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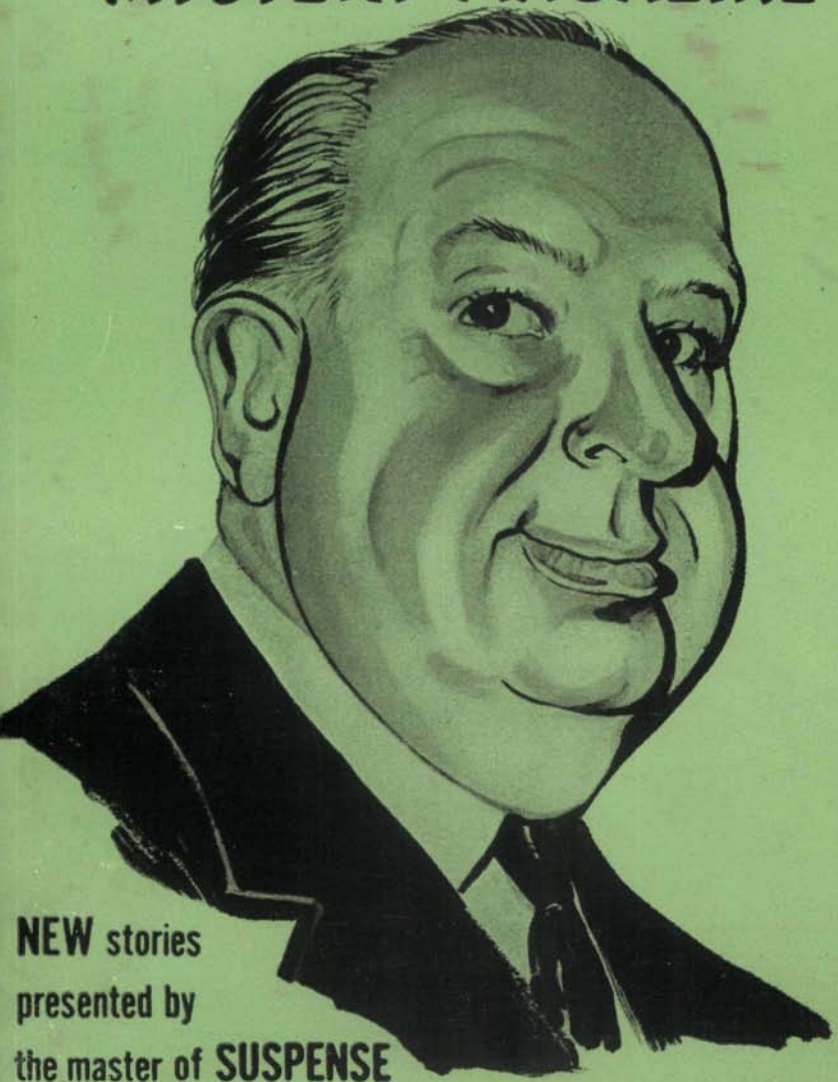
MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories
presented by
the master of **SUSPENSE**

August 1966

Dear Reader:

Currently we are in the midst of dog days, which generally are regarded as a period of stagnation or inactivity. Yet in these pages you will find no evidence of that sort of asphyxiation. If a mystery writer takes a vacation at all, his traveling paraphernalia inevitably includes a portable typewriter.

Speaking of vacations, you realize, of course, that they are little more than an arduous disposition of the populace —northerners go south, and southerners go north. Some even fail to return. These are called fugitives from justice.

I once knew a Mr. Fugitive from Justice, Illinois, which, I suspect, is how the term originated. He was decidedly unpunctual. He told me he was on time only once—while clinging to a mountain precipice with a friend, he happened to step on the man's wristwatch. Naturally, this did nothing to enhance his image, particularly since I was wearing it at the time.

Nevertheless, vacations have become an institution, and perhaps have helped to fill many, as well. It is academic whom vacations aid most—the tourist or the resort owner. But the stories herein are aimed precisely at the hearts of all.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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It seems that poetry, like music, not only "soothes the savage breast," but, at times, beclouds the eyes.

I WAS walking through Lafayette Park in the smoky dusk on my way back to the office when I saw it, out of the corner of my eye—a stocky young thug snatching at a handbag and a girl screaming; and suddenly I was running and clutching at this guy, but just missing him as he took off at a gallop.

She was slender and tallish, with brown hair combed back behind her ears, and even in the darkening haze you could see her eyes—black and wide open and frightened—and her mouth quivering a little.

"It's okay, he's gone." I felt a little silly and out of breath as I picked up the handbag, a brown leather job, and used an elbow of my jacket to dust it off. "Here it is," I said.

She took the bag and her mouth stopped quivering, but she was still shaking in her tan sweater and skirt. "Thank you," she said. "I am all right. It was—a shock."

I looked at her, and it was a pleasure: shining brown hair, straight and clean-looking and done in a bun; a long delicate nose; very white skin; a wide mouth.

"I am all right," she said, and she held out her hand.

"Sure," I said. "I'll get you home and you'll be fine."

She shook her head. "No, please don't trouble yourself. I live very nearby." She seemed embarrassed.

"No trouble," I said. "Let's get out of here. I've got nothing else to do." I took her arm and steered her along the path and out onto H Street, and she didn't object.

When we got out of the park she

motioned up 16th Street. "Up there, just three blocks," she said.

When we got to K Street, across from the Statler, she stopped. "It's only a little way now," she said. "Really, I shall be all right."

She spoke good English, but there was something—a huskiness, a slight heaviness. I couldn't figure it.

"Nope," I said. "I can make it to your door. I'm really stronger than I look."

She looked up at me then, and smiled a little smile. She pointed across the street, so we crossed K Street and then 16th to the Statler side. We walked up 16th and suddenly she stopped and said, "Here we are."

"Here?" I questioned. We were standing outside the Soviet Embassy. "Is this where you live?"

"This is where I live—and work," she said. "You have been very kind—and gentle. I am very grateful to you."

She drew her arm away from me and put out her hand, and I took it and tightly held onto it.

"Look," I said. I didn't know what to say, but I didn't want her to leave me that quickly. "I'll walk you to the door," and I took her arm again and steered her up the short driveway.

Well, a Russian, I thought. *How is that for international intrigue?* But I didn't want to let her go.

At the door she said, "Thank you," and smiled. It was a good wide smile this time, and her eyes were full of little lights. "You've been so kind and nice and thoughtful, but now I must go in. I have

work to do that's quite urgent."

"Listen," I said, "couldn't you tell me your name? What do you do here? My name is Sam Carter. I'm a newspaper reporter. I'm not an imperialist warmonger."

She laughed, a fine laugh that was hearty and yet kind of trilling. "Mr. Carter, I'm very impolite. My name is Irina Uralova. I write reports on economics. And you are very funny, and nice."

I said, "My name is really Jack Benny. But listen, could we—could I ask you to dinner some night? Like tomorrow?"

She stopped smiling. "Oh, that would be impossible. It would not be—I could not do that." Then her face relaxed again. "Yes, yes, you could ask me to dinner, and I would accept. Tomorrow night?"

"Right. How about seven-thirty?"

"Seven-thirty. And now I must go in." She smiled, then turned and opened the big door and was gone.

The next night she was waiting and opened the door of the Embassy for me when I rang. She didn't invite me in, but hurried out the door as though wanting to get away. She looked fine in a dark red dress and red earrings. We had some martinis and some good sole at Paul Young's.

She was a good talker. She told me about going to school in Leningrad and passing examinations to get into the Foreign Ministry, and finally landing in Washington after two years in Prague. She was a career girl, all right, but she hadn't lost her femininity. She was a *bona fide* female.

But when I took her home to the Embassy, she changed, was tense and hurried, and she barely shook my hand before turning to open the door. "Irina," I said, and started to reach for her hand so she wouldn't go right then, but she put a finger to her lips, and whispered, "Quiet."

"When can I see you again?" I asked, in a whisper. I felt like a spy.

"Will you phone me?"

"Tomorrow," I said.

She shook her head a little, then smiled. "All right," she said. "You bet. Tomorrow," and she was gone.

That was the way it was for weeks. I phoned her the next day at the Embassy and, after going through about six assorted secret policemen, they put me onto her. She was busy that night, but the next night was all right. For more than a month I saw her two and sometimes three nights a week, without ever stepping foot inside the Embassy. She was lively and fun at dinner and at the movies


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and dancing, but every night when I took her home she couldn't wait to get rid of me.

"Irina, I'm all right," I told her one night at dinner. "I'm not trying to steal any atomic bombs."

"Silly," she said. She put her drink down and touched my hand across the table.

"It's nothing, really, Sam. It's just that—well, my superiors are quite—strict."

"Okay, Mata Hari, but I'm beginning to feel old-fashioned. I'd like to court you properly. This cloak-and-dagger stuff baffles me."

Every time I said something like that, Irina smiled and patted my hand. She didn't have to say anything. It was all right, so long as I could be with her.

I courted her, but on Moscow's terms. She always had to be home by midnight, and there were certain restaurants she wouldn't go to because they were favorites among the other Embassy staffers. A couple of times I had invitations to weekend house parties in the country, but she couldn't be away overnight. Once she came to my place and let me cook dinner, but she was nervous about it. She said the Embassy people didn't object to her going to public places but they said *nyet* to private homes. I asked her how they'd find out and she said she knew they would and, anyway, she had to write daily reports telling where she'd spent her off-time.

"You mean you have to put down something like 'Had dinner with Sam Carter at Duke Zeibert's and let him hold my hand?'" I asked.

"Yes, about Duke Zeibert's, but not about the hand-holding; and sometimes I invent another name for you."

"But why?"

"Oh, it probably doesn't fool them, but I try anyway. It's better if they don't know I'm always with the same man. Do you mind?"

I didn't mind. I had gone along for thirty-five years without serious romance, but now I was in love. I was in love with this Russian girl, and I wanted to marry her, Communist or not, but I didn't know what to do about it. Was it disloyal to marry a Communist? If she was Irina Uralova and you were in love with her?

"Are you a Communist?" I asked her.

She looked across the table at me and her eyes seemed to be trying to appraise me. "Yes, Sam, I am. I am a good patriotic Soviet citizen. I was brought up to be a Communist. I'm a good Party member, otherwise I would not have this good position here in the Soviet Embassy." She looked down at the table and moved her knife over

against her plate. "But first, Sam, I am in love with you. I am in love with Sam Carter, Democrat."

She looked across at me, her eyes blinking, and for a moment I just stared at her. Then suddenly I was leaning over the table and kissing her, awkwardly, with the martini glasses in the way, and saying a lot of things, but mostly, "Darling." We talked so much we hardly tasted our food. It was wonderfully trivial talk, all about us, and how we were as kids, and if I really enjoyed the ballet.

"Let's get married real soon," I said. "Like next week; or tomorrow."

That was when Irina got a new look in her eyes. "Sam, my dearest, we can't get married."

Then she told me. It was the old story of the hostage back home, in this case Irina's mother, who was not really back home but in Poland. She was a harpist and was just finishing a concert tour of the satellite countries.

"So you see, we can't get married, Sam. If we did, I don't know what would happen to my mother. It's what they hold over our heads, over the heads of everyone who goes outside the Soviet Union."

"But isn't she a good Communist, too?" I asked. "How could they do anything to her?"

"Sam, darling, in the first place my mother is not a Communist. She's an artist. She conforms, but she's nobody politically. They'd snuff her out like that."

"They couldn't do anything to your mother just because you married an American," I said, but I didn't believe my own words. I knew about this sort of thing, and it had never meant anything to me. Now here it was, and it was affecting me, personally. It was sticking its ugly face into my life.

"They could and they would, Sam. Listen, my dear Democrat, you've done something for me. I've always been a good Communist. I've tried to be faithful to the party as well as to my country. If I hadn't met you, I still would be. But now that I am in love, I wonder if there isn't something wrong with the Party. There must be something wrong with a system that won't let two people in love be married—that will wreak its vengeance on innocent people. But there's nothing I can do about it. Even if I didn't love my mother, I couldn't sacrifice another person's life for my happiness."

I felt sick, but at the same time cold and calculating. I was thinking clearly, the sickness and the anger spurring my thinking.

"We'll fix it," I said. "We'll get your mother over here. We can do it. I know some people." I didn't

know what people I was talking about, but I knew there were some people who could help. Their names would come to me later.

Irina couldn't see it. She saw no way that any American could help her mother. In the first place, her mother's passport restricted her to travel in the satellite countries; the Poles wouldn't let her get out even if she had an American visa.

"Never mind," I said, "I'm going to see some people. Let's not talk about it any more tonight."

We both had brandy then, and when I drove Irina home to the Embassy she kissed me at the door before going in. "Because I've wanted to ever since that first night," she said.

When I woke up the next morning, I knew one of the people I'd been thinking of—Eddie Maloney. He was a vice president for public relations for Columbia Airlines, and he was on drinking terms with do-it-yourself types from Chevy Chase to Vladivostok.

I called Eddie and luckily he was in town. We had lunch and I told him the story.

"I know a guy in Warsaw," he said. "He owes me. I think I can do business with him. He can take care of that passport. He'll get your girl's mother a new one or fix up a new page where it has all those restrictions. I'll get word to him."

I didn't ask Eddie how he would get word to this passport expert. I didn't want to know, and I knew Eddie would prefer not to tell me.

After lunch, I went over and talked to a man I knew in the State Department. We had been in Korea together and we were good friends. We talked about things like cultural exchanges and the importance of giving visas to artists from the Iron Curtain countries, and I gave him Irina's mother's name and he got the point.

"If somebody can fix that passport, we'll give her a tourist visa," he said. "But let me tell you, this dame is going to be followed around over here, just in case she's a wrong-o. I'm for romance, but at State we do not like to be taken in."

That was okay with me. I knew Irina was all right, and I knew her mother was all right. I don't know why I knew, but I did. My State Department pal had a right to take out insurance, but I was sure it would be okay.

That night I had dinner with Irina in Georgetown in a favorite place of hers, because she said it looked so American. I told her it was in the bag.

At first she couldn't believe it. "It couldn't be. They are too strict over there."

"We can try. My friend said that

if it works it won't take more than a week. We've got some real cloak-and-dagger men going for us."

Irina reached over the table and took my hand. "I believe in you, Sam. I'll wait and have confidence."

Irina thought it best that we not see each other until we had some word about her mother. "We must avoid making them suspicious at the Embassy. They are already interested in—us, but they agree that it might be helpful for me to get to know an American newspaperman who might tell me something valuable."

"Tell 'em I've got something hot on perpetual motion," I said, "but that you've got to work on me gradually."

I didn't even phone Irina that week. She called me a couple of times from outside the Embassy and told me everything seemed okay. She said one of the Embassy boys, a secret policeman, had asked her about me, and she had told him I was getting a little boring.

"How do you like that!" I said. "I'm one of the most stimulating journalists in America."

Irina giggled. "And so modest."

The next Monday morning, Eddie Maloney called me at home while I was shaving.

"It's okay," he told me, matter-of factly. "The dame is practically on her way to London right now."

I was so surprised I was a little silly. "She's no dame," I said sharply. "She's Irina's mother." Then I started asking questions.

"Wait a minute," he said. "We got her a visa to England first. We figured that was less suspicious. The Embassy will take care of her in London. It'll only take a couple of days. But she's safe."

It was all over. When I finally hung up I was so excited I cut myself twice. I wanted to call Irina right away, but I knew it was practically impossible until she got down to her office about ten o'clock. I went downstairs to the drugstore and drank four cups of coffee.

Two minutes after ten I called Irina from my office. I couldn't tell her anything over the phone, so I made a date for lunch at the Mayflower.

I told Irina in the lobby. She seemed, at first, bewildered, and she held onto my arm as we went into the Presidential Room, but she calmed down while I was ordering drinks. Since Eddie Maloney had said he'd have word later in the day about her mother's arrival in London, we figured she'd better go back to the Embassy after lunch and wait it out.

"We don't dare do anything until my mother arrives in London,"

Irina said. "We're not even sure yet that she took off from Warsaw. If they stop her and find out I've deserted my post here, they'll arrest her. Sam, she'd just disappear. I can't take the chance of them hurting her."

I had to admit that was reasonable, so after lunch I put Irina in a cab and she went back to work. I called my man at State and he said everything was under control, so I walked over to the office to sweat it out.

Eddie Maloney's call came at four o'clock. "She's in London," he said. "Got in about an hour ago. Relax, boy."

Now, it *was* over. All I had to do now was get in touch with Irina and arrange a dinner date—and the Embassy would never see her again. I phoned her at the Embassy.

As usual, it took some time. Three men came on the phone in succession. The last one gave it to me. "Irina Uralova cannot come to the telephone," he said. "She is ill." Then he hung up.

I called the Embassy three times more. All I got was the same message: Irina Uralova was not available to come to the telephone. I didn't need to be hit over the head to realize something had gone wrong. I was frantic. I called Briggs at State and he put it bluntly, as he sometimes can.

"They've got her locked up," he said. "They must have found out something from Warsaw—or Moscow."

"Dammit, what do I do now?"

"Pray," he said, "or go kidnap her."

I sat at my desk, and I wasn't aware that the newsroom was full of people. I had to think. There was no use going over to the Embassy and demanding to see Irina. She was in jail and there were no visiting hours. I couldn't even stand out in the street and wave to her in her cell.

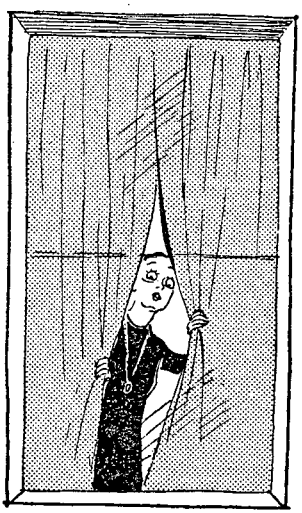
Wait a minute. I *could* wave to her in her cell. I remembered I used to kid her about living next to the capitalistic University Club, and she had said she used to look out her window at night and see the club members sitting around reading and playing billiards. Once, walking by the Embassy, she had shown me the two windows to her fourth-floor room facing the alley between the Embassy and the Club.

I *could* wave to her—*if* she was in her room. I could wave to her from the University Club, and I could get a message to her—somehow. But what message?

I sat there and thought until my head ached. It was no good just waving to her, just seeing her. I had to have something to say to

her, some plan to get her out of there.

Then it came to me. My eyes wandered to an open copy of the Washington *Post* on my desk and there it was in a headline: "Soviet Embassy Party Tonight." It was November 7 and the Embassy was throwing its annual reception in



honor of the celebrated revolution.

I took a cab over to the University Club and went into the Secretary's office and told him what I wanted—use of a fourth-floor room for about fifteen minutes. He thought I was nuts. I told him I didn't blame him, but I wasn't doing anything illegal and I hoped he'd go along. He thought about it for a minute, then threw up his hands and said okay, but if I got him in any trouble whatever . . .

Frankly, I didn't care who got in trouble. I just wanted to spring Irina from that elegant hoosegow.

The Secretary personally escorted me up to one of the fourth-floor rooms. "All right," he said. "I'll give you an hour."

It couldn't have been better. Irina's windows were almost exactly opposite the window of the room I was in. I opened the window and looked down into the alley. Nobody was there, so I reached into my pocket and pulled out a handful of marbles. I took one of the marbles and tossed it across the alley against one of Irina's windows. It made a big, cracking sound.

I waited a minute or so, but nothing happened. Then I threw another marble. It missed the window. I threw another. Again it missed. I was trembling, and I lit a cigaret to keep my nerves busy. Then I tossed another marble and it hit with a bang.

Suddenly, Irina was there. I saw her hands part the yellow curtains and then saw her face and her brown hair. She looked down into the alley, and I was just going to yell when she looked across and saw me. She seemed to reel back, as though frightened, then she parted the curtains wider and looked across at me and smiled.

I wanted to jump and whoop and fly across that alley and take her in my arms, but I went to work. I put a finger to my lips, and pulled a piece of cardboard out of my pocket. I had lettered it before leaving the office.

I held it up to the window so she could see the big block letters. They said simply, SEE YOU TONIGHT. BE READY.

She squinted momentarily, then put her face closer to the glass and she got it. She nodded, and I could see her lips saying, "Yes, yes—tonight."

Then I held up another cardboard. It said, HARPIST IN LONDON. She nodded again, smiled, and blinked her eyes.

Now Irina held up a finger, then turned and was back in a few seconds with a piece of paper. She put it against the window to write on it, then held it up to me. It read: One guard in hallway always.

I nodded to show her I understood, blew her a kiss, then got away from the window and left. I went downstairs and called the office. There was a message from Eddie Maloney to call him. I went into a phone booth and got him on the line.

"I heard from my man in Warsaw," he said. "The Soviet Embassy there was suspicious, but their man got to the airport too late to catch your girl's mother, so they sent a message to the Embassy here to put Irina under arrest. She'll be sent back to Moscow. I'm sorry, Sam."

I told him it was all right, that I thought I'd figured out something, I'd let him know how it worked out. He said to let him know if he could help some more, but it was up to me now.

From the University Club I went over to a drugstore and bought a couple of things. Then I walked over to Twentieth Street and paid a visit to an eye doctor pal. When I left him, it was time to go home and change for the Embassy party.

The party started at six o'clock. I left my apartment at six-thirty. I didn't want to get to the Embassy until things had begun to rock. The stuff I'd bought didn't take up much room in the pockets of my blue suit, but the thing I had taped to the inside of my right thigh, under my trousers, felt funny.

To kill time, I walked the ten blocks from my apartment to the Embassy, with some window-shopping along the way, and it was almost seven when I walked up the Embassy drive. The foyer was already jammed with guests. I didn't think any of the Embassy staffers knew me by sight, but it didn't matter. There was so much confusion nobody was looking for

anybody in particular, and anyway everyone seemed to be busy drinking.

The main stairway to the ballroom on the second floor was clogged with people waiting to go through the reception line. I muscled my way through the mob, not winning any popularity contests en route, and pulled up against a wall at the head of the stairs.

I couldn't see the Ambassador and he couldn't see me, because there was that long line of people between us, but I knew he was standing near the entrance to the ballroom greeting his guests. I knew another thing—that there was a stairway off a small hallway reached by going through the serving pantry to my right. I had seen it once at another Embassy party when I'd blundered into the serving pantry looking for the men's room.

The time had come to get lost again, only on purpose this time. I sidled along the wall, nodding to assorted tipsy males wearing baggy pants and shaggy haircuts, and made the serving pantry. Waiters and maids were scooting about, making a clatter with their trays of glasses and hors d'oeuvres. That was fine because nobody noticed me when I slipped out the door into the little hallway. I stood there for a moment, but I was alone in the hall so I started up the stairs.

It was easy because the stairway was closed off by doors at each landing. I had only two flights to go, and there was no traffic. I had to make it fast, but I figured the noise of the party would drown out the sound of my feet on the stairs. I stopped when I reached the fourth-floor landing, to get my breath and to think. I couldn't let that guard see me opening the door into the hallway. I had to have time to get close to him without his knowing it.

My hand closed over the doorknob and I turned it gently. It let out a little squeak and my hair reached for the ceiling. I held it rigid for a moment, then turned it again. This time there was no sound. I kept turning until the door was free, then pushed the door gently until it was open a crack, about an inch.

I put my eye to the crack. I was on the University Club side of the house and by counting doors along the hall I picked out Irina's, three doors down. There was no one in the hallway, at least in the end I was looking at. I didn't know about the end behind the door, but I had to take that chance.

Suddenly my hand was steady, although my mouth felt thick. I pushed the door gently and slowly and when the crack was wide enough for me, I stepped through

it and into the hall, whirling to look down at the other end. I was alone.

I pushed the staircase door closed and started down the hall to Irina's room. After about five steps, the first door in the line started to open. I was about three feet from the door and I stopped and glued myself to the wall. The door was opening in, not like the staircase door which had opened out into the hall, and it was opening slowly.

It was the guard. He was wearing a green uniform with red trim, and as he came out he turned his back to me to close the door softly. He had a vodka bottle in one hand. The mug was hijacking somebody's private booze so he could have his own party upstairs.

Then he turned and saw me and his eyes opened wide, and his mouth worked wordlessly. I didn't wait. I got my weight behind my right fist and let him have it smack in the middle of his bulging belly. I could never have done it if I hadn't caught him by surprise, but things had been just right. He tottered crazily, his wind knocked out, and his arms clutching at his midsection.

I didn't waste any time thinking about the Marquis of Queensberry. I kicked him, hard in the groin, and he staggered against the wall and fell in a heap, out cold. I pulled a little flask out of my pocket, the one I'd gotten from my eye doctor friend. I unscrewed the cap and poured a good dollop of the chloroform on my handkerchief, then knelt down and held it over the guard's mouth.

The doctor said a couple of minutes would do it, but I played safe, held the handkerchief there for three minutes by my wristwatch. Then I put the handkerchief back in my pocket and hurried down the hall and opened Irina's door.

She was standing there, listening, dressed in a light blue sweater and skirt. I took her into my arms for a minute, then said, "We've got to hurry. Help me drag that joker into the room."

After we dragged him into Irina's room, I said, "Okay, now to work."

I took a pair of barber's shears out of one pocket. Then I unbuckled my belt, reached down and yanked at the aerosol bomb taped to my thigh. I showed it to Irina.

"Hair dye," I said. "Blonde. We spray it on. It'll wash off."

She got the idea. She didn't say a word, just sat down in a chair so I could get to work with the scissors. I cut away swiftly, giving her a kind of boyish bob. It was a lousy job, but it sure made her look different. Irina stood up and looked in the mirror over her

dressing table, then took the shears from me and did some trimming. It looked better when she was through.

We didn't try to be fancy with the hair dye. First, Irina took a hairbrush and worked on her hair until she had one of those Italian tossed-salad type hair-dos. Then she sat down and I went to work with the bomb. I just sprayed and sprayed, trying to get it down to the scalp, making sure I covered the brown completely. When I had finished there was no doubt about the color of her hair. It was blonde.

Irina looked in the mirror again and made a face, but she didn't say anything. I walked over and kissed her.

"It looks pretty awful, Sweetie, but that's what we want."

She grinned. "Maybe I'll keep it this way," she said.

"Maybe you won't," I said. "Now, one more thing."

I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket and took out a pair of sun glasses with gold rims set with sequins. When Irina put those on, she no longer was Irina Uralova, Soviet economics expert, but one of those American dames who'll try anything to get attention.

"You look awful," I said, "but I love you."

Irina grinned, and slipped out of her robe and went to the closet. She got a light blue evening gown and shoes to match, was in them and ready to go before I finished tying the guard's hands and feet with a couple of pieces of wire. That was insurance; I was sure he'd be out for some time yet.

We got down the two flights of stairs without any trouble, although they creaked a lot more this time. I was worried when we opened the door to the serving pantry, but Irina took charge. The pantry was still a rat race and Irina fitted right in. A couple of the waiters saw us come in and looked surprised, but Irina walked right up to them.

"Ooh, caviar!" she shrilled, and grabbed a couple of canapes from one of the trays, popped one in her mouth and gave the other to me. Then she winked at the waiters and leaned over and chucked one of them under the chin and we sailed on through the pantry. *Just another loaded American dame,* I knew the waiters were thinking.

Out on the landing of the grand stairway it figured to be tougher, and it was, but not because of the Russians. It still looked like the storming of the Bastille, with drinks being spilled down ladies' backs and elbows cracking into ribs, and that was all to the good.

But we hadn't figured on Gladys McAdams. Gladys was one of those

famous Washington hostesses who had to make it a production every time she saw somebody she knew. Gladys knew me and sure enough, she made a production out of it. She was talking to a Russian officer, a big hunk of a guy with enough medals on his chest to supply the Liberian Army for ten years, and we were edging toward the stairs as naturally as we could and trying not to see anybody, when Gladys spied me.

"Sam, Sam, dahling!" she yelled, and then she was standing in front of us, barring the way to the stairs, and the Russian officer was with her, beaming and showing two gold teeth.

"Dahling," said Gladys in her patented scream, "you weren't slipping out without saying hello! And who is this charming creature at your side?"

"Hello, Gladys," I said. "I've got to go back and write a piece on this shindig."

Gladys took my arm. "Not until you meet my fascinating general," she shrilled. "Sam, this is General Artkinov. He's something big in Moscow."

I shook hands with the general, but he wasn't looking at me. He was staring at Irina. She was something to stare at, and yet she was authentic, too, if you'd been in this country long enough and had seen some of our beatnik-type females.

"And the lady?" He said it softly, not taking his eyes off Irina.

Well, here goes, I thought. "This is Miss Hamilton," I said. "She writes. That is, she is a writer." I had a sudden inspiration. "Poetry," I added.

"A poet!" Gladys screamed. "You mean a real poet?"

The general took Irina's hand and held it, looked at her and smiled his gold-toothed smile. "I am a lover of poetry," he said.

Irina stared right back at him—and then winked. "Thanks," she said. "I'll write you a sonnet." She sounded like one of those dames that hang around places where they drink coffee all night and spout blank verse.

"I like poetry, too," I said. "I'm going to do a piece about Miss Hamilton. But now we've got to go."

The general turned and gave me a long look. He seemed to be trying to remember something, trying to place me, like a man who feels there is something wrong but just can't put his finger on it.

"We've got to go," I said again. "Goodbye, Gladys. Goodbye, General." And we started down the stairs.

We had just reached the bottom when I looked back up, and the general was coming down—two

steps at a time—glaring at us.

"Here's the general," I told Irina. "Be ready to run. Do you know him?"

"No. I think he is with the military mission. They have offices outside the Embassy. But he is a secret policeman, I am sure."

We kept walking as we talked and had just reached the front door, guarded by a flunky, when General Artkinov caught up with us.

"Keep moving," I told Irina. "Don't stop."

Then I felt Artkinov's hand on my shoulder, and just before I turned I saw Irina at the door, but the flunky wasn't opening it for her.

"Yes, General?" I said—and I had a fist and a knee ready. Three guys in baggy pants, obviously security men, were standing against one wall and looking at us, and I saw a fourth man walk over and join the flunky standing with Irina at the door. It was all so casual, nobody in the foyer seemed aware of anything.

General Artkinov cleared his throat pompously, like a banker about to refuse a loan. "Mr. Carter," he said, "when we met upstairs I was sure your name was familiar. I now know why." His voice was gently conversational, and he was smiling like a good host having a few last words with a guest before bidding him goodnight. "It was stupid of me, but now I know who you are. I wonder if you would mind stepping into the next room with me for a brief minute. I should like to offer you some information."

I thought, *it didn't work after all,* but I didn't say anything. I was trying too hard to think.

Artkinov turned to Irina. "I'm sure the lady will excuse us." He gave her another look at his gold teeth in a wide smile. Irina returned the smile. She wasn't panicking, yet.

"Sure, General," I said, "but I don't have too much time."

"This will not take much time," Artkinov said, "and Miss Hamilton will still be here when we're through. I'm sure we can assure him of that, can't we, Miss Hamilton?"

Irina nodded. "Of course, General," she said. Then she turned to me. "But don't forget your deadline, Sam."

The general opened the door to a little anteroom. I walked in ahead of him, thinking *I can always take a chance and clobber him, then try to rush the front door.* It was a wishful thought, though.

Artkinov closed the door and turned to me. He didn't offer me a chair, but got right to the point. "As I said, Mr. Carter, I know who

you are and I won't waste your time. I would like to give you a message for a lady—a Soviet citizen—who recently arrived in London as a tourist."

We were trapped. We were surrounded by civilized people, but we were trapped.

"I don't understand, General," I said. I was stalling, trying to think of something. Even starting a fight wouldn't do it—not with those flunkies at the door.

"I think you do, Mr. Carter," the General said, still smiling. "I do not want to frighten anyone, but please see that the lady in London is informed that her daughter is—very ill. And that unless the mother returns to Moscow on the first plane she will never see her daughter again."

He kept his smile on, with those two gold teeth gleaming, and held out a hand to me.

I took his hand in a daze. I couldn't believe it. It had worked. We'd done it.

Artkinov knew me, but he didn't know Irina. She said she'd never seen him. Maybe she was just a number to him, not a face. Maybe she'd been too unimportant for him to see. And he didn't know about that guard upstairs.

"And now, I bid you goodnight, Mr. Carter," the general was saying. "It was so nice you could come." He opened the door and we walked out into the hall. He looked over to where Irina was standing and bowed from the waist.

"Goodnight, Miss Hamilton," he said. "I hope some day I shall be lucky enough to read some of your poetry."

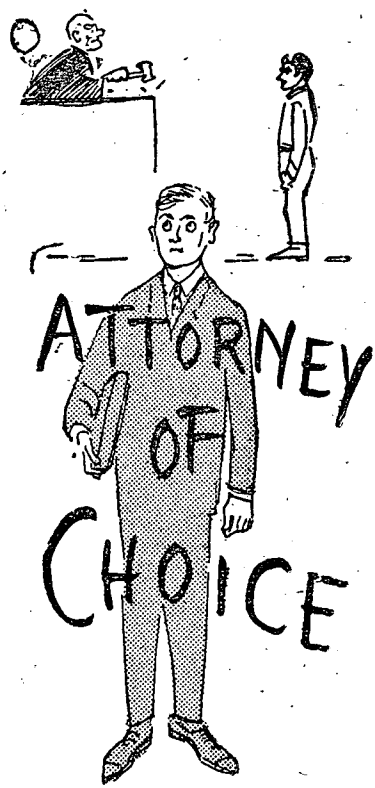
Irina was giving him a faint smile when I walked to the front door and took her arm. One of the flunkies opened the door.

I turned to the general. I felt giddy, and was suddenly conscious of a pain in my right wrist. *That big-ape guard,* I thought.

"Goodnight, General Artkinov," I said. "It was a swell party."

And Irina and I went out the door and down the driveway to the sidewalk, and started walking down Sixteenth Street toward the White House.

Dependent upon individual propensity, the reader may elect to label the following, "perseverance in a good cause,—and of obstinacy in a bad one."



By Clark Howard

THE courtroom was bleak, as courtrooms so often are. The judge was old, but judicially wise and fair. He looked down from the bench like a monarch grown weary of his throne.

"George Mendez, you are accused of first degree robbery and have been held to answer that charge by a preliminary hearing in the lower court. How do you now plead?"

"Not guilty," said George Mendez. He was a tall, dark Mexican-American; he would have been handsome had it not been for an ingrained hostility toward authority that caused his lips to curl and made him ugly.

"Do you have funds for an attorney?" the judge asked.

"No," said Mendez slurringly, omitting *Sir* and *Your Honor*.

"Court will appoint a public defender," the judge said, ignoring the prisoner's surly tone. He had served at the bar of justice too long to be affected by petty discourtesies.

"I want the same lawyer the court gave me at the preliminary

hearing," said Mendez; same tone, same quiet, determined arrogance.

"The attorney you had at your preliminary hearing was a public defender assigned to the Municipal Court," the judge advised him. "The lawyer you have here will be a Superior Court public defender."

"I want the same lawyer," Mendez repeated unabashed.

"Court will assign an attorney experienced in the Superior Court," the judge declared, taking his pen and beginning to write along the bottom margin of the indictment. "Municipal Court public defenders," he began explaining, "are not the—"

"I won't talk to no other lawyer," Mendez said defiantly.

"Do not interrupt the Court," said the judge, bristling slightly for the first time. "It is not practicable to appoint lower court defense counsel to Superior Court cases, especially when the charge involved is sufficiently serious in nature—"

"I won't talk to no other lawyer," Mendez interrupted again.

The judge's jaw tightened, making a hard little knob on each cheek, making his mouth a line. "Trial is set for the nineteenth," he ordered tersely. "Remove the prisoner."

"I don't want no other lawyer," Mendez loudly insisted as a bailiff pulled him by the arm toward a door leading to the holding cells. "I want that guy Bishop, you hear? I got a right to pick the lawyer I want! I got a right—"

The rest of what he said was shut off as the door closed behind him. Not, however, before his demand had piqued the curiosity of the row of newspaper reporters routinely assigned to the arraignment calendar.

Dennis Bishop was slightly stoop-shouldered but, aside from that, he presented a nice, well-scrubbed appearance. His mouth had a natural weakness to it but he usually managed to conceal that well enough with an engaging smile and sincere manner.

"What's the story, Bishop?" asked the chief deputy public defender. He shoved the morning paper across his desk toward Bishop. "What gives with this Mendez case?"

"It's as much a surprise to me as it is to you, Chief," Bishop said. "I'd forgotten all about the guy since I defended him at the prelim."

"Then why is he trying to adopt you all of a sudden?"

"I don't know," Bishop shrugged. "I mean, I was nice to the guy, just like I am to all the indigents; I gave him a couple packs of smokes and did the best I could

for him at the prelim, but he—"

"This looks bad for the whole office," the chief said. "This bird yelling his head off, saying he doesn't trust anyone but you."

"Look, Chief, I can't help—"

"There's a system here, Bishop, and we've got to maintain the *status quo*. We can't rock the boat, understand? In order to be a Class One deputy public defender and work Superior Court, a man's got to have three years seniority as Class Two in Municipal Court, and you've only been out of law school eight months!"

"I know, Chief."

"Come on." The chief got up abruptly. "Let's go upstairs and see the judge."

They took the elevator to four, where the courtrooms were. The judge was in his chambers. He too had a copy of the morning paper.

"This story," the judge tapped a long finger monotonously on the front page, "isn't good. It isn't good at all. It insinuates that I deprived this man Mendez of his constitutional right to choose counsel." He turned cool eyes to rest on Bishop. "You, I presume, are Mr. Mendez's attorney of choice?"

"Yes, your honor, but—"

"He didn't have anything to do with it, Judge," the chief cut in. "All he did was give the guy some cigarettes."

"Perhaps," the temper of the judge's voice matched his eyes, "you can tell me, then, where he got all that business about his constitutional rights to an attorney of his own selection?"

The chief did not interrupt this time. He quickly decided to let Bishop answer the tricky ones.

"I—I don't know, sir," said Bishop. "He's got a record, couple of short stretches. He might have picked up a few things from some jailhouse lawyer when he was inside before. I hope your honor doesn't think that I—"

"I don't *think* anything," the judge said rather pompously. "I merely weigh facts; that happens to be my job. And your job, young man," he emphasized, "is to defend indigents—in the *Municipal* Court. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Bishop answered quietly.

A heavy, uncomfortable silence pervaded the room, like something uncontrollably combustible. It was the chief, finally, who disrupted the stillness.

"What are we going to do about it?" he asked awkwardly.

"In view of this," the judge tapped the paper again, "we'll have to take at least some token action. I'll send the thing up to the appellate division for a ruling. In the meantime," he said pointedly, "I'd

suggest you tighten up your department a little. Eliminate unnecessary familiarity between your lawyers and the indigents; keep your people away from the press; things like that."

"I'll take care of it, Your Honor," the chief said sternly.

Appellate ruled in favor of Mendez. Every accused, it said, was entitled to the attorney of his choice. In the case of indigents, that choice was necessarily limited to those attorneys practicing within the realm of the public defender system; but if an indigent had a particular choice within that limitation, it was then the duty of the courts to honor his choice, provided the workload of the selected attorney would so permit.

"We are here to protect the rights of every man accused before the bar of justice," the judge told a press conference shortly after the ruling had been sent down. In his chambers with him were the chief deputy public defender and Bishop. "To strengthen those rights in any way," he continued, "as this new ruling does, is only further undeniable evidence of a democratic law in action." The judge smiled and put his arm around Bishop's shoulders. "This fine young attorney will be appointed immediately by me to defend George Mendez, in keeping with Mr. Mendez's own wishes, to protect his rights."

Everyone smiled now—the judge, the chief deputy public defender, and Dennis Bishop—while the reporters scribbled in notebooks and the photographers took pictures. In the papers the next day the judge looked wise and judicious; the chief deputy looked dignified and firm. Bishop, as usual, looked well-scrubbed, engaging, sincere, and only slightly stoop-shouldered.

"It worked, huh?" said George Mendez across the divided table in the jail visiting room. Dennis Bishop nodded, glancing cautiously at the guard standing on the "Spot," the marked place on the floor from which the hands of everyone in the room could be observed in a single glance. "What do we do now?" Mendez wanted to know.

"We go to trial," Bishop said. "You get convicted and sent to prison."

"I'm a two-time loser already," Mendez reminded him for perhaps the hundredth time. "I'll get twenty years for sure."

"Doesn't matter," said Bishop. "They can give you life, it doesn't matter. You'll be out in a year. The appeal: that's our hole card." He leaned forward on his forearms, being careful to keep his hands well back so not to agitate the guard. "Once you've been sent up," he explained, "I'll petition the

State Supreme Court for a hearing. I'll file for a reversal on two counts: one, that the appellate division was in error in permitting you to be defended by an inexperienced attorney like myself; even if it was your own choice, the court is supposed to protect your interests; and two, that you didn't get a fair and impartial trial due to prejudice on the part of the judge because of all the adverse publicity you caused him to get. One way or another, the Supreme Court will have to reverse your conviction. See?"

"Yeah, I see," Mendez said tightly. "I just hope it works."

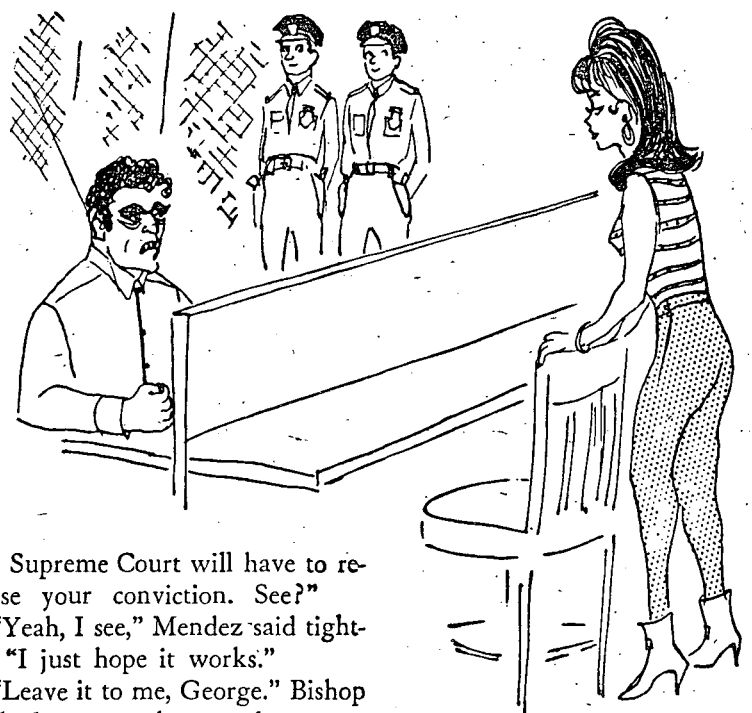
"Leave it to me, George." Bishop looked over at the guard counter. A slim, bronze girl in tight Capris was coming into the visitors' area. "Here comes your wife. I'll be going now."

"That Maria," Mendez almost snarled, "I told her not to wear them tight pants down here. Watch how those lousy guards all look at her."

"Relax," said Bishop.

"Rotten screws!" Mendez's face froze in anger.

"Relax," Bishop's voice grew firm. "Don't start anything, with



the guards or her. I don't want any disciplinary action on your record when I appeal. Do you understand me, George?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

"Hello, Mrs. Mendez," Bishop said as Maria Mendez walked over. He snapped shut his briefcase, smiling. "I was just leaving."

The slim, bronze girl was bending to sit down as Bishop left. Mendez, he observed, had been right; all the guards were watching Maria in her tight Capris.

The trial of the People versus George Raymond Mendez lasted through one morning and two afternoon sessions. Dennis Bishop, despite his limited experience in the practice of criminal law, did himself well in the conduct of the defense. His trial preparation had been thorough, his cross-examination of the state witnesses was clever without being melodramatic, and the structure of his defense against the charge was factual and well-developed; the evidence, what he had, was presented step by step in the clean manner of a deft bricklayer cementing one brick atop another until he had a finished wall.

In the case of George Mendez, however, the wall lacked a solid foundation. Mendez, as he himself had predicted, got twenty years.

"Remember," he told Bishop in the holding cell after his sentencing, "you said a year. One year. Remember that."

"I won't forget."

"I done everything you told me."

"I know," Bishop nodded.

"Right down the line, everything just like you said, right?"

"Right. Don't worry."

Mendex laughed a strained, nervous laugh. "Don't worry, yeah. You and Maria, that's all you two know how to say: don't worry." He licked dry lips with a dry tongue. "I'll worry. I'll worry plenty."

Bishop shrugged. The jail guard came in and handcuffed Mendez to take him away.

"So long," Bishop said as they left.

"I see you haven't drawn up appeal papers on your boy Mendez," the chief said to Bishop two weeks later. "Why not?"

"He asked me not to," Bishop said. The chief frowned.

"He *what?*"

"Asked me not to." Bishop sighed heavily, like a man weary of some great burden. "I might as well level with you, Chief. Mendez told me after the trial that he was guilty. Broke down and cried in the holding cell. Said he was tired of being a burden to his wife, tired of trying to make it on the outside. He considers himself an incorrigible

criminal. Says he wants to stay in prison, away from the rest of the world."

"Well, now I've heard everything!" said the chief. "That is the absolute end!"

"I wanted to keep it as quiet as possible," Bishop went on, "so it wouldn't leak to the papers. I think we've all had enough publicity over George Mendez."

"That's good thinking," the chief agreed. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You've got a good head on you, Denny," he said confidentially. "I'm going to see if I can pull a few strings to get you brought downtown with me, even if you haven't got the seniority."

"Thanks, Chief," Bishop smiled engagingly. "Thanks a lot."

It was already dark when Bishop let himself into his small apartment. He stood for a moment just inside the door, looking contentedly around the pleasant, cozy little livingroom. The stereo was on, softly, a stack of longplays on the spindle; the drapes were drawn and only the lamps with the colored bulbs were turned on; and a shaker of drinks packed in crushed ice was on the floor next to two large foam cushions.

Through the bedroom he could hear the sound of the shower running. He walked in and leaned against the open bathroom door. The plexiglass shower door was shadowed from the inside by a slim female figure.

"You're not getting your hair wet, are you?" Bishop called; he liked her hair silky and soft, not wet. The water went off at the sound of his voice.

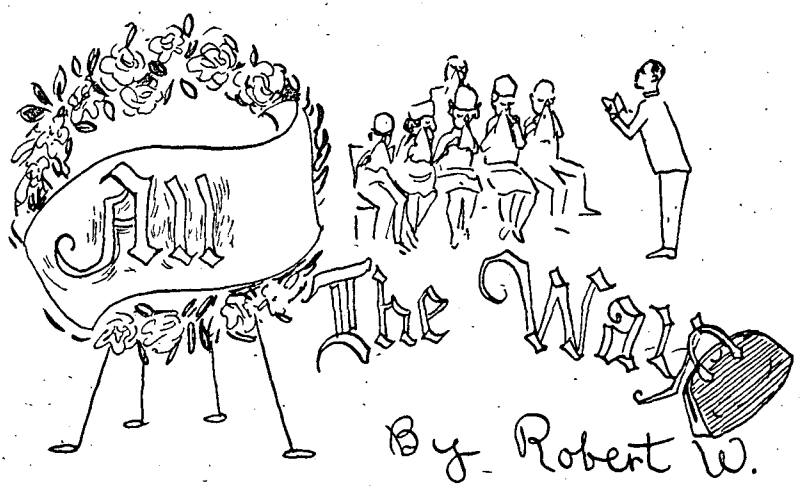
"No, I'm not." The girl pulled a large towel from the shower door and fastened it around her before she stepped out. "How did it go today? Any trouble?"

"No. No trouble. This was the final day for filing the notice of appeal. He's in—for twenty years."

"Good."

She stepped before the mirror and began running a brush through her long raven-black hair. Bishop watched her with unconcealed interest. George Mendez's wife looked just as good in a towel as she did in Capris.

I hasten to suggest that one who would commit himself irrevocably to an objective should carefully ponder the merits of "flowers for the living."



I BOUGHT the ticket and got on the bus just before it left. I could have afforded a plane. In fact, I had enough money in my satchel to buy a plane, but I knew the airports would be watched; trains, too. I didn't think the buses would be covered as quickly.

My ticket was for Los Angeles, but I intended to hop off long before St. Louis, and grab another ticket for someplace else. If successful, I hoped then to switch to a plane; and then a train, and maybe a few more buses. Where I headed was of no consequence. The emergency called for me to get lost, and quickly.

It was several hundred miles before I could breathe easily. Even then, every time the bus stopped I pressed my face against the window and thoroughly checked the station. No one was going to gun me down without an argument. I left Chicago heeled, and I can use a gun.

I was surprised how quickly they located me. I knew the organization was large. (I ought to! I was

the head accountant.) But as we pulled into this little town about nine at night during a downpour, I spotted two men in a cafe, eyeing the bus like it might shoot at them. They stood out like claws on a crab. I recognized one, Pete Jamison, but he couldn't see me inside the dark bus.

I was sitting up front, across from the driver, and I slapped a bill in his face. "Twenty bucks!" I said. "Don't stop."

The bus was almost stopped then, but he gave me a quick, surprised glance and let the bus ease along. "Gotta make it," he said. "Passengers on and off. How's if I circle the block?"

That was good enough. I could have raised the ante and kept him going, but the hoods would have piled into a car and stopped us. "Get going," I said, looking at the cafe, keeping my fingers crossed.

Both of the men were moving fast along the counter when they saw the bus wasn't stopping. The driver took a glance, too. No doubt he was looking forward to more bucks, by telling them where he let me off.

I cursed my stupidity for sticking on the bus so long, especially on a main highway like 66. I should have taken some shuttle bus to nowhere, but I couldn't be particular when I dashed in for a ticket. I wanted on the first bus leaving, and this was it.

The other side of the block, where the driver dropped me off, fronted along a depot of some antiquated railroad. A couple of dim lights were on inside. I jumped from the bus and started running, squinting as the rain pelted my face. I looked for cover. Any second a car would scream around the corner.

I decided to cross the street and run behind the depot, then keep going and hope the darkness covered me. I would be temporarily safe, and that, only. The gang had me pegged in a little town that probably bragged a single hotel. Come daylight, they'd hunt me down like a rabbit.

Then my luck changed. Across the tracks, on the other side of the depot, I found a train with three

cars parked there. A hearse was backed up to the end boxcar, near me. I hesitated. There could have been a lake on the other side of the train for all I knew. At the best, it would be a field and even that could be fenced.

The hearse, a big black sedan, had a coffin in it. The motor was running. Inside the depot, I could see a skinny guy in a black suit talking to a railroad man.

Then everything happened at once. A car with a bright spotlight came around the corner just as the skinny guy started toward the hearse. My only chance was to open the rear door of the hearse and jump in. I barely got settled, jamming myself alongside the casket, when the driver swung his door open. He didn't look in the back. We drove away before the car, looking for me, swung into the depot. I don't know for sure, but I can guess they searched that train.

The limousine rode pretty smoothly. Immediate plans for escape whizzed thru my head. The best chance seemed to hitch a quick ride, or beg, borrow or steal a car. Steal a car? I was *in* a car of little suspect.

My chauffeur unknowingly drove me to his mortuary. I hoped to steal his hearse, and give me that much more time to make distance. Thru the side window, I saw us circle a large white house and pulled into a fair-sized parking basement under the house.

I got my automatic out and waited, hoping he'd leave. He surprised me by opening side doors to stare right at my face. I pointed the gun at him. He teetered a little. I guess he thought I'd flopped out of the coffin. But he surprised me too. I lowered the gun.

"Chester Millentown!" I gasped.

"Ulp!" was all Chet could first answer. "Allen Wentz," he finally sputtered.

I hadn't seen Chester in years. I had bumped into him occasionally in Pasadena after college, but we had nothing in common. I grinned as I got out of his Black Maria.

Naturally, he asked, "What are you doing here?"

I wasn't afraid to tell him. Chester was an 'all right' kid in school. Everybody sort of stepped on him; shunned him, might better say it. Four of us had roomed together, but none of us felt comfortable around a guy who was studying to be an undertaker. He just didn't fit in with our social life. I told him how I'd dived into his hearse for cover.

"The gang's out to gun me down, Chet."

"What gang, Allen?"

I had to fill in the past years for him. As an accountant, I'd hired

out to a rubbish collector in Los Angeles and, by using the angles, saved them money by putting them wise how to avoid taxes legally. I also mentioned ways they could evade taxes, illegally, with little chance of being caught. It wasn't long before the real owners, the outfit in Chicago, had me transferred to the windy city. In due time I was head man for the books of all their legitimate operations.

"It's a syndicate, Chet," I explained. "My boss was a guy named Thorny. He wields a big club. With all his dough, his pet peeve was the income taxes he had to pay. When I'd make out his personal form, he wanted to blow the government up, and me included. I insisted he include all his income, and I cut where I could, at first."

Actually, the syndicate paid me a good salary, but I wasn't receiving what I thought I was worth. The top brass paid the government millions and still had a mint for themselves. They grumbled about the taxes, but instructed me to keep things honest. They wanted no truck with the government. So I decided to go into business for myself. One April thirteenth, I took Thorny's tax form up to him to sign. I listened to him scream as I stood at the bar and drank his liquor. After he signed it, I gave him the pitch.

"I could cut that down," I told him.

He nearly exploded. He reached for his gun, though he didn't pull it out. He demanded, "Whadda I pay you for?"

"To keep you and the syndicate out of trouble," I hurriedly told him. "The syndicate's one thing. It's too big to fool with. Everything can be cross-checked. But your own enterprises? They could be juggled."

He practically insisted I juggle them, at the point of a gun.

"Sure," I agreed, "but what's in it for me? I stick my neck out to make it safe. Maybe I buy a few favors from the tax boys I know." That was a lie. I don't even know one Revenue man. But, to Thorny, it sounded like a normal operation. He went for it. I got ten cents on every dollar I saved him.

"But, you know how it is, Chet. Greed catches up. I expected to be long gone when the Internal Revenue caught up with Thorny, but I guess the new electronic machines are checking tax forms faster and more thoroughly than I thought. Anyway, they nailed Thorny, but not me."

I looked around Chet's cold basement. "Hey. How about going inside and get warm?"

Chet hesitated. "Well, I don't

know. . . . I'm married, Allen. I don't want any trouble—"

"Forget it," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. "This is the last place they'd look for me." I urged him towards the stairs.

Chet's mortuary was also where he lived. The stairs led to his kitchen, a large, warm room. An electric coffee pot was on and waiting.

"I'll have coffee with you," Chet said. "Then I'll have to work. The body was shipped in tonight. I've got to have it in a slumber room by morning." He poured the coffee. "Allen, you're not going to stay tonight?"

I shook my head at his pale face. If ever a guy looked like a mortician, it was Chester. He hadn't wanted to be an undertaker, but his father was one, and Chet couldn't bring himself to tell his father he didn't like it.

I'll never forget him at school dances. Chet liked the girls. He wasn't a bad dancer, either, but, once a girl learned his major, she avoided him. Maybe it was the *way* he told them. He'd nervously clasp his hands, then announce slowly, "I'll be a mortician." The girl invariably backed up. He might as well have said, "I pronounce you dead!"

Chet sat down at the kitchen table with me. I poured sugar into my cup. Chet sipped carefully at his black coffee. I had to smile. With a solemn face like Chet's, I just couldn't picture him drinking coffee any way but black. Chet's eyes wandered to my satchel and then to me.

"Are you sure someone's after you?"

"Am I sure? I knew it the instant the Revenue asked me to come down. They had Thorny there when they phoned. I lit out. I paid a kid to drive my car to the airport, while I grabbed a bus. Thorny will get ten years, but he alerted the syndicate that I crossed them. I can't stay around to deny it. Just with Thorny, I'm a marked man."

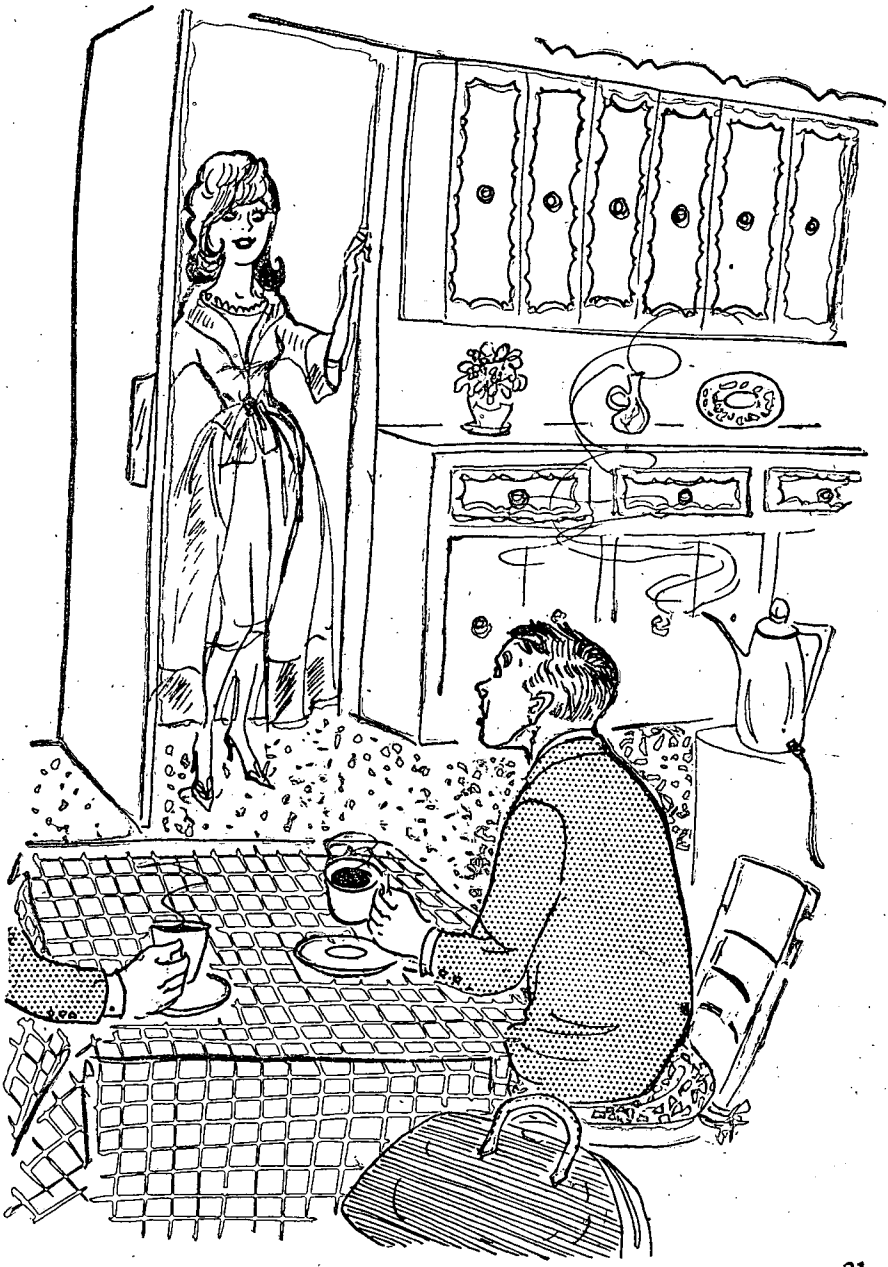
"Where will you go?"

"World's a big place. I'll change names and a discernible part of my personality, as well as looks."

The swinging door to the kitchen swung open, and I nearly jumped out of my chair. It was Chet's wife.

"Oh! Excuse me," she said, surprised to see me.

The surprise was mutual. Chet had said he was married, but I hadn't had the chance to reflect to what type of woman. I would have guessed some homey girl of bountiful portion, or perhaps an opposite, a shy, solemn girl with no meat on her bones, but the beauty



smiling quizzically at me was none of that. She was a dazzling redhead with sparkling green eyes.

She was wearing a rust colored peignoir tied close at the waist. I guessed her four or five years younger than Chet, maybe twenty-seven? There was nothing dowdy about Mrs. Millentown. I've never seen a woman look less a *married* woman.

Typical of Chet, he stood up and made formal introductions. Audrey gave me a winning smile and extended her hand, which proved firm and feminine. Chet explained we were roommates in school as Audrey gracefully poured herself coffee.

"Then you'll stay tonight?" she invited.

"I could, for the night," I said, all eyes as she sat down across from me. Remembering Chester, I turned to him, and skillfully guided the conversation so that it was all about the two of them. I learned his father had made a down payment on the mortuary for Chet. Chet had come to the midwest four years ago, met and married Audrey.

I winked at Chet, who wasn't doing much of the talking. "Chet," I said, "you've had all the luck for a lifetime."

"Thank you, sir," Audrey laughed, amused by my admiration which I made no pretense to hide. Women doll up to be admired. Chet gave no indication how he felt about it.

He stood up. "Allen, we do have a guest room," he said, which I presumed sanctioned his wife's invitation. "I, ahh . . . have work to do. It will take me about an hour." He looked at Audrey, who nodded.

"I'll entertain," she said.

I'm somewhat of a fatalist. However, precautions help extend the future. My safest move was to stay in the funeral home that night. No doubt more syndicate boys had arrived and were combing the town for me. Tomorrow I could try for distance, perhaps with Chet's hearse.

For some reason, Audrey was more than amused by me. There was a twinkle in her eyes when I offered her a cigarette. To make conversation, I asked, "How is business?"

"Dead," she answered quickly.

I didn't expect it. I broke out laughing.

"Very dead," she said, "to be corny, but it's a fact. I have to work, too—at the courthouse. Chet and I are barely getting by with the payments on this place, and the limousine."

"How's that?"

"Oh," she shrugged, "all the

profit's in the expensive caskets. People out here think a wooden box is good enough, which it is, but . . ." She mischievously eyed my satchel. "Odd suitcase?"

"Heh, heh," I answered. I tried to change the subject, but she wouldn't be detoured.

"Got money in it?" she asked, arching her brows prettily.

"Why do you think that?"

"This is a large building. There are intercoms all over, even in the basement garage. I listened."

I was forced to smile with her. She hadn't walked into the kitchen unprepared to see me. What an act! No wonder she was dolled up. "Chet know you were listening?" I asked.

"Sure. We've got no secrets."

"You have one to which I'd like the answer. How come Chet? I *mean,*" I emphasized, "you could have picked from thousands?"

She gave me an appreciative nod. "Sure, but Chester is genuine. A girl tires of wolves. Blame it on mothering instinct, I guess. He was so forlorn when he came here. He'd come down for burial permits to the court where I work. He was so precise and formal with me, yet I knew I dazed him. He even walked into a post while looking at me." She sighed. "You won't believe this, but I asked him for our first date."

"I believe it."

"I was never courted so politely."

"I believe that, too."

"I fell in love with him."

"That," I said, shaking my head, "is something else."

"It's true, or why would I stick with him? In *this* business."

"I've wondered from the first instant I saw you."

"Thanks." She looked up slyly, speculating me fully. I'm six foot, muscularly tapered, and have better than average looks. Plenty of girls in my past will agree to that part.

"So, you're Allen T. Wentz?" she said.

By her adding my initial I knew Chet had told her about me.

"Old A.T.W., himself," I agreed. "Chet tell you what the initials stand for?"

She smiled as she nodded. "All the Way."

I've always been proud of that. A sportswriter first tagged me with it after I made several long runs for touchdowns, then others adopted it. Girls thought it had a sinister meaning, which I didn't deny. It gave me an enviable image. I've been trying to live up to the nickname all my life.

"How much money have you?" she asked.

"You're cute, Audrey. Why would it interest you?"

"We need money, frankly."

"A loan?"

"No," she said simply, shaking her head. "I've got something to sell, you've got money to buy."

"What? Silence?" I asked, suddenly suspicious. "Say, just where *is* Chester!" I demanded.

"Relax," she grinned. "He's working. Chet wouldn't give you away. It wouldn't occur to him."

"How about you?"

"You're not thinking," she teased. "Where's the profit to give you away? Besides, Chester would never forgive me." Her eyes mischievously flirted with me until I smiled. "I was thinking," she said. "How would you like to walk away from this town without *ever* having to worry about a gang looking for you again. Would it be worth half your money?"

By simple arithmetic, it could be worth all of it. I pulled the satchel to my side of the table. "You don't know how much I have," I countered.

"Let's open the bag and count it before you hide most of it," she suggested. I had to laugh.

"What's your plan?"

"How much have you got?"

"Okay," I agreed. "I'll tell you what's in here. There's a hundred and ten grand. I emptied Thorny's safe. What's your idea? Half is yours, if I like it."

"We give you a funeral."

"What!"

"Sure! They'd stop looking for you if they thought you were dead." She looked expectantly toward the wall. I didn't see anything. Suddenly she said, "Chet, what do you think?"

"I don't like it, Audrey," came over the intercom. "Don't get us involved."

Surprised, I looked from the speaker to Audrey. I wasn't aware that Chet had been listening to every word we said. Audrey cutely wrinkled her nose as I winced, trying to recall if I'd said anything damaging. Audrey asked Chet to hurry and join us. I asked for a drink.

I was careful what I said while Audrey made a shaker of drinks. We took them to the livingroom where Chet joined us, saying he could finish up later. He was with us because he wanted no part of her idea. He did his best to talk her out of it, but it was obvious he'd do anything she asked him. I gave it some thought and decided I was interested.

Audrey babbled out a plan I think she made up as she went along.

I cautioned her, "These guys aren't going to believe a country newspaper story about me being killed in an auto accident, even if

you *can* get it in tomorrow's paper."

"So we'll do a funeral," she said. "I'll have to call the story in now. Melvin can still reset the front page." She bit at her lip, looking at me. "We should run your picture, too."

Chet perfunctorily stood up. "Melvin's her brother," he said wearily. "I'll take your picture, Allen."

Audrey's fantastic scheme appealed to me. The story she took to her brother was that I had died of a heart attack, supposedly from overexertion. I apparently had been running along the highway for miles, until I dropped. The syndicate boys could believe that!

Bright and early the next morning I read my obituary on the front page; picture and all. Frankly, I felt a little weird. It could have happened! Then, Chester took me to his showroom. There must have been twenty coffins.

"Pick a casket," he said.

Audrey joined us. "Pick a good one," she said. "They're hard to sell."

They had one in bronze, a real heavy thing. "This one looks bulletproof," I said.

Audrey agreed. "This one's twenty-two hundred."

"It's all in the deal," I protested.

"Oh, no," she corrected sweetly. "You're paying the expenses. My brother expects five hundred for the story."

I still agreed to the bronze casket, since I was going to have to lie in it. However, I began to wonder how Chet was doing so poorly with a wife like Audrey around.

The mortuary would open at ten and I was sure the boys would come to see for themselves. The story gave the mortuary's address where I was laid out! This, to me, was the touchy part of the scheme.

Audrey didn't have the least qualm. "Ah, poof!" she said, as Chet wheeled the heavy casket in on rollers. "Chet will make you look dead."

Chet did just that as soon as Audrey and I helped him roll the casket to a private room. Audrey dashed away to arrange flowers she'd ordered.

I was a bit apprehensive as I sat on a stool in Chet's laboratory amidst the stench of heavily disinfected sanitation. His cold cement work slab and the huge bottles of liquid and all the tubes and other gadgets were not conducive to digestion of the nice breakfast Audrey had served.

Chet had me remove my shirt. As he worked on my face, I noticed just the barest trace of a smile at the corners of his mouth. "You're

the first subject I've ever had watch me."

"I should hope," I shuddered. "You know, it's cold in here."

"Air conditioned. Precaution against spoiling."

"Oh, great," I protested. "How can you do this?"

"You get used to it, Allen," he said, turning my head with cold fingers. He used a cotton swab doused with a freezing cold lotion to wash my neck before applying powder. "Dad started small and built up. He flies here twice a month. I'm supposed to emulate."

"You never liked it," I said, turning my head the other way for him. "You should have studied something else.

"I didn't have the sense, then. Of course, Audrey's after me to quit. Photography's my hobby. If I were financially able, I'd probably switch to it."

"Half my loot do it for you?"

"Possibly," he temporized. He set the powder puff down to stare into my eyes. "Allen," he said solemnly, "Audrey is more naive than you know. She can't believe if this doesn't work that the hoods will kill you, and maybe us!"

"I've worried about it," I admitted.

"So have I!" he said seriously. He nervously sucked at his lip, then sighed. "Come on. We'll go upstairs. I'll finish dressing you in the casket."

Audrey was already there, arranging a floral piece on the bottom half of the casket. The casket had a divided hinged top; it would only open from my waist up. I held my coat and shirt in my hand, but Audrey waved them away.

"We'll deck you out in a starched shirt and black coat. Can you climb in?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. I knew it was going to surprise her, but I wasn't getting into the casket without my gun. I'm sure Chet anticipated I'd have it in my hand, but Audrey's eyes widened when I brought it out in the open.

"You won't need *that!*" she protested.

"I hope not, but suppose I sneeze? Or my face twitches? I've got to count on more than just scaring them."

"Allen's right," Chet said. "They'd kill him right where he was. You see? I warned you. Now we've started, we must go all the way."

Audrey gamely cocked her head. "A.T.W.," she said.

Chet looked at his watch. "We've got two hours to finish. Then I want you," he said to Audrey, "to leave. Go to work."

"Not today. I've already called in."

"I want you out of the house."

Audrey adamantly shook her head. "It was my idea. We'll chance it together."

Chet argued, but Audrey won.

I climbed onto the silky lining of the casket and squirmed myself in as Audrey held the pillow for me. I frowned even before I stretched out. "Hey! No padding. This thing's like a rock."

Audrey shoved the pillow under my head. "You're the first to complain," she grinned. "Now sit up. We'll dress you."

Before they buttoned the white shirt, Chet lined my chest with a piece of cardboard. That way I could breathe without my chest showing movement. Audrey cheerfully explained it was a filler they used on mangled bodies. I slipped on the black coat, acutely aware it had dressed untold numbers of cadavers. Audrey snapped a somber tie on me and then leaned on the casket, smiling down, as Chet finished me up.

"How's he look?" Chet asked her.

"Dead," she said, "if he'd close his eyes."

"I will at the time," I assured.

Audrey got me a mirror and let me look at myself. It was an eerie sight, but Chet had done a good job. I really looked gaunt. When I squinted, my reflection gave the appearance of a dead man made up to appear asleep.

"Now, one more thing," Audrey said, pulling the mirror away. "No! Don't move! You've got to stay put."

Chet straightened the pillow I had mussed by turning my head. "What did I forget?" he asked.

"Well," Audrey said, posing reflectively over me, "I was thinking. Suppose they come—"

"That's the whole idea," I offered.

She nodded ominously in a way that tightened my stomach. "Suppose," she hissed, "they touch you to see if you're cold?"

I looked at Chet. "Suppose?" I questioned.

Audrey had the answer. "We'll keep his face and hands packed with ice—until someone comes." My hands were in the open. They made me fold them on my chest, but I had my gun where I could grab it, if need be. Chet objected to ice.

"No. He'd feel too cold to them."

"Not if I keep vigil and pull it on and off to chill him to the right temperature. I'll make some ice packs."

Audrey put some plastic over my face to preserve my makeup, then placed a soft bag of crushed ice over my face and hands. She'd leave it on until I groaned I could-

n't breathe, then remove it briefly.

"You're freezing me!" I grumbled. "There's an hour before you open. Let's cool it, and I mean, wait! Hmmmm?"

"All right," she saucily agreed, "but I'm only making you room temperature."

I had a wise answer, but the door chimes rang. Chet grabbed his coat and slipped into it. His face was whiter than mine. "They're early," he said. Audrey jammed the ice on my face.

I heard Chet tell them he wasn't open for another hour. I didn't hear their argument because Audrey rustled the bag, reaching under the ice pack to feel my face. She suddenly jerked the ice away.

"Play dead," she whispered, "and *don't* move."

With my eyes closed, I tried to count how many I could hear breathing.

"That him?" an unfamiliar voice said.

"Yeh! How about that? Healthy guy like him."

I recognized the voice. It was Pete Jamison, Thorny's all-around boy.

"Where do you suppose Thorny's dough is?"

"Get the undertaker." A moment of silence lapsed. Suddenly Pete asked, "Who found him? The paper didn't say."

Chet's professional whisper filled the room. "The police. Are you relatives?"

"Yeh. Or, wait! Who's paying for the funeral?"

I had to give Chet credit, for I'd worried about him folding under pressure. He said, "The police found money with him. Of course, we wired his sister in California for instructions."

"Sure sudden. The police have the money?"

"The most of it. The deceased caused a traffic jam on Highway 66. The police found him when they came to clear traffic. People were picking money up all over the place. The deceased probably threw the money to attract help when he was stricken, but the police recovered most of the money . . . several hundred dollars."

"Several hundred!" Pete growled. "There was more than that! You sure he ain't got it on him?"

I felt Pete start poking around me!

"Of course not!" I heard Audrey say angrily.

I was making up my mind to grab the gun when Pete touched my hand.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "He's cold as ice!" Suddenly I felt his hand on my face. "Hey!" he hollered. "That's unnatural!"

"Gentlemen, please!" Audrey scolded as Pete squeezed my cheeks together. "We just removed the body from the refrigerator."

Pete released my cheeks. I don't know how he came to touch Audrey, unless she grabbed at his hands, but suddenly he said, "Hey, your hands are cold too. What is this?"

"I just came up from embalming another body!" Audrey answered.

I heard Pete say, "Oh!" followed by, "Let's go. Thorny's dough is spread all over the country."

As they walked away I heard Chet have the gall to ask them to sign the visitors' book. They refused. Then the three of us celebrated in the kitchen with straight shots. I wanted to get my satchel and split the money, then and there. Audrey shook her head.

"Not yet. After the funeral."

"What funeral?"

"Your funeral," she insisted. Chet agreed; there had to be a funeral. I could see the logic of it, but I thought they could hold it without me, a closed casket affair.

"We'll go all the way," Audrey taunted me with a wink.

To my surprise, Chet had a list of professional mourners. They attended for ten dollars each, plus ten dollars for cab fare. I'm positive they all walked to the place! A cemetery plot was another six hundred, and there was a marker fee, plus an organist, a soloist, a minister and pallbearers to be paid. It's more economical to stay alive.

Three days later Chet again made me up to look dead. The service was held in the little chapel on the right wing of his house. The plan was to bury the bronze casket in the cemetery. Chet had it arranged, when everyone had filed out, that I was to lift the lid of the casket and hop out. He explained he would close the lid of the casket after the mourners filed by. I was to count to sixty, pop out, and then hide in the kitchen.

The service was beautiful, considering the minister didn't know me from a lump of lard. Chet must have tipped him off, because he said some true and mighty pretty things about me, but during the organ music I began to feel melancholy. If one of the hired mourners, as he filed by to pay his last respects, had tearfully sobbed, "Poor Allen," I'd probably have bawled with them. Lying in state affected me.

On schedule, Chet and his helper lowered the top on the casket. It got dark inside and, immediately, stuffy. I counted to sixty, and pushed on the lid. Nothing! I couldn't budge it! And I tried!

I found myself laughing—may-

be it was hysterics; or fright. Chet wanted all the money! Or, maybe it was all Audrey's idea! I'd never know. But, it was Audrey who had talked me out of taking my gun into the casket this time. I might have shot my way out, or attracted attention.

I was suffocating, but I knew no one would hear me if I yelled. Chet would stall things a proper length of time. Being buried alive isn't a pleasant way to die. There's too much time to think. Breathing wasn't doing me any good. I couldn't see, but I felt dizzy.

It was Audrey who opened the lid. She slapped my face. "Are you all right? Can you get up? Hurry!" she cried.

So, it was Chet! I weaved upright, gulping for air. I guess I did it in slow motion, but I managed to scramble out of the casket. Audrey helped me to the kitchen. A drink helped. She smiled at me, watching me puff. With her on my side, I had one thing to do. Get rid of Chet!

"That was close," she said. "Chet's helper fastened the latches. He couldn't say anything, but he finally got a chance to tell me . . ." She suddenly cocked her head and squinted at me. "Ohhh," she said, knowingly, "I can guess what you thought."

I shook my head. "Those who haven't faced death, will never know, until . . ."

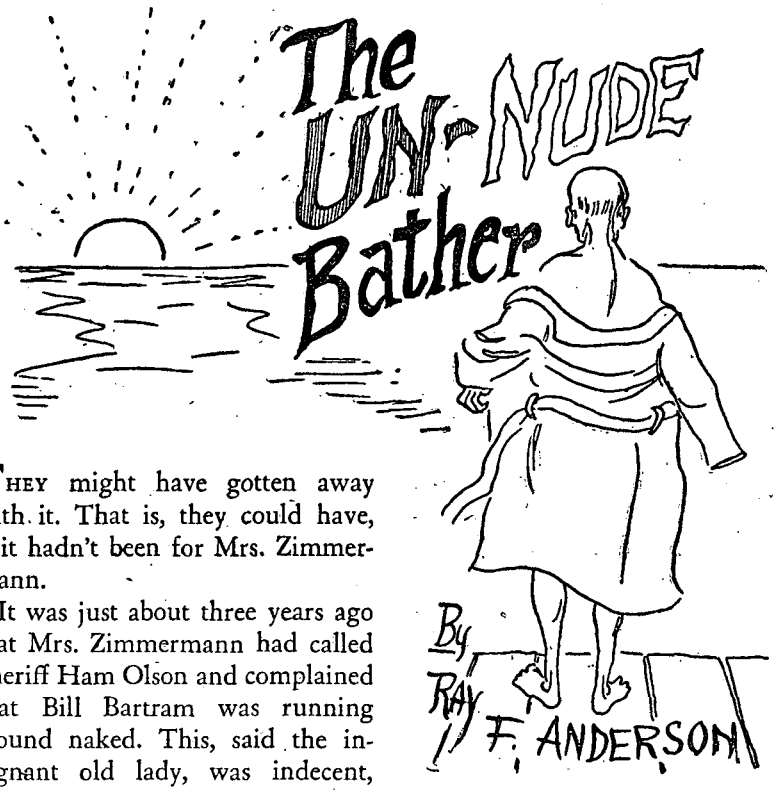
The rest of it turned out like planned. Chet blackened my brown hair, found me glasses and set me up with makeup until I hardly recognized myself. But when it came to accepting half my money, he refused.

"Just the costs of the funeral," he said.

Audrey waved a palm at me and then kissed him. "That's my husband," she sighed.

I figured Chester Millentown had everything he'd ever need, but I went All the Way. I left them every dime in the satchel, all one hundred and ten thousand. I have more than that amount in banks under assumed names. Who needs more? Not me! I've got a different perspective toward life, after hearing my funeral.

When it is smugly presumed one has performed creditably by observing convention, it may tardily be perceived he has not been observant at all.



THEY might have gotten away with it. That is, they could have, if it hadn't been for Mrs. Zimmermann.

It was just about three years ago that Mrs. Zimmermann had called Sheriff Ham Olson and complained that Bill Bartram was running around naked. This, said the indignant old lady, was indecent, immoral and illegal, and Sheriff Olson had better see that something was done about it.

Public nudity did, the sheriff agreed, constitute a misdemeanor, but since Mr. Bartram was such a prominent, upstanding and universally well liked member of the community, the sheriff suggested that perhaps it would be better to have incontrovertible proof that Mr. Bartram was creating a public

nuisance before going further with the case.

"Proof!" Mrs. Zimmermann had shrieked, backing Sheriff Olson away from the telephone. "I have the proof of my own eyes!" Mrs. Zimmermann had proceeded to describe the antics of the immoral Mr. Bartram who, every morning at five o'clock, did flagrantly walk from his summer cottage to his dock, shamelessly remove his bright red bathrobe and, naked as a jaybird, plunge into the waters of Rainy Lake. "It's really very humiliating to be exposed to such embarrassment day after day."

"Your place is directly across the bay from Bill Bartram's, isn't it, Mrs. Zimmermann?" the sheriff had asked. "It seems to me that the bay is about half a mile wide there."

"Yes, but I can see him clearly through my binoculars. It's disgusting!"

The sheriff, casting his eyes upward in a silent appeal for help and strength, had had the temerity to suggest, "Perhaps you could direct your attention elsewhere at five a.m."

"Well of all things!" Mrs. Zimmermann had snorted. "SOMEONE has to keep track of such carryings on!" The phone had slammed in the sheriff's ear. Shaking his head, he had hung up, grinning crookedly and hoping that would be the end of that.

And it was the end of it until a week ago last Monday, when Bill Bartram's skinny-legged, potbellied little body emerged from the lake, attired in a swimsuit.

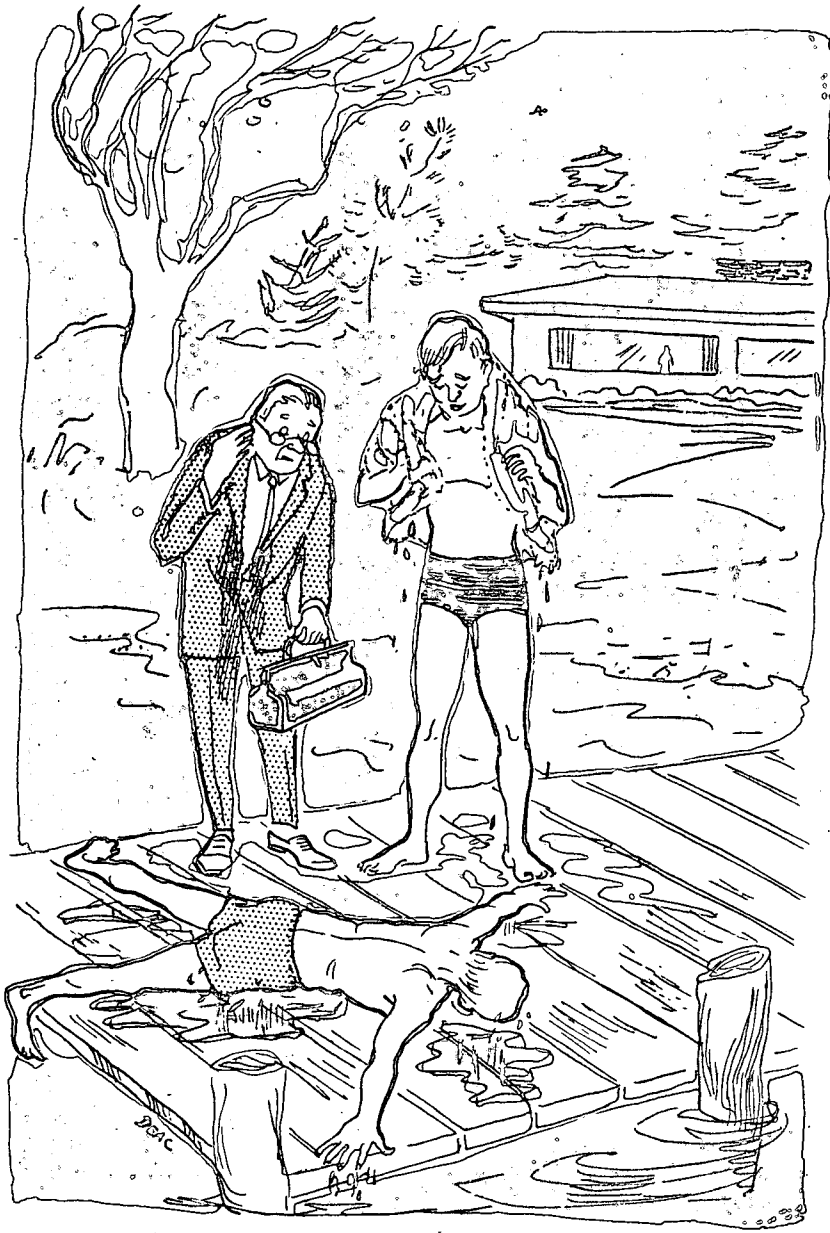
The corpse had been pulled out of the water and was spread-eagled on the Bartram dock when Sheriff Olson reached the scene of the accident. Doc Soames, the coroner, and a husky, good-looking young fellow stared down at the body of the retired businessman. The young fellow wore swimming trunks. The front of Doc's suit was wet.

"We thought we might just as well pull him out," Doc said. "Didn't see any reason to wait for you."

"Sure, that's OK, Doc." Olson looked questioningly at the young man in trunks. "Don't think I've had the pleasure." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Ham Olson, Sheriff."

The young fellow looked a little nervous. "I'm Warren Foster. I stayed with Bill and Betty over the weekend." His hand was cool, damp and strong, as it gripped the sheriff's. He tried a grin that didn't quite work. "I—I—I found him. It was pretty awful."

"I bet it was." The sheriff studied the body. Something about it



wasn't quite right," something about the funny way the trunks were twisted around almost sideways. He turned to the coroner. "What d'you think, Doc? Heart attack?"

"No. Couldn't have been. He's full of water. Looks like he hit his head on something. There's a bruise above his right temple."

"Pulpwood stick, probably," Foster said. "Bill told me that every time the tug tows a boom down to the paper mill a few sticks get loose. Sometimes one will drift in here. The tug went by with a boom yesterday."

Sheriff Olson nodded. "Could be." He still couldn't put his finger on what puzzled him. He turned again to Doc Soames. "How's Mrs. Bartram taking it?"

"Pretty well, considering they were married only about four months ago. She broke down a little at first but, all in all, she's being quite sensi—"

"She's being very brave!" Foster cut in. "Very brave."

Olson stared at Foster. "Yes, I'm sure she is. She's quite a bit younger than Bill was, isn't she?"

"Yes, but she was pretty darn devoted to him."

"Mm-m, yes, I see," the sheriff said, then bent and closely scrutinized the small bluish lump above the victim's temple. The bruise was about the size of a nickel. It was slightly raised but the skin was intact. There was no sign of abrasion.

"I'll never forgive myself for not going swimming with him this morning," Foster said, a bit of a tremor in his voice. "He asked me last night and I said I would. But this morning when he called me, the bed was so nice and warm and I wanted those few extra winks—" He trailed off, looking helplessly from one to the other of the two officials.

"Sure, kid, sure," Doc said consolingly and laid his hand on Foster's shoulder. "You can't blame yourself. Not many of us are nutty enough to jump out of a nice warm bed into a cold lake. There are only a few like that. Bill was one of them."

Doc's words jogged Olson's memory, and he knew what had bothered him. He remembered the phone call from Mrs. Zimmermann, and Bill Bartram saying, "Why the nosy old bag!" when Olson mentioned the complaint. "I'll wave to her tomorrow. Maybe that'll give her a thrill. But I'll be damned if I'll wear trunks!" No wonder the trunks bugged the sheriff. They shouldn't have been there!

"Known the Bartrams very long, Mr. Foster?" The sheriff unfolded

himself from the kneeling position and faced the younger man. He was not quite as tall as Foster, but his shoulders were as broad and muscular, and his blue eyes had a hard time trying to keep up with Foster's darting brown ones.

"I sold him a life insurance policy about three years ago. That was while his first wife was still living." Foster fidgeted and went on. "I came up last Thursday to bring his policies up to date, change the beneficiary and so on, to protect Betty, Mrs. Bartram."

"How much life insurance did he carry?" Olson wanted to know.

Foster hesitated, looked uncomfortable. "Well, the company will take a dim view of this, considering what happened, but I talked him into increasing it to a hundred and fifty thousand."

"And this policy is in effect? Binding?"

"Yes, it was signed, sealed and delivered on Friday morning."

"With Mrs. Bartram as beneficiary?"

"Yes."

"Did you meet Mrs. Bartram for the first time last Thursday?"

"No, I'd met her before."

"Before or after her marriage to Bill?"

"Before."

"How long before?"

Foster hesitated, apparently mentally calculating. Doc Soames broke in, "Mind if I haul him to town now, Ham? I'd like to get the autopsy out of the way as soon as possible."

"Oh, sure, Doc. Sure, you go ahead and get your basket. Maybe Foster here will help you carry him up to the hearse. I think I'll go up and give my regards to Mrs. Bartram. She'd probably rather not be alone at a time like this. You'd better get going on that autopsy right away. And Doc, be sure to—" The sheriff lowered his head and his voice, and Foster missed the last few words.

Doc shot a startled glance at Foster, then said, "OK, Ham."

Betty Bartram answered Olson's knock. "You must be Sheriff Olson. Doctor Soames said that you would want to talk to me." She led him to a long, low-beamed pine-paneled room. Two walls of almost solid glass brought the lake and its wild beauty into the room. A great stone fireplace dominated the west wall, and books lined the south wall from floor to ceiling.

Betty Bartram was a small, lithe woman. Her black stretch pants were pleasantly well filled, and the sloppy black sweatshirt she wore failed to conceal the fact that the rest of her figure was equally pleasing. She could be either a sophisticated, worldly twenty-five or

a youthful forty. Ham Olson guessed early thirties. Her brown eyes were a little teary, a little red, with a hint of dark shadow beneath them. She lit a fresh cigarette from a two-inch stub and tossed the stub into the fireplace.

"That's right, Mrs. Bartram. If it weren't for the circumstance, I'd say that I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Yes. Poor Bill . . . He did enjoy life so."

"He sure did. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"You knew him?"

"A little. We were on a couple of fishing trips together. He was quite a fisherman."

"Yes."

"I understand Bill swam a lot too. That's a little unusual for a man his age. Did you ever swim with him, Mrs. Bartram?"

"Oh yes, we went in almost every afternoon."

"How about the mornings?"

"Bill always wanted me to, but I'm too much of a sleepyhead for that." She drew on her cigarette and tried a smile. It was pretty wan. "Now I wish I had gone—at least once—this morning anyway." A tear meandered down the side of her nose. She brushed at it and took another drag on her cigarette, sat down in a deep chair facing the fireplace and lay back, staring into the dead, stark black opening.

"That's what Foster said too. Have you known him long?"

"He was in college with my brother. I've known him since then." She lit another cigarette. "I don't know what I'd have done without Warren."

"Yes, I imagine he was a big help."

"Oh, it would have been so awful if I had found Bill myself." She grimaced painfully. "I just don't know what I'd have done. Gone helplessly hysterical, I suppose."

"It would have been tough all right, I guess." Olson ambled idly to the east wall. He stood looking out and down. It was like being on an observation platform. "I've always said this is the best view on the lake."

"Bill always said that too. I guess that's why he built here."

"That's it, all right. That and the fishing and the swimming."

"Yes, the swimming."

Neither spoke for several moments, then Olson turned from the window. "The last time I talked with Bill he said he was planning to have a well drilled. He thought the lake was getting too contaminated to use. Did he do that?"

"No. He had a water purification system installed instead."

"I guess those outfits work fine, if you keep them serviced. Use or-

dinary household bleach in them, don't you?"

Betty Bartram stared at the sheriff, eyes veiled, then lit another cigarette. "I wouldn't know. Bill always took care of it."

"Oh." Olson started to say something else but just then Foster padded in on bare feet.

"Get him loaded?" Olson asked,

glancing at Mrs. Bartram. She smoked impassively and stared at the cold, black maw of the fireplace.

"Yes. What a job! I hope I never have to go through anything like that again." He glanced at Olson, then looked long and searchingly at Betty Bartram. She returned the stare expressionlessly. Foster shivered slightly and shrugged. "Think I'll get into some clothes. Sort of chilly like this."

While Foster was gone, Betty Bartram smoked silently and Sheriff Olson watched her without speaking. This is no ordinary drowning, he thought, and wondered how much he could prove of what he was thinking. Nothing, probably, if they got a high-priced lawyer—and they'd have a high-priced lawyer. He needed more evidence. He wondered if Mrs. Zimmermann might call.

Foster came back into the room dressed in a black, turtleneck sweater, gray slacks and canvas top-siders. He looked elegantly nautical.

Foster took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He held the matchbook in his right hand, used his left to strike the match and touch it to the cigarette.

"Ah-h-h, Mr. Foster," the sheriff said, "when Doc got in a rush and interrupted us, down there on the dock, you were just about to tell me how long you and Mrs. Bartram have been acquainted?"

"Let's see now. It was when—"

Mrs. Bartram looked up sharply. "I told you, Sheriff, that I met Warren when he and my brother were in college together."

"Oh, yes, that's right. Thank you, Mrs. Bartram." Olson pondered a moment, then asked "Had

Bill had much to drink last night?"

"What is this, Sheriff?" Foster snapped. "The third degree? If you suspect either one of us of anything, say so."

"Take it easy, man. This is just routine, part of my job. When there's an accidental death, it's my duty to find out what happened —if I can."

"Well, it's plain as the nose on your face what happened." Foster expelled a long stream of smoke. "He hit his head on something when he dived, knocked himself out and drowned. Anybody should be able to see that."

"For heaven's sake, Warren," Betty Bartram cut in, "the sheriff is just doing his job, as he says." She turned to Olson. "Bill just had his usual small glass of port last night."

"Well, I didn't like the implication," Foster muttered, pacing angrily. He blew another cloud of smoke and threw the end of his cigarette into the fireplace.

"Thank you, Mrs. Bartram," the sheriff said. "I know this is distressing and troublesome but sooner or later it's got to be done. I always figure it might as well be sooner," he grinned companionably. "Now if you can just bear with me for a few more questions, this will all be over and I'll head for town."

Olson settled himself in a deep armchair and began a stream of questions that continued, interrupted by one brief visit to the bathroom, for almost half an hour. Foster, evidently somewhat mollified, paced the floor, occasionally punctuating his short, terse replies by thumping his right palm with his left fist. Betty Bartram lit one cigarette from another and fidgeted in her big chair. She answered Olson's questions coolly and calmly, quickly and quietly.

"Well, I guess that just about does it," the sheriff said finally, and stood up. "Can't do much more here, so I might as well be on my way." Foster stopped pacing. Betty Bartram stopped fidgeting. "But first, if I may, I'd like to make a phone call." He inclined his head slightly toward Betty Bartram.

"Why, of course, Sheriff. Go right ahead." Mrs. Bartram lolled back and tossed her cigarette into the fireplace. She didn't light a fresh one. "It's on that little shelf over by the door."

Olson dialed and waited, watching Foster and Mrs. Bartram. Foster had settled on the arm of her chair and held one of her hands, consolingly, between his. The phone buzzed twice before the sheriff heard, "Coroner's office. Soames speaking."

"Yeah, Doc. Ham here. Find out

anything?" He listened a minute, watching Foster who had looked up alertly.

"OK, Doc, thanks. I'm not surprised. It figures." Sheriff Olson put the phone back on its cradle and faced the couple. "I'm afraid I'll have to take both of you in for the murder of Bill Bartram," he said.

Betty Bartram slumped and fumbled for her cigarettes. Warren Foster leaped to his feet and thumped his right palm. "What the hell are you talking about?" he yelled. "You've got nothing on us!"

"Well, I think I have," the sheriff said laconically. "You put me on the trail yourself, when you pulled those trunks on Bill before you dumped him into the lake. I didn't tumble to what was wrong about them until it finally hit me that Bill always took his early morning dips in his birthday suit." Sheriff Olson watched Mrs. Bartram take a couple of nervous drags. "I guess you didn't know that, Mrs. Bartram—I did."

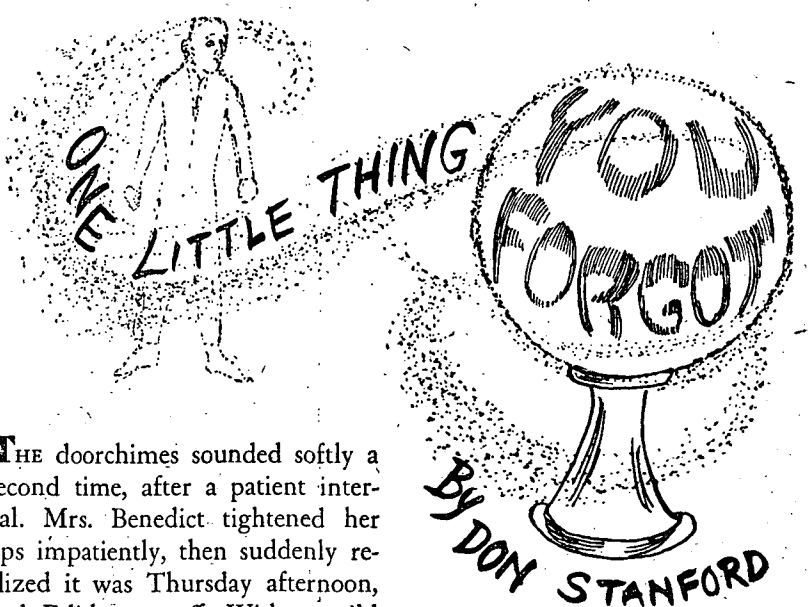
"What does that prove, lunkhead?" Foster was aggressively sarcastic. "Exactly nothing. Nothing!"

"Right. But I've got a pretty good picture of what happened. Let's see if I can paint it for you. Now, I'm not sure whether he caught you together, or whether you planned it from the start for the insurance, but I know that you, Foster, slugged Bartram with that big left fist of yours, and knocked him out. That bruise is in the wrong place, and too small to have happened while diving. You finished him off by drowning him right here in this house, probably in the bathtub."

"You can't prove that!" Betty Bartram's voice was a couple of octaves higher than normal. "He drowned in the lake, and you can't prove anything else!"

"I couldn't until I got the coroner's report. Doc found chlorine in Bill's lungs." The sheriff paused, looking from one to the other of the couple as they stared at each other, fright beginning to show in both pairs of eyes. "That new water purifying system that Bill had installed puts chlorine into the water supply—not into the lake."

There is a particular fervency one may overlook in his passion which, when realized, holds the might to alter an unseemly deportment.



THE doorchimes sounded softly a second time, after a patient interval. Mrs. Benedict tightened her lips impatiently, then suddenly realized it was Thursday afternoon, and Edith was off. With a mild exclamation of vexation she hurriedly put aside her sewing and rose, trotting down the carpeted stairs to her front hall, feeling now the silent emptiness of the house.

The man who stood one deferential step down from her front stoop was, Mrs. Benedict was startled to observe, an Indian—or *something* like that. He wore a shining white silk turban, anyway, with a strange carved jewel centered above his smooth dark forehead, and somehow it did not look in the least incongruous with his beautifully-cut and immaculately-pressed pale gray suit. His face was very dark and velvet-skinned, not as though he were clean-shaven but as though he did not need to shave, ever; his eyes were large and dark and liquid.

"Mrs. Benedict?" he said in a voice that was like an organ tone,

deep and rich and strangely hushed; he smiled, diffidently, and his teeth between the parted dark lips were wonderfully white and even.

She nodded, wordless. Beyond him, at the foot of her front walk, scattered with the first fallen autumn leaves, she saw a long black limousine, glittering opulently, with a uniformed chauffeur sitting upright at attention behind the wheel.

"My name," the Indian said softly, and smiled again as though deprecating the difficulty of it, "is Rohitasthira. I am called Gurū, which is easier to say; it is an humble kind of title in my country and means *Teacher*. I have come to bring you a message, Mrs. Benedict, from your husband."

She tried to shake her head, and could not; his large, soft, dark eyes held her. She felt as though she were drowning in liquid warmth and understanding. At last she managed to say, weakly, in a voice quite unlike her own and quite without conviction, "My husband is—dead."

"Of course," the Indian said, almost whispering. His soft deep voice seemed to throb with intimate knowledge and intimate sympathy. "He has been dead for more than seven years. We know. And now he is able, he is strong enough to . . . Now he wants you to know how he died and that he is with you still. May I come in?"

Spring had come at last; melting snow lay in shrinking drifts everywhere, and gutters ran deep with dark water. The fragrance of moist earth came in through the open windows of the bank. The trust officer scratched his signature vigorously, and with ill-concealed irritation shoved the paperbound legal document in an angry flutter of pages to his secretary, waiting with her notary public's seal. LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT, the thick paper cover said in Old English script; beneath, neatly typed, OF MYRA FOX BENEDICT.

"Myra," the trust officer said in a carefully controlled voice, leaning across his desk toward Mrs. Benedict, "as your banker and your trustee I can't stop you from doing this; I *can only offer* advice, to which you simply won't listen. But as a very old friend, Myra—as George's best friend all his life, and yours ever since you married him—I *beg* you, Myra, not to make this kind of a fool of yourself! The principal of George's estate amounts to a great deal of money, Myra. Aside from the trust he arranged for you when you were married, which has provided for you very comfortably ever since,

George had nearly a million dollars when he—disappeared. Under the bank's management it has increased during these seven years —seven and a half, now—to more than one million, four hundred thousand. And now you want to leave it all, no strings attached, to a—a man you haven't known six months, a man you *know* isn't even what he pretends to be. It's enough to make George Benedict rise from the dead, Myra! What do you think George would say if he knew?"

"I *know* what George would say, Ben, dear," Mrs. Benedict said sweetly and firmly, and stood up, drawing on her gloves. "In fact, I know what George *did* say. Last night. To me. I talk with George every week now, you know; I can't tell you what a joy it is, and what a relief. I could never do anything right without George's advice, you know; I've—I've *needed* him so, I can't tell you how wonderful it is to be able to go to him again for help. And it was *George* who said we ought to help the Guru carry on his vocation, because it was through the Guru that George was finally able to get through to me. So you see, Ben—"

"Dammit, Myra!" the trust officer cried, slapping his hand down hard on a file neatly labeled BURNS DETECTIVE AGENCY, INC. "Your Guru's a fake, I tell you! It's all right here, if you'd only read it; the bank has tried to protect you. He's no Indian, never has been near India in his life! He was born Edward Jamison in Chicago, in and out of jail all his life."

"The bank wouldn't understand, Ben," Mrs. Benedict said gently, and took her Will from the secretary with a gracious nod. "And neither would you. The Guru has known many names, and many incarnations; George explained it all to me. It's all right, Ben, dear; really it is."

She went out, gracious and unhurried, and the trust officer ground his teeth. He looked at his secretary and spread his hands helplessly.

His secretary, gazing thoughtfully at the door through which Mrs. Benedict had departed, said absently, "I know, Mr. Driscoll, but what can you do? It's funny, you know, but she looks ten years younger these last few weeks, so *serene.*"

"Yes," the trust officer said almost inaudibly. Then crisply he added, "Get that detective agency on the phone, will you? Tell them to send their man over to my club; I want to talk to him. I won't be back today."

The young man had good teeth

and a frank, open smile; he was crewcut and passed easily for Ivy League, even in the hushed elegance of the old and imposing club. No one would ever guess him to be a private detective, Mr. Driscoll decided, and no doubt that was what made him a good one; in any case the agency thought highly of him, and the bank had used the agency for many, many years.

"How he got onto her is easy enough, sir," the young man said respectfully. "It was in the papers, in the part he'd have been reading carefully every day, looking for the right deal to come up. Legal notice: Husband declared legally dead, having been missing for seven years; entire estate to widow. Probably a mention of the amount of the estate, too. If not, it would be on open file at Probate Court."

"Yes," Mr. Driscoll said, and thought a moment. "He didn't turn up right after that, though; it must have been a month or more. We'd already transferred into her name a good many of the—"

"He had a lot to do first, sir," the young man said. "Research, bankroll, store; this isn't a small operation, sir, nor a sloppy one. It's what we call The Big Con. The spook racket has always been great for swindling widows, and sometimes the take is pretty good

even with a minimum operation. But this is a *big* take, and a *maximum* operation. The limousines, the store, the front, the research—the whole con is first class. It has cost a lot of money, just up to now, and Eddie Jamison didn't have it; he had to go to a bank for it. And pretty soon he's going to have to pay."

"A *bank*?" the trust officer repeated, scandalized. The young man shook his head, smiling, and said, "Not a bank like yours, of course. There's a lot of investment money, or speculation money, in the underworld; any good crook can get financed easily enough, if he's got a good business project in mind. It's *like* going to the bank, and that's what they call it, but of course the interest rates are a lot higher, and the penalty for not paying off is more drastic. In fact, it's likely to be fatal. Well, I don't want to bore you with a lot of details."

"You're not boring me," Mr. Driscoll said firmly. "I feel absurdly out of my element, but I am very much concerned about Mrs. Benedict. Her husband was my oldest and closest friend. This crook simply read in the paper that her husband had disappeared and never been found, was now legally dead, and had left her a lot of money, did he? And then, on the strength of that, and I suppose his plan for getting it away from her, he went out and borrowed a substantial sum—for what? You mentioned a store, I believe; I confess I do not understand what a store has to do with—"

"That's slang, sir, crook slang," the young man said. "The *store* is what con men call the place of business they set up especially for the con. It can be a fake stockbroker's office or, in this case an apartment in a very good building, as you know. Rent, eight hundred dollars a month, one-year lease, all paid in advance. Decorated by the landlord, but furnished in luxurious oriental style. Most of the furnishings are rented, but even that isn't cheap; nearly two hundred a month more there. We can't even estimate the cost of the wiring and electronic installations, but it's fantastic; there are dime-sized loudspeakers all over the place, and *two* control panels so he can make voices move around and come from anywhere whether he's in the room or out of it, fade them in and out from *ten* pre-recorded tapes at a time. And there's a triple-angle rear-screen projection system, and a mercury-vapor gun which can hang a little cloud of vapor in a pitch-dark room like dissolving mist, and back-project a life-size moving pic-

ture of a man, in color, right into the middle of it, giving a three-dimensional effect for about three or four seconds that would make anyone *swear* his ghost had just faded in and out!

"Well, that's the *store,* sir, and it's quite a bag of tricks. Then there's his *front*; that means his clothes, and the limousine—not rented by the day, either; it's on a six-month lease, complete with chauffeur. They don't hurry these big operations. Then there are the weekly *regular* seances; Mrs. Benedict started going to them, and she still does, but now she has one private seance a week, just in case her husband can't get through at the regular session. The regular session seems to be legitimate, by the way. He isn't using any shills; the other ladies who come are just lonely deluded widows like Mrs. Benedict. And—"

The trust officer shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and re-crossed his legs; he seemed about to protest at the mention of Mrs. Benedict's name, but thought better of it.

"Then there's the research," the young man said thoughtfully. "He had to have some old dictating machine belts, or some kind of recordings of Mr. Benedict's voice, to make tapes imitating it well enough to fool Mrs. Benedict, which they do. She's *convinced* it's her husband talking to her every week."

"I know she is," Mr. Driscoll said resentfully.

"And he had to have all kinds of photographs to know exactly what Mr. Benedict looked like about the time she saw him last, for his movie projections. He'd use an actor, of course, but the makeup would have to be convincing. And, of course, he had to know *everything* about Mr. Benedict, all his life, including a lot of things *she* would be convinced nobody but Mr. Benedict could possibly know. It would cost a lot of money, to find out *everything* about a man, you know."

"Hah!" the trust officer snorted, and smiled a brief thin-lipped smile of savage pleasure. "It would take more than money, in the case of George Benedict! Well, no matter. Apparently he knew enough to persuade Myra it was George who came back from the grave to visit with her at that "store" of his, and George who told her to make a Will and leave everything to him. Myra Benedict would unhesitatingly walk barefoot across hot coals if George advised it, so she's made her Will that way. Now, what comes next?"

"Well . . ." the young man said slowly, and lowered his voice as

though embarrassed, "she dies, I guess."

"She—*what?*" Mr. Driscoll said, coming forward with his hands gripping his knees.

"Well, I mean," the young man said reasonably, "nothing more *can* happen until she dies, can it, sir? She's made the Will, which is what he wanted; now, after she dies, the Will's probated, he inherits this million or so, pays off his bankers, and lives happily ever after. Nobody can touch him; he hasn't done anything illegal. That's the beauty of a really good con game. But of course there's no payoff, in this case, until Mrs. Benedict is dead. You see that, don't you, sir?"

"You mean he's just going to sit back now, and wait for Myra to die? But Myra Benedict is forty-one years old, and in perfect health! I know you said crooks of this kind never hurry, but merciful heavens! Myra'll probably live another thirty years; she might very well live another fifty! Do you seriously imply that this fellow—"

"Well, no; no, I didn't mean quite that," the young man said, and shifted uneasily. "I—he couldn't, very well, you see. As I told you, this money he's borrowed is short-term, high-interest money; he'll have to pay it back fairly soon. And I should think he'd be getting impatient, too. He's been broke a long time, and he wouldn't want to wait around indefinitely for his inheritance, now that it's all set up for him. I should think he'd want her to die as soon as possible, wouldn't you, sir?"

The trust officer stared at the young man with horror in his eyes, but no disbelief at all. "You mean he's going to *murder* her?"

"No," the young man said, frowning unhappily. "This isn't a murder-type operation, sir. This is a big confidence game, with a slick operator in front and some very big bankroll people behind him, and that type doesn't commit murder. They don't commit *any* crime, if they can help it. That's the beauty of the Big Con—*nothing really illegal takes place*! In this case there's no law against people believing in spiritualism, or holding seances; there's no law against Mrs. Benedict leaving her money to anyone she wishes. The law has nothing on the Guru, or any of his backers, and he's certainly not going to stick his neck out for a murder rap. *But* he must be pretty sure he's not going to have to wait around for any thirty years for her to die, and he must have convinced his bankers, too. I just wish I knew, sir, but I don't."

"Well, I must say," Mr. Driscoll said pettishly, "this all seems pre-

posterous to me. That I should be involved in any such thing, I mean. One reads about people being in danger of their lives, and so forth, but that's light reading, for distraction. I'm a banker; this is real. It's *unreal.*"

"Yes, sir," the young man said soberly, and stood up. "Will you want the agency to continue surveillance, sir, or do anything further?"

"No. *Yes.* For the bank, no; you've done everything that could be done, and very satisfactorily, and that's finished. But I have twenty years' affection invested in Myra Benedict, and nearly fifty in George; there are a couple of things you could do for me. Personally, and confidentially of course. I don't want to be called at the bank; I lunch here every day, and I'm here for an hour on my way home every afternoon. Sit down, young man."

Rain battered lustily against the tall windows in the assistant district attorney's office, sluiced down the panes in broad sheets, darkened the noonday sky so that all the lights in the office were turned on. The assistant D. A. hunched forward over his desk, covering a small stack of file folders with his vast hairy hands and forearms as though protectively, glaring up at Mr. Driscoll from beneath ferocious beetling eyebrows. By the window, his broad back turned, staring out at the rain and fiddling idly with the shade cord, the captain of detectives stood solid and silent.

"Your detective agency's done a good job, Ben," the assistant district attorney rasped, and patted the topmost file. "It's all there, and it's all correct. No crime's been committed, and there's nothing to indicate that any crime is contemplated; certainly not murder. As your investigator told you, these aren't the kinds of crooks that kill people. They're far higher in the scale than that. So just what is it you want us to do, Ben?"

"Keep her from dying!" Mr. Driscoll cried, his voice suddenly thin with tension. *"Prevent* a crime! Dammit, Andy, you can see none of it's any good to him until she's dead, can't you? What do you people have to do—wait for the autopsy before you start protecting the citizenry?"

The captain of detectives flipped the window shade cord high in the air and half spun on his heel; then he checked himself and turned back to the window. The assistant D. A. thinned his lips and said icily, "You want a 'round-the-clock protective bodyguard for her, Ben? For an indefinite pe-

riod, against *anything* that could cause her death? And *against her will,* Ben? You know we can't do anything like that. I know it's no good to you, my saying that if and when this lady does die, if it's within twenty years or so, every circumstance of her death will be sifted like flour before that Will goes to Probate. But that's all I can say, Ben, and you know it; you've been all over this with the bank's legal staff, I know you have. The man hasn't done anything actionable, and so far as we know he doesn't contemplate doing anything actionable. He's a citizen too, you know, Ben; he has rights too."

"How about fraud, or false pretenses, or something; *anything* to get him away from her?" Driscoll said a little wildly. "He isn't an Indian, you know; his name's Edward Jamison, and he's a—"

"His name is Guru Rohitasthira," the captain of detectives said heavily, stumbling a little over the name, and turned to face the trust officer. "He changed it by deed poll, in Cook County Court, on the twenty-seventh of September last year. So he's using his own legal name, and we've no evidence of intent to defraud. And would Mrs. Benedict endorse an action, if we could find grounds to bring one?"

Driscoll was silent, and presently the captain, studying him, spoke more softly. "Mr. Driscoll, you know this woman very well; you knew her husband very well. Maybe it would help if you'd spell a few things out for us. What kind of people they are—*were*; that kind of thing. Sometimes, you know, if you know what kind of a person you're dealing with, you can think of things. I've read the files; I know the circumstances of Mr. Benedict's disappearance. He just went down to the docks one morning, on routine business, and nobody ever saw him again. He didn't take anything with him; and he left a million dollars behind, so he hadn't made any *preparations* to disappear. Though he left his affairs in real good order, he—"

"George's affairs were *always* in good order," the trust officer said stiffly. "He had a very deep sense of responsibility. Even when he was a small boy his parents taught him that he was going to be very rich some day, and that wealth carries with it a great responsibility. It conflicted with his basic nature, which was reckless and adventurous. George always wanted to join the French Foreign Legion, and he *did* enlist in the Marines the day after Pearl Harbor, when he could easily have had a commission, but he always put his duty to others first. The day he

married Myra he set up a trust that would provide lavishly for her, no matter what happened to him. He could never get rid of responsibility, and there was never time for anything else. But repressed or not, he was a hell of a guy, always trying to figure a way out from under, but getting in deeper all the time; always cheerful about it, though, and competent."

"Well, I didn't mean we thought he'd disappeared on purpose," the captain said. "Like I said, he hadn't made any preparations, and nobody just walks off with the change in his pocket, not even cashing one last check, you know. Funny thing, though; there never was much of a search put out for him, was there? Routine missing persons report, that's all. I mean, a guy as rich as that, you'd think the wife would hire one of the private agencies, wouldn't you? Like, even your bank uses this agency any time anything smells funny, huh?"

"I believe the bank advised against it," Mr. Driscoll said stiffly. "It did not seem at the time that anything smelled funny, as you put it; the reasonable assumption was that George Benedict had met with an accident, and that the police would be best equipped to find out about it. As you said, he obviously hadn't planned to disappear at all, had he, Captain?"

"No," the captain of detectives said shortly. "All right, I've got a picture of Mr. Benedict. Now, what about her? I mean *then,* not just now. How'd they get along, what was between them? D'you know?"

Mr. Driscoll hesitated. He steepled his fingers and pursed his lips, considering; then he said slowly, "Yes, I know. I suppose I know better than anyone else, probably. Myra never suspected it for a moment, George would never have let her know it, but the fact was she bored him so desperately he—I think he would have left her, if he could have borne the knowledge that he had hurt her, let her down, failed in his responsibility toward her. Myra was lovely and sweet, and she adored George completely, but there wasn't a spark of adventure or originality in her anywhere; she was just—*good,* and *dull.* She loved him so much that she *reflected* him when he was there. Then she seemed alive, I suppose, even to him. But there was never really anything to her, except her capacity to love him."

"Yeah. She must've, to leave this Guru all that loot just for putting her in touch with his ghost, huh? He knew she was that ape about him, when he took off?"

"I thought we'd agreed he *didn't* take off," Driscoll said angrily.

"All right; at the time of his disappearance, did he know how she felt about him?"

"I . . . don't know," Driscoll said softly. "I don't suppose he did, really; Myra wasn't very articulate, and George was impatient. No, I don't suppose she ever did manage to communicate to him the *extent* of her love."

"I see. Well, it's tough on the lady, all right, but I don't see what we can do about it, you know? She's of age; she can leave her dough to anybody she wants. And if she's so happy thinking she's talking to her husband's ghost once a week, well, I wish I knew how to make somebody that rich that happy, you know? . . . So that's it: if Mrs. Benedict has any funny-looking fatal accidents, or *any* kind of fatal accident, we'll pick up the Guru and pin it on him unless he's *really* clean. But there just isn't a thing we can do now. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand. Thank you very much. I'm sorry to have taken your time. I knew I was grasping at straws when I called you, but—"

"Any time, Ben," the assistant D. A. said a little awkwardly, and came around his desk to shake hands. He added almost absently, "And if you remember anything, or think of anything else, to give us a little more to go on . . ."

Two of the dark-skinned silent little men in the cabin of the boat played a desultory game of checkers while the third bent over a newspaper headed LA DIARIA, thin lips moving as he laboriously read. For a moment there was no sound but the lap of water.

"They don't understand English, I suppose?" Mr. Driscoll said, lifting an eyebrow to indicate the three men. "Very well, then. If she would pay any attention at all to my advice, of course I wouldn't have come; you know that. If it were only a matter of her throwing the money away, in spite of my best efforts to persuade her to be sensible, I'd stick to the agreement in that case, too; you wouldn't blame me for doing my best and failing, and I wouldn't blame myself."

He paused, as though expecting some sign of assent or dissent; receiving none, he cleared his throat and, delving into the sagging side pocket of his jacket, said less defensively, a little more forcefully, "However, it's a matter of her life, and that alters circumstances considerably. She is going to die, quite soon and long before her time, and no one is going to be punished for

causing her death. That's something I never anticipated, and I know you didn't. Only you can prevent it, and that at the cost of —*Listen to this*!"

He set the tiny flat box of the miniature tape recorder on the scarred table and touched a switch. The little spools began to turn. Almost at once Mrs. Benedict's voice spoke clearly, and the checkerplayers glanced up. Mr. Driscoll turned the volume far down, and the checker players lost interest and returned to their game.

Mrs. Benedict's voice said shakily, through tears, "*When* can I come, darling? Oh, *please,* George, when can I come and join you so we'll be together again, always? I'm no good without you, George, I never was; I never wanted to live without you, and it's been so awfully, *terribly* long! Can't I come right away, George? *Please*?"

She was crying helplessly now, trying to stifle little choking sobs; the spools continued to turn, unhurried, and presently another voice answered, a voice that seemed to come, with enormous effort, across an inconceivable distance. It was pitched somewhere between a sigh and a groan, and it faded in and out as though the speaker's strength were strained to its utmost to say, "Soon. Soon, Myra, my Mouse. Soon . . ." It faded, as though the effort had become too much.

Mrs. Benedict sobbed once, and said sharply, "*Mouse*! It *is* Mouse, George; it's me! George, *please,* I'm all ready, everything's done; the Guru will have everything we won't need any more, to carry on his work. George, I'm *so* lonely. *Please,* George, when will you tell me how I'm to—do it, and be with you again?"

The spools turned, and there was no answer; then a faint sound grew like the echoing of wind in a distant cave, and at last the voice, very weak, almost inaudible, said, "Next . . . time . . ."

Mr. Driscoll touched the switch and the spools ceased to turn. The little machine was silent. He withdrew his hand, leaving the recorder where it lay, then said harshly, "Suicide is against the law, of course, but if it's successful the lawbreaker is effectively beyond punishment. There's no really effective way to prevent it, when there's no way to prove intent; she isn't going to sit on a high ledge and dangle her legs, you know; she's just going to lie down on her bed and take a whole bottle of sleeping pills, *because she thinks you told her to, because she believes she can be with you again, just by dying*!"

He leaned forward across the

table, thrusting his face toward the other man's, and the other man's lined leathery face was shining wet with tears, rivulets of tears that ran down the deep seams in his tanned cheeks and splashed on the tabletop.

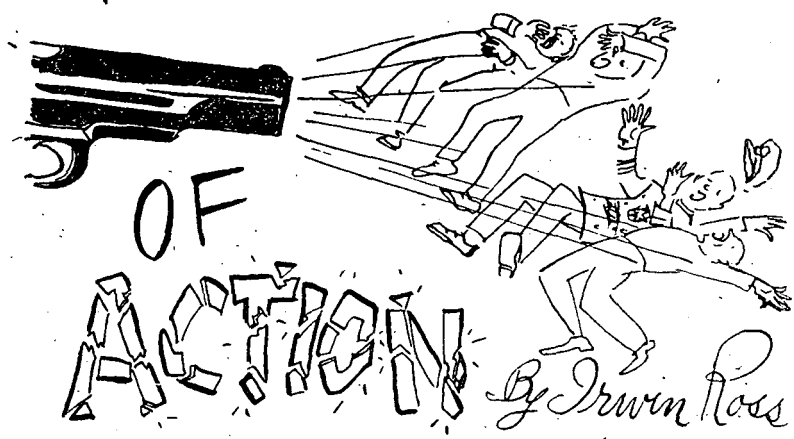
Driscoll spoke, and his voice was both harsh and gentle. "It *seemed* fair, George; I agreed with you. You kept nothing for yourself, you took nothing with you except the chance to be yourself. You left everything behind, and therefore you were free of responsibility; it even seemed to me, and I daresay to you, that you were paying a quixotically high price for your freedom. A million dollars, for the privilege of working seven years at all the roughneck jobs you've had. But it certainly seemed that you weren't hurting anyone but yourself. There wasn't anyone but Myra, and time would heal her grief. She'd have all the dull little things that always filled her dull little life, and money enough to do anything she wanted. I thought so, too, George; I agreed with you; I *admired* you, and I still do. If I hadn't been so happily married and happy with my kids and my job I would have wanted to do the same thing you did. But it doesn't seem to have worked out the way we both thought it would, George; it seems you had one responsibility that didn't get left behind after all, and it's with you still. You're stuck with her, aren't you, George?"

George Benedict made no effort to wipe his tear-wet face, nor to speak; he simply nodded hard, and swallowed.

"I've got an airplane," Mr. Driscoll said, and stood up. "I chartered it. I have to be back at work Monday, haven't been late in twenty years. Maybe we can think, on the way home, of some way of resurrecting you without startling Myra to death. I think she'd really just as soon be alive with you as dead with you, though she isn't much in favor of staying alive without you. And you know, George, it would be pretty hard not to love someone just a little bit who loved you that much, wouldn't it?"

With the commission of the heinous crimes described below, the perpetrator would surely be presumptuous to expect sympathetic understanding.

A MAN OF ACTION!



By Irwin Ross

STUART'S instincts had always been antisocial. As far back as he could remember he'd rebelled against parental authority, had violently resented the disciplines imposed on him by society. He still might have been an upright citizen, in spite of his distaste for authority, if crime had not exerted a romantic appeal on his imagination.

Actually, it was this uncontrolled imagination of Stuart's which had made of him an outlaw. His robberies were perpetrated not so much for loot as for the thrill of seeing his victims quail before the authority of his automatic. Nothing bored him quite so thoroughly as those periods between crimes when it was necessary for him to hide out from the authorities.

Perhaps part of Stuart's success

in evading detection was due to the fact that he lived with his mother in a quiet street in an unobtrusive suburban community. Mrs. Feldman was apparently unaware of her son's criminal proclivities. It was true that his comings and goings sometimes aroused her suspicions. Indeed, she had observed that he never left the house without his gun. But, inconsistent as mothers often are, she objected to it only on the ground that it pulled his pockets out of shape. Not for a moment did she suppose that her son was capable of holding up the First National Bank alone, in broad daylight, as he had done only a week ago.

Of course, Stuart was extremely cunning in the way he cached the proceeds; it did not consist of the kind of money a person could spend carelessly about town. Anyway, money was a secondary consideration with him. In this last job he'd had to drill a policeman. Stuart knew it meant the chair if he was caught. But Officer Riker had got in his way, and there was nothing to do but pump him full of lead.

Stuart had felt no especial emotion at the deed. Riker wasn't the first one he'd had to rub out. There had been a couple of nosy detectives, and a watchman or two. But, like other criminals of his type, Stuart was the possessor of a strict, if quixotic, moral code. He never killed except in self-defense. After it was over, he could sleep the night through with a perfectly clear conscience.

As a matter of fact, on this particular morning Stuart was almost impossible to arouse. Mrs. Feldman had been shaking him by the shoulder for the last half hour. He blinked his eyes. "I don't think I've ever come across anyone quite as lazy as you are, Stuart," he heard her say. "Get up. This is the last time I'm going to tell you."

"Okay, okay," Stuart murmured, flexing his arms. Later he had planned to execute a particularly interesting job, something a bit off the beaten track even for Stuart Feldman. His mother set his breakfast before him and he ate it absent-mindedly, rehearsing in his head the factors involved in this latest of his criminal experiments.

"What I can't understand, Stuart," Mrs. Feldman was saying, "is why you don't settle down and do something useful instead of disappearing the moment my back is turned. What do you do, anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know," murmured Stuart, who wasn't much of a conversationalist. "One thing and another."

"Well, I'm sure I can't imagine

what you're up to half the time. In any case, I'd like you to do a little shopping for me this morning, Stuart."

"Shopping?" said Stuart, wrinkling his brow. For some unexplained reason he had a deep psychological distaste for shopping, a distaste that amounted almost to a horror. It was always a source of contention between him and Mrs. Feldman. Perhaps it had something to do with his tendency to take by violence and force what he needed, but the act of approaching a store counter and purchasing a bagful of groceries reduced him to impotence and made him feel like a callow child.

"Yes, shopping," declared Mrs. Feldman. "Here you've had virtually the whole summer off, Stuart, with nothing to do but vanish each day on some mysterious occupation of your own. And still you protest doing a trivial bit of service for your mother."

"All right, all right," said Stuart. "Okay. Make out a list of what you want, and I'll get it for you. Now I think I'll go upstairs and take a shave."

"Stuart, I wish—" began Mrs. Feldman, but he had already gone.

In the bathroom he felt his chin and it felt pretty rough to him, so he soaped up his face and hastily ran the safety razor around it. Stuart possessed enough *amour-propre* to feel that his deftly executed crimes called for a dapper appearance to match. His chin felt almost as rough after the shave as before, but was cleaner in appearance, and he nodded at himself approvingly. This shopping business irritated him unendurably, but his shrewd intelligence had already concluded that a graceful acceptance of the menial task would do much to allay suspicions concerning the criminal activities to follow.

Before visiting the stores, he thought it would be a good idea to walk through the park and case the job he'd decided upon. Part of Stuart's success as an undetected criminal was due to the fact that his appearance belied his occupation; no one would have supposed for a moment that this neatly dressed, fair-haired young man was a hardened outlaw. On the other hand, his success was also the result of an almost incredible coolness of execution based on careful and scientific planning. Stuart never committed a crime without first weighing every conceivable element of it.

In the present situation he photographed the setting indelibly in his mind, calculated such things as timing and alternative modes of escape. Every day the mail truck

left the post office for the airport at exactly two o'clock, taking the shortcut through the park. It was Stuart's intention to apprehend the driver and make off with the registered mail. He realized it was a robbery which would involve him with the F.B.I. But, like other criminals of his stripe, the odds only increased his desire to pit himself against the might of the federal government. It was a "thrill" job, of course, and not merely for the paltry reward to be found in the registered mail. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary for him to kill the driver.

However, his business now was to complete this detested task of shopping. When Stuart returned home he was so loaded down with various-shaped parcels and bags that he was almost hidden by them.

"There," said Mrs. Feldman, smiling her approbation as she relieved him of the packages. "That wasn't so hard to do, was it, Stuart?"

Stuart shrugged, glancing about cautiously, as his custom was, to see if any agents had picked up his trail. Then he went upstairs and got his gun, first examining the mechanism before slipping it into his pocket.

"Where are you going now?" asked Mrs. Feldman.

"Out," said Stuart laconically.

"Come over here!"

In spite of Stuart's inherent rebellion against parental authority, he obeyed. Mrs. Feldman felt for his trouser pocket. Withdrawing the heavy weapon, she sighed and shook her head. "Will you please be good enough to tell me why you have to go about with this pistol in your pocket *all* the time?"

Exasperated, Stuart reached out to repossess his trusty automatic. "How," he demanded, "do you expect me to hold up mail trucks and so forth without this here gun of mine?"

"Well, I'd think a big boy of eight could be doing something better with his time than playing with a silly toy pistol."

"Aw, Mom, you don't understand," Stuart protested, blinking. "Mothers, they don't never understand nothing!"

A beguiled murderer, when at last he perceives his time is nigh, may be likened to a fresh-caught fish flopping on a riverbank.

THE MAN ON THE HOOK

By Dick Ellis

It was barely nine o'clock when Don Thomas entered the resort hotel lobby. He carried only a small shaving kit, and a newspaper folded under his arm. His eyes were bloodshot and his hand shaky as he signed the register at the desk: *J. D. Jones, Chicago, Ill.*

The desk clerk, who knew a hangover when he saw one, murmured sympathetically, "Dining room's open, Mr. Jones, if you'd care for breakfast. Lots of good hot coffee, perhaps."

Don Thomas grimaced. "Fine. I could use it."

He left his shaving kit at the desk,

crossed the lobby and entered the dining room. He took a small table in a corner, as far as possible from the morning sunlight that flooded in through the huge picture window that made up most of the room's east wall. Beyond the window was a green lawn that stretched down to the shore of a sparkling blue lake. Already a few sailboats scudded about the lake in the morning breeze.

Thomas shuddered at the harsh glare of colors. Little men with hammers were pounding away inside his skull, and his scalp still tingled from the ministrations of that barber who had cropped his shaggy brown hair down to its present bristly crew cut an hour ago.

He ordered coffee and toast. He opened his paper, the early edition of the Midwest City *Guardian*. Banner headlines screamed: REPORTER SOUGHT IN BRUTAL MURDER. The drop head carried on: "City Newspaperman Implicated In Double Slaying."

Don Thomas sent an uneasy glance around the dining room. A good many guests were having breakfast amid a buzz of conversation and the homely tinkle of silverware and china. No one appeared to be paying any attention to him. He gulped coffee and squinted back to the paper.

The story concerned a young woman and her father who had been murdered the preceding night in their apartment in Midwest City, some hundred miles from the lakeside resort. According to the *Guardian* the case was all but solved; there remained the minor detail of arresting the killer. With a sort of mournful outrage, the paper named the suspect—Donald Thomas, age thirty. For the past year Thomas had worked as a reporter on the *Guardian*. The paper implied that Thomas' betrayal of the sacred halls of journalism was almost as bad as the near certainty that he was a sadistic, ruthless murderer.

The evidence against him was more than damning. It was known that he had dated the dead girl—Ilene Levitt, age twenty-five—for several months. Mutual friends stated that it was an often stormy romance. Thomas was a heavy drinker, given to violent fits of temper, and extremely jealous by nature. And Ilene Levitt had now and again enjoyed dating other men, much to Thomas' outspoken anger.

"It was a bad situation," friends said. "Ilene should have broken off with that guy a long time ago."

The previous evening Thomas had brought the girl home by taxi at approximately ten-thirty. There

were witnesses, other residents of the apartment building where the girl and her father lived. These witnesses were sitting in lawn chairs in front of the building, and they not only saw Thomas with Ilene, but also heard a snatch of their conversation as they came up the front walk and entered the building. All agreed that the young couple were engaged in bitter debate.

Ilene was heard to snap, "I tell you, I won't stand any more of it," to which Thomas had retorted, "Yeah? We'll see about that . . ."

One of the witnesses declared that Don Thomas had sounded, "Positively vicious."

The couple had entered the building, and nothing more was seen or heard of them. But it was noted that Thomas did not come out the way he had entered.

At a few minutes before eleven the girl's father arrived: William Levitt, age fifty-six, partner in the prosperous business firm of Levitt and Newer, Inc. The faithful witnesses on the front lawn stated that Levitt was his usual friendly, if rather preoccupied, self. He did express surprise—and some annoyance—when told that his daughter and her young man had come in half an hour before. He abruptly hurried into the building.

Moments later the crack of a shot was heard in the third-floor corridor. Startled neighbors investigated. They found William Levitt sprawled in the open doorway of his apartment, door key still clutched in his dead hand.

And inside the apartment they found Ilene Levitt. She had been brutally beaten and slashed with a knife. The knife, found beside her body, matched a set discovered in the Levitts' kitchen.

So the sequence of events was all too obvious. Donald Thomas had gone into the apartment with Ilene. Between ten-thirty and eleven he had murdered her in a passionate rage. William Levitt had innocently walked into what the *Guardian* called "The gore-spattered murder apartment," and the killer, caught at his grisly work, had shot the father and fled unseen.

There were several ways out of the building, and only the front entrance had been under constant observation.

At press-time, no trace had been found of Donald Thomas, and no photographs of the wanted man had been discovered. He was described as medium size, medium build, with a shock of overlong brown hair, and usually wearing hornrimmed glasses.

However, ironically enough, he was well known to many members

of the Midwest City Police Department. For the last six months he had been assigned as the *Guardidian's* day-shift police reporter. His arrest was expectedly momentarily, if not sooner.

Thomas found that his hands were shaking as he folded the paper and placed it on the table beside his plate. He'd read the story earlier, of course, and heard the repeated bulletins on his car radio during the drive from Midwest City to the resort. But there was no getting used to it.

A shadow fell across the table. Thomas looked up with a start. A squat, pudgy man stood there, and for a moment their glances met. Then the man moved on across the dining room toward the door. He wore a hearing aid, its cord running down from his left ear and under the collar of his rumpled, lightweight jacket.

Thomas watched the pudgy man out of sight. The description of himself in the paper would fit half the men in the country, and with his hair trimmed down almost to the bone, and without his glasses, it was possible that even

some people who knew him wouldn't recognize him. But he suddenly felt as if there were a large neon sign suspended over his head, complete with a flashing arrow pointing at him, and the words: "Don Thomas, Wanted For Murder!"

The little men inside his head redoubled their efforts to hammer their way out. For that, at least, he had a cure. Dropping change on the table, he left the dining room, picked up his room key and shaving kit at the desk in the lobby and started for the elevator.

By now the resort was in full swing. Scattered around the lobby were chattering groups—some dressed for a hike into the hills around the lake, others headed for the lake itself, to swim, or sail, or fish, or all three. Everyone seemed determined to have fun. Most were young, but there were a number of older men and women. These Thomas examined with care as he waited for the elevator to return from the hotel's upper regions, but he didn't see the man he'd come here to find.

The elevator came and he rode it up to the fourth floor. He found his room and went inside, locking the door behind him. He stared longingly at the big double bed, but sleep would have to wait.

Unzipping his shaving kit, he dumped its contents on the bed: razor, soap, toothbrush and paste; a heavy silver-cased wristwatch; a snub-nosed .32 pistol; an unopened pint of bourbon.

This last article was what he wanted right now. He opened the bottle, found a glass in the tiny bathroom, and poured a generous four fingers. He downed it in two gulps. When he could breathe again, he poured a second, smaller drink, then firmly recapped the bottle and put it away in a dresser drawer.

By mischance his eyes met his reflection in the mirror above the dresser. He shuddered. With his bristly hair and red-veined eyes, he might be a convict just escaped from a prison work farm—except he didn't look healthy enough.

He wore wrinkled slacks and a wilted, tail-out sports shirt. He wished he'd been able to go by his place last night and pick up some clothes, but that wouldn't have done at all—not for a murder suspect on the run.

For a moment he thought about Ilene. His face twisted with pain. That silly squabble they'd had last night, and the horror that it had led to. . . . He shook his head violently. He wasn't going to think about that. It led only to self-loathing and sick regret, and those things wouldn't help Ilene—not now.

Nothing would help Ilene; or her father. Thomas had liked William Levitt well enough though the feeling hadn't been mutual. The old man had just two loves in his life—the brokerage business in which he was a partner, and his daughter. For his daughter he'd wanted someone better than a ne'er-do-well newspaperman, and maybe he was right.

It didn't matter anymore.

Don Thomas finished his drink in a gulp. He took a shower and shaved. Then he put his soiled clothing back on. He strapped the heavy watch on his wrist and tucked the pistol under the waistband of his trousers. His shirt concealed the bulge the gun made. As he was buttoning his cuffs there was a tap at the door.

Thomas jumped. "Yeah? Who is it?"

"Message for you, Mr. Jones."

Cautiously he opened the door far enough to see a bellboy standing there with an envelope in his hand. Thomas put a half-dollar in the kid's eager palm, took the envelope, and shut the door.

The message was short: "He's fishing on the far side of the lake. Alone. In boat with outboard motor."

Thomas crumpled the paper and envelope and threw them in a wastebasket. He left the room. It was up to him now, for good or bad, everything—or nothing.

He found that there were boats to rent at a dock a few hundred yards along the beach from the hotel. He walked out onto the veranda, wincing at the sudden yellow glare of sunlight. Shading his eyes with a palm, he spotted the boat house and dock and headed that way.

And a short, pudgy man wearing a hearing aid stood up from a chair on the veranda and stared thoughtfully after him.

Thomas moved along the sandy beach, avoiding the groups of sunbathers and the laughing men and women running to or from the lake. There were a good many boats out on the wide blue expanse —motorboats, sailing craft, even a few canoes. But as far as Thomas could see, all of these were out for the ride. The fishermen would be in the quiet little inlets and coves along the distant shore.

He reached the dock, and rented a battered, leaky boat with an outboard motor. After several attempts he got the motor started, and putt-putted away from the dock, following the shoreline around the lake.

His eyes were smarting from the glare and the strain of trying to see distant objects. He was very nearsighted, but he didn't want to

put on his glasses, not just yet.

It took a good quarter-hour to reach the far shore. There was no beach there; heavily wooded hills plunged right down to the waterline. The shore was notched with coves and occasional inlets where creeks emptied into the lake. And here were the fishermen, alone or in twosomes, their boats at anchor or drifting slowly over the deep blue water, all grimly intent on their business.

Thomas throttled his boat down to a bare crawl. He took his glasses from his shirt pocket and put them on. He had gone perhaps half a mile before he saw the man he wanted—William Levitt's business partner, Francis Newer. He found Newer in a shallow cove shaded by overhanging clumps of willow.

He put his glasses back into his pocket, turned into the cove. He killed his motor, letting the impetus carry him on toward the other boat.

As he approached, Newer cried out angrily and reeled in his line before Thomas' boat could foul it. "Watch what you're doing, you fool!"

Thomas didn't answer until the two boats bumped gently together. Newer fumed. He was a tall, middle-aged man with an angular face glowering under a canvas hat studded with variegated fishing lures.

Thomas said, "Sorry. But I had to see you, Mr. Newer. They told me at the hotel I might find you over here."

"Who the devil are you, and what do you want?"

"I'm a reporter. I wanted to interview you about the murders in Midwest City last night."

Newer's deep-set eyes narrowed. "Do I know you?"

"No, sir, we've never met, but I—"

"There's not a thing I can tell you. All I know is that some maniac named Thomas slaughtered my partner's daughter, then shot Bill when he came in unexpectedly. Terrible thing. *Terrible.*"

Thomas nodded. "Yes, sir. Of course, we know all that. My editor thought you might give us some sidelights. Did you know this Thomas at all?"

"Never saw him," Newer scowled. "Heard of him, from Bill —Mr. Levitt. A drunken bum."

"How did you hear about the crime?"

Newer moved around restlessly. "The Midwest City police called me early this morning. I've been vacationing here the past week. There's nothing whatever I could do in the city, so I decided to stay on until Saturday, as I'd planned. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"What about the business, Mr. Newer? With your partner dead, surely there are—"

"The business will get along very well for another two days. Besides, what possible interest is that to you?"

Thomas shrugged. He was aware that the older man was studying him with ever-deepening attention. Newer had laid his rod and reel down in the bottom of his boat. Now his right hand was concealed behind his back.

There was no sound except the twittering of birds in the trees on the nearby shore and the soft lap of the water against the boats. Glancing back toward the lake, Thomas saw only an empty expanse of water. The two of them might have been in the middle of some remote virgin wilderness. He put on his glasses.

Newer suddenly brought his hand around. There was a gun in it. "You're Donald Thomas," he said. "No—don't move. I should have known right away, from the newspaper—"

"I look a little different without my glasses," Thomas said, "and with my hair cut."

"Well, I'm sure the police will recognize you quickly enough," Newer snapped nervously. "They want you bad—"

"Yes," Thomas agreed, "but you and I know who really killed those people, don't we, Mr. Newer?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" The gun in Newer's fist was aimed directly at Thomas' sweating face.

"When I took Ilene home last night, I left her at the door of her apartment. But as she went inside, I heard her say, 'Uncle Frank! What're you doing here?' Then she shut the door . . ."

Newer didn't move. The gun didn't waver. Finally he said remotely, "So you heard that, did you?"

Thomas slowly nodded. "Yes I did. Ilene and I had quarreled—a silly thing about her wanting me to quit drinking and settle down. It was nothing. Not really. But it did end with my taking her home early, much earlier than anyone had expected."

Newer gave a sudden bark of laughter. "You think the police would believe that for one minute? The idea's insane. That I would harm that girl—"

"It wasn't the girl you wanted. It was William Levitt you were after. Ilene mentioned that you and her father were having trouble. No, when she came in, you saw a golden chance to make everything look exactly opposite to the way it really was—"

Thomas broke off. He thought Newer was going to fire. Then

the older man's finger slackened on the trigger. Thomas managed a shaky breath.

"So you figured it out," Newer said, finally. "Very clever of you, but it won't do any good. I was right here, a hundred miles from the city, last night. Ask anyone around the hotel. Perhaps no one actually saw me from nine o'clock until sometime after midnight, but that's all right. I was out here on the lake, fishing, just as I have been every night for the past week. Ask anyone. I'm a great fisherman. Look at the way I hooked you, Thomas."

"Yeah. You got a hook in me, all right. And even if I wriggled off, you'd still be in the clear, as long as people believe that Ilene was the intended victim."

"That's the general idea." Newer's eyes flicked around the cove, on out to the lake and back. The sides of the two boats scraped gently together.

"I had it figured right, then. I wasn't sure until now," Thomas said warily. "You sneaked off and drove into town to kill your partner, and then she got in your way, a poor kid who never did you the slightest harm."

Newer grimaced. "I'm really sorry about that. I told her so—that it was nothing personal—before I knocked her unconscious. I honestly regret that part of it. But she shouldn't have come in before William got there. I'd made an appointment to see him at eleven . . ."

Thomas slowly rested his hand on the bobbing gunwale of Newer's boat. "Why did you want to kill him?"

"He was getting too close for comfort to finding out certain deals I'd made—not altogether legal deals, but quite profitable to me. But William being William, he would have caused a stink. So I didn't have any choice."

"Too bad about you," Thomas said bitterly.

With a sudden shove, he sent Newer's boat rocking away. Newer dropped his hands for a moment to brace himself against the unexpected movement. The moment was long enough for Thomas to pull the gun from under his shirt. Both men brought up their guns in the same split-second. They glared at each other.

"You want first shot, Newer?"

"Don't be a damn fool—"

"Use it or drop it. Right now!"

Newer abruptly lowered his gun, let it fall to the bottom of the boat. "You don't dare fire. Too many people would hear the shot. All you can do is run—until they catch you. So go ahead, Thomas, run."

"After what you've told me?"

He wryly picked up Newer's gun.

Newer grinned. "Who would believe you? A wanted criminal, running for your life. Look at you."

"I do look the part. That was the idea," Thomas said. "This whole business was arranged for this moment, Newer, to get a confession out of you—the newspaper stories, some of which I wrote myself, all of it."

"You're—you're lying."

The cops never suspected me, Newer. When I left Ilene, I did what any red-blooded newspaperman would do after a quarrel with his girl. I went straight to a bar and got drunk. I was there a quarter of an hour before William Levitt was killed. I had some very good witnesses, including two off-duty cops I know."

Newer scrubbed a hand over his bony face. "It's still my word against yours."

"Not quite. The Midwest City boys arranged to have the sheriff's office in this county plant a deputy out here to help me. There he is now."

Newer gave a startled grunt, jerked his head around to follow Thomas' gesture. A squat, pudgy man was just emerging from the trees down at the end of the cove, about fifty yards away.

"He couldn't possibly have heard," Newer snarled.

Thomas said quietly, "Wave your arms, Deputy."

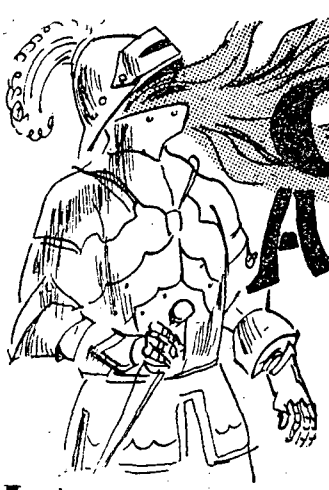
The man on the shore obligingly waved his arms.

"Amazing what they can do with radio, these days," Don Thomas said. "This watch on my wrist, for instance, is really a miniature transmitter, and the hearing aid the deputy is wearing—that's a receiver, attached to a tape recorder he has in his coat pocket. What's the matter, Mr. Newer? You look sick. Like you'd just swallowed a hook, maybe."

Francis Newer looked more than sick.

"Let's get to shore," Thomas said. "I've never met the deputy there, but I want to shake his hand. And Mr. Newer? Don't take it so hard. There's nothing personal. Nothing personal at all."

A coup de grace, adroitly executed, is intended to end one's suffering, but there are occasions when it is roguishly calculated to prolong it.



CITIZEN'S ARREST

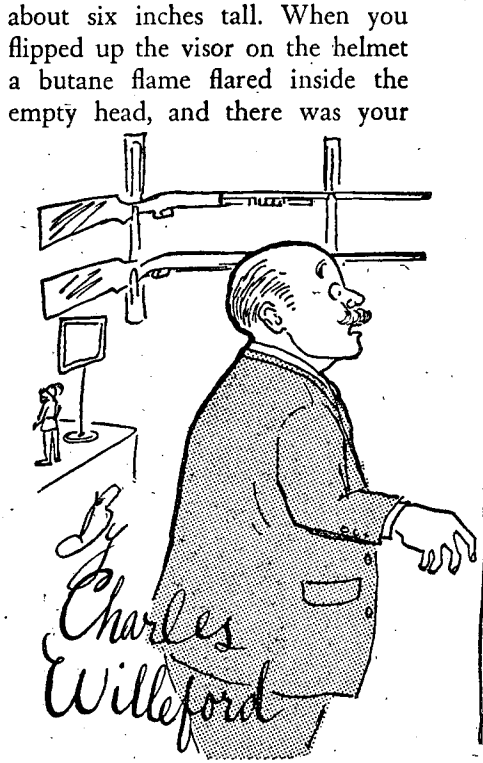
It was fairly late in the afternoon when I stopped at Gwynn's Department Store on my way home to look at some new fishing tackle. Gwynn's is the best store in the entire city; there are three full floors of everything imaginable. So I always took my time shopping at Gwynn's; a man who's interested in the outdoors can spend several hours in there just looking around.

My back was to the man at the counter—the thief, I should say—because I was looking at the shotguns in the rack behind the locked glass doors. He must have seen me, of course, but he didn't know, I suppose, that I could see his reflection in the glass doors as he stood at the next counter. There was no clerk in the immediate vicinity; there were just the two of us in this part of the store on the ground floor. Casually, as I watched him in the polished glass, he snatched the heavy lighter off the counter and slipped it into the deep right-hand pocket of his green gabardine raincoat.

I was pretty well shocked by this action. As a kid, I had pilfered a few things from ten-cent stores—pencils and nickle key-rings, and once a twenty-five-cent "diamond" ring—but this was the first time in my life I had ever seen anybody deliberately *steal* something. And

It was an expensive table lighter: $75 not counting tax. Only a minute or two before I had examined the lighter myself, thinking how masculine it would look on the desk in my office or on the coffee table in a bachelor's apartment. Of course, as a married man, I couldn't afford to pay that much money just for a cigarette lighter, but it was a beautiful piece of work, a "conversation piece," as they say in the magazine ads. It was a chromium-plated knight in armor about six inches tall. When you flipped up the visor on the helmet a butane flame flared inside the empty head, and there was your light. There had been a display of these lighters in shining armor on the gift counter, and now, as the big man sauntered toward the elevators, there was one less.

If I'd had time to think things over I am inclined to believe now that I would have ignored the theft. As I've always said, it was none of my business, and nobody wants to get involved in a situation that is bound to be unpleasant, but at that particular moment a young clerk appeared out of no-



where and asked me if I needed any help. I shook my head, and pointed my chin in the general direction of the elevators.

"Do you see that man over there in the green raincoat? I just saw him take one of those knight table lighters off the counter and put it into his pocket."

"Do you mean he stole it?" he asked, in a kind of stage whisper.

"No." I shook my head again. "I didn't say that. All I said was that he put the lighter into his pocket and then walked over to the elevators."

The big man entered the elevator, together with a teenaged boy who badly needed a haircut, and the operator clanged the door closed.

The clerk, who couldn't have been more than twenty-two or three, cleared his throat. "I'm afraid, sir, that this sort of thing is a little out of my province. Would you mind talking to our floor manager, Mr. Levine?"

I shrugged in reply, but there was a sinking sensation in my stomach all the same. By mentioning the theft I had committed myself, and now I knew that I had to go through with it no matter how unpleasant it turned out to be.

The clerk soon returned with Mr. Levine, a squat bald man in his early forties. He wore a plastic name tag and a red carnation on the left lapel of his black silk suit coat.

I briefly explained the theft to Mr. Levine. He pursed his lips, listened attentively, and then checked out my story by going over to the glass case of shotguns to prove to himself that the gift counter was reflected perfectly in the polished surface.

"Would you be willing, Mr.—?"

"Goranovsky."

"Would you be willing, Mr. Goranovsky, to appear in court as a witness to this shoplifting? Providing, of course, that such is the case."

"What do you mean, if such is the case? I told you I saw him take it. All you have to do is search him, and if you find the lighter in his raincoat—in the right hand pocket—the case is cut and dried."

"Not exactly, sir. It isn't quite that simple." He turned to the clerk, whose eyes were bright with excitement, and lowered his voice. "Call Mr. Sileo, and ask him to join us here."

The clerk left, and Mr. Levine steepled his fingers. "Mr. Sileo is our security officer," he explained. "I don't want you to think that we don't appreciate your reporting this matter, Mr. Goranovsky, because we do, but Gwynn's can't afford to make a false accusation.

As you said, there was no clerk in the vicinity at the time, and it's quite possible that the gentleman might have gone off to search for one."

I snorted in disgust. "Sure, and if he can't find one on the second floor, maybe he'll find one on the third."

"It's possible," he said seriously, ignoring my tone of voice. "Legally, you see, no theft is involved unless he actually leaves the store without paying for the item. He can still pay for the lighter, or put it back on the counter before he leaves."

"Sure, I see. Why not forget the whole thing? I'm sorry I brought the matter up."

"No, please. I merely wanted to explain the technical points. We'll need your cooperation, and it's Mr. Gwynn's policy to prosecute shoplifters; but you can't make charges without an airtight case and a reliable witness. If we arrest him within the store, all the man has to say is that he was looking for a clerk, and there isn't anything we can do about it. He very well may be looking for a clerk. If such is the case, we could very easily lose the goodwill of a valuable customer."

"I understand; I'm a businessman myself. In fact, I hope I'm wrong. But if I'm not, you can count on me to appear in court, Mr. Levine. I've gone this far."

We were joined by Mr. Sileo. He was slight, dark, and businesslike. He looked more like a bank executive than a detective, and I had a hunch that he had an important job of some kind with Gwynn's, that he merely doubled as a security officer. In a businesslike manner, he quickly and quietly took charge of the situation.

I was directed to stand by the elevators and to point out the thief when he came down. Mr. Levine was stationed in the center aisle, and Mr. Sileo took up his post by the Main Street entrance. If, by chance, the shoplifter turned right after leaving the elevator—toward the side exit to 37th Street—Mr. Levine could follow him out, and Mr. Sileo could dart out the main door and circle around the corner to meet the man outside on 37th Street. Mr. Sileo explained the plan so smoothly, I supposed it was some kind of standing procedure they had used effectively before. The eager young clerk, much to his disgust, was sent back to work by Mr. Levine, but he wasn't needed.

To my surprise, when I looked at my watch, only ten minutes had passed since I reported the theft. The next ten minutes were much longer as I waited by the elevators

for the man in the green raincoat to reappear. He didn't look at me as he got off, and I pointed him out by holding my arm above my head, as Mr. Sileo had directed, and then trailed the man down the wide corridor at a safe distance. I wondered if he had a gun, and at this alarming thought I dropped back a little farther, letting Mr. Levine get well ahead of me. Mr. Sileo, who had picked up my signal, went out the front door as soon as it became apparent that the man was going to use the Main Street exit. I could see Mr. Sileo through the glass door as he stood on the front sidewalk; he was pretending to fumble a cigarette out of his pack. A moment later, just about the time I reluctantly reached the Main Street doorway myself, Mr. Levine and Mr. Sileo were escorting the big man back inside the store.

I couldn't understand the man's attitude; he was smiling. He had a huge nose, crisscrossed with prominent blood veins, and he had a large mouth, too, which probably looked bigger than it was because of several missing teeth.

The four of us moved silently down the right side aisle a short distance to avoid blocking the doorway. For a strained moment nobody said anything.

"I'm sorry, sir," Mr. Sileo said flatly, but pleasantly, "but this gentleman claims that you took a desk lighter off the counter and put it into your pocket without paying for it."

I resented the offhand way Mr. Sileo had shifted all of the responsibility onto me. The big man shrugged and, if anything, his genial smile widened, but his bluish white eyes weren't smiling as he looked at me. They were as cold and hard as glass marbles.

"Is that right?" He chuckled deep in his throat. "Is this the lighter you mean?" He took the chrome-plated knight out of his raincoat pocket.

"Yes," I said grimly, "that's the one."

He unbuttoned his raincoat and, after transferring the lighter to his left hand, dug into his pants pocket with his right.

"This," he said, handing a slip of paper to Mr. Sileo, "is my receipt for it."

Mr. Sileo examined the receipt and then passed it to Mr. Levine. The floor manager shot me a coldly furious look and returned the slip of paper to the man. The thief reached into his inside jacket pocket for his checkbook. "If you like," he said, "you can look at the checkstub, as well."

Mr. Sileo shook his head, and held his hands back to avoid tak-

ing the checkbook. "No, sir, that's quite all right, sir," he said apologetically.

Mr. Levine made some effusive apologies for the store which I thought, under the circumstances, were uncalled for—but the big man cut him off in the middle of a long sentence.

"No harm done," he said good-naturedly, "none at all. In your place, I'd have checked, too. In all probability," he qualified his remark.

"It was my mistake," I said, finally. "I'm sorry you were inconvenienced." And then, when neither Mr. Levine nor Mr. Sileo said anything to me, and the big man just stood there—grinning—I turned on my heel and left the store, resolving, then and there, never to spend another dime in Gwynn's as long as I lived.

There had been no mistake. I had seen the man take the lighter, and there had been no clerks anywhere near us at the time. I stood beside my car at the curb, filled with frustration as I ran things all over again in my mind. A trick of some kind had been pulled on the three of us, but how the man had worked it was beyond my comprehension. I opened the door on the sidewalk side and slid across the seat. As I fastened my seat belt, a meaty hand opened the door and the big man in the green raincoat grinned in at me. He held out the shining knight for my inspection.

"Want to buy a nice table lighter, buddy?" He said, chuckling deep in his throat. I can let you have it without any tax."

I swallowed twice before I replied. "I knew you stole the lighter, but how did you get the receipt?"

"Will you buy the lighter if I tell you?"

"No, damn you; I wouldn't give you ten cents for it!"

"Okay, Mr. Do-Gooder," he said cheerfully, "I'll tell you anyway. This morning there were several lighters on the counter, and I bought one of them at ten A.M. After stashing the first one in a safe place, I came back late this afternoon and got this one free. Unfortunately, you happened to see me pick it up. The receipt I got this morning, however, served me very well for the second. The store stays open until nine-thirty tonight, and I had planned to come back after dinner and get another one. So long as I took them one at a time, one receipt is as good as three, if you get my meaning. So the way I figure it, you ought to buy this one from me because I can't come back tonight for my third lighter. You cost me some money, fella."

"I've got a good mind to go

back in and tell Mr. Sileo how you worked it."

"Really? Come on, then. I'll go in with you."

"Get the hell out of here!"

He chuckled, slammed the door, and walked away.

My fingers trembled as I lit a cigarette. There was no mistaking my reaction now—I was no longer frustrated, I was angry. If the man had been my size—or smaller—I would have chased after him and knocked out the remainder of his front teeth. I also considered, for a short moment, the idea of telling Mr. Levine how he had been cheated. All they had to do was to inventory their remaining lighters (there couldn't be too many of them in stock, an expensive item like that) and they would soon find out that they were one short. But after the cold way they had treated me, I didn't feel like telling them anything.

A policeman's head appeared at the car window. "Is this your car, sir?"

"Of course."

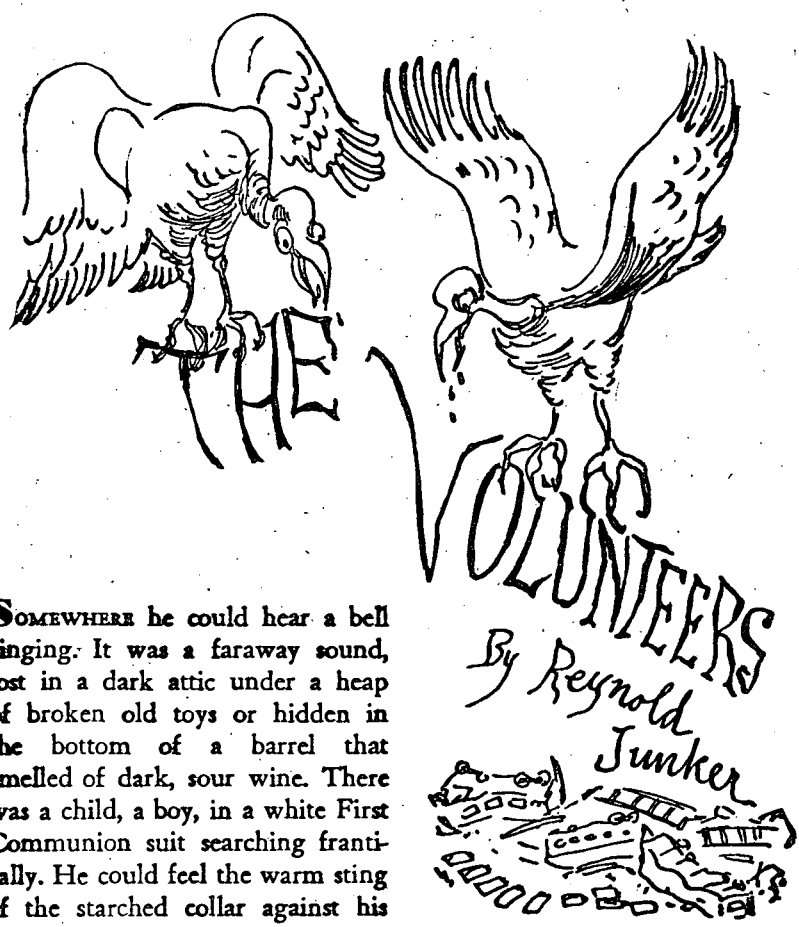
"Will you get out, please, and join me on the sidewalk?" He walked around the front of the car, and I unfastened my seat belt and slid back across the seat; I was more than a little puzzled.

"Take a look," he said, pointing at the curb when I joined him on the sidewalk. "You're parked well into the red zone."

"That isn't true," I said indignantly. "Only the front bumper's in the zone; my wheels are well behind the red paint. There's supposed to be a little leeway, a limit of tolerance, and I'm not blocking the red zone in any way—"

"Don't argue with me, sir," he said wearily, taking a pad of tickets out of his hip pocket. "Ordinarily, I'd merely tell you to repark or move on, but this time I'm giving you a ticket. A good citizen in a green raincoat reported your violation to me at the corner just now, and he was a gentleman who had every right to be sore. He said he told you that you were parked in the red zone—just as a favor—and you told him to go to hell. Now, sir, what is your name?"

One may resolve for himself the matter of which is the more palatable or, perhaps, the less strenuous to abide: the raucous magpie or the taciturn vulture.



SOMEWHERE he could hear a bell ringing. It was a faraway sound, lost in a dark attic under a heap of broken old toys or hidden in the bottom of a barrel that smelled of dark, sour wine. There was a child, a boy, in a white First Communion suit searching frantically. He could feel the warm sting of the starched collar against his freshly scrubbed neck. It had been

his brother's suit. And before his brother? And since?

Then the ringing was right there inside his head, pushing against the warm numbness of sleep. The child was crying.

Santro Ristelli shifted his bulk into a half sitting position and ran a hand over his black, day-old beard. The bed creaked someplace in its joints. He leaned back against his elbows and listened. The only sound was the hoarse, strained breathing of the child sleeping on the couch in the front room.

The phone rang. Santro didn't move. He wondered sleepily how many times it had already rung. He had been awake only seconds. Maria, his wife, jerked awake at the sound. She, like her husband, was a dark, heavy person but had learned to move quickly. With five children, she had to. "What's wrong? What is it?" Her voice was thick with sleep.

In a few seconds, Santro thought, she will be wide awake, but now her voice is like that, as though she was afraid to say all of the things that are bottled up inside her. In the old days she sang and cried and laughed, but now there is nothing to laugh and sing about, and what's the use of crying? There is only the slow, heavy voice always asking, "Is anything wrong?"

Without answering, Santro slipped from the bed onto the bare wooden floor. He picked his way through the darkness past the front room and out onto the landing. Outlined against the dirty gray light from the open roof, his squat, hairy body looked like a circus bear. He lifted the phone from the wall before it stopped ringing. "Hallo?"

"Santro?"

Even in his sleep, he would have known the voice. It was like a loud hissing in his ears, someone telling another a great secret, but very anxious that everyone should overhear. "Johnny. . . . What the hell do you want?"

"Santro, my old friend, is that any way to talk to a buddy?"

"'Buddy.' It's the middle of the night. I need sleep, not smart talk. I'm the one who works for a living, remember?"

"Sure, Santro, sure. How could I possibly forget? Work all day, sleep all night. Someday you'll be the patron saint of the working class."

"Don't make fun, Johnny. Don't make fun." Santro could feel all of the sleep seeping out of him.

"Then listen, friend, and listen good. This is no smart talk. There's been a train wreck just outside of Fairfield. One of the specials coming up from Miami jumped the

track or missed a stop. I didn't get it all exactly."

"So?" Santro heard the child groaning awake in the front room.

Johnny breathed sharply into the phone. "Is that all you can say? Think, Santro. Use something besides your belly for once. The special is loaded with a bunch of rich so-and-sos who have nothing to do but ride back and forth between New York and Miami looking for someplace to throw their money around."

Johnny paused, then continued slowly. He was saying each word carefully, as though he were driving nails. "Fairfield is a small town. They're calling for volunteers to help with the bodies. The police can't handle it. They need help—with the bodies."

"I don't know," Santro said, more to himself than into the phone.

Johnny's voice became an angry hiss. Santro remembered the time the younger man had spoken at a local union rally. He remembered the voice and eyes and the arms rising and falling wildly.

"Santro, listen, do I have to go down there myself and bring back the stuff to show it to you? All you have to do is pick it up off the ground—at most empty a few pockets or fingers. They're dead! It's no good to them anymore. They're dead! What do you say?"

"Shut up. Shut up for a second, will you? I've got to think about it. There are other things. . . ." He shut his eyes and tried to ask himself what they were, these other things. The old words and answers he had learned as a child floated back across the years, but he could never be the child in the white communion suit again. How easy the answers had been then. He had learned all of the answers, but nobody had ever really explained the questions. They had never told him that he would have to choose and that no matter what the choice, someone had to get hurt. He had had to learn that for himself. Someone is always getting hurt. Every door you open leads to another door.

Johnny's voice was a whisper. "What about your old lady? And the kids? Is young Santro still having that trouble? It's a terrible cough. Sometimes, it's almost as though his chest were breaking in . . ."

"Liar," he whispered, but there wasn't any anger in his voice. Santro ran a hand across his face. He was wet with perspiration. Johnny was whistling softly under his breath. Santro tried to swallow. His mouth tasted of something stale and brown. "How soon will you be here?"

"Just as soon as I can."

"I've got to get dressed."

"Better get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry. I'll only need time to dress."

"Just as well. Tonight we'll be eating steak. Your old lady—"

"Don't come to the house. I'll meet you at the corner."

"OK. I'll be driving my cousin Guido's truck. We'll need a couple of picks and a shovel and maybe some—"

"Bring them. Whatever you think." Santro hung up the phone without waiting for an answer and stood listening to the silence around him. He felt a little sick. He tried to think, but he could only remember.

Maria was sitting up on the edge of the bed. "Is anything wrong?" she asked dully. "Who was that?"

Santro picked up his clothes from the chair on which he had laid them the night before and began pulling them on.

"Where are you going? What's wrong?"

"That was Carlo," he lied quickly. "There's been a train wreck over near Fairfield, and he wants us to go over and help with the—hurt. The police can't handle it. I guess it's pretty bad."

"Why you? What about the others? The younger ones?" The sound of her voice made him want to scream, to strike out at her.

"A bunch of us are going. It's pretty bad." He could feel the words catching at the bottom of his throat. It was hard to keep from shouting.

"Will you lose any time on the job? Will they pay you?"

He turned to face her. She looked far away, like a ghost or part of a dream. "Money!" he answered angrily. The words were coming loose now. "Always money. Isn't there ever anything else? Why can't there ever be something besides money?" He looked at her and found himself hoping that she would be able to tell him something he hadn't been able to find

for himself. There was still a chance. Somewhere, someplace maybe he had missed something.

"How can there ever be anything else for us?" Her voice neither fell nor rose. The words tumbled across her lips simply because the muscles expanded and contracted.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "The company wants us to go. It will look good for them. We'll be paid. Maybe even a bonus."

He finished dressing in silence. When he looked back at the bed, Maria had rolled over on her side and lay facing the wall. He couldn't tell whether or not she had fallen back to sleep. He picked up his jacket, turned off the light and started out through the front room.

Santro walked slowly through the soft gray morning. The streets smelled sweet and damp and a kind of freshness ran through them like something lost. His mind was flooded through with thoughts of Maria and of the children. They came into his mind, not separately and distinctly, but fused together, a jumble of names and faces without any real name or face: Maria's voice, the boy's eyes, a cough, a cry. They tumbled together crazily. It was like looking into a toy kaleidoscope or even more like being inside one. Everything was lost in the shifting patterns of colored glass. Everything he once thought was sure seemed to become tangled and changed each time he moved. He couldn't be certain of anything except that he seemed to be moving all of the time; not going anywhere, just moving.

He turned quickly at the sound of the truck pulling up at the curb beside him. It rattled to a stop and the door swung open. Santro climbed up into the pickup and pulled the door closed behind him. He leaned back against the worn seat and tugged the collar of his jacket up around his chin. Johnny laughed lightly, shrugged his shoulders and gunned the engine. The truck groaned around the corner and jerked heavily toward the highway.

"Don't be so gloomy, Santro. It's not the end of the world."

"Maybe it is. For some." He avoided looking at Johnny.

"The weak must die so that the strong may live, eh, Santro?"

"And vultures. What about the vultures?"

Johnny laughed softly. He reached across the seat and slapped Santro sharply across the thigh. "You and me, vulture and friend. The vultures going to loot the vultures. They loot from us when they are alive and we, like any self-respecting vultures, return the favor. Hah, hah."

They drove in silence to the highway where they turned north toward Fairfield. Johnny whistled the same tune over and over until it became like a faucet dripping someplace in the middle of the night. Santro shut his eyes against it and tried to relax.

"You know what's wrong with you, Santro? You're an Italian . . ." He said 'Eyetalian' as though it were a word he had never heard before except in street jokes. Santro opened his eyes and stared out along the narrow white ribbon of highway. It had already begun to grow quite light. ". . . and you know what's wrong with *Eye*talians? They're a whole race of nothing but stomachs. Stomachs. The women are always pregnant and the men are always eating. I don't think there's been an *Eye*talian with an idea since—since da Vinci."

"And you, Giovanni mio, of course we mustn't forget you," Santro said wearily.

"Not me. Not the kid." Johnny grinned at him and tapped his head just in front of his ear. "Up here, plenty of ideas, American ideas."

"Johnny, Johnny the American. Excuse me."

They approached Fairfield from the south along the highway that paralleled the railroad and then turned onto a dirt road that ran along the tracks on either side. The wreck wasn't visible until they had made a jogging turn to the right and drove up over the top of a softly sloping hill. The pickup jerked down the incline slowly. Santro had never seen a train wreck before. The only trains he could remember seeing were the shining blue and silver limiteds that screamed past the gangs working near the tracks and the faded red-brown locals that labored up and down the coast between the small resort towns. What he saw before him now looked like something he might have seen in a newsreel somewhere, something quick and alive and violent that had broken and snapped into silent deathlike pieces. Beams and splinters of wood and metal stuck out at crazy angles from the tangle of the wreckage. At places up and down the line he could see small puffs of smoke rising and settling. The narrow shoulder beside the tracks was dotted at places with dark blankets. He felt the same stale brown taste come up into his mouth. A couple of the bodies hadn't been covered over yet. Maybe they had run out of dark blankets.

Johnny drove down the sloping road to a small canvas tent that had been set up about halfway

down the line. A dark, squat man came out and motioned for them to stop. Johnny waved back at him and pulled up beside the tent.

"Just in time," he grinned at Santro.

"There's hardly anyone here."

"That's what I mean. Just in time."

Santro reached over to open the door at his side. Johnny grabbed at his sleeve. "In case they ask us for our names, I'm Johnny Williams and you're Santro Candoli. Get it?"

"Got it, Johnny Williams," Santro nodded.

They dropped down from the truck and Johnny came around quickly, past Santro, to where the fat man was standing. "I'm Johnny Williams and this here's my friend Santro Candoli. We came over to help. They said over the radio that the police couldn't handle it and you were sending out a call for volunteers."

The fat man spat into the dust at his feet and shrugged at Johnny. "Leave it to the radio."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean leave it to the radio to figure out a way to exaggerate the thing—anything."

"You mean this," Johnny motioned with his arm at the wrecked train, "isn't the special from Miami?" He had stopped grinning.

"Kid, this ain't even the special from Hoboken." He spat again.

Santro looked closely at the faded red cars. He smiled weakly.

"But I guess since you're here, we can use you to help finish cleaning up this mess. We're short of tools. Did you bring any?"

"A pick and a couple of shovels," Santro answered. He felt sort of giddy, as though he were listening to someone telling a very funny joke. He could still get breakfast and make it to work on time, but there was something he wanted to watch: the American; the idea man. After all, they had come to help, he and Johnny Williams.

"You may as well grab them and start on down the line. We figure we already got all or mostly all of the bodies. There couldn't have been too many passengers. If you find one, call for one of the guys and he'll tag it and cover it up. Maybe you'd better check and see if they want you to start anyplace in particular." He spat again and went back into the tent.

Johnny stared down the line at the small group of men bending over their shovels. Santro walked back to the truck and pulled out the two shovels and the pick. He shouldered the shovels and tossed Johnny the pick.

"Let's go, volunteer."

"Of all the luck! Of all the rot-

ten luck! It makes my blood boil!"

Santro laughed softly. He wanted to laugh out loud and clap Johnny across the back. Here they were, volunteers, clearing the track so that the Miami Special wouldn't be delayed. All of the rich devils who have nothing to do but ride back and forth between New York and Miami looking for someplace to throw their money around would be back in New York for dinner—thanks to the volunteers.

They started down the line toward the small cluster of men. Johnny walked behind Santro, kicking up the dirt with his feet. He didn't look at the older man. Santro didn't figure that he would, not for a while anyway.

"Son of a . . . of all the rotten, stinking luck!"

"Oh well, it was an idea." Santro spoke evenly. He wasn't about to give Johnny the chance to explode. That would get it out of his system too soon, and Santro wanted him to live with it for a little while longer.

They made their way to a man who was standing over a shovel watching a couple of others. A small pack of yellow tags showed from inside his jacket pocket. "Volunteers," Santro said, when the man looked up at them.

His eyes were like those of the man in the tent, and Santro half expected him to spit. Instead he straightened up and looked down the line to the rear of the train. "We already finished up most of it on this side. I don't know why he sent you down here. How about going around to the other side and checking with the boys around there? They started after we did."

Santro nodded and motioned to Johnny. They started slowly down the line toward the last car. Santro glanced at his watch. He should have been leaving for work. Neither of them spoke. Johnny picked up a rock and heaved it ahead of them at one of the beams that lay across the track. It hit something soft and kicked up a small puff of dust. Something yellow caught the light and flickered through the dirt. Something groaned.

Santro caught at Johnny's shoulder. "Listen!"

The groan came again. Santro caught his breath. He looked quickly back toward the others. One of the cars jutted out between them. They wouldn't be able to see him and Johnny. Something yellow flickered again.

Johnny dropped to his knees and began pawing at the dirt with his hands. He dropped back against his haunches and held a woman's gold bracelet in the sun for Santro to see. Santro dropped the shovels and shoved him aside, away from

the woman. The younger man fell back heavily into the dust and glared up at Santro. He grabbed for the pick.

"You fool, she's alive! Didn't you hear it?"

"You're nuts. You're hearing things." Johnny pulled his hands away from the pick. It had been only a gesture. Santro knew he wouldn't use it.

"Help me get her out of here."

Each of them grabbed at one end of the beam and lifted it from the woman's body. They cleared away the dirt and dragged her out from under the wreckage. She had been pinned there on her stomach.

"Turn her over gently."

They laid her out on her back. Santro dropped to his knees beside her and pressed his ear against her chest. He could hear her heart beating faintly. There were other sounds. Sounds of something breaking or broken inside of her. He pulled himself up on his knees. "She's alive."

Johnny had moved off to one side behind him. Santro looked back at him. The younger man's eyes were like those of a frightened child. He tried to say something, but the words caught inside him and all that came out was a small whining sound. He pulled the bracelet out of his pocket and let it fall into the dirt. "Her face . . . her poor face," he muttered weakly.

Santro looked down at the face for the first time. It was broken and blue with bruises, and the eyes were open.

Santro heard Johnny drop to his knees. He was retching. Santro placed his hand against the woman's chest. He could feel the soft tapping cadence of the heartbeats. He looked down into the woman's face again. The colored glass dropped away. All of the faces in his mind became one final, distinct face. . . .

He placed the flat of his hand against her chest and forced down against it. One final spurt of blood ran purple from the twisted mouth before the eyes rolled up into the lifeless head.

Santro reached down and removed a pin from the dead woman's dress. He took two rings, one a diamond engagement ring, from her fingers.

"She was all but dead," he said to the stillness around him. "The children deserve a chance to live. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is—for us, anyway."

He stood up beside the body. Johnny was gone. The pick was still where he had dropped it. Santro reached down and picked up the bracelet. He turned and started back to the truck. The jewelry was heavy in his jacket pocket.

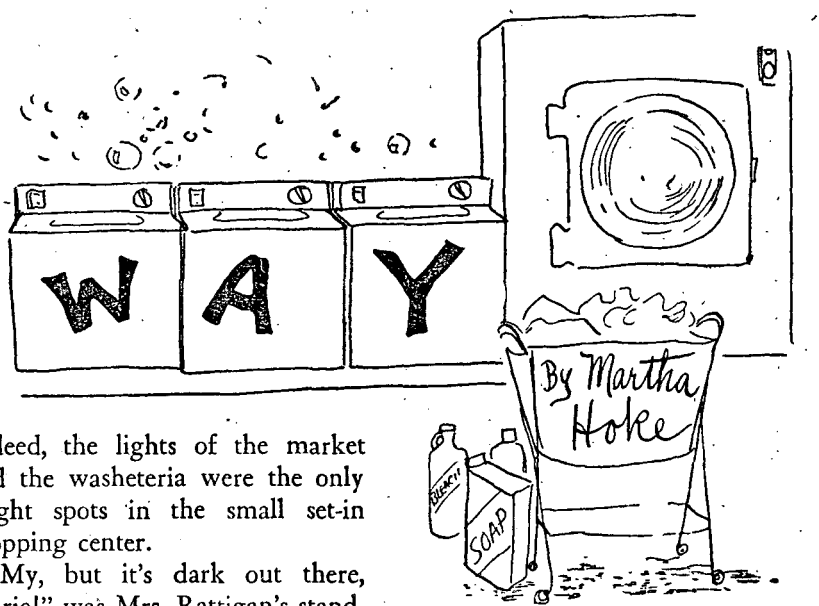
A washeteria functions in the relentless pursuit of grime, and the patron, too, is subject at times to an appropriate cleansing.

Miss Gussie Sloan's venture into crime in her sunset years was undoubtedly inspired by Mrs. Rattigan. However, as an avid addict of thriller fiction, Miss Gussie lately found herself identifying deliciously with the criminals, rather than with the purveyors of law and order. So, perhaps she was simply ripe for suggestion.

Miss Gussie and Mrs. Rattigan first met in the sanitary environs of the Avant Garde Washeteria. Subsequently, they shared an enjoyable hour each Wednesday night to the tune of sloshing, rinsing and whirling clothes. Wednesday being church night, there was a lack of customers, which assured the two ladies of washing privileges and privacy to further their acquaintance.

Since they adhered to a certain washeteria code, their knowledge of one another was limited to personal observation concerning the weather and current news topics. Miss Gussie did know Mrs. Rattigan lived somewhere in the neighborhood and worked as a clerk. Mrs. Rattigan's cognizance of Miss Gussie was equally nebulous.

Mrs. Rattigan always arrived first, started her washing, and seated herself by the window next to the row of pink hair dryers. From this vantage point she could watch the comings and goings at the Quickie Market two doors away.



Indeed, the lights of the market and the washeteria were the only bright spots in the small set-in shopping center.

"My, but it's dark out there, dearie!" was Mrs. Rattigan's standard greeting as Miss Gussie wheeled her laundry cart through the door at exactly ten thirty-five; and Miss Gussie would peer over her shoulder, nodding agreement. But one Wednesday night began with something new.

"It's a wonder the Quickie Market ain't robbed," Mrs. Rattigan offered. She clicked her teeth and turned to stare at Miss Gussie's spare frame swaddled in her usual rusty, calf-length skirt and frayed cardigan buttoned virtuously under her chin.

Privately, Miss Gussie was a little embarrassed by Mrs. Rattigan's lavender stretch pants which embraced and revealed overly plump contours. But after all, Mrs. Rattigan meant well. Once she had even treated Miss Gussie to a soft drink, and she did offer companionship of a sort.

Now Miss Gussie found herself slightly short of breath for no reason she could name. "Why the

Quickie Market?" she whispered.

Mrs. Rattigan pursed her magenta lips. "Well, take a night like tonight. Hardly nobody around and there goes the patrol car right on schedule." She pointed a plump finger as the black and white police car ducked into the center, slowed, and went about its business. "You read all them crime magazines so you ought to know. What could be better? The guy that owns the store don't pick up the money half the time—I hear he drinks. And that goof he's got working nights can't stay awake." Mrs. Rattigan sighed, hoisted her lavender-clad derriere from the gaily striped chair, and waddled over to the machine holding her unmentionables.

Miss Gussie loaded her clothes thoughtfully. An idea was beginning to titillate her. She slipped coins into the slot and watched the machine start to rotate. Trying to make her tone casual she asked, "How much money do you suppose they do keep there?"

"A couple hundred bucks I should say, maybe more." Mrs. Rattigan eyed her sharply. "But this is a nice, respectable neighborhood. They're safe enough." She added emphatically, "What I couldn't do with even a hundred!" She ran her tongue over her upper lip. "What would *you* do with a hundred bucks, Miss Gussie?"

Miss Gussie didn't have to think about this. She knew. "Why, I'd go to Los Angeles. I've always wanted to. My sister lives out there."

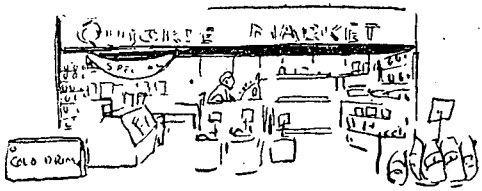
"Not me!" Mrs. Rattigan grinned. "Me, I'd head for Vegas. I got a system."

Miss Gussie sighed and sat down, folding her hands primly in her lap. "I wish they had a little music here," she changed the subject. "One place I used to go to did." But her mind was not on music. It could be done, she thought excitedly. It could!

Miss Gussie's reading was curtailed throughout the next week. Mostly she just rocked and planned.

The following Wednesday night she let herself quietly out of her "room with kitchen privileges and private entrance." For once she did not wince because her "private entrance" opened into the alley. Just in case, she wore a pair of cotton slacks under her hiked-up skirt. Her outer covering consisted of a long, old-fashioned duster which had belonged to her late brother. An added touch was a man's battered felt hat pulled down over her eyes in the best tradition.

Miss Gussie trundled her laundry cart down the alley, waited until no car lights were in sight, then



scurried across the street into the alley running back of the shopping center. Mrs. Rattigan would wonder why she was late but it couldn't be helped. She melted behind a hedge as the patrol car passed, then pushed her cart quickly around the corner into the area way of the deserted store flanking the market. Mrs. Rattigan's ancient car was nose to curb in front of the washeteria. But Miss Gussie had assured herself Mrs. Rattigan could see only up to the curb from her favorite seat by the window.

Miss Gussie would take a certain pride in the following few minutes. As she slipped into the market, the clerk drowsed with his back to the folding doors. Of course, committing assault with a sockful of detergent tablets lacked glamour, but she knew the cleverest criminals made do with props at hand. The man grunted and slumped over the counter. In short order Miss Gussie deposited a fistful of bills in the plastic case she had prepared, thrust the case into the deep pocket of the duster, then hurried back to her parked cart. She pulled off the slacks and duster and stuffed them in the bottom of the cart under her laundry. Then, sailing the old felt hat into the street, she hastened to the Avant Garde, her heart pounding.

Mrs. Rattigan's broad brow was creased. "I thought you wasn't coming, dearie. It's real spooky in here alone in spite of the lights." She raised her voice above the noise of the machine. "Here, take number three. It gets 'em cleaner,

I think. Seems to for me, anyway."

Miss Gussie nodded, trying to smile. What could be more innocent than two ladies of uncertain years doing their washing? She shook two of the detergent tablets out of the sock into the washing machine. The rest she dumped into her voluminous purse.

Suddenly the lights of a car turned into the market. Mrs. Rattigan pressed her face to the window. Miss Gussie, poised in the act of loading number three, waited for the shout. Her heart gave a bit of a leap when it came. "Better safe than sorry," she advised herself, and stuffed the duster and slacks behind the rest of the laundry in the machine. With pride of accomplishment she closed the door firmly, inserted dimes in the coin slot with fingers that only trembled slightly, and joined Mrs. Rattigan at the window as sirens shrilled.

Mrs. Rattigan was expressing herself loudly. "I ain't no hero, and you and me are going to stay right here. Something sure happened at the market."

Miss Gussie hugged herself mentally. She was sorry about the clerk, but the sock had been well padded with a pair of pink rayon bloomers, and she had hit him with care. And now she had the money where nobody would think to look for it. The two women watched without words as police cars pulled up to the market.

With the lessening of noise, Miss Gussie turned from the window. "Your machine has stopped," she advised. She knew what would follow. It was a weekly game between them.

Mrs. Rattigan left the window. "We'll know soon enough, I bet." She waddled over to number five and began pulling out wet clothes. Without looking at Miss Gussie, she said as usual, "I guess I'll dry 'em tonight." Her voice was apologetic. "I know *you* like to hang out, but it looks like rain, and anyway I gotta go to work tomorrow. Thanks, dearie," she said gratefully, as Miss Gussie took one handle of the basket. "It's real nice of you to help me."

As usual Miss Gussie said to herself, "Doesn't think I have the price of a dryer." As usual she kept her eyes cast down. She knew Mrs. Rattigan was trying to spare her feelings.

Her back was toward the door when the policeman swung it open. He looked around the antiseptic room and back to the two women. "Did either of you ladies see anybody else around here?" he asked. "The Quickie Market was robbed since the patrol went by. Clerk was knocked over the

head and five hundred dollars taken."

Mrs. Rattigan shook her head. "I didn't see nobody." She used her thumb inelegantly. "Miss Gussie here was late though. She has to walk right by the market. Whew! Five hundred bucks!"

Miss Gussie felt her face redden. The policeman looked at her curiously, and under his gaze something happened to her composure. "But I didn't see anything really," she stuttered.

"Surely you could see into the market, Madam?"

"No . . . no!" she cried. "There was something . . ." She closed her eyes, her mind suddenly a terrified blank.

The policeman took her arm firmly. "Perhaps we'd better have a look at what you saw." His voice was grim now. He turned to Mrs. Rattigan. "I'll get your statement later. Please wait." He propelled a quaking Miss Gussie to the door.

In front of the market he loosened his grip and suppressed a chuckle as he saw, blocking the view from the street, a woman-high pyramid of multicolored toilet tissue. Miss Gussie stared, weak with relief. The young policeman looked with amusement at Miss Gussie's scarlet face and led her gently into the market.

She had a bad moment when she faced the dazed clerk, although she felt sure he had not seen her. The interview was shortlived, to her relief, and ten minutes later the policeman walked her back to the washeteria solicitously. Mrs. Rattigan stood by the door, her basket piled high with dry, folded clothing.

Miss Gussie's eyes jumped to number three machine. The door was open and her laundry was not in sight. Mrs. Rattigan smiled diffidently. "I just decided to treat you to the dryer, dearie," she said. With obvious embarrassment, she added, "I really do think it looks like rain and I had a couple extra dimes."

Miss Gussie fumbled her way to one of the striped chairs. Somehow she managed to thank Mrs. Rattigan, who brashly handed the policeman her basket of wash. "Here, young man. I sure would appreciate your putting this in my car." She called back over her shoulder. "They'll be out in ten minutes, dearie. I'll be seeing you."

Miss Gussie watched the young policeman heave the basket into the back of Mrs. Rattigan's car. They talked for a minute and then walked toward the market. *If I ever get out of this,* she thought, and heard herself say aloud, "Never again." But as she watched the

clothes tumbling in the dryer she found herself humming an off-key version of "California, Here I Come."

Subconsciously she heard Mrs. Rattigan's car start up and then the noise of the engine was gone. The dryer clicked and began to slow. It stopped—then suddenly burst into flames which quickly enveloped her clothes.

Miss Gussie stifled an involuntary scream. Even in her horror she knew she must not get help. Numbly she watched until the flames died. Then, all at once, she was terribly relieved. She began to feel a warm glow of affection for Mrs. Rattigan. A life of crime isn't all it's cooked up to be, she thought ruefully, peering at the mass of smoldering ashes through the window of the dryer.

The door opened. "Thought I smelled smoke, ma'am. What's going on in here?"

Miss Gussie pointed wordlessly to the dryer and stumbled weakly to a chair. The young policeman opened the door of the dryer and doused the pile of ashes. Then he turned to Miss Gussie, pointing to a sign just above the dryer: Notice! Articles made of dacron, nylon, rubber, or plastic may ignite after the dryer stops. We are not responsible if this should occur. Signed, The Management.

"My wife did the same thing once," he offered kindly. "Put a shirt bag in with my summer uniform by mistake. Hope you didn't lose too much." Miss Gussie could only shake her head.

He helped her to her feet and pushed her cart to the door. "I'll report this. Never you mind. Too bad your friend didn't wait and take you home but she said she had a bus to catch. Would you like me to walk you home?" He looked dubiously at Miss Gussie's face.

"No . . . no!" Miss Gussie declined, then added, "What was it you said about Mrs. Rattigan's bus?"

"She said you were forgetful sometimes—told me she's going to Las Vegas tonight. What a place for a vacation! I bet you'll miss her."

One who fosters a state of gullibility is not apt to pause for deliberation at the precarious brink of irrevocable self-deception.

DON TOTHE

GLADYS found herself gasping for breath as Jimmy ended the kiss. She pushed the boy away from her, firmly but hardly forcibly. "It's after six."

"So what?"

"I can't stay."

"Why not?" He grinned, obviously teasing her with his blue eyes. "Why do you have to go, Glad?"

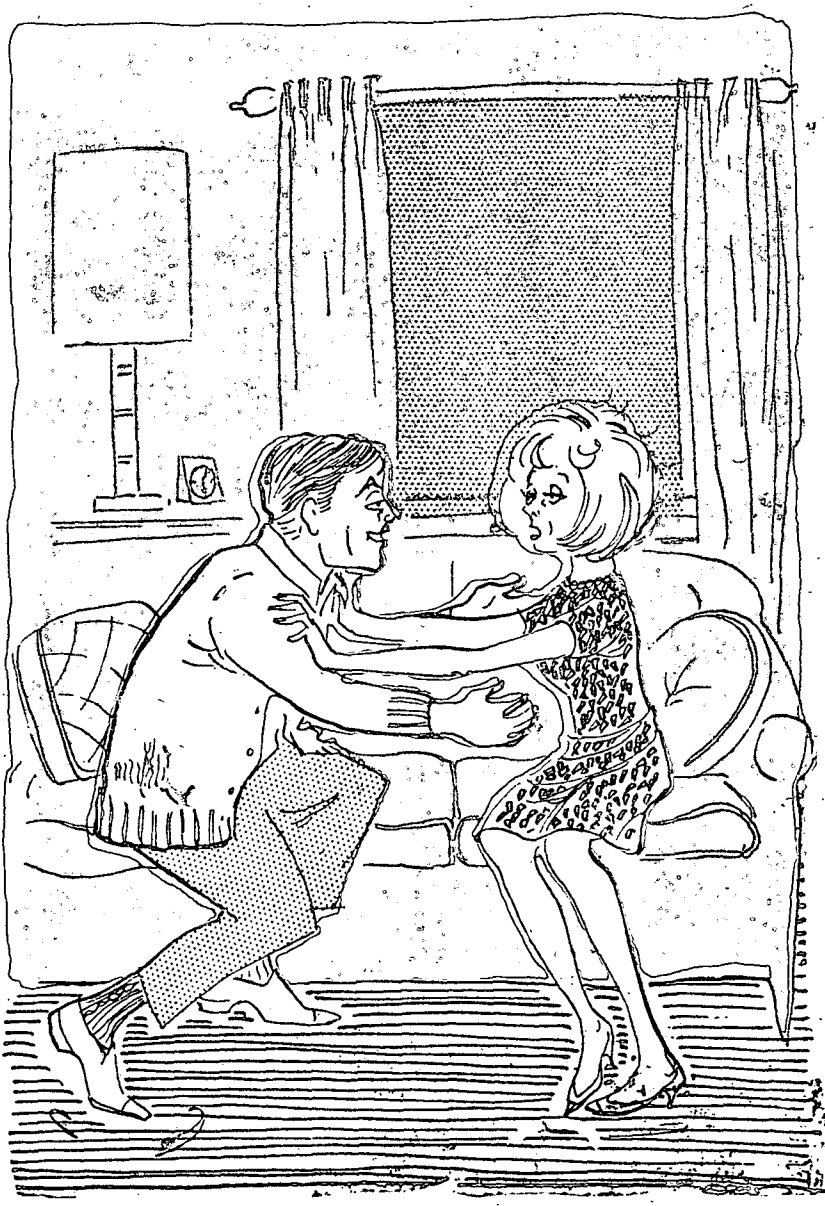
"Oh, you know." Strange she should think of Jimmy as a boy; he wasn't that much younger than she—twenty-six to her thirty-one. "You know I've got to fix Herbert's supper. It can't be late."

"Good old Hippo Herbert! Let the old buffalo fix his own grub. Maybe he won't pack in so much that way."

"He'll wonder if I'm not there when he gets home."

"So! Let him wonder. Let him get a little suspicious."

She smiled, mostly to herself.



Herbert suspicious of her having an affair, especially with a college kid? He would more easily believe that the sun would be setting for the last time that very night. She shook her head. "I'd better go." Reluctantly, she stood up from the couch.

"Glad?"

She looked back at him. Just the way he whispered her name—Herbert had never called her anything but Gladys—pushed goose pimples out on her arms.

"Come here." He smiled, then winked, beckoning with a sly wave of his hand. "One more kiss."

"No, I'd better—"

"One more smooch," he begged, patting the couch. "What's it going to hurt?"

"But I—"

"You don't like to kiss me." He pouted, shoving out his lower lip so far that a giggle escaped her before she could stifle it.

She went to him, sat down, and stared into his eyes. "You know better than that, Jimmy."

"Prove it." Roughly, he pulled her to him, and kissed her hard on the lips. She closed her eyes.

Up in the clouds for two weeks now, she found it almost impossible to believe that it was all happening, really happening, to her. Jimmy Cramer lived in the other half of the duplex she and Herbert owned. He'd been there three months, but until two weeks ago had done little more than to say "Hello" to either of them. Then had come that fantastic morning when Gladys had gone over to use the renter's telephone, to notify the phone company that her own telephone was out of order, and to call Herbert for something or other. It was early, and she was still in her robe. As she was putting down the receiver, she felt his arms moving around her waist, tightening. Too shocked to object, or even to move, she froze. When he turned her around and kissed her, she struggled—but not for long. After only slight hesitation, probably because he was doing what she'd been dreaming about for over a month, she'd found herself kissing him back.

Herbert had been more than happy to rent the apartment to a young bachelor, rather than to some family with a troop of kids that would wreck the place in six months. Her husband's unlikeliest imaginings would never include visions of her carrying on an affair with the neighbor.

A warm flush reddened her cheeks again as the kiss came to an end. She stood up. This time, Jimmy, with a sly smirk on his face, let her go.

She walked to the kitchen, pur-

posely swaying her hips as she moved away from him, and went out the back door. It was dark outside. Her gaze guiltily swept the top of the gray block wall enclosing the patio common to both apartments. She could move from one apartment to the other with no fear of being seen—that is, if the rear gate was closed—and if some kid wasn't playing around on top of the wall or in one of the tall trees in the area.

In the bathroom, Gladys straightened her hair and restored order to her makeup. Studying her face for several minutes in the mirror, she decided that she definitely was looking younger. A certain sparkle had returned to her eyes, a glow that had been missing for a dozen years—she'd married Herbert thirteen years ago. The glimmer faded as she thought that Herbert was due home in an hour.

She turned on the radio in the kitchen as she began preparing dinner for the two of them. There was bean soup, pork chops, string beans, and mashed potatoes—and cherry pie. Herbert would undoubtedly consume half of the pie before leaving the dinner table. "Consume" was the only way to describe the way Herbert ate.

She was softly humming in tune with a dreamy ballad, trying to pretend she was somewhere else in another time, when the music stopped abruptly.

"We interrupt this program for an important news bulletin. The sheriff's office reports that Albert Menlo, a worker at the Jarvis Brothers Bakery, has confessed that early this morning he added a gallon of rat poison to a batch of the firm's cherry pie filling. It has been learned that Menlo is a former mental patient. Any Jarvis Brothers cherry pie purchased today is liable to contain a lethal dose of the poison. We repeat: cherry pies baked by the Jarvis Brothers Bakery and purchased today may be poisonous. If you have one of these pies in your possession, notify the sheriff's office immediately. The following markets and stores sell Jarvis Brothers goods. . . ."

Gladys only half-heard the rest of the announcement. She'd learned enough. She stared at the cardboard pie container on the drainboard. JARVIS BROTHERS BAKERY stood out in bold red letters on the side of the carton. She held her breath, thinking, plotting, realizing in a moment that unspoken prayers had been answered. With sudden inspiration, she knew what had to be done. There was little time. She must act fast, but she had to keep her wits about her.

Lifting the pie from the contain-

er, she set it down carefully next to the sink. A glance at the clock over the refrigerator told her she had fifteen minutes at the most.

The announcer's words, *"liable* to contain a lethal dose," rang in her ears. She switched off the radio, hurried out to the garage, and turned on the light. There at the rear of the garage was the shelf with the garden supplies: sprays, nozzles, insecticides, ant powders, snail pellets, grass seed, bone meal, fertilizer. There! There it was! She found it, a small, brown bottle with prominent red crossbones on it—the rat poison. She dashed back to the kitchen, the bottle clutched at her breast.

Gladys had used several minutes of her time. Herbert was maddeningly punctual, never more than a few minutes early, but seldom late. Time was precious, but she had to be certain the pie contained a "lethal dose of the poison."

She sliced the pie. The crust was fresh, flaky, and it broke around the edge as she made the four cuts. Carefully, she unscrewed the lid from the brown bottle. Raising the top crust of each slice with a fork, she slowly poured the pale fluid over the cherry filling. She paused, staring, waiting, expecting the red to turn to green or black or blue, but no suspicious discoloration resulted. The filling retained its cherry red. Satisfied, she sighed, and wet her lips in anticipation.

Herbert would be home in five minutes.

A hissing noise startled her. The soup on the stove was boiling over and splattering against the hot burner. She turned off the gas, and moved the pan to another burner. The chops were almost done. She stirred the potatoes.

The pie—that was the important thing. She put one slice on a dish, then returned the pie to its carton. She glanced around the kitchen to pick a likely hiding place. Herbert might have heard the newscast, but she didn't want him to see the JARVIS BROTHERS label. If he had heard the news, but didn't spot the carton, she could always tell him she'd baked the pie herself. The radio in the car was broken, though, and if luck was with her, he hadn't heard anything about the poisonous pies.

She was pouring Herbert's soup when she saw the empty rat poison bottle in plain sight on the sink. "Oh gosh," she muttered. She had to dispose of it. Throwing it into the rubbish was no good. There wasn't time to take it out anywhere. The garbage disposal! She'd seen Herbert run coke bottles through it. She turned it on, ran plenty of water, and dropped the bottle into the opening in the sink,

covering the opening with the stopper to prevent flying glass.

The disposal emitted loud grinding and battering noises for several moments. Then it stopped—jammed! The motor hummed, complaining against the load.

A car door slammed.

Gladys flipped off the switch. In the same moment, she saw the bottle cap, the crossbones. She slipped the cap into the pocket of her dress.

Her hands trembling, she finished pouring Herbert's soup just as he lumbered into the kitchen, entering through the rear door. He nodded to her, without speaking, and sat right down at the table

"Hello, Herbert." Her voice was shaky, but he would never notice. He seldom listened to her. She tried to smile. "Just in time, dear."

"I'm starving." He patted his ample stomach. "Missed my coffee break. Long distance call just when the coffee wagon came. Stupid secretary forgot to get me coffee, and the darned machine was busted again."

"Poor dear," Gladys sympathized. She set his soup down in front of him. It was steaming.

"Hot! It's too hot!" He scowled, his fat lips twisting. "Can't you see it's too hot?"

"I'll get an ice cube." She took a cube from the freezer and dropped it into his dish, not gently enough. Soup spattered onto his shirt.

"Gladys! How clumsy can a woman get! Look what you did." His face was distorted now in an anger that set his fat cheeks to jiggling.

"I'm terribly sorry, dear." She blotted his shirt with a dish towel, recoiling at the touch of his blubbery stomach, mentally comparing it to the flat, muscular midsection of young, virile Jimmy. For the past week, she'd been unable to bear even the sight of Herbert's flabby body. "I was only trying to—"

"All right, all right! Forget it."

She poured a dish of soup for herself, staring at it as she gently blew each spoonful, trying to shut her ears to Herbert's slurping. She found her gaze returning again and again to the piece of pie in front of Herbert. The harmless looking dessert was to be her salvation. Was it turning blue at the edges? Or was it her eyes, her imagination, deceiving her? She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them. The pie was red again.

She had to get out of the room, out of the house. She could never stay and watch him die, no matter how much she hated him. Besides, if she were somewhere else, she could stay away long enough to make certain he was dead. She might even arrange to bring some-

one back with her to discover the body.

She thought first of going to Jimmy, but quickly decided against it. That was impossible; she had no excuse for going there. Besides, it was best to keep Jimmy out of it. There was time later to tell him the truth, to tell him what she'd done to free herself for him.

Mary Ann, her neighbor—that was it. From Mary Ann's house she could see her own kitchen. Mary Ann would ask her to stay for coffee—she always did. But with what excuse could she go there while Herbert was still eating dinner? She grew desperate. Herbert finished his soup. She dished up his meat and vegetables, and set his plate down in front of him. He went right to work with knife and fork.

What if Mary Ann had heard the news flash? What if she brought it up while Gladys was there? And before Herbert was dead? Mary Ann would probably pat her on the back if she knew Gladys had murdered Herbert. Mary Ann knew what Gladys had gone through for a dozen years, but one could never tell about people. No, she'd better stay away from Mary Ann's house.

"I'm not hungry for some reason." Gladys stood up. "I think I'll go out and water the flowers."

"It's dark outside. Don't be stupid," Herbert mumbled in protest.

"But it's warm," she countered. "It's a nice night."

Herbert shrugged, and returned to eating.

Gladys went out the back door. She turned on the water, and started sprinkling the lawn. Glancing toward Jimmy's kitchen window, she caught him looking out at her. He pressed his lips against the pane, and she blew him a kiss, smiling. Jimmy moved away with a wave.

Herbert had a large life insurance policy. Added to what she planned to sue the bakery for, she had no financial worries; she'd have fifty or sixty thousand dollars, at the least. She wondered how long that much money would keep Jimmy interested in her.

Minutes passed while she moved slowly around the yard, soaking the lawn and spraying the flowers next to the house.

The shock of hearing the sound of music from the kitchen caused her to drop the hose. Herbert had turned the radio on. If the news bulletin were repeated now, all might be ruined. She picked up the hose, and waited breathlessly. Herbert must certainly be eating his pie by now. She visualized the contortions he would make as the cramps wracked his body. Her own stomach muscles tightened as

she thought of how he would grab at the fire in his stomach.

She heard a low moan—not in her imagination. A crash! The kitchen window was open; she heard every sound.

"Gladys! Gladys!" Even in his death throes, even begging for her help, he had to call her "Gladys."

Herbert shuffled across the kitchen, stumbling—she could tell by the sounds. The back door opened. Staring at it, she backed away. The door opened enough for her to see him, the light behind him silhouetting his large frame in the doorway. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't. He grimaced, his eyes bugging out in pain. He fell against the door, pushing it closed in front of him. A thud, then silence, told her he was on the floor, with the life slipping out of him.

She waited several minutes—hours it seemed—with the water gathering in a pool at her feet. It soaked through her shoes, sending an icy shiver rippling through her body. She forced herself to stand there, to keep watering. Jimmy wasn't at his kitchen window—he hadn't heard anything. Nobody had heard anything except Gladys. She and Herbert were alone in the world; just the two of them existed for the past ten minutes.

She would have to wait for as long as she could bear it to make absolutely certain he was dead. Thoughts crowded into her mind until her temples pounded. The half-crushed poison bottle still was stuck in the disposal. Something had to be done about that.

Would she be able to keep her wits when the police started questioning her? Or would she slip, make a stupid blunder, simply crack wide open and admit all?

Already her guilt-ridden mind fabricated a mystery witness who would appear at her trial, someone who would claim to have seen everything.

Why was she jumpy? What could possibly make the police suspicious? The bakery worker was the one who had put the poison in the pie—that was clear enough.

Slowly, she moved toward the back door, her shoes making a wet, squishing sound with each step.

She would have to do something before phoning the sheriff. She had to unjam the disposal, and grind up the rest of the poison bottle; the bottle cap—she hadn't forgotten it—had to be disposed of. And she would have to make certain Herbert had not a single breath of life left in him.

There were so many things to think about, so many details, any one of which could trip her. No wonder murderers were nearly al-

ways caught . . . and tried . . . and . . .

She pushed against the back door. It refused to budge. She went around to the front door. It was unlocked. She walked through the house, darkened except for the kitchen, unconsciously walking almost on tiptoe.

A crazy thought entered her mind. Herbert was playing a trick on her. He'd found out what she was doing, and now he was pretending to be dead.

She stepped into the kitchen. A scream escaped her lips at the sight of him, sitting up, his back against the door, a crazy grin on his face. When she looked closer, noticing that he was still as a statue, she saw that it wasn't a grin. His once rubbery face was now frozen in a pattern of contorted agony, his mouth and eyes opened wide. His hands still clutched at his stomach.

Swallowing dryly, she moved past him, opened the junk drawer and picked out a wrench that Herbert used to unjam the disposal. She'd done it a few times herself. She inserted the wrench into the disposal, took a minute to engage it in the right slots, then turned the handle counterclockwise. The cutter blades refused to move. She tried again, grunting at the effort and praying at the same time. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. Herbert's body kept intruding at the edge of her vision. She rested a moment, took a deep breath, and tried one supreme effort. The rotor broke loose.

She ran water, then reached under the sink to press and release the red button on the bottom of the disposal. She turned on the switch. The motor started quickly, ran freely, and finished its job in ten seconds. That took care of the bottle—now the cap. Gladys was amazed at how clearly she was thinking.

She went to the bathroom, and dropped the bottle cap into the bowl. She flushed the toilet, the water swirled and went down. The cap was there, in the bowl. She waited for the tank to fill, and tried again. The cap seemed glued to the bottom of the bowl; it refused to move. Frantically now, she tried to think of another way to dispose of it. The water filled the tank again. She tried once more. The cap floated a moment, then disappeared with the water. The evidence was gone, well into the city sewage system, completely irretrievable.

One more task, and she was home free. Distasteful as it was, she had to make sure Herbert was dead. Returning to the kitchen, she knelt down beside the body. Avoiding looking at his face, she

felt along his fat wrist for his pulse. She found none. His chest, too, was unmoving. No trace of a heartbeat was apparent.

A feeling of sudden exhilaration took her breath away. He was dead. Herbert was dead. And she was free.

Kneeling there on the linoleum, she closed her eyes, and thought of strong, young, eager arms around her for a long time to come. She stood up, a smile playing at her lips, and went to the kitchen telephone. With no compassion she looked down at Herbert's body as she dialed.

The policeman, a blond young man who reminded her of Jimmy, had listened carefully to her story, seldom interrupting her.

Her story was a short, simple one, easily told: Herbert had come home for dinner, as usual. She had served his food, then had gone outside to do some watering. She'd been outside for an hour or so. When she tried to go back into the house, assuming her husband had finished eating by then—

"I—I tried to get in through the back door. It seemed to be stuck, so I went around to the front. I found Herbert th—there on the floor, in the kitchen. He wasn't breathing."

"And you called the police right away, of course?"

"Yes. I called immediately."

"Why didn't you phone a doctor?"

"He—Herbert wasn't breathing. He was dead."

"You can't always be sure. Even a doctor can't always be sure." The policeman studied her face. Nervously, she turned away. There was something in his eyes that was difficult to read—not outright disbelief, but a certain wariness, a certain calculating appraisal.

"Looks like some kind of poison, something he ate, from the look on his face."

Gladys cringed.

"Oh, I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to go into detail. Do you think he might have taken poison —intentionally, I mean?"

"No, no, of course not. Besides, we don't have any poison around the house."

"Not even rat poison?"

She hesitated. *He must be trying to trap her,* she thought. "Now, I'm not so sure. We might have . . . but no, Herbert would never have—"

"There are all kinds of poison to be found in most any house, ma'am, a thousand kinds. Take just rat poison alone—there are even different kinds of rat poison. Did you know that?"

A cold finger touched her spine. Different kinds of rat poison! It

hadn't even occurred to her.

"Most of them use arsenic, though," he added, when she didn't say anything.

There was still hope, still a chance, she told herself.

"Did you hear the newscasts this afternoon, ma'am?"

Trying to trap her again. "Newscasts?"

"Yes. About the trouble at the Jarvis Brothers Bakery."

"Why no, I haven't had the radio on today at all," she lied, then wished she hadn't as she wondered, frantically, if there were some way they could tell by checking the radio. Are the tubes still warm? These police are so darned clever on things like that.

"Well, ma'am, there were several bulletins this afternoon warning people that cherry pies from the Jarvis Brothers Bakery contained rat poison. You didn't hear about that, huh?"

"Why no, I've told you the radio wasn't on." Then, as if just realizing what he'd told her, she gave him the proper look of shocked surprise. "Poison? In the pie? But Herbert had cherry pie with his dinner—a Jarvis pie, I think. You mean, that's what—what killed him?"

"We don't know what killed him."

"But you said—"

"There was a later bulletin—just an hour ago. The fellow who confessed to pulling that crazy stunt is a nut all right, but the sheriff figures that it would have been impossible for the guy to do what he said he did. He was just trying to get his picture in the paper. You know, one of them kooks that's always trying to get his name in the paper."

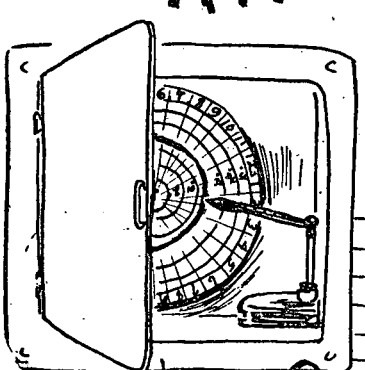
Gladys felt faint. "But if they said on the radio—"

"The sheriff didn't want to take any chances until we could check it out. We got back enough pies to be sure. I know it's not any consolation, ma'am, but I'm sure the coroner will find out what killed your husband. We'll have a report very soon now."

She stared at his young face, and it would have reminded her of Jimmy, except for the stern look of accusation in the unblinking blue eyes.

Inured as we are to the eggheads in government, the reader may be inclined to doubt the validity of a practical example.

AN UNKNOWN QUANTITY



by Leo R. Ellis

THE frozen food plant had the only lighted windows in a block of industrial buildings. A uniformed officer greeted me at the door and pointed up the stairs. When we entered the office, I saw Sergeant Conn was handling the case.

"I'm not on duty," I told Conn, and introduced him to the Prof.

The Prof is a pretty good Joe for an egghead. He isn't a full professor, only an assistant professor of physics over at State University.

"The Prof has been bugging me on how we should handle homicides," I explained. "When I caught this call on my radio, I decided to bring him over. He won't get in your way," I added quickly.

Conn nodded and gave us the details. It was a murder-burglary job, where the cashier had been killed and the safe rifled. The front door was locked, and there was no

forced entry. "The cashier and bookkeeper were working late," Conn said, and nodded toward a paunchy, balding man hunched over a desk. "The bookkeeper claims he was out when it happened."

The meat wagon had taken the body away, but there was a congealed puddle of blood on the floor. A heavy, brass hose nozzle lay on a paper towel. "The murder weapon?" I asked.

"Yeah, somebody took it off the fire hose in the hallway and bashed Larkin's head in. It's been wiped clean."

I nudged the Prof. "Not much like solving a classroom physics problem, is it?"

The Prof ran his fingers through his short, black hair. "I don't know," he said, stretching his long neck out, as if he were looking for a chart. "You do have certain known facts here. A problem consists of constants, variables and an unknown factor."

Conn gave him a funny look, then turned to the man at the desk. "Okay, Tibbet," he said wearily. "Let's run through it again."

Tibbet jerked his head up from over the ashtray of half-smoked cigarette butts. "Mr. Larkin and I were working late, as we always do at the end of the month," he said mechanically. "At nine forty-five I let myself out of the building to get us coffee and sandwiches. I know the time, because the only cafe in the neighborhood closes at ten."

Conn crossed to the door. "And when you got back, fifteen minutes later, you found Larkin dead."

Tibbet looked ready to blubber. "I'm afraid this will kill my wife. She's been in the hospital three weeks, and this is the first evening I haven't spent with her."

Conn beckoned a uniformed officer to the door. "Bring in that watchman you found in the engine room."

The watchman was a lanky man with a long, sad face. "My name's Joe Winton," he said without being asked.

"Where were you between nine forty-five and ten o'clock?"

"Fixing the freezing machine."

Conn lighted a cigarette. "Is that part of your job?"

Winton shook his long head. "No, but I'm supposed to check the compressor every so often. They've got tons of frozen food stored here. I noticed the compressor hadn't run any since I came on at six, so at nine-thirty I got worried and told Mr. Larkin about it."

Tibbet looked up. "I heard Winton say the compressor had broken down," he said dully.

"Yeah, so Mr. Larkin told me to

call Andy Cameron, our engineer."

"Did you call the engineer?"

"Sure, right away. I used that phone over there. As usual, Andy didn't want to come down; he told me to try and find the trouble myself. He said to check the fuses and relays, and explained again how to loosen up the magnetic starter on the motor. I said I'd call him back."

Conn tamped out his cigarette. "You found the trouble then?"

"Finally—I don't know nothing about that machine," Winton said defensively. "I couldn't get it going until after ten. I was talking to Andy on the engine room phone when the cop came in and got me."

The Prof had taken everything in, now he leaned over to me. "I'd like to look over the rest of the plant," he said.

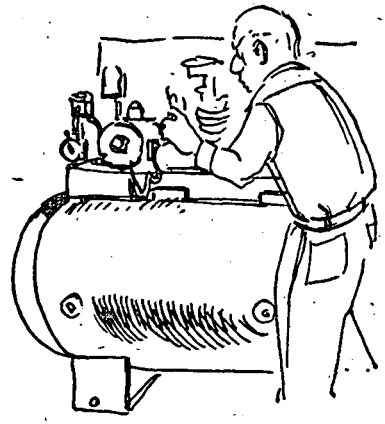
This didn't make much sense, since the crime had been committed in the office, but the Prof was my guest so I followed him outside.

"Crime detection is a science, something like physics," I explained as we walked down the corridor. "Only in physics you have charts and graphs to help give you the answer. We've got human beings to deal with."

"Then we'll designate the human quality as a variable factor," the Prof said.

"Sure, like that Tibbet. All those cigarette butts—the guy is jumpy as a cat. And that slip he made about his wife in the hospital, that costs a lot. A bookkeeper don't make that kind of money."

"The human need for ready cash can certainly qualify as a constant," the Prof said drily. "But if Tibbet committed the crime, why didn't he provide an alibi?"



"That's the human factor again," I said, pleased with myself. "Tibbet thought we would suspect the watchman, but the compressor broke down and crossed him up. Maybe he meant to leave the front door unlocked, but forgot. An amateur criminal usually makes at least one slip-up."

"Ah yes," the Prof said thoughtfully, "so we will call the slip-up our unknown quantity, or X factor in this problem."

I still hadn't figured that out when we entered the engine room, where the compressor was pounding away now. The Prof looked around, then walked over to a box fastened to the wall.

"I thought I'd find one," he said and opened the door. "You see, this is the chart, or graph you mentioned."

I looked in the box. There was a paper disk inside, covered with lines and figures. "It's a graph all right," I admitted.

"This is a graphic record of the temperature in the frozen food room," the Prof said. "The disk is clock driven, and the pen makes a continuous line, marking the degrees." He put his finger on the disk. "Now here we have six o'clock last evening. If the compressor broke down, as Winton claimed, then we should have a slight rise in temperature until the compressor started up again."

I looked at the graph. The inked line held steady from the Prof's finger to the pen point. "The compressor didn't break down," I said. "Then instead of working on the machine, Winton slipped upstairs while Tibbet was out—"

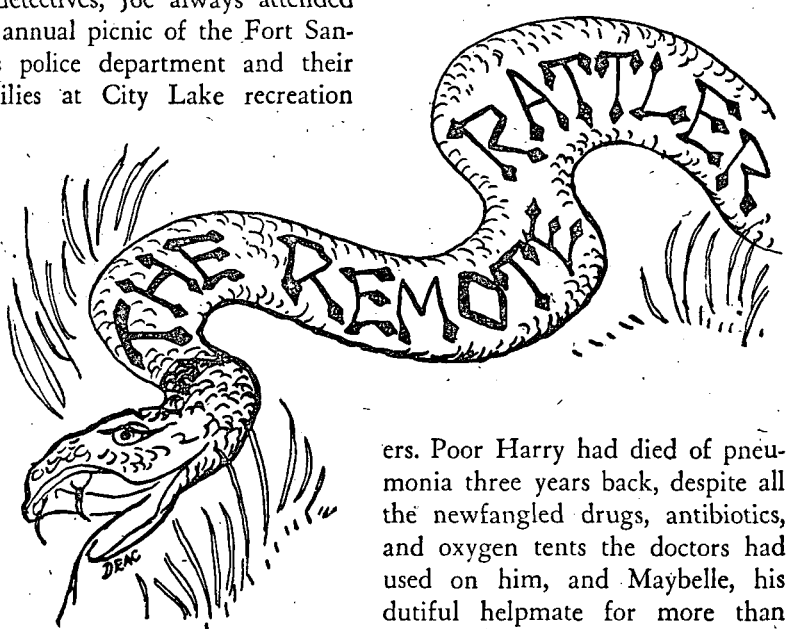
"Exactly, and I think you will find the money hidden around the plant." The Prof cleared his throat. "When the problem is stated, and one knows the constants and the variables, then one must seek the unknown quantity. In this case we found the X factor, or slip-up to be that Winton neglected to turn off the compressor between six and ten o'clock."

I nodded. Like I said, the Prof is a pretty good Joe for an egghead.

It is a common concept that a strategem instigated with malicious intent, like a chicken, invariably comes home to roost.

BIG Joe Chaviski selected a drumstick from the tray of fried chicken which Maybelle Jones passed to him and piled it on one side of his paper plate that already was loaded with potato salad, baked beans, half of a dill pickle, a slice of onion, and the heel of a loaf of homemade bread. As a retired chief of detectives, Joe always attended the annual picnic of the Fort Sanders police department and their families at City Lake recreation ground, in the mountains thirty miles from town.

Now that Lucy, his wife, was gone, being around all these women made him uneasy. They all meant well, of course, but some of them, such as Captain Harry Jones' widow, and Cholly Buck's young wife, were downright man-hunt-



ers. Poor Harry had died of pneumonia three years back, despite all the newfangled drugs, antibiotics, and oxygen tents the doctors had used on him, and Maybelle, his dutiful helpmate for more than twenty years and Lucy's good friend as well, had set her cap for

Joe, in a nice way of course, a very short time after Captain Jones' demise. She had confessed frankly to Joe that living alone was no life for her—and since Lucy had been gone more than two years at the time,

and since they had all been friends together—well, wouldn't it be the sensible thing for them to consider marriage? Oh, not immediately—but in time?

Now Cholly Buck's frau was a different proposition entirely. Cholly was a lieutenant of detectives and a good one, but Pearlie, his red-haired wife, was more than he could handle. At least, there wasn't a man on the force she hadn't made eyes at, and only the fear of Cholly himself had kept several of the younger fellows from following up their opportunities. Cholly was a strapping six-footer, with a solid two hundred pounds of karate-trained bone and muscle with which to patrol his fences. Even so, some of them had tried it—Jerry Hedges for one.

Joe Chaviski remembered well what had happened, because Joe was chief of detectives at that time. Pearlie Buck had given Jerry that come-hither look, and Jerry had got the signal instantly. Within two weeks the whole police force was like a powder magazine with lighted fuse. The explosion occurred in a restaurant across the river bridge on the Oklahoma side and beyond the jurisdiction of the Fort Sanders police department. Cholly had found Jerry and Pearlie snuggled up in a booth, drinking beer.

The ensuing fracas wrecked the restaurant and sent Jerry to the hospital with three broken ribs and a couple of discs out of place, while Cholly had followed in a second ambulance, with a broken nose, fractured jaw, and two of the blackest eyes on record. Joe Chaviski's ear-to-the-ground telegraph

had been a fraction slow, but he did reach the restaurant with two plainclothesmen and a motor patrolman a second before manslaughter would have occurred.

Jerry Hedges, of course, was fired from the force, but the stubborn Okie had remained in Fort Sanders and had caught on almost immediately in the sporting goods department of a leading hardware store. In addition to his fistic ability, Jerry, who had been brought up on the banks of the Cimarron River, had a rare talent. He could put a lure in a teacup at fifty feet, using a fly rod, spinning rod, or casting rod. In fact, before his tour of duty in Korea, he had traveled for a tackle manufacturer, demonstrating his uncanny skill through the Midwestern states. Now that he was back in the sporting goods business again, he had quickly developed a following. Frequently he was called upon for casting demonstrations before civic clubs and youth organizations.

Jerry Hedges also had a peculiar hobby that would have got him killed for sure if he had remained on the police force. Joe might have had to kill him himself, if Jerry had put a snake on him! For Jerry, among other things, was a snake fancier from Okeene, Oklahoma.

For many years, Okeene was famous for its annual rattlesnake hunts. Still is, for that matter. Jerry had hunted snakes from the time he was a kid. Used to go out with a forked stick, pin down a wriggling six-foot diamondback, and put all ten-twenty pounds of snake and buzzing tail into an ordinary tow sack. He picked up quite a bit of money selling the snakes, for the skins, and for the venom milked from the fangs of live rattlers. Also, there's a fairly steady demand for big diamondbacks by zoos. Jerry had developed a passion for playing with snakes. Whenever he saw one while he was patrolling the suburbs of town or along the river bank, he would bring it to the station and suddenly deposit it wreath-like around the neck of a fellow officer, just for the fun of it. Yes, Joe Chaviski was glad Jerry had been fired from the department.

Having finished his meal, Joe was starting to get up from his bench, when the breast of a chicken was deposited on his plate from one side of him, and a second helping of potato salad appeared magically from the other side. Two soft arms wrapped around his shoulders. The arm on the right side belonged to Maybelle Jones, and she had put the chicken on his plate; the arm on the left side was attached to blue-eyed, red-haired Pearlie Buck, who was young

enough to be Joe's daughter but who drew no age limit when it came to men.

"But I can't eat any more!" Joe protested.

"Sure you can, Joe. I've seen you eat three times that much over at my house many a time," said Maybelle, glaring at the redhead. Even in that anxious moment, Joe Chaviski noted that Maybelle didn't explain that the times he had eaten so heartily at her home, his beloved wife Lucy had been there too.

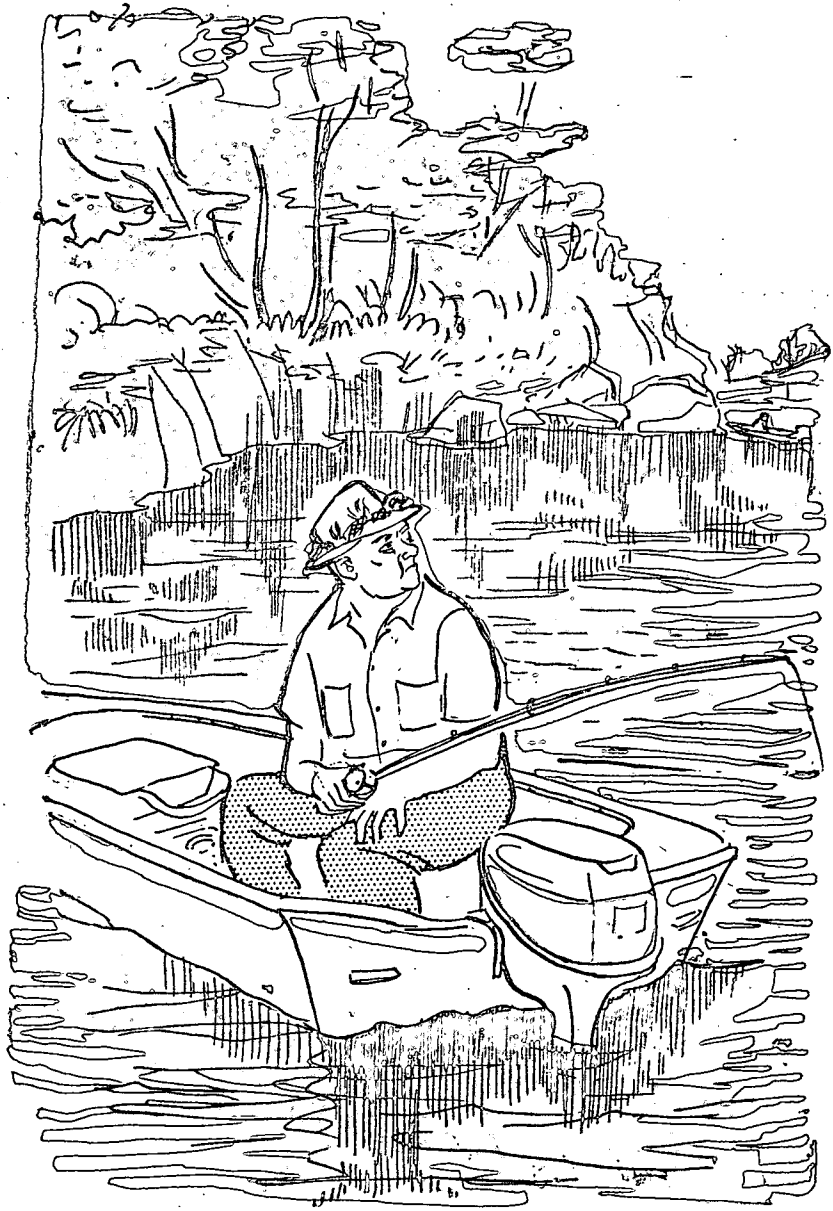
"Here, honey, eat that," said Pearlie, "and then I've got a real treat for you. Cholly told me what you like. A double saucer of vanilla ice cream!" She smiled triumphantly at Maybelle and then ran to get the ice cream. Joe knew the meal he had just eaten would add two or three pounds to that he was already carrying, but he never had been able to resist vanilla ice cream.

Finally, he did manage to break away and head for his car, boat and trailer. Joe loved to fish as well as he loved vanilla ice cream, and there would be no man-hungry women on the lake. He fled for his boat, promising everybody he would be back with enough fish for the whole party in time for the evening meal. This declaration brought hoots and catcalls from the men he used to call "my boys."

Out on the lake Joe chuckled to himself, wished he could have some luck and land a big bass or two, or even enough crappie to make a showing. If he did, he would bring them back to the picnic grounds and make the fellows clean them, the lazy dogs. If only Lucy could be there at the picnic! Nobody could fry fish like Lucy! Nobody could make potato salad, or fry chicken like Lucy, and nobody could make ice cream like Lucy. No, Joe Chaviski would never marry again. He could understand Maybelle Jones' loneliness, poor woman, but he was lonely for Lucy and for no other woman.

Below the bluff on the west side of the lake, the shadows were about forty feet out from the shore. A surface lure took a two pound bass, and Joe chuckled. Fish didn't hit too well in City Lake, but maybe today would be different. A jig and black eel was a good combination to fish the point he was approaching. Joe edged out from the point and let the boat drift. He cast towards the bank and let the jig and eel sink to the bottom, then began winding slowly, with plenty of line out, so that the lure dropped from ledge to ledge. This was a deadly maneuver for a lunker bass, but sometimes they wouldn't touch it, or anything else.

Down at the end of the lake, a



red boat was anchored near a boulder on the west side. Joe frowned. The boat belonged to Jerry Hedges. What was Jerry doing up here? Then he remembered. The paper had said that Jerry was giving casting demonstrations for the lads in the boys' camp which was located just a couple of hundred yards from the spot where the police were holding their picnic. Jerry probably had given his demonstration right after lunch when all the boys were present, and then was taking the afternoon off, fishing.

Joe felt a powerful tug on the line, deep down on the bottom. A big one had taken the black eel! Careful now, careful! Let him take it. Don't strike too soon! Six inches long the eel was. Be sure he's got the jig in his mouth. Strike now! Strike hard—once, twice! Drive the point of that jig deep into the lunker's tough jaw.

Gosh almighty! What a fish! It was boring deep down now, heading for the middle of the lake with the power of a team of horses. That's the way it felt, anyway. The monofilament line was peeling off yard after yard against the tension brake. Handle him carefully now. Work around the bow of the boat with the rod, because he's passing under. Now up and around the other end, around the motor. Man, what did he have at the end of that line? Now the fish was headed back towards the point. Bound to be rocks and boulders that would fray a line like the edge of a razor blade. Work him out—work him out! Turn him and lead him away from there. There, he's coming back again; he's beginning to wear down. Get the landing net handy, get it ready. There he is—the first glimpse of a big, bronze body, three-four feet down in the water. He's not whipped yet. He'll make another lunge when he sees the boat. There he goes down the well and under the boat again. Handle him boy, handle him! You can't lose this big boy now! Joe never knew he talked to himself when he landed a big fish, but he could have been heard half a mile away now, as he fought this great lunker to a standstill. Finally Old John Bass allowed the landing net to come gently up beneath him. He was taken headfirst and half of his tail stuck out the top of the hoop.

Joe deposited the great fish, net and all, on the bottom of the boat and grabbed with both hands to still the flopping. When the bass was quiet, and Joe had regained his breath, he weighed the catch. Eight pounds, six ounces!

The middle seat of the boat contained a fish box. Joe placed the lunker in the box and grinned hap-

pily. He would show those darn flat-footed cops what a fisherman really was! He cast a half-dozen times, hopeful that lightning would strike again, but nothing happened.

He reeled in the jig and eel then, and placed a blue, imitation swimming minnow on his line. He would troll now and just rest and relax. Later he would go in and make those policemen clean the big bass, while he laughed at them.

The blue swimming minnow picked up a good crappie on the way down the lake. As Joe turned to head back up the lake he was within a hundred feet of the north shore, and within a stone's throw of Jerry Hedges' boat anchored by the boulder. Where was Jerry? What the heck was he doing, anyway?

Then he knew. Jerry was up there among the boulders somewhere, following his hobby of snake hunting, searching for a nice rattlesnake or a copperhead. Instinctively Joe Chaviski sped from that end of the lake. If by any chance Jerry should find a snake, and Joe were anywhere near, the fool would try to toss the slithery thing over into his boat.

Joe trolled along favorite spots he knew at the far side of the lake. At the end of an hour he had picked up a half-dozen crappie and a pound and a half bass. As he started back down the lake, he saw Jerry working along the marshy side of one of the small spring-fed creeks that drained the mountain bluff and emptied into the lake. Sure enough, he had a brown tow sack in his hand. Without doubt he had a snake inside that bag—a rattlesnake, copperhead or water moccasin—something poisonous, or he would have been carrying it in his bare hand.

Joe made a circle so as not to tangle his line in the motor, and headed back to the landing. He didn't want any part of Jerry Hedges, didn't want to be on the same lake with him.

Back at the picnic, Cholly Buck, proudly displaying his athletic body in red bathing trunks, yelled at Joe, "We're waiting for those fish!"

"Yeah, the mighty fisherman has returned!" somebody whooped.

"Well, come and get them," Joe said nonchalantly. "I did all the work of catching them, but I'll be damned if I'm going to clean them for you."

The men crowded around, laughing and jeering, and all set to give Joe a hard time. When they opened the fish box their jeers turned to cheers.

"Get those fish cleaned as fast as you can," Joe commanded. "I'm a hungry man!"

Joe was the center of attention as he sat on a picnic bench in the cool shade and ate from two dishes of vanilla ice cream which had been provided by Maybelle Jones and Pearlie Buck. He was a happy man now. There were two things he was always willing to talk about: the old days on the police force, and fishing. He sat back and ate ice cream until he felt stuffed, and he blew off enough steam about his battle with the big bass to make up for many lonely nights at home.

Maybelle Jones supervised the cooking of the fish, bless her heart. That was one thing she could do equal to Lucy, although Joe felt like a traitor to Lucy in admitting it. A whole fillet of the big bass was reserved for him when everybody gathered at the tables. The fillet had been browned to a crisp, and the white meat inside was cooked through and through.

After the safety rest period, following the fish dinner, everybody drew around the park pool for a final swim. That is, everybody went in except Joe Chaviski and Pearlie Buck. Joe hadn't brought his swimsuit, because he knew how he looked in swimming trunks, big and round. But Pearlie, he guessed, didn't go into the pool for just the opposite reason. She wore a two piece swimsuit of emerald green, a shade larger than a bikini, and although she did do a couple of graceful swan dives from the lower board, she spent most of her time showing off her shape on the side of the pool. She even sat playfully on Joe's knee for a spell and pretended to make love to him.

But Joe had a good time despite all this carrying on. He was with his boys once more, his beloved police force to which he had given thirty years of his life preceding his retirement two years before. He had caught the biggest fish of his angling career, and had got to show it off before these people whom he loved. And he had a belly full of wonderfully cooked fish and vanilla ice cream.

Some of the fellows now were running from the side and jumping into the pool—a return, perhaps, to the old swimming hole days on the creek bank, when they would dive that way. And of course every man in a swimming suit was showing off before the ladies, who screamed and squealed, and screeched aplenty when they came up from a ducking.

Suddenly there was a howl out in the edge of the grass, and Cholly Buck came hopping toward the pool on one foot, holding the other in his hands. "Something bit me!" he shouted. "Something bit me hard! I think it was a snake."

Instantly the pool was a bedlam.

Women screamed in real fear now. Joe rushed to Cholly, and the men in the pool clawed up the side and came running to him. Across Cholly's right ankle were two deep gashes from which the blood was running freely.

"Stop that hopping around!" Joe shouted at Cholly. "You shouldn't exert yourself after being bitten by a snake."

"A horrible snake!" Cholly screamed. "I felt it sink its teeth in, then tear itself out!" He was shaking and pale.

"Sit down and shut up!" said Joe. "One of you fellows run and get my snakebite kit from my tackle box in the back seat of my car. Now get hold of yourself, Cholly. Did you see the snake?"

"No, I didn't see it. Didn't see nothing! But I felt it when it hit me. Then quick as lightning, before I could look down even, it was gone."

"How far back were you from the side of the pool?"

"Just about ten feet back there in the grass. I was getting ready to run and dive."

"Everybody be careful out there in the grass. Somebody else might be bitten!" Joe boomed. "Get the women and kids in the cars where they will be safe."

The snakebite kit was brought to Joe, and he went to work immediately. He tied a rubber tourniquet just above the ugly wound. The razor blade sliced quickly and deeply across the cuts. The suction cup was applied to the cuts, sucking out the blood and venom.

"No need to panic! I reckon I got the critter that did it!"

Everybody looked up to see Jerry Hedges stalk into the lights of the pool, and in his right hand was a six-foot diamondback rattlesnake. Its head had been bashed in, but it was still twisting and wriggling.

After the screaming women had been quieted, Jerry recited his piece. "I was coming up to the pool when I heard Cholly yell he had been bit. About that time I saw this big devil crawling through the grass right at my feet. I picked up a rock and bashed his head in."

So that was that!

"You're our rattlesnake expert," said Joe. "Whatta we do now?"

"Get Cholly to a doctor as fast as you can. Get serum for a rattlesnake bite into him as soon as possible. Don't move him. Drive a car up here and load him in. Get him down to a Fort Sanders hospital pronto. Any of you got a police car here?"

"No, just our private cars."

"Too bad. If you had a police car you could use your radio and tell the hospital what had happened so they could get a doctor

and have the serum ready. Minutes count in a snakebite. Minutes!"

Cholly groaned. "Oh, it's horrible!" he said. Jerry turned away, but Joe caught the half-grin on his face as he did so. He was pouring it on poor old Cholly with that minutes-count stuff, and Joe knew it.

"I have a two-way radio in my car," Joe said. "When I quit the force I had one installed in my car for old times' sake, and for emergency duty. You get going with Cholly. I'll call the station and get them ready at the hospital."

They roared off with Cholly then, and Cholly's wife was right there in the car with him. She hadn't wasted a look on Jerry Hedges, and she was doing the best she could now to comfort her husband. Joe thought a lot more of Pearlie after that.

Joe jumped into his own car then, hit the radio, told them at the station what had happened and to get the rattlesnake serum ready at the hospital. All the time, in the back of his mind, he was thinking about Jerry Hedges coming down from the end of the bluff at the north shore of the lake, with that tow sack in hand.

It was a peculiar thing too, Jerry showing up suddenly with that freshly killed diamondback, right after Cholly had been bitten. Could he have planted that rattler in some way for Cholly to step on? No, he couldn't! Cholly was too near the pool, and Jerry was nowhere in sight. Another thing, how could Jerry see that big snake crawling in front of him so easily, way back there in the darkness, when Cholly hadn't been quick enough even to glimpse the snake when it bit him there near the pool? There was something fishy about that snakebite. Jerry had been very cooperative about telling them what to do, but Joe still remembered that half-smile on Jerry's face when he stressed that minutes counted in saving a snakebite victim—and they were thirty miles from town.

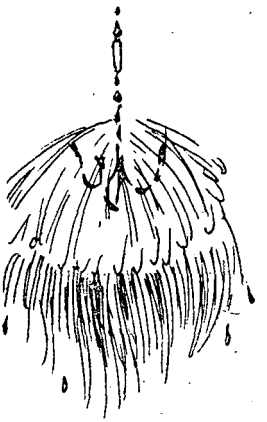
Joe switched on his lights, and turned into the graveled park road. He glimpsed something bright in the waist-high hedge that bordered the road, just a tiny flicker of brightness that his headlights caught. Joe never was quite sure why he stopped. Perhaps his police experience, the countless times he had searched for the missing gun or knife or cash box, was responsible. His sixth sense was screaming out again about that peculiar rattlesnake sequence.

He got out of his car and bent down for a closer look. A spinning rod and attached reel had been pressed down deeply into the hedge. The light had been re-

flected from the highly polished reel cover. Joe examined the rod closely. It was a six-foot glass rod of excellent quality. It had enough whip in it to send a lure almost any fishable distance, yet there was backbone a-plenty, the type of rod an expert angler would use. But the line, a 15-pound monofilament line, on the rod was unusual. Even the average fisherman around Fort Sanders didn't use more than a 10-pound test line, and that was plenty heavy. The so-called experts used 6-pound test lines, even 4-pounds, with which a skilled angler could land any big bass in almost any body of water where the fish could be kept out of rocks or snags.

Attached to the line was a most remarkable lure. A rather large and weighted bucktail was fastened just ahead of a triple hook. Such devices sometimes were used to snag catfish beneath the spillways of dams, but a heavier rod would have been used, an even heavier test line, and the triple hooks would have been of strong steel capable of biting deep and holding firm in large fish. But these triple hooks were regulation No. 2 crappie hooks, soft wire hooks designed to bend readily so they could be pulled loose when caught in logs, and utterly worthless for snagging big fish. Two of the hooks had been spread from the shanks, and the barbs had been filed off each hook—leaving the sharp points only. There was a gooey wetness to the bucktail.

Without saying a word to any of the picnickers, Joe placed the rod in his car and headed for home. He did some more gabbing on the police radio as he sped down the highway, and when he reached the station the police laboratory technician was awaiting him.



"Let me know what you find on the points of these hooks and on the bucktail," he said. "Run it through the lab. I want a chemical analysis of everything you find."

Then he drove to the hospital. The news was good. It had been a rattlesnake bite all right, and Cholly Buck was sick as a dog, but the doctors thought he was out of

danger. The serum was doing its work.

The following morning the laboratory technician had news for him—most interesting news.

A few minutes later Joe walked into the sporting goods department of the Star Hardware store. At his side was Freddie Wilbanks, plainclothesman.

"Where's my prize?" Joe asked Jerry Hedges.

"What prize are you talking about?" asked Jerry.

"I caught an eight-pound-six-ounce bass yesterday."

"News to me. Rules of the Big Bass contest provide you have to bring it in here and weigh it and measure it."

Wilbanks began laughing uproariously.

"What are you laughing at?" Joe asked.

"What was the prize for the biggest bass of the season?"

"Six-foot, top quality glass spinning rod, together with reel and line," said Jerry. "But you have to bring it in here and enter it officially, like I said."

"And he let us eat that bass up there at the picnic yesterday," Wilbanks said. "What a sucker!"

"Too bad, Joe."

"Let's have a look at that rod you owe me," said Joe.

Joe looked at the prize rod, examined it closely, as well as the reel, and noted with inner satisfaction that there was a 6-pound test line on the reel.

"If you don't give me this rod I won, then I'll keep your rod I found up at the lake last night. I thought for a second it might have belonged to one of the other boys, but then I remembered you and I were the only ones fishing up there."

"You son of a gun!" said Jerry. "I've been worrying about that rod ever since. I'd have had to make it good. But where in the heck did you find it? I guess I must have thrown it away when I saw that big devil of a rattlesnake headed toward me."

"Then it's your rod? You're sure?" Joe looked plenty gloomy.

"Naw, not mine. Belongs to the store. Used it in casting demonstrations. Had it up there for the boy's camp yesterday noon. Went fishing on the lake in the afternoon. Knew you folks were having your picnic, and just thought I'd visit a little for old times' sake."

"Okay, I'm a good loser. Shake hands with me, and no hard feelings about the rod you owe me," Joe said.

Grinning, Jerry stuck out his hand, and Joe clapped nippers around his wrist.

Jerry stared at the steel. "What's

the meaning of this?" he said. "This is no fun, Joe."

"Nice trick, Jerry," said Joe, "milking that rattlesnake you caught up on the bluff by the lake, and putting the venom on that bucktail and hooks. I ought to have known when I saw the torn gashes in Cholly's leg that no rattlesnake fangs had done that. You used a 15-pound test line so you would be sure to jerk the hooks loose. Real nice shot, Jerry. How far away from Cholly were you?"

"What are you talking about, Joe?" Jerry's face was white.

"No need trying to get out of it, Jerry," said Joe. "The chemical analysis shows rattlesnake venom and human blood on the points of those two hooks and all through that bucktail. That rattlesnake you came up with didn't put that venom on those hooks himself, nor did he file off the barbs so they would jerk free."

Suddenly Jerry surrendered, his confidence and arrogance gone. "It was easy," he said. "I was only forty or fifty feet from Jerry. I dropped the bucktail and hooks about a foot in front of his ankle and jerked it back. Two of the hooks bit into the top of his shin and pulled right out, like I knew they would. That's the reason I used crappie hooks. I didn't mean to kill the so-and-so, but I thought a good dose of rattlesnake venom would make him plenty sick. I hate his guts. Always have hated him. He was the one that got me thrown off the police force."

"That bucktail idea was a good one," Joe said.

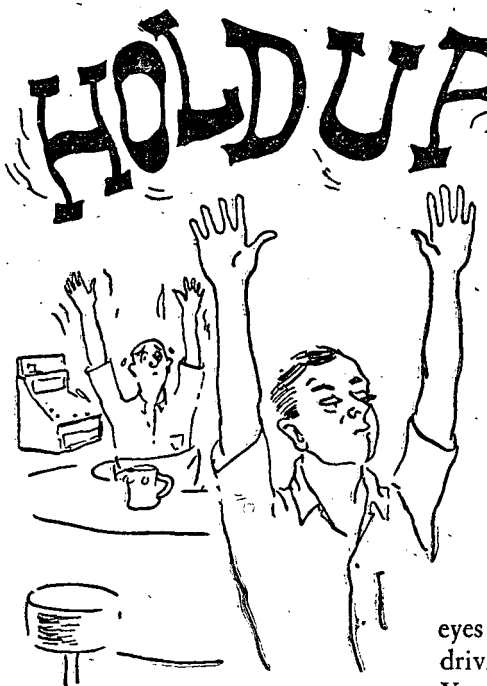
Jerry grinned rather sickly. "Yeah. I was afraid not enough of the venom would stay on the bare hooks when I cast them, so I soused the bucktail with it and poured it over the hooks too. When the weighted bucktail dragged across the guy's ankle it dripped venom all over it, and the hooks tore right through the stuff."

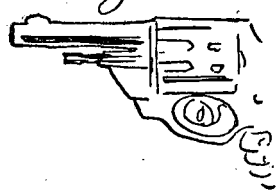
"I just want to straighten you out—it wasn't Cholly that got you thrown off the force," Joe said. "It was Pearlie—and your own sweet self," and Joe gave the nippers a little pull in the direction of the waiting police patrol car.

A man's reputation is, in certain cases, his most jealously guarded asset, a matter that precludes trepidation in a vexing predicament.

HOLDUP

By Morris F. Baughman





FROM El Centro to Yuma, there are 59 miles of the hottest, barest, driest country that man ever set foot in. Some of it is sand that won't even grow cactus. Take a drive through it some August afternoon, with the mercury pounding at 120° in the shade, where there isn't any shade. Your eyes will feel like somebody's been driving red hot spikes in them. You'll think you've got No. 2 sandpaper in your mouth, instead of a tongue.

When you get to Yuma, the bars are air-conditioned. They serve real cold beer. You have to watch it sometimes, not to take on too much of a load. A guy in my business can't be getting himself stoned, out in public.

Take last summer. I was heading from Dago, bound for Phoenix. The desert was worse than usual. The sand blew from the time I wheeled the car down out of the mountains. It rose up in solid sheets and scorched the paint off. The drivers brave enough to try it were running real slow, with their lights on.

I skipped El Centro, but I couldn't make it all the way to Yuma. Stopped in Winterhaven, on the California side, about two miles out, at a brand new little tavern by the side of the road. I thought I'd give it a try. I could just croak the words, "Glassa beer."

The bartender carefully ran the amber liquid into a glass. When it was setting in front of me, he spoke. "Come from El Centro?"

I drained the slender glass and pushed it out to him, nodding.

"Tough on the road today. Man says worst sandstorms of the year." He jerked his thumb at a radio on the end of the bar.

I was recovering. I drank about half the second glass and set it down, feeling the cold, bitter fluid descending into my innards.

"I'll buy that. Never saw it so thick through the dunes."

We talked on about the favorite subject of that wretched end of the world—the weather. The natives take pride that this is the hottest fourteen days ever recorded anywhere, that yesterday's dust storm was the worst in history. It's not enough to be able to take it and live. You've got to brag about it, make believe you enjoy it.

The bartender moved to the radio and tuned in a news broadcast. We listened to a description of Harry Murphy, West Coast desperado, who had held up a payroll messenger in San Diego that morning and was believed to be headed east. The announcer told us that Murphy was armed and should be considered dangerous.

I was on my third beer when the sedan slid to a dusty stop in front of the tavern. A slender, dark young man, wearing a hat and coat despite the drying heat, pushed open the door and stepped inside. I knew he was blind from sun glare, so I looked him over good. I could see the bartender doing likewise. I saw his eyes widen. The newcomer didn't hear what the bartender said. I barely heard the gasped whisper myself.

"Harry Murphy!"

I looked closer. The man on the radio hadn't said much. Six feet, 165 pounds. Dark hair. Armed. Should be considered dangerous. Funny how many men that would fit. How could you tell if he'd be dangerous? I guess you'd know. If the description fits, the man's

dangerous. I wondered about him.

He had moved to the bar, but didn't sit down. With a quick movement, making the bartender jump a foot, the man reached into his pocket and produced some change.

"Gimme a beer."

Never taking his eyes from the new arrival's face, the bartender reached behind him for a glass and felt for the handle to draw the beer. He ran the glass over before he shut off the flow and pushed the beer across the counter. He did not pick up the money.

We were both watching the man drink his beer. I suddenly realized that he wasn't staring absently straight ahead, but was watching me in the mirror back of the bar. He finished his beer and carefully set the glass down. Then he straightened up and quickly whipped out a pistol that was stuck in his belt. That's why the coat, I thought.

"All right now, Pop, just take it easy and nobody'll get hurt," he said to the bartender. He jerked his head at me. "You, Buster, just reach in your hip pocket real slow and lay your wallet on the bar, then slide it down here to me. And you, Pop, reach around in back of you and punch the register, then gather up all the folding money in there and lay it beside Buster's wallet. Both of you keep your other hands right on the bar, where I can see them."

He had his pistol pointed about halfway between us, ready to cover either one. I began to reach very slowly for my wallet. The bartender was feeling frantically behind him for the cash register keys.

"Take it easy now, Pop. I ain't in that much of a hurry. You're shaking so you won't get that box open till sundown." The gunman let a trace of amusement flicker across his lips, but his eyes were still flat and hard and watchful.

The bartender finally found the *No Sale* key and banged it down. I could see the drawer, and there wasn't much in it. The gunman wanted to look, but he didn't. Right then I knew when my chance would come. The question was, would I take it?

"All right, you got it open, Pop. Scoop it out, and let's go. And you, Buster, don't hang onto that wallet so tight. Let's see what you got you're so proud of."

I lifted my wallet out of my pocket while the bartender was pulling bills out of the till. The wallet bulged a little. It felt heavy.

When the little pile of paper money was put on the counter, the chance came. The gunman had to look. He just had to check his haul. How did I know he'd have

to do it? I knew it. And when he turned his head a fraction of an inch and flicked his eyes at the lettuce, I slammed my wallet at the side of his face.

It caught him by surprise. He jerked up both arms, probably thinking I had thrown a bottle. I hit him while his pistol was pointing at the ceiling. I slammed my shoulder into his ribs, grabbing for his gun arm with one hand and aiming the side of my other hand at his Adam's apple. I caught it full. He staggered back, clutching at his throat and gagging. There were some tables and chairs in the middle of the room. He fell over one of the chairs and banged his head on the corner of the juke box as he dropped. He didn't move. The gun lay where he had dropped it. I walked over two steps and kicked it across the room, a little disappointed. The thing was over before it had started.

The bartender had shrunk back almost out of sight beside the cash register. Slowly, he came out of it, and leaned over the bar.

"Jeez!" At first, he could manage no more. In a second or two, however, he got his voice back. "Jeez, mister! That guy's Harry Murphy, the bandit! Man alive, he'd a killed you quick as look at you!"

His eyes were big as saucers as he stared from me to the heap on the floor and back again.

"Okay, Pop. Now you better call the law."

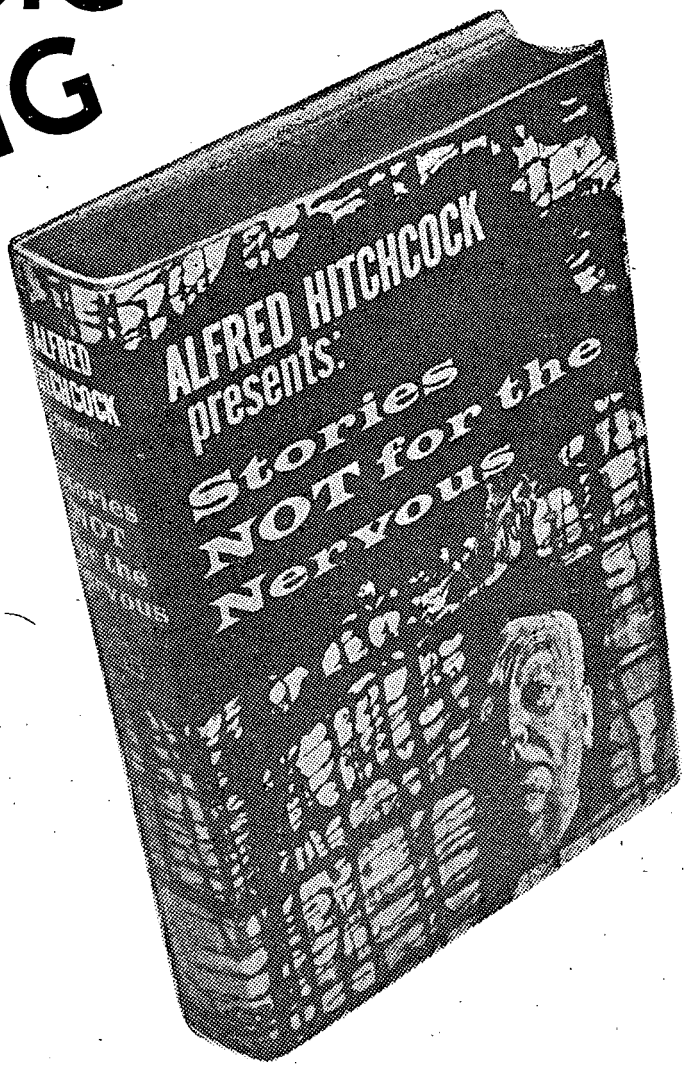
He nodded and backed toward a phone booth at one end of the room. While he was dialing, I grabbed my wallet off the floor and made for the door. My car was hot, ready to go. We were off. I headed east, looking for a side road. There was one two blocks from the bar, and I turned to the right. There had to be a way to circle back and head west. When the cops came, I wanted them to start looking for me in Yuma, or east of it.

I didn't tell you, I guess. The kid with the hardware didn't scare me much. Neither did the bartender, telling me the kid was Harry Murphy, apt to blast you on sight. I knew better.

I'm Harry Murphy.

BIG BIG BIG

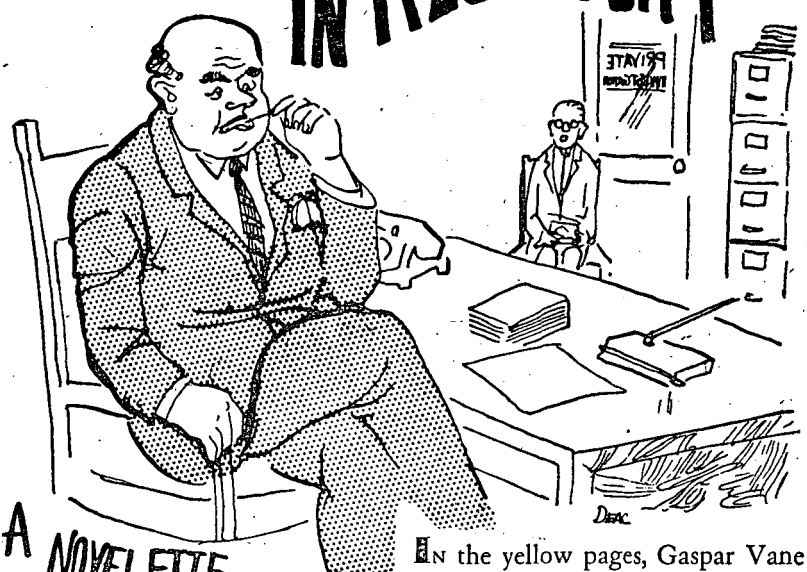
Money Saving Offer



For details please see other side

Although reciprocity implies mutuality, from this form of barter one party generally emerges a beneficiary.

A LESSON IN RECIPROCITY



A NOVELETTE

By

FLETCHER FLORA

In the yellow pages, Gaspar Vane was listed simply as a private investigator, leaving it up to any prospective client to discover for himself the precise nature of investigations undertaken. As a matter of fact, almost any kind that promised a fee was acceptable, but as things worked out, most of them

were associated with the more sordid aspects of divorce. He was prepared to gather the evidence of grounds where grounds existed, and he was, for a premium, prepared to create it where it did not. He was not, in brief, a man to permit professional ethics to handicap his operations.

Gaspar suffered from baldness, which is a perfectly normal hazard of maturity, and he was fat. Altogether, considering a pocked face, loose lips, and ferrety little eyes, he was a physical composition of exceptional ugliness. What was not immediately apparent was the poetic range of his imagination. He spent much of his time in a private world in which miracles happened to Gaspar Vane, and it was this happy facility for fantasy that kept him in the practice of his rather unsavory trade.

In spite of the liberal policies that made it possible for him to take any kind of work that was offered, Gaspar's practice did not flourish. He frequently had difficulty in paying the rent and satisfying his creature needs. He had no payroll to meet, having no employees. However, he did have an answering service that was essential to the little practice that he had, and he was forced at times into devious maneuvers to scratch up even the little that it cost. But he was stuck to his last, as the old saying goes, by a tenacious dream. He existed in the hope of a lode of luck. There would surely be one client who would turn out to be a jackpot.

He did not dream, however, when Hershell Fitch climbed the creaky stairs to his dingy office, that the jackpot was at hand. Hershell was a faded, depleted little man who had bleached to virtual anonymity in the shadow of a domineering wife, and it was under the orders of this wife, it developed, that he was seeking the services of Gaspar Vane. Anyhow, Hershell did not look like a jackpot, and he wasn't one. The jackpot was Rudolph La Roche, and it was merely Hershell's coincidental function to reveal him. Gaspar acknowledged Hershell's introduction with a flabby smile and a greasy handshake.

"Sit down, Mr. Fitch," Gaspar said. "How can I help you?"

Hershell sat in the one client's chair and balanced his felt hat carefully on his knees.

"It isn't exactly I," Hershell said. "It's actually my wife. I mean, it's my wife who sent me here to see you."

"In that case, how can I help your wife?"

"Well, we have these neighbors. La Roche is their name. Mr. and

Mrs. Rudolph La Roche. It's Mr. La Roche's activities that she wants investigated."

"Ah! That's different. Quite different." Gaspar leaned back and dry-washed his fat hands. "You suspect Mr. La Roche of something illicit?"

"Perhaps I'd better tell you about it."

"I was about to suggest it."

"Well, it's this way." Hershell's fingers fiddled nervously with his hat, while he attempted to gather his harried thoughts. "The La Roches moved in next door nearly three years ago. Immediately they adopted this peculiar routine, and they've been in it ever since."

"Routine? What's peculiar about a routine? Most married people have a routine."

"It's not only the routine. It's mostly that they act so mysterious about it. In the beginning, when Mrs. Fitch and Mrs. La Roche were on amiable terms, my wife tried to find out where Mr. La Roche went and what he did, but Mrs. La Roche was evasive. Finally she was quite rude about it. That, I think, was the beginning of the bad feeling."

"Went? Did?" Gaspar's confusion was apparent in his voice. "Mr. Fitch, if you want my help, you must be more explicit."

"I'm trying to. The point is, you see, Mr. La Roche operates a small barber shop. As owner, he works the first chair. There is one other chair that is worked by a hired barber. I must say that the La Roches live in a much higher fashion than one would expect from the income from such a small shop, especially when Mr. La Roche is never there himself on Saturdays."

"Where," said Gaspar, "is Mr. La Roche on Saturdays?"

"That's the main point. That's what I'm coming to. We don't know, and we can't find out. Every Friday night, about six o'clock, Mr. La Roche leaves home in his automobile. He always carries a medium size bag, and he always leaves alone. Sunday night, between nine and ten, he returns. The schedule varies only slightly from week to week. The general routine never varies at all. Don't you agree that it's peculiar?"

"Not necessarily. Just because the La Roches decline to discuss their private affairs, it doesn't mean they're up to anything shady. Maybe Mr. La Roche has other business elsewhere on weekends that is more profitable than working the first chair in his barber shop."

"Exactly. What *kind* of business? After all, Saturday is the busiest day of the week in most barber shops."

"Mr. Fitch, let us come directly

to the crux. Do you want to hire me to find out where Mr. La Roche goes and what he does?"

"It's my wife, really. She's the one who's got her mind set."

"No matter. It comes to the same thing. Are you prepared to pay my fee even though my report may be disappointing to you? I mean to say, even though Mr. La Roche's activities may be perfectly innocent?"

"Yes, of course. My wife and I have discussed the possibility, and we've decided that it's a risk we must take."

"Good. In the meanwhile, there will be certain expenses. Shall we estimate a hundred dollars?"

"A hundred dollars! My wife and I thought fifty would be ample."

"Well, let's not quibble. If my expenses are more than fifty, I'll simply add them to my fee. If you will give me the cash or your personal check. . . ."

Hershell had a personal check already made out in the proper amount. He extracted it from a worn wallet and handed it across the desk. It was signed, Gaspar noted, by Mrs. Fitch. Her Christian name was Gabriella.

Friday afternoon, Gaspar threw an extra shirt and a pair of socks into a worn bag, threw the bag into the rear seat of his worn car and drove to the address he had extracted from Hershell in a final settlement of details. He had been there earlier in the week in a preliminary excursion designed to get the lay of the land, and now he drove past the La Roche house, a modest brick one across the hedge from the Fitches' modest frame one, and on down the block and around the corner. Turning his car around so that he would be in position to fall in behind La Roche when the latter passed the intersection, he settled himself behind the wheel to wait. It was then a quarter to six. He had ascertained from Hershell, of course, the direction in which La Roche took off. He had already observed La Roche's car, a black late model, and had unobtrusively taken down the license number. In the course of his careful preliminaries, he had even inspected La Roche himself in his two-chair barber shop.

On schedule, the black car passed the intersection shortly after six. Gaspar wheeled in behind and followed at a discreet distance. La Roche made his way across town, avoiding the congested trafficways, and turned onto the entrance to a turnpike and stopped obediently at the tollgate. He accepted his ticket, properly punched, and was immediately off again, while Gaspar was forced to wait for what seemed

an interminable time until his own ticket was delivered. Meanwhile, he watched the other car uneasily and saw that it took the ramp which would send it onto the turnpike eastbound. He was soon nicely spaced behind La Roche's car, and it was apparent that the pace was going to be a judicious sixty-five.

At this speed, just below the level of terrifying rattles and threatening tremors, he was even able to consider comfortably the man he was pursuing. Rudolph La Roche was, indeed, a rather unusual personality. Even Gaspar, who was not especially sensitive to such things, had felt it immediately. In the first place, his appearance was somehow arresting. Neither tall nor short, he was erect in bearing and decisive in his movements. His body was slender and supple. His hair was gray above the temples but otherwise dark. His eyes were lustrous, his nose was straight, his lips were full and firm. He was, in fact, a handsome man, and there was about him a disconcerting impression of agelessness. He might have been thirty or fifty or any age between, but he would be, one felt, the age forever that he was at the moment, whatever that age might be.

In the second place, with no more to go on than a queer prickling in the lard along his spine, Gaspar had the feeling that La Roche was a man who might be up to something extraordinary. He felt that here, at last, might be the miraculous jackpot.

After a couple hours of steady driving, Gaspar was paying his toll at the last exit and cursing bitterly at the delay as he strained to keep the receding red taillights of the black car in view. Under way again, he managed to close the intervening distance at the risk of violating the speed limit, now sharply reduced on the freeway running on for several miles into the city. The downtown traffic created serious problems with intruding cars that were unconcerned with Gaspar's mission, but the black car turned abruptly into a parking garage, and Gaspar, with one intruder preceding him, turned in after it. As he waited briefly for service, La Roche, having deposited his car and received his claim check, passed by so closely, carrying his bag, that Gaspar could have reached out and touched him. Gaspar cursed again, silently and bitterly, and implored dubious gods to prod the attendant.

A minute later he was on the street, peering with wild despair in the direction La Roche had taken. At first the elusive barber was nowhere to be seen among

the pedestrians. Then by the sheerest good luck, by the accidental course of his frantic gaze at the last instant, Gaspar saw him turning into the entrance of a fashionable hotel on the far corner. When he entered the large and ornate lobby of the hotel, however, he discovered that La Roche had again vanished.

Gaspar looked behind pillars and potted palms and even took a quick tour of a long arcade between expensive little shops, now closed. No La Roche. Forced by his failure to consider the improbability of incredibly fast service, Gaspar approached the desk and invoked the attention of the clerk, an indolent and elegant young man who did not look as if he could be forced to hurry by prince or bishop or even a congressman. Gaspar thought it best to present his problem directly and candidly.

"I'm looking," he said, "for a gentleman who just came into this hotel. Rudolph La Roche. Could you tell me if he registered?"

The clerk said coldly that Mr. La Roche had not, and his tone implied that even if Mr. La Roche had, the truth would be considered far too sacred to be divulged to a seedy transient with frayed cuffs and a shiny seat. Gaspar retreated behind a pillar, in the shadow of a potted palm, and sat down to brood and consider his position and tactical alternatives.

His attention was caught by the soft neon identification of a cocktail lounge. Of course! La Roche had simply developed a big thirst during his long drive, and he had stopped first thing to slake it. Gaspar had, now that he had time to recognize it, developed a considerable thirst himself. With the dual intention of nailing La Roche and having a cold beer, he crossed to the lounge and entered. But he was still out of luck. The barber was not there, and Gaspar, afraid of missing him in the lobby, returned with his thirst to the potted palm.

Then, after another extended period of brooding, his dilemma was solved. He was staring at a bank of elevators, and one of the elevators, having just descended, opened with a pneumatic whisper, and there in the brightly lighted box like a magician's pawn in a magical cabinet, was Rudolph La Roche.

Rudolph La Roche transformed. Rudolph La Roche, elegant and polished as a brand new dime, in impeccable evening clothes.

And on his arm, staring up at him with a candid adoration that promised an exciting night, was the slickest, sexiest blonde bomb that Gaspar had seen in a long,

long time. He stared, entranced.

Fifteen minutes later, Gaspar was installed in a room on the eleventh floor. It was a relatively cheap room assigned by the supercilious clerk as being appropriate to Gaspar's frayed cuffs and shiny seat. Gaspar had rejected the idea of attempting to follow La Roche and his gorgeous companion on their apparent excursion of night-spots for two sound reasons. The first was that he would almost certainly lose them along the way. The second was that the excursion would certainly make greater demands on the Vane expense account than the account could bear. Indeed, it was already obvious that the fifty dollars extracted from Hershell Fitch was going to be woefully inadequate.

Anyhow, since it was necessary to spend the night somewhere, it had seemed a good idea to spend it at the hotel which would clearly be his base of operations, whatever those operations amounted to. Fortunately, he was at the moment, in addition to Hershell's fifty, in possession of funds, so to speak, in another pocket. Inventory disclosed that these funds came to approximately another fifty, and if necessary he could pay his hotel bill with a rubber check that he would have to cover by some device before it bounced. He considered this no reckless expenditure, but rather a sound, if somewhat speculative, investment in prospects that were beginning to glitter. Therefore, his inventory completed, he called room service and ordered ice and a bottle of bourbon.

While he waited for delivery, he thought about Rudolph La Roche, who was currently looking like the most remarkable barber since Figaro. Imagine the ingenious devil carrying on a sizzling affair within a hundred miles of home in a flagrantly open manner which practically invited detection! After all, other citizens of the old home town certainly stayed at times in this hotel and it was by no means a remote possibility that one or more of them would know La Roche there and recognize him here. The man must have monstrous assurance and vanity to think that he could get away with it indefinitely. The whole affair was all the more remarkable because it was clearly conducted on some kind of schedule with apparent stability. What kind of cock-and-bull story did he perpetuate about his weekly excursions to keep his wife chronically deceived? In addition to his other manifest talents, he must be, surely, a superb liar. Gaspar, indeed, was

becoming almost violently ambivalent about the astounding barber. He was admiring on the one hand; on the other he was filled with envy and malice.

There was a knock at the door of his room, and he got up and opened the door to admit a bellhop, who was carrying a bottle and a thermos bucket full of ice cubes.

"Put them on the table," Gaspar said.

Following the bellhop back into the room he took a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and sat on the bed. He smoothed the bill on one knee and laid it carefully beside him. The bellhop was a very small man with a puckered and pallid face that made Gaspar think wildly of an improbable albino prune. As he turned, the bellhop's eyes passed over the fin on their way across the bed to a spot on the wall behind it.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Gaspar, "unless you could give me a little information."

"That's possible, sir. What kind of information?"

"I'm wondering if you could tell me how long Mr. Rudolph La Roche has been coming to this hotel."

"Mr. Rudolph La Roche, sir? I'm afraid I don't know the gentleman."

"A slender man. Not very tall. Dark hair with a little gray over the ears. Military bearing. Appearance rather distinguished."

There was a flicker in the bellhop's ancient eyes as he raised them from the wall to the ceiling, closing them in transience.

"I know a gentleman who fits that general description, sir, but his name is not La Roche. A coincidental similarity, perhaps."

"Let's get down to cases. La Roche came into this hotel tonight and went directly upstairs without registering. Later he came down again, dressed fit to kill, with a beautiful blonde hanging on his arm. Since he changed his clothes upstairs, I assume that he has a room or has the use of the lady's."

"Ah." The bellhop's eyes descended slowly from the ceiling. As they crossed the fin on the bed, they opened briefly and closed again. "You must be referring to Mr. and Mrs. Roger Le Rambeau."

Gaspar was silent for a moment, scarcely breathing.

"Did you say Mr. and *Mrs.* Roger Le Rambeau?"

"Yes, sir. They have a suite on the fifteenth floor. Permanent residents. Mr. Le Rambeau is out of town during the week. He returns every Friday night."

"Oh? And where does Mr. Le Rambeau go during the week?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir. I assume that he goes on business."

"How long have Mr. and Mrs. Le Rambeau been residents here?"

"Approximately three years. They moved in, I understand, immediately after their marriage."

"They must be well-heeled to afford this kind of setup."

"They appear to be quite affluent. It's my understanding, however, that Mrs. Le Rambeau has most of the money."

"I see. Do you happen to know if they were married here in the city or elsewhere?"

"I'm not sure. Wherever they were married, it should be a matter of record."

"Yes. So it should."

"I hope I have been helpful, sir."

"You have. You bet you have."

"In that case, sir, if there is nothing else, I had better get on with my duties."

"Sure, sure. You run along, son."

The bellhop, who was at least as old as Gaspar, flicked the fin off the bed with practiced fingers and went out of the room. Gaspar, left alone, continued to sit on the edge of the bed with his fat body folded forward over the bulge of his belly. A toad of a man, ugly and scarred and poor in the world's goods, he was nevertheless lifted by soaring dreams into the rarefied air of enlarged hopes.

Gaspar wasted no more time in spying personally on the astounding barber whom he still thought of, in order to avoid confusion, as Rudolph La Roche. After three stout highballs, he rolled into bed in his underwear and slept soundly for a few hours, rousing and rising early the next morning, which was Saturday. With the help of a clerk, he spent the morning checking the file of photostated marriage licenses at the county courthouse, which turned out not to be such a tedious task as he had feared, inasmuch as he knew, thanks to the bellhop, the approximate time when La Roche had taken his bride. The only question was whether or not the marriage had been performed in the county and was there recorded. Happily, it had been and was.

Gaspar returned to the hotel, got his bag, paid his bill, claimed his car at the parking garage, and drove home. He was feeling so pleased with himself and the turn his affairs were taking that he had only the mildest pang of envy when he thought of Rudolph La Roche with his blonde bomb in their fifteenth floor suite.

He spent Sunday with pleasant anticipations, and the following morning, with the resumption of

workaday affairs, he investigated more records and satisfied himself on a critical point. Rudolph La Roche was married, all right. In fact, being married twice at once, he was excessively so. And if a philandering husband is a patsy, to make a riddle of it, what is a bigamist?

Gaspar drove by the two-chair barber shop, which was located in a small suburban shopping area,

and there at the first chair, sure enough, spruce in a starched white tunic and plying his scissors to a head of hair, was the errant Mr. La Roche. Smiling wetly and humming softly, Gaspar drove slowly on. He parked in the alley behind the building in which his office was located, and heavily climbed back stairs, still smiling and humming between puffs. In his office, without delay, he dialed the number of Hershell Fitch, who was at home and came to the telephone at the summons of Mrs. Fitch, who had answered.

"Gaspar Vane speaking," said Gaspar. "Can you talk?"

"Yes," said Hershell. "There's no one here but Gabriella. Don't you think, however, I had better come to your office for your report?"

"You are welcome to come," Gaspar said, "if you want to waste your time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there isn't any report. None, that is, worth mentioning."

"Where did he go?"

"He went to Kansas City."

"What for?"

"He went to see a woman."

"A woman! That sounds to me like something worth mentioning."

"I guess it is if you see something wrong with seeing an eighty-year-old woman who happens also to be his mother."

"He goes to Kansas City every weekend to see his *mother?*"

"That's right. She's in a nursing home there. Our friend is devoted to her, it seems. His visits are practically a ritual."

"Excuse me a minute."

There followed a brief period during which Hershell talked aside, apparently to the hovering Gabriella, and then his voice came through the receiver again, thin and a little petulant with disappointment.

"I guess you're right, then. I guess there's no use in my coming down."

"None at all."

"Since there wasn't really anything to report, I hope the fee won't be excessive."

"I'll send you a bill," Gaspar said.

He hung up and leaned back in his chair. On the other hand, he thought, maybe I won't. Truth is, he ought to send *me* a bill.

Mindful of the old adage that one should strike while the iron is hot, Gaspar consulted his directory and found the telephone number of the shop of Rudolph La Roche. He dialed the number and listened to distant rings. Then, the third ring being chopped off in the middle, he was listening to the voice of Rudolph himself. The voice, true to Gaspar's imagination, was modulated and suave and unmistakably urbane.

"Rudolph La Roche speaking," the voice said.

"I must have the wrong number," Gaspar said. "I thought I was calling Roger Le Rambeau."

There was a pause, almost imperceptible, and Rudolph's voice, when he spoke again, was as impeccably suave as before.

"Who is this, please?"

"Never mind. We'll get better acquainted in good time."

"I'm sure I shall be delighted. Would you care to make an appointment?"

"What's wrong with this evening?"

"Nothing whatever. Shall I name the place?"

"You name it. If I don't like it, I'll change it."

"There's a small tavern a few doors east of my shop. I sometimes stop in there for a beer or two before going home. If that's acceptable, I shall be pleased to see you there."

"That sounds all right. What time?"

"I close my shop at five-thirty."

"See you then," said Gaspar, and gently cradled the phone.

A cool customer, he thought. A real cool customer. But after all, any guy who could deliberately marry two women and practically

keep them next door to each other was bound to be.

The tavern was a narrow building compressed between an appliance store on one side and a loan office on the other. It was clearly a place that exploited an atmosphere of decorum and respectability, making its appeal to the solid citizen whose thirst, while decently inhibited, could be counted on to recur with some regularity. Of the patrons present when Gaspar entered, the one who was the most respectable in appearance and the least so in fact was Rudolph La Roche.

He was sitting alone in a booth along the wall opposite the bar. A beaded glass of beer, untouched, was on the table before him. As Gaspar approached, he slid out of his seat, stood up and made an odd, old-fashioned bow from the hips.

"Rudolph La Roche," he said. "I'm sorry that I don't know your name."

"It's Vane," Gaspar said. "Gaspar Vane."

"How do you do, Mr. Vane. Will you join me in a beer? I'm afraid nothing stronger is sold here."

"Beer's fine."

They sat opposite each other with an air of cordiality and waited in silence while Gaspar was served by a waitress. After she was gone, Rudolph lifted his glass in a small salute, to which Gaspar responded uneasily. It was strange that Gaspar, who held all the cards, was by far the more uneasy of the two.

"May I ask," said Rudolph, "how you became aware of Roger Le Rambeau?"

"You can ask," said Gaspar, "which is not to say I'll answer."

"It would do me no good, I suppose, to deny anything?"

"Not a bit."

"In that case, I'll save myself the trouble. Which brings us, of course, directly to the point. What do you intend to do about it?"

"That depends. I'm not what you might call a bluenose. If a man chooses to have two wives at the same time, I say, let him have them."

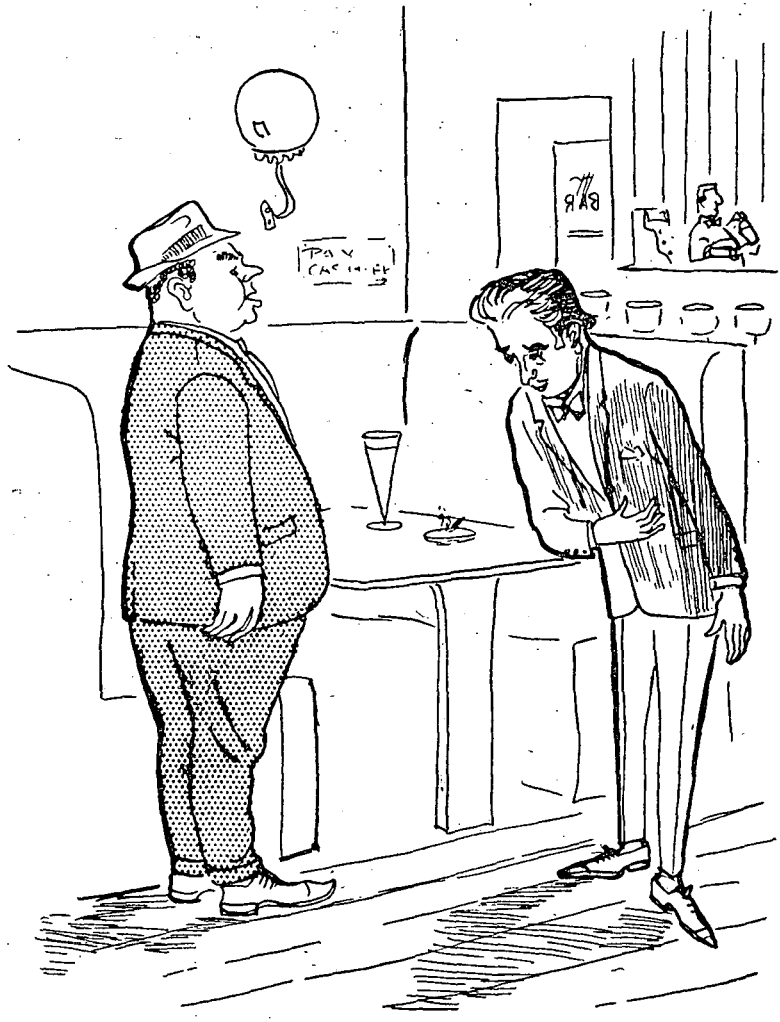
"Very wise of you, Mr. Vane. You are, I see, a liberal man. And why not? Bigamy is, per se, quite harmless. It has been respectable enough in the past in certain places and is still so today. It is a felony only where the laws of the land condemn it, and it is a sin only where the mores of society make it so. I pride myself, if I may say so, on being a kind of universal man. I select my ethical standards from all societies in all places at any given time."

"That sounds good enough, but it's liable to land you in a mess of trouble."

"True, true. One must have the courage of his convictions."

"If you ask me, two wives take more courage than sense. One is bad enough."

"Mr. Vane, you disappoint me. Marriage is, indeed, a blessed in-



stitution. It is made less than blessed only by the idiotic restrictions placed upon it. It is confused, I mean, with monogamy, which is quite another thing. It is extremely rare that a man can be fulfilled by one woman, or vice versa. Take me, for example. I rather imagine, Mr. Vane, that you think me, all things considered, a complex man. On the contrary, I am a very simple man. I have, on the one hand, very strong physical appetites that can be satisfied only by a rich and beautiful woman of a passionate nature. On the other, I have a deep and normal yearning for the stigmata of middle-class stability—a modest and comfortable home, a devoted and orderly wife who is primarily a housekeeper, a respected and undistinguished trade to engage my attention. It is surely clear that one wife could hardly satisfy my needs. And I am not, whatever you may think superficially, a libertine. I choose not to engage in philandering. Therefore, I solve my problem simply and sensibly. I take two wives, and I am fulfilled. I am, Mr. Vane, a happy man."

"Well, as the saying goes," said Gaspar pointedly, "every good thing must come to an end."

"Must it?" Rudolph smiled and sipped his headless beer. "That sentiment seems to be in conflict with this interview. I understood that we were meeting to arrange conditions under which my particular good thing, as you put it, can continue."

"As I said, I'm no bluenose. I'm prepared to be reasonable."

"Mr. Vane, I've been completely candid with you. Surely you owe me the same consideration. If you wish to blackmail me, why don't you say so?"

"Call it what you like. Whatever you call it, I know a good thing when I see it."

"Precisely, Mr. Vane, how do you see it?"

"I see you in a trap, that's how."

"Quite so. A just observation. I can either pay or go to prison."

"Not only that. Your wives would be a little upset by your shenanigans, to say the least. You'd lose them both, and that's for sure."

"There you touch me in my most vulnerable spot. The loss of my wives would be the cruelest blow of all. I am, you see, a dedicated and loving husband."

"I'd give a pretty penny to know how you've been fooling them all this time."

"Secrets, Mr. Vane, secrets. As you said a while ago, you may ask, which is not to say I'll answer."

"It's not important. What's im-

portant is that you stand to lose them."

"A disaster, I admit, which I should prefer to avoid at any cost. Which brings us, I believe, to another crucial point. What, Mr. Vane, will be the cost?"

"Well, I don't want to be greedy, but at the same time I don't want to give anything away. Besides, that weekend wife of yours is rich. You said so yourself."

"A tactical error, perhaps. Having gone so far, however, I'll go even farther. Angela is not only rich; she is exceedingly generous and quite incurious as to how I spend her money."

"In that case, how does twenty-five grand sound?"

"To Rudolph La Roche, like far too much. To Roger Le Rambeau, fair enough."

"Roger Le Rambeau's who I'm talking to."

"As Roger Le Rambeau, I'll consider it."

"What's to consider? You pay or else."

"Of course. That's abundantly clear, I think. However, you must realize that I am dependent upon Angela for such an amount. In any event, I couldn't pay until I've had an opportunity next weekend to make proper arrangements."

"You think she may kick up rough about shelling out that much?" Gaspar's brow furrowed.

"No, no. I anticipate no difficulty with Angela."

"Just the same, you'd better think up a good reason."

"You can safely leave that in my hands. As a matter of fact, I've established a reputation with Angela for being lucky. She has profited more from certain wagers of mine, wins and losses taken together, than this will cost."

"I'll want cash. No check."

"I must say, Mr. Vane, that you're a strange mixture of professional acumen and amateur naivete. Whoever heard of paying a blackmailer by check?"

"I just wanted it understood, that's all."

"I believe I understand the conditions perfectly, Mr. Vane."

"In that case all that's left is to arrange the time and place of our next meeting."

"I see no reason to drag this affair out. I'm sure you're anxious to have it completed, and so am I. Shall we say next Monday evening?"

"Suits me. Where?"

"Well, the transfer of funds will, perhaps, require a bit more privacy than we have here. I suggest the back room of my shop. I close at five-thirty, as I've told you, and my assistant leaves promptly. A quarter to six should be about

right. Drive into the alley and knock at the back door. I'll let you in."

"No tricks."

"Please Mr. Vane! What kind of trick could I possibly employ? I'm realist enough to concede that I've been found out, and gentleman enough, I hope, to accept the consequences gracefully."

Rudolph La Roche smiled faintly, slipped out of the booth, and repeated his odd little bow.

"Until Monday, then."

Turning briskly, his back erect and his head high, he walked to the door and out into the street. Gaspar signaled the waitress and ordered another beer. Somehow, he did not feel as elated as a man should feel when he has hit the jackpot. What color were Rudolph's eyes, he wondered suddenly. Blue? Green? Whatever the color, they were as cool and pale as a handful of sea water.

The alley was a littered brick lane between brick walls. Behind Rudolph's barber shop there was an indentation which provided enough space in which to park a pair of cars. Rudolph's car was there when Gaspar pulled his old one up alongside, and the time at that moment was exactly a quarter to six. Gaspar crawled out and banged on the rear door of the shop. He was promptly admitted by Rudolph, who must have been waiting just on the other side. The barber was still wearing his starched white tunic, uniform of his trade, and it gave him an antiseptic look that was somehow disconcerting to Gaspar, who always felt slightly soiled even when he was still dripping from the shower.

"Ah, here you are," Rudolph said. "Right on time, I see. Come in, come in."

Gaspar, entering, found himself in a tiny room which had been devised by the simple expedient of erecting a plywood wall toward the rear of the original, single room. There was a small table with a bundle of laundry on it. On the same table there was a coffee pot on a hot plate, which was on a square of asbestos, and beside the table were two straight chairs. For an instant Gaspar felt trapped and vulnerable, and a wave of panic swept over him. But the panic receded quickly to leave him with no more than a vague feeling of uneasiness.

"Sit down, Mr. Vane," Rudolph said, indicating one of the straight chairs. "Shall I make coffee?"

"Not for me," said Gaspar.

"Very well, then." Seated sidewise to the table in the second chair, Rudolph leaned an elbow upon it and stared at Gaspar.

"Shall we come down to business at once?"

"If you've got the money, let's do."

"Oh, I have the money, I assure you. Indeed, I have twice the amount we agreed on."

"*Fifty grand?*"

"Quite so."

"Where is it?"

"Never mind that. It's available."

"What's it for?"

"It's for you, Mr. Vane, all for you if you care to earn it."

Gaspar's feeling of uneasiness was suddenly acute. His fat body felt clammy.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Earn it how?"

"By performing a certain service for me. I'm prepared, in brief, to make you a counter-proposition. Would you care to hear it?"

"It's no crime to listen."

"Let me say in the beginning, Mr. Vane, that you have made me sensitive to my position. I have realized all along, I suppose, that I could not indefinitely continue to live securely in my precarious circumstances, however desirable and delightful they might be. If you have found me out, it is certain that others will do so in good time, and although you are reasonable and willing to settle things amicably, it is certain that others will not be. Therefore, I have decided that it would be wise, so to speak, to settle for half a loaf. It is better, to put it brutally, to lose one wife than two. Do you understand me, Mr. Vane?"

Rudolph paused for an answer and examined his pared and polished fingernails, smiling at them with wry resignation, sadly and tenderly. As for Gaspar he felt as if an angry heavyweight had slugged him suddenly in the fat belly. In protest, it emitted a startled rumble.

"I'm not sure," he said.

"Perhaps I'd better be more explicit. I have decided with deep regret to sacrifice one of the two."

"Which one?"

"That has been my sad dilemma. Shall it be Angela or Winifred? Believe me, Mr. Vane, I have struggled over the choice with a troubled soul. To begin with, I am approaching that time of life when the passions will cool and simple domestic comforts, such as quiet evenings and home-cooked meals and a tidy house, will assume dominant importance. A point, as you can see, for Winifred. On the other hand, that time, although approaching, has not arrived. Moreover, there is another commanding consideration which must be, I fear, definitive. I have reason to know that I am the principal heir in Angela's will. You can easily

see, the enormous complications that would arise if a will involving a large fortune were to be probated at this time. Not only would my bigamy almost certainly be exposed, but I should, inasmuch as Winifred was unfortunately my first and legal wife, lose everything that Angela left me. So, when you come right down to it, I really have no choice at all. Winifred must go."

"Go where? Go how?"

"Oh, come, Mr. Vane. Please don't be evasive. I've taken the liberty of investigating you discreetly, and you are, if I may say so, a ruthless man. I'm suggesting nothing beyond your capabilities."

"Let's put it into words. You want to hire me to kill your second wife?"

"Chronologically, my first wife. That's my counter-proposition."

"You're asking me to commit murder."

"I'm presenting you with the opportunity if you wish to take it. I'm also giving you the chance to earn fifty thousand dollars instead of twenty-five."

This, of course, was Gaspar's great temptation, the overwhelming seduction of the affair as it was developing. Nevertheless, he dragged his heels. The disruption in the orderly sequence of routine blackmail was so abrupt and monstrous that it created in his mind an effect of violence. He was confused. He struggled for clarity and coherence. Yet, for all his confusion, he thought he could see certain possibilities of treachery.

"Nothing doing," he said.

"Is that decisive? Don't you even feel inclined to discuss it?"

"What's to discuss?"

"Certainly you can see the benefits to yourself."

"I can see one thing, all right. I can see that you're a bigamist, and I'm a blackmailer, to be honest about it. That makes us just about equal. Tit for tat. But if I accepted your proposition, I'd be a murderer. We wouldn't be equal any longer, and I'd have a lot more to lose than you."

"Nonsense. You're forgetting that I'd be guilty of conspiracy to commit murder, which is handled rather harshly under the law. No, Mr. Vance. We would be compelled to keep each other's secret, and that's all there is to it."

"That's not the point. The point is, you'd have me in a tighter bind than I'd have you, and you could refuse to pay me a dime for anything. If you were to do that, I wouldn't dare do a thing about it."

"I am an honorable man, Mr. Vane. My word is my bond."

"In that case, hand over the fifty grand in advance."

"I said, Mr. Vane, that *my* word is *my* bond. I didn't say that *yours* is *yours*. However, I'm prepared to pay you an advance of ten thousand dollars upon your acceptance of my proposition, just to show my good faith, and I assure you that the balance will be paid promptly upon the completion of your duties."

Gaspar, oddly enough, believed him. The cool little devil was just weird enough to have a kooky code of honor that would bind him to his word in the terms of his devilment.

"Wait a minute," Gaspar said suddenly. "If you've got fifty grand to throw around, why can't I just raise the ante of the game as it is?"

"You could try, Mr. Vane, but you would fail. I am a reasonable man, and I'm willing to pay a reasonable price for silence or service, but I will not be victimized. I'll face my ruin first."

Again, Gaspar was convinced. The idea, he decided, was not worth pursuing. As to Rudolph's proposition, the suspicion of trickery was nearly allayed, but the fear of apprehension still remained.

"Well," he said heavily, "I'm not saying I'll do it, mind you, but I don't see anything against listening a little longer. What makes you think we could get away with it?"

"There's nothing in that to deter us. The exercise of reasonable caution should suffice. As you know, I leave home every Friday evening and don't return until Sunday evening. Winifred is alone all that time. She is, moreover, a creature of habit, and her actions can be accurately predicted. She has told me that she invariably attends a movie Saturday night. She returns home immediately afterward and consoles herself with several strong highballs. It is poor Winifred's one minor vice, but since it is rigidly controlled and is allowed to function only that one night of the week, it can perhaps be excused. In any event, she goes to bed somewhat under the influence and can be expected to sleep heavily. Anytime after midnight, I should say, would be safe for you to enter. I shall provide you with a backdoor key. A heavy blow on the head, deliberately planted evidence of burglary, and the thing is done. Poor Winifred has clearly surprised a burglar, who has killed her in his alarm. You simply walk out of the house and away, and in the meanwhile I am in another city, which can easily be established. Upon my return, we complete the terms of our agreement."

"It sounds easy enough. Too easy by half, I'd say."

"It's a mistake to confuse simplicity with incompetence. Do you

accept my proposition or not?"

"I'll have to think about it."

"As you wish." Rudolph stood up briskly, with an air of cheerfulness, and began to unbutton his tunic. "Meanwhile, I must ask you to excuse me. I'm late already, and Winifred is having chicken and dumplings for dinner. I'm very fond of chicken and dumplings."

Gaspar was dimly aware of being ushered deftly into the alley. He was slightly dazed, in a sluggish kind of way, by the turn of events. But he realized, at any rate, that the game was radically changed, and that all the money, in spite of his high hand, was still in the pot.

To express it in extravagant terms, Gaspar wrestled three days with the devil. Although he had been directly responsible for one suicide, a neurotic woman without the stability to weather a minor scandal, he had never killed anyone with his own hands, and now he was filled with dread at the thought of doing so. Not that he was afflicted with compassion or serious moral qualms. He was merely fearful of being caught, and of the consequences thereof. Still, the bait, fifty thousand lovely tax-free dollars, was a mighty temptation. Moreover, the project as Rudolph La Roche had presented it was so wonderfully simple. It was merely a matter of letting himself into a house, sapping a woman in an alcoholic sleep, faking a bit of evidence, and walking away. It seemed to him, in his more optimistic moments, that anyone could do it successfully.

There was another consideration. Gaspar looked upon himself as a rather exceptional fellow who had been haunted all his life by minor misfortunes, and in his gross body he nursed the pride of his delusion. He had always felt, when Shakespeare's famous tide rolled in, that he, Gaspar Vane, would take it at the flood and ride it to fortune. Well, here was the tide, and here was he. What was he going to do about it? On Thursday afternoon, he made his decision suddenly.

Sitting at the desk in his shabby little office, he looked at his watch and saw that it was twenty minutes to six. Rudolph's shop was closed, the second barber probably gone, but there was a good chance that Rudolph himself, engaged with the petty details of closing, was still there. Giving himself no time for further vacillation, Gaspar seized his phone and dialed. Two rings later, Rudolph's suave voice answered.

"Rudolph La Roche speaking."

"Gaspar Vane. Can you talk?"

"All alone here. Tomorrow is

Friday, you know. I was wondering if you'd call."

"You got the ten grand?"

"Certainly."

"You got the other forty?"

"As I told you. In escrow, so to speak."

"When can you pay off?"

"Tomorrow. I'll have to go to the bank."

"Won't it look suspicious if you draw out all that money at once?"

"Hardly. Rudolph La Roche is not Roger Le Rambeau. His bank account never exceeds a few hundred dollars. The money, Mr. Vane, is in a safety deposit box."

"Shall I pick it up at your shop?"

"I think not. From now on it would be wiser, I think, if we took no chances of being seen together. I'll go to the bank on my lunch hour tomorrow. Let's see, now. Do you know where Huton's Restaurant is? I'll go there for lunch at one precisely. Before eating, I'll go directly to the washroom to wash my hands. Be there at that time, and I'll manage to slip you the packet unobserved."

"Don't forget the key."

"Of course. Also the key."

"Huton's. One sharp. I'll be waiting for you."

And so, as good as his word, he was. He spent the few minutes before Rudolph's arrival in examining his pocked and ravished face in one of Huton's mirrors. Luckily, he was the only one in the washroom when Rudolph entered. Claiming the next lavatory, the dapper barber ran water into the bowl, squirted liquid soap into a palm, and began to wash his hands.

"The packet and the key are in my right jacket pocket," he said. "Help yourself."

Gaspar did, dropping them quickly into his own.

"Is it all here?" he asked.

"Certainly. When are you going to be convinced, Mr. Vane, that you are dealing with an honorable man? If the total is not correct, you are under no compulsion to render service."

"You'd better believe it."

"Listen carefully. Go in the back door and across the kitchen into the dining room. Turn right into a hall. Winifred's bedroom is first on the right. Got it?"

"Got it."

Rudolph pressed a button and held his hands in a rush of hot air, rubbing them briskly together. When they were dry, he adjusted his tie, settled his jacket more comfortably on his shoulders, and turned away. From entrance to exit, he had barely looked at Gaspar.

"Good-by, Mr. Vane," he said. "I'll be in touch."

Gaspar did not linger for lunch.

Back in his office, he counted the money and found that Rudolph had indeed proved himself, at least so far, an honorable man. Gaspar put the ten grand in a metal lockbox, and locked the box in the bottom drawer of his battered file cabinet. He had never worried about thieves before, having had nothing worth stealing, but now he found himself wondering anxiously if he were exercising proper security measures. Oh, well, there was nothing to be gained by dissipating his mental powers in anxiety.

At a quarter to six, taking certain precautions that seemed fundamental, he was parked on the cross street at the end of the block on which Rudolph lived. Soon afterward, right on his weekly schedule, Rudolph passed the intersection in his car. Falling in behind, Gaspar followed as far as the turnpike entrance. Sure enough, Rudolph picked up his ticket at the toll gate and took the ramp that would point him east. Satisfied, or as nearly so as he could be, Gaspar drove back to town.

Approximately twenty-four hours thereafter, about one o'clock of the following morning, he was getting out of his car on a mean street some six blocks from the house of La Roche. He had chosen this place to leave the car because it was a block of rooming houses in front of which a variety of other cars were invariably parked at night. His own, he reasoned, would be less conspicuous in company. Moreover, it was remote enough from the scene of projected action to minimize the chance of disastrous association, just in case someone did happen to take notice of the car as a stranger.

Afoot, Gaspar navigated the dark streets, trying to exercise proper care without giving the impression of skulking. However, the houses he passed were dark. He saw not a single pedestrian, late abroad, on his way. His caution, while commendable, seemed to be superfluous. The backdoor key was readily at hand in the right pocket of his coat. In the inside pocket, a dead weight that was at once comforting and threatening, was a short length of lead pipe.

A fat shadow, he slipped from the cross-street at the end of the La Roche block into the alley that ran behind the La Roche house. Minutes later, having paused briefly to reconnoiter, he was moving silently past garbage can and trash burner up a concrete walk to the back door. He paused there again, leaning forward with a large ear near the door. Silence within. Beyond the hedge where the Fitches dwelled, silence. Silence within and without and all around. Si-

lence and thick, black darkness.

The key slipped smoothly into the lock. The lock responded smoothly to the key. Moving with swiftness and quietness that was surprising in one so bulky, Gaspar entered a kitchen and closed the door behind him. He stood by the door without moving until his eyes had adjusted to the deeper interior darkness, then moved across the floor toward the outline of a doorway. Suddenly, beside him, there was a terrifying whirr in the shadows, like an aroused rattlesnake, and his heart leaped and fluttered wildly before he realized that the refrigerator, with devilish malice, had chosen that moment to come alive. When he had his breath back, he moved on into a small dining room and turned right through another doorway into a hall. Following his directions, he stopped at a door on his right, behind which he detected a gentle snoring such as might be indulged in by a lady who had drunk mildly to excess. Without further delay, he opened the door and entered the room.

A tiny nightlight made a meager glow. The luminous face of a clock leered at him through the darkness from a bedside table. On the bed, a prone and ample mass stirred and muttered. Another gentle snore followed.

Now! thought Gaspar. *Now!*

The length of lead pipe at the ready, he moved toward the bed.

Behind him, the silence was split by the merest whisper of sound. Then his head exploded with a clap of thunder and a blinding bolt of pain, and he was swallowed by the absolute night at the end of his particular world.

Rudolph came in the door from the attached garage and went directly to Winifred's room. He crossed to the bathroom and turned on the light above the lavatory. As he washed his hands, he spoke to Winifred, who was sitting up in bed against the headboard. She was gently stroking a cat that lay purring in her lap.

"Well," said Rudolph, "that's done."

"Did you have any difficulty, dear?" she asked.

"Oh, no. I was careful not to be seen, of course. It was simply a matter of leaving him at the mouth of a dark alley on a side street. It's a very rough neighborhood, the haunt of thugs and criminals and undesirable people of all sorts. He was, I'm sorry to say, exactly the kind of man who would be likely to frequent such a place. I emptied his pockets, and I'm sure, considering the blow on the head and all, that it will pass as an accidental

killing in a routine mugging."

"My dear, you're so clever."

"Not at all. Very little cleverness was required to deal with Mr. Vane. He was quite a dull fellow."

"Did you find his car?"

"No, but it scarcely matters. Wherever it's found, there will be reasonable explanations for his leaving it there. It's sufficient that he didn't leave it nearby."

"It's a shame that the ten thousand dollars can't be recovered."

"No matter. A paltry sum, surely, to invest in our continued security and happiness."

Rudolph emerged from the bathroom and began to pull on his coat, which he had removed.

"Must you return tonight?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I must. My weekend has been intolerably disrupted as it is. Besides, it is better to sustain the fiction that I didn't come back here."

"Yes. Of course, dear. Imagine that stupid man thinking that his dirty spying would make the slightest difference to us!"

"I'm tempted to remark that he simply underestimated my appeal to the distaff side, but it would be immodest. Let me just say that I've been incredibly fortunate in my marital life."

"Thank you, my dear. It's sweet of you to say it."

"And now I must rush. I really must." He went to the bed and leaned over to receive a chaste and tender kiss on his smooth cheek. "Good-night, Winifred. I'll see you tomorrow evening, as usual."

"Drive carefully, dear," she said. "Give my best wishes to Angela."

(Continued from Other Side)

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