn't killed her. Since he didn't, I came to the conclusion my imagination was working overtime. What he actually did was immediately call an ambulance. He had applied an emergency splint by the time it arrived. His actions after the fall were hardly compatible with his having arranged it."

"No," I agreed. "If he has been trying to kill her, he isn't a very efficient murderer." I thanked the doctor for his time and left.

Even a stubborn cop can't keep beating his head against the wall

over a case when there are no further leads to investigate. When I got back to headquarters, I wrote up the case record, concluded it, "No evidence of criminous action," and put it on the lieutenant's desk. I wasn't really satisfied, though. I kept brooding about it, and finally phoned Dr. Muntz.

"I've checked back over Mrs. Mosher's previous hospitalizations," I told him. "I didn't unearth any evidence of foul play, but there were enough slightly odd circumstances in each case to leave me slightly uneasy about the whole thing. There's certainly nothing definite enough for us to take action on down here, though."

"Well, my mind's easier for having called you in anyway," he said. "I'm letting Mrs. Mosher go home today, so let's hope my suspicion was unfounded. Mr. Mosher just phoned me, incidentally."

"Oh? About what?"

"To ask me to send him my bill in quadruplicate."

"Quadruplicate? What for?"

"I suppose he carries more than one health insurance policy. I often get asked for bills in duplicate, but this is the first time anyone ever wanted four."

Bingo! It fell into place so neatly, I wondered why I hadn't figured it out from the beginning.

"This may seem like an odd question, Doctor, but I have a reason for it. Do you mind telling me how much your bill is going to be?"

In a tone of mild surprise he said, "It is a rather odd question. But if it's important, I charge ten dollars a day for hospital calls. Mrs. Mosher was hospitalized a total of fifteen days, so my bill will be a hundred and fifty dollars."

"Thanks," I said. "If there are any further developments, I'll let you know."

I hung up and phoned the registrar at St. Luke's. Part of the information hospitals enter on admission cards is designed to let them know how the patient intends to pay his bill. It includes such things as what health insurance is carried and the name of the responsible person's bank. I got both items of information from the registrar, and also the amount of Mrs. Mosher's bill both for this period of hospitalization and her previous time at St. Luke's.

Then I phoned Barnes Hospital and the two other doctors, aside from Muntz, who had treated her.

The banks were already closed for the day, so I had to wait until morning to complete my investi-

gation. At nine a.m. I was closeted with the president of the bank where the Moshers had their accounts.

Bankers are stuffy about disclosing their depositors' affairs, even to the police, without a court order. However, they'll usually cooperate if you make it an off-the-record inquiry with a guarantee that you won't use the information you get as courtroom evidence without first going through the proper legal procedure to get it legally. I came away knowing the Mosher's exact financial condition.

Harry Mosher would be at work in the daytime, I assumed, so I waited until that evening to call on them. They had a small, two-story house on Jefferson, within walking distance of the garage where he worked.

Arlene answered the door. She seemed surprised to see me, but she invited me in politely enough. Her husband was seated in the front room drinking a can of beer. He rose to offer me a rather frigid handshake and asked without much enthusiasm if I would like a beer.

"No thanks," I said. "I just dropped by to discuss your wife's various hospitalizations for a few minutes."

I seated myself on a sofa opposite his chair. Arlene had taken another chair. She gazed at me expectantly.

"I've been checking up on the cost of Mrs. Mosher's illnesses during the past couple of years," I said. "It certainly costs to get sick these days. Doctor and hospital bills together have come to five thousand, eight hundred and thirty dollars."

"Most of that was covered by our Blue Cross and Blue Shield," Arlene said quickly, with a glance at her husband to see if the figure had shocked him.

"All but approximately twenty-seven hundred dollars," I agreed. "And since Harry's employer pays his insurance premiums, that's been your total medical expense. Except for the five hundred a year Harry pays out of his own pocket for your other three health policies."

She gazed at me puzzledly. "What other policies?"

"I didn't think you knew about those," I said. "They've paid off on your illnesses too. A total of seven thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven dollars, plus an additional five hundred and some dollars which will be coming in as soon as your husband submits claims for this last illness. Except for the thousand dollars he's paid out in premiums during the past

two years, it's all in a savings account under his own name, presumably as a fund to finish his education when he finally finishes with you."

She looked at her husband with her jaw drooping. "What's he talking about, Harry?"

"I'll explain it bluntly," I said. "Your husband resented being trapped into a marriage he didn't want and being forced to abandon his chosen career for one he doesn't like. So he decided to use you as a means of accumulating enough money to go back to school. What his plans are when he decides he has enough of a bank account, I don't know. Maybe he merely means to leave you. Maybe he plans a final illness which will be terminal. You'll have to ask him."

Her face registered horror. "Harry! Is he telling the truth?"

Her husband glared at me belligerently. "Try to prove it, Sergeant."

"I doubt very much that I could," I admitted. "I'd hate to try to convince a jury that you deliberately caused your wife's illnesses, because there isn't a bit of actual evidence. And without proving that, we could never establish fraud. There's nothing fraudulent *per se* about carrying extra hospitalization. Many people carry enough to make a profit from their illnesses. I'm not planning to arrest you."

"Then why the devil are you bothering us?"

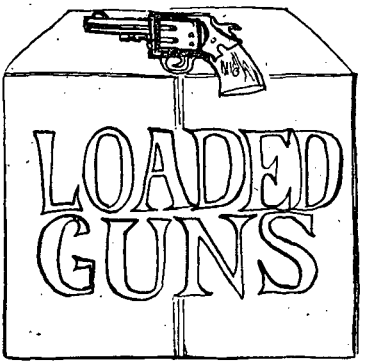
"Just to clear the air. In the event you do plan a terminal illness for your wife, I'd suggest you abandon the idea. I rather suspect she won't be around long enough for you to slip her more pills or rig any more accidents anyway."

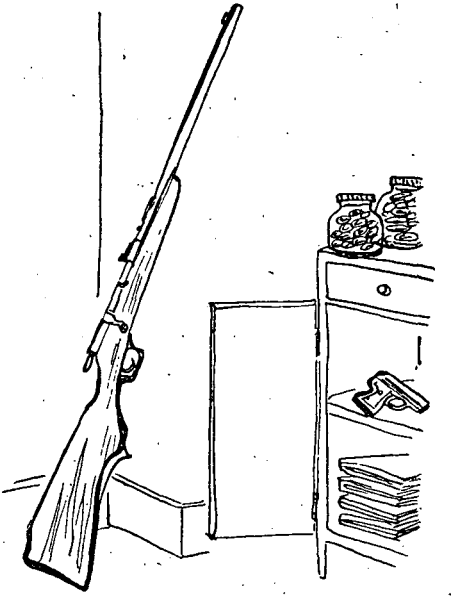
He looked at her and saw what I meant. Her eyes were blazing at him with horrified indignation.

I got to my feet. "I'll leave you to work out your own solution, and it had better be nonviolent. If either of you end up dead, I *will* prove what happened in court."

Arlene was on her way up the stairs, probably to start packing, when I let myself out the door.

It is my observation that chitchat over "a nice cup of tea" may, on occasion, be so seasoned as to conceal the introduction of a red herring.





ARE DANGEROUS

WHEN George Unders answered the knock on the back door and saw the two strange men waiting there in the glow of the porch light, he guessed that this was it. It was the thing he had been more or less expecting, night after night, yet hoping would never happen.

"We'd like to use your telephone," one of them said. He was a big man with a round face and thick lips.

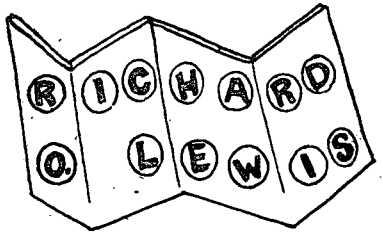
"It won't take us long," said the other. He was as big as his companion, but his face was more angular and was blue with a stubble of beard.

George didn't unlock the screen door. He stood with his hand hesitantly on the latch while a multi-

tude of thoughts raced about in his head. He knew these men. Not by sight, of course. No one knew them by sight. Yet, he felt certain that these were the men he had been vaguely expecting. These were the ones who pounced out of the night onto lone coin collectors, looted them, and vanished back again into the night, leaving no witnesses. The papers had been full of their exploits for the past several months. And now they were here.

When he had first read the newspaper articles, he had taken certain precautionary measures. There was a pistol in the kitchen at his back. It was on top of the cabinet, within easy reach—provided one was standing near enough to the cabinet. It had been placed there for just such an emergency. But now that the emergency was at hand, George realized the pistol was of no earthly use to him. If these men were who he thought they were, he wouldn't dare make a try for it.

He considered slamming the wooden door and bolting it. Then he could grab the pistol and turn off the lights. Certainly they wouldn't break down the door. Or would they? Yes, they would! Now that they had let him see their faces, they would not turn back. And they were big enough to crash through the screen before he had time to bolt the door.



But what if they did merely want to use the telephone? What if their car had broken down?

There was a sudden swish of slippered footsteps at his back. Martha came up beside him. She was a round little woman with a topknot of mousey hair, pale cheeks, and eyes of pale blue. As usual, her spectacles hung halfway down over the bridge of her short nose.

"What is it, George?" she wanted to know, lowering her head a trifle so she could peer over her glasses through the screen. "Who is it?"

"We'd like to use your telephone, ma'am," said the one with the round face.

"Why, of course! George, don't just stand there! Where are your manners? Let the gentlemen in."

George unlatched the screen and pushed it open. Under the circumstances, there seemed little else he could do.

Each man picked up a black valise and followed him into the lighted kitchen. George glanced at the top of the cabinet. The black

butt of the pistol was plainly visible. But he couldn't make a try for it, not with the man with the round face breathing directly down the back of his neck.

Martha bustled among them, around them, and ahead of them, leading them into the living room, babbling on and on, as usual, like a meandering brook, getting nowhere in particular.

"Now you just put your things down and make yourselves comfortable," she invited. "I'll make a nice pot of tea for us all. And I believe I have some cookies."

"We don't want any tea," the round-faced one said, flatly. He seated himself on the arm of a chair, his bag beside him.

"No tea?" said Martha. "Perhaps a cup of coffee, then?" She pushed her glasses up over the bridge of her nose, and they promptly fell back again to their customary resting place. She peered over them from one to the other. "Oh, goodness!" she said, suddenly, clasping her hands together in dismay. "How silly of me! Here I've gone and forgotten your names already."

"That's Mr. Blackie," said the round-faced one. "I'm Wilberforce. But you can just call me Wilber."

"Wilber," said Martha, appreciatively. "That's a real nice name! I had a cousin once—"

Poor Martha. They were poking fun at her, and she didn't even realize it. Fervently, George wished she had gone out somewhere this night. Anywhere. Anywhere so she wouldn't have to face this ordeal! But, no, Martha never went out anywhere. Starved for friendship as she was, she had made few friends. She simply tried too hard. When callers came, she plied them with a continuous flow of food and drink, drowned them in conversation, gushed and bustled over them —and wondered why they seldom came back or invited her out.

Wilber had turned toward George. "I hear you have a large collection of coins," he said, casually.

George was leaning against the open door to the stairway. He was certain now that his first guess had been right. These were the killers! He wondered how they had learned of his collection; only a few friends knew of its existence. Then, suddenly, he knew. An advertisement had appeared several months ago in a magazine offering a fabulous buy in old coins. He had answered it; he had received no reply. These men had placed the ad; they now had the name and address of every coin collector who had answered it. They had started down the list, leaving a trail of blood in their wake, and they would continue until somewhere,

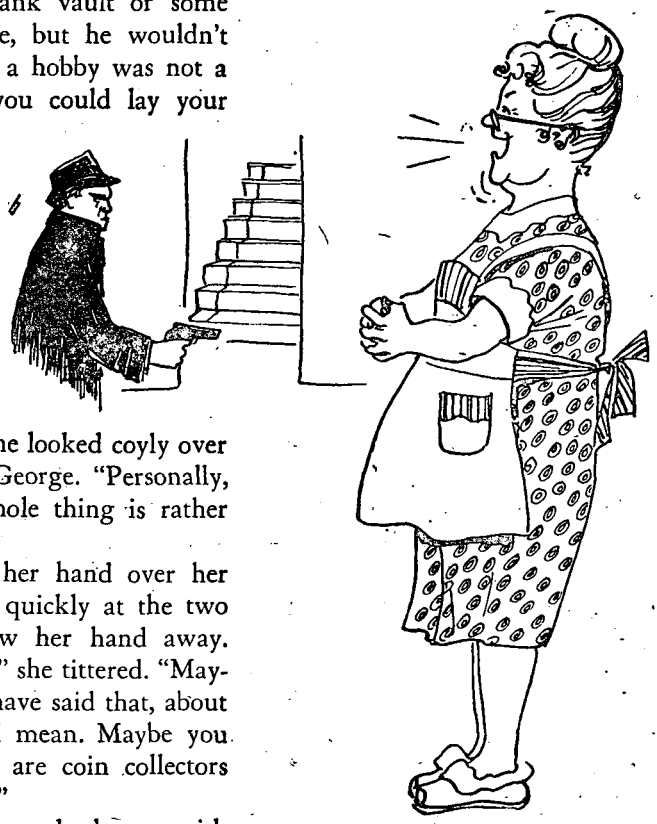
somehow, someone stopped them.

"Oh, yes!" Martha was saying. "George has a whole cabinet full of coins upstairs. I don't know what on earth he is going to do with them all. He just keeps collecting them and putting them into folders and jars and things. He spends hours at it. I wanted him to put them into a bank vault or some other safe place, but he wouldn't hear of it, said a hobby was not a hobby unless you could lay your hands on it." She looked coyly over her glasses at George. "Personally, I think the whole thing is rather silly."

She clapped her hand over her mouth, looked quickly at the two men, then drew her hand away. "Oh, goodness!" she tittered. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that, about it being silly, I mean. Maybe you two gentlemen are coin collectors too. Are you?"

Blackie exchanged glances with Wilber. "Yes," he said. "You could call us that."

The lines of peace which habitually marked George's lean face had vanished, and his lips had become thin and white with fear and anger. He had prepared himself for this—the gun on the cabinet in the kitchen, the rifle in the corner of the bedroom, the little automatic in the coin cabinet—and now he real-



ized how futile his efforts had been. The guns were all in the wrong places. The rifle should be in the stairway, at his back, where he could lay his hands on it. He considered making a quick dash up the stairs to the bedroom, clutching up the rifle—

But that would leave Martha at their mercy! No, the rifle was out of the question. That left only the little automatic among the coins. If they would permit him to reach that cabinet, a flick of the safety, a touch of the trigger—

"We also collect guns," said Wilber. He slid a short-snouted .38 from the pocket of his coat and pointed it casually in George's direction.

George felt a spasm clutch his stomach at sight of the thing. He wondered how many lives it had taken, how many more it would take.

"Oh, my!" Martha gasped. "I don't like guns! They frighten me half to death! But—but George collects them, too, like he does everything else. And I don't know why. He just keeps them lying around the house; one in the kitchen, one in the bedroom, one in his coin cabinet. I've been after him time and time again to put them away."

George groaned inwardly. There went his last chance, his *only* chance! Martha had blabbed it away without even realizing it.

He felt infinitely sorry for her. She seemed not to have the slightest notion as to what was going on. These men intended to kill her. They wore no masks; they'd leave no witnesses. They were murderers! And she was chatting on, entertainingly, about whatever entered her head, as if they were old friends who had just dropped in for tea.

"I do hope it isn't loaded," said Martha, drawing back another step from Wilber. "I don't like loaded guns. They're too dangerous. I keep telling George he shouldn't have loaded guns about the house. What if children should come in and get hold of one? Why, they could hurt themselves real bad. That's why I had all the bullets taken out of George's guns. Better be safe than sorry, I always say."

"Smart lady! Smart lady!" said Wilber, his thick lips twisting mockingly.

"Yes," said Blackie. *"Very!"*

"And now," said Wilber, getting up from the arm of the chair, "I think we had better have a look at your collection." He gathered up the two valises with one hand and made a slight motion with his gun toward the stairs. "Your coin collection, I mean."

George hesitated. The gun in Wilber's hand was less than three

feet from him. If he made a sudden grab for it—

Then he felt the man's eyes upon him, saw the cold, wary glint of them, and knew he wouldn't stand a chance. He turned slowly and started up the stairs, his legs rubbery beneath him. He felt beaten, inadequate, utterly helpless.

"I wouldn't touch one of the things myself," Martha was chattering on. "That's why I had Brother Al unload them the last time he was here. When George was away, of course."

George paused on the stairs, felt the gun prod into the small of his back, then continued up the stairs.

"I do believe I have some cake left," Martha said to Blackie. "I'll bring you some and get you some cold milk to drink while they're looking at the collection." She started toward the kitchen.

Blackie stepped in front of her. "Don't bother," he said, dropping his right hand into his coat pocket. "Just stay here. And shut up!"

"I always try to have cake or cookies or something like that on hand," Martha explained. "Just in case someone should drop in. But we don't have many callers, living out here away from things as we are."

Blackie was trying not to listen to her. He had his attention tuned to the room above them. Twice he nodded his head in satisfaction as he heard the continued, muffled clinking of many coins being poured into a valise.

Martha heard it, too. "Maybe Mr. Wilber is buying the collection," she said. "I do hope so! George has been collecting for nearly twenty years. He must have thousands and thousands of all kinds of coins. And he spends so much time with them. Always sorting them and such. Why, some days I hardly get to talk with him at all."

Martha broke off. Blackie stiffened. The two shots from upstairs had come in rapid succession, startlingly abrupt.

Blackie's hand came swiftly from his pocket, bringing a gun with it. He brushed her aside, took a step nearer the stairs, and paused.

There was a sound of shuffling footsteps above. They faltered, approached the stairs, then dragged heavily as they came slowly down, step by step.

Blackie shoved Martha roughly against the wall, then stepped back, his gun covering both her and the doorway. "It had better be the right one," he said, thinly.

The footsteps paused, then came on again. George appeared in the doorway, his face sickly white. He was slumped over, nearly double, both hands clasping his stomach, his fingers crimson.

A piercing cry came from Martha's pale lips as she leaped toward him.

Blackie's hand tightened about the gun.

George staggered sideways through the door to the near wall, leaned his head against it.

Blackie relaxed, lowered his gun, and grinned. "Looks like you've had it, buddy," he said.

George began to slump lower along the wall. He reached out with his left hand toward Martha, clawed empty air, and lurched in front of her. Then his right hand swung suddenly out and around, and the little automatic in it spoke rapidly, three times.

A look of surprise chased the grin from Blackie's face a second or two before he hit the floor.

George had his arms around Martha, and she was struggling away from him. "You're hurt!" she screamed. "George, you're hurt!"

"It isn't my blood," he said, letting her free herself. "It belongs to the one upstairs. I had to use it to make my act look convincing."

Then she was in his arms again, and he was holding her tightly, feeling the warmth of her body slowly calming the cold sickness that was churning within him.

"They believed you," he whispered. "About the guns being unloaded. It threw Wilber off his guard—gave me the scant second I needed, *the scant second I had to have!*"

"After I finally realized who they were, I knew they would be watching you," she said, "watching your every move. I had to throw them off—somehow."

He relaxed his arms from about her and turned toward the telephone. Then he paused and turned back. "You know," he said, "you had *me* believing it, too—until that bit about some unknown character named Brother Al."

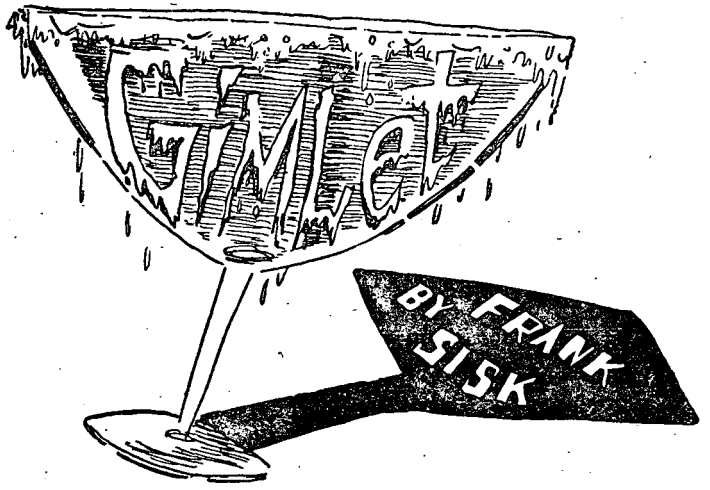
"I didn't know what else to do," said Martha. "I hoped you'd get the message."

"Smart lady! Smart lady!" said George, turning again toward the telephone.

"Yes," she said, pushing her glasses up to the bridge of her nose again. *"Very!"*

An actor may employ asides to explain digressions from the plot; conversely, a woman may deploy distractions to circumvent discernment of the main theme.

A VERY COLD GIMLET



THE phone was ringing as Osgood Chace approached the door of his hotel room. He got the key slantwise in the lock and dropped it, then recovered it. He finally got in, just as the ringing stopped. Closing the door behind him, he said aloud, "She'll try again, that's for sure."

He set his attaché case on a chair and his hat on the dresser, then shed his coat on the divan that was converted each night into a bed. Then he walked to a lowboy and took frowning note of the small assortment of bottles, an ice bucket, and a tray of clean glasses. He spoke aloud again, musingly.

"Gin? Hmmm. Why not? But tonight with lime water. A very cold, very dry gimlet."

He uncovered the bucket. No ice. "I'll murder that maid," he said.

Osgood started toward the phone but it began to ring before he reached it. He knew who it would be. He had not noticed that about her at first, yet it was a trait that must have been there always. He had simply seen it as something else, girlish daring perhaps, or empathy. How else did two strangers strike up an acquaintance in a cocktail lounge unless they had something along those lines?

He addressed the phone's black maw. "Hello."

"Well, greetings to you too, Ozzie."

He wished she wouldn't call him that. "Janice?"

"Who else, honey?"

"I thought you were to attend a concert with your husband tonight."

"So did he. But you know how it is—I developed a splitting migraine."

"This may be one migraine too many, Janice. He's no fool. And I wish you wouldn't call me Ozzie. You know perfectly well what I prefer to be called."

"Okay, Buff. We'll play it your way. But I must see you tonight."

"I'm not too sure a meeting tonight would be in the best interests of either of us. Oh, and by the way, Janice, is your brother in town?"

"My brother?" A slight pause. "Ray?"

"Ray, yes. Have you got more than one brother?"

"Only one. Where did you think you saw him?"

"At a bus stop across the street from the hotel. Not more than twenty minutes ago."

"You're definitely mistaken, darling."

"Could be. A funny thing, though, I got the impression that this guy at the bus stop recognized me too. He seemed to turn his head away."

"That doesn't sound like Ray. And after all, Buff you've met him only once."

"He'd shaved off that hussar's mustache of his."

She laughed. "That cinches it. Ray would rather part with his right arm than surrender a single whisker on his upper lip. Now let's get back to us for a moment. I have something important to tell you but I want to tell you in utmost privacy."

"Do you have a meeting place in mind?"

"A perfect place. And miles and

miles away from here. Perfect!"

"Just how many miles, my love?"

"Say that again. The love part."

He said it again self-consciously. It was a word he had used with her quite naturally, if thoughtlessly, until a few days ago. He considered the word and its uses a bachelor's prerogative. It would come to his lips again some day with somebody else.

Janice was now employing the purr that was intended to give her voice a special intimacy. "I'll drive by and pick you up, lover, in twenty minutes."

"Okay." Smiling at his image in the dresser mirror, he shook his head resignedly. "But not at the hotel entrance. There's a shoe store halfway up the block, Deane's. I'll be there at five after eight, just twenty minutes from now."

He was there but she was ten minutes late. The interval gave him time to wonder at his foolishness in prolonging a relationship already dangerous to his career. He had not known how dangerous it was until the day before yesterday. Then he had discovered that Janice Sanford, the beautiful young blonde with whom he had recently worked out a most pleasurable arrangement, was the wife of M. P. Sanford, board chairman of Carboy Dominion Incorporated.

Osgood Chace was temporarily working for Carboy Dominion. As an architectural engineer with a New York consulting firm, he had been assigned to Carboy six weeks earlier to make a preliminary study of the company's plans to build a new administration building. On his second night as a stranger in a strange city, he had picked up Janice in the hotel cocktail lounge. Or had she picked him up?

At the instant of contact, it seemed, each knew that chance was throwing them together for more than a single night. Hence, there was no effort to falsify basic facts about themselves. Chace knew from the beginning that Janice's last name was Sanford, and that she was married to a much older man who was very rich. But at the time, the name M. P. Sanford meant nothing to him; if he had ever heard that such a man was chairman of Carboy's board, he had forgotten it.

The affair marched well. Without concealment, it moved delightfully through the weeks from cocktail bar to restaurant to inn to motel and even to his own hotel room.

Chace was at that stage of bachelorhood when one lives to a

large extent on whim continuously tempered by caution. In this case, however, he had been infected by Janice's delicious sense of the reckless. Flattery had dulled his instincts.

He should have recognized the trait of recklessness in her on that occasion three weeks ago, when he had accidentally met her in a New York hotel bar with her brother, Ray George. With that hussar's mustache and those wild blue eyes, Ray displayed the family characteristic as transparently as a glass of effervescent liquid.

The meeting, now recalled, was a strange one. Chace was in New York for the day to review a few radical construction ideas with his firm. He was to take a late-afternoon train from Grand Central. With fifteen minutes to kill before train time, he dashed into the hotel bar for a quickie and nearly collided with Janice and her fierce-looking brother coming through the entrance.

"What a surprise!" exclaimed Janice. "A small world."

Chace stared jealously at the tall man holding her elbow. "Small world indeed," he said.

There must have been the hint of accusation in his voice because Janice quickly said, "Oh, Ozzie, I want you to meet Ray George. My brother. Ray, this is Osgood Chace, the man I told you about."

Over a makeshift handshake Ray George said, "Hiya, Chace. Unexpected pleasure." He managed the impossible—to sneer behind his mustache. "I've heard a couple of things about you from Sis."

"Nothing derogatory, I hope," he said, more to Janice than to Ray.

But the brother answered, "All in the point of view, pal."

Disconcerted, Chace said directly to Janice, "I'm catching the four-sixteen. Like to join me?"

"Love to, but I can't. Family business. But I'll phone you when I get in tonight. Okay?"

"Fine."

She kept her word. That night, after eleven, she called to say goodnight and to explain that her brother, a compulsive gambler, was deeply in debt and that she had gone to New York that day to bail him out. "Otherwise," she added, "somebody might have killed him."

"Killed him?" Chace remembered how surprised he had been at her casualness. "Rather extreme measure, isn't it?"

"That's the kind of company he keeps," Janice told him.

He should have known then how unsafe it was to play around with somebody who possessed

such a devil-may-care outlook. He knew now. But was it soon enough?

He was still balancing this question when a white convertible slid up to the curb. He got in. Janice gave his knee an affectionate pat as the car began to move.

Chace said, "Couldn't you have come in something else—the black sedan?"

"Still worried about Max?"

"Worried is hardly the word. I ought to have my head examined. Every time I think of that talk with Hanley the other day, I turn cold inside."

"You need a drink."

"I was just about to make one when you called. Yeah, I need a drink all right."

"Who's Hanley, honey?"

"The building coordinator at Big Daddy's plant."

"Oh, him."

"It's good he's a dumb slob or he might have put two and two together and come up with my finish."

"Tell me again what he said, Ozzie. Pardon me—Buff."

"He said that the hotel bartender told him that M. P.'s wife was playing right out in the open with one of the guests. And then he described the guest as the bartender had described him, and it was me to a T."

Janice laughed. "But you still didn't get it?"

"No, I didn't even know what the initials stood for. I asked Hanley who the devil was M. P., and he said M. P. Sanford, of course.

But I still didn't make the connection. I thought of you as Janice, not Janice Sanford. Hanley even had to tell me—remind me rather—that M. P. Sanford was chairman of the board. That's how detached I was from reality. Once I caught on, though, I caught on good."

"And you've been running cold ever since."

"I'm only human, you know. I know what a man like M. P. Sanford could do to my career if the fancy moved him. He could cancel our consulting contract just like that." Chace snapped his fingers. "He could blame the cancellation on my moral turpitude or something. And that would finish me with my firm right on the spot. The boss is a real puritan. He wouldn't even give me a reference."

"I'd give you a reference, darling."

"The personnel managers might not be susceptible. Where are we going, Janice?"

"The place is about an hour's drive from here, in a grove of pines overlooking a lake. Cafe Tranquille. *Trés recherché.* And a superb cuisine."

Unsaid was the fact that Cafe Tranquille numbered among its regular clientele the M. P. Sanfords. Chace began to get the tip-off under the porte-cochere. The doorman, taking the car, was full of special deference. The girl at the cloakroom addressed Janice as Madame and flashed a speculative glance at Chace. The maitre d' inquired after the health of Monsieur Sanford, and the sommelier asked if he should chill a bottle of that champagne that had so appealed to Madame on the last occasion.

As soon as they were alone for a moment, Chace said, "We should have rented a window in Macy's."

"This is just as good," said Janice complacently. "Don't you like its charm, darling?"

"It's French enough for DeGaulle. But it's hardly a hideaway. Everybody in the place seems to know you and the old man.

"That's why I decided it was ideal for the purpose."

"What purpose?"

The discreet shadow of the sommelier again. Chace ordered a gimlet, and Janice, a champagne cocktail.

Chace asked again in a low voice, "What purpose?"

Janice took a cigarette from a beaded case. A waiter materialized with a lighter.

"What purpose?" Chace asked for the third time.

Janice exhaled a gentle cloud of

smoke and said, "Well, Ozzie, I may as well tell you the truth. Max has begun to suspect there is another man in my life."

Chace felt suddenly dehydrated.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," she continued calmly. "As you have recently been observing, discretion is not one of my strong points."

Chace moistened dry lips. "Does he— Has he—"

"Has he done anything about it? Why, yes."

"Like what?"

"Well, he did the businesslike thing. He hired a private detective to follow me around."

"Oh, no!"

Janice laughed with genuine humor. "Oh, Ozzie. Don't take it so much to heart. You look like a frightened adolescent."

Chace strove for composure. "You don't understand the implication here, Janice. You don't see what's at stake."

"Oh, don't I now?" She smiled mysteriously. "I think I do. Your job is at stake for one thing."

"Exactly."

"And my life, my one and only life."

"Your life. Just what do you mean by that, Janice?"

"My life wouldn't be worth living if I let Max put together a case of infidelity. I'd end up with a besmirched reputation and not a sou of alimony. That's how a self-made man takes care of a self-made girl like me when his pride is injured." She gave him a gay wink. "When you grow older and richer, Ozzie, you'll be a bit like Max."

"Well, I'm not going to grow any richer as matters stand now. How long has this detective been on your trail?"

"For weeks."

"You mean ever since—"

"Ever since the night we first met in the hotel lounge."

The drinks arrived. Chace took a long swallow. The gimlet was very cold and quite dry enough. It fired a thought that seemed to start in his stomach and rise upward. "Let me get this straight," he said fearfully. "You mean that a private eye has been looking over our shoulders, at practically everything, all these weeks?"

"Yes, honey chile."

"And you have been aware of it?"

"Again yes."

Chace finished the gimlet. "Then I am to assume that M. P. Sanford knows all about us."

"You assume right, Ozzie."

"He's got a report and—everything?"

"He received a full report yesterday. With pictures. All very vivid. Don't perspire, Ozzie. Order an-

other drink, and stop trembling."

The waiter, not the sommelier, was approaching the table. Before he got within earshot Chace asked, "Did you also arrange for this detective to follow us out here?"

"The man was removed from my husband's payroll this morning. He had accomplished his task."

The waiter set a telephone on the table and stooped to make a connection with a jack on the floor. "A call for you, Madame," he said upon rising.

"I don't get it at all," said Chace.

With her hand still on the cradled phone she said, "All will be clear in a moment, Ozzie." She turned to the waiter. "We'll have another cocktail, please." And then she lifted the phone and said, "Janice here." Nothing more. She listened for a second and then hung up. Her eyes were dazzling.

Stunned at the quick change in her manner, Chace said, "What goes on here anyway?"

"Your worries are over, Ozzie."

"I bet."

"Really. You see I just learned, by prearranged code, that my husband was shot to death ten minutes ago in the men's lounge at Philharmonic Auditorium."

Chace heard himself say, "You must be kidding."

"I never kid in matters of life or death," said Janice. "That's why I provided us with such an ironclad alibi in advance."

"An alibi?" Chace was bemused.

"I thought we might need one," said Janice vivaciously. "After all, when the police begin nosing

around and learn about that private detective's report, we will certainly be the most logical suspects. Don't you think so?"

"I do."

"But at the time Max was shot, here we were in the Cafe Tranquille, sixty-five miles from the scene of the crime, enjoying cocktails. Of course, there may be certain persistent investigators who may suspect that we hired a professional killer to do the job for us. But we know that's not true, don't we, Ozzie?"

"Do we?" he asked.

"Well, unless you say otherwise, I would never admit to such a conspiracy between us. It would be, as you say, indiscreet."

Chace's numb brain was beginning to think again. "But that call just now. It's little things like that which the cops get a hold of."

"Let them try. It was a call from a bookie giving me the results of the last race at Santa Anita. I bet five hundred on a loser, it seems. That can be checked."

"Who did the job, Janice?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Your brother Ray, wasn't it?"

"I don't have a brother Ray," she said evenly.

"You know the man I mean. Ray George."

"I don't know anyone named Ray George."

"Well, whatever his name is," said Chace.

"Whatever his name is remains a secret." An icy note, that Chace had never heard before, crept into her voice. "It was to keep it a secret that we invented you."

"Just what do you mean invented?"

"Can't you guess even that much? We invented you solely for the sake of Max and his dumb detective. We gave them a sideshow that distracted them from the main event. And now I guess we've got to keep the show on the road a while longer for the benefit of the police."

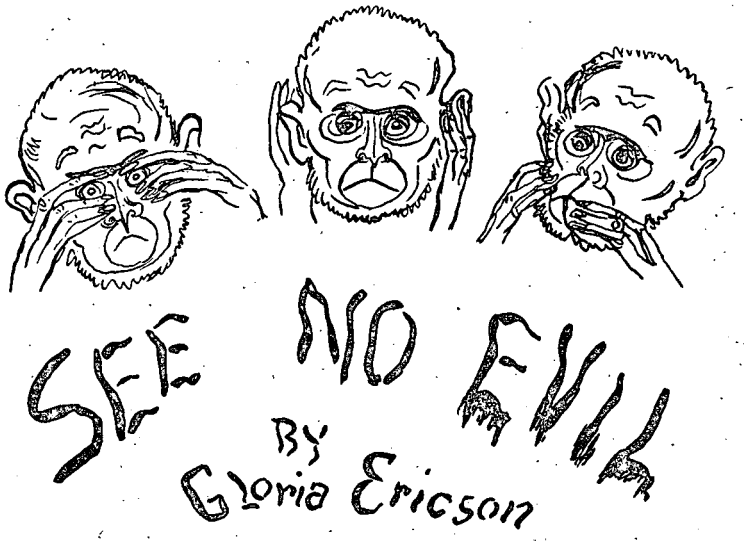
A gimlet was set in front of him. He drank it in two gulps.

"Dry enough, darling?" Janice was asking, obviously for the sommelier's attention.

"And cold," he said dully.

Not being one to court controversy, I merely intimate that occasionally one might be confronted with situations which apparently substantiate Mr. Darwin's hypothesis.

IT was a damp fall morning, which meant that Benjy's arthritis would be particularly bad that day. He swore under his breath as he hobbled out to let down the faded awning in front of his pet shop. He had no way of knowing that the humdrum tenor of his days would be irrevocably changed by nightfall. It seemed merely the start of another boring day. He glared with distaste down the litter-strewn street. How he hated this neighborhood and his dingy life here! At times he felt as penned in as Jiggs, the ringtail monkey that sat grumpily in its cage against the wall and screamed insults at the infrequent customers. But Jiggs was lucky, Benjy reflected bitterly. He could afford to be insulting; not like Benjy, who had to smile and talk pleasantries to every old maid that came in to buy "Kitty-Sand" for her mangy cat's box.



The awning properly secured,

Benjy stopped a moment to stare into the shop window. When Benjy's father had first opened the pet shop it had been in a nice section of the city, but the neighborhood had since gone downhill. The shop itself was typical of the general rundown condition: Dusty empty parakeet cages hung from a limp rope strung across the fly-specked window, and below, a few faded promotional placards for a NEW, IMPROVED! Dog Food sagged on their stands.

Benjy reentered the store, which evidenced the same neglect inside as it did outside. Paint peeled from the ceiling, and wooden laths showed through the various cracks in the walls. There were several large bags of dog kibble lined along the floor, and overhead hung a tangle of ancient leashes and dog collars, the brass studs of which were rusted. Along one of the walls there were a few unlighted tanks of fish, and somehow the occupants of those tanks, swimming around in the murky water, seemed to give the impression that they, like everything else in the shop, were covered with a film of dust.

It had been in its day a genuine pet shop, but by now its main commodities were dog kibble and fish food. Pets, as such, were not for sale; not even Jiggs, the monkey, the sole remaining exoticism from the days when Benjy's father had run the shop.

Jiggs was the survivor of what had once been a pair of monkeys, the other half called, of course, "Maggie." But Maggie hadn't lasted long, done in by the imitative nature that is so natural in monkeys. One day a lady customer had stood in front of the monkeys' cage for a long time, admiring them. Unfortunately, she'd had a nervous habit of playing with her beads, twisting them this way and that. After the shop had closed that night, Maggie, spying a chain leash nearby, pulled it into the cage. She, too, would have a necklace with which to play. She had twisted it round and round her neck, but one of the links caught on the latch of the cage. The next morning Benjy's father, who had a genuine love for animals, was horrified to discover her hanging in the cage, lynched by her own hands, as it were.

Whether that tragedy or merely the aging process was responsible, Jiggs's nature became one of sullen brooding. He was old now and it would be difficult to say why Benjy kept him. Certainly there was no great affection between the two, but there was a bond, perhaps a stronger one than mere affection could have provided. For they were quite alike; both were aging bache-

lors whom life had passed by. To see the two sour faces side by side, the man's and the monkey's, was to see a startling resemblance. Then too, Jiggs was someone to whom Benjy could talk. He couldn't very well talk to the fish, and customers were few and far between. So Benjy talked to him, and Jiggs listened and made his cynical comments. They agreed, after all, on major issues: life was terrible; people were worse; there was no justice anywhere in the world.

The day passed, not unlike other days. There was the usual smattering of customers, and when school let out, the usual gang of fresh kids that grouped themselves around the front of the store, taunting:

"Benjy, Benjy, the Monkey-Man,
Eats bananas out of a fryin' pan."

They did not disperse, of course, until he went to the door and threw a handful of kibble at them. Then they ran, laughing and shrieking, down the street. Lousy kids! Benjy slammed the door furiously. If he could only leave this place, but of course he couldn't. His earnings were less each year; there would soon come a day when even this run-down store could not be maintained. And his arthritis was getting worse . . . Benjy tried not to think of the inevitable day when both his money and his health would finally run out. His fate on that day could only be some horrible charity institution. He slammed his hand on the counter in a frenzy of frustration.

The days were getting longer, and it was already dark when Benjy locked up for the night. The

official closing time was six, but he always locked up fifteen minutes earlier so that Jiggs might be allowed out of his cage. This daily fifteen-minute exercise period was necessary if Jiggs was to avoid cage paralysis, a condition that often cripples monkeys kept too long in a confined space.

Jiggs was quite routinized, and

much as he looked forward to his evening freedom, he usually made no fuss when Benjy took the dilapidated Raggedy Ann doll from under the counter and threw it into the cage as a signal for Jiggs to go back in for the night. The doll was, in a sense, all things to Jiggs. That he recognized the faded colors on the face for features was obvious, for he often picked the doll up and chattered almost lovingly to it. Other times, when his mood was less amenable, he would jump on poor Raggedy Ann in a fury, pummeling her, and flinging her about the cage. However, whether the doll was lover or enemy on any given evening, she always ended up being merely his bed, and he soon settled down comfortably on her, curled his tail around himself, and slept.

Benjy had just locked up Jiggs in his cage on the wall behind the counter, when he was startled by a knock. He turned and swore under his breath as he made out the dim features of old Miss Decker flattened against the glass door. Didn't that old biddy know he was closed? But he went to open the door, and Miss Decker, all 90 pounds of her, skittered in, her black shawl and unfashionably long dress fluttering about her legs.

She was apologetic. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I saw your light and I just had to get something. Poor Puddles was taken suddenly sick. He's at the vet's now, and I just have to get a new toy to take to him when I visit him tomorrow."

There was the glimmer of unshed tears in her old faded eyes. Benjy managed, with an effort, not to show his disgust. Of all the old women that patronized his shop he considered her one of the more loathsome. She differed from the others only in that the center of her universe was not a cat, but a dog, an ancient white spitz, whose ruined personality, digestion and disposition showed only too clearly that even a once-sturdy dog cannot stand up under the pressure of constant devotion.

"I'm sorry to hear about Puddles," Benjy managed, hoping he wasn't prostituting himself too much. He motioned further down the counter. "There are some rubber bones and things in that tray. You'd better go behind the counter to get at 'em. Those bags of kibble'll be in your way on this side."

Miss Decker fluttered behind the counter and went down to the end to the tray of toys. She began pawing through them, but Benjy got the distinct impression she wasn't really seeing them. Too upset, apparently. All that hysteria over a mutt.

Suddenly she held up a small

rubber pork chop. "Oh, I do think Puddles would like this, don't you . . ." She never finished the sentence. A queer look came over her face, her hand fluttered to her heart, and she pitched forward to the floor. As she did so, the ancient pocketbook she always carried hit the counter, the clasp flew open, and something spilled out. It landed on the floor about the same time Miss Decker did, and rolled lumpily over to Benjy's feet. Benjy stared aghast; first, at the mound that was Miss Decker—and then at the smaller object near his feet. He'd see what he could do for Miss Decker in a minute, but the smaller object commanded his primary attention. It was so obviously a wad of money. And what a wad! Quickly Benjy picked it up and slid the rubber band off it. There were a few ones and fives on the outer layers, but then there were only hundreds. Benjy's eyes popped. There was a small fortune here! He stared in disbelief at the unmoving form on the floor. Whoever would have thought such a poor-looking old crone would have all that money? He licked his lips uncertainly. With a wad like that would she really notice if he pocketed one of the bills—or two? He hesitated, his brain racing feverishly. Maybe she was one of those recluses you read about sometimes in the papers, one of those eccentrics who seemed poor but who really had a stack of fat bank-books hidden away. Benjy furrowed his brow. Bits of previous conversations with Miss Decker were coming back to him. She had moved into the neighborhood six or seven years ago, and he remembered that right from the beginning, when she wasn't babbling about dear Puddles, she was babbling about her dear dead Daddy who had always been so good to her. Suddenly what had seemed to be the ramblings of a senile old woman took on new meaning for Benjy. Maybe she had inherited a lot of money! After all, if she went around with a couple thousand dollars in her pocketbook, why couldn't she have a veritable fortune stashed away in her apartment?

Benjy fumbled for the old stool he kept behind the counter and sat down uncertainly. Thoughts were coming too thick and fast to be digested properly. But then another thought came, even more shattering than the others. What if she hadn't just fainted but had actually dropped dead? At her age a heart attack, brought on by worry over Puddles, was very possible. If she were dead, then all the money in her purse could safely be taken and no one the wiser. She had virtually no friends, he knew, and her re-

peated assertation that Puddles was all she had in this world seemed to eliminate the possibility of relatives. Benjy fingered the bills longingly. This money could ease things so much for him, and if there were even *more* money in her apartment, there could be no limit . . .

He looked over at the still form on the floor, and was suddenly resolute. He fumbled in the old purse and found her key. For a moment he hesitated, and then stuffed the wad of money into his pocket. If she came to before he got back he'd brazen it out, say he had gone looking for a doctor and put her money in his pocket for safekeeping. He hesitated again. Why not check to see if she *were* dead? Then he wouldn't have to hurry so. But if she were only unconscious, touching her might bring her to. No, he'd check his hunch at her apartment first, and then come back. Fortunately she had fallen behind the counter and could not be seen from the street.

The apartment was only two blocks away, and one flight up. Benjy had delivered kibble there once when Miss Decker was sick. He arrived panting. There was no one around the outer door. Good. He let himself in and went quietly up the stairs. Apartment 2-B. Here it was. The key turned easily and in a second he was inside, fumbling for the light switch. As the light blazed on he was relieved to note that the lone window in the apartment had its shade drawn. The apartment was small, only one room with a tiny kitchen alcove. It was sparsely furnished, a large chest dominating the whole room. Quickly Benjy crossed to the chest and began searching the drawers one by one, starting nervously at every imagined sound. Nothing. He looked about wildly. At any moment Miss Decker might come back.

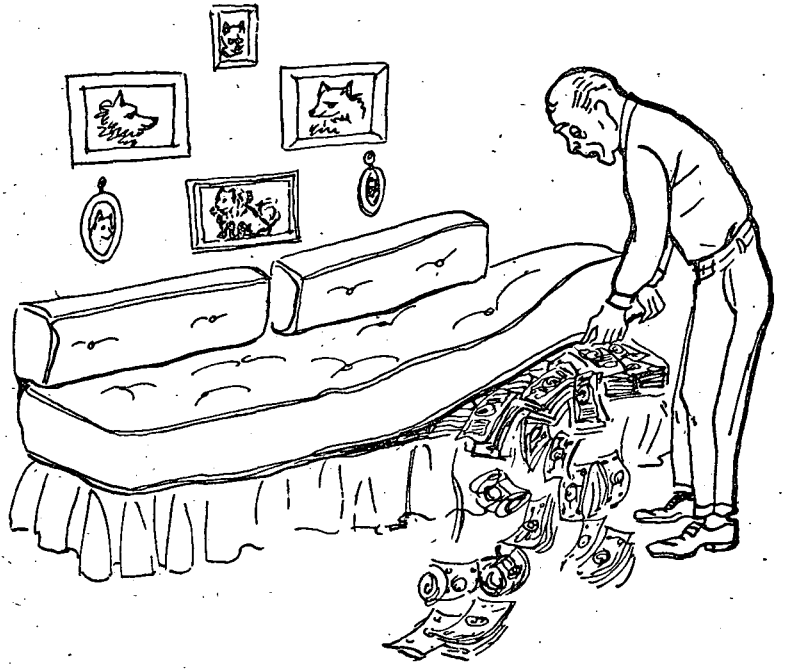
His eye lit on the daybed. Not really expecting anything, he lifted the corner of the mattress, and then let it drop out of sheer shock. He sat down shakily on the edge of the bed. The sight, so desired, so hoped for, when actually viewed, seemed impossible. Benjy squeezed his eyes shut and like a projection on a movie screen the sight just witnessed paraded before him—pack after pack of paper money, row after row of it, under the old lumpy mattress.

His mouth felt dry, and he could feel sudden sweat pop out on his forehead. He stood up, a kind of hysteria upon him. What to do? There was so much money there, so very much—enough to buy a whole new life for a person—a whole new life for Benjy. If Miss Decker wasn't dead but only un-

conscious, he might never get an opportunity to come here again. He must take it, now, NOW. But she might suspect . . . Let her suspect —what could she prove? But she might . . . No, no, don't think about it—there wasn't time. It was now or never. Anyway, she was probably dead. She just *had* to be dead!

Almost sobbing, he began sweeping the money out onto the floor. There was an old battered shopping bag near the chest. He'd carry the money home in that.

Benjy entered his store the back way, first going down into the basement and hiding the shopping bag behind a jumble of old furniture. Then he crept up the basement stairs and quietly opened the door leading into the store. Almost



at once he noted the mound on the floor and felt a rise of exultant joy inside him. She *must* be dead, then, or surely she would have come to by now. He'd have to call a doctor . . . No, he'd better check her first, to be absolutely certain. He went over to her and tried to turn her over. As he did so he was horrified to feel her body stir slightly under his hands. He jumped as if burned. After all he had been through, the old biddy hadn't had the decency to die . . . His heart seemed to be racing, and an ironic thought came to him; wouldn't it be funny if *he* got the heart attack instead of her? No, not funny at all! He must pull himself together and think. All right, she was alive and would go home to find she had been robbed. She wouldn't know who did it . . . Like fun she wouldn't . . . She'd go to the police. But would the police believe she'd had a fortune? Of course not. Even if they didn't believe her, though, her accusation would draw attention to him. He'd have to lay low for years, maybe, before he dared move away and live in the fashion which all that money would make possible. He was sixty-three now and getting more crippled every day. The money could do so much for him —pay for expensive doctors, medications, health spas. And even if the arthritis could not be completely defeated, there would undoubtedly be some years ahead of comparable health in which he could live like a king. Oh, to come this close—and then lose . . .

His anguished musings were cut short by a sudden groan from the huddled figure on the floor. The dingy heap of clothes stirred slightly and then with more vigor. Miss Decker was groggily raising herself on her hands, but she was still facing the floor, her old humped back rising slowly, painfully, beneath Benjy's gaze.

No, no, it was too unfair. At her age how many more years could she have, and what did that money mean to her? Nothing but a mattress pad, whereas to Benjy it would mean so much. She was getting up. Soon it would be too late . . . It almost seemed to Benjy that his hand was an entity in itself. Surely it wasn't Benjy, but the hand, that decided to close on the sharp knife that lay on the counter where earlier in the day he had cut some twine. Surely it was all the hand's fault—Benjy really hadn't had time to think the thing out himself. It was the hand that plunged the knife in the old humped back once, twice, three times. So easily and quickly was it done that from the victim there was barely a sound. It was Jiggs who screamed in shrill excitement.

And then Benjy hated his hand. It could have strangled or clubbed just as easily, and there wouldn't be all that blood. Almost sobbing with sudden fear, Benjy slid some old newspapers under the body to absorb the flow. Fortunately all this was hidden from the street. After a while the blood became less and Benjy's heart quieted somewhat. He almost wished that it wouldn't quiet, that he would succumb to a heart attack. Then he wouldn't have to attend to the plans that now, irrevocably, must be made and carried out.

First, he must get rid of the body. His battered old car was in the rear garage. He could drive out to the country and drop the body off in some secluded spot. No, that would never do. He'd have to drive at least an hour, and the chance that the old car would blow a tire or break down in some other fashion in that time was just too predictable.

The thought of breaking down on the highway, with a dead body in the back seat (he couldn't put the body in the trunk because the hinges had sprung and it would not close) made shivers run down Benjy's spine. Anyway, he reflected, even if by some miracle the car held together long enough for the job, how long would the body remain undiscovered? Sooner or later someone would come upon it and there would be an investigation.

He pressed his trembling fingers to his forehead. He must think. And then, when he almost despaired of finding a solution, it came to him; take her back to her own apartment. Make it look as if some nut had broken in and killed her there. Yes, that was it—he'd take her there and then come back and clean this place up. The police would have no reason to check his place. After all, they wouldn't suspect robbery—and they would have no reason to think that he, a veritable landmark in the neighborhood, had suddenly turned wanton killer. No, he should not be suspect at all.

Suddenly his eye spotted the knife lying on the floor. The papers could be burned, the floor scrubbed, but the knife—the most damning evidence of all—must be disposed of. The sight of that bloody knife unnerved him. He looked around. Nearby there was a small hole in the wall, through which the laths showed. He gave the knife a hasty wipe with a piece of newspaper and dropped it into the hole. He heard it clink down behind the laths. There, that would do for now, anyway. Later he could think of how he might better dispose of it. With the knife

out of sight, he felt better, calmer. And he must be calm if he were to think clearly.

The problem of getting Miss Decker's body out to the car and then into her building and up the stairs to her apartment was an appalling one. He would, of course, wait until it was later, when there would be fewer people on the streets. Still, someone might see him; it must not look as if he were carrying a body. His eye fell on the big 50-lb. bags of kibble. Two of those bags could be emptied and Miss Decker's body jackknifed so that the upper half of the body fitted into one, and the lower half into the other bag, and then a rag—no, a dog coat—thrown casually over the middle. It would look as if he were carrying up two bags of dog food to her apartment. An awful lot of food for one dog, true, but Miss Decker was known to be a sort of nut—and particularly a nut about her dog.

He shifted uncomfortably. It was going to be sheer hell waiting to move the body. He looked nervously at the still form on the floor. Only minutes ago it had been alive and now it was dead, stiff. Rigor mortis! He hadn't thought of that. How long before rigor mortis set in? Not too long, but *how* long? He didn't know. He almost whimpered then. The whole thing was like a horrible puzzle and each time he thought he had the solution, a new facet of the puzzle presented itself to make his solution unworkable.

He couldn't afford to wait until later. He had to jackknife the body into the bags while it was still pliable, and he couldn't deliver it later to the apartment because by then he might be unable to get the body straightened out into a normal position. The realization that he must move the body so early in the evening frightened him, and yet he realized there were advantages. It was as dark now as it would be at ten and it was still the supper hour—not too many people would be abroad. Also, it certainly was a more logical hour to be delivering dog food if he were detected.

He followed his plan. It was only when he parked in front of Miss Decker's apartment building that the hopelessness of the whole thing assailed him. How had he ever expected to get away with it?

He waited in the car until the hysterical thudding of his heart had quieted somewhat, and then slid out. He went upstairs, unlocked the apartment door and came back down again. There was nobody on the stairs, no one on

the street. It was now or never. He opened the back door of the car and hefted the body to his back. He groaned under the weight. If Miss Decker had been any heavier the whole thing would have been impossible. As it was, his arthritic bones groaned in protest. He was inside the building, starting up the stairs. And now, half-way up, a door slammed a couple of floors above. Benjy felt his whole body sag and his knees seemed suddenly jelly. He leaned against the wall, puffing, aware that guilt stood out like a neon sign from his every feature. He'd never be able to bluff it, never. The footsteps came nearer in the hall above. Benjy felt the perspiration run down his back like a river, but was it perspiration? Had the jostling of the corpse caused the blood to flow again? Was he at this very minute leaving a trail of gore behind him? He couldn't twist his head to see, and the footsteps were coming nearer, nearer. . . . Then they went past the stairwell. There was the sound of knocking, a murmur of voices, and a door slamming. Relief stood out in shining globules on Benjy's forehead. It was just someone calling on a neighbor—nobody going down to the street. He shifted the weight of the body, and was able to see behind him. There was no blood. He took the remaining stairs almost on a run, his muscles screaming at the effort. He kicked the door open, shut it quickly behind him, and in an agony of relief let the body sink to the floor. The worst part was over.

Benjy worked fast then, placing the body on the bed, face down, and seeing that as much blood as possible was smeared around, to make it seem that the murder had taken place here in the apartment. Then he went over to the big wooden chest. Making sure there was no blood on his gloved hands, he opened the drawers which he had earlier rifled, checking to see that everything looked neat. He didn't want even the shadow of a suspicion that robbery had figured in this slaying. As it was, he'd better wait several months before he moved out and began living a more affluent life.

He looked around, then switched off the light, went over and reached under the drawn shade and unlocked the window. The murderer had been on the fire escape outside and had entered through the unlocked window, of course.

He switched on the light again to make one last check. Then he folded the kibble bags and hid them under his coat. He listened

at the door. The halls seemed empty. Quietly he slipped down the stairs and into his car. He was sure no one had seen him. Relief practically oozed from every pore. But he still had a big night ahead of him. He must go back and burn the newspapers and kibble bags in the furnace and clean up all traces of blood on the floor.

It was several hours before the murder scene was cleaned to his satisfaction. When he got through he even thought to grind dirt into the newly cleaned floor. It mustn't look any cleaner than the rest of the store. He sought to retrieve the knife from the hole in the wall, but found that his pudgy fingers couldn't reach it. He got out a flashlight and looked in. Several inches down behind the laths he could dimly make out the tip of the knife handle. He stared at it thoughtfully. It didn't even look like a knife handle from that angle. It just sort of blended in with the old plaster and laths, and the hole itself certainly didn't look like a fresh one; there were several similar ones in the old cracked walls. No, perhaps the knife had found its own hiding place, and a better one than any he might have devised.

It was three in the morning before he finally went to bed in his little apartment over the store, but even then he didn't sleep. His mind seemed to be racing, checking, re-checking. When he finally assured himself that he had taken care of everything, he still could not sleep. He found himself in alternate fits of depression and joy; depression, when he considered the enormity of what he had done, of what would happen if he were found out; joy when he contemplated the new life that was almost upon him. Gone was the specter of failing health and poverty. He would be free now to live wherever he wished and in whatever fashion he wished. The vision of the luxurious travels, pleasant hotels, and gourmet meals that would now be his made his mind reel. Yes, he'd wait six months just to be safe, and then he'd sell the store, get rid of the fish—and Jiggs. Jiggs? What would he do with Jiggs? No one would buy him at his age and even the zoo probably wouldn't take him. Well, he'd just have to be put to sleep, that's all. He'd never really liked the old cuss.

The next day in the store he found himself prey again to the alternate moods of depression and joy. No word had come to him of Miss Decker's body being found, and he wondered how long it would be before he heard.

He didn't have so very long to

wait, after all, for just as he was going to the front of the store to lock up for the day, a big policeman loomed up in the doorway. Benjy felt himself start to tremble, but then he controlled himself. *Fool! They couldn't have found her body yet.*

But they had. The vet had called her and getting no answer, asked the superintendent to check her apartment. Benjy remembered to look shocked when the big policeman told him of Miss Decker's fate.

". . . And so," the officer was saying, taking out a notebook and pen, "we're doing a routine check of the neighborhood to find out who saw and talked with her yesterday. Did you, for instance?"

Benjy had decided that if asked such a question he would admit that she had been in his store. There was too much danger that someone had seen her come in, or she had babbled to the vet or someone else that she was going to the store to buy a toy for Puddles. Better to risk the slight involvement having seen her would mean, than to be caught in an out-and-out lie which would throw suspicion on him.

"Why, yes," he assured the policeman. "She was in here to buy a toy for her dog." He furrowed his brow, as if trying to think. "About closing time, I believe it was."

The policeman jotted this in his notebook. "Did she stay long?"

"Oh no, only a few minutes."

"Well, can you remember . . ." The rest of the policeman's question was lost in the shrill chattering of Jiggs whose voice had been steadily rising since the policeman came in. Now he added to the din by angrily banging his metal dish against the bars of the cage.

The policeman stared at him with interest. "What's he carrying on about?" he asked, leaning close to Benjy's ear to make himself heard.

"Oh, it's just his usual time to be let out for exercise. He gets mad if it's delayed."

"A real prima donna, hey?" The policeman looked amused. He turned to Jiggs. "Hey you, quit making all that racket." Unfortunately he made the mistake of waggling his pen admonishingly at Jiggs. Swift as lightning, Jiggs seized the pen and retired to the back of his cage with it.

"Oh, no!" said Benjy, aghast. "Drop that pen. Jiggs, do you hear me? Drop that pen!" But Jiggs had no intention of dropping it. Instead he turned and began furiously scribbling on the wall in back of his cage.

The policeman, to Benjy's surprise, let out a bellow of laughter. "Monkey see, monkey do, eh? He saw me writing with it and now he's trying to write. Imitative little cusses, aren't they?" And then he added, as Benjy tried unsuccessfully to grab the pen through the bars, "That's O.K., let him have it. It's just one of those 15¢ ball-points."

But Jiggs had tired of the new toy, and disdainfully flinging it through the grid-floor of his cage, took up his shrill screeching again. Any conversation between the policeman and Benjy was obviously going to be impossible unless Jiggs quieted down.

"You'd better let him out, if that's the only thing that will quiet him," bellowed the policeman. Benjy, nodding, unlatched the cage. Jiggs, freed at last, scampered out and onto the counter, where he immediately reached down and pulled out the Raggedy Ann doll.

The policeman, still amused, grinned. "That his doll?" he asked. Benjy nodded, relieved that Jiggs was absorbing the policeman's attention for a while as it gave him time to think ahead to what questions might be asked.

Bemused, he didn't realize at first what Jiggs was up to when the agile monkey, dragging his doll with him, hopped over to the stool behind the counter. Quickly the long sinewy arm was thrust down the hole where Benjy's stubby fingers had not been able to reach. And when the arm was drawn out, clasped firmly in the small human-like hand was the knife. Then, before Benjy could do more than gasp, Jiggs plunged the knife furiously into the unresisting back of Raggedy Ann—one, two, three times, in perfect imitation of the scene that had been played out there only the night before.

Horror-struck, Benjy saw the gleam of amusement in the officer's eyes change suddenly to a glitter of awareness. With ominous calm the big policeman reached over to take the faintly red-tinged knife from the furious monkey.

It is a popular belief (male) that, "He knows little who will tell his wife all he knows." I purport that womanly intuition makes speech superfluous.

The Perfect Wife

by Arthur Porges

EVERY now and then I have to go out and kill somebody. At one time I felt very guilty about it, remembering all the religious talk of my aunts. Now I know it's something that can't be helped; in fact, those same aunts, plus an assortment of similar school teachers, also women of a particular type, helped to make me what I am: to the papers, a mass murderer, a maniac; to me, a selective exterminator doing a small part of purifying the world.

I say "selective", because I kill only women of a certain character. Not prostitutes, like Jack the Ripper; I have nothing against them. They are useful, if not savory people. I go after the woman in her fifties, usually. The squawking, pesty, domineering, fault-finding, loud, gossipy, blue-nosed, malicious, unsexed harridans are endemic in large numbers to almost every neighborhood. Just by strolling a few blocks in my own part of the city, or not far from where I work, I can spot and identify several a day, as easily as a bird-watcher distinguishes a jay from a bluebird.

I see them in markets, laundromats, banks, and in their yards, yelling at their invariably spoiled kids, or bullying their unfortunate husbands.

All this might lead you to think I'm a bachelor, a woman-hater; but that isn't so. My wife is tops; we've had a perfect marriage for twenty years. She was a lovely girl, quiet, deep, kind, and feminine to the core. She didn't try to wear my pants.

Not only that—she saved my life, literally. It was the one time I got caught. The evidence was all circumstantial, but overwhelming; I'd have been convicted for sure. It happened like this.

I began the killings in 1953, after coming back from Korea. When you've seen a dozen waves of screaming Chinese blotted out by machine guns, the value of human life takes a sudden drop. I'd always had a grudge, I suppose, against the typical harridan, American subspecies; there's some Freudian explanation, naturally; my being brought up by a flock of choice specimens, for one thing.

Anyhow, one day I saw a woman carrying on in the bank, arguing about her statement, insulting the girl teller, blocking the line, and raising hell generally. She was about sixty, but wearing make-up an inch thick, high heels, and had used enough bleach on her hair to lighten all of Africa.

On impulse I followed her, and when she walked through an alley, I suddenly wondered how it would feel to shut her up permanently. Curiously enough, I'd just read Masters' excellent novels about the Thugs, and just happened to have a nice, silky handkerchief in my pocket. The alley was deserted; the old gal had a most inviting neck—raddled and scrawny, like that of a peaky hen—and the impulse was too strong for me. So I padded up behind, crossed my wrists in the approved way of the Thugs, flipped the noose over her blotchy-blonde head, and pulled my hands apart.

It worked like a dream. She gave one little wheeze, rose on her toes, and then folded up like clothes dropped from a line.

Well, she was the first of nine. I knocked off roughly five a year for two years; then I was nabbed. It was my own fault; I broke the rules I'd worked out so carefully. You see, after that first impulsive killing, I realized what a chance I'd taken. That "deserted" alley

had a million houses with back windows and garages along it; a dozen people, including kids, might have seen me kill that woman. I was home free, purely on luck.

So I went about it more cautiously, picking my victims with care, finding out a bit about their habits, and striking at the right time and place. There was, of course, an embarrassment of riches; every block in the city has from four to nineteen terrible harpies living in it. I vouch for the statistics, which are more dependable than the political polls, believe me.

But on that fatal evening, I'd gone to the market for a few items we needed. Ordinarily, Julia, my wife, came along; we do almost everything together. But she wanted to wash her hair, so I went alone.

And there, in the market, I met one of the finest specimens of Harridanus Americanus ever. She was about fifty, I'd guess, with mean little eyes that no shadow or extra-long phony lashes could glamorize. She had a voice like an air-drill. One look at her slash of a mouth, made up into an unsuitable Cupid's bow much too large for it, and I could see her kiss would paralyze a shark.

She was giving the checker a bad time. The girl's note, on the register, listed something—detergent, I think—at thirty-seven cents; but the manager had a sign on the shelf of thirty-five. It wasn't the girl's fault, obviously; her list was wrong; but the woman laid into her as if dealing with a thief. A more experienced checker would have left the old gal for dead; it's harder to get a good checker these days than a customer. But this girl was new, apparently from some small town, and was so scared and humiliated

she looked almost ready to collapse.

It was stupid of me, but I broke the pattern and followed that woman when she left. It was crazy; wild; madness. So help me, I caught her right on the lot, between two cars, where we were out of sight. When she started to unlock her car, I snapped the handkerchief around her throat, and let her have my best yank, almost breaking her scraggly neck.

Unfortunately, I had to drop my groceries to do it, and I forgot the damned eggs. To cut the agony short, there was a mess of circumstantial evidence. They found egg on the blacktop; somebody caught a glimpse of me, and was able to talk about height, build, and jacket. People remembered my being in the market, near the woman who was bullying the checker; a lot of things like that, but no real proof.

But they got to my place pretty fast that night; the manager knew where I lived. And they found the egg box and the broken eggs. I tried to tell them about dropping the sack on my own stairs, but they wouldn't go for it.

We didn't have money for a top lawyer, and my goose seemed to be not only cooked, but overdone.

Julia was wild. She thought I was innocent, naturally, and was going to the gas chamber for something I hadn't done. She was a wife in a million, as you'll see.

I didn't have a chance. My Korean record was looked up, and they found I'd been a bad boy more than once; just how, doesn't matter. Pointless violence, was the phrase, I think. In, of all places, a war zone. Can you figure that!

Well, when the trial was almost over, and all the experts were predicting the gas chamber, what should happen but another killing, and with that exact same M. O. I'd used! That really saved my neck. Even a law student could have wrecked the D. A.'s case after such a break. The evidence was only circumstantial; I was a respectable fellow; steady on my job, with only that business in Korea, as a kid in war, against me. So the trial was quashed, and the cops had to start over, still looking for the "fiend", now ready, they figured, for his eleventh.

I thought, reasonably enough, that some kook had picked that moment to imitate me, something that often happens with killings. But not long after, in bed, I learned the truth. Julia talks in her sleep, but only when she's really disturbed. I heard enough to spill the beans. Stuff about, "I'm a murderer . . . blood on my hands . . had to do it . . my

husband . . . love, honor—kill! . . . he's innocent . . . no other way . . . will he hate me if he ever knows . . . oh, Johnny, I love you . . ."

I didn't let on I knew; just treated her fine, better than ever. The papers had mentioned how the cops figured the killer used a scarf or bandanna, so she actually took one of my big silk handkerchiefs, not knowing how closely she was imitating my technique. She's small but strong, and made a good choice, picking, of all people, our own neighbor, Mrs. Ticknor, a terrible old witch I'd longed to execute, but thought to be too near home! Isn't that a kick?

But writing up the past makes a guy look more closely at the future. I laid off the killing for a while. Then I went back, more carefully than ever, adding six more to my tally. The cops are going crazy.

The trial was almost nine years ago. Things change in that time. I've noticed for a long while now how Julia acts. By saving me, she gave her ego a boost. As I said, she was quiet, feminine; she let me run things. But after snatching me from the gas chamber, so to speak, she got more and more bossy, as if she owned me. And louder, too.

And just today I saw those wrinkles in her neck, and the chickeny way she moves her head. Yesterday, in the market, she made quite a fuss about nothing, bawling out Nick, the manager. And when I tried to quiet her down, damned if she didn't tear into me. Me! It's something to think about . . .

Dear Fans:
Here are the particulars about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club:

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

Most sincerely,
Pat Hitchcock

P.O. Box 5425
Sherman Oaks, California

One who believes himself more clever than others may discover, under analysis, that he is merely the scapegoat of hallucinative perception.

"VICE is a monster of such ugly mien," old Mr. Rawlinson misquoted, "that to be hated needs but to be seen."

Tommy Russell stared fixedly at his own manicured fingernails which wore the faint evidence of colorless lacquer. The older man's eyes were rheumy blue, flecked with white and the redness of broken veins. They were watery and wandered from spot to spot. Russell preferred not to stare at them. When he looked too long, he found, the pupils seemed to darken and absorb light, and for a moment he felt he was looking at something as harsh and blue-black as the North Atlantic.

"But seen too oft, familiar with her face," old Rawlinson went on while Tommy Russell gritted his teeth and waited for the cracked, high voice to be still, "We first endure, then pity, then embrace."

Russell sat quietly waiting for the substance, for which this quavering misquotation was only the introduction. *How many years*

more must I suffer? he thought.

"I am talking about you, Thomas," the old man said, after an interminable pause, "your conduct, your friends, your way of life. Your father made me executor of his estate. He was very clear on the point. We talked it out even before the will was written. You have a perfectly adequate income. It was $10,000 a year when the will was written, and now it is almost twice that amount. But the capital you cannot touch, nor the additional income, until I feel you can begin to handle it. And so far, Thomas, you have given me no reason to think you have acquired any wisdom or foresight."

Russell felt the big vein in his forehead throb uncontrollably. For a moment, he felt like reaching across the perfectly empty, perfectly polished glossy desk and grabbing

BY JAMES CROSS

the thin wattled throat, squeezing it until the prominent Adam's Apple crunched under his hands. But then the cold, submerged, planning area of his brain took over, and he realized that the old man couldn't live forever, and that when he was dead it would all be Tommy Russell's, all five million.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Uncle Fred," he said mildly. "I think that even by your standards I've improved a good deal."

"Nonsense," his uncle said. "I've seen nothing. You will not get the capital to squander, not until you are thirty-five, and that's nearly seven years from now; or until I am dead and you can find a more complaisant executor. While you may think me an old man, I am only sixty and I expect to live a good many years more."

"I'm not asking for the whole estate," Russell said. "I'll leave that up to you, but I am a little strapped."

"If you cannot get along on $10,000 a year, it is because you have too much time in which to spend money. Why don't you get a job? It would bring in a decent salary and give you less time to use up the income you have."

"I find it hard to picture myself working forty hours a week at anything," Russell said. He realized his mistake as soon as he'd said it, but it was too late.

"I am afraid you are going to have to get a job or change your standard of living," his uncle said dryly. "In any event, your income stays at $10,000. Perhaps that will

encourage you to take one or another of the choices."

"I owe more than that," Russell said slowly and carefully.

"If your debts bring you into court, you can either make some arrangement with your creditors or go into bankruptcy. If, as I suspect, they are gambling debts, I should remind you that in most states such debts are not collectible."

"There may be no legal way to collect them, but they can kick my teeth out in an alley or, if they get really unhappy, drop me in the East River with a cement block wired to me."

"I should be very sorry if that happened, my boy, particularly so since I would then be saddled with the estate your father left. Nevertheless, I do not intend to pay your gambling debts."

Tommy Russell had been thinking about it for some time now, but it was only then that he realized two things: that his uncle would like to see him dead and that he felt himself not too old at sixty to enjoy the Russell fortune in his declining years; and that he, Tommy Russell, was going to murder his uncle at the earliest opportunity.

Once his uncle were dead, the next trustee would be an impersonal bank, only too glad to oblige a major depositor in any way and release the estate at once. The murder was purely a matter of doing it quickly and safely.

For a moment, Tommy considered the possibility of the simple garotte with his silk scarf, there and then. The thought of the watery blue eyes popping from the dark-red face was attractive, but he cast it aside at once. A dozen people, from the doorman to the elevator operator, had seen him arrive at the suite his uncle kept at his club. Anything on home grounds would hang him quickly.

In the next weeks, Tommy lived frugally on his allowance checks, and studied his uncle's habits very closely. At the end of two months he admitted defeat. A typical self-sufficient bachelor, his uncle was screened off from the world twenty-four hours a day: breakfast at his club, a visit to his broker's by taxi; lunch with a friend; return to his club and a nap; cocktails at the club or outside with other friends; dinner either at the club or as a wealthy and still quasi-eligible bachelor, making up the odd man at a dinner party; or to the theater, again with a group; and finally back to the club. He was never alone, and at every moment there was a screen of servants to pass or a screen of witnesses to avoid. Old Rawlinson was about as safe as a man can be from violent death. He

did not drive. In New York he took taxis; on his infrequent weekend visits, he took trains. He was a healthy five pounds underweight for his age and build; his temperament was equable and self-satisfied; his four grandparents had all lived to be ninety; he was temperate and abstemious in his life.

At the end of two months of careful investigation and planning, Russell came to the conclusion that his uncle, left to natural causes, would possibly outlive him, and that, still worse, he was almost impossible to kill with impunity.

He put it that way to his current mistress one evening when he was on his sixth Armagnac. Phyllis was very attentive. She had majored in psychology in college, and she prided herself on her understanding of human behavior and motivation. She was not shocked; Russell's decision to kill his uncle seemed logical and economical. What did bother her was his inability to come to the heart of the matter.

"The way he lives," she said, "it just can't be done."

"Then I had better get used to living like a ribbon clerk for the next seven years. Does that appeal to you?"

"I didn't say it couldn't be done. I just said you have to change his way of life, break up his habits."

"He's had them for thirty years. What am I supposed to do—invite him on a hunting trip he'd never even consider, and then have an accident? Drown him in a canoe? He won't go near the water in anything smaller than a 50,000 ton ocean liner."

"How about golf—backswing on a number 3 iron when he's on the tee with you?"

"He once told me his only game is helping to carry the coffins of his friends who went in for athletics."

"Well then, the only way is to change his environment, and the best way to do that is to get him married."

"He's sixty years old and he's kept away from it so far, with a long succession of debutantes and post-debutantes and divorcees and widows throwing themselves at his head. He's immune."

"A smart woman could do it."

"Like who?"

"Like me."

Russell paused for a moment to consider the new factor.

"You know," he said slowly, "I think you could. You're young, but not too young. You're smart, but smart enough not to show it. You can play almost any role you want. I think you just could do it."

"I know I could, and I could do it in three months. I know these old bachelor types."

"You could get him out of the club and living in the country, away from everything. And way out there, anything could happen. Baby, I think you've got it solved."

"Just one thing," she said. "What's the rate of payment for decoy ducks?"

"You'd be a wealthy widow. I figure the old boy has about $50,000 to leave. Most of his money's tied up, goes to Harvard when he's gone."

"Have you ever tried living on the income of $50,000? It's just about champagne money. How about you? How much do you stand to get? Don't bother to con me; I can find out."

"About five million. What do you want?"

"I want you to marry the widow. You're mean, but I've kind of got used to you, and it's a lot of fun. I think we could make it together."

"We'd have to wait quite a while; it wouldn't be safe."

"I know that. I just want your promise. Tell me you'll marry me after he's dead, and I'll believe it. And remember," she went on, "we'd both be in it together. It would be the smartest thing for both of us, and the safest."

"Honey, it would be a pleasure. Just get him lined up, and I'll take care of everything. You want my promise; you have it."

He reached over, tilting her chin toward his kiss, thinking how little the years of psychology had taught her if she believed that a man worth $5,000,000 would marry her.

"Baby," he said, "let's make it fast; I don't want to wait for you."

When it happened it was almost as fast as she had predicted. Russell brought Phyllis with him purposefully to Central Park where his uncle frequently took what he called a "constitutional". On the third day they met. It was a matter of five minutes for Russell to take them all to lunch, to celebrate with champagne a prospective job, to pay the bill and leave old Rawlinson with Phyllis while he kept a non-existent appointment in connection with the job he had described. Over coffee and cognac, Phyllis and Rawlinson became friends. For the first time in his life, Rawlinson had met a woman who seemed to be attractive and intelligent and non-predatory. Within a week he was taking her to the theatre and giving her the benefit of his theories of dramatics; he was lecturing to her on Hellenistic art at the Metropolitan. Within two weeks, he was in her apartment for a nightcap. Within three weeks he was nervously convinced that he had seduced her and that as an honorable man he owed her marriage, and, more important, that he

had enjoyed the sensation and would like to repeat it. Phyllis gave him one week of remorse. She had been carried away by his experience and sophistication, she let him know, but it would be wrong to repeat.

"It just wouldn't be right, Fred," she told him demurely. "That one time I was carried away is one thing, but if it becomes a regular way of life, what does that make me?"

Some mixture of innocence and caution must have told Uncle Fred where the conversation was leading, because he changed the subject, took her home early and did not phone her for ten days. But at the end of that time he found the mild pleasures of his former life had become intensely boring: his bridge game became erratic and then despondent; the theater put him to sleep; he was irritated by the conversation of dinner partners; the smooth transactions of club life reminded him that not too many years were left him, and frightened him with a foreboding of a slow decline into uneventful loneliness.

At the end of two weeks, he asked Phyllis to marry him. A month later they were married quietly in the chambers of a judge with whom he sometimes played billiards. There were two witnesses. One was the judge's nephew. The other was Tommy Russell.

Russell had changed a bit, Uncle Fred thought. He seemed to be quieter and more serious. Perhaps it was the job he had gotten selling bonds on commission. I certainly owe him a lot. If I hadn't bumped into him in the park, I'd never have met Phyllis.

He wondered whether he should do something about increasing the younger man's allowance, but he put the thought aside. Bringing him up short seems to have done him good, but let's see if he can keep it up. After a year or so I can think of it, and still later, if I think the change is permanent, I might do something about releasing the estate.

St. Denis, the legend goes, walked seven miles across Paris, carrying in his hand his own recently severed head. "The seven miles don't impress me," Mme. du Deffand once remarked of the saint's stroll. "It's the first step that counts." So it was with Uncle Fred. Once the impossible first step had been taken, the rest came easily.

They had hardly returned from the honeymoon in Europe, when they moved to an old restored farmhouse in Connecticut. Gone the daily visits to the brokers, gone the bridge games and dinner parties. Uncle Fred even gave up his

club membership. His old friends, most of whom considered a trip to the country the equivalent of a safari, rarely saw him and gradually dropped away. He did not miss them. He was too busy grubbing in the garden, building an elaborate barbecue, and for the first time enjoying (for his health was remarkable for his age) a relationship which, as Shaw has pointed out, combines the maximum of temptation with the maximum of opportunity.

When Tommy Russell was invited up for dinner, he was dismayed by his uncle's appearance: his step was vigorous, his eyes were clear, his voice was deep, his laugh boomed out annoyingly. He looked like a man fifteen years younger, and good for another quarter-century.

It was Phyllis who had aged. There were dark circles under her eyes. There was a bandaid on one wrist where she had burned it in the kitchen. Two of her fingernails were broken, he noted with distaste, and she had abandoned nail polish. Her hair was only adequately clean and set in an unbecoming way. She still was alert enough to listen to Uncle Fred admiringly, to laugh at his jokes, to touch and pat him with an air of proprietorship from time to time; but Russell noticed that when Uncle Fred's attention was taken from her for a minute, she relaxed gratefully into a sort of dull stupor.

The thought of marrying her as she was now, even for $5,000,000, was something less than pleasant.

They were alone only once that evening, and then only for a few minutes.

"I can't stand much more of this, Tommy," she said. "We'll have to do it fast."

"I'd hoped the old boy might kill himself—natural causes, much simpler all around; but he looks like a man of 45."

"It's killing me. No help except a cleaning woman. I had to learn to cook. I have to help him garden. I can't find a hairdresser."

"He seems to be happy."

"He should be. I thought you said he was shy with women. I work all day, and then I can't get a night's sleep. We've got to do something. A month more and I'll end up taking an axe to him right here."

"Come into New York this Thursday to my apartment. I have it all arranged. We can move pretty fast, and . . ."

He broke off as Uncle Fred came down the stairs humming tunelessly. Russell was shown the barbecue under the patio floodlights; he saw the sites of the projected herb-garden and swimming pool, and then

he left as soon as he could and drove back to New York.

Phyllis found it was not so easy to plan a day in New York as Russell had seemed to believe. Once Uncle Fred had changed his way of life he had cut himself off completely. He had not gone in to town himself since they had moved to Connecticut, and he saw no reason why his wife should. He wanted her around to minister to whatever need or desire occurred to him. He had broken off with his old way of living, he had invested in a wife, and he saw no reason why he should not get full value from his investment.

It would have to be a very good excuse, Phyllis knew, and it was a day before she had it. At first, he couldn't understand why she wanted to take a train all that distance just to see her doctor. There was a perfectly good, if elderly, G.P. in the next village, and a hospital in Danbury. It required a good deal of demure hinting before she managed to let Uncle Fred find it out for himself.

"A father," he said, "at my age. I never could have imagined it."

"I'm not sure yet, darling. That's why I want to see Dr. McPherson. I'd feel better with an old friend. And you'll be all right here. Millie will be in, and I'll be back early."

"Perhaps I should go in with you," he said somewhat dubiously.

"No, I'll be quite all right. And you don't need to worry about Millie's cooking. I'll make you a casserole the night before, and you can heat it up."

On Uncle Fred's face, relief at not having to make the trip battled for a few seconds with distaste at being left alone. Then both emotions were routed by the simply fatuity of fatherhood.

"By all means, my dear."

The day after Phyllis returned, she was tired. The trip had been a long one. She had been forced to make an appointment with Dr. McPherson, in case her husband phoned him to inquire. She had only a few days before the negative blood test results would come in. Tommy Russell's plan was simple and good, but it required discussion and rehearsal. Finally, she had had to talk with the local insurance agent late in the afternoon.

As they had expected, the insurance man was not very enthusiastic about the possibilities of any company's increasing coverage on the contents of the house. The carefully-rehearsed story she told him made him shake his head in reproachful wonder.

"Several thousand dollars in cash," he said," *and* your jewelry. All in bureau drawers. No really, Mrs. Rawlinson, I don't think any-

one would want to cover them under the circumstances."

"Mrs. Rawlinson," he went on severely, "that money should be in a bank account, and the jewelry in a vault. The way it is now you stand to have a total loss in case of fire, to say nothing of theft."

"My husband dislikes banks. I don't like it any more than you, but he's an elderly man and he lost some money in a bank failure during the depression. Sometimes I'm really frightened when I think how isolated we are."

Tommy Russell had looked over the terrain carefully and in his negligent, almost offhanded way had picked up quite a lot of information about the local inhabitants. Phyllis knew from him that the insurance agent played poker with a group including the chief of police, that he was talkative and that, both as insurance agent and a director of the local bank, his *bete-noire* was the person who kept cash and jewelry at home instead of depositing it. The poker game was the next night, Friday, and by Saturday afternoon the word would be around that nice old Mr. Rawlinson and his young wife kept cash and jewelry, in large and (as the story circulated) constantly growing amounts, in their isolated house a few miles from town. Now, the preliminaries were taken care of, and the final step was planned for Saturday night. It had taken Tommy Russell quite a while to perfect this plan, but once in action it was scheduled for very quick completion.

Saturday night was warm, with a mild breeze blowing up from the Sound, more like July than October weather. But there was almost no traffic on the back roads when Tommy Russell's borrowed car, with the New Jersey license plates he had stolen from the parking lot in Danbury half an hour before, coasted into Uncle Fred's driveway with its lights off and came to a halt in back of the house where it would be screened from the road.

In his pocket Tommy had a standing-room theater stub for a sold-out show he had already seen and which, he estimated, was only now ending the second act. He could do it quickly and be back in New York, changing license plates en route, in time to drop in somewhere he was known for an after-theater drink and discuss the show with a few friends or with the bartender.

He pushed open the back door carefully. Phyllis had oiled the hinges that afternoon, had gone down for a glass of milk after her husband had locked up for the night and unlocked the door. Russell was wearing the cheap pigskin

gloves he had worn ever since he left New York, and which he would destroy after he returned. He left the door ajar, then went to a rear window. There was a piece of sacking near a low shed adjoining the house, and next to it a short hatchet. He wrapped the hatchet head in the burlap, and tapped the glass near the window lock, hearing it tinkle to the floor inside. He opened the lock quickly and lifted the window. Then he trotted back to the door and entered.

Upstairs, Uncle Fred was asleep, but his wife heard the signal and tugged at his shoulder.

"Wake up, there's someone downstairs."

Fred heard the backdoor opening and closing gently in the wind, tapping against the frame. He heard nothing else. "It's the door," he said grumpily.

"You must have forgotten to lock it. Please close it, it's keeping me awake."

"All right, all right."

He was still not completely awake when he reached the bottom of the stairs, moving without difficulty in the bright moonlight. He had turned into the dining room toward the kitchen and taken two steps when Russell, who was crouching in the oldfashioned open stairwell, stepped up behind him and hit him on the head with the hatchet twice, the second time as he was falling. Russell felt the brittle skull crush under the blows. For a moment he was sick and dizzy. He took a few slow deep breaths, feeling calmness return. Then he stood there waiting.

The rest of the plan was routine. Phyllis was to come downstairs, alarmed when her husband did not return. She would be knocked out from behind, without seeing her attacker, and tied up. Russell would loot the house, taking whatever jewelry there was and the fifty-odd dollars that were actually all Uncle Fred carried. And that would be it. Later, Russell, as the old man's only relative, would help with the funeral arrangements and relieve the horror-stricken widow of responsibility. Phyllis would sell the house and move back into New York. In the most natural way, Russell would continue to look out for her welfare; and in a year or so they would be quietly married, exciting neither surprise nor suspicion.

It was while he heard her coming down the stairs, heard her pause halfway down and call out carefully, "Fred, where are you?" that Russell decided to modify the original plan. He was not going to marry this woman, the sort of wife, he told himself angrily, who would arrange the murder of her

own husband. She was not wearing well, she was becoming petulant, she was drinking too much. He would never be safe with her. One moment of anger and she might confess the whole thing, willing to convict herself so long as she could take Russell with her. And if he did not marry her, she could blackmail him the rest of her life. Why would a house-breaker just kill the husband, he thought, and spare the wife, carefully tying her up? It wasn't even reasonable; the police would start digging. But killing both of them would be no more dangerous than one, and there would be no loose ends.

He hefted the bloody hatchet when he heard Phyllis call again, as he had instructed her, "Fred, where are you?"

Then she came down the stairs and saw him in the moonlight, standing over the body of Uncle Fred.

"Is he dead?"

"As good as dead. He may hang on a couple of hours in a coma. Let's get on with it."

He was to knock her out from behind as she entered the dining room and saw the old man's body. "Let's go," he said, "I'll get in position behind you."

He would get behind her, and knock her out as they had planned —but it would be with the hatchet and he would make sure of it. As for the old man, by the time someone investigated there would be no life in him either.

He had taken only one step when the dining room lights went on. For a moment, he thought only that Phyllis had somehow brushed against the switch with the ruffled wrists of the absurdly elaborate black negligee she was wearing.

"Turn it off! Someone might see it from the road."

"I need some light, Tommy," she said. "Don't you want to know why?"

"Just turn it off," he said, starting to go forward to turn it off himself.

Phyllis took the revolver from her pocket. It was small, no more than .25 calibre, but it was pointing right at him and the hole in the muzzle looked as big as a tunnel.

"The insurance man worried me," she said, "about all that money and jewelry in the house. So I picked this up as he advised. Don't worry," she went on. "I know how to use it."

"You're crazy. What good would it do to kill me?"

"About $5,000,000 worth of good."

"What do you mean? We're not married, you wouldn't get a penny of my money."

"Your money, Tommy? What

makes you think it's your money."

"It comes to me after the old man dies."

"He isn't dead yet, Tommy. What happens to the money if you die first?"

"It was supposed to go to Uncle Fred."

"It still does, Tommy. He isn't dead yet, and when he dies in a couple of hours, it goes to me."

"He'll never come out of it; he's as good as dead."

"If there's a pulse, the slightest breath, the barest heart-beat, he's still alive. If you died just five minutes before him, he'd inherit in that five minutes before he died, and his heirs would get it. There's a library in town, Tommy. I read all about it—the day I bought the gun."

"How could you prove it, you stupid witch?"

"There was a burglar, Tommy. He battered poor Fred with a hatchet, but I came down and shot him in the dark, and he died instantly. Then I turned the light on and it was Tommy Russell. Everyone knows Tommy wanted the money; everyone knows Fred kept him short of cash; I know they quarrelled when Tommy came up for dinner. He murdered Fred and tried to make it look like a housebreaker, and he would have murdered me too. And when the police come, they'll find Fred still not quite dead. But not you, Tommy. You won't be breathing."

For a moment, Russell thought he could run at her and get the gun; but the muzzle was very steady on him and he knew it was no use. *Five minutes,* he thought, *for five minutes I was rich.* The last emotion he felt was disbelief.

"Goodby, Tommy," she said and shot him twice, very accurately through the heart and head. But she was very careful. She leaned over him and tested for breathing with a little pocket mirror. It was only when she was absolutely certain that she made the phone call to the police. While she was waiting for them to come, poor Fred groaned once or twice. It was a little unpleasant, but she knew it wouldn't be long. After all, life is not all pleasantness.

Curiosity is said to be a characteristic of a vigorous mind, but when unrestrained, it is liable to assume the characteristics of a physical weapon.

GALLIVANTIN' WOMAN

By Wenzell Brown

ABOUT twice every summer Miss Susie Sloane would come gallivantin' down the mountain a-whoopin' and a-hollerin' at everyone she met on the way. Mostly she'd walk the whole twelve miles from Mount Solomon, 'cause even if someone offered her a lift she warn't a-ridin' in no new-fangled contraption like an autymobile.

She'd be wearin' a sunbonnet and a flouncy, bright-colored cotton skirt such as went out of fashion

nigh onto thirty years ago. As for her long yellow curls, they must 'a been a wig 'cause they never changed one mite over the years.

Susie had a voice that would wake a clam, and a laugh you could her clear to Sebago Lake. The way she'd come prancin' along, a-lookin' at everythin' and doin' a funny little jig step, always gave me a sort o' warm feeling. But there was some in Cripple's Bend was right vexed with Susie and I don't mind admittin'. they had reason.

I reckon Susie was just about the nosiest woman in the whole o' Pisquaticook County, or mebbe it was just that she come to town so seldom she plain wanted to see everythin' as was goin' on, which ain't much in Cripple's Bend. She'd been livin' all alone up there on Mount Solomon ever since her daddy died, so it seems like she had a right to bust loose once in a while and get an eyeful to take back to the farm with her.

People around used to complain that Miss Susie warn't never backward about comin' forward, and that was the plain unadulterated truth. She'd march straight into the kitchen o' Gimpy's Diner to watch Mrs. Gimpy makin' flapjacks and then she'd grab a spoon and start stirrin' the batter sayin' as how it needed a pinch more o' bakin' powder or they'd be heavy as lead.

Most local folks would take Miss Susie in good spirits because they'd all known the loneliness of Maine winters and what it's like to be snowbound for months at a stretch. But some of the city crowd who come up here in the summer would get real irked. Like this feller Bingham, who's supposed to be big shakes in the art world. Seems like one day he's a-paintin' the lighthouse over to Cushman's Cove when Susie comes up in back o' him. She stands there for awhile, her hands on her hips and her head tilted to one side. Then she snaps, "That ain't right."

Before you could say Jack Spratt, she's swooped up the pallet and brush and added a few strokes of her own.

Bingham's so mad he almost blows a gasket. He wants me to arrest Susie and toss her into pokey. When I explain there ain't no local jail, and anyway Susie didn't mean no harm, he stamps away, a-huffin' and a-puffin' and a-cussin' me as a hick sheriff, which is a charge I never did deny.

All the same I have a heart-to-heart talk with Susie, especially after the run-in she has with Mrs. Godwin who's about the richest woman in town. Susie prances right up to her on the main street and wants to know if the bloom on her cheeks is real. Afore Mrs. God-

win can think up an answer, Susie licks a finger and traces it across her face. I reckon Mrs. Godwin wouldn't have been so all-fired riled up if her rouge hadn't smeared and come off all over Susie's finger.

Talkin' to Susie's about as much use as singin' a lullaby to a lobster.

"Gracious sakes alive!" she whoops. "Folks around here is gettin' mighty tetchy. Seems like a gal can't even ask questions no more without somebody rearin' up on their hind legs and chewin' her ears off."

I can't help it. I bust out laughin' and the next thing I know Susie's a-shootin' off across the road to see for herself if Emmie Coolidge's latest young-un is a boy or a girl.

I guess it's plain as the nose on my face that I always had a soft spot for Miss Susie Sloane, even afore the summer the bank robbers come to town.

There's three of 'em, a trio of hoods as busted loose in a jailbreak across the state line in Massachusetts. Word had come through to be on the look-out for 'em, as they might be workin' their way up to Canada, but there didn't seem no reason for 'em to show their faces in Cripple's Bend, seein' as how we're off the beaten track so to speak.

Just to be on the safe side, I take a good squint at the mug shots and memorize the descriptions. The leader seems to be a big ugly feller called Harry Jenks who's been servin' time for woundin' a bank guard in a holdup. His sidekick is a junkie, a wizened excitable hood known as Hoppy Jackson. The third is Lew Abbott. He's hardly more than a boy, and a handsome one at that, but he's got a double murder rap hangin' over him and was headin' for the death house when he made the break.

The bandits hit the Cripple's Bend Savings Bank just about five minutes afore closin' time. Jenks and Hoppy go in, while Abbott stays in the getaway car that's parked down the street a piece, with its motor idlin'.

There ain't hardly a soul around savin' young Tom Nash, the teller, and Lucy Dohm who's secretary to Mert Simon, the president o' the bank. Mert himself is in his office at the rear.

These hoods ain't foolin' none. They're playin' for keeps. Hoppy pulls a revolver on Tom Nash and orders him out from behind his cage. Once he's out, Jenks smashes him along the side of his head with the butt of his gun. Tom slumps to the floor. He's out cold as a mackerel.

Lucy's a-watchin', so scared she can't move. She starts to scream but afore the scream can come out,

Jenks claps a hand over her mouth, hustles her to a closet and shoves her in, warnin' her he'll shoot through the panel if she don't make like a mouse.

They drag Tom out o' sight, pull the blinds and lock the front door, but they leave the door at the side ajar for a quick getaway, or mebbe because they just plain forget it. Everything goes so fast and smooth, none of the few people moseyin' along the main street notice anything amiss.

Mert Simon's seated at his desk when these two hoods rush into his office, flourishin' their guns. Hoppy sticks his revolver about two inches from Mert's face, but it's Jenks as does the talkin'.

He says, "Open up the vault and do it quick. Try any tricks and we'll blast you."

Mert acts cool as a cucumber. He explains there ain't no vault, just the big wall safe at his back.

Jenks snarls, "Quit yackin' and get busy."

Mert don't panic. He does what they tell him, but he takes it slow and easy. He ain't got no doubt that they mean what they say, but he's safe enough until they get their hands on the money. After that he reckons his chances ain't too good. His best bet is to stall as long as he can, hopin' some act o' providence or dumb luck will save him.

Sure enough, someone does spot that part-open side door. And seein' as how it's Miss Susie Sloane, she has to come prancin' in to satisfy her curiosity. At first she thinks the bank is empty and she goes caperin' and peerin' around. 'Tain't long afore she spies Tom Nash lyin' behind the counter, curled up like he's asleep. About the same time, Lucy Dohm works up enough nerve to start a feeble poundin' on the closet door.

Miss Susie cocks her head to one side. Then she hears voices in Mert Simon's office and she tiptoes down the corridor to listen. Mert's opened up the safe and Hoppy is busy stuffin' all the bills he can find into a duffel bag, while Jenks keeps Mert covered with his gun. Meanwhile, they're arguin' betwixt themselves what had better be done with Mert.

Hoppy says, "If we blast him we got no worries. He can't never put the finger on us."

"Act your age," Jenks answers. "Ain't no sense in shootin' 'less you have to. Tie him up, Hoppy, and let's beat it out of here."

Mert's been wonderin' if he dares to jump for the alarm button beside his desk. The alarm is attached to a klaxon on the roof, and once it goes off, it'll alert the whole town and bring me a-runnin'. But when he hears they're

tyin' him up, he decides it ain't worth the risk, particularly as they'll have plenty o' time to gun him down before help can come.

So he slides to the floor the way they tell him to. Hoppy circles his waist a couple o' times with a length o' cord and he's busy bindin' his hands, when Miss Susie marches straight into the room.

If she'd tried to back away or scream, I reckon they would have shot her on the spot. But she ain't scared one bit. She's just curious as all get-out to know what's goin' on. She stands there a-twirlin' the red umbrella she always carries, and watchin' Hoppy who's a-kneelin' in back o' Mert loopin' the knots into place.

Susie drops right down beside him, her lips puckered in disapproval. "That ain't the way to tie a square knot. Land sakes alive, a man could slip a knot like that in no time flat. Here, let me show you."

Hoppy's so flabbergasted he lets go of the cord.

Susie picks it up and says, "Look. You loop it over like this and tuck the end in here and he's trussed up like a rooster. Now you try it, mister. I'll tell you when you go wrong."

Jenks grates out, "Just leave things the way they are, if you know what's good for you, sister."

Susie tilts back on her haunches, pickin' up her umbrella that's spilled to the floor. Up 'til now she ain't realized that anything was really wrong. It ain't that she's stupid, but she's sort o' lost touch with the world, livin' as she does all alone on the side o' Mount Solomon. Bank robbery is somethin' she just ain't never give a second thought to. Even now it don't cross her mind that these men are really dangerous.

"Don't you get fresh with me, young man," she retorts. "I ain't your sister and I ain't never like to be."

"Shut up," Jenks snarls and covers her with his revolver.

"Don't you use that tone of voice to me and don't you point that thing at me neither," she snaps back, real tart-like.

Jenks stares at her. "Lady, don't you know what this is? It's a .32 automatic that can blow a hole through you the size of a grapefruit."

Susie ain't listenin'. Her eyes have lit on the duffel bag and she yips, "What have you got in there? You're not stealin' from Mr. Simon, are you?"

She stands up and starts for the duffel bag. Jenks yells to Hoppy, "Grab her. Shut her up quick."

Hoppy snatches Susie's arm to swing her around. But he don't

know Susie. She may look like a comic Dresden doll, old and fragile, but she ain't nothin' o' the kind. She's worked that farm o' hers for thirty years, sawin' wood, totin' water and tendin' to the livestock.

Susie breaks away, and she's got her umbrella up. She slaps it down hard, right on the top o' Hoppy's head.

He lets out a yell but it's drowned out by another sound. Mert Simon's been edgin' over toward his desk until he can lean forward and press the alarm button with his forehead.

That klaxon is loud enough to deafen you halfway across town. I'm in Gimpy's cafe, cleanin' up on a platter of fried clams when I hear it. I leap up and race toward the bank, with my gun out.

As I round the corner, Jenks and Hoppy come a-tearin' out of the alley beside the bank, racin' breast to breast. Right behind them comes Susie Sloane, whammin' first at one and then at t'other with her umbrella.

I skid to a stop, my gun pointin', but not darin' to shoot for fear o' pickin' off Miss Susie. While I'm standin' there open-mouthed, bullet whistles by me. 'Taint neither Jenks nor Hoppy, but Lew Abbott, gunnin' me from the getaway car.

Jenks drops the duffel bag and bills tumble out. There's just enough breeze to send 'em skitterin' down the main street.

Hoppy drops to his knees grabbin' at the bills, but Jenks keeps right on runnin'. I see the gun juttin' out o' the window of the getaway car and I fire. At the same time Abbott lets loose a blast. Jenks stops dead in his tracks, then he topples over and slides to the cobblestones. Abbott flings his gun away and steps on the accelerator. The car shoots off down the main street like the devil was on its tail. It screams around a corner, the tires a-burnin' rubber.

I snap off one more shot. The bullet ricochets off a back fender. Then the car's out o' sight.

I look around. I don't have to do much lookin' to see that Jenks is dead as a boiled lobster. In back o' me I hear a groan and spin about. It's Hoppy. He's a-layin' on the ground, holdin' his head in both hands. At first I think he's been shot too. But I'm wrong. Susie's just whammed him over the head so many times that his skull is nigh stove in. He's alive, all right, but there ain't a single ounce of fight left in him. Susie's standin' a-lookin' down at him, her brelly raised high, to get in another whack if he moves.

Hoppy sees me and yells, "Pull

her off me. Make her leave me alone."

I go to Susie. She's right pale, and she's got a waxy look to her eyes. At first I think it's just the excitement; then I spot the blood on her sleeve.

She ain't hurt bad, just a flesh wound where a bullet grazed her arm, but now that it's all over, she faints dead away.

Well, I don't mind tellin' you the next hour or so was mighty hectic. We had to get an ambulance to cart Susie to the hospital along with Tom Nash. As for Hoppy, I send him to get fixed up at the state police barracks over to Barrow.

Mert Simon is still trussed up inside the bank, but I set him free in a couple shakes of a lamb's tail. There ain't nothin' wrong with him, nor with Lucy Dohm neither, though she throws as fine a set of hysterics as I ever did see.

About six miles outside o' Cripple's Bend, Abbott loses control of his car and slams into a tree. The state police pick him up wanderin' along the highway with a concussion. He don't put up no fight at all.

That sort o' wraps things up. O' course we could have tried him and Hoppy for bank robbery, but there don't seem much sense to it with state o' Massachusetts willin' and eager to take 'em off our hands.

Susie Sloane's the heroine o' Cripple's Bend. Soon as people hear what she's done they start flockin' to the hospital, bringin' her fruit and flowers and such. Bein' as how she's Susie, you'd think she'd enjoy all the fuss but that ain't the case at all.

Once she's got a bandage on her arm, wild horses couldn't a-kept her in Cripple's Bend over night. She says she's got her fill o' the wicked city and she's headin' straight back to Mount Solomon where she can take life easy. Besides that if she don't get back that night, the cow'll be bawling its head off to be milked.

Six years has passed since then and it's a funny thing, in all that time Susie Sloane ain't come gallivantin' down the mountain, not even once. Seems to me like I owe something to Miss Susie. If it hadn't a-been for her, I might have run smack into a brace of bullets, or Mert Simon might have got hisself kilt. So every summer I make the trip up Mount Solomon to see her.

Miss Susie always acts like she's glad for a visit, but there ain't nothin' I can do that'll change her mind about Cripple's Bend.

There is a firm, its fame worldwide, which is said to insure against any contingency. Would the following, I wonder, qualify as double indemnity?

THE KIDNAPPERS

RITA KAPON, forty and beginning to gray and widen, was watching nervously from a front window of the pretentious stone house when the young man left the black sedan and came up the walk. Her heartbeat increased with his appearance. The young man was so casually confident. Look at him, walking so tall and straight, and as if he did not have a care in the world. He was immaculate in an expensive blue suit and hat, and he carried a new briefcase. Rita was at the heavy door to open it with his first ring.

"Good morning, Mrs. Kapon," the young man beamed. "I represent the Caraway Insurance Co—"

"Come in, Robert," Rita interrupted quickly. "Come in." She drew him into the cool dimness of the foyer. "We don't have to pretend. Timothy is at the pool and Martha has gone to the market."

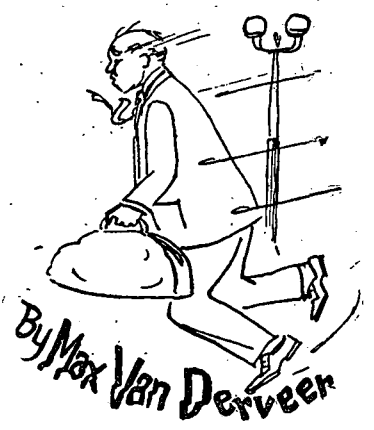
The young man closed the door with a gentle smile, and Rita immediately raised her lips to his mouth. Their kiss was long and, for her, a heady sensation. Finally, she drew back her head and looked deep into his dark eyes. She shuddered involuntarily.

"I still can't believe you have happened to me," she whispered. "Yet the first day we met I could sense there was something between us. And all the time you were so piously busy, attempting to sell me on the idea of life insurance."

The young man kissed the tip

of her nose, grinned roguishly. "To think I've been selling insurance three years and only now I have—"

"Hush." Rita wrinkled her eyes impishly. "No woman likes to hear about a man's other con-



quests. Nor does she want to be lied to."

"Sweetheart, that's just the point. There have been no conquests."

"You told me, darling," Rita said, kissing the young man briefly. "But I didn't believe you then, nor do I believe you now. You are too handsome, Robert Shelton."

"Honey?"

Rita shivered. Robert Shelton had suddenly become serious. She hoped that what she felt at this moment was visible in her eyes. "I've thought about it, darling," she whispered. "I didn't sleep all night, thinking, trying to decide."

"And?"

She nodded quickly.

"You'll do it?" Robert Shelton said, almost as if he could not believe her.

"We have to have money," she said softly, "to be able to do the things we want to do, to go where we want to go."

"When?"

"T-tomorrow morning?" Rita stuttered.

"Fine."

"I just wish . . ." Rita hesitated. Suddenly, for some reason she did not understand, she had to look away from the penetrating dark eyes.

"Baby?" Robert Shelton said in a husky low tone. His hand cupped her chin and forced her to look again into his eyes. "It's all right, baby," he murmured. "It'll work. Your husband will pay. If not for you, he will pay for your son. Isn't that what you said?"

"Y-yes."

"You said it yourself, sweetheart," Robert Shelton said softly. "If we are to be together, we must have the money."

"If only Hobart wasn't so miserly," Rita murmured. "If only he would allow me to have a bank account rather than parceling out what I need when I . . ." She

forced a smile. "If only you had money, Robert, then we wouldn't have to go through—"

"Hey," he interrupted gently, "you're not hedging, are you?"

"No." She shook her head determinedly.

"I'm broke, pet. I haven't got a sou."

"I know," she said quickly.

"But we'll be set in a couple of days, baby. Fifty thousand great big beautiful clams." He grinned in anticipation. "You're positive he can put his hands on that much cash in a matter of hours?"

"All Hobart will do is pick up a telephone," Rita Kapon said sourly. "That's all he has ever had to do, while I almost have to beg to get one dollar!"

Robert Shelton kissed her hard. "You're a doll."

"One thing," Rita said. "You won't hurt Timothy? He isn't to be—"

"Not a scratch, cat," Robert Shelton grinned.

"And you are sure he will not recognize you. After all, he has seen you here. The other day he saw you coming up the walk and he—"

"Honey," Robert Shelton broke in, his grin widening, "I told you, I tried to make it on the stage for five years, but I was nothing. I didn't have it. But that doesn't mean those five years were a total loss. I can change my face in five minutes."

"All right, Robert. I believe you."

"Even you might not recognize me," he chuckled.

She kissed him impulsively. "I'd know you anywhere."

"Hadn't I better leave?" he interrupted.

Wrinkles pleated Rita's brow. "You just arrived."

"But I've been here so often, baby, that maid of yours is going to wonder—"

"I told you, darling, I sent Martha to the market. I didn't want her here when you arrived."

"So should I be here when she returns? She could be suspicious," he pressed. "And after tomorrow, she could recall to the police how an insurance salesman—"

"All right," Rita said quickly. She stepped away from Robert, studied him for a second, and then was back in his arms. "Darling, we will have so much fun together," she whispered.

"For months and months," he said gruffly.

Then Robert turned to the door. He was grinning when he looked at her over his shoulder. "How am I wearing my lipstick, baby?"

Rita shook her head. "There isn't any, darling."

"The supermarket? Tomorrow morning? Ten o'clock?" he prompted.

"Just as you planned," Rita Kapon nodded.

Robert Shelton winked at her and stepped outside with a gentle laugh. She was at the front window before he was down the walk, and watched him get into the black sedan and drive smoothly away. When she turned from the window finally, a startled cry caught in her throat. Her son, his eight-year-old body deeply tanned and dripping water from the patio swimming pool, stood in the door of the livingroom.

"Did someone just leave the house?" he asked.

"No," Rita Kapon said, hating the lie and hastening to the boy to cover her brief befuddlement. She put an arm across his bare shoulders and hugged him. "What are you doing in the house?"

"I wanted a cookie, but Martha isn't in the kitchen."

"Martha is at the market," Rita said. "How 'bout if your mom finds you a cookie?"

"Great," the boy answered.

They went through the house and into a large, neat kitchen where Timothy Kapon acquired a handful of chocolate cookies. Then he returned to the patio swimming pool, frowning. He wondered why his mother had lied to him. It seemed as if that man who always talked about insurance had been coming to the house pretty often. Why would his mother lie about the man? Perhaps his father could explain when he came home that evening.

"Timothy tells me the Caraway representative was here again today," Hobart Kapon said that night, coming from the bathroom into the bedroom and going to a dresser.

"Oh?" Rita said with a catch in her voice. She sat stiffly at the dressing table. Momentarily, her fingers had stopped working, but now they made tiny, vigorous circles against her cheek as she applied cream to her skin and dubiously inventoried the reflection of her ponderous husband across the room. Had he detected the catch?

His back was to her as he lit a cigarette. He had allowed himself to become monstrously fat at forty-two, and the deep blue robe that hung loosely from his frame accentuated the bulbousness.

"I must say the man is persistent," he said. "Perhaps I should hire him. Anyone who continues to seek business from a saturated—"

"He's young, Hobart," Rita said, unable to keep her eyes on his

reflection, "and you know young men just starting out. They are stubborn, determined. They simply refuse to recognize a stone wall even if it is staring them in the face. We call it ambition, don't we?"

"Can't he understand we've got more life insurance than—"

"He does now. He won't be back."

"You could have told him the first time he—"

"Hobart, will you leave twenty dollars on the dresser for me? I have an appointment with my hairdresser in the morning."

"Hairdresser! Your hair looks okay to me."

"I need a tint."

He returned to the bathroom, mumbling. "Women! Tints! Why can't women do with what they've got?" He ran a hand over his bald head and slammed the door behind him.

Wednesday morning was gray and rainy. The rain drummed down steadily. At exactly nine-thirty, timing everything to perfection, Rita entered the kitchen and told the maid, "I have a ten-thirty appointment with the hairdresser, Martha, but I'm leaving now. I want to stop at the market."

"The market, ma'am?" Martha frowned. "I just went to the market yesterday."

"Mr. Kapon mentioned avocados last night."

Martha brightened. "I can go for them, ma'am."

"Why should two of us go out in this rain? I'll be going right past the market, Martha. I'll stop. Incidentally, I'm taking Timothy with me."

"Yes, ma'am."

"School begins in a month," Rita explained against the maid's obvious speculation. "I want him to try on a suit."

"Yes, ma'am."

Rita turned from the kitchen to hide her irritation. She was on edge, taut as stretched leather.

She stopped briefly. She had to relax, get a grip on herself. She felt exactly as a novice criminal must feel before committing an initial crime.

But this was not a crime! This was merely subterfuge to obtain money that rightfully should be available to her anyway.

If there were a crime in this, it was being in love, being a married woman for eighteen years and suddenly, for the first time, being truly in love, being in love with a man half her age. Well, perhaps, not half, but Robert could be no more than twenty-four or twenty-five.

Rita shivered and entered the livingroom. "Timothy, put the

game away. I want you to go with me."

The boy, sprawled stomach down behind a row of toy soldiers on the carpeting, frowned at her over his shoulder and then turned onto his side. "Go? Where are we going, Mom?" He sat up and looked out a window at the steady rain.

"Don't quibble with me," she said irritably. "We're going to find a school suit."

The boy got to his feet. "Sure, Mom," he said with trained obedience. "Can't I leave my men?"

Rita, straining now for the composure she needed, said shortly, "Yes, yes, you can leave them. But hurry. Get your coat."

She was behind schedule now. She should have allowed for unforeseeable factors, like the rain, in her schedule.

Her son was forced into scurrying to match her movements. In the garage, she tapped her nails nervously on the steering wheel of the car as she waited for the boy to drop into the bucket seat beside her and pull the door shut. She snapped the car out of the garage, backed too fast down the drive, and rocked to a stop in the street. She zoomed across dangerous intersections and only half braked at the stop signs. It was three minutes before ten o'clock when she turned the car into the supermarket parking lot and parked in a stall in the previously designated lane. A man she did not recognize got out of a black sedan to her left. He met her as she started around the front of her car. Her son was beside her. She put a protective hand on his shoulder.

The man allowed them to see the gun in his hand. "This way, please," he said politely.

Rita felt her son tense. She tightened her hand on his shoulder. "Do what the man says, Timothy," she said tersely.

Robert had been right about one thing. He had changed his appearance so even she was not sure he was Robert Shelton as he ushered them to the black sedan.

"You drive," he said in a gruff voice.

He got into the back seat and allowed her son to sit beside her in front. The boy's eyes were wide with incomprehension as he looked at her. She shook her head, telling him to be silent, as she turned the ignition key.

Robert Shelton directed her to a weathered motel on what once had been a main highway, but now was only a remote side road of an expressway on the south edge of the city.

"Your husband should be get-

ting my message just about now," he said after he had escorted them into a unit. "Take off your coat. We might as well be comfortable. This is going to take a while."

Rita Kapon looked at her son. The boy was still wide-eyed. "Have we been kidnapped, Mom?" he asked innocently.

"Yes," she answered softly.

He came to her and buried his face against her. She could feel him trembling and his fingers biting into the skin of her back as she looked at their abductor.

The abductor winked and blew her a kiss.

Connie Landers, who had been secretary to Mr. Hobart Kapon at Kapon Paper Company almost four months now, tapped the second morning mail into a neat stack and left her desk. Blonde, petite, and twenty-five, she rapped discreetly on the door of Mr. Kapon's office, entered without waiting for permission, and placed the envelopes in a symmetrically tidy stack before him.

"Thank you, Miss Landers," Hobart Kapon said without looking up.

Connie went around the desk with an amused smile tugging at the corners of freshly painted lips, and kissed his forehead peremptorily.

Hobart Kapon sat rigid for a second before pushing her away. "You fool!" he hissed. He pointed to the open door. "Someone could see you! Nights, fine. Here, no!"

"Tonight?" asked Connie.

"Yes, yes," Hobart said, waving a hand in consternation. "Tonight."

"What time?"

"Nine o'clock."

"I'll be waiting, darling," Connie purred softly.

Hobart slumped back in the heavy leather chair and watched the undulation of her young, ungirdled hips as she left the office. He passed a hand across his brow after she had closed the door behind her and looked at the smear of red lipstick in his palm, wiped it off.

Why had he ever become so involved with Connie Landers? The answer was not difficult. She was so young, so stimulating, so invigorating to a man his age . . .

Hobart sorted the envelopes on his desk quickly, stacking them by categories. What was this envelope?

Hobart scowled. This was not the usual important-looking business envelope, but had been manufactured from a cheap grade of paper. There was no return address, but the envelope was addressed to him and was marked

"Personal". Ruthlessly, he tore it open. The content left him dazed.

It was several minutes before Hobart Kapon summoned Connie Landers to his office again. "Close the door, please," he said in a voice that cracked with emotion.

Connie frowned and closed the door gently. "What's the matter, honey?" she asked. "You look as if—"

"Look!" Hobart extended the ransom note.

Although the note was short, Connie took her time examining it before she looked up. She went around the desk slowly, looped an arm around Hobart's neck and hugged him. "Gee, a break for us."

"What!" Hobart exploded.

Connie continued. "Well, you're not gonna pay, are you?"

"Wha- Oh, no!" Hobart sat shaking his head.

Connie dropped the note on the desk and turned to him. Taking his face in her hands, she kissed him. Then she said, "Isn't this what we've been waiting for, honey? Somebody has kidnapped your wife. Don't pay and you won't get her back. That's what it says in the note. If you don't pay them—"

"Connie, these people also have my son!"

"So?"

Hobart could not believe his ears. "Don't you understand? If I don't pay, they say they will kill both my wife and my son!"

"Well, you've been looking for a way to get rid of your wife without having to pay a fortune, haven't you?"

"Rita, yes! But not Timothy!"

Connie Landers stood erect. "You mean you want a kid along on our honeymoon?"

"You dumb broad!" he rasped. "Don't you have one ounce of—"

"Broad!" Connie shrilled. "Why, you lecherous, old—"

"Shut up! Just shut up. I have to think."

Hobart sat hunched forward in the large chair, his mouth pursed, his brow furrowed, his fingers interlocked and working against his bulbous middle. Connie Landers stared at him, her breathing sibilant.

Kapon finally spoke. "I hafta pay. Fifty thousand dollars. I can't let these people harm my son."

"Are you gonna call the cops?" Connie asked.

"No, I'm going to do exactly as it says in the letter. I'll take the money to Thompson Park tonight. Incidentally, you're fired, Miss Landers."

"What! You can't get away with

this," she snarled. "You double . . ."

"I still own Kapon Paper Company, don't I?"

Connie Landers stomped angrily from the office.

At exactly nine o'clock that night Hobart Kapon, as instructed, left his house, a suitcase clutched firmly in his hand, got in his station wagon in the driveway and backed down to the street. It had stopped raining, but he did not notice. Nor did he notice the black sedan that turned onto the street behind him at the first intersection. He felt miserable. How hard he had worked for this money! This was worse than opening a checking account for his wife.

Hobart drove straight to Thompson Park. He had not telephoned the police. His son was too valuable to take the chance. He walked through the park, scowling, and surveyed his surroundings. He came to a sidewalk flanking another busy thoroughfare. There were pedestrians but no one seemed to be paying any particular attention to him. He stood there in the damp night with fear beginning to build in him. He had followed the instructions in the ransom note to the letter, but no one had met him. Had the kidnappers panicked? Had they slain his wife and son?

Kapon marched laboriously back through the park with his heart pounding. It probably was too late now, but he was going to the police. He placed the suitcase inside the wagon and walked around the front end. A shadowed figure left a dark sedan parked in front of the station wagon. The shadow allowed Hobart to get into the wagon and fit the key in the ignition switch before a voice said, "One moment, sir. I think you have something for me."

Hobart felt his heart lurch and he sat frozen as the man opened the door on the sidewalk side of the wagon, reached inside without bending to expose his face in the dome light, and removed the suitcase. "Thank you," the man said politely, and closed the door.

"Wait a minute!" Hobart cried out. "M-my . . . son?" he stammered.

"He will be home within the hour," the man said.

Hobart continued, "I have to trust you about him, don't I?"

"You do."

"The boy could already be dead. You could—"

"He's okay," the man interrupted.

"You're a fool," Hobart Kapon said suddenly. "You aren't going to kill anyone."

"What!"

"You're an amateur," Hobart said, gaining confidence as the tall man remained rooted on the sidewalk. Hobart shifted across the seat and opened the door of the wagon. "A professional certainly would not stand here at this moment talking."

The man broke and ran to the black sedan. Hobart lumbered after him. He basically was not a brave man but he recognized advantage. It was one reason he had been so successful in business. When you had a man down, it was merely a matter of putting on the screws, twisting.

Hobart did not see the tall man launch the first. He ran into it. Pain blinded him. He sat down hard on the wet street.

The motor of the black sedan leaped to life and the car roared away.

Robert Shelton needed a drink. His fingers trembled as he put stolen license plates on the black sedan. Finally, the plates were securely in place and he entered the motel unit. He was breathing harshly. He looked at the gagged and trussed mother and son on the twin beds. Both stared at him wide-eyed.

Shelton ripped the adhesive tape from Rita Kapon's ankles. He pushed her up to her feet and into the bathroom, where he unwound the tape from her wrists and removed her gag.

"Wh-what happened?" she whispered.

"Shut up." He pushed the door shut.

"T-Timothy can't hear us. You put plugs in his ears."

"I'm gonna have to leave town for a few weeks, honey. I'll take the money and—"

"Leave town!" Rita blurted.

"Your husband isn't the great big coward you said he was. He attacked me, and right now I'd bet all of the money in that suitcase out there he is at police headquarters."

Rita stood rigid in disbelief as Robert Shelton explained. Then he said, "The only thing for me to do is get out of town for a few weeks. I can come back when things cool down a bit. But right now we have to play this cozy."

"But I thought you were going to lease an apartment," Rita protested. "That's what we planned. You would lease someplace we could be together."

"Yeah, yeah, but things have changed," Robert Shelton said impatiently. "There's cops now."

"You don't know that Hobart went to—"

Robert Shelton took her shoul-

ders and shook her. "Will you listen to me, doll? I have to leave town for a while, and you have to be careful what you say in the next few days. You have to be confused. About me. About what I look like. About the car. About here. Remember, if I'm caught, I bleat. You're as much involved as I am at this point."

It hit her hard. She stood stunned. He stared at her, allowing his anger to show. Then he softened abruptly and chucked her chin with the edge of his fist. He kissed her. "Easy," he breathed. "This is going to be tough on me too. I'll miss you."

"Robert, Robert . . ." she murmured, clinging to him.

He held her a minute. "Okay," he said, "we have to get back to the acting, doll. We got to make it look good to the kid all the way."

"Yes, darling," she nodded. And then there was misery in her eyes. "But don't stay away too long."

He gave her his best grin. That grin became frozen with the sound of the heavy pounding on the unit's outside door.

Robert Shelton rushed into the bedroom to find Timothy Kapon on the floor and rolled over to the door. He was kicking it vigorously.

"Kid, you've got a lot of guts," Robert said, "but don't try anything that foolish again."

He removed the tape, gag and plugs from Timothy Kapon. The boy stared back at him defiantly. Robert tapped the top of the boy's head lightly with the muzzle of the gun, then marched him out to the car and pushed him into the front seat. He waved Rita into the middle of the front seat, got behind the steering wheel and held the gun in his left hand as he drove with his right.

They picked up the tail as he drove away from the motel. Headlights leaped alive in his rear view mirror and remained there, and it was a few seconds before he was able to breathe normally again. But in those same few seconds he realized the tail was not police. Police would have stopped him immediately.

He drove straight and hard into the center of the city, stopped at a downtown intersection, and told Rita Kapon and her son to get out of the car. She stared at him, her eyes asking all kinds of questions, but he managed to keep his face blank. He still had a car following him, but he wasn't worried.

He checked into a busy hotel several blocks from where he had rid himself of his passengers, and

registered as Robert Wax of Phoenix, Arizona. A bellboy picked up his suitcase.

"Seven," the boy said as they entered the elevator.

The only other passenger was a blonde girl in a bright green suit and carrying a large, matching purse. She also got off the elevator on the seventh floor, but she walked away from them in the opposite direction as the bellboy preceded Robert Shelton down a thickly-carpeted corridor. Robert looked over his shoulder and grinned at the play of the blonde's hips.

Minutes later, there was a knock on his room door and he opened. The blonde stood there unsmiling, with the large purse clasped in both hands.

"Honey," he said, "I didn't know your trust in me was so deep. Now was that smart, following us from the motel?"

"Did you get the dough?" Connie Landers snapped.

He made a grand gesture with his hand toward the suitcase on the bed as he closed the door behind her. "Give me ten minutes in the bathroom, doll, and I'll be a new man. Then we'll be on our way."

Connie opened the suitcase, picked up a packet of currency and riffled it. "The dame?"

"Hooked." Robert moved in behind her, and pulled her back against him. He nuzzled her neck and liked the smell of her perfume. "She'll think twice about involving herself before she says anything. Damn, that was smart, getting her invol . . ."

Suddenly, Connie Landers turned out of his hands. Her eyes were bright and cold as she tapped the package of currency against the palm of her hand. "I play everything smart," she said tartly. "Like Kapon. I told you he was a sucker when it came to that kid. Do you think I put up with his pawing for weeks for nothing?"

Robert squelched the quick irritation he felt at her rebuff of his advance. "Kid," he said, drawing her to him, "I think you're the greatest thing I ever found in a bar. How 'bout a kiss, just to sorta seal our future?"

But she pushed away from him. "We don't have time. Get changed. I want to be on the road in thirty minutes."

Again he ignored the rebuff. He watched her replace the packet of money in the suitcase. Then he chuckled and turned into the bathroom. There was plenty of time ahead for her. They had an entire future together. He heard the snap of the locks as she closed the

suitcase. He stripped out of his tie and shirt and filled the bowl with water. He was jackknifed over the bowl and beginning to remove the makeup when he sensed her presence behind him. He saw her stockinged feet when he looked under the crook of his arm. She had removed her shoes. He started to straighten, but something hard and deadly crushed the back of his skull.

Connie Landers double checked everything. Robert Shelton was unconscious on the floor, his face a macabre smear of water and makeup. She looked at the water in the bowl. It was a reddish-brown color now. She laughed. Shelton in his makeup, the water, would throw the police a curve for awhile. Good.

Seconds later, she was at the door of the room. This was the moment of true danger. If there was someone in the corridor immediately outside the door when she left, if there was anyone in the corridor at all, she was in trouble.

She took a deep breath, picked up the suitcase with the same hand that clutched her purse, stepped outside and closed the door behind her. The corridor was empty.

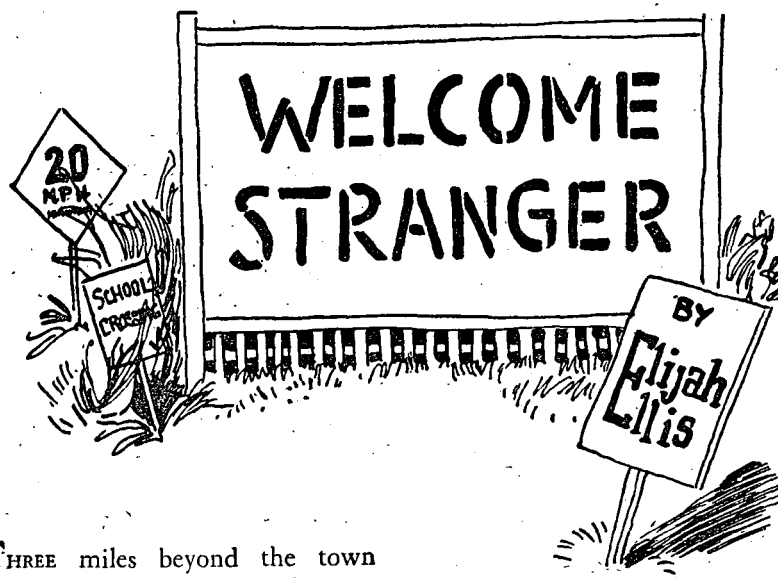
She walked its length quickly and went around a corner. She opened the door she had located earlier, walked down two flights, entered another corridor, and a few seconds later was standing at the door of the room she had taken that afternoon, fumbling in the purse for her door key.

Connie Landers did not sleep that night, but she was bathed, freshly perfumed, and looked pertly rested when she paid her bill and checked out of the hotel at six o'clock the following morning. She allowed a bellboy to place her luggage in her car in the basement garage, but he was never out of her sight. He was the same bellboy who had taken Robert Shelton up to the seventh floor hours earlier. She gave him a dollar bill.

"Thank you, ma'am," he grinned. "You're leaving early."

"I have a long way to go," she smiled.

While some men rely on luck to replenish their coffers, others use the fuel of "creative economy."



THREE miles beyond the town Garvin slowed down and muttered disgustedly. He glanced again at the rearview mirror of his sports car. There was only a battered old sedan behind him. Garvin turned his head slightly, and said, "He must have turned off somewhere."

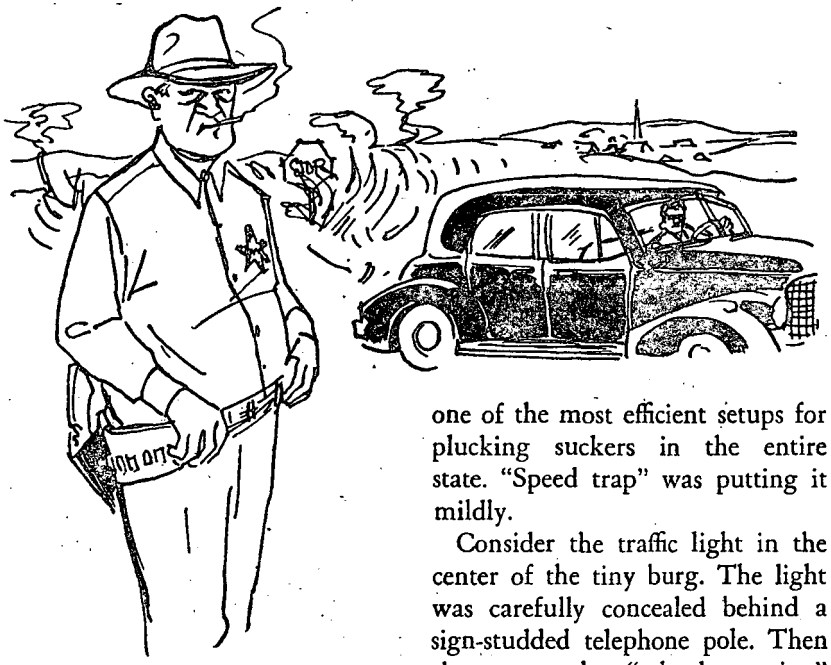
Though to all appearances Garvin was alone in the car, a muffled voice answered from the closed luggage compartment just behind the seat. "That's funny. Way you talked, I thought we had a bite for sure."

"So did I," Garvin said. He frowned ahead along the narrow, multi-patched blacktop highway. "Well, I'll go on a few miles, then turn around. We'll give the town another try. Okay?"

"Okay, but don't take all day.

It's hot in here, and I've got cramps on top of my cramps."

"Take it easy," Garvin laughed. He fed gas to the rakish, bright yellow car. It roared ahead. The small tape recorder in the inside breast pocket of his jacket was



digging into his ribs, and he unbuttoned the jacket to ease the pressure. He lit a cigarette, flicked the match out the window.

As Mac, the man hidden in the luggage compartment, had said, it was strange that the black and white police car that had got on their tail back in the town had evidently given up the chase. That didn't square at all with the information they had about the endearing habits of the local-yokel lawmen of the town, Keysburg.

Garvin and Mac had heard from many sources that Keysburg had one of the most efficient setups for plucking suckers in the entire state. "Speed trap" was putting it mildly.

Consider the traffic light in the center of the tiny burg. The light was carefully concealed behind a sign-studded telephone pole. Then there was the "school crossing" sign hidden in a clump of weeds on a vacant lot bordering the highway, and the sign that announced in huge black letters, "20 MPH"; and just above it in microscopic type, "Minimum Speed".

Garvin tossed away his cigarette, and suddenly that nondescript old sedan that had been trailing him

was alongside, and cutting in front. Garvin hit the brakes, swerved toward the ditch. The sports car skidded to a stop with its front wheels balanced precariously on the ditch's steep edge. Garvin sat there shaking.

Mac gargled, "What in the flaming . . ."

"Idiot forced me off the road," Garvin said, when he was able to talk. Then, looking ahead, he added, "Huh oh."

The sedan had stopped, and one of the two men inside it climbed out slowly. The afternoon sun winked on a silver badge pinned to the man's khaki shirt.

As the man ambled back toward the sports car, Garvin flicked on the tape recorder in his pocket. He murmured to Mac, "Maybe we got a bite, after all."

The man came on slowly, eyeing the out-of-state tag on Garvin's front bumper. Garvin blustered, "What you trying to do, Mister?"

"Better question—what're you tryin' to do?" the man drawled. He was tall and stoop-shouldered, and carried an outsized pistol slung low on one hip. "Kind of in a rush, ain't you, cuz?"

Garvin pretended to notice the badge for the first time, and said ingratiatingly, "Why, no, officer."

"Ashley's the name. County constable." He stared down at Garvin through pale gray eyes. "We got laws here about speedin' within the city limits."

Garvin blinked. "City? Why, Keysville is three or four miles back."

"It's Keys*burg*," Ashley said. He gave a wintry laugh. He pointed a forefinger at a hill far in the distance. "That there ridge marks the city limits. Kind of a spread-out town we got. I might overlook the speedin', since you're a stranger and all. We might even let you off with a warnin' for runnin' the traffic light in town, and ignorin' several signs. But we just can't put up with litterbugs."

"Litterbug?" Garvin said weakly.

Constable Ashley nodded slowly. "Oh, yes, cuz. I seen you throw out that smoulderin' cigarette. An' the match. An' a pile of newspapers, an' no tellin' what else."

Garvin felt a reluctant admiration. "Well, I . . ."

Ashley stiffened. "Oh? Threatenin' an officer, huh? That'll cost you, cuz."

"Why, I didn't . . ."

"The scout car officers back in town told me over the radio that you had a mean look about you—

asked me and my partner to keep an eye on you. Lucky we did, I reckon. Can't be too careful."

"Constable, I didn't say any . . ."

"Shut that smart mouth, cuz." Ashley turned his head, called toward the other car, "Go on, Lem. I'll foller you."

The old sedan moved off down the highway, trailing a cloud of exhaust smoke.

Ashley snapped at Garvin, "Git over, cuz. I'll drive."

"Now just a moment," Garvin said. He hesitated. "What if I handed you a twenty, say?"

Ashley lifted a horny hand, slapped Garvin across the mouth. "Attempted brib'ry—that'll cost you, cuz. Git over."

Garvin got over. He rubbed his stinging lips. He swallowed his temper and whined, "I didn't mean anything."

Silently the constable got in under the wheel. He got the sports car back on the highway, then tramped on the gas. The car took off with a screech of tires. Within seconds they had passed the old sedan.

"Don't these speed laws apply to you?" Garvin muttered.

Ashley took his hand from the wheel long enough to slap Garvin again. "I ain't goin' to warn you again."

With an effort Garvin unclenched his fists, huddled down in the seat with an air of, he hoped, cringing apprehension. He touched the whirring tape recorder hidden in his jacket pocket. He thought, *Just wait, Cuz. Just wait.*

The sports car sailed over a hill. In the valley beyond, Ashley hit the brakes, careened off the highway onto a dusty, rutted lane. There was a ramshackle house up ahead, crouched in the middle of a straggling grove of trees.

Ashley stopped near the tumbledown front porch of the house. There was a faded sign on the wall of the house, near the door.

"'Justice of the Peace'," Garvin read aloud.

"That's right, cuz. Get out."

Garvin opened his door. He started to slide out.

Suddenly the constable put a palm against his back and shoved, hard. Garvin sprawled to his hands and knees.

"Tryin' to escape, huh? That'll cost you, cuz."

The other car came along the lane, stopped across the yard. A carbon copy of Constable Ashley got out and strolled forward.

Ashley told him, "Feller tried to make a run for it, Lem."

"I seen him," Lem said, with a chuckle. "Mean as hell."

"Judge'll take care of him," Ashley said.

Lem nodded, watching Garvin get painfully to his feet. Now a large, potbellied man shambled out of the house. He frowned at Garvin. His tiny eyes moved on to the expensive sports car, the out-of-state tag. The frown gave way to an anticipatory beam. "Well, now."

"Sho'," Ashley said, "got us a real bad 'un."

"Bring him in," the judge rumbled. He led the way into a dim, shabbily furnished room, and lowered his bulk into a chair behind an ancient desk. "Ah?" he said.

"Town boys tipped us to this feller on the radio," Ashley explained. "They had about half-a-dozen charges on him, a'fore he got out of town. Then we picked him up, and lordy! Speedin', litterin' the highway, reckless drivin', attempted brib'ry . . ."

"Just a minute," the judge broke in. He whacked his pudgy knuckles on the desk top, cleared his throat, and said, "Court's now in session. Go ahead, Constable."

"Interferin' with a officer doin' his duty, attempted assault, an' as you can see, Judge, the feller is fallin' down drunk." Ashley paused for breath.

The judge nodded ponderously. He rubbed a hand over the bald expanse of his skull. "Well, now," he said comfortably. Then his gimlet eyes turned to Garvin. "Got anythin' important to say?"

"Why, this is highway robbery," Garvin sputtered. "It's insane. All of those so-called charges, none of them true. I've heard rumors about this place. But I'd never have believed . . ."

"Uh huh," the judge said. He smiled. "Contempt of court. Want to go on?"

Garvin threw up his hands. "Alright. How much?"

The judge scribbled on a piece of paper. Ashley and Lem watched him breathlessly. Garvin sent a quick glance toward the open door. He knew Mac would be just outside, drinking in every word. And the tape recorder in Garvin's pocket would have it all down, loud and clear. He smiled.

"Ha, well," the judge said, finally, "I figger that comes to something like two hundred dollars."

The three men looked toward Garvin. He didn't have to pretend a shudder. "That's . . ."

"That's it," the judge growled. "Two hundred dollars, or two hundred days in jail. Take your pick."

Garvin fumbled out his wallet, let it drop to the floor. He bent down, but Ashley was ahead of him. The lanky constable straightened with the wallet in his hands. He riffled through a fat sheaf of bills.

"Judge, he's got a roll here'd choke a horse."

The judge shoved out his hand. "Gimme." He took the wallet from Ashley, peered inside. He whistled softly. Then he cleared his throat, and said, "On second thought, Mister, I'm afraid your fine will be a little more. I overlooked a couple of things while ago. Let's say three hundred dollars."

"You want me to pay you three hundred dollars?" Garvin said slowly and distinctly.

"You heard him, cuz," Ashley snapped.

"And you're gettin' off easy," the judge said.

The other constable, Lem, said, "Why don't we take it all? What the heck? This feller ain't goin' to do nothin' about it. What could he do?"

Silence. Then the judge murmured, "I think you have a point there, Lem."

And that was plenty. More than plenty, Garvin told himself in grim triumph. He backed toward the door, getting well clear of any reaching arms. Then he pulled the tape recorder from his pocket, snapped it off. He waggled it at the three men.

"What's that thing?" Lem asked.

"A nice little gadget that's going to put you thieves behind bars for a long, long time," Garvin said crisply.

Ashley stammered, "Listen here, you can't pull . . ."

"Oh, yes, I can—cuz," Garvin told him. "Every word you crooks have said is here on tape. All the hoked-up charges. And most especially, that last little bit about taking all my money. Eh, Judge?"

The judge's fat face gleamed with sweat. "Who are you?"

"Throw me that wallet, quick," Garvin said. And, when he had it, he flipped it open to the card-case. He let them see an official-looking card. "State crime bureau," he said shortly. "Satisfied?"

"Oh, lordy," Lem wheezed.

Ashley looked as if he might faint.

The judge opened and shut his mouth like a fish out of water, finally managed, "Well, now. Maybe we can do business."

"What are you suggesting?" Garvin said.

Taking a small key from his pants pocket, the judge shakily unlocked the desk. He brought out a small metal box. From it he drew fat wads of money. "There's about two-thousand here."

"Tryin' to bribe an officer, eh?" Garvin mocked.

"Come on, let's be serious about this," the judge said.

"I'm plenty serious." Garvin jerked his head toward the door. "Let's go, boys. There's a cell waiting for you, up at Capitol City."

Now the judge had found another metal box, containing another hoard. "Three thousand," he groaned. Huge beads of sweat rolled down his jowls.

"How long did it take you to collect that?" Garvin asked. "How many poor slobs did you and your goons here rob in this kangaroo court?"

The judge waved his hands bitterly. "Skip the sermon."

For the past few seconds, Ashley had been easing behind Lem. Now Ashley suddenly jerked out his gun, leaped toward Garvin, thrusting the big .45 ahead of him.

"You fool!" Ashley cried. "You think we'd just let you haul us off to jail like a bunch of sheep?"

Garvin said calmly, "Look over by the door, cuz."

Mac stood framed in the doorway, with a gun trained on the constable's head. With a frightened bleat, Ashley dropped his .45, and hurriedly backed away.

"You want to try, Lem?" Garvin asked.

Lem's gun thudded to the floor. "Not me, Mister."

While Mac covered the three, Garvin stepped to the desk, scooped up the money, stuffed it into his pockets, making a prominent bulge.

"I'm going to give you boys a break you don't deserve," Garvin said. He turned, walked to the door.

Behind him, the judge said, "How about that tape?"

Garvin didn't bother to answer. Seconds later he and Mac were speeding toward the highway. Mac glanced back.

"Whew!" Mac said. "They didn't follow us out. I was afraid they would. What a way to make a living!"

Garvin turned the car onto the highway. He laughed shakily. "Yeah, but look at the short hours and the long pay."

Several minutes and several miles later, Mac asked, "Think they really believed you were a state cop?"

Garvin shrugged. "Well, that old Army I.D. card does look pretty official. You know something? I've a good mind to put that tape we have in a little box, and send it to the state cops—the real ones, I mean. Of all the dirty crooks I ever saw, those three are the worst."

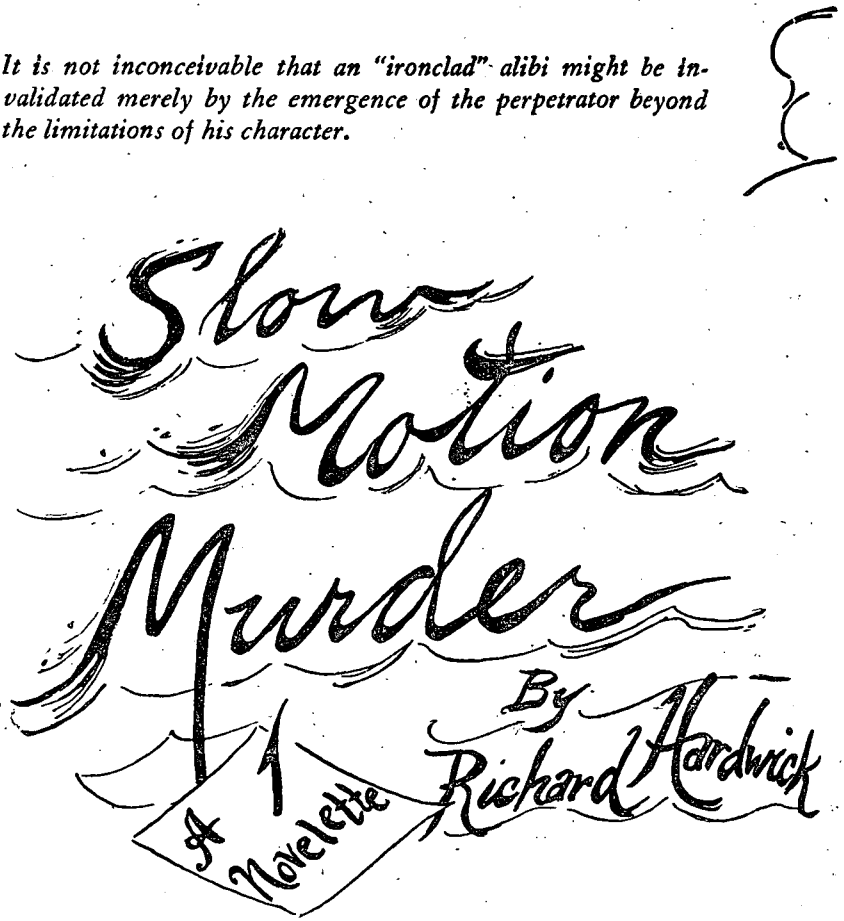
Mac nodded hesitantly. "One thing, though, before you send that tape anywhere."

"Yeah?"

"Just be sure you wipe off any fingerprints that might be on is."

"Yeah."

It is not inconceivable that an "ironclad" alibi might be invalidated merely by the emergence of the perpetrator beyond the limitations of his character.



THE reason for old Gus Johnson's almost unintelligible call was sitting with his back against the wall inside the boathouse. It was Bernie Hibler, or more correctly, it was the mortal coil which Bernie had shuffled off rather recently and abruptly. He had been hog-tied to a stout wall beam, blindfolded, gagged, and shot squarely in the chest.

"I ain't touched a thing since I found him," Gus vowed to Sheriff Dan Peavy. Gus operated a little bait place on the creek about a quarter of a mile back, at the junction of the main road. "Well, nothin' except when I went in the

house to phone you and Deputy Miller."

Dan Peavy nodded, then knelt and touched the body. "Still warm, Pete," he said, glancing up at me. "Ain't been dead too long." His gaze shifted to Gus. "How'd you happen to find him?"

The old fellow didn't seem entirely steady on his feet. One reason was probably the shock of finding the dead man. Another reason could be detected easily anywhere downwind of him. He was pretty well smashed. "Well, Dan, you know we been havin' this dang northeaster for the better part of a week now, and any fool knows the fishin' ain't any good while a northeaster's blowin'. No reason for anybody to wanta buy bait, so when the weather's like this I allus use the time to kinda catch up on my rest."

"Been catchin' up on your drinkin' too, ain't you, Gus?"

The old man bent his head and nodded seriously. "A mite, I reckon. Not too much, mind you. Everything in moderation. Anyhow, all day I been sort of nappin' off and on. Along about three or four o'clock this afternoon I woke up and had me a little nip, and just as I was layin' back down on my cot I heard somethin' from down this way toward Hibler's. Sounded like a shotgun goin' off. I figured it was just Bernie blastin' a varmint, and I went on back to sleep."

"You say that was about three or four o'clock?" I asked him. "How do you know?"

"I'm kinda guessin' at that. You see, I had me another little nip at two. I noticed the clock then. And later on, when that dang car woke me up, it was right at four-thirty. So it musta been around three or four when I got up in between."

"What car?" asked Dan.

"*Her* car! She was tearin' outta Hibler's road like the devil was after her. Didn't even stop when she hit the main road; just laid it over on two wheels, and high-tailed on towards town. All that racket woulda woke up a dead man!"

"You said her? Who're you talkin about?"

"I thought I told you! It was Mollie Hammond."

I stared at the old man. "Mollie *Ham*mond?" I couldn't believe it.

Mollie was one of the finest young women in Guale County, and lately, one of the unluckiest. Barely twenty-five, she was already a widow. Sam Hammond missed a turn a couple of months before on the old post road. The big live oak he tangled with survived. Sam didn't.

It wasn't more than a day after the funeral that Mollie learned

Sam had put every dime they had into some kind of deal with Bernie Hibler. Bernie insisted the deal had fizzled, and that his and Sam's money had gone down the drain.

"Afraid it was Mollie, right enough," Gus said. "That got me to wonderin'. From everything I been hearin', I'd say Mollie was about the last person in Guale County to pay a friendly visit to Hibler. I ain't got a phone, so I got in my pickup and drove down here to his place." He nodded toward the body. "That's what I found."

"Whatd'ya think, Pete?" Dan Peavy asked.

I shrugged. "Same as you do, I suppose. There was plenty of folks said Hibler out and out swindled her. I guess Mollie could have done it, but I'd sure like to hear what she's got to say."

Dan turned to Gus. "You didn't see her drive in here, huh?"

"Nope. She musta come in a lot quieter than she come out. And like I said—"

"I know," Dan nodded tiredly. "You was nippin' and nappin'."

Bernie Hibler wasn't exactly a hermit, but he did treasure his privacy. His place was on a point overlooking Frenchman's Creek in the northwest corner of Guale County, about twenty miles out from the county seat. The boathouse was on a small tidewater, maybe a hundred feet back from Frenchman's Creek, and the same distance from the house proper. There was a permanent deck inside that ran the length of the little building. A ladder led down to a floating dock in the boat slip, the usual arrangement to accomodate the six-foot rise and fall of the tide along our part of the coast.

The boat slip was empty, which prompted Dan to ask Gus if he knew where the boat might be.

"Hibler was havin' some work done on it down at the county marina while the weather was so poor."

Dan walked down the deck, looking around. It was pretty much the same as any other boathouse; coils of rope hung from pegs on the wall, there were a couple of cast nets, a lantern, and half a dozen fishing rods of assorted sizes were hanging from nails. A tackle box and a large bait bucket sat side by side at the edge of the deck just above the float, and a rigged fishing rod lay nearby. The line was tangled around the end of the rod, as if it had been dropped or thrown down hurriedly. A couple of yards of line dangled over the edge where the hook, which still had a piece of shrimp on it, had snagged on the planking of the floating dock.

Bernie Hibler had been a partic-

ular sort of fisherman, despite his other drawbacks, and it would have been a cool day you-know-where before he was that careless and messy with his equipment.

"You best have a look in the house, too," Gus said. "The whole place was a real mess when I went in there to phone you boys." The old fisherman scratched his head uncertainly. "Do you reckon I finished doin' my duty, Dan? I'd sure like to get on back to my cabin."

Dan Peavy nodded absently, his puzzled attention being on the dead man. "Yeah, Gus, you run on. Don't stray far, though, in case we need you."

As Gus hobbled out to his pick-up truck Dan said to me, "I can't figure this business about tyin' him up, blindfoldin' him, and puttin' that dang gag in his mouth." He gave a gentle twist to the lumpy end of his nose. "You called Doc before we left town, didn't you?"

"Right." I could see the dirt road through the open door. "Fact is, here he comes now."

"Good. Call in and tell Jerry to pick up Mollie Hammond. Tell him to bring her out here."

Guale County's beloved physician and coroner pulled up in the ambulance from the funeral parlor. "County's gettin' to be worse than New York City," he grumbled as he put his black satchel down alongside the body of Bernie Hibler. "Murders, gangsters . . ."

"How soon can you give me some idea on the time of death?" Dan asked him.

"What's your hurry?"

"We got a suspect, and the time might be right important."

"I'll narrow it down after the autopsy, but I'll see what I can do to oblige you now."

I used the interval to radio the office and get Deputy Jerry Sealey started on his task, and then I met Dan inside Hibler's house. Gus Johnson had been right; the place was a real mess. Drawers were pulled out and stuff thrown all about, furniture overturned, cabinets open with all the contents on the floor. Whoever had done it either had been looking for something, or wanted to make us think he had.

"There's always been tales around that Hibler kept a lot of cash out here, Dan," I said. "Maybe that's what happened."

"Maybe. Still can't figure what he's doin' out there in the boathouse, though. Looks to me like if somebody was goin' to shoot him, he'd have just *shot* him."

"And speaking of shooting," I said, "I haven't seen a gun anywhere around here. Hibler must have had a shotgun."

"He had one," Dan said. "I've

seen it. A double-barrel twelve guage. And you're right, it ain't here."

"Reckon the killer must have taken it when he left."

He looked around at me. "Or *she?*"

We returned to the dock where Doc Stebbins was just closing up his little bag. "Well, it's five after six now. Judgin' from the body temperature, state o' rigor mortis, blood coagulation, he was probably alive at two o'clock, Dan. And he was probably dead by, oh, maybe four. That much spread help you any?"

Dan Peavy sighed. "Helps me, Doc. But I'm afraid it ain't gonna help Mollie Hammond much."

The old medic's eyebrows lifted. "Mollie? What's she got to do with this?"

"That's our suspect," I said, and went on to tell him what Gus had said.

"I'd stake every dime I got on that girl!" Doc exploded. "Why, that girl couldn'ta done this!"

"What makes you say so?"

"Well, she . . . she just *couldn'ta!*"

"Right now it's just her word against Gus', of course," I said hopefully. "That is, if she denies being out here."

"What about Gus himself?" Doc suggested. He snapped his fingers. "I'll tell you right now who to start lookin' for. Fred Trent! That no-good bum has threatened Hibler plenty of times; in front of witnesses, too! He coulda tied him up and shot him, and enjoyed every minute of it!"

Dan shook his head. "He's the first one I thought about when I heard somebody had murdered Hibler."

"Right!" said Doc. "He's always hated Bernie Hibler, and that judgment Bernie got against him a few months back just might have been the last straw."

The judgment Doc had reference to was five hundred dollars the court had awarded Hibler after Fred Trent, three sheets to the wind, had smacked into Bernie's car in the middle of town and ripped off a fender and a few other things.

"There's only one thing wrong with figuring Trent did this," Dan said. "He's got an ironclad alibi."

"Ironclad my foot! Ain't no such thing!"

"Afraid this time there is." Dan Peavy sighed and scratched his head through his bushy white hair. *"I'm* his alibi. Trent's been workin' for the county all week, and since eight o'clock this morning he's been paintin' the inside of the jail."

By the time Deputy Jerry Sealey arrived with Mollie Hammond,

Doc had wound up everything he could do on the scene, and Hibler's body had been taken back to town for the autopsy. Bloodstains and a chalk outline were all that remained to indicate what had happened.

"I didn't know what to tell her, Dan," Jerry said. "I just said you wanted to see her."

"What's this all about, Sheriff Peavy?" Mollie wanted to know. She was a pretty little thing in a tired sort of way, with big brown eyes and a worried look. You couldn't help but wonder what a new hair-do and some makeup would do for her.

"You were out here this afternoon, weren't you, Mollie?" Dan asked.

She frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"We got somebody says he saw you leavin' here in your car about four-thirty. Gus Johnson. He's got a shack up at the junction o' the main road—"

She drew herself up, as if preparing for an ordeal. "I won't deny it, Sheriff. I was here."

"Something's happened out here, Mollie," I said. "Something bad."

She nodded, not looking directly at me. "I—I know. Bernie Hibler's been shot. He's dead."

"I reckon you know your legal rights," Dan said. "Maybe you best get a lawyer."

"I didn't do it! That was why I was driving so fast by Gus Johnson's place. I was scared! I found his body out in the boathouse when I got here, and I never saw anything like that before in my life! I—I was scared half to death!"

"Kind of unusual you bein' out here, wouldn't you say?" Dan asked her.

"I wouldn't have been here at all if Hibler hadn't phoned me and asked me to come. He called me at about four o'clock. He said he'd decided to settle up with me, and for me to come out here before he changed his mind. At first I thought it was some kind of a joke, that maybe it wasn't Hibler at all. So, when he hung up, I tried to phone him back. He wouldn't answer, and there wasn't anything for me to do but come out and see what it was all about. Well, I knocked on the door, and when nobody came I walked out here to the boathouse, and I found him, tied up and all that blood."

"He called you at four?" I said.

She nodded. "I remember looking at the clock. It's only about five miles over here from my house, and I left after I tried to call him back. I don't suppose I was here more than five minutes or so be-

fore I discovered this terrible . . ."

"Was anybody with you when you got this call?"

"No. Since—since Sam was killed things have been pretty tough for me, and I've been taking in sewing. I was working when he called."

Dan scratched his chin. "I don't reckon I have to tell you how this is gonna look to some folks, Mollie."

"They'll think I killed Hibler? But I didn't, Sheriff Peavy! I swear I didn't! He was dead when I got here!"

"How come you didn't call us, Mollie?" Jerry said. "If you'd of called us, then it woulda looked a lot better."

"I was plain scared. I—I knew how it would look, and I guess I figured if nobody knew I was out here I would be better off." She looked at Dan Peavy. "Are—are you going to arrest me?"

"No. Jerry'll take you home, Mollie. But I'm gonna have to ask you to stay there till you hear from me."

Doc Stebbins got a preliminary autopsy report to the sheriff's office at eleven that night. It backed up what he had said before, about the time of death being between two and four in the afternoon.

"Couldn't narrow it down any closer than that," the coroner said. "That close enough to do any good?"

"Reckon it'll have to be."

"There were a couple other things might interest you. There was a bruise on his head; looked like a hard enough blow to knock him out."

"Which could explain how the killer managed to get him all tied up that way," Jerry suggested.

"And," Doc went on, "the angle of the wound was right interesting. The way it looked to me, he was shot right where the body was found, sittin' propped against the wall. If that was the case, the killer musta been lying down on the deck when he shot him. The gun, by my figurin', couldn'ta been more'n six or eight inches off the floor."

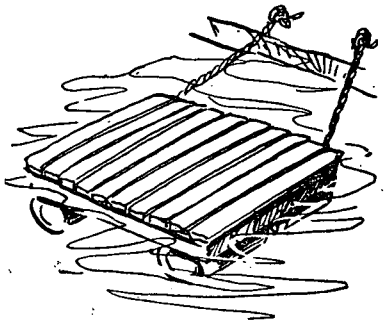
"There could be another explanation for that," I put in. There was a tide table in the desk drawer and I pulled it out and ran my finger down the low tide column. "Yeah, look here. The tide was low this afternoon at 4:42. Now if Hibler was shot at, say, four o'clock, the tide would have been pretty nearly out. A man standing on the floating dock, maybe just about to get into a boat and leave, would have been able to lay the gun right over the edge of the deck and let loose!"

"It makes sense," admitted Jerry.

Dan Peavy nodded skeptically. "There's a lot of screwy angles to this thing. Pete, you and Jerry check up and down Frenchman's Creek first thing in the morning. Maybe you can find somebody that saw something."

"Like what?" asked Jerry.

"Like a boat," Dan snapped. " 'Specially like a boat somewhere near Hibler's place."



Just then there was the sound of tires squealing up to the curb outside. A door slammed and old Gus Johnson came wheezing into the office.

"Just remembered something, Dan! Dang if I know how come I was to overlook it before! There *was* another car come outta Hibler's road today! It was that old rattle trap o' Fred Trent's!"

"I was right!" boomed Doc Stebbins, slamming his hand down on the desk. "I told you so, didn't I!"

Dan Peavy held up one hand for silence. "What time was this, Gus?"

"Time? Oh, it was about seven-thirty this mornin'. Dunno what time he drove into Hibler's. I woke up 'bout quarter past and was havin' a bite o' breakfast when I seen him drive out."

Dan looked over at Doc. "Hibler couldn'ta been dead that long, could he?"

The coroner's jaw knotted and he shook his head. "No, he couldn'ta!"

The northeaster was over. At daybreak next morning the sky was clean and blue, with just a zephyr of a breeze from the south. Jerry and I launched the county's boat at the Frenchman's Landing ramp and headed upstream, stopping at every house, shack, fishing camp, everywhere, in fact, that we could find somebody to talk to. We found one other boat on the creek, a crab fisherman tending his traps. The answer was the same everywhere. The only boat anybody had seen on the river all day was the crab boat.

Jerry and I both knew him, a fellow by the name of Lewis, from up Cypress City way.

"Who is it you're looking for?" he asked us.

"Ain't exactly sure," Jerry said.

"The guy what murdered Bernie Hibler, whoever it is."

Lewis' eyes popped. "That's the first I heard of any murder. When did it happen?"

"You'll read about it in the paper. We got to get moving," I said.

On the way back to town, Jerry said, "What about him, Pete? What about Lewis? He was out there on Frenchman's Creek yesterday. All he woulda had to do was run his boat into Hibler's place and nobody woulda been the wiser. That business just now coulda been an act."

"And what about any of the others we talked to? Seems to me with traffic as light as it was on the water yesterday, pretty near anybody with a boat could have sneaked over there without being seen."

"Yeah," he mumbled, slouching down in the car seat, "I see whatcha mean."

I knew what was on Jerry's mind, the same thing that was bothering me more with each dead end we hit. The fear that we were going to wind up with Mollie Hammond when everything else had fizzled out.

We had started early, and it was just after nine-thirty when we arrived at the office. Fred Trent's car pulled up right in back of us.

"You boys just gettin' to work, too?" he said somewhat pointedly.

"We been working, Trent," Jerry said. "Which seems to be more'n you been doin'."

"Didn't feel so hot this morning," he said. "Pretty near didn't make it atall."

Dan Peavy met us at the door. "Want a word with you, Trent," he said.

"You fellas caught Bernie's murderer yet?" Trent said.

"You heard about it, huh?"

Trent walked to the desk, nodding. "Yeah. Stopped on the way in this morning to get me a cup o' coffee. Everybody was talkin' about it. Just goes to show, you never know."

"What does that mean?" I asked him.

He looked around at me. "Just that you never know when you see somebody but what it'll be the last time. I seen Bernie myself yesterday morning. Stopped by his place about seven on my way to work. That dang judgment he got against me, I been payin' him twenty-five a month on it." He fumbled in his shirt pocket and dropped a piece of paper on the desk. "There's the receipt he give me. Musta been about the last thing he signed his name to."

Dan Peavy glanced at the paper. We hadn't found any money, either in the house or on the body.

Unless Hibler had gone out during the day—and we had no reason to assume he had—there should have been at least twenty-five dollars somewhere out there. It looked now like robbery had been part of it.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Sheriff Peavy?" Trent said.

Dan gave the end of his nose a little tug. "I reckon you just about covered it, Trent. Now then, how about gettin' busy and finish up this paint job?"

Dan checked with the bank and found out that Hibler carried a checking account with them.

"There's always been talk around that he kept a good bit o' money out there at his house," Dan said. "You set any store in this?"

The banker nodded. "I'm right sure he did. Bernie was always working on some kind of deal and he liked to have cash to work with."

"You have any idea how much he mighta kept, or where he kept it?"

"As for where, your guess is good as mine. As for how much, well, that'd be a plain guess, too. I'd say he had at least two thousand dollars cash all the time. Maybe more, but two thousand would be the absolute minimum."

I was thinking about Mollie Hammond, taking in sewing to make a living. Two thousand would be a lot of money to her; two thousand, along with some revenge.

And what about Gus Johnson? Or the crab fisherman?

"How's the case going?" the banker asked Dan.

"As good as we could expect," Dan answered guardedly.

"There's talk around town that the thing's cut and dried. Folks say Mollie Hammond admitted being out there about the time Hibler was shot."

"Like I say, it's goin' about as good as we could hope for."

"It don't look too good for Mollie, does it?" I said to Dan on the way back to the office.

"Not with folks around town startin' to talk against her, it don't. Pete, how come half the folks in this county ain't got sense enough to come in outta the rain, and yet they can all figure out a murder case in five minutes?"

He wasn't really expecting an answer, and of course, he didn't get one.

Doc was at the office when we got there, along with Jerry. The coroner was sitting at Dan's desk.

"There's something else about Hibler's body," he said. "The time

of death is the same as I said it was, but the marks where his arms were tied look to me like he might have been tied up for a considerable time before he was shot."

Dan filled a cup at the water cooler. "Got any idea how long?"

"'Fraid not. Might have been less than an hour, actually, dependin' on how hard he tried to get loose."

"You know," Dan said, coming over and slouching down on the corner of the desk, "that's the part o' this thing that I just can't figure. If you was gonna shoot a man, how come you'd go to all the trouble o' tying him up that way, and what the devil was the idea of the blindfold and the gag? It just don't make any sense at all!"

"It makes plenty of sense to me," Jerry said. "Fact is, I'm kinda surprised none of you figured it out."

"Is that so?" Dan said. "Then how about tellin' us?"

"It's a smoke screen, pure and simple. Same with that business of the fishing rod and the bait bucket and the tackle box. The killer did every bit o' that just to get us to puzzling over it."

"Could be he's right," I said. Up to now, it was the only thing that made any sense.

"Alright," said Dan. "Then gettin' back to what you might say is our number one suspect, Mollie Hammond, how come she'd have the time and patience to do all that and then go flyin' outta there right past old Gus Johnson's shack, makin' enough racket to wake him up, and even admit she was there when we told her she had been seen?"

"That's simple, too," Jerry said. "She ain't the murderer."

But at that point, even Doc Stebbins looked a bit skeptical about it.

I knew it the second Jerry walked into the cafe. There was that telltale gleam in his eye as he took the vacant stool next to mine. "Pete—"

It was late afternoon and I had plans for that night. I lifted both hands. "Don't say it! You've got an idea?"

Jerry nodded, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing an accompaniment. "Not just an idea, but a *great* idea. Listen, unless it was somebody we ain't even got a lead on, it stands to reason that from the point of motive it coulda been either Mollie or Fred Trent, right?"

"Right, but—"

"But Trent's got an alibi, so that narrows it down to Mollie. Alright. Then, from the point o'

quite a bit, too. I was on the spot.

"Alright," I said. "Open the envelope and read it to me."

"Jerry said nobody was to open it but you."

My blood pressure started rising. As soon as the movie was over Juanita and I had planned to drive out to the beach. The moon was full and there's nothing like a walk on the beach in the moonlight to . . .

"Pete," Thelma said. "There's a customer coming in. I gotta go. You'd better come see about this note. It might be real important."

Juanita wasn't any happier about it than I was as I pulled up in front of the Bon Air Cafe. I trotted inside and Thelma handed me the enevelope, pausing long enough to throw a disapproving glance toward the car, where Juanita was pointedly applying lipstick.

Jerry's note was as short as it was cryptic. It read:

I'm putting the pressure on Gus Johnson's weak spot. Get out to his place as soon as you read this and, if everything works out as planned, you just might get to see a real lawman in action.

JS

That did it. I crumpled the note and jammed it into my pocket. As I strode out to the car I noticed the lights were on in the sheriff's office across the street, and I could see the top of Dan Peavy's head there at his desk. I knew this case had him going, and there might be a chance that Jerry was onto something. I had no choice but to follow through on it.

"Nothing's wrong, is it, Pete?" Juanita asked.

I gripped the window sill with both hands. "It's like this—"

"We're not going out to the beach?" The dreamy expression she had featured all evening was no longer in evidence. In its place was something more tight-lipped.

"It's the Hibler case."

The door flew open, almost knocking me down. "Alright, *Mis*ter Miller! Al*right*!" She walked rapidly away down the sidewalk, glancing over her shoulder only long enough to say, "Call me sometime, when you're not so *busy*!"

"Juanita! Let me explain! *Juanita!*"

"The great lover having trouble?" somebody said behind me. I didn't even have to look to know it was Thelma.

I went across the street to the office, fighting a number of conflicting urges, many of which were not at all in keeping with my oath as a deputy, to uphold the law.

I uncrumpled Jerry's note and dropped it on Dan Peavy's desk.

view of opportunity, it coulda been Mollie or Gus Johnson, right? And if robbery was the motive, it still coulda been Gus. Right?"

"Sure, but—"

"Now me and you both know a sweet girl like Mollie Hammond couldn't have done what was done out there to Hibler, right?"

"I suppose you might say that."

"So, where does that leave us?" he asked, grinning slyly.

I stared at him for several seconds, letting all that deduction sift through the gray matter again. It still came out a little confused. "I see what you're getting at. You're saying Gus did it, and you're saying that by the process of elimination. But let me remind you of something, Deputy Sealey; in the good old United States, a man's innocent till proven guilty. And you haven't proved a thing!"

"Ah ha! You're absolutely correct! But in my book, every criminal has a weak spot. All you have to do is find that weak spot, zero in on it with all you've got, and the next thing you know he's behind bars! And that's where my idea comes in."

I got up and tossed a dime to Thelma for my coffee. "Well, you and your idea sit right here and talk to each other. I've been in on some of your schemes, if you'll recall. I'm not having any tonight, Deputy. Fact is, I'm taking Juanita to the drive-in movie, and that's that."

I knew it when I said it. I couldn't get that skinny screwball off my mind.

I sat there staring blankly at the silver screen, Juanita's head on my shoulder, and all I could think about was Jerry.

"What do you suppose he's doing?"

"What'd you say, Pete?" Juanita murmured, digging into the popcorn box.

"Huh? Oh, I guess I was just thinking out loud."

Juanita snuggled up a little closer and just then a head poked in the window on my side of the car. It was the theatre manager. "Deputy Miller, there's a message for you to call the Bon Air Cafe. You can use the phone over at the refreshment stand."

Juanita pulled away. "Is that Thelma calling you?"

"It might be important. I'll be right back."

I made the call and Thelma told me that Jerry had left an envelope there for me. "He knew you'd be at the movie," she said, "and he made me promise to call you at ten-thirty. I . . . I really didn't want to, Pete." It was kind of touchy, because I dated Thelma

body. Everybody c'mon with me."

"Dan," I whispered. "Dan, maybe we better take that thing away from him before somebody gets hurt—or killed."

"In a minute," Dan said. "Let's see what he's got in mind. We just mighta underestimated Jerry."

Gus made it through the front door on the second try and with Jerry, Dan, and myself bringing up the rear, he headed out the narrow dock over the creek. At the end of the dock he stopped. Jerry draped one arm around the old man's shoulders, winked broadly at Dan and me, and said, "Now, ol' buddy, show us how you gunned him down!"

Gus nodded, lifted the big gun unsteadily to his shoulder, pointed it out over the marsh, and pulled both triggers.

It sounded like a baby atom bomb going off. But even as the blast faded away, the tremendous recoil of the two shells sent both Gus and Jerry flying backward where they vanished in the creek amid a great splash.

Jerry was the first to surface, coughing and spluttering and yelling, *"You heard him! What'd I tell ya!"*

Gus bobbed up and I managed to grab his arm before he went down again. Dan had hold of Jerry and we dragged them both up onto the dock, wet and soggy.

"Put the cuffs on him, Dan!" Jerry squealed. "You heard him! That's how he shot Bernie Hibler!"

Gus wavered back and forth, tilting his head to drain the water out of his right ear. "Bernie?" he said. He started to laugh and then he draped his arm around Jerry. "Wuz it Bernie you wuz talkin' about, ol' pal? Why dincha shay so? I didn't shoot ol' *Bernie!* I wuz talkin' about that buck I shot back in '53. Bigges' deer ever come outta Guale County!" He started back toward the shack with Jerry. "Shay, ol' pal, reckon you got any more o' that stuff in your car?"

Dan gave Jerry the morning off next day. Even so, when he reported in at two p.m., he was not a well man. His hangover was surpassed only by his desire for silence on the happenings of the previous night. But there are some people who do not go along with the theory of letting sleeping dogs lie. I'm one of them.

"You ever seen a real lawman in action, Jerry?" I asked.

He was at the water cooler, for the fifteenth time. "Pete, how's about knocking it off? I *still* think he done it. It's just that, well, the old codger's a lot smarter'n I give him credit for being. I'll figure something out yet!"

"I have no idea what it means," I said. "All I know is, he messed up a right promising evening, and whatever this is all about, it better be good!"

It was nearly midnight when Dan and I got out to Gus Johnson's bait shack. The moon was high, and the creek and the marshes beyond the cabin were almost as bright as day.

Jerry's car stood beside Gus' pickup truck, and lights were on inside the shack. As soon as we stopped the car and shut off the engine, we heard the singing. It was coming from the shack, two voices loudly but unsuccessfully trying to harmonize on *Bluetail Fly*. The place was a musical disaster area.

"What in the name o'—" Dan growled.

I was beginning to suspect something, but there was little point in venturing a guess in view of the fact we would know in a matter of seconds. The door was open and we stepped inside. There was Gus and Jerry, sitting at a rickety old table, heads thrown back, caterwauling like a pair of hoarse beagles baying at the moon. On the table were two glasses and a quart bottle of Old Sourmash. Jerry had indeed lashed out at Gus' weakness.

Deputy Sealey spotted us and lurched to his feet, grinning like an idiot. "Look who's here!" He shook Gus, who was still singing. "We got comp'ny! Where's your manners? Get 'em a glass!"

"Never mind the glass," said Dan. "I think you just better come on home with us, Deputy."

Jerry came around the table, one finger to his lips in an obvious effort to shut Dan up. When he was closer he whispered, "I done it! I got him t' confess! Now you all just sit tight and I'll get him to do it again!"

"Confess?"

Jerry's head rocked up and down. "Just come right out and asked him if he didn't shoot him, and he said he sure did, and was proud of it! Listen . . ." He faced around and headed back to the table like he was battling a high wind. He picked up the bottle of *Old Sourmash* and poured the last of it into Gus' glass. "Drink up, ol' pal. Drink up, and tell me once more how you wanted to do it for a long time, and you fin'ly got your scattergun and let him have it. C'mon and tell ol' Jer."

Gus guzzled down the booze and stood up. "Better'n that, ol' pal, I'm gonna *show* ya! Jush a secon' . . ." He staggered through a door and reappeared carrying a long double barrelled shotgun. "Lesh go outside. C'mon, every-

Dan Peavy came in, and right away I could tell something had happened. He wasn't exactly smiling, but there was a look of possible discovery on his weathered face.

"Deputy Sealey, it come to me while I was havin' lunch!" he said, clapping his junior deputy on the shoulder. "It might be you cracked this murder case without even knowin' it! Come on, let's me and you take a little ride and see if I'm right!"

"You mean you think Gus done it? How . . ."

"Never mind the questions right now. Pete, you stick here at the office and be sure Fred Trent gets that paintin' done. I might need you to round up the suspects if this pans out."

I'd worked for Dan Peavy long enough to know he had said his last word on the subject, so I did as I was told.

After Dan and Jerry drove away, I busied myself catching up on a little paper work, and when that was done I phoned Juanita down at the bus station and tried to soft soap her about last night. It took about ten minutes of talk, but I managed to get a date with her for the following Friday night.

Dan called in at about four o'clock, and I could tell by the tone of his voice he was onto something; he'd found a lead.

"Pete, I want you to get Trent and Mollie, and have the lot of 'em out here at Hibler's boathouse at five o'clock sharp. You got that? Five sharp, without fail!"

"How come—"

"Don't ask fool questions! Just be here!"

Fred Trent was no problem. He was right there, still painting the inside of the jail.

I phoned Mollie's house and told her I'd pick her up in half an hour.

"What for, Pete?" she asked.

I could almost see those big brown eyes, scared, wondering what was going to happen to her. I wanted to say something encouraging, but I couldn't. "Now you try not to worry, Mollie. Dan Peavy's got some kind of idea about this, and he wants everybody out there."

When I told Fred to put away his paint and brushes and come with me, he put up a bit of a squawk. "What for, Miller? I got work to do here! I ain't got time to go traipsin' all over the county, like some folks I know."

"Look, Trent," I said, beginning to wear a little thin myself. "All I know is we're investigating a murder. Now when the sheriff tells me to bring some folks to where he is, I'm going to bring

'em. One way or another, so move."

He muttered something, and began to clean his brush. Frankly, I was puzzled about Dan wanting him out there. There didn't seem to be any way he could figure in it, unless he had an accomplice.

Trent and I went by Mollie's house and picked her up, and the three of us drove out to Hibler's. It was a quiet drive. Mollie seemed too scared to carry on any conversation, and Fred seemed too mad. I would have been glad to talk to either one of them, but it just didn't work out that way.

We were five minutes ahead of the prescribed time, and Dan Peavy met us outside the boathouse as we all got out of the car.

Gus Johnson was sitting in Dan's car.

The sheriff took off his hat. "Mollie. Trent. Glad Pete was able to get you both out here. I think we just might be about to wind this whole thing up."

"Yeah?" said Trent. "Well, unless all of us done it, how come you just didn't get the guilty one out here?"

"Because we ain't . . ." Dan grinned and waved over toward the boathouse. "Like somebody said, one picture's worth a mess o' words. Let's all step inside and see if I can conjure up a picture o' what happened."

Jerry was standing inside on the upper deck, smiling like he knew something, or thought he did. Everything seemed to be about the same as it had been, with the exception that the body was gone, and just the chalk marks and the bloodstain to show where it had been.

Then I saw that something else was different. There was a double barreled shotgun lying on the heavy beam at the edge of the dock. It was upside down, the stock sticking out over the edge, and the barrel pointed squarely at the outline where Hibler's body had been. The barrel was wedged in between the tackle box and the bait bucket.

Dan Peavy turned around to the little group, like a sightseeing guide. His cold gray eyes stopped on Trent. "That's Hibler's gun, the one that was missin' from the house."

"Where the devil did you find it?" Gus Johnson asked.

"We'll get around to that in a minute," said Dan. "First things first. Now, if it was Mollie who shot him—"

"I *swear* I didn't do it, Sheriff Peavy!" she broke in.

"I said *if*. If it was Mollie, she coulda got rid o' the gun in á thousand places after she left here. And if it was Gus, he coulda done

the same thing. Neither one o' them had an alibi for hardly any part of the afternoon. But we found the gun not more'n twenty feet from where the body was, so . . ."

"I don't understand," Gus said. "I seen you fellas look all around here, and you didn't find no gun."

"We didn't look in the water," said Dan. "That's where the gun was."

He looked over at Jerry. "About time, ain't it, Deputy?"

"Right."

Dan nodded. "Rig it up."

Jerry went around the shotgun, picked up the tip of the fishing rod that had been lying there when the body was found, and slipped the tip inside the trigger guard of the shotgun. Then he stepped back. "Any second now."

The line still hung down to the float below, but now the tide was almost at ebb, and instead of being slack like it was the day of the murder, it was almost taut.

"Now then, everybody watch," said Dan Peavy.

"Any second—" Jerry started to say again.

But he was interrupted by three things in rapid succession. First, there was a mighty blast as the fishing rod pulled the trigger of the gun. Second, the recoil sent the gun sailing out to splash into the boat slip and disappear. And third, Fred Trent let out a yell and made a lunge for the door.

He was halfway to the main road before Jerry and I caught up to him in the patrol car.

Fred Trent confessed that he had killed Hibler for revenge and money. After he had paid Hibler the twenty-five dollars the morning of the day of the murder, Trent drove away from the house. But he stopped beyond a clump of bushes, sneaked back, and peeped through a window. He saw Hibler stashing the money away, waited till Bernie came outside and konked him on the head. He had figured out what he was going to do, and he carried the unconscious man to the boathouse, tied him to the beam. The blindfold was so Hibler wouldn't see what was in store for him, and maybe twist loose or at least get out of the line of fire. The gag was just in case somebody came around during the day.

Trent had figured the tide carefully. At seven that morning the tide was coming in. He rigged up the murder apparatus, reeling off just enough line so that it would tighten an hour before low tide in the afternoon. When everything was set, he took Hibler's money, messed the house up to try to

throw a wrench into the investigation, then drove on into town to set up an alibi that nobody could question.

At four that afternoon he had gone across the street to the Bon Air for a cup of coffee. He had phoned Mollie from there, acting like he was Hibler and telling her to come out to talk about Sam Hammond's money. Mollie, as he knew, would give us a first-class suspect. About the time he was talking to Mollie, the shotgun discharged out at Hibler's.

Well, we had Trent behind bars where he belonged, and Dan Peavy answered a few questions.

"What put you onto Trent?" I asked him. "Especially, since you were his alibi?"

"First off," he said, giving Mollie a paternal smile, "I couldn't bring myself to believe Mollie could do a thing like that. Then there was all that fishin' tackle layin' around the boathouse, and I knew Hibler was too good a fisherman to waste his time in a northeaster. 'Course, there was Fred Trent himself, working like a dog all day, with just a couple of short coffee breaks. He never was outta sight the whole day, and that just wasn't like Fred Trent." He grinned and looked over at Jerry. "And there was Deputy Sealey's night out at Gus Johnson's place when that gun kicked 'em both into the creek. It hit me all of a sudden, later on, that that was how the gun was got rid of. And sure enough, when I had Jerry take a swim in Hibler's boat slip, there it was, right on the bottom where it had been all along."

Mollie Hammond came over to the desk and leaned and gave Dan a kiss on the cheek. "I don't care how you did it, Sheriff Peavy. I'm just glad you did."

She was mighty pretty when she smiled. I noticed, too, that she had done something to her hair, and she was wearing lipstick. Of course, Sam hadn't been dead long, but when a bit more time had passed, it would be perfectly proper for me to call on her.

Besides, Juanita and Thelma both might do well with a little competition.

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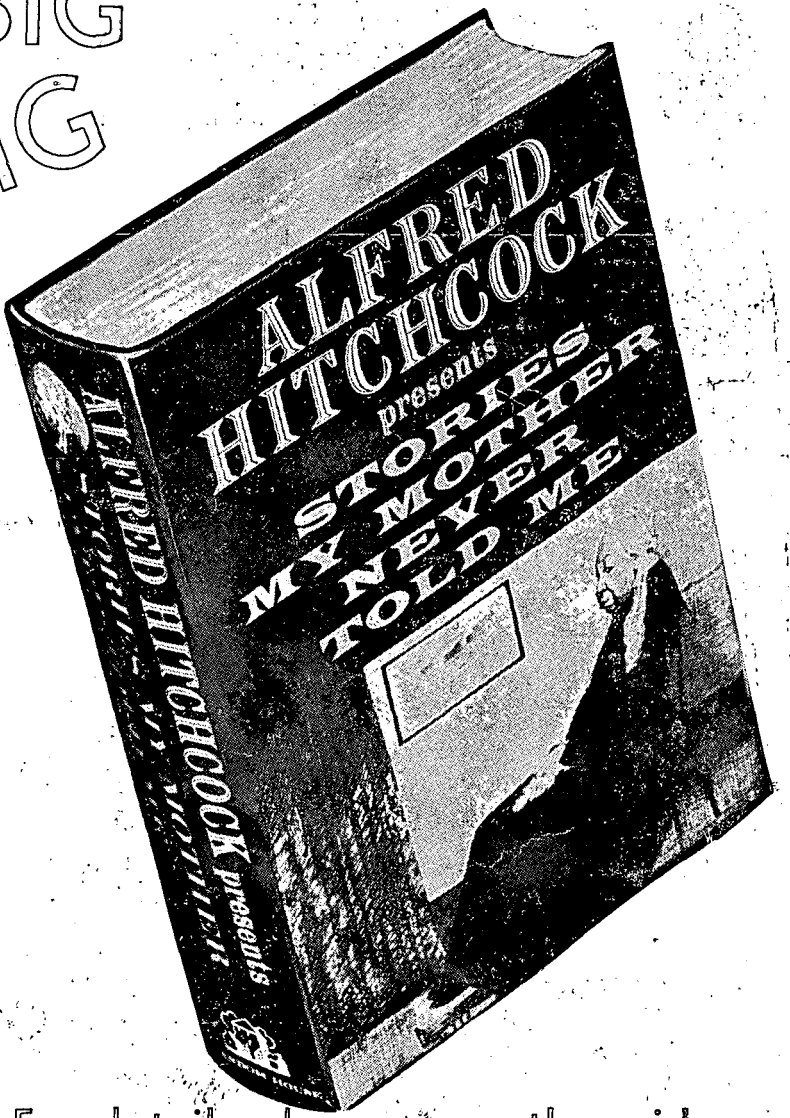

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