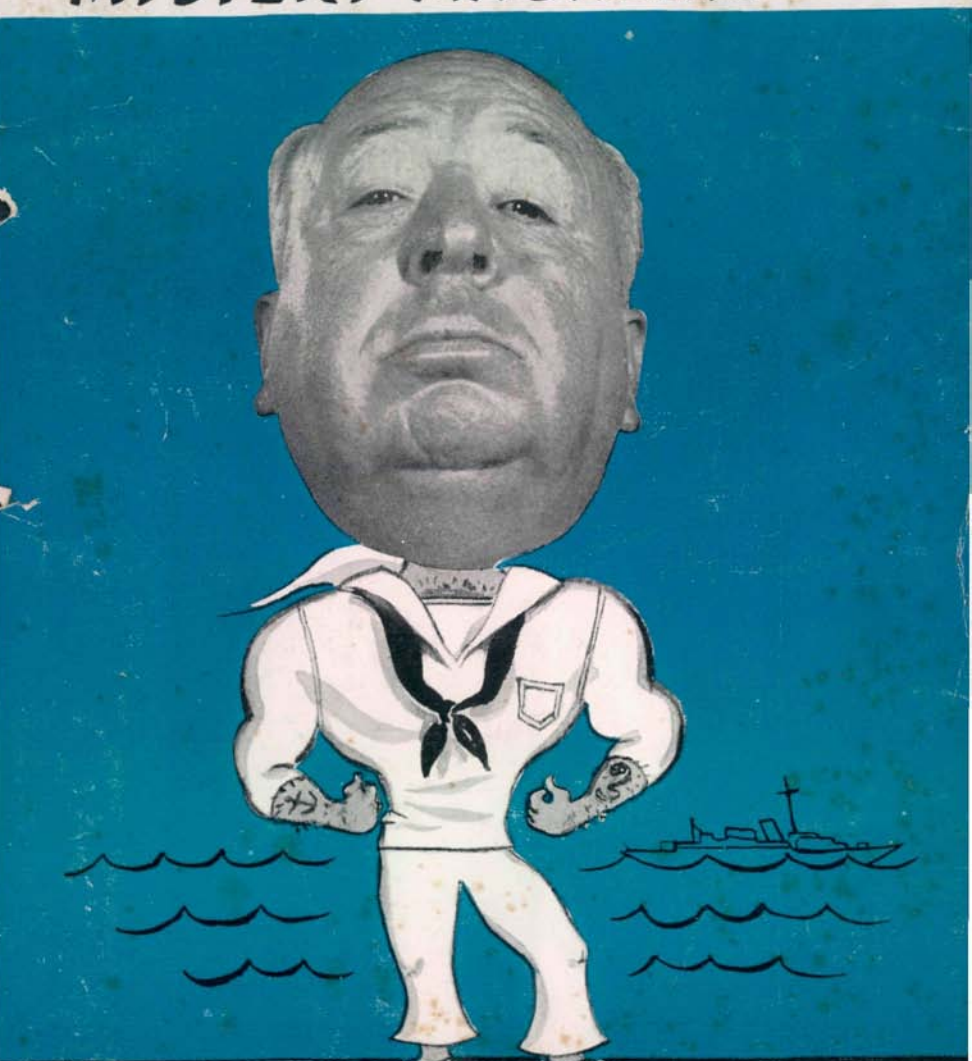
ALFRED

SEPTEMBER 50¢ K

# HITCHCOCK'S

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE


September 1966

Dear Reader:

Remember how the last warm days of September sent you, and your family, out to your favorite picnic spot? Remember how the first one to find a four leaf clover got an extra piece of chocolate cake?

Today these favorite haunts are joined by a concrete cloverleaf to overhead highways, speeding city dwellers to and from the countryside in less time than it used to take to make the picnic fixings, and bake the cake. (Prepackage mix era, of course.)

Since speed is the order of the day, this is the season to exercise caution with a Big C. Remember this is colorful, lush September, the harvest season, not one to be dubbed gray with a plethora of highway pileups.

As for a season of suspense with a Big S, you will find it within these pages. So, if you must have excitement of some kind, before the winter winds blow, draw it with impunity from the suspenseful stories offered herein. I recommend all of them with a Big R.

Alfred Hitchcock

**ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE** Vol. 11, No. 9, September 1966. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions $6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $7.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. 

VOLUME 11, No. 9 SEPTEMBER 1966

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

*CONTENTS*

**NOVELETTE**



**SHORT STORIES**



RICHARD E. DECKER, Publisher
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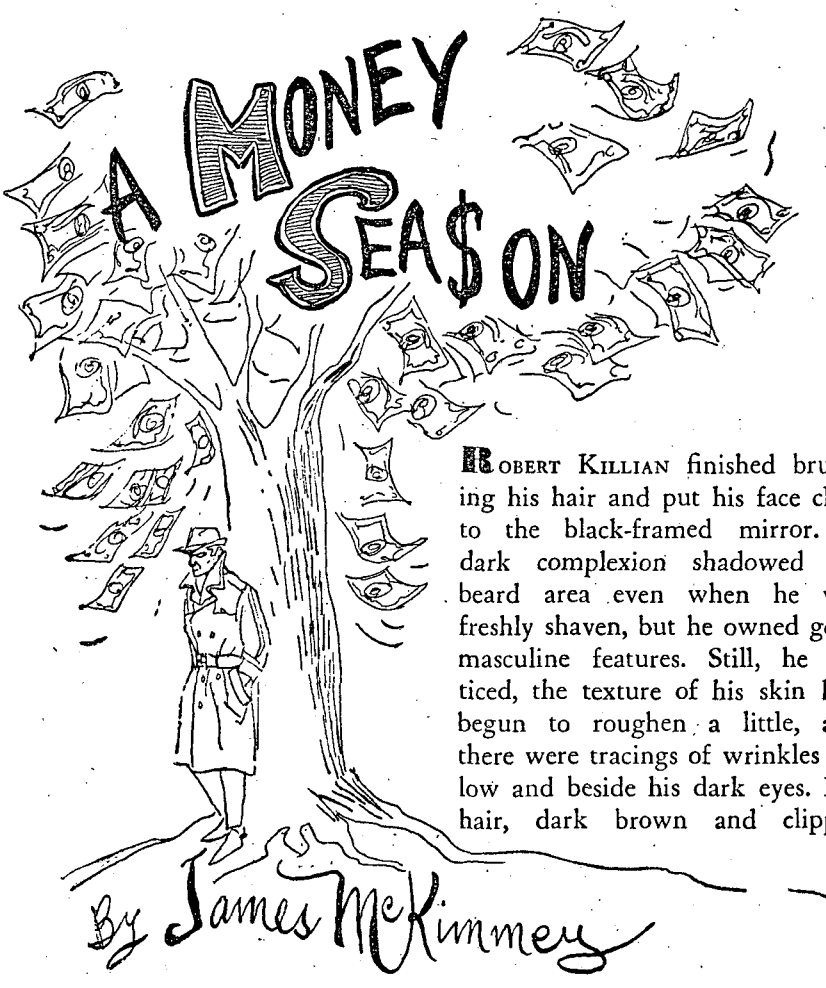
*To gain a certain objective, reference to a man's vices often proves more persuasive than an appeal to his virtues.*




ROBERT KILLIAN finished brushing his hair and put his face close to the black-framed mirror. A dark complexion shadowed the beard area even when he was freshly shaven, but he owned good masculine features. Still, he noticed, the texture of his skin had begun to roughen a little, and there were tracings of wrinkles below and beside his dark eyes. His hair, dark brown and clipped

short, was showing sprinklings of gray but, after all, he was thirty-nine. He looped a brown tie around his collar.

On the wall, between the mirror and a small writing table, was a card announcing the hotel's rates. His wallet was on the table. He tried to keep his eyes off the rate card, but he couldn't keep them off the wallet. He finally picked it up and checked the money again—two dollars.

He tossed the wallet down and looked at the figure lying in bed. The covers were pulled almost to her small nose. She slept with her legs drawn up, like a child. Her blonde hair was tumbled around her head in a golden halo.

He opened the door to the closet quietly, thinking about the night before. They'd eaten pressed duck at Kan's, then walked up and down Grant Avenue, examining jade memorabilia in the Chinese shops. Then, out of tradition, they'd gone to the Mark for dancing, and finally to the Wharf, where they'd each finished off a large platter of stuffed turbot. The evening had also almost finished off the money.

One brown jacket was hung in the closet, beside a trench-type raincoat. The jacket belonged to the slacks he was wearing, and the two items made up the only suit he owned. In a burst of optimism he'd thrown his old clothes away when he'd come in from Venezuela two weeks ago—optimism over what, he didn't now know. He'd paid a hundred and eighty-five dollars for the suit. He could be tempted now to turn it in on a sixty-dollar model, to have the difference back.

He put on the jacket and walked along the bed toward the television set where he'd put his keys and watch. Francy's clothes were arranged over the chair, which was crowded between the bed and the single window. The whole room discouraged him. The furniture was worn, the plumbing old and the walls stained. You might accept that if the hotel had achieved a relic reputation for class, but this one hadn't. He strapped on his watch and looked out the window.

An early September sun washed down on San Francisco in a pale, cool dawn. A few men in topcoats moved down the sidewalk. A white-haired newsboy with a pinched face stood on the corner; Killian could see his mouth moving. A blue-and-white bakery truck rolled heavily along the street. Killian found himself thinking of Miss Moss. He was tired before he started.

He turned in time to see the girl

in the bed coming awake. Her eyes opened, so unbelievably blue, so round, so direct, so clear that strangers invariably looked at them with disbelief, smiling a little before they gathered up their senses and decided they were real. She held the covers tightly at her neck, giving him a sleepy smile. In a moment she sat up with a smooth wriggle that was characteristic of all of her movements. Her face was a near-perfect oval; her features were so carefully arranged that, like her eyes, they did not at first seem possible. She yawned, doubling a small hand against her mouth.

"Well, good morning," he said.

"Good morning." Her voice was high, clear and musical.

He stepped over and kissed her. She put her arms around his neck tightly. "Do you have to go? And where? Why?"

"A very big deal."

"I don't want you to go."

"Very big deals don't come every day."

"I know it." She buried her head against his jacket. "I don't want to see Otto today."

"You don't have to."

"He kept wanting me to have dinner with him, and I finally promised. I'll come right back when it's over."

"Good," Robert Killian said. "Tell him good-bye. Make it stick."

"I'm afraid of him, Bobby."

He pictured Otto Teal's slim, blunt-nosed face with its thin-lipped mouth twisted into a sarcastic smile, its pale-gray eyes shrewdly alert. There was a studied superiority in the composure of Otto Teal's face, and Killian wondered if he would have achieved it if his father had not given him the big-money advantage. He kissed the blonde hair reassuringly and turned back to the small writing table supporting his depleted wallet.

"I was always in love with you, Bobby. When you came back to Sacramento and I saw you that first time in, let's see—nineteen fifty-eight?—I knew I was in love with you right away. Did you love me right away, Bobby?"

He decided to look in the top bureau drawer, in the unlikely event that he might have put some other money in there. He went through his possessions: his discharge from the Navy certifying that he'd been a fighter pilot in the South Pacific combat, a couple of letters Francy had written him when he'd been in the Philippines which he had not told her he'd saved, his travel papers including his passport, a ticket on the Irish Sweepstakes and a thin silver chain for the St. Christopher's

medal which he'd lost somewhere on the journey from Caracas after he'd told the U.S. Government people down there what they could do with that clerk's job. He slid his wallet into a jacket pocket. There was no more money.

"Did you, Bobby?"

"Sure."

"You never answered my letters. How did I know?"

"You didn't. It was my fault."

"That's why I started with Otto. You're how I met him, remember? When we met him at that party?"

"I remember."

"He talked all about you, after you left for the Philippines, and said how you'd gone to high school together. And you never answered any of my letters. So I went with Otto. Bobby?"

He got his trench coat and hat from the closet and put them on. He looked ruggedly handsome in the old, stained hotel room with the beautiful young girl sitting in the bed looking at him with large, adoring eyes. The girl had said he'd gone to high school with Otto Teal. He was thinking how, after that, he'd gotten a football scholarship to the University of San Francisco. He'd wanted Stanford or California. But he got the University of San Francisco, and played freshman ball, then varsity ball for half a season. Then, because he couldn't see that it was getting him anywhere—you didn't make All American out of a school that small—he'd quit. Then he'd joined the Navy. Probably, he thought, he would have quit that too; but there was a war and they wouldn't let him. Yet that was probably the best thing he'd ever done, flying a fighter plane in combat. At times he'd had the guilty wish that he could get into another war, but that was insanity. He'd hated it when it was going on, no matter how good he'd been at it; and he really didn't want any more. He wanted something else; something big, but not a war.

"Bobby," she said, "I wouldn't care if I never had any money. I liked all the things Otto bought me, and all the things he promised to get me if we got married. But I wouldn't care about any of that if we could just be together, Bobby. We could have fun doing anything, couldn't we? We'd have breakfast together in the mornings, and you could go to work at any job you wanted. It wouldn't make any difference to me, just so we were together. I'd be waiting for you when you'd come home at night, and I'd cook for you, all the things you like. We could live in a nice, little cottage right here in San Francisco, maybe up on

Twin Peaks, or Telegraph, if we could find a place. It would be sunny and warm sometimes, and then foggy and cold, like at night, and we could cuddle together in bed and never care. Why can't we do that, Bobby?"

"I don't know any reason."

She held her arms out and he came over again. She hugged him once more, shivering. "You won't ever leave me again, Bobby, will you?"

"Why would I?"

Her voice was muffled against his coat. "I'm worried about Otto."

"I know all about Otto. We've known each other a long, long time."

"But he'll try to get even with you, because I left him when you called me. He can be awfully jealous, Bobby."

"What can he do?" he said gently. "Nobody has any strings on me. When you've got nothing to lose, no one can touch you."

He kissed her lightly, then left. The hall was narrow and musty-smelling, the rug a threadbare memory of better times. He waited for the elevator wearily, hands shoved into the pockets of the trench coat, feeling dismal with the atmosphere of the hotel. Too, the week's bill would be due tomorrow.

When he stepped into the small lobby below, Otto Teal stood up and came over to meet him. He was slimly immaculate in a double-breasted topcoat and a narrow-brimmed hat, richer looking than ever, though Killian noticed that the set of his thin face, the twist of his smile had not changed.

"Hello, Bobby," Otto said softly. He put out his hand, and Killian thought of all the years they'd known each other and how little they had in common. Killian had never cared, one way or another, about Otto Teal. But Otto had always been around. Killian had played his best high-school football during his senior year. Otto had influenced his way into managing the team so that he'd gotten a letter sweater and given the impression that the team would have folded without him. There had been a big and important dance after the final game, and Killian had gotten a date with the prettiest girl in school; she'd had fifteen invitations for that dance, and she'd accepted Killian's. But he'd broken his nose in the final minutes of the game, and he didn't want to go to the dance. Instead, after they'd got the nose set, he'd taken her to a roadhouse outside of town where you could drink underage. Otto had come along. He'd sat with them in a booth; Killian had drunk whiskey with

his nose bandaged and hurting like hell, and the girl had kept complaining that she'd dreamed all year about going to that dance. She was getting on his nerves and wouldn't get drunk with him, so Otto had finally gone to the bar and come back and told Killian that he'd ordered *carte-blanche* for him—anything he wanted, including five steaks if he felt like it. Then Otto had taken the girl to the dance, and had told a dozen people that he'd taken the girl away from Killian. All Killian had got out of it was one of the world's most monumental hangovers. That girl, he thought bitterly, normally wouldn't have given Otto the time of day. But he didn't hate Otto; he simply didn't care about him, and ignored his hand.

"How are you, Otto?" he said coolly.

"Never better. And you're looking excellent, Bobby, handsome as ever. Trench coat, snap-brim hat; still the same old romantic, eh? Still searching for the grail."

"I'm in a hurry, Otto."

"Right. A man of affairs, searching the universe for the large reward. This is a lovely and quaint little hotel, Bobby. How did you happen to discover it? But I don't want to hold you. Is she upstairs?"

"I thought you were having the last supper with her tonight."

Otto Teal laughed delightedly. "Clever, Bobby—last supper. Well, I was, but I thought I might as well get it over sooner. I want to ask her personally if she's really leaving me. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind. You know the answer, don't you?"

"Perhaps, but I want to hear it from her. You were always deadly with the girls, Bobby-boy. Makes it difficult for the rest of us, especially with someone like Francy. You don't find them like that every day."

"You can go up if you want. She's in bed, but I think she's awake."

Otto's eyes flickered, but he put a hand gently on Killian's shoulder. "There isn't anything I could say to convince you, is there? I've grown quite attached to her."

"I don't know what it would be."

"Well, I don't either, unless it might be money. I could make out a check, say, for a thousand dollars very quickly, Bobby."

"Why don't you do that?" Killian said brusquely. "And then tear it up."

He strode out of the lobby into the cool morning air. Traffic was increasing. People were hurrying from cars and buses. There was a fat man wearing a Homburg

standing at the corner, smiling vaguely at the morning. Killian walked past him, on to Market Street. They were turning a cable car at Powell. The movie marquees and the fronts of the amusement galleries looked cold and out of place; they would, until darkness returned and the neon would light them up with a false warmth and brightness. A drunk tried to stop Killian at the light at Seventh, and Killian was bothered that he couldn't give him something. Sunlight, silver-clear, was slanting over the lower buildings, making flat, regular patterns on the east walls of the higher ones. Killian crossed the street and walked down the block to the bus station.

The job, which he'd gotten from a want-ad, was in South City where they were taking a new government census. It was quite a job, Killian thought as he bought his round-trip ticket and found himself reduced to coins. Almost everybody else who'd applied for the temporary work was either a housewife in need of Christmas money or a bum, so Killian, with a man named Bumbridge, had been made a team captain. Under the supervision of the government coach, Miss Moss, he had sent his team out to get the census of his assigned district, as had Bumbridge; and now they were the only two left, catching up on people missed on the original canvas. It was exacting, demanding work, Killian thought, fit for a ten-year-old idiot.

The bus, going south, was almost empty. Killian sat in a rear seat, so that he could smoke, and noticed that with him were only two people: a homely girl, who sat woodenly on a front side seat; and a fat man who wore a Homburg, two seats back from her. Killian studied the man for a moment. He was certain he was the same one he'd seen earlier. The girl kept staring at Killian, holding her hands together. He was used to that, but it irritated him this morning.

They rolled onto the Skyway, speeding out of the city. Killian watched the water of the bay at Candlestick, noticing the way it looked flatly gray, the small waves undistinguished even by whitecaps. He was thinking how sweet and child-like Francy had looked in bed, and he was wondering how much money Otto Teal was now worth. He thought of his Montaigne book and remembered the part he'd read on the boat about the seasons of man. There was, Montaigne had pronounced, a season for everything, and everything had a season.

What season, he wondered, had

he reached? Was it the season to give up waiting for the big one to come along? Was it the season to forget about moving through the almost-but-not-quite effort, the clerk jobs, the small bureaucratic appointments, always so easy to get because he'd been willing to go anywhere? Was it the season to realize that he was always on the outside, never quite in, and had never been since he'd quit flying a plane for Uncle? Was it the season to realize that he was thirty-nine and possibly past hoping reasonably for the big one to come along? Was it the season to find himself a decent, dependable job, no matter how colorless and low-paying, and marry Francy, settle down, have kids, admit defeat, and relax?

Bumbridge was standing outside the city hall when Killian walked over from the bus. He was a tall man with an aging cherubic face and a very shiny bald head, wearing the cheap, wrinkled gray flannel suit he'd worn every day on this job. He looked now as though he'd just been shot in the stomach.

"What's the matter, Bumbridge?"

"It's Miss Moss. She let me go."

"I thought there were three more days."

"Yeah, but she let me go. I brought over her carton of coffee, like always, and was early, and she lets me go. What am I supposed to do now?"

"Suicide?"

"It's not funny, Killian. I told you I lost damn near everything trying to run my own real-estate place, and I need the money. I was counting on three more days. I got a new house and a wife and four kids."

"I know," Killian nodded. "Well, she'll probably let me go too. Wait for me, and we'll have a cup of coffee and figure out something. You know what's the matter with her, don't you, Bumbridge?"

"Yeah, and you should have taken care of it, Killian. Maybe we'd have hung on longer."

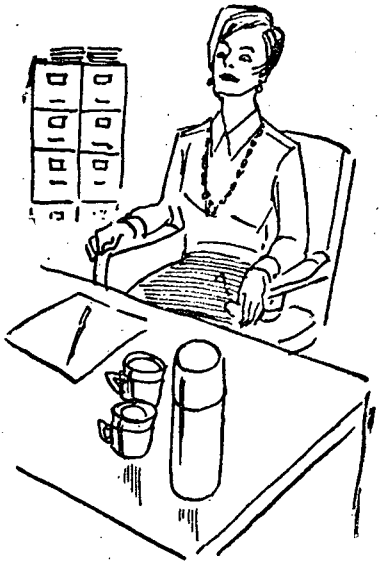
Killian put his hand on the grieving man's shoulder, then walked inside. Miss Moss, in her late thirties, with dyed black hair, stern face, boyish torso, and long, extraordinarily beautiful legs, looked up from her desk. There was a large container of coffee beside her; on his own initiative Bumbridge had brought one in to her every day.

"Good morning, Mr. Killian. Sit down. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

He sat down, watching her. She sat behind the desk straight as a military commander, and Killian

could visualize her in a uniform. "Okay," he said.

She poured coffee from the carton into mugs confiscated by Bumbridge out of the administration office a week ago. It was the first



time Killian had had coffee with her; he'd always gone over to Main to a small restaurant.

"Well, Mr. Killian," she said, "it looks like it's just you and I for the next six days."

"Oh?" he said finally.

"I let Mr. Bumbridge go. Even if it now takes twice as long to finish up, I'm sure the job will turn out that much better. Working closely together, just you and I, ought to produce more accurate results on the whole."

"I see."

Holding a folder, she came around the desk, sat down on the corner and crossed her extraordinary legs, smiling at Killian steadily. She tapped the folder. "I have your application here, Mr. Killian. I've been going over it, because I find it highly fascinating. You were a Navy fighter pilot during the war?"

"Yes."

"It looks like we've got something in common. I was a captain in the Wacs for a time."

"Well," he said, "what do you know about that?"

"All those places you've been—Morocco, France, Japan, Philippines, South America—I imagine you've seen and done just about everything, haven't you, Mr. Killian? I was in Europe myself. But that's the extent of my world traveling, although I've seen a lot of these United States. Paris enthralled me."

"Did it?"

"Didn't it you, Mr. Killian? The licentiousness! Well, I'm sure you know all about it. Frankly, I thought I was sophisticated until someone took me to one of those shows." She laughed, showing her white teeth, and moved her ex-

traordinary legs so that one of them brushed against his. "Do you know what I mean, Mr. Killian?"

"I think so," he said, nodding. He was wondering if Otto Teal had actually gone up to the room to talk to Francy, or if he'd phoned and asked her to come down. The latter, he thought; certainly the latter.

"I think," Miss Moss said carefully, "you and I could work so much better in privacy, don't you? Without a lot of time-wasting interruptions?"

He looked at her, finally said, "No, I don't think so, Miss Moss." He looked away and studied his hands thoughtfully, thinking of Bumbridge waiting outside like a man shot in the stomach because Miss Moss had cut off three days of low-pay work for him. The world, he thought, sometimes got too small.

Miss Moss finally found her voice. "Did you say you don't think so, Mr. Killian?"

"Yes," he said, standing, "that's what I said."

Her face had turned pink. "Apparently you've misconstrued something, Mr. Killian. I—"

"I'm quitting. Bumbridge is still outside. Shall I send him in?"

Miss Moss came off her desk swiftly and moved behind it, her body rigid. She slapped his application folder down. "I find your attitude fairly sickening, Mr. Killian. That sophistication of yours!" Her eyes flashed. "I think your guise of being the great adventurer is laughable. Outside of flying a plane in a war when they had to take anybody, you haven't done anything worth a solid damn in your life, have you?"

"I'd like my money," he said quietly.

"You'll get it by check," Miss Moss said, her voice rising. "When the government sends it to you!"

"I didn't understand that."

"Well, now you do!"

He walked out and put his hand on the shoulder of Bumbridge. "Miss Moss wants to see you." Then he moved down the steps. He had walked a block before he realized that the fat man he'd seen earlier was moving along, across the street, behind him a little. Killian frowned and shoved his hands into his pockets.

The fat man climbed on the bus behind him. When Killian left the bus station in San Francisco and walked slowly back toward his hotel, the fat man was still behind him.

Two blocks from the hotel, Killian stepped into a small cocktail lounge. He went to the bar and ordered a short beer, putting down a fifty-cent piece. The fat

man came in and sat down beside him. He put a chubby white hand on the coin, his manicured nails gleaming, and shoved it back in Killian's direction; the hand went into an inner pocket of a gray suit and reappeared with a ten-dollar bill. "My pleasure."

The bartender made change, then ambled down to the other end of the bar.

"Okay," Killian said finally. "What's the pitch?"

"Pitch?" The fat man laughed softly, touching the coins and bills from the change, but not picking up the money. "You're a skeptic, Mr. Killian."

"I'm a realist. What did Otto send you to do?"

"Otto?" the fat man said. "Otto, Otto." He drew a thin notebook from his pocket and fanned the pages, finally holding the book open. "Otto Teal. Certainly. I should have remembered—old friend from Sacramento, engaged to the girl, Francy; that is, until said girl came here, where she has been staying with you. It was the Otto that escaped me. He was at your hotel this morning, I believe, before you and I traveled to South San Francisco and back. I have no attachments to Mr. Otto Teal, I'm afraid."

Killian stared at the man for a moment, then motioned toward the book. "What's that all about?"

"A report on you, Mr. Killian, rather complete, I think. We've been quite thorough. We have to be, in our capacity."

"You've lost me," Killian said, feeling the beginning of a pulse of excitement.

"All I can tell you is that we've had our eye on you for some time. Did you give up that little job with the census people, Mr. Killian?"

"Let's have it," Killian said impatiently. "What do you want?"

"Slowly," the fat man laughed gently. "Slowly, Mr. Killian. I suspect you learned a certain patience in your South American experience. You speak the language rather well, don't you?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Quite a lot, perhaps, if it works out. We hope it works out. We would be so delighted."

"What works out?"

"Don't be impatient, Mr. Killian. We want you to get used to the idea first. Then we can be specific."

"You're not with Otto Teal?"

"I tried to make that clear."

"All right," Killian said finally. "Any time you're ready."

"Good," the fat man said cheerfully. He reached inside his jacket again. The plump white hand reappeared with a sheaf of currency.

He placed the bills on the bar, smiling. "The thing we would like you to do is simply relax with us, Mr. Killian. Get the feeling, more or less. Are you happy with that little hotel you're using?"

"What do you think?"

"Ah, yes. Then why don't you try something else? What would appeal to you? The St. Francis? Please move over there, won't you? Any time after, oh, about an hour. They'll be ready for you. It will be our pleasure, of course."

"You've got a job you want done," Killian said slowly. "I presume it's in South America."

"In a very short time I can be specific," the fat man said. "But this is the age of high competition for good employees. We wouldn't want to lose you, Mr. Killian, by moving too swiftly." The fat man smiled and pushed the bills toward Killian.

Killian looked at them. "I'll tell you, outside of a very small black-market operation which any five-year-old could have handled, I've remained surprisingly honest all my life."

"Ah," the fat man said softly, "you must give us a chance, Mr. Killian. Please don't think. Please just relax and become a little bit receptive. It's been very nice, Mr. Killian. We'll contact you again shortly. Good day." The smiling fat man walked out into the sunshine.

Killian picked up the money and counted it. There were five hundred dollars. He put the bills in his wallet, with the change from the ten dollars, and walked out.

He went over to Union Square and sat down on a bench, gazing at the St. Francis across the street. Some smartly dressed women got out of a cab and walked up the steps into the hotel. Killian got out his wallet to recount the money, then put it back into his pocket. He waited an hour and one minute, then crossed the street. At the desk, he said, "I'm Robert Killian."

The clerk smiled broadly. "Of course, Mr. Killian. We're looking forward to having you and Mrs. Killian. Would you like to register now?"

Killian registered, then returned to his small hotel. Otto Teal was still in the lobby, looking nervous and angry. When Killian walked in he came over, rubbing a handkerchief across his forehead.

"She gave you the answer?" Killian asked.

"I'll write you a check for two thousand," Otto said in a strained voice. "What do you say?"

Killian smiled. "You may as well go back to Sacramento."

A flushed Otto Teal walked an-

grily to the door, lost for words.

In the room, Francy now wore a blue dress. Her smile was radiant, her eyes were shining. She kissed Killian and said breathlessly, "I told him, Bobby, straight to his face. I went down to the lobby and told him cold-turkey. He didn't say a word. He just turned around and looked out the window. That's all there was to it."

"I think," Killian said, grinning, "we're done with Mr. Otto Teal. My deal's coming through, baby. Let's get out of here and get checked into the St. Francis."

"My goodness! I should have brought my clothes, Bobby."

He gave her two hundred dollars. "Pick up a couple of things on the way. I need another suit myself."

They were shown to a large suite. Killian didn't hear from the fat man for two days. In that time, they ate in favorite restaurants in new clothes and rode the cable cars like newlyweds and drank champagne in the suite at night and made love as dawn streaked over the city.

Then Killian would lie there, in the large, comfortable bed, Francy curled next to him, thinking of how everyone had stared at her beauty everywhere he'd taken her. He had never cared much about anything but little things, like a momentary sympathy for those like Bumbridge and small animals and almost nothing else. He had really not cared a damn for anyone but this girl. With his arms around her as she slept, holding her carefully and lovingly, he realized she was the only person in the world he loved and probably would ever love.

The third day, Francy was taking a nap in the afternoon. Killian was having a drink alone in the bar off the lobby of the hotel. The fat man appeared and sat down, smiling.

"Ah, Mr. Killian, that's a nice-looking suit. How are the rooms? Satisfactory?"

"Who is it you want murdered?" Killian asked it calmly, but he had to control the excitement now.

"Murdered," the fat man said, laughing softly. "Would you commit murder, Mr. Killian?"

"No."

"I see. But no one mentioned murder but you, did he?"

"That's right."

The fat man nodded, gazing reflectively over the room. "Are you feeling a bit more receptive, Mr. Killian?"

"I would say so."

"Excellent." The pudgy white hand dropped a pack of bills on the table. "A little more, to make sure you are. I think we can let

you know something very definite tomorrow—tomorrow evening we'll say."

"How much?" Killian said. "Altogether."

"Tomorrow you will know everything, I think," the fat man said quietly.

"How much?" Killian insisted.

The fat man sat there for a time, silent, a faint smile on his mouth, examining the well-tended cuticle on his right thumb. Finally he said, "Counting the thousand already invested, in the neighborhood of sixty thousand dollars."

Killian blinked once. "In the neighborhood of sixty thousand?"

"Perhaps not in the neighborhood," the fat man said, chuckling and getting to his feet, "but just precisely that." He left, smiling.

Otto Teal called that night. His voice was hoarse, and he sounded desperate. "They told me you'd moved over there. Listen, my final offer—five thousand. It's what you've wanted, isn't it?"

Killian hung up on him. That night he and Francy had dinner in the suite, and he knew that he had finally, with her, found the right thing. "Would you like to live in South America, Francy?"

"Anywhere, just so I'm with you. You'll never leave me again, will you, Bobby?"

"That's foolish."

The next evening they sat in the bar off the lobby, slowly enjoying a brandy. Killian could feel the pulse pounding in his temples, but he also felt a pleasurable detachment that kept his hand from trembling when he lifted his glass. It was so near now that he could smell it, and he'd made up his mind. Murder, no—but anything short of it.

He realized he was being paged. He stood up and bent to kiss Francy's forehead, then went out to the lobby. In a moment he was on a house phone, listening to the fat man's voice.

"Room four-twenty-eight, Mr. Killian."

He decided to go straight up. When he had it sealed, then he would know what to tell Francy. He took an elevator up and rapped lightly on the door. The fat man opened it, and he stepped inside. The door was shut behind him before he saw Otto Teal sitting across the room, legs crossed, hands forming a steeple over which he was staring at Killian with hard, amused eyes.

Killian felt cold inside, looking at him.

Otto finally laughed, then brushed a hand over a knee, shaking his head in amusement. "Bobby, Bobby, such an incurable romantic."

Killian did not answer. He did not move. There was a third man in the room, a medium-tall man with thick, iron-gray hair.

"But then," Otto said, getting up, smile fixed, "I'm sure you knew it was my little game all along, Bobby. You didn't, of course, really think it was anything else, did you?"

Killian found his voice. "For a thousand bucks and this hotel, I'll take a joke any time. It happens, however, I'm tired of the joke." He turned toward the door, face hot.

"Bobby," Otto said quietly. Killian stood with his hand on the door handle. "The money isn't a joke, Bobby." Killian didn't move. "I mean," Otto said behind him, "the girl means a lot to me. Sixty thousand, Bobby-boy. Mr. Parker, whom you've met, is a business associate of mine. Mr. Abbot, here, is my lawyer. There are papers on that desk over there. All you have to do is sign."

Killian turned around slowly to stare at Otto Teal.

Otto shrugged. "I have a little office in Lima, just a room with a desk and chair in it and the name of one of my companies on the door. It's of great advantage to me, for various reasons, to have someone look in every week or two to blow the dust off."

Killian wanted to get out his handkerchief and wipe the prickling perspiration from his forehead, but he would not do it. "You're ready to hand over fifty-nine thousand dollars, just like that?"

"Ten now, Bobby. The balance at two hundred per week, which works out to something like four years and thirty-seven weeks. The only stipulation, of course, is that the contract is invalid, with all sums to be returned, if you should happen to leave Peru before those four years and thirty-seven weeks are up. I think you should be able to make something pretty good for yourself in that time. I doubt if you'll want to come back. You must go down alone, naturally. But Peruvian girls are lovely, Bobby. The papers and ten thousand are right over there, if you're interested."

Killian felt them watching him as he stared at the rug. Then he walked over to the desk and read the agreements.

"Give him a pen, Mr. Abbot," Otto said, "and please notarize the signatures after him."

The man with the iron-gray hair held a pen toward Killian.

"We're throwing in boat passage, Bobby," Otto said. "Pier sixty-three. It leaves in thirty minutes. We took the privilege of having

your bag packed and sent down while you were downstairs in the bar. There isn't much time."

Killian suddenly knew what season it was—it was a season for sixty thousand dollars. He took the pen and started signing, the man with the iron-gray hair stamping and signing behind him. Finally he straightened and looked at Otto. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Immensely."

Killian picked up the money and left without looking at them again.

In the lobby, he realized that it had taken only minutes. He looked toward the bar. He could see her sitting up there, faced away from him, waiting.

He walked out to the sidewalk where the doorman was waiting with his trench coat and bag, certain that he could hear something snapping inside him—but it could be nothing, he knew, but the sound of his soul.

At the pier, he walked up the gangplank, listening to the mist-filled wind whipping at the canvas covering the runway. His cabin was outside, mid-ship, on the upper deck, a deluxe bedroom. He surveyed it carefully; he'd sailed aft on B deck in a four-berth room out of Venezuela.

The room steward beamed. "We're delighted to have you aboard, Mr. Killian. Is there anything you want?"

"How about a drink?" Killian said roughly.

In a moment, the steward returned with the order. "There we are, sir. Will you sign, Mr. Killian?"

A muscle jerked at the corner of Killian's mouth. "I'll sign anything."

After a time, when the engines had started, he went down to the promenade of the main deck and watched the lights of the city getting smaller as the ship slipped out into the oil-black water. Finally he went into the busy main-deck bar. Looking around, he saw a dark-haired girl with a lovely exotic face. She looked back at him across the room, and smiled. He started toward her through the crowd.

*The salesman whose audience is composed of "caveat emptors" must beware lest he find himself in juxtaposition with the author whose book doesn't sell.*

O'Toole was sweating. His face wore the big-toothed grin as he yammered away into the microphone, and his right hand waved above his head, forefinger pointing toward the ceiling. He chucked the words out into the mike, spun his hand over his head, then brought the arm down quick, forefinger aimed at the engineer on the other side of the glass, who took his hand off the cued record. The red light over the glass went off and a high nasal voice came out of the speaker: "Oooo-ooo-ooo-AH-wah—"

O'Toole leaned back in the chair, grabbed his handkerchief

off the table and mopped his round happy face. He grinned at the engineer, who gave him back the grin and made the O sign of approval with thumb and middle finger. O'Toole was selling them.

Yeah. Punch it out, throw it out, throw the words into the mike, keep them up, up, up, throw them the two beat, one-two, one-two, ooo-ooo-ooo-AH-wah, plug in a commercial, talk it fast, work up a sweat, steam up the double-thickness glass by the engineer's booth, keep the punks out there snapping their fingers, snapping their fingers, man, *yeah!*

O'Toole looked up at the big round clock with the big red second hand and saw there was just time for two quick breaks and the fade-out. The engineer gave him the get-ready sign; the disc was almost done. O'Toole dropped the handkerchief, leaned forward, hulked over the mike like a gorilla over a banana, opened his wide mouth into the big big smile and waited for the red light, the big red light, waited for the word to go go go! The high forehead glistened red and white and wet, and O'Toole, fat happy wealthy O'Toole, waited with his mouth open to bite the world in two.

Red light!

"A *gas!* Can that man sing or can he sing? Coooll, Dad, sweet. Yeah, I said *sweet,* Dad, like brand-new Disco-Lo, the low calorie soda that is nothing but *in!*" Speed it up, ram it down their throats. If they're old enough to have pockets they're old enough to carry dough, they're old enough to be sold. "Yeah, I said *Disco-Lo,* you know what I mean, man. The crazy new soda that's so *great* you wonder what sugar used to be *for!* Disco-Lo, for the cat who *knows!*"

Big breath, and into the other spot with only a one-beat break: "And the next time you make it down to Main Street, chicks, the next time you ankle down the town, check them wild scarves in Mullenstern's windows, baby, they are the living end! Listen, babies, listen to Cool O'Toole from Liverpool, the wise old fool himself, these scarves are the *thing!* I mean they are the end of the road, baby! *Eight-feet-long!* Tassels! Plaids or checks! *Every* cool kitten is gonna wrap the old neck in one of these scarves from Mullenstern's, honey chile. What about *you?* Well, I see by the old clock on the wall that it's back into the woodwork for mine, so this is Cool O'Toole, the old fool himself, the O.K. deejay, cuttin' out till tomorrow p.m., same time, same station, with the music *you* like best, plus some news and chatter and what's the matter and

all that jazz. Dedications, birthdays, the works, if we ain't got it, it ain't been made yet." Hand down, finger pointing, cut theme in and under . . . "Till tomorrow, then, Cool O'Toole here. You there?"

The light went out and the engineer gave him the O sign again. Right on time. Great work. O.K.

O'Toole grinned and mopped his brow and heaved out of the chair. He waddled away from the mike, his suit hanging limp and creased around his heavy body.

Just outside the studio he ran into Matt, one of the news announcers, who said, "Great show, Dan. You were really working tonight."

"Thanks, baby," said O'Toole. He loved compliments, he ate them up like whipped cream. He patted Matt's shoulder and moved on down the hall, headed for the outside world, his convertible, and home.

It was rough work, a four-hour disc jockey show like that six days a week, belting it out and belting it out so that sometimes he sweated right through the back of his coat and the seat of his pants, but it was worth it. For the money, for the fame, for the ease and comfort the other twenty hours of every day and all day Sunday.

And O'Toole knew he did good work, that at his profession he was one of the best. Ten, twelve commercial spots for every half hour segment, the clients *clamored* to buy time on the Cool O'Toole show! And why? Because he could deliver the kids. He had them, in the palm of his hand, in his hip pocket, and he could deliver them.

Like Mullenstern's, for instance. They'd had those scarves hanging around for months, and no takers. But a week of spots on the Cool O'Toole show, and those scarves would go go go! All the little cutie-pies would squeeze four bills out of the old lady or the old man and waggle their little fannies on down to Mullenstern's, and those dog scarves would be no more. That's why Mullenstern's paid for two or three spots on his show every night, and why anybody who had anything he wanted to sell to the teenage crowd knew the cheapest and best advertising dollar he could spend was the dollar that went into the pocket of Daniel Aloysius "Cool" O'Toole, disc jockey extraordinary.

O'Toole trotted down the station stairs, his round frame bop-bop-bopping down the two flights to the ground floor. He shoved open the door and stepped out into the evening, then crossed the street to the station parking lot and got

behind the wheel of his pale cream convertible. The engine made no sound as he headed home. He had a radio on the dash, but he never listened to it.

O'Toole stopped in front of his apartment house, and the guy from the garage in the basement trotted over and opened the door for him. He got out, and the garageman slid in behind the wheel and drove the purring car away to be parked. O'Toole walked under the canopy to the glass doors, one of which the doorman held open for him as he said, "Evening, Mister O'Toole."

O'Toole said, "Evening, Harry," and went into the building.

His bachelor apartment was on the fourth floor. He rode up in the self-service elevator and went down the hall to his door. He unlocked the door, went inside, and turned on the light.

Three kids froze.

O'Toole stared at them. They stood in the livingroom with canvas bags in their hands, near the window, near the fire escape. O'Toole looked and saw the window open, saw where they'd cut through the pane with some sort of glass cutter so they could reach in for the lock.

He turned his eyes back to the kids and they looked like triplets. They all had black hair and sideburns. They all had acne and black leather jackets. They all had dungarees and loafers. And they all had gray turtleneck sweaters.

From Mullenstern's. Gray turtleneck sweaters from Mullenstern's, the push for—what was it?—five or six weeks ago.

They made a tableau there, the four of them, O'Toole and the kids, all of them frozen by surprise and fright, and everything depended on who unfroze first. And it wasn't O'Toole.

His medical discharge from the Army declared: unfit for active duty. He was too excitable, too emotional; he panicked too easily. It was the same thing that made him a great announcer, the same thing that had made him think when he was young that he would be a great legitimate actor—Falstaff, Nero, Big Daddy—until the smalltime radio jobs he'd taken to help support himself through acting school had gradually become bigtime radio jobs and he'd learned what he was made for.

And this scene, in this room with three scared and dangerous kids, was not it.

O'Toole was not the first to move. The kid nearest the window was. He dropped his bag, which jangled like silverware when it hit the floor, and came running pell-mell across the room.

O'Toole put his chubby hands out to defend himself and the kid crashed into him, knocking him back against the door. O'Toole heard the click of the lock as the door slammed shut.

No one else could get in, now. He was on his own, with the three of them.

The kid grabbed him by the lapels and swung him around like a big sluggish balloon, away from the door and out into the middle of the room, where O'Toole lost his balance, tripped over his own feet, and fell down hard. He looked up through stinging eyes and saw the kid standing there with his back against the door.

One of the other kids said, "Artie—"

The kid by the door said, "Shut up! You bird brain, now he knows my name!"

The second kid, dropping his canvas bag, said, "What the hell difference does it make, Artie? He seen our faces. He'll identify us."

O'Toole stared from face to face, petrified.

The kid by the door, Artie, stared down at O'Toole and said, "Mister, you came home too early. You made yourself a mistake."

The third kid asked, "Artie, what are we gonna do?"

"Shut up," Artie told him. "Let me think."

The third kid added, "Tommy's right, he could identify us."

Artie said, "So what do *you* want to do?"

"I don't want to go to jail, Artie."

"That's fine," said Artie. "Thanks for telling me."

The second one, Tommy, suddenly came forward. "We can't kill him! Artie, we can't *kill* him!"

The third kid spoke up, "I told you we shouldn't of brought him. I told you, Artie. I said he'd fink out on us."

O'Toole found his voice at last, or at least part of his voice, because when he opened his mouth the best he could do was make a croaking sound like a frog. "I won't tell," he croaked at them.

They looked at him with surprise, as though they hadn't expected him to be capable of speech. Then Artie gave him a cynical smile and said, "Sure you won't."

O'Toole croaked, "I swear I won't tell. Honest."

Artie shook his head. "Forget it," he said. "Just put it out of your mind. It ain't gonna happen that way."

The third kid asked, "What do we do with him, Artie?"

Artie looked around the room, then ordered, "See if that window goes out to the fire escape too."

The boy went over and opened

the window and stuck his head out. When he came back in he said, "No, there's a nice drop to the sidewalk. The fire escape quits right over there."

"Okay," said Artie. "It's a tough break, but he fell out the window."

"No!" croaked O'Toole, but they ignored him. He sat on the floor in their midst, and they ignored him.

Artie said, "Tommy, you start putting that stuff back. Everything. There wasn't any burglary here tonight."

Tommy whined, "Do we have to, Artie?"

"You want him to point the finger at you? You want to spend twenty years up the river?"

"But there ought to be another way. Artie? Isn't there any other way?"

O'Toole stared at these kids as they talked it back and forth. His mind was full of a million whirling thoughts, but one thought kept coming back and coming back and coming back: *I've got these kids in the palm of my hand. I can deliver them.* That was the boast, that was what sold the time, that was what bought the convertible and all the other good stuff.

These three were wearing the gray turtleneck sweaters. They were *his* kids. He could get to them, he knew he could. He just had to play it right.

They didn't know yet who he was. They hadn't recognized the voice, and no wonder; it hadn't been coming out right. But now he had to get it to come out right, and he had to make it say the right things. Not to convince them to let him go, they wouldn't believe Cool O'Toole's word on something like this any more than anybody else's, but just to distract them, distract them and shake them up and mesmerize them. Get them in the palm of his hand and keep them there till he could get to the door.

He stared up at Artie and he *thought* a mike just in front of his face, and he *thought* a studio and a double sheet of plate glass just in front of Artie, and that made Artie the engineer. He worked up the words, he heated them, he got them up to boil, then he threw the big big toothy smile all over his face and spoke in the old voice the kids knew and loved so well, and he said to Artie, "Un-cool, man, you already *got* yourself one a them crazy gray sweaters from Mullenstern's. Why you so hot for jack, Jack?"

They stared at him. One of them said, "What the hell—"

The old sweat was pop, pop, popping out on the old shiny fore-

head, and Cool O'Toole was getting in the swing, off on the pitch, the great big pitch, the Biggest Pitch of his whole damn career. Sing-song, sing-song, he rolled it off. "Man, man, don't you dig the old voice? Don't you know your *man?* Don't you just *know?* Cats, it's Cool O'Toole from Liverpool, the great big fool himself, and he's IN PERSON!"

They stared at one another and at him, and their mouths hung open and their faces were white and shocked.

O'Toole kept it up, he sold and sold, and he dared to lift himself onto one knee, and he smiled the big-bite smile and he reeled it off: "Daddy-O, you know, you *know,* old O'Toole won't sing! Man, what've I got *records* for? O'Toole doesn't sing or *an-y*-thing, he sticks to his own and he knows he's home, and he digs you, cats, he digs you *good!*"

They kept on staring at him, and he dared again and was on his feet. The old smile was there, the old voice was there, and his hands were palms out to show them he was their friend. "You know O'Toole, you know he's cool," he chanted, he turned it on, he pumped and pumped. "You know I never steer you wrong, say so long, I *dig* your song, cats, cats, I'm one of you, I'm on the team, ain't no dream, no fret, no sweat, it's Cool O'Toole, and I *ain't* no fool, so grab the swag, grab the bag, you *know* I'm right, I'll keep it tight, you know me every night, no cause for fright. Man, man, there's more where that came from, so have a ball, take it all, O'Toole don't mind."

They watched him, their eyes on his glittering eyes and his sweating face and his chomping mouth, and he moved around, in time, in time, keeping to the beat. He moved around and moved around, he worked it slow and dared and dared and kept it up and didn't look at the door, didn't have to look at the door, he knew the old door, knew what it was for, and he talked and talked, sing-song, sing-song, and he moved around and moved around and he was getting closer to the door, and they kept on staring and staring.

"I make it, I take it, I break it, goodbye, no cry, no sigh, not O'Toole, O'Toole don't sweat he *knows* he's right, it's every night, it's Cool O'Toole from Liverpool, out of the woodwork, the master fool, and he's *long gone!*"

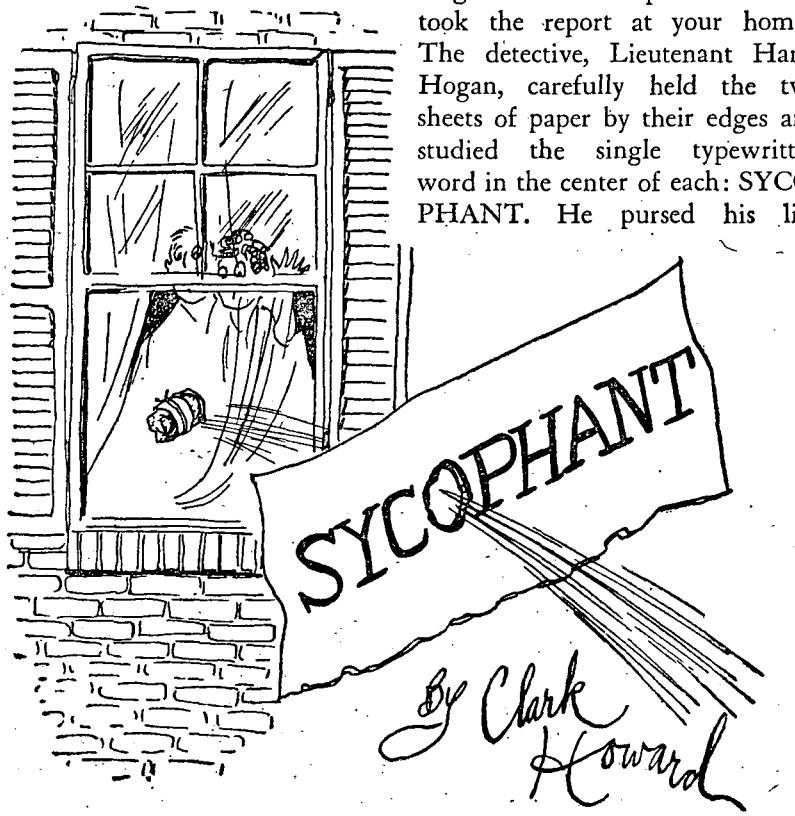
O'Toole turned and stabbed for the doorknob and out of the corner of his eye he saw Artie move and for just a second he caught a glimpse of the knife.

From Mullenstern's.

*A crank is generally conceded to be an eccentric, but the term also may be applied to a device for putting one's machinery into predestined motion.*

WALTER KEYES leaned forward across his kidney-shaped desk and handed two sheets of paper to the detective. "These are the notes I received in the mail," he said. "I guess you already have the one that was tied to the rock and thrown through my window last night."

"Yes, I have," the detective said. "I got it from the patrolman who took the report at your home." The detective, Lieutenant Harry Hogan, carefully held the two sheets of paper by their edges and studied the single typewritten word in the center of each: SYCOPHANT. He pursed his lips



thoughtfully for a moment, then looked over at Keyes and smiled briefly. "Same as the one that was thrown through your window, looks like. Have any idea what it means?"

"I looked up the word in the dictionary, naturally, after I received the first note," Keyes said. "It has something to do with being an informer, an accuser."

Hogan smiled briefly again. "Who can you think of that you've informed on recently, or accused of something?"

"Wish I *could* think of someone," Keyes said as lightly as possible. "Maybe then we could put a stop to this nonsense."

Walter Keyes, Hogan noted, was a trifle embarrassed by the situation. He attempted to conceal it by adopting the attitude that the whole affair was simply a nuisance perpetrated for the sole purpose of adding to his already considerable burden of daily problems. He was a small man, light-haired, with a relatively handsome face marred, in Hogan's estimation, by a somewhat weak mouth partially concealed by a light mustache.

"I probably would have let the whole thing pass if it hadn't been for my wife," Keyes said, trying to shift some of the discomfort of the moment away from himself. "As a matter of fact, I haven't even told her about the two notes I got in the mail. Of course, after that rock came crashing through our bedroom window last night, she insisted I call the police. She was pretty upset."

"Yes," Hogan sympathized, "I can imagine. Incidentally, did you keep the envelopes those first two notes came in?"

"No, I'm afraid I didn't. At first I thought it might be some kind of an advertising or promotion gimmick; I almost didn't even keep the first note, except that I was curious as to what the word meant. Then a couple of days later, when the second note arrived, I remembered that I still had the first one; I had left it on the desk in my study after I looked up the definition. I compared the two, saw they were identical, and decided to keep them. I don't know why, really; intuition, perhaps."

"Well, I'm glad you did, Mr. Keyes," said Hogan. "If you get any more in the mail, hold onto the envelope too; it's possible that postal inspectors can help us trace them."

Hogan carefully slipped the two notes into a manila envelope.

"What do you do now?" Keyes wanted to know.

"Oh, technical work, mostly," said Hogan, "in the lab. We'll have the notes tested for finger-

prints, we'll classify the paper stock and see if it can be traced, and we'll have the type impressions checked to determine what kind of typewriter was used. Aside from that, there isn't much we *can* do at this stage, except wait."

Keyes frowned. "Wait?"

"Wait for whoever's doing it to do it again."

"Do you think he will?"

"I'm certain of it," Hogan said. "There must be some kind of purpose behind the notes, some motive, something the person who's doing it is trying to accomplish. Whatever that is, it hasn't been accomplished yet." The detective looked closely at Keyes, who seemed to be deep in thought. "Do you follow me?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes, I see your point."

"I'd like to ask you again, Mr. Keyes," Hogan said flatly, "in seriousness, for the record this time, if you know of anyone who might possibly have a motive for sending you these notes? Anyone at all who might have reason to hold a grudge against you for anything?"

"Why, no—no one at all," Keyes said, his face dropping, as if the mere thought of anyone disliking him was painful. "Why, I don't have an enemy in the world," he said, spreading his hands innocently. "I'm always fair and honest in my dealings with everyone, I go out of my way to help anyone I can—"

"All right, Mr. Keyes," Hogan smiled, "we'll just go on the assumption that it's the work of a crank, then." The detective stood up and buttoned his coat. "I'll be in touch with you in a few days. Meantime, if you get any more notes, let me know right away."

Hogan left Walter Keyes' office and drove to the precinct station. He had a cup of coffee and thumbed through some old magazines in the patrolmen's lounge until half past three, when the night watch started arriving for duty. Then he went into the locker room to look for George Tapp, the patrolman who had answered the radio call to Keyes' home the previous night. The young officer was at his locker, putting on his uniform, when Hogan found him.

"Been out talking to this guy Walter Keyes," he told Tapp.

"That was the rock-through-the-window bit up on Forest Drive last night, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Get anything out of the guy?"

"Not a nickle's worth," Hogan smiled. "Keyes swears he hasn't got an enemy in the world."

"He's got at least one peculiar friend then," Tapp said dryly.

Hogan smiled his brief smile and nodded in agreement. "You have one-man patrols up in that area, haven't you?"

"Yeah," Tapp said. "It's mostly upper-class residential, pretty quiet as a rule; no need for two-man patrols."

"Do you think you could work it into your schedule to make a few extra passes by the Keyes home for the next couple of nights? No surveillance or anything like that, understand. Just break your routine a time or two in case this rock-thrower has figured out what time you usually pass there."

"Don't see why not," Tapp said. "You mind filing a Special Observation request with the desk so I'll be covered in case anything happens on the other side of my beat?"

"Be glad to," Hogan agreed. He started to leave, then turned back. "Say, you saw Keyes' wife last night, didn't you? What kind of a woman did she seem to be?"

Tapp shrugged. "Just a nice, quiet, middle-aged woman; seemed to be rather a nervous type, but that was probably because of the rock sailing through her window. Nothing really special about her. Why, what are you looking for?"

"Don't know, really," Hogan said. "Just to keep you up to date, though, that note tied to the rock was the third one Keyes has gotten. Two more just like it came in his mail last week."

"He didn't tell me that last night," Tapp said, frowning.

"That was because his wife was there. He told me this afternoon that he hadn't told her about the first two notes. Said he hadn't wanted to worry her. Now, that in itself doesn't bother me. What *does* bother me is that for some reason he obviously *still* doesn't want her to know about them."

"Think he knows more than he's told us?" Tapp asked.

"I'm not sure," Hogan said. He stared into space for a thoughtful moment, then smiled at Tapp and left the room without further comment.

The fourth note to Walter Keyes came at eleven o'clock that night in the same manner in which the third had been delivered—tied to a large rock which was hurled through the Keyes' second-floor bedroom window.

Patrolman George Tapp was at the front door eleven minutes after it happened.

"Now look," Walter Keyes began, "I pay taxes in this city—*substantial* taxes, too, although I don't usually boast about it—and I think I'm entitled to some protection—"

"Would you and your wife please stay inside the house," Tapp interrupted, "while I look around outside. I've radioed the four patrols adjacent to the area and they're already cruising the streets, but whoever's doing it may still be near the house."

Tapp pulled the door closed in Walter Keyes' face and hurried around to the side of the house from which the previous night's rock had been thrown. Flashlight in one hand, service revolver in the other, he prowled the grounds, searching shrubbery, trees and adjoining yards. He found no one.

Returning to his patrol car, Tapp radioed the station to relay a message to adjacent patrols that the suspect apparently had left the area of the Keyes home. Then he went back to the front door and was admitted to the house by a still angry Walter Keyes.

"Have you notified Lieutenant Hogan?" Keyes demanded.

"Lieutenant Hogan works days," Tapp said. "He isn't on duty right now." He took the rock with the note tied to it from Keyes' hand.

"Well, can't you get him at home?" Keyes said indignantly. "After all, this is a serious matter—"

Tapp glanced up and saw Mrs. Keyes coming down the stairs.

"Yes, it is serious, isn't it? Let's see, this is the fourth note you've received, I believe—"

A look of extreme discomfort immediately shrouded Walter Keyes' face and he looked nervously up the stairs at his wife. "Uh —Officer, I wish you wouldn't mention the first two notes in front of my wife." Keyes tried to look concerned and protective of his wife. "I didn't tell her about them, you see; don't want to upset her any more than necessary—"

"This is terrible, Walter, just terrible," Mrs. Keyes said as she entered the room. "I just don't know what to make of it. I'm so nervous I can't even think straight." She turned tearfully to Tapp. "Officer, can't you do *something—*"

"Now, Helen, calm down," Keyes said. "I'm sure the police are doing everything possible to find whoever's doing this. Here," he guided her to a chair, "sit down here and I'll make you some tea." Turning to Tapp, he took the officer's arm and led him back to the front door. "I'm sorry if I was abrupt a moment ago," Keyes said with forced friendliness. "You'll let Lieutenant Hogan know about this in the morning, I presume."

"Yes, I will," Tapp said.

The young officer went back out to his patrol car and turned on

the interior light. Carefully, he untied the string around the rock and unfolded the single sheet of paper that fell into his hand. Just as in the three notes that had preceded it, the message consisted of a single typewritten word: SYCOPHANT.

Tapp, wearing street clothes, returned to the Keyes home at ten o'clock the next morning. He found Hogan and several crime lab men on the side of the house below the broken bedroom window.

"What are you doing up this early?" Hogan asked.

"Policeman's curiosity," Tapp said lightly. "Couldn't sleep. Anything new?"

"Afraid not," Hogan said, "not so far, anyway. No footprints possible; grass is too thick. Nothing in the shrubbery or anywhere else on the grounds. None of the neighbors saw or heard anything suspicious until the rock went through the window."

"Patrols pick up anybody after I checked out last night?"

"Not a soul."

The two policemen walked out to the street where Tapp had left his car.

"Have you talked to Keyes yet this morning?" Tapp asked.

Hogan shook his head. "Not yet. Why?"

"He was pretty jumpy last night, afraid that his wife was going to find out about those first two notes. Practically pushed me out of the house so I wouldn't mention them in front of her."

"Yeah, he's made it pretty obvious that he doesn't want her to know about them, all right, but what I can't understand is *why*. They're all the same, identical, every one of them. What possible difference can it make if Mrs. Keyes knows about all of them or only half of them?"

"Good question," Tapp observed.

"What do you make of it?" Hogan wanted to know.

Tapp shrugged. "Don't ask me; you're the detective, remember?"

"You're a lot of help," Hogan said wryly, "all you do is give me complications." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment, rocking back on his heels in a slow, sleepy motion. "Tell you what," he said at last, "why don't you and I go in and have a little talk with Mrs. Keyes while Mr. Keyes isn't there? She might tell us something that her husband, uh, shall we say, *forgot* to mention."

Tapp grinned. "Lead the way, Lieutenant."

They walked up to the house and Hogan rang the bell. Helen Keyes opened the door, and led them to a small sitting room where Hogan and Tapp politely declined her offer of tea. The two policemen sat facing her in a neat circular arrangement of chairs before a fireplace.

"Mrs. Keyes," Hogan said quiet-

ly, "I know you're upset about this matter and I hate to bother you with questions, but do you personally have any suspicion at all of who could be causing this harrassment?"

"Dear me, no," Mrs. Keyes said in bewilderment. "Walter—Mr. Keyes—and I discussed it at length last night after Officer—uh—"

"Tapp, ma'am."

"Yes, after Officer Tapp left. I was too nervous to sleep anyway, and Walter stayed up with me for several hours. He's so thoughtful and understanding when I'm upset."

"Yes, I'm sure he is," Hogan said politely. "You say you discussed the matter last night?"

"Yes, we did. We tried and tried to think of anyone who could possibly be doing this—anyone at all. Why, Walter even helped me make a list of everyone we know, and we checked off every single name, but for the life of us we just couldn't think of a soul who would want to torment me this way."

"Torment *you,* you say?" Hogan glanced quickly at Tapp, and saw that the younger officer also had picked up on the woman's phrasing. "Why do you say it's to torment you, Mrs. Keyes?" the detective asked quietly.

"Why, it must be, that's all. I certainly can't imagine anyone doing a thing like this to Walter. I mean, he's such a warm and generous man, everyone just thinks the world of him. I'm sure no one would have any reason to torment *him* in this manner."

"I see," said Hogan, "but you do think maybe someone has a reason to torment you?"

"Well, that's the only other answer, isn't it? I mean, we're the only two people in the house. Who else could it be?"

"But you said a moment ago you couldn't think of anyone who would do a thing like this to you," Hogan reminded her.

"I can't. Walter even tried to help me think of someone, like the gardener I had to let go last year because he wasn't taking proper care of the geraniums, but mercy, I'm sure he wouldn't do such a thing. Of course, I can give you his name and address if you want to check on him."

"Yes," Hogan smiled quickly, "yes, why don't you do that, Mrs. Keyes."

"I'll get my address book," she said.

The woman left the room. Hogan and Tapp looked knowingly at each other.

"He sure has got her convinced that the notes were meant for her, hasn't he?" Tapp said quietly.

"Yes," Hogan nodded, pursing his lips in thought. "Yes, he has."

Both men stood as Mrs. Keyes returned to the room.

"Here's his name and address, Lieutenant." She handed Hogan a slip of paper. "Frankly, I hope he's not who you're looking for; he was really a nice old man. He just didn't care for geraniums."

"Well, we'll look into it anyway, Mrs. Keyes; always a chance, you know. We'll be going now. Thank you for your time."

As Hogan and Tapp walked out toward the cars, one of the crime lab men approached them. "You just got a radio call, Lieutenant. That fellow Keyes left a message for you at the station. Said he'd found another note a little while ago, stuck under the windshield wiper of his car in the parking lot behind his office."

"Thanks," Hogan said with a frown. He and Tapp walked on to their cars.

"Well, what now?" Tapp asked.

Hogan glanced down at the slip of paper Mrs. Keyes had given him. "I think," the detective said, "that I'll drive down and check out this ex-gardener of theirs. If I don't pick up anything there—which I don't expect to, frankly—I'll go out and have a quiet lunch someplace and read the sports page and maybe even splurge on a four-bit-cigar. Then after I've relaxed for an hour and put myself in the right frame of mind—" Hogan paused to smile, "I think I'll go have a real heart-to-heart talk with Mr. Walter Keyes." He raised his eyebrows at Tapp. "Care to join me?"

"Gee, I'd sure like to," Tapp said in mock disappointment, "but I've got a date to teach a certain young lady the art of bowling. Besides," he grinned, "this is detective's work. I'm just plain old patrolman." He gave Hogan a light salute and sauntered over to his car.

At two that afternoon, Lieutenant Harry Hogan once again sat facing Walter Keyes across the businessman's kidney-shaped desk. "Mr. Keyes," he said easily, "I'm going to have to ask you to give me a little more help on this case of yours, but before I do, I'd like to bring you up to date on what's been done so far.

"First of all, we've made a complete lab analysis of the paper on which the notes were written. We found no fingerprints of any kind, and we learned that the paper is a cheap tablet stock that can be purchased in any dimestore in the city.

"Next, we had our Questioned Documents expert go over the type face of the word 'sycophant'

which was the only word on each of the notes. He found it to be a style of type used by the second largest typewriter manufacturer in the country. They've been using that style for six years, during which time they've built seven-and-a-half million machines. Now, this particular manufacturer keeps a card file of type samples on every machine it builds, and of course, like fingerprints, no two typewriters are the same. However, it would take all the typewriter experts in the whole F.B.I. a year or more to go through seven-and-a-half million index cards, and I doubt if they'd do it for anything less than a threatening letter to the President.

"Now then, as you know, we've covered every inch of ground around your home searching for any possible clues that might have been left when the two rocks were thrown through your window, and again, as with everything else, we ran into a dead-end.

"So, as far as physical evidence is concerned, we have nothing at all. As far as individual suspects, only one: a certain ex-gardener of yours that Mrs. Keyes told me about this morning—"

"You've talked with my wife about this?" Keyes interrupted, surprised. "I believe I made it clear, Lieutenant, that she wasn't to be upset any further. Please."

"I assure you that I didn't upset her, Mr. Keyes," Hogan said in a flat voice. "As a matter of fact, we had a very pleasant discussion during which, as I said, Mrs. Keyes gave me the name and address of your former gardener. Just to cover all bases, I checked the man out and determined that he isn't in any way involved. He had a stroke three months ago and has been in a veteran's hospital ever since."

"Frankly, Lieutenant," Keyes said rather aloofly, "I still don't know exactly what you're getting at."

"Well, *exactly* what I'm getting at, Mr. Keyes, is this: number one, we are presently at a complete standstill as far as evidence is concerned, for we can't make another move until our mysterious note-sender makes one first; number two, this is a bad position to be in because from all outward appearances we are dealing with some kind of psychopath, a potentially dangerous person who is leading up to a dangerous act."

"Just how do you know that, may I ask?" Keyes questioned.

"I know it," Hogan said quietly, "because every move he makes is more brazen than the last. First he plays it safe by mailing the notes, then he stands outside your home at night and throws them through

your window, and now—*in broad daylight*—he's putting them on the windshield of your car. Next he'll be tucking them into your shirt pocket."

"That's very dramatic, Lieutenant," Keyes said snidely, "but hardly conclusive. The mere fact that a pest is becoming pestier doesn't necessarily mean that he's becoming dangerous."

"True," said Hogan. "However, it is my professional opinion as an experienced police officer that this person *is* potentially dangerous. I've worked on cases involving psychopaths before, Mr. Keyes. I'm not being dramatic when I tell you that I think you are in danger of bodily harm from this person."

Keyes got up and turned away from Hogan to gaze out a large window behind his desk. He clasped his hands behind him and stood thoughtfully for several moments. "Lieutenant," he said quietly, "I handle financial investments for a number of important people in this city. I can't afford any sensational publicity—"

"Then I suggest you help me stop this person while there's still time to stop him," said Hogan.

"What would I have to do?" Keyes asked.

"Just fill in a missing piece for me, Mr. Keyes, that's all. I already know that you're covering up for the notes at home by convincing your wife that they were meant for her. You obviously did that to avoid having to explain why anyone would send the notes to *you*. Now, before I came to see you today I stopped in at the reference department of the main library and did some research on the word 'sycophant.' I found out that it has another meaning besides the definition you gave me. It's taken from the Greek *sykophantes,* and it's used to describe a deceiver. Its most common use was formerly applied to a person who seduced innocent women."

Keyes was still facing the window, but Hogan saw the back of his neck turn red with embarrassment and knew he had found the missing piece of the puzzle.

"This can be done very quietly, without any publicity at all," the police lieutenant assured, "if you'll just give me the whole story."

Keyes turned to face Hogan again, suddenly looking very old, his weak mouth drooping under its mustache camouflage in an arc of weariness and worry.

"All right," he said resignedly, "I'll tell you about it. As you've probably already guessed, it involves a girl—"

Hogan made it back to the pre-

cinct in time to catch Tapp before he started his night shift. They sat over coffee in the patrolmen's lounge and the detective brought the case up to date.

"Walter Keyes," Hogan said dryly, "that fair and honest paragon of virtue who doesn't have an enemy in the world, has turned out to be a first-class chiseler and cheat."

"How shocking," said Tapp. "Just when I was about to model my life after him, too."

"Save your witty remarks for later," Hogan said, glancing at the clock. "You go on duty in ten minutes and I want you to have some details. It's highly possible that we're playing around with a killer."

"Okay, shoot," said Tapp, his young face becoming serious.

"A few years ago, Keyes hired a young girl to work as his secretary. She was engaged to a soldier who had just been sent to Korea—that was when they were still fighting over there. Well, about six months later the girl was notified that her fiance had been killed in action. Naturally, she was pretty broken up about it—" Hogan paused momentarily, sighing heavily. "I lost a boy in Korea. Did I ever tell you?"

Tapp shook his head without speaking. Hogan gazed out at nothingness for a moment, then blinked his way back to the present.

"This girl, Jane Fraser was her name, didn't have a family, her folks were dead, so I guess in her grief she leaned pretty heavily on Keyes. I suppose she looked up to him, trusted him; he was old enough to be her father. Anyway she—"

"You don't have to draw me a picture," Tapp said tightly. "He seduced the girl, right?"

"Right. He played on her grief, her loneliness, her immaturity, and before she knew it she was involved in an affair with him. Then one day she got a letter through the Swiss Red Cross. Her fiance wasn't dead, after all. He was a prisoner of war.

"By that time, of course, she was living in an apartment Keyes was paying the rent on, wearing clothes he had bought her, drinking pretty heavily, the whole routine. When she realized what she'd become, I guess she kind of went out of her head. She ended up in a sanitarium and finally managed to cut her wrists one night, right after she'd written to her fiance telling him the whole sordid story."

"You think it's the fiance who's sending the notes?" asked Tapp.

"Looks that way. He called Keyes on the telephone one day a

couple of months after the Korean war ended and the prisoners had been exchanged. Told Keyes he was going to kill him for what he'd done to Jane Fraser. Called him a sycophant, and told him to remember that word because it was going to be the last word he ever heard."

"Looks like he's our man, then," Tapp said. "You getting a run-down on him?"

"I can't," said Hogan. "That's the catch. Keyes doesn't know his name. Odd as it may seem, Jane Fraser never once mentioned it."

"Great," said Tapp. "We're right back where we started."

"Not quite. I've sent a wire to the Swiss Red Cross to see if they can trace the original letter that was sent to Jane Fraser. If they can give us the name of the sender, the rest will be easy."

"And in the meantime?" Tapp asked soberly.

"In the meantime, the guy is loose—and dangerous. Now, Keyes won't permit special guards around his house; he's afraid of attracting attention and getting his good name in the newspapers. He has agreed to send his wife out of town so she won't be in danger, so that will leave him alone in the house. What I'm going to do is get a man to relieve you in the patrol car as soon as it gets dark, and put you in the house with him. I want you to ride shotgun on this joker all night long, and I'll take over when he leaves for work in the morning. Get the picture?"

"Yeah," Tapp nodded. "I'll be making the regular patrol while it's still daylight outside, so in case our man has me spotted, he won't get suspicious seeing a new face."

"Right," said Hogan, "but after dark we'll have another patrolman take over and you'll be inside where you'll do the most good."

"Because I'm already familiar with the house and grounds, right? Sounds good," said Tapp.

The two policemen looked at each other for a silent, awkward moment.

"I guess you're thinking the same thing I am," said Hogan. "Personally, I think Keyes has got it coming too, after what he did to Jane Fraser. But—"

"I know," said Tapp. "Our job is to keep him alive, not judge him."

Hogan nodded slowly. The younger man drank the last of his coffee and left to start his night shift.

At ten o'clock that night, Tapp was playing gin rummy with Walter Keyes at the kitchen table in the Keyes home.

"Do you think he'll show up tonight?" Keyes asked, trying to dis-

guise his fear with a nonchalant tone.

"Never can tell," said Tapp, throwing down a card.

"I suppose this is a little boring for you, having to sit around here all night."

Tapp shrugged. "I get overtime for it." He made another play, then looked thoughtfully at Keyes. "Do you keep a gun in the house, Mr. Keyes?"

"Why, yes, I do. I have one in the desk in my study."

"Might not be a bad idea to get it and keep it handy tonight."

"All right, I'll do that when this game is over—"

"It's over now," Tapp said, spreading his cards on the table. "Gin."

Keyes chuckled and pushed back his chair. "That's four straight," he said lightly. "You don't cheat, do you?"

Tapp looked flatly at the little man for a moment. "No, Mr. Keyes," he said quietly, "I don't cheat—at anything."

Keyes reddened and his weak line of a mouth tightened under its flimsy mustache. He turned abruptly and left the room.

Smart young punk, Keyes thought, going into his study. What did he know about it anyway? A man only had one life; he had to take what pleasure he could get out of it, no matter whom it hurt. Besides, how could he have known that stupid girl would go crazy and slash her wrists?

He opened a desk drawer and took out the gun, a small automatic he had bought in Italy. There had been a girl in Italy, too, during his short trip there; and several girls before Jane Fraser, and a couple since her. Most of them had gotten over their moments of weakness, had walked out on him when they realized what kind of person he was. But, he smiled to himself, there would be others. What did he care what some smart young cop thought?

Keyes loaded the gun and went back into the kitchen. The cards were still on the table but Tapp was not there. The back door was open, and Keyes walked over and peered out at the dark yard. "Officer Tapp," he said softly, "are you out there?" No answer came from the darkness. Keyes frowned and stepped outside. "Officer Tapp?"

The big yard was silent and still. Raising the gun, Keyes walked slowly along to the corner of the house where a streetlight broke the pattern of black over the lawn. He stopped just at the edge of the light, trying to distinguish what looked like a shadowy figure next to a tree. "Who's there?" he said in

a loud, reverberating whisper.

"Destiny," a voice whispered back. "Goodbye, Sycophant!"

A single shot exploded in the quiet and a single, well-aimed bullet bored dead-center into Walter Keyes' chest, killing him instantly. Seconds later the shadowy figure bent over the body, raised its dead right hand with the automatic still clutched tightly, and forced the lifeless trigger finger to fire a shot into the nearby tree. Then he stood straight, stared for a moment at the sky as if trying to communicate with the beyond, and finally turned to walk slowly into the Keyes house to call the precinct station.

After it was all over, after the coroner's men had been there and the body taken away, after the reporters had been satisfied and the last flashbulb exploded, after the Keyes house had been darkened and the neighborhood quieted down again, Tapp rode back to the station with Hogan.

"What are you going to tell them at the inquest?" the detective wanted to know. "They will . . ."

"Same thing I told the reporters," Tapp said. "I went outside to check on a noise. Keyes came out with his own gun a couple of minutes later. In the dark we mistook each other for the prowler. He fired at me, missed and hit the tree. I fired back and didn't miss. It's that simple."

"Well, it's a good story," said Hogan. "No reason why it shouldn't be believed. Incidentally, I got a wire from the Swiss Red Cross; they can't help us. They don't keep records on people they forward mail to, only the names of the prisoners of war who write the letters."

"Never be able to locate anyone that way," Tapp commented. "There were thousands of prisoners taken during the Korean war. I was one myself."

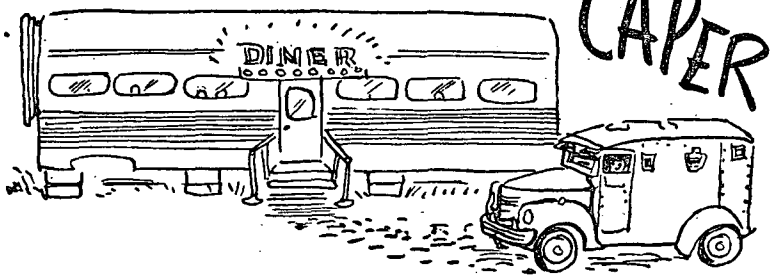
"I lost a boy in Korea," Hogan said quietly. "Did I ever tell you?"

"Yes," Tapp answered, "you did."

The two men rode in silence the rest of the way to the station, each caught up in his own memories.

*It is a sagacious gourmand who, while daring to risk potluck, makes ready for indigestion, at the least.*

# THAT'S HOW THE CAPER CRUMBLES




by Lawrence Wasser

IT WAS two o'clock and by now Byron was sneezing and coughing so loudly Spanish Henry was sure they could hear him clear back in town. Not that he was much quieter. His chattering teeth almost drowned out Byron's hacking. Georgie was the only one who didn't seem to mind the steady, chilling downpour. He sat with them in the ditch, soaked to the skin, and didn't make a sound.

For Spanish Henry this was the moment of truth. The powerful and far reaching criminal code allowed a gang boss only three foul-

ups. And if he blew this caper . . . he shuddered when he thought of the consequences.

Suddenly a familiar green truck rounded the bend in the highway and rumbled up to the parking area some fifty feet from where they were hidden.

"This is it, Companeros," Spanish Henry said nervously. "Now wait for my signal."

One of the guards got out and made a hunched-up dash for the diner. His partner drooped in the seat and tilted his cap over his eyes.

Spanish Henry waited five minutes, then gave the signal, "Let's go!"

Byron took his post outside the diner while the other two crept up on the armored truck and quickly overpowered the bewildered guard. Spanish Henry took the guard's visored cap, put it on and got behind the wheel. Georgie pushed the guard down to the floorboards and sat on him. Byron came stumbling over and sat beside him.

Spanish Henry drove carefully on the slick asphalt. So far, things had gone smoother than he'd dared hope, especially with eight-balls like Byron and Georgie. But after all, a gang boss with two straight washouts couldn't afford to be choosy.

A tear welled up in his left eye and was quickly followed by one in his right as an uncontrollable wave of self-pity swept over him. It stirred up memories of every low point in his life, from the time he was orphaned at seven and taken in by Mexican migrants, to three days ago when he had to swallow his pride and scrape the bottom of the underworld barrel for a gang. He wiped his eyes and looked at his watch. It was two-thirty.

At two-thirty the day before, the three of them were drinking beer in a back booth of Pop Lampert's bar and grill. Byron could have doubled for Jerry Lewis and Georgie for King Kong. They were listening to Spanish Henry, a big Swede, whose real name was Helvar.

"How big is the payoff?" Byron asked.

Spanish Henry smacked his lips and put down his glass. "Couldn't be sure, Muchacho—but I figure it'll be around forty or fifty G's."

Byron's allergy was acting up and he blew his nose excitedly. "Hot dog! Now I can get that racing car I always wanted."

Georgie snorted. "Racing car? Now what do you wanna do a dumb thing like that for?" His face brightened. "I'm gonna get

me a real thoroughbred race horse and win a lot of big races."

"A race horse?" Byron looked at him in stunned disbelief. "And you say *I'm* doing a dumb thing?"

Spanish Henry heard them faintly through his own thoughts:

. . . listen to those jokers. One's dumber than the other.

. . . I'm not spending *my* money foolishly. I'm gonna give it to Big Mike to line me up a big job. A real big job. Two, three hundred grand. I'll get two of the best men around and knock off the trick with no sweat. Then I'll buy an island way out in the ocean and I'll be top man there. My house will be the biggest and it'll have two—no!—*three* bathrooms . . .

"How about you, Boss?" Byron asked. "What're you gonna do with your share?"

"Nothing dumb like buying a car or a horse!" Spanish Henry snapped. He drained his beer, wiped his mouth and lowered his voice. "Now listen. Here's how we're gonna pull it off.

"We drive out to a cutoff about a mile from the diner, stash the car and hike it to the stakeout. We lay low until the tank gets there. There'll be two guards and they eat in shifts. As soon as one goes into the diner, Byron will take his post outside in case the guard comes out ahead of time. Then me and Georgie'll jump the other one and take off in the tank.

"We go back to the cutoff, toss the money sacks into the car and head for the hideout." He looked at them quizzically. "Well, Compadres? Is it simple—or is it simple?"

They agreed it was simple.

"Okay. Now the tank should get to the diner around one o'clock," he continued. "That means we gotta be there ready and waiting no later than twelve forty-five, and that means we gotta stash the car around twelve. That'll give us plenty of time to cover the mile through the woods to the diner. Any questions?"

"Where and when we gonna meet?" Byron asked.

Spanish Henry leaned forward. "Be outside Steber's parking lot tomorrow morning at nine o'clock sharp."

"Why so early?" Byron asked.

"Two reasons, Muchacho. One, the extra time is an edge in case we run into trouble; and two," his voice tightened, "because I say so."

It was raining the next morning when he drove up to Steber's parking lot at nine o'clock on the nose. Georgie didn't get there until nine-thirty. "I overslept," he said. Spanish Henry swallowed some bile, grabbed the big guy by the tie and

yanked him brusquely into the car.

They sat there and waited for Byron. At a quarter of ten Spanish Henry, cursing steadily and bilingually, stormed out of the car and down to the corner phone booth. He gouged out Byron's number impatiently.

"Hello?" rasped a congested voice.

"I'll hello *you*—you idiot! Whatinell are you doing up there when you're supposed to be down here!"

"Sorry, Boss, but I can't make it today. I got a bad head cold and my mother won't let me out of the house."

Spanish Henry exploded. "A head cold! How can a juice-head like you tell when you got a head cold? Now you listen to me—this is my last chance and I'm not letting anybody louse it up. I want you down here pronto and that means NOW!"

"But I can't, Boss," Byron whined. "My mother hid my clothes."

"Listen, you creep with ears! Find some clothes, anybody's clothes. Your mother's clothes even—I don't care. And if you're not down here in half an hour I'll come up there and drag you out naked as a blue jay. Sabe?" He smashed the phone down and marched back to the car.

Byron finally showed up an hour later. He was wearing his father's clothes and his father was obviously a foot taller. Every few steps he had to stop and roll the cuffs up to his ankles so he wouldn't trip over them. The cuffs, wet and heavy, kept falling down. That's why he was so late, he tried to explain as Spanish Henry grabbed him and booted him into the car.

Spanish Henry got behind the wheel and looked at his watch. It was eleven o'clock. They had only an hour to cover a little over sixty miles. He stomped on the gas pedal and, keeping a watchful eye out for the cops, he kept it there all the way.

When he pulled into the cutoff and parked behind some trees the rain was bouncing about four inches off the highway. It was five minutes after twelve. They had only forty minutes to get to the diner.

Spanish Henry took a new forty-five out of the glove compartment and they started off through the woods. They got to the diner at five minutes to one. This gave them only five minutes to get ready for the arrival of the armored truck. They took their places in the ditch, behind some shrubbery that gave them a clear view of the diner and the highway. And the rain just wouldn't quit.

One-thirty rolled around and

there was still no sign of the armored truck.

"You think they've been here and gone?" Byron asked.

"I hope not," Spanish Henry said darkly. "For both your sakes."

"Don't worry. They'll show," Georgie said brightly.

"Don't worry—don't worry," Spanish Henry mimicked as he turned up his collar and wiped his face with a wet handkerchief.

A sports car suddenly roared past the armored truck and jarred Spanish Henry's thoughts back to the present. He squinted through the blurry windshield until he spotted the cutoff up ahead. Turning off the highway, he pulled in behind the trees and parked alongside his car.

They got out of the truck and left the guard, still not quite believing what was happening, lying on the floorboards. Spanish Henry took a roll of hospital tape from his pocket and tossed it to Byron. "Tape his hands and feet tight and stick a strip over his mouth. Make sure you don't tape over his nose. We want him quiet—not dead."

Then he took the ignition keys from the truck and tossed them to Georgie. Georgie fumbled.

"Caramba! Can't you guys do anything?" He picked up the keys and placed them with exaggerated care into Georgie's hand. "Now find the right one and open the back door. You *can* find the back door, can't you?"

Georgie found the right key after some difficulty and opened the heavy steel door. He jumped into the truck and dragged the lone money sack to the edge.

Spanish Henry couldn't bear to look. "Is it empty?"

"Are you kidding?" Georgie said. "This sack is so heavy there must be a million dollars in it."

Spanish Henry couldn't believe it. Did he finally beat the jinx? He grabbed the sack eagerly and pulled it off the truck. It was heavy all right. "Byron," he said, "come help Georgie get this sack into the car."

When the sack was safely locked in the trunk, they all crowded into the front seat and drove off, leaving the guard taped up in the front seat of the armored truck.

Fifteen minutes later the guard finally snapped out of his daze and leaned on the horn until help came. By that time the gang was holed up in Spanish Henry's room in a quiet out-of-the-way motel some twenty miles away.

The first thing Spanish Henry did, after he tossed the sack on the floor and locked the door, was to wrap himself completely in towels and a giant-size terry cloth robe.

Byron cocooned himself in a bed quilt and sat soaking his feet in a pan of hot water. Four nickle packs of tissues were on the table nearby. The wastepaper basket beside him was filled with soggy crumpled balls. The hot air vent was turned up to "high." The money sack lay unopened and almost forgotten on the floor. Only Georgie, still in his wet clothes, was thinking about it.

"Well, when we gonna open the sack?" he asked finally.

Spanish Henry ha-chooed earthily, managed to gasp out, "You open it," and sneezed again even louder.

Georgie eagerly knifed a hole in the tough canvas and ripped the sack three quarters of the way down. Promptly his size twelve double E's were pelted with hundreds of rolls of *pennies.*

Spanish Henry's eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets. He bit his index finger joint hard. "I'm finished," he groaned. "Three strikes—I'm out!" He stood there seething for a few minutes, then suddenly boiled over. He grabbed the sack and ripped it open all the way down. Then he shook it wildly in all directions. The rest of the rolls of pennies flew out and bounced off the walls and floor. Some of the wrappers broke open and loose cents rolled all around the room, spiraled into corners.

Then a thin bundle of crisp new bills dropped out. Spanish Henry scooped them up quickly, blanched when he saw the figure on the top bill and riffled through the stack apprehensively. They were all thousand dollar bills! Dropping the "fortune," he collapsed on the bed in a state of shock.

Puzzled, Georgie picked up the green stack and after carefully

checking every bill, tossed the loot into the wastepaper basket.

Byron, oblivious to what was going on, stepped out of the pan of hot water and sat down on the floor. "You know, Georgie," he said, "I'll bet we got a million dollars worth of pennies here." He began picking up the loose coppers and stacking them in piles of twenty.

A piece of paper still sticking in the corner of the sack caught Georgie's eye. He picked it up and looked at it. It was the shipping list. "One thousand dollars in pennies and forty-nine thousand in one-thousand-dollar bills," he read.

"Gee, Georgie," Byron said reverently, "we got fifty thousand bucks."

Georgie looked over at Spanish Henry with disgust and kicked over Byron's penny stacks. "We got fifty thousand bucks worth of nothing!"

The next morning Spanish Henry woke up with a splitting headache. He was alone. Byron and Georgie had gone home the night before, each with five dollars in pennies straining their pockets to the ripping point. Spanish Henry had hidden the rest of the coins all over the place—in his suitcases, the trunk of his car, and the pockets of all his clothes hanging in the closet.

The bills were behind a Van Gogh print hanging over his bed. That is, all except one. That was in his wallet, sandwiched between ten singles.

Spanish Henry got dressed and drove into the city. He parked and bought a newspaper. The front page was full of it, but there was one part of the story that put a rare smile on his face. The guard's description of the gang—all wrong. He must have been scared blind.

He went into a Russian restaurant where a big sloppy-looking man was sitting at a table dipping an enormous chunk of black bread into a bowl of beet soup. Spanish Henry sat down without a word of greeting. He took out the bill and waved it under the man's nose. "Seven hundred for a G note. What do you say, Boris?"

Boris looked up slowly. "You think I'm nuts? Even if it wasn't hot, you think I want the tax boys or the feds nosing around asking me questions? I wouldn't give you two phony kopecks for that lousy bill."

Spanish Henry leaned closer. "Look, Boris buddy, I'm in a bad bind. I gotta show a profit on this one or I'm a three-time loser. And you know what that means."

"Yeah, I know. According to the code you can't boss no more jobs." He dunked the bread vigorously

and ruined Spanish Henry's new white tie. "You can always go back to being wheelman," he added as an afterthought. "You was pretty good behind the wheel."

Spanish Henry shook his head emphatically. "No! If I can't be boss," he gulped hard, "I'd rather go straight."

Boris smiled through a mouthful of wet bread. "That's a better idea. You're a born loser. You should have gone straight years ago."

Spanish Henry felt like a loser. He got up and walked slowly out of the restaurant. Later that day he drove over to Pop Lampert's. Georgie and Byron were waiting for him at the back booth.

"Any luck?" Byron sniffled.

"Si, Muchacho—all bad." He sat down wearily. "I been all over town and I couldn't even *give* the damn thing away!" He reached for Byron's beer, changed his mind and drank Georgie's beer instead. "Hey, Pop," he called out, "three more here."

"What'll we do now? Pass the pennies?" Byron asked.

"Don't be loco. The cops'll be on the lookout for any heavy penny pushers."

Pop shuffled over with his tray and set three beers down on the table. Byron reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of pennies. Spanish Henry quickly grabbed his arm and tossed Pop a dollar bill. The old man counted out the change carefully. A quarter, a dime, two nickles—and ten pennies. Spanish Henry scooped up the silver and left the cents lay there.

"Keep them, Pop," he said wryly. "I never carry them."

They drank their beers slowly. Spanish Henry absently made wet rings on the table with the bottom of his glass. Then suddenly, without a word, Georgie and Byron got up and left him sitting there all alone.

The next day, just when he seriously began thinking of asking his brother-in-law for a job in his bar and grill, he read in the paper that the armored truck company was offering a reward for the return of the money. The notice read in part, "—liberal reward for the return of, or information leading to . . . no questions asked."

Spanish Henry had some trouble getting his ex-gang to listen to him, but when he explained that rewards in situations like this usually ran into ten percent of the amount involved, Georgie's head jerked up fast. Byron dropped his wet tissue. "Ten percent? Let me see, ten percent of fifty—hey! That's five G's!"

"Just about sixteen hundred apiece," Georgie figured.

Spanish Henry smiled the smile

of a condemned man who just got a last minute reprieve. "Sixteen hundred and sixty-six dollars and sixty-six and two thirds cents, to be exact." He saw them wince when he mentioned the word *cents* and he burst out laughing. They thought he was cracking up.

The next day, all slicked up and lugging the loot, they entered the office of Edward Conroy Van Ingen. Mister Van Ingen was the executive vice-president of Armored Carriers, Incorporated. He was the one picked to present the reward to the three honest men who returned the money they found while hunting.

The photographers made Spanish Henry turn over the package of thousand-dollar bills to Mister Van Ingen six times before they had enough pictures. Then more flashbulbs popped as Byron and Georgie opened the laundry bag and dumped the pennies on the floor.

Mister Van Ingen shook hands all around for still more pictures. Then it was time for the formal presentation. The photographers put fresh bulbs in their flash units and the TV men repositioned their cameras.

Van Ingen took a handsome mahogany case from his desk and cleared his throat. "Gentlemen," he began, "we're here today to reward three men to whom honesty is more than just a policy. It's a way of life—men to whom some things are more important than mere money.

"How then can we hope aptly to reward these three extraordinary individuals? Certainly not with anything as cold, impersonal and transitory as coin of the realm. No! It must be a reward that is lasting —a memorial in miniature, so to speak, for a deed long to be remembered."

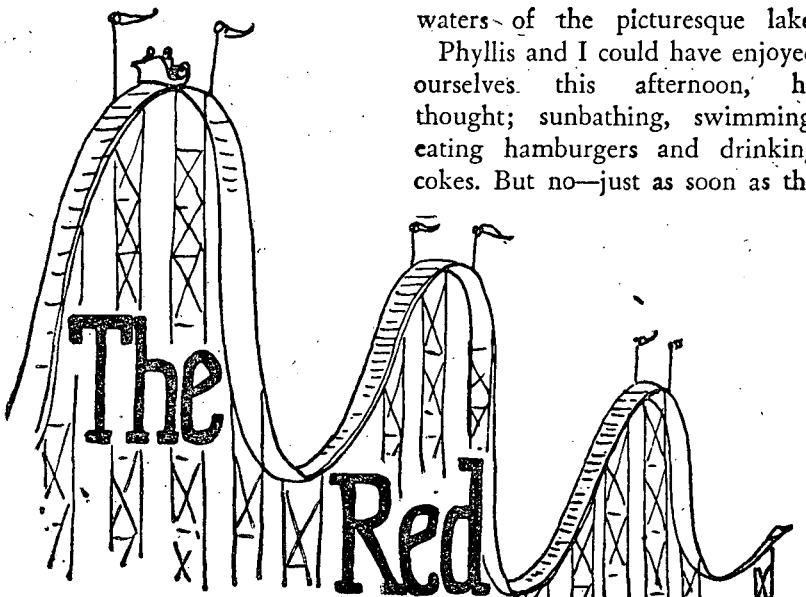
The three hoods stood there smiling for the TV cameras. It was obvious they weren't getting the gist of what he was saying. Van Ingen finally opened the case to reveal three shining medals on a handsome blue plush background.

*Now* they got the message—and it was bad news. They stood there stunned as they were duly pinned in turn. Spanish Henry saw himself clearly in a white apron, wringing out a bar rag.

Mister Van Ingen turned Spanish Henry's medal to read the inscription engraved on the back. "For outstanding honesty," he read sententiously, "in the face of the enemy—temptation."

Spanish Henry was flanked by Georgie and Byron, and if looks could really kill, he would have been the first man ever murdered in stereo.

*The "kook" who scorns all things traditional occasionally is persuaded by circumstance to revert to the proverbial; e.g., "If wishes were horses. . ."*



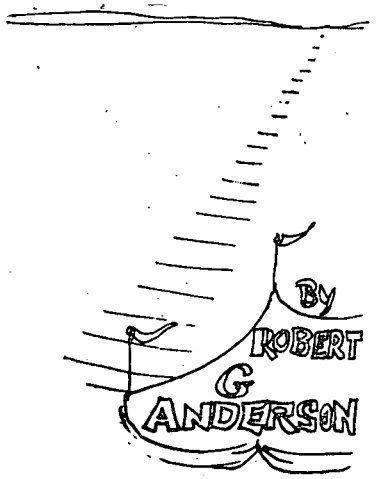
# The Red Ferrari

GRAVEL flew for twenty feet as the beat-up convertible with the multicolored fenders shot out of the parking lot. Wooshy drove with studied nonchalance but there was a scowl on his tanned, young face. His girlfriend sat stonily beside him, back stiff, eyes straight ahead, cool and frosty in spite of the August sunshine. Behind him lay Rainford Park Beach, curving like a white scimitar into the indigo waters of the picturesque lake.

Phyllis and I could have enjoyed ourselves this afternoon, he thought; sunbathing, swimming, eating hamburgers and drinking cokes. But no—just as soon as the beach blanket was spread, she started in again. The words between them had gained momentum, become heated and strident. Finally, he had taken her by the elbow and steered her to the car.

Maybe a ride would help cool them off.

They always wound up like this lately; angry, frustrated, and miles apart in their thinking. He liked Phyllis, she was nice to dance with, lots of fun, but why couldn't she




simply take him just as he was?

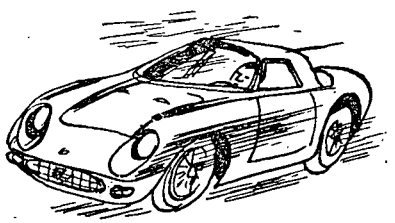
He wanted a sports car so much he could almost feel the glossy finish under his hand, and she kept urging him to go to work for her father in his warehouse, make plans, get married. Not for him—he longed to enter the world of road-racing and dreamed of Elkhart Lake and Watkins Glen. Roaring motors and snarling exhausts were food and drink to Wooshy; he knew he'd never be happy at that warehouse. Wooshy didn't get along too well with Phyllis' watchful father, anyway.

Suddenly, from the anonymity of the highway behind them, a red Ferrari flashed by, its lean and swarthy driver favoring them with an arrogant, saturnine smile. The man handled the powerful car with a careless touch which brought an admiring gleam to Wooshy's eyes. Then, with a derisive snort, the Ferrari dodged around the car ahead and was gone.

Wooshy sat up a little straighter, unconsciously breathing aloud a list of statistics, "250 Ferrari—Millemiglia—V-12—240 horsepower."

The bright car represented a cherished goal for him, shining, almost unattainable, and he smiled as he pictured himself behind the wheel of the imported job. Then he became aware of Phyllis' continued coolness once more and his smile faded.

She spoke, this time a little re-



signedly. "Cars, cars, cars. Is that all you ever think of?"

Wooshy had no ready answer. Maybe there was something lack-

in him. Perhaps he wasn't exactly the steady kind, but he wasn't a bum. He had a job as short-order cook at the Dixie Cup five nights a week, and he saved a few dollars. Who could tell? Maybe tomorrow he'd be discovered. After all, Jimmy Clark and Dan Gurney had sprung from somewhere, he reasoned.

"Don't you love me enough to apply yourself—to get ahead?" she asked. "Anybody else would jump at the chance my father is offering you."

"Sure, sure," Wooshy agreed, curbing a rising anger. "It's just that I already have a job—and it's one I got by myself." Still seeing a vibrant red image in his mind's eye, he changed the direction of the conversation, "I think I'll go see Freddie Reynolds. You know Freddie, works at a garage. He told me that the new car agency next door sometimes gets sports cars in trade-ins. I could watch for a Ferrari."

"Oh, you're impossible, twenty years old and holding on to moonbeams."

"Moonbeams, huh?" Wooshy was angry now. "Well, I'll show you—and your father. I thought at first we'd go for this ride to clear the air between us, but I'm taking you home. You're not going to spoil the whole Saturday!"

As he let her out at her house, he took note of the strained silence but said nothing. Phyllis moved in a careful, deliberate way, as if waiting for him to speak. He didn't, and the moment passed. She stalked into the house. Wooshy drove sedately until he reached the highway again.

He hadn't been alone on a Saturday night for quite some time. This was a new feeling, and it was exhilarating. The late afternoon air was soft and inviting, the car was humming, and it was too early to go home. He remembered the rides at the beach would be opening up, and he had a couple of bucks in his pocket. What the hell! Wooshy turned the convertible toward the lights of Rainford Beach.

A strange mixture of freedom and discontent fought within him as he drove into the dusty parking lot. Pale orchid of early evening hung above the carnival grounds which adjoined the beach, and Wooshy wandered restlessly among the concession stands. Looking, for what?

He noticed the midway was rapidly filling. At one stand, a red-faced man stood before a large, green-painted tank, imploring the passing crowd. There were five gay boats in the tank, bobbing on the water and attached by wooden arms to a central pole.

"Come on, folks," the man entreated. "Only fifteen cents a ride. Bring the kiddies and let them ride the dreamboats."

Wooshy moved on with the fast-thickening stream and idly watched two sporty young fellows try to knock lead-bottomed milk bottles off a raised platform.

The full dark of summer fell and the rides increased their tempo, whizzing along their grooved tracks, wheels and passengers shrieking together. A food-scented breeze reminded Wooshy that he hadn't eaten anything for hours. He bought some sausages and washed them down with a malted milk. As he finished the last of the sausages, he glanced across the midway and noticed the tawny-haired girl in white. Taking a chance on his charm, he sauntered over to lean beside her as she watched the antics of the Krazy Kars.

"Hello."

"Hi." She wasn't exactly enthusiastic but it wasn't the cold shoulder, either.

"You going to try these things?" Wooshy asked, nodding toward the busy, bumping vehicles. She smiled.

"No, I was just watching the crazy things." Then her face sobered when she realized she didn't know him.

"I like 'em . . . little slow, maybe. I like speed." Wooshy's voice was hearty. "They don't call me Wooshy for nothing. I get in, step on the gas, and woo-o-sh—I go! Say, what's your name?"

"Nora. I'm waiting for my girlfriend and her date. I promised I'd meet them here."

"Why not go with me for a while, your girlfriend won't mind. Three's a crowd, anyway. Come on, we'll have some fun. We'll check back here later if you want."

She cocked her head at him. He was nice and open, even if a little bold. What was the danger right here on a well-lighted midway with all these people? She nodded, and they strolled away together.

They came to a narrow key stand. On the counter stood several rotating racks, the brass hooks filled with bright keys of every size and shape, representing all the prestige automobiles Wooshy had ever heard of. He leaned over and fingered the shiny bits of metal.

"Got one home in the garage?" Nora kidded him.

"Look!" Wooshy stopped the rack. "Here's one for a Ferrari." He picked out the key and examined it, turning it over in his palm. He saw the red car of the afternoon bobbing ahead of him once more. He glanced up at the sign. One buck. "I'll take it."

Nora tugged at his arm. "Aren't you going to have it ground?"

"No-o," Wooshy said softly, "I'll just save it until I get the car to go with it." He smiled sheepishly and paid for the key.

"Now, how about a ride?" He maneuvered Nora through the press of the crowd to "The Bug." This was a clattering, undulating monster just finishing its run and discharging a disheveled, unsteady group. Nora tried to hang back momentarily but Wooshy took her hand and drew her on. Soon they were lost in the whirling ride.

Now that they had entered into this night of motion and frenzy, Wooshy felt a tide rising within him which demanded speed and more speed. They moved on and on, through a succession of rides which seemed only to whet his appetite.

They came at last to the awesome "Ogre," the highest, fastest, and most daring of all the rides at Rainford.

"Let's go, this is the biggest and best one of all! That's for us!" Flushed and eager, there was no stopping Wooshy now.

They took the front seat. The slow, clicking pull up the first incline began. It was purposely deceptive and lulled them into an oasis of calm. Then a sudden, sickening drop froze Nora's hands to the rail; she gasped for breath. Wooshy circled her waist and gripped the hand rail himself, laughing into the wind.

The force of each succeeding plunge lifted them from the seat, the upward zoom slammed them back again with bone-jarring force. Each slanting climb, with its terrible anticipation, led to an inevitable dive. They dropped repeatedly through the night sky, into the carnival world below. The people stared.

The cars roared on, chained to their rails but threatening to hurtle off into space at any moment. Climb and plunge, climb and plunge again; the headlong descent turned lights and sounds and people into one gigantic maelstrom.

At the end of the ride, the crowd stood immobile in the silence. There was no breeze and the dust lay thick on the wispy grass. Everything seemed the same —the streaked brown tents, the squat bulk of machinery beneath spidery framework.

But the midway had widened out into a smooth, white road. A red Ferrari crouched to one side of it; *the* red Ferrari. The same swarthy driver stood beside it, teeth flashing in an inviting smile. He beckoned Wooshy to get be-

hind the wheel. Moving slowly, Wooshy took the key from his pocket. He slid into the seat and gazed wonderingly at the bit of metal in his hand.

"Try it," the man urged, closing the door.

Wooshy fitted the key into the ignition, turned it, and the car leaped to life. The powerful engine settled into a throaty, eager rumbling.

The dark man waved, "It's yours—all yours, young man." He stepped back and bowed.

Wooshy listened to the throbbing motor. He gripped the steering wheel lovingly and stepped down on the accelerator. The wheels spun as Wooshy vanished up the white and shining road.

Nora screamed steadily on one high, thin note until the man who ran "The Ogre" stopped the car and lifted her out. He stood her on her feet, shook her, then slapped her face—hard.

"All right, sister, enough of that. What happened? Calm down now and tell me."

Nora's breath caught from the sting of the blow. "I *told* him not to stand up. I tried—he wouldn't listen to me. He was laughing so crazy!"

"Okay, okay." The man looked around helplessly as the crowd closed in. "Dammit, something like this would have to happen."

Another man came running from a nearby concession. "I saw it, I saw him fall! It sure was quick. The brace over the track caught him smack alongside the head."

"Save the details, Ralph. Here, take this girl over to the first-aid tent. Call the police and an ambulance; I don't think it will do him much good, though. I'll try my best to keep these people back. Shake it up." He swore under his breath and shook his head.

Wooshy's crumpled body lay in the thin grass below the soaring, crisscrossed timbers. His T-shirt and jeans looked curiously empty. His blond head lay twisted on the suntanned neck, but at the corner of his mouth was the beginning of a smile.

*There comes a time, it seems, when a situation demands unilateral action, but one would profit best by reflecting upon the side for which to aim.*

# THE VOLCANO EFFECT

by Elijah Ellis

It was Sheriff Ed Carson on the phone and he didn't sound happy. "There's a man and his wife here in my office. Man claims he's scared some fella is goin' to kill him."

"Any attempts been made?" I asked.

The sheriff laughed. "I don't think so. Truth is, these people ain't impressed with me. They want to see the county attorney. I'll bring them up."

"No, I'll come down," I said, glancing at my watch. "It's time to go to lunch anyhow."

Minutes later I left my third-floor office and went down the zigzag flights of grimy marble stairs to the ground floor of the ancient Pokochobee County Courthouse. I went into the sheriff's office. I walked across the big, dingy outer office toward the open door of Carson's private cubbyhole. His desk faced the door and he rose as he saw me coming.

Inside, I found a man and a woman on chairs facing the desk.

The sheriff said, "Mr. and Mrs. Trent, this is Lon Gates, the coun-

ty attorney that you asked for."

Trent got up to give my hand a brief, clammy shake. He was a squat, burly man with bloodshot eyes and stubbled jaw. He looked as if he hadn't had much sleep lately.

"Maybe you can help," he said. Scowling at the sheriff, he added, "All we can get from this guy is a runaround."

Mrs. Trent gave a deprecating murmur. She had dark hair and a nice face. There was a sparkle of diamonds on her fingers and she tapped ashes from a cigarette into a tray on the desk.

I lifted an eyebrow at Ed Carson. As usual, he had on faded khakis and his lank gray hair needed trimming, as did his ragged pepper-and-salt mustache.

He said mildly, "I been tryin' to explain that there's not much we can do to help—"

"This man followed us down here from Memphis, our home," Trent broke in. "He's going to kill me if he can. He as much as told me so back home."

"What man?" I asked.

"Richard Royce, of course," Trent said impatiently. "The thing is to get him behind bars where he belongs, right now. We can talk later."

I asked, "What's he done to you?"

Trent waved thick, hairy arms. "He's here, isn't he? He followed us, didn't he? That's enough."

I exchanged a glance with Carson. His eyes had a sardonic gleam. He didn't speak.

Now Mrs. Trent said, "Let me explain, Mr. Gates. My husband was associated with Richard Royce in a business deal—real estate speculation. The deal fell through and —and Royce lost a lot of money."

"I told him it was risky," Trent muttered. "Nobody twisted his arm. Just because I managed to salvage a few bucks, and he didn't, he claims I took him to the cleaners."

Mrs. Trent nodded. "In any case, Royce was very upset. He made things so difficult at home that Darren and I thought we'd get away for a while and drive down to Florida for a few weeks, hoping that Royce would come to his senses while we were gone. But instead—"

"Instead, the bum tailed us," Trent blurted. "We drove all last night, and checked into a motel here this morning to get some sleep. About an hour ago I got up, stepped out the door of our cabin, and there was Royce. Darned if he didn't have the cabin right next to ours. You see?"

I said patiently, "But just what has he done?"

Trent growled, "He laughed, and told me to enjoy myself, that I was about out of time—and all the while he was patting his trouser pocket. He had a gun in there."

"Were there any witnesses to this?"

"I'm telling you, that's what happened," Trent snapped. "There wasn't anyone around close enough to hear. Royce is too smart for that. Just like back home in Memphis. He never made any threats when outsiders were around, but I'd see him on a downtown street, and he'd ease up beside me and whisper, 'I'm going to get you, Trent—real soon, now.' Or call up in the middle of the night—"

"I can swear to that," Mrs. Trent said. Her lips tightened. "I answered the phone a couple of times when he called, always late at night. It was awful."

"Did you notify the police in Memphis?"

Trent grimaced. "I talked to a detective there. He gave me the same song-and-dance as this dumbhead sheriff. They wouldn't do a thing to help. What am I supposed to do? Let this guy kill me, and then the cops maybe will believe my story? Hell of a lot of good that'll do me."

I summed up, "You and Royce went in together on a business deal that didn't come off. Royce blamed you, and made threats against your life. Isn't that a little—extreme, Mr. Trent? Just because he lost some money?"

Trent didn't answer.

His wife gave me a glance, then coughed and said, "Well, there's more to it than that. You see, at one time I was engaged to Richard Royce, but, well, Darren came along. And I—I broke off with Richard, to marry Darren."

She hesitated. Her face flushed slightly. She twisted the diamond rings around on her finger and looked toward her husband, but he had gone to stand in the open doorway, his back to us.

"Anyway, Richard must have been more hurt than anyone knew," Mrs. Trent said finally. "We remained friends, the three of us—or so I thought. And he was eager enough to invest money with Darren in this land speculation thing. But maybe losing his money, on top of this other, was . . ."

Her voice trailed off into silence.

Trent wheeled around. "All right. What are you going to do about it?" he asked me.

I thought about it. "There's nothing we can do. If you want my advice, I suggest you and your wife go home. When you get there, go to a local magistrate, and have

Royce placed under a peace bond. That should—"

"Peace bond," Trent exploded. "Good night, Royce is a nut. He's crazy. You think a lousy peace bond will stop him? Oh, I get it. All you want is me out of your lousy little town here. Sure. Lot you care if I get murdered—so long as it doesn't disturb you two-bit hick politicians—"

"Now, that's enough," the sheriff said. He had been leaning against the front of his desk, arms folded across his chest. "Frankly, I think your conscience is your main problem, Trent. But whatever, you've given us no proof at all that you're in any danger."

Trent, becoming more and more agitated, suddenly lunged past me, kicked a chair out of the way, and took a wild swing at the startled sheriff. There was a meaty thud as his fist caught Carson on the shoulder.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted, grabbing at Trent. He shoved me back, and took another swing at Carson. His wife was up now, wringing her hands, making little squealing sounds.

Carson, off balance, was knocked back onto his desk. There was a trickle of blood from his split lower lip. Trent was on top of him, clawing for his throat.

"Conscience, huh?" Trent panted. "I'll 'conscience' you, you stupid son of—"

That's when I clobbered him with a chair. It didn't knock him out, but he lost interest in fighting. Carson pushed the slack body off to the side and scrambled to his feet.

Mrs. Trent was whimpering, "He didn't mean—"

By now Deputy Buck Mullins had rushed in from the outer office. He stared from the sheriff to Trent, who was sprawled face down, half-on, half-off the desk.

Carson dabbed at his bloody lip. "Take him out of here, Buck," he snapped. "Take him over to the jail. Put him in a cell. If he makes trouble, knock his head off."

The big deputy hauled the dazed Trent to his feet, manhandled him out of the office. Trent struggled feebly, but it didn't do him any good.

There was a moment's silence. Carson pushed his handkerchief against his mouth. He glared at Mrs. Trent. She started to speak, stopped, turned mutely to me. I shook my head.

"But he didn't mean it," she said imploringly. "It's just that he's been under such a strain. Please—"

I shook my head again. "We may be a bunch of hicks down here, but we don't appreciate people assaulting the county sheriff,

Mrs. Trent. Not even a little bit. I suggest you see a lawyer."

She straightened up. Her eyes gleamed with sudden anger. "I will. I'll call our attorney in Memphis and have him fly down here. The very idea! We come to you for help, and you throw my husband in jail!"

She stalked out of the office without looking back. I decided she didn't have such a nice face after all.

I turned to Carson. "You all right?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Guy kind of gave himself away, didn't he?"

I laughed shortly. "You could say that. More than likely he bilked this Richard Royce for all he was worth. I'd like to hear Royce's side of it."

While Carson went to wash his face and put antiseptic on his split lip, I called the two motels in the area. I found that the Trents, and Royce, were registered at the Travel Inn, on the highway just north of town.

As Carson and I were leaving the office, Deputy Mullins returned from the jail. "What's with that guy?" the bulky deputy asked. "I put him in a cell, and he started raising heck, yelling that he had to get out, his wife was in danger. I don't know what all."

"Yeah, well, he's goin' to stay right where he is, for a few hours anyway," Carson said grimly. "He wants to fight, he can take on the cockroaches in his cell."

We got the county car from the courthouse parking lot and drove through Monroe's small business district and on out the north highway. The Travel Inn was only a half-mile or so beyond the Monroe city limits.

There was a large neon sign in front. Behind it was a little office. Behind that were two rows of shabby cabins facing each other across a wide, weed-grown courtyard. We stopped at the office. The manager, an elderly, balding man named Ferris, wasn't overjoyed to see us.

"Whatever you all heard, it's a lie," Ferris greeted us. "We run a respectable place here—no bootleg whisky, no wild parties an' no call girls or anythin' like that."

Carson grunted. "Which cabin is Richard Royce in?"

Ferris looked relieved. "Oh. Let's see. . . ." He thumbed through a small stack of registration cards on the counter that bisected the office. "Here he is. Royce. He's down in cabin nine unless he's gone to eat lunch somewheres."

"What about a Mr. and Mrs. Trent?" I asked.

"They're in cabin ten, right next

door to Royce. I remember them. Big car. Good lookin' woman, too. When the man paid me, he pulled out a roll of bills would choke a horse."

"What time did they check in?" Carson asked.

" 'Bout five o'clock this mornin'. This here Royce, he come in not long afterwards. I kind of got the idea he knew the Trents—asked me to put him in the cabin next to them, an' all. Nice feller."

We left the office and followed the manager's directions along the row of cabins on our right. Each cabin was separated from the next by a carport. The whole place had a dreary, shabby look to it in the glare of the noon sun.

We parked in front of cabin nine. There was a dusty car with Tennessee plates in the carport beside it. The cabin door opened as we walked toward it.

A tall, well-built man wearing slacks and T-shirt looked out at us. "I'll be darned," he said. "They had the nerve to go to the cops."

"You Richard Royce?" the sheriff asked.

"Yep. I take it you're the local law. Come in."

We followed him inside the cabin—one large room with a bed, a couple of battered chairs, a dresser with a cracked mirror, and a closet and bathroom opening off the back, a typical cabin room.

Royce didn't offer to shake hands when we introduced ourselves. He gestured us to chairs, and sat down on the edge of the rumpled bed and lit a cigarette.

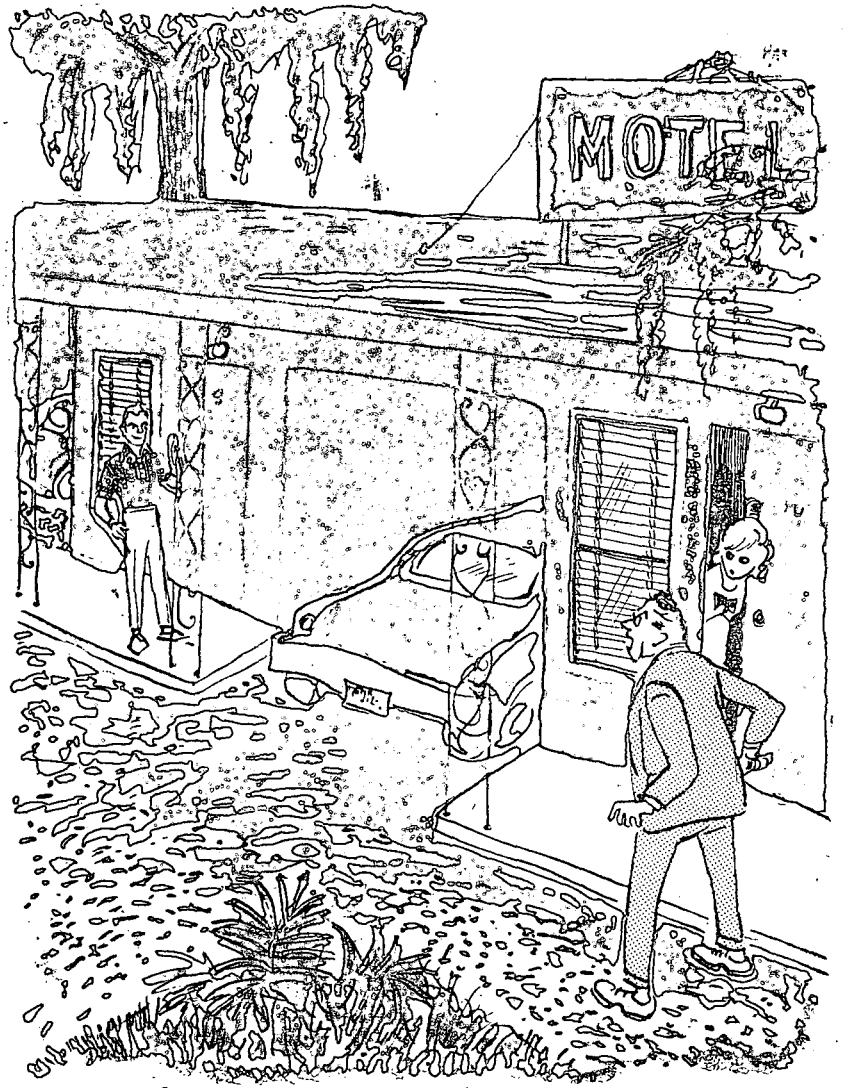
"What happened to your lip, Sheriff?" he asked. "Run into a door?"

"Somethin' like that. What's this trouble between you and the Trents?"

Royce shrugged. "No trouble. Yet."

"Did you threaten to kill Trent?" I asked.

Royce took a thoughtful puff of his cigarette. He nodded abruptly, and said, "I'll lay it out for you. Darren Trent is a thief, though the polite term for it is 'wheeler-dealer.' He's been in a hundred shady deals, mostly land speculation and construction contracts, and always come out with a profit. Well, I don't like the bum, personally, but he is a money-maker. So I invested a bundle with him. How much, or how I got it, is my business. Okay? What I didn't know was that a state investigating committee was breathing down his neck. Not until it was too late. To make it short, Trent gathered up all the cash he could lay his hands on, and took off. Me, I want my money back. So I followed him."




A bottle and a glass were on a little bedside table. Royce poured a drink and gulped it down. He chased it with a drag from his cigarette and then flicked the ash.

"That's not the way the Trents tell it," I said.

Royce grinned, showing large

white teeth. "I bet it isn't. But that's the way it is. They're heading for Florida, and from there to South America, more than likely."

Again I asked, "Did you threaten to kill him?"

Royce hesitated. Finally he said, "Just talk. Tried to scare the jerk into returning my money. I thought I had him this morning. He turned white as a sheet when he saw me. But he put me off, as usual. Then he must have headed straight for you guys. Talk about gall. Man!"

"If he's in trouble, why would he come to us?"

"Why, to get me off his back, of course," Royce said. "At least long enough for him and Janet to blow out of the country."

Carson got up. "You have a gun, Royce?"

"No, of course not." He looked uneasy.

"You won't mind if I look around here, then?"

"Not if you show me a search warrant."

The sheriff glanced at me. I shook my head slightly. Carson sat back down. Royce relaxed a little and poured himself another shot of bourbon.

"What about you and Mrs. Trent?" I asked sharply.

His hand jerked, spilling whisky over the table. He set down the bottle. His dark eyes flicked at me, then away. "That has nothing to do with this. All I want is my money. As for that cheap broad, Trent's welcome to her."

He rose, crossed the room and stared out the front window. His hands clenched into fists at his sides. Then he turned back toward us, a dark silhouette against the sunlit window.

"Where are they now?" he asked. "I know they're still around town here. They didn't take their bags when they drove out this morning."

"They're around," I said. "You leave them alone, Royce. If you've got a legitimate beef, make it to the law."

"The law," Royce said bitterly. "Don't make me laugh."

Carson and I got up to leave. As we went out, Carson growled, "You heard what the county attorney said, Royce. Leave those people alone."

Royce didn't answer. He stood at the door, watching us drive toward the highway. He was smiling, but not as if he thought anything was funny.

On the way back into Monroe I said, "That's a nice mess. It's probably a good thing we have Trent in jail. I wouldn't mind putting Royce in a cell, either, at least until we find out the truth

about all this funny business."

Carson grunted agreement. "I'll call the Memphis police soon as we get to the courthouse. Wonder where the Trent woman is?"

It was an hour before we found out the answer to that. In the meantime, Carson called Memphis long-distance. The police there had nothing on Trent, beyond the fact that he did have a rather dubious reputation as a businessman. Richard Royce had a record—neither Carson nor I were too surprised at that—and had done three years for armed robbery some time ago. He had been arrested several times, but had only the one conviction. He was suspected of being involved in at least one murder. Not a nice man at all, but at the moment there were no warrants out for him.

"So it looks like both sides were telling the truth, more or less," Carson said, when he'd finished the call. "Trent did get into Royce for a bundle, and Royce probably did threaten to put a few slugs in Trent. I just wish they'd kept their lousy mess out of Pokochobee County."

I didn't argue about that. We left to get a belated lunch, stopping at the city police station on the way, to ask the chief to have his patrolmen keep an eye out for Janet Trent, and to have a man tail her, if and when she was spotted around town.

It was close to two o'clock when we got back to the courthouse. I plodded up to my office on the third floor and tried to get interested in the heaps of paper work on my desk. Then the phone rang. It was the sheriff.

"About Mrs. Trent," he said. "A city cop found out she was over at the LaGrande Hotel; made a long-distance phone call from the lobby there. And Buck Mullins says she called my office, while we were havin' lunch, to let us know her husband's attorney was on his way, an' we're goin' to regret throwin' poor Trent in jail. Don't know where she is now."

"Hope she has enough sense to stay away from the motel."

"Yeah, I—hold it a minute, Lon. I have another call."

The line went dead for a few moments, then Carson came back on. He sounded grim. "That was Ferris, out at the motel. Been a shooting out there. He was too excited to tell me what happened. You want to ride out with me?"

I was already on my way out of the office.

When we reached the motel we found a small group of people milling around excitedly in front of one of the cabins in the row on our right. Carson skidded to a

stop on the edge of the crowd. We jumped out and pushed our way through to the open door of cabin nine, Royce's cabin.

Ferris, the motel manager, was in the doorway, keeping the crowd out. He was shaking like a leaf, and practically collapsed into the sheriff's arms as we reached him.

"Awful—blood all over—awful thing," he chattered.

I noticed a long black sedan parked in front of the Trents' cabin next door. Mrs. Trent was huddled in the front seat, her face buried in her hands.

Deputy Mullins had followed us in a second car. He kept the crowd back as Carson, Ferris and I went inside the cabin. Richard Royce was sprawled on the floor. He was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. There was a large red stain on the chest of his white T-shirt. I went over, knelt beside him, then shook my head at Carson.

Royce was dead. There was a pistol near his outflung right hand. Bending far down, I sniffed the muzzle of the gun. It had been fired not long ago.

"What happened here?" Carson barked at Ferris.

The elderly motel manager was dancing from one foot to the other in excitement. "I don't know. I heard the shots, ran out of the office and saw that there Mrs. Trent comin' out of this cabin. She looked awful—dress all tore away from her shoulders, an' her face scratched. Lordy!"

"Did she shoot this man?"

"Sure. She had a little gun in her hand—gave it to me, then went over and got in her car. Didn't say a word."

At Carson's sharp order, Ferris fumbled a small .25 automatic from his hip pocket and handed it over. Carson examined the gun. Then he looked around the floor.

Almost at once he pointed to a bright cartridge case lying on the worn rug about midway between the body of Royce and the cabin door.

"Just one shot fired from this gun," he said, after pulling the clip from the butt of the automatic and checking it. "And there's the ejected shell. Uh huh."

"There was two shots," Ferris said. "I heard 'em. All them folks outside heard 'em. Two shots."

I gestured toward the pistol near Royce's dead hand. "He must have fired the second one," I said.

Ferris exclaimed, "Lordy—maybe that poor woman was hit!"

"I doubt it," I said. "She wouldn't be up walking around. That's a .38 caliber pistol there."

"Let's talk to her," Carson said,

wheeling toward the door. "Ferris, you help my deputy keep people out of here."

Carson stopped suddenly. He stared at the window beside the door. Following his gaze, I saw a neat round hole in the window glass, surrounded by radiating fracture lines.

"That's where Royce's bullet went," I said.

Carson nodded, and we went on outside. While the people out there gaped at us in silence, I headed for the Trent car, while the sheriff paused a moment to examine the bullet hole in the window, then the bare ground just beneath it. He carefully picked up two tiny bits of glass and placed them on the windowsill. Then he joined me.

Mrs. Trent was still huddled in the car, her face in her hands. I saw that her blouse was torn, exposing her shoulders. There were scratches on the white skin. She sat up as I opened the door, and dropped her hands to her lap. Her face was tear-stained. A lump marred the line of her jaw.

"He tried to kill me," she said hoarsely. Fresh tears spilled out of her eyes.

I slid onto the seat beside her, and Carson leaned in behind me, bracing his hands on either side of the door frame.

"Take it easy, Mrs. Trent," I said. "Try to tell us what happened."

She gulped, moistened her lips with her tongue. She stared straight ahead. "He tried to kill me," she repeated. "I—I didn't think I was in any danger—it was Darren I was worried about. But —" She pressed her fists to her mouth.

"Please. Tell us what happened here," I said gently.

"I made some calls in town," she said. "Then I drove out here to get our bags so that when our attorney got here and—and got Darren freed, we could leave right away. Get out of this awful place."

Her hands were in her lap again, fingers locked tightly together. I could hear her breathing. Her ripped blouse slid down, exposing a black lace bra. She didn't seem to notice. Behind me Carson stirred impatiently.

"I packed our bags and put them in the car," she said, finally. "Then he—Richard Royce—came out. He was nice enough. He said he didn't have anything against me, even invited me to come into his place for a drink. Oh, I was a fool, but I went in with him. I had some crazy idea that maybe I could persuade him to stop bothering us. But then, soon as we were in the cabin, he—he ran over

and grabbed a gun, from under the pillow on the bed. He came toward me, grinning, and pawed at me with his free hand, clawed at me. He hit me—here, on the face—with the gun." She took a long, shuddering breath.

"Go on," I said.

"Somehow I fought him off. I was screaming. I tried to get to the door. Then he fired at me. I had my little gun—Darren gave it to me a long time ago—I had it in my purse and managed to get it out. I turned and fired once, blindly, just as he was aiming at me. He—he fell to the floor, and I ran out. That's all I remember."

Carson said over my shoulder, "But he fired at you first, is that right? After tryin' to attack you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "It was a nightmare . . ."

By now the ambulance had arrived from Monroe. The county coroner was in Royce's cabin.

Mrs. Trent turned her head, glared from swollen eyes at me, then at the sheriff. "You!" she snapped. "If you hadn't put Darren in jail this wouldn't have happened. It's your fault."

"I think you're right," Carson said mildly. "Come along, Mrs. Trent. I want you to show us exactly what happened."

"I can't. I can't go in there."

"I'll see that the body is covered. Come along." He made it an order.

Slowly, still protesting, Janet Trent got out of the car after me. I gave Carson a puzzled glance. He winked. I had more than a few doubts about the woman's story, but for the moment I couldn't see any way to break it down.

Carson went on ahead, while Mrs. Trent and I followed. She stumbled and I took her arm. She was trembling. The crowd pressed in for a close look at her, but Buck Mullins had them in hand. I helped her up the single step and into the cabin. I noticed that the coroner, Doc Johnson, had spread a sheet over the body.

"Now," Carson said, "you came out here, Mrs. Trent. You packed your bags, put them in your car."

She nodded, keeping her face turned away from the sheet-covered figure on the floor.

Carson went on in the same casual voice. "Then you went back into your cabin, ripped your dress, scratched your shoulders and hit yourself on the jaw to make that bump—"

"What? What are you saying?"

Carson talked on over her startled interruption. "An' then you were all set. You waited till the courtyard was empty. Then you ran out of your cabin. Royce was standin' in here, lookin' out the

window, just as you knew he would be. You shot him, through the window. He staggered back an' fell there on the floor. You grabbed the ejected cartridge case from the ground where it had flown out of your gun. You came in, threw the case on the floor yonder. Then you found Royce's gun—maybe under the bed pillow, or in his pocket. You fired a shot from it through the open door, pressed the gun into his hand for a second, an' left it there by him. Then you grabbed up the tiny pieces of glass from the window and ran outside. By then people were coming out of other cabins, but that was fine. All you had to do was drop the little pieces of glass on the ground outside the window. Perfect picture of self-defense."

Janet Trent opened her mouth, shut it, opened it again. "You're insane," she breathed. "You can't —that's not—"

"I can, and it is," Carson said grimly. "It was a good plan you and your husband dreamed up—have him take a poke at me, knowin' I'd do just what I did. Throw him in jail an' give him the best possible alibi, while you took care of Royce. Oh, yes. A good plan."

"You're crazy," Mrs. Trent shouted, jerking away from my grasp on her arm. "It was self-defense."

"Sorry, lady." the sheriff said. He walked to the window, pointed at the bullet hole. "Funny thing about bullets and glass windows."

I went over and finally saw what he'd seen earlier. Around the hole was a miniature crater, slanting down to the hole itself. And the crater was on this side.

"Uh huh," Carson said. "Some folks call it the 'volcano-effect'. An' it's always—always, Mrs. Trent—on the side of the glass where the bullet comes out."

Janet Trent leaned against the wall beside the door. She looked sick. I didn't blame her. She'd just been convicted of murder.

The sheriff walked toward her. "Let's go into town. I'll get you a nice cell right next to your husband. I imagine you and him will have a lot to talk about."

*When one faces an undertaking of consequence, it is essential to assign a most able and proven performer to the task.*

I FLICKED the ashes off my dollar cigar, leaned back in my chair and shook my head sadly. "Pete, I think you ought to visit a good doctor and have him look you over. There's something wrong with the machinery inside your head. Maybe you've been working too hard, maybe you ought to take a trip to Florida, get out in the sun and relax. Take a dame with you, live it up a little."


Pete Granite was a tall, dark-haired, handsome guy. He was a good man with a knife and a gun, and he'd used both weapons for me in the past without leaving a trace. Pete goes for classy dames and they go for him. He likes the good life and he lives it up real good. Pete's ambitious, and that's all right with me, because I like to see guys in my organization who want to make something out of themselves. Lately though, he's been knocking around town with a beautiful dolly and he's got her set up in a fancy apartment overlooking Central Park. He spreads the word around that the dame is paying the tab, but he's broke all the time, so his story doesn't add

up. It's time I learned the score.

"Sit down," I said. "Take it easy. Have a drink."

He sat, swallowed a shot of bourbon, and said, "Boss, I tell you that old man knocked off Harry Apples. Hogan pulled me in and had me sitting in the squad room when this guy came in asking to speak to him. He told Hogan that he killed Harry."

I sighed patiently. "Hogan didn't believe him."

Pete stood up. "Boss, I tell you the old man really sounded like he did it. He said he killed Harry and then buried him in the basement."

"He sounds like some kind of nut. Who is he anyway?"

"His name's Jonathan Sunbeam."

"You know something, Pete, you kind of surprise me. You think that cops are stupid or something? Right off you tell me that this Sunbeam guy is about seventy-five years old. Seventy-five year old guys don't go around knocking off top syndicate men like Harry. If anybody chilled Harry it figures to be some out of town guns, maybe some boys from Detroit or Chicago specially brought in to do the job."

Pete nodded. "Yeah, it figures that way, boss, but that old man knew a lot of things about Harry."

"Anybody who reads newspapers knows lots of things about Harry Apples. Pick up any newspaper and you can read how he was a big man in the organization, big in narcotics, protection, loan sharking. So what does that mean?" I had to laugh in spite of myself. "Pete, you're supposed to be a hip guy, a guy who's been around. Do you know what a crank is?"

"I know, boss."

"Let me straighten you out, Pete. The cops are always bothered by cranks right after a sensational murder, or when somebody disappears. There's a mad dash by these quacks to get over to the police so they can confess to the crime. Loonies, crackpots, wierdos, they're all over the place, but the cops know who they are. It's their business. All they have to do is listen to them and they recognize them."

"This old guy wasn't any crank, boss. He even knew that you and Harry were partners."

"He got that out of the newspapers."

There was a long silence. Pete poured himself another drink and downed it. He pursed his lips. "He told Hogan what kind of suit Harry was wearing. He even described his diamond stickpin."

I leaned forward. "Did he show Hogan the stickpin?"

"No, but . . ."

"But what? If the old man really knocked Harry off and wanted to pay for it, he'd have the stickpin to show, or something." I shook my head. "I don't think you understand these things, Pete. These crackpots are always looking for publicity. The cops claim they come out when there's a full moon. There are people who complain that their neighbors are throwing cockroaches into their apartments. They say they're being followed by spies, or little green people from outer space, or they know a guy who's making an atomic bomb in his basement and plans to blow up Manhattan at noon."

"Yeah, I know you're right, boss. I know about those creeps, but this Sunbeam guy even told Hogan how he knocked Harry off."

I took a long, hard look. "Maybe you better tell me all about this. Start at the beginning. Get back to Hogan. Why did he take you in?"

Pete shrugged. "I was over at the Chez Briand having a few drinks when Hogan came in and said he wanted to talk to me. He brought me downtown and started asking questions about where I was when Armondo got knocked off in Jersey."

"You walked away clean there."

"That's right, boss. Two shots through the head and I just left him in the car. Nobody seen or heard anything. I didn't leave any prints, nothing. But Hogan acted as though he knew something."

"Forget it. Don't let that bother you. You had an alibi."

"That's right, but when a hardnose bull like Hogan wants to bring you in, you go. It ain't the first time he's brought me in for questioning, and it won't be the last."

"A little discomfort is one of the occupational hazards of your job, Pete. But you get paid for it."

"No complaints there, boss. Anyway, I'm talking to Hogan about five minutes and all of a sudden a cop walks over to Hogan's desk and says there's a Jonathan Sunbeam who wants to talk to Hogan on a very important matter. So Hogan tells me to take a chair against the wall, and Sunbeam walks in, sits down at Hogan's desk and starts telling about how he knocked off Harry Apples. I take a good look at this bird and wonder what's with him, because he don't look like a gun."

"Did you hear all the conversation?"

"Yeah, he tells Hogan he's got Harry buried in the cellar. Hogan just nods and smiles, humoring Sunbeam along. Then Hogan asks him why he knocked Harry off, and Sunbeam says, 'Because I'm

the Avenging Angel of Death.'"

I tapped my temple with my forefinger. "What did I tell you? Sunbeam has got bats, loose bolts, and bugs. He's whacky. He's read that Harry disappeared and is assumed dead. Sunbeam probably thinks he really killed him."

"That's what I think too, boss. He's nuts. But Hogan humors him along. He asks him how he put the chill on Harry. Sunbeam has an odd look on his face, like there's all kinds of thinking going on inside his head. Then he puts a big diamond on Hogan's desk, and that shakes Hogan. Right away he wants to know where the old man got the rock. It's a real big blue and white sparkler. I'm sitting close enough to see that. Sunbeam says he has many rocks like that in his house. In fact, he says this diamond is the one that killed Harry Apples."

I sighed. "How, Pete? But make it fast. I've got some things to take care of. I don't want to spend the entire night with this thing."

Pete took a quick breath. "Sunbeam says he showed the rock to Harry and wanted to sell him a batch of stones just like it. It was all a trick to get Harry alone. He says Harry went to see him and he killed him, used a .38 with a silencer."

I said, "Straighten me out, Pete. You mean to just sit there and tell me that Hogan didn't do anything after he heard the story and saw the rock?"

"Hogan said, 'Thank you very much, Mr. Sunbeam. I'll look into it.' Sunbeam said, 'I'll be waiting at my house to show you where I buried Mr. Apples and the rest of the diamonds,' and he said some more garbage about him being the Avenging Angel of Death."

I gave it a little thought, because the bit with the diamond was just the kind of thing that would appeal to Harry Apples. I knew Harry. Harry liked lots of dough. If he felt there was a chance to pull a little deal on his own and get away with it, he'd do it. Harry always had ambition to be a big man. He was always making private deals on his own for hot ice.

"Let's have the rest," I said.

"After Sunbeam left I sat down at Hogan's desk again. Hogan was grinning. He says kooks would drive him crazy. He asked me if I saw that piece of glass the old man put down on his desk, said paste was all it was."

I nodded. "That sounds more like it. Hogan isn't any fool."

"That's just it, boss. I wasn't sitting more than ten feet away, and that wasn't any chunk of paste."

I gave it some thought. "Hogan's been around a long time. If

he says it was paste, it's paste."

"Boss, I'm telling you, it was a real diamond, big. I know that Harry liked to deal in hot ice. He could have been tricked by Sunbeam."

"Pete, I appreciate what you're trying to tell me. It shows you're up on your toes. You keep your eyes open and you've got ambition. You'll go places in this outfit, but I think you're wrong on this one. I'm sure of it."

"Boss, I know you're right all the time. But this time is different."

I got up and walked over to the window and looked out at the East River. The view costs me five hundred dollars a month and I can afford it. I was here because I had ambition and the necessary drive. In a way Pete was like me when I was his age. There were the gorgeous dames and the fine cars and the power I wanted. Pete had a little of that ambition, too. I couldn't fault him for that. He was trying to get ahead.

"All right, Pete. It wouldn't hurt to check."

Pete grinned. "Thanks, boss. I'll get right on it. I already got Sunbeam's address. I even drove up to his place and looked it over. He lives in an old house out of town, a real spook place overgrown with weeds, and the porch is all broken and the steps are gone."

"The more you say about it, the more it sounds like the kind of a place where a weirdo would live."

Pete grinned. "Yeah, it must sound like that. Suppose I find Harry in the cellar?" he said softly.

"You're not going to, but if you do, then you just make sure that Sunbeam joins him."

Pete grinned. "Boss, I was wondering about chances of working on the inside of the organization."

"If this hunch of yours is right, Pete, it'll open the door for you. You've got ambition and initiative. There's a place for a man like you."

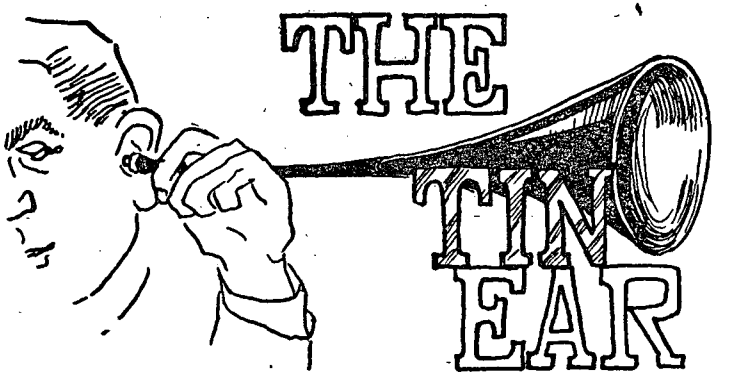
"Thanks, boss."

After he left I went across the room, pushed my original Van Gogh aside, opened the safe and removed two thousand dollars. It was the agreed-upon amount.

I picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Hogan," I said, "call the old man and tell him that Pete's on his way. You can pick up the money in the usual place."

I hung up and walked over to the window. There was a magnificent view of the river. Ambition had brought me here. Hogan had some of it. Ambition could kill him, too—but all in good time.

*One may verbally denounce the "bogus habiliments of so-called mourning," yet disclose his sentiment by his conduct.*




IT WAS a bad day to be ransacked, a yellow, smoggy, eighty-five degree morning. John Easy tossed his denim sport coat over his desk chair and scratched the place where his shoulder holster chafed him. Beyond his office windows he could see limp palm trees, and sports cars flickering. Easy hunched his wide shoulders and cracked his knuckles. "How about Ad?" he asked his secretary. It was after ten and his partner hadn't yet called in today.

"He's still down in San Amaro I guess," said Naida Sim, fanning herself with an empty file folder. "On the Shubert case, I suppose."

Easy frowned and unstrapped his gun. "This damn thing," he said.

"I thought you and Mr. Faber were going to get a burglar alarm in?"

"We got you the electric typewriter instead." He wiped perspiration from his forehead and squatted down. Spilled all across the grey rug were file folders, letters, envelopes, tape spools. "Wonder what they took."

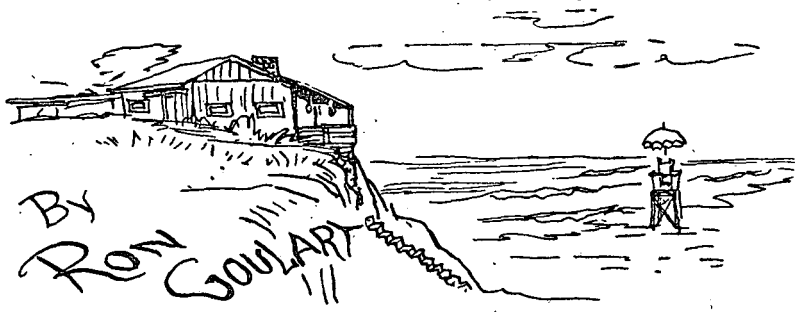
"Something pretty important, I suppose," said Naida. She was a pretty blonde girl, slender and

freckled. Her hair had no curl today.

Easy sniffed. "What's that smell?"

"Cinders in the air. Another fire over in the valley."

"Why did I leave the San Francisco police and come down here




to L.A.?" Easy complained.

"I guess because they busted you after you were supposed to have taken that bribe," said Naida, kneeling down beside him.

Unbuttoning his top shirt button, Easy said, "Well, let's get this stuff gathered up and try to figure who swiped what."

The phone rang and Naida popped up to answer it. "Faber and Easy, Detective Service." She blinked. "He's right here, I guess." To Easy, she said, "It's a Lt. Disney of the San Amaro police."

The phone was damp. "Yeah?" said Easy.

"This is Lt. Bryan K. Disney. We found your partner down here."

"Found him how?" asked Easy, inhaling sharply. "And where?"

"Dead. Shot twice with a .38, it looks like. In a place down the beach called Retirement Cove."

"What is Retirement Cove?"

"New senior citizens' beach town being built. Not finished yet and nobody living there. Workman found the body about two hours ago, spread-eagled on a badminton court."

"Damn," said Easy, grimacing at their secretary.

"What was he working on?"

Easy answered, "Nothing. He was taking a few days off. Vacation. He was a latent beach bum and liked to get the sun." A silver sports car flashed by and the glare made Easy duck.

Naida had started to cry. "I guess Ad's hurt."

"He's dead," said Easy. "Do you want to see me for anything, Lt. Disney?"

"You might come down and talk to me today sometime, yeah," said the policeman. "Anything you can

say now? Enemies, affairs, that kind of thing?"

"Ad led a blameless life," said Easy. "But I'll think about it."

"My office is across the street from the equestrian statue of General Grant. See you."

Easy cradled the phone and wiped his palms on his thighs. "Well," he said. He sat down in his swivel chair.

"Why didn't you tell them Mr. Faber had been watching Mrs. Shubert for a week and a half?"

"I don't know," said Easy. "I've got a habit of not confiding in the police. Anyway, I want to check some things out myself." He strapped his gun back on.

"Maybe he found out something big," suggested the girl.

"I doubt it," said Easy. "Ad had a tin ear most of the time. If he heard anything important he

wouldn't have known it probably."

"He was your partner."

"That doesn't mean he was an exceptional operative. We were probably going to bust up this partnership in another few months anyway."

Naida wiped her eyes. "I hate to have anybody I know get killed."

Easy looked past her at the bright morning. "I'll go down to San Amaro now. Clean up the office and let me know what's gone."

"Does this rummaging here tie in with what happened to Mr. Faber?"

"Maybe," said Easy, shrugging into his coat. "If Ad's reports on the Shubert case are missing it might mean something."

"Shall I close the office?"

"Why?"

"I imagined we might go into mourning for a day."

"Nope. Ad didn't have any family. That means we have to see him buried. We can't afford to lose a day. A client might walk in any minute."

"I guess you're not very sentimental."

"No," said Easy, walking out into the hot morning.

The real estate cottage looked down on a white stretch of beach. The San Amaro afternoon was relatively mild. Easy rested his arms on the half open Dutch doors and called in, "Mr. Majors?"

There was a purple-haired secretary, old and wide, sitting at the nearest desk and a thin blond man of about forty at the further desk. "Yes," the man said, half rising.

A phone rang and the secretary caught it. "Mr. MacQuarrie for you, Mr. Majors."

"I'll call him later," said Majors, walking out of the shadows toward the unmoving Easy. "Did you want to come in?"

"Out here would be better," said Easy. "This is what they call a delicate situation."

Majors had on a golf sweater, tweed slacks. He had a nice outdoor tan. "Who are you?"

"I'm John Easy. Until this morning my outfit was called Faber and Easy."

"You're trying to sell me something, Mr. Easy?"

"Maybe," said Easy. "Protection and security. It all depends. Right now I want to find out who killed my partner."

Majors smiled, his lips pursing. "This is a very cryptic sales pitch."

"I'll be direct," said Easy. "You're Norm Majors, aren't you?"

"Of course. So?"

"For the past three months, from what I've been able to put together from the reports and tapes my partner turned in, you've been having

an affair with a Mrs. Nita Shubert. We've been on the case a couple of weeks. That is, Ad Faber was down here at the request of our client, Mr. Shubert. Okay?"

Majors opened his mouth and studied Easy. He reached back and felt for a low rustic bench that fronted the cottage. "I didn't know," he said, letting himself sit.

"Didn't know what?"

"That we were watched." He straightened. "Tapes, did you say? That's illegal, isn't it?"

"So's adultery. I'm not here to chat on ethics, Majors. I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

"To ask you," said Easy, "if you killed Ad Faber."

Majors coughed. "No, Easy, no. No. I didn't."

"Did you ever see him? Know about him?"

"I told you I didn't."

"You were with Mrs. Shubert yesterday."

"No," said Majors. "Not at all yesterday. Nita said she couldn't get free yesterday." He put his knuckles against his cheek. "Wait. Your partner must be the one who was found down at Retirement Cove. A friend of mine is selling that and called me."

"That's right," said Easy. "I drove by it a while ago. It's not too far from the beach house Mrs. Shubert is renting for your meetings."

Majors rose up. "Shubert is aware of us?"

"For a week."

"Then what did you mean about protection?"

"The police don't know about you as yet. You might mention that to Nita Shubert."

"This sounds like blackmail," said Majors.

Easy shrugged and headed back for his car.

Easy called his secretary from a phone booth in a drugstore near the San Amaro town square. A few seconds after he'd stepped into the booth a teenage singing group appeared on a platform next to the soda fountain. They were singing about surf riding now as the place filled up with a sun-bleached after school crowd.

"Are you in a saloon?" Naida asked.

"A soda fountain. What's happening there?"

"Did you see Lt. Disney yet?"

"I'm en route." A silver blonde in an orange shift jumped up on the entertainment platform. A big sign over the fountain said Grand Opening. All the guitars were amplified. "What's missing?"

"Nothing at all," said Naida. 'I double checked. But listen . . ."

"Any new business?"

"A man called you a couple of times but wouldn't say who he was. But listen . . ."

"Okay, what?"

"A final report came in from Mr. Faber. Mailed late yesterday in San Amaro."

"Well, tell me what he said."

"I'm trying. No tape this time. He said that Mrs. Shubert met somebody new yesterday. He listened in and got the feeling this was somebody she hadn't seen for a while. No names. He couldn't catch any name for the man. But the man mentioned money, a lot of it. And he wanted Mrs. Shubert to leave with him but she said no."

"Leave with him?" He had the impression the phone booth was gently rocking.

"To Mexico."

"This new guy came to the beach place she uses to meet Majors?"

"Yes," said Naida. "Is there some kind of political rally going on where you are?"

"It's a musical event. How hot is it in L.A.?"

"I guess about 92," answered his secretary. "Are you going to see Lt. Disney?"

"Soon," said Easy, and hung up. He worked his way out of the thick crowd of teenagers. Until now, thirty-four hadn't seemed that old. Suddenly he felt his years.

Lt. Disney was almost too short to be a cop. He smoked cigarette-sized cigars and kept his hat, an almost brimless checked thing, on indoors. The walls of his humid office were papered with what looked to be long out-of-date wanted posters. He didn't tell Easy much, and Easy didn't tell him anything. Their interview lasted twenty-five minutes.

Kevin Shubert, Easy's client, made his money in some way that allowed him to be home daytimes. He talked to Easy beside a glass-enclosed swimming pool. The grounds around the big low Moorish house were almost sufficient to let the place be called an estate.

"I'm in perfect health," Shubert said. He was tall and about fifty, with his balding head crewcut. "You'd think all this anguish Nita heaps on me would make me ill."

"Maybe you'll collapse unexpectedly," said Easy.

"Does the murder of your partner tie in with Nita and her lover?" Shubert asked him.

Easy was sitting at an awkward angle in a striped canvas chair. "Probably."

"Do the police know about us?"

"Not by way of me. But they could find out," said Easy. "You told me you'd been married how long?"

"Nearly two years. My second marriage. Nita's first."

"You met her where?"

"In San Francisco," said his client, making a flapping motion with his thin elbows. "Your old haunt."

"Something I'm trying to place. Something about the pictures of Mrs. Shubert you showed me. What was her name then?"

"Halpern. Nita Halpern."

"There was some bank scandal, wasn't there?"

The skin of Shubert's pale lips was dry. He moistened it with his tongue. "Well, yes. She was secretary to a bank official who vanished, a man named Robert L. Brasil. Three hundred thousand dollars vanished along with him. You may have seen Nita's photo in the press. Nothing was ever laid at her door, however. That was three years ago."

"I wonder," said Easy. "Is your wife around?"

"For a change, yes. She's in her studio. Nita paints a little."

"I'd like to talk to her."

"Listen, Easy," said Shubert, rising, "I'd like no more scandal to touch my wife. I appreciate your keeping things to yourself so far. What will it cost for you to continue silent?"

"You've already paid us," said Easy. "I'd like to see Mrs. Shubert alone," he added peremptorily.

"I assumed as much."

Large on the canvas was a faithfully rendered box of wheat cereal. Nita Shubert was rangy and dark, angular in yellow stretch pants and a shaggy yellow pullover. The small pitchfork wrinkles at her eyes indicated she was about thirty-five. "You've fouled things up, Mr. Easy," she said, putting a white-tipped brush aside. "You and your late partner. I don't even think it's legal to eavesdrop the way you apparently were."

"When did you first realize you were being watched?" Easy asked her.

"Kevin told me just a short time ago, when the death of your partner became known."

"Ad," said Easy. "That's Ad Faber, my partner, was given to being heavy-handed at times. I think he gave himself away yesterday somehow; yesterday, when you didn't see Majors at the beach house."

The woman didn't reply. She slowly squeezed earth-colored paint onto her palette.

"Ad had a tin ear," said Easy. "But sometimes he could tumble to what he was hearing. I think he heard something yesterday, and finally figured out what it might mean."

"I was with Norm Majors yesterday," said Nita Shubert. "No

matter what you might believe."

"Ad must have gone back to your beach house last night, after he'd sent his last report off to me. Somebody spotted him and got worried."

"Yes?"

"Probably your ex-boss," said Easy. "Robert L. Brasil."

Her head gave a negative jerk. "He vanished three years ago."

"I want," said Easy, "to be clear on one thing. I haven't told the police any of this. For a consideration, nobody has to find out about Brasil."

"Nobody will find out anything," said the woman. "He's long gone."

"If he wants to stay vanished," said Easy, "he might think about as little as $20,000."

Nita Shubert turned her back on him.

"I noticed a motel down near your beach house, the Mermaid Terrace. I'll stay there tonight if anyone wants me." He studied the painting. "You spelled wheat wrong."

"Perhaps I wanted to," she said.

Easy nodded and left.

Easy got the call at a little after nine. A muffled male voice told him to be at the #3 lifeguard station on the beach in a half hour.

The night was warm and overcast. The lifeguard station was down the silent empty beach, near a closed soft drink stand. Easy found it early, but there was someone sitting up in the lifeguard chair.

The dark water glowed faintly, fluttering silently.

"Brasil?" Easy called to the figure on the tall-legged chair.

The shadow of the protecting beach umbrella hid the upper half of the man. He was wearing a dark colored coat, hands in the pockets. "I didn't know we were being watched and listened to," said the man. His voice had a touch of chest cold in it. "I picked a bad time to come out of the woodwork."

"My partner bumped into you?"

"I had planned to spend the night in the beach house. He came poking around, not too covertly, and offered to keep quiet for a fee. He had figured out that I wasn't anxious to be found here in California."

"You shot him, huh?"

"Yes," said Brasil.

"Then drove up to L.A. to see if he'd turned in anything to the office."

"I'm cautious, and I don't like paying money out needlessly, Easy."

"I figured you didn't go in for payoffs," said Easy. He lunged and caught the man's legs, and jerked him from his perch. Brasil's head hit the lowest rung of the chair as he fell.

Brasil rolled and grabbed out a pistol from his coat pocket.

Easy dived sideways, got out his own .38.

Brasil's first shot went up and tore the umbrella into tatters.

Easy planted himself and fired twice. Brasil twisted up until he was almost standing and then fell. He died face down in the sand.

Easy put his gun away. He still didn't know what the man looked like.

His secretary said, "Iced tea," and put a paper cup on his desk.

The office was cleaned up now, and the sunlight on the street was not too glaring. Easy drank some of the tea and leaned back in his chair.

"You really weren't planning to blackmail anybody, were you?" Naida asked.

"Wasn't I?"

"No, you were just setting yourself up as a decoy to lure somebody out into the open, I guess."

"Run over to the delicatessen and get me a sandwich. No chicken."

"I think you really are sentimental," said the girl. "You actually do care about Mr. Faber and you wanted to avenge him. Right?"

"And don't take any of those dill pickles they give away."

"I guess you're not a bad person at all," said Naida, leaving the room.

Easy sighed and closed his eyes.

*Self-psychotherapy takes myriad forms, but where one's grit is deviously involved, an external remedy is prescribed to resist abrasion.*


By Glynn Condace

SHE was as wholesome as whole wheat bread, Fleming decided, and just about as appetizing. He winced inwardly; his was a more epicurean palate. Still, she looked like a girl who would keep to herself, and this was a point in her favor. The last thing he wanted, now that his meticulous plans were nearing completion, was a cook who would gossip with all and sundry, or ogle the policeman on the beat.

"Your name?"

"Wilmot."

That would account for her

fluent English, despite the French accent. He was already summing her up. "Is that all?"

"My Christian name is Blanche."

"Blanche?" he repeated, trying to picture the word as a woman—a pale, plain, sturdily-built woman, just like this one. "Yes, of course. Please tell me something of your background."

"My father was English; my mother French. We owned a restaurant in the Rue Marbeuf just off the Champs-Elysees."

"Your father was an artist?"

The dark eyes regarded him gravely. "Monsieur knew him?"

He shook his head. "No; just a guess." He was good at guessing. He could picture the whole setup: the penniless English artist, or he could have been a down-at-heel journalist, attracted to the plain, thrifty Frenchwoman by the thought of three meals a day. Doubtless, the little restaurant was her *dot,* her marriage portion. It was a pity more of the father's artistry had not brushed off onto the daughter; the pink blouse was dreadful, the tailored linen skirt not bad at all. She was one of those sturdily built women with neat hips and—his eyes dropped—shapely ankles.

"Are you on holiday here at St. Jean-Cap Ferrat?"

"Oui, monsieur. I would like to

stay longer, but money is running short, and now I hear that you have need of a cook."

"The position is only for two months."

She shrugged her solid shoulders. "It will be long enough."

"Among your other duties," he said, pointing to a brightly illuminated aquarium of tropical fish, "will be the feeding of those things. They belong to the owner of the villa and merit a special clause in my lease."

"I will look after them, monsieur," she said gravely.

Roy Fleming lay back in his chair on the terrace, apparently at his ease. Below him he could see the white cement of the pier scribbled with the brown-gold of fishing nets drying in the sun; behind him, partly hidden among the pines on the ridge, he could sense the

formidable Villa de Valois whose owner, the wealthy Lady Raimund, had unwittingly brought him to St. Jean.

*Only a week to go,* he was thinking, trying to ignore the familiar fisting of fear in his stomach; *just one more week!*

An E-type Jaguar ran down the hill with quietly-burbling exhaust, its driver changing down to take the corner. Fleming's hands tightened on the wicker arms of his chair. For a moment he stared at his whitened knuckles as last year's headlines came back to him:

FLEMING NEVER TO RACE AGAIN . . . ACE DRIVER RETIRES AFTER CRASH. . . .

The sweat broke out on his forehead. He remembered overhearing the two racing journalists talking together in a Monte Carlo bar:

"Pity about Fleming; I thought we had a future world champion there."

"I've seen it happen before, mind you. One good crash and they lose their nerve. . . ."

Very deliberately, he unclenched his fingers and flexed them, watching the muscles knot in his forearms. It was a pity that he couldn't disprove to the world the allegation that he had lost his nerve. He could disprove it only to himself, over and over again, if need be. His nerve was still sound. It was his reflexes that had suffered. His doctor had told him what he knew himself: at racing speeds the fractional delay in his physical responses would soon prove fatal.

So he had looked around for other—dangerous—ways of earning a living.

Thoughtfully, he drank some of his beer. Through the wrought ironwork of the terrace he could see Blanche snipping off the dead tops of the geraniums, pulling out the weeds. A straw hat was jammed down almost over her ears, and through her blouse he could see the bra straps cutting into her flesh.

"You don't have to do that," he said testily. "The gardener comes for the day tomorrow."

"You object, monsieur?"

As she spoke, she almost straightened up; she never *quite* straightened up, and it irritated him. A girl couldn't help her face, but she could do something about her posture. She could do something, too, about that coiffure. It was unbecoming the way she wore her dark hair combed straight back and tucked behind her ears.

"Of course I don't object," he said, "but I employed you to cook."

"The lunch is ready, monsieur. You wanted only a lobster mayonnaise, remember? I had a few minutes to spare so I came out here."

She had been with him nearly two weeks and had taken over running the household, so much so that he sometimes wondered how he would ever manage without her. Her cooking was superb. She devoted all her time to his service and appeared to have no social life of her own.

For a moment, he contemplated asking her to join him on the terrace for a drink, but hurriedly put the thought out of his mind, wondering what could have prompted it.

"Tomorrow night, Blanche," he said, "I'd like you to prepare a very special dinner for me. I am inviting a friend."

"A lady, monsieur?"

"But, of course."

The following afternoon he collected Veronica from her hotel in Monte Carlo and dawdled the few kilometers home along the Corniche, pleased to be driving in an open car with a pretty girl by his side.

"I can't understand your missing the German Grand Prix, Roy," she said. "It was such fun on those curves 'round the Nurburgring. You should have seen Jimmy's face when he won!"

"I've never cared much for just the role of spectator," he said.

He felt the quick pressure of her hand on his knee. "Poor Roy! But you'll come back to racing, won't you? Once you've recovered your . . . Once you've completely recovered, I mean."

"I have completely recovered," he said, keeping his eyes on the road ahead.

Tactfully, after a little while, she changed the subject. "What made you rent a villa at St. Jean for a couple of months?"

He grinned at her and quoted from the guidebook. *"C'est une oasis de calme et de repos."*

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her purse her pretty lips.

"Don't look so astonished," he said.

Later, they sat on the terrace and drank their martinis while the sky changed to a darker blue and the lights danced on the water.

He raised his glass, knowing that he was drinking too quickly. "Veronica, you're a beautiful woman." A figurine fashioned by a jeweler-artist, perhaps by Faberge, favorite of the Czars; something flawless and exquisite, with eyes like emeralds in the sculptured gold of her face.

"Thank you, Roy; I thought you'd forgotten—"

What? The reek of tortured rubber? Oil sizzling on hot exhausts? The taste of champagne from the victor's trophy? The hero worshippers, girls who clustered round him

with pleading eyes and eager hands, stimulated by the fact that he had faced death in the arena like some gladiator of old?

"You?" he asked. "That night in East London?" She was an *aficionada,* daughter of an oil company mogul, and she followed the Grand Prix races. Against this background of competition and camaraderie, intrigue and excitement, she came alive. Otherwise, she was bored. She craved the vicarious thrills of the course, her favors pinned to the helmet of some young driver as if he were her chosen, jousting knight.

"East London?" she repeated, and he knew that what had been something special for him had been commonplace for her, and already she was trying to sort it out from other memories of other Grand Prix races in different parts of the world. "But, of course."

He knew, even before they sat down, that the intimate dinner was a mistake. Nothing would come of it. The past was dead. He and Veronica no longer spoke the same language; he was no longer one of the privileged racing crowd.

Over the complicated and delicious *Sole Fecampoise,* she said, "That girl of yours certainly knows how to cook. Did she come with the villa?"

"No, the one who came with the villa suddenly decamped one day."

"You were lucky. What's this one's name?"

"Blanche Wilmot. She's half English."

"Wilmot, my dear Roy, or Wilnot?"

"Both," he said coldly, unaccountably annoyed.

On the way back to Monte Carlo, Veronica snuggled against him. "Faster," she breathed, "faster; the road's empty, darling."

He was relaxed behind the wheel, his head clear, his wrists strong. This was his element; this was the skill at which he had once excelled. He had only to put his foot down, charge the curves ahead, change sweetly from gear to gear and back again to demonstrate his old expertise. Veronica would be pleased. Already the needle was creeping around the clock—65, 70, 75. . . .

"Faster, darling."

What was he trying to do? Rejoin the ranks of those young men who competed for Veronica's favors? The young men with Death grinning at their elbows?

Very deliberately, he slowed down.

At breakfast next morning, he said, "Thank you, Blanche, for a very good dinner."

The dark eyes met his for a moment. "A special occasion, mon-

sieur. It was not difficult."

"All the same, it was kind of you to take so much trouble."

"I hope mademoiselle enjoyed it." As she spoke, she took away his empty plate and he found himself staring at the strong, rounded forearm.

"What? Oh, yes, yes; she enjoyed it very much."

Time was running short and he concentrated on keeping fit for the dangerous task ahead. Every morning he swam a mile in the Golfe de St. Hospice, and in the little garden behind his villa he practiced his archery. Sometimes he slung a rope between two trees and crossed it, hand over hand.

On Saturday he said, "Take the evening off, Blanche; I'm having dinner with Lady Raimund."

"At the Villa de Valois?"

"Yes. Dr. Mastin, the English pianist, is going to be there." He made a wry face. "Afterwards, I strongly suspect, we'll be made to listen to one of his compositions."

Fleming dressed that night with his usual flair. In his frilled shirt he wore black pearl studs. For a moment, examining himself in the mirror, he fingered the dogleg scar behind his left ear, then smoothed his fair, sun-bleached hair down over it.

Blanche was in the hall, and he shot his cuffs and flicked a speck of face powder from his shawl collar.

"Will I pass, Blanche?"

"You look like a film star, monsieur. Very handsome."

He laughed, and went out. Only when he had closed the door behind him did he remember that he had given her the night off.

It was only a ten-minute walk to the Villa de Valois, but he decided to drive. Five other cars were there before him. He drew up behind them and sat for a minute or two studying the architecture.

The villa had been built by a wealthy English milord at the turn of the century. It was too tall for its site—badly-proportioned, hideous. Its walls were of reconstituted stone and it had scalloped eaves and a sharply-pitched slate roof. This roof was cut off a few feet below its imaginary crest to form a widow's walk protected by railings of ornamental iron. When new, Fleming thought, it must have been a blot on the landscape. However, over the years, stone pines had grown up around it to screen it in places and soften its silhouette.

Lady Raimund was a large, formidable-looking woman, expertly gowned in black. Her blue-rinsed hair, set in corrugated waves, framed her heavily made-up face like a wig. The Raimund diamonds flashed blue fire beneath her sev-

eral chins in extravagant harmony.

"Mr. Fleming, how very nice to see you. Ah, Maisie," she addressed a tiny, birdlike woman with red hair and withered cheeks, "this is the young man who changed my wheel for me on the *Circulaire* the other day. He's a racing driver. Mr. Fleming, Countess Lascaux."

Fleming bent over the beringed hand. So far, so good. The evening was going according to plan.

After dinner the guests returned to the green-and-gilt drawing room for coffee and liqueurs. Presently, Lady Raimund gave an imperious nod to the little pianist and he settled himself down at the grand piano. The recital went on and on. Occasionally one of the men would slip quietly from the room, only to take his seat again a few minutes later. Fleming, who was sitting close to the door, unobtrusively did the same.

The entrance hall was deserted, and he walked casually up the stairs. The lights were on in the master bedroom, the door ajar. He hesitated, thinking that perhaps the maid was turning down the bed. Hearing nothing, he slipped inside.

The room was large and overpowering, the air reeking of scent. He saw the cluttered dressing table, the huge, silk-canopied bed, the ornate Louis Quinze furniture, the rose-colored carpet, the faded damask screen. . . .

And behind the screen was the safe. It was large, old-fashioned and immensely strong. Fleming dropped to his knees and confirmed that it was not connected to any alarm system. He took out his silk handkerchief and tried the handle. As he had anticipated, the safe was locked.

Scraping fluff from the carpet, he worked it into the keyhole until he was confident that the precisely-machined key would jam. Then, dusting his knees, he returned to the drawing room.

The recital dragged on. Finally, the pianist rose, bowed first to his hostess and then to the audience, and closed the piano with unexpected force. There was a round of polite applause. A man-servant came into the room carrying drinks on a silver tray; behind him came a maid with sandwiches.

Lady Raimund, Fleming noticed with satisfaction, took a large whisky as a nightcap. She'd had more than her fair share of the wines at dinner, and with luck, she would sleep heavily that night.

Fleming was neither the first to leave, nor the last. He drove back to his villa, garaged his car and went up to his room. The time was a quarter to twelve. He set his tiny travel-alarm for two o'clock, un-

dressed and lay down on his bed.

At a quarter past two, dressed in dark clothes and soft-soled shoes, and with a haversack over his shoulder, he was on his way back to the Villa de Valois.

There was no difficulty in getting into the grounds. It was the house itself that had been effectively protected by the latest electronic devices at every door and window.

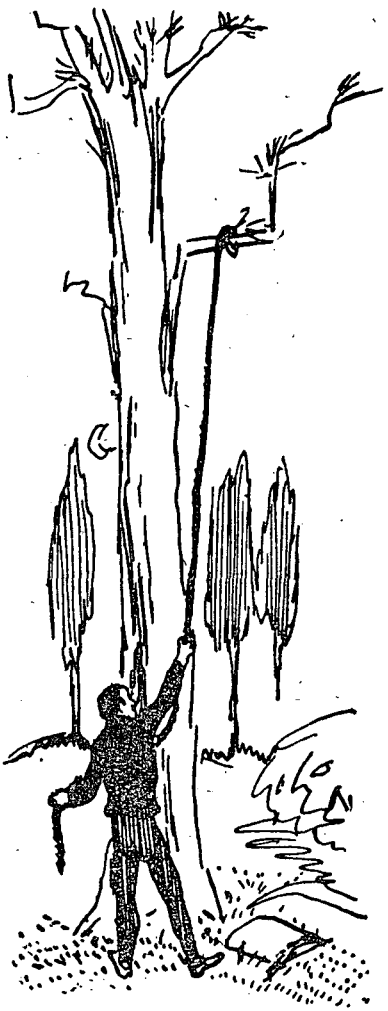
One of the stone pines, bent by the prevailing wind, leaned towards the villa, a branch of its lopsided parasol almost overhanging the roof. The sturdy bole was without branches for the first thirty feet.

Out of the haversack came a nylon rope with a rubber-covered steel hook attached. Fleming took the hook in his right hand and threw it over the nearest branch, and a minute later he was lodged safely in the lowest fork of the tree.

Breathing steadily, he recoiled the rope, reclaimed the hook and began to climb. The villa was in darkness. There was no moon—just a dusting of stars. A light wind came in from the sea.

Presently he was astride the branch he needed. It snaked out over the drive and slanted skyward at an angle of thirty-five degrees. He began to squirm along it. Whispers of bark drifted down. The scent of the pine filled his nostrils; resin clung to his hands and clothes; fear knotted his stomach, and he was thankful for the darkness that hid the sickening void beneath.

He came at last to the fork that marked the limit of his climb. At



this point he was almost level with the widow's walk, an estimated sixty feet above the ground. Hanging on desperately with his left hand, he let out the rope and set the hook swinging.

Backward and forward it went, and the branch swayed too. Higher and higher rose the hook against the dull gray of the roof; soon it was swinging higher than the railing, and he gauged his distance, letting out more rope. As the hook started on its downward swing, it fouled the ornamental iron. There was a clatter, muffled by the rubber coating but still startlingly loud in the silence. Fleming held his breath. He pulled tentatively at the rope, and the hook clung fast.

The branch creaked as he tugged harder, testing the strength of the railing. The long-dead workmen had known their job, for the iron stood firm. He made the free end of the rope fast to the branch he was on, and the terrifying gap was bridged by the tough, slack nylon.

He drew on his driving gloves, gripped the rope with both hands and took the weight of his body on his arms. The branch creaked again. Slowly, deliberately, he began to work his way along the rope toward the railing.

He felt the sea breeze cold on his forehead, and saw the dark needles of the pine dancing against the stars. The rope swung alarmingly, the nylon cutting through the leather of his gloves. His arms ached. The toe of one foot touched the roof and he raised his knees; then he was clutching the railing, scrambling over it, momentarily caressing its reassuring coldness with his cheek.

In the far corner of the lead-covered walk he found the door he was looking for. He was banking on the hope that the workmen who had wired the villa against housebreakers had decided that it was too inaccessible to bother about. To his surprise, it opened with only the faintest protest from its ancient hinges.

No sound came from below. He shone the pencil-ray of his light over the opening and satisfied himself that there were no electrical contacts of any kind.

It was time to take further precautions: off came the leather gloves and on went a pair of rubber ones; then he drew a nylon stocking over his head.

Silently, he went down the narrow stairs. These would be the servants' quarters under the roof, he told himself. He reached a carpeted landing and turned a corner, recognizing the arched corridor running the length of the house from the top of the main stairs.

Outside the master bedroom he

paused. In the silence he could hear the ticking of the hall clock. There was another sound, something that brought a faint smile to his lips: the slow, rhythmic snoring of a large woman asleep.

He opened the door and listened, but there was no change in that noisy, labored breath. His light flickered over the dressing table. Her rings and earrings were there, possibly indicating that she hadn't been able to open the safe, but there was no sign of the necklace.

He knelt by Lady Raimund's bed and slipped his hand under her pillow. She gave a grunt and turned over, heaving her bulk into a more comfortable position. Her snoring died away. He pictured her lying awake in the darkness, listening. He dared not withdraw his hand.

Gradually, the snoring began again, growing in volume. Fleming crouched by the bedside, motionless. When he was sure that she was properly asleep, he tried again. In turning, she had moved her head to the far edge of the pillow and he had no difficulty in withdrawing the diamonds.

Minutes later, he was back on the widow's walk. He tied a string to the hook and swung himself along the rope back into the branches of the pine; then, by pulling on the string, he worked the hook free. It fell noiselessly.

He had barely fallen asleep, it seemed, when the banging awakened him. Stretching himself, he looked hard at his bedside clock. It was ten minutes to seven. He climbed out of bed and shrugged on a dressing gown. There were voices in the hall. He opened the door and saw Blanche. Behind her was a tall, sad-looking man with a toothbrush moustache and lean, unshaven cheeks.

"Monsieur," Blanche said quietly, "this is Inspector Latouche of the Nice *Prefecture.*"

Fleming saw that she was white to the lips. For him, the next hour passed abominably slowly.

"I'm telling you, Inspector," Fleming said, pausing to drink the last of his coffee, "you're barking up the wrong tree."

"A very apt expression, Monsieur Fleming; I can only respond that you must have barked up the right one, and that is why I am here. Very shortly, I shall receive authority to search this villa, and I am not letting you out of my sight until then."

"You've been here over an hour already. I'd like to go for my morning swim."

"You are very self-assured, monsieur. It is a serious charge you are facing."

"But I keep telling you I didn't steal the diamonds."

"We found your glove—with your initials in it—under the tree, remember? And by that tree, monsieur, you entered the Villa de Valois."

Fleming threw up his hands despairingly.

"I entered the Villa de Valois by the front door like the rest of the dinner guests last night. That's when I must have dropped my glove."

The telephone rang and he heard Blanche answering it. She came to the door and looked gravely at the inspector. "The call is for you."

Latouche returned five minutes later, a bewildered look on his face. "Monsieur Fleming," he began formally, "I have an apology to make. You have no case to answer. The diamonds have been found."

Fleming looked closely at the policeman, suspecting a trick. "May I ask where they've been found, Inspector?"

"According to Lady Raimund, she found them at the bottom of her large, untidy bed."

Once the police inspector had left, Fleming plunged his hand into the brightly illuminated aquarium and raked his fingers through the sand. Slowly, he turned to Blanche, who was watching him.

"You witch!" he said bitterly. "You meddling, interfering witch!"

He saw the sudden pain in her eyes, just as if he had smacked her across the face with his open hand; then she turned and walked away from him.

He stared moodily into the aquarium without even seeing the tiny, jeweled fish darting to and fro. Losing the glove had been the worst luck. Latouche had recognized the rope mark across the palm, and had correctly interpreted the meaning of the flakes of bark that strewed the gravel beneath the overhanging branch. He was no fool, that inspector. He would have found the diamonds even if it had meant tearing the villa apart.

Fleming fingered the crooked scar behind his ear. He had thought he was doing something clever and courageous, yet on only the third robbery he had come unstuck. Slowly, he walked down the passage to the servant's room. Blanche was bending over her bed, packing her case.

He said quietly, painfully, "Why did you do it, Blanche?"

The dark eyes widened. "Return the necklace to Lady Raimund?"

"No; protect me from Inspector Latouche."

She hesitated, her eyes searching his face. "People were saying that you had lost your nerve. I think I knew what you were trying to

prove. But there is no need."

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"I was an investigator for Paris-Albion, the insurance people. Now I shall have to resign. I would have you know that your last robbery at St. Tropez cost my company the franc equivalent of fifty thousand pounds."

"And you suspected me from the beginning?"

She shook her head. "Not from the beginning. You were one of several suspects after the St. Tropez affair. Again, you remember, it was an operation calling for an athlete, and a courageous one at that. Then we heard that the Racing Drivers' Benevolent Association had received an anonymous donation of twenty thousand pounds—roughly the amount the St. Tropez jewels would have fetched on the illegal market. When you rented this villa, it was decided that I should seek employment with you."

"So you bribed away my original cook?"

She smiled, almost for the first time. "I hope there were no complaints about my cooking?"

"It wasn't just your cooking," he said. "I liked having you around."

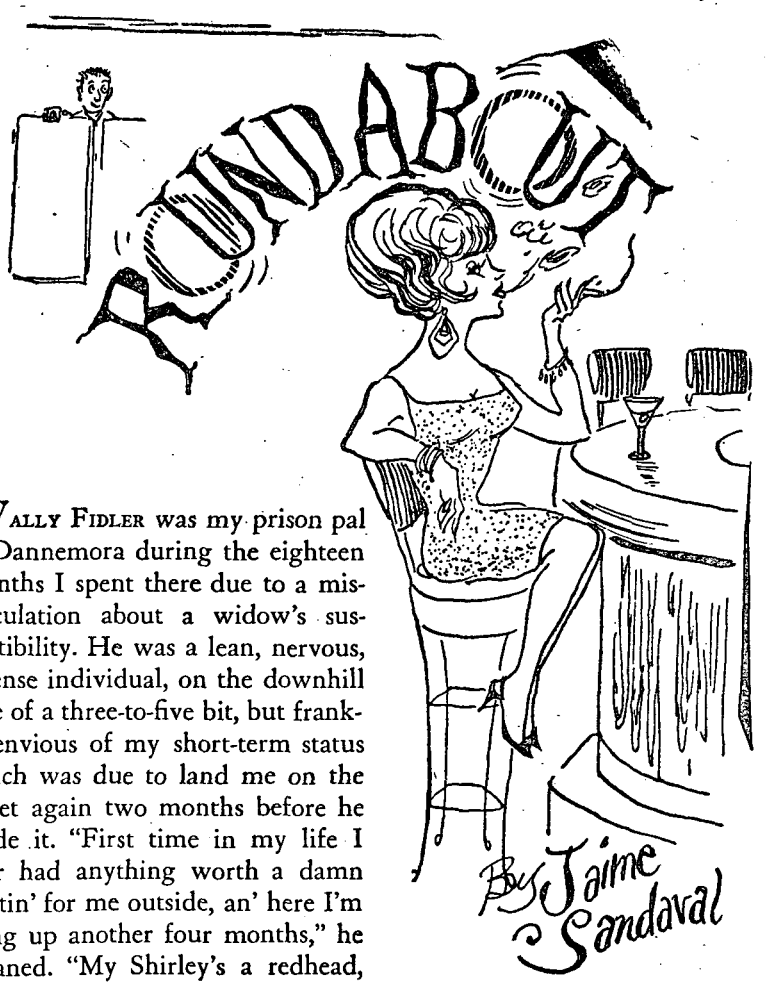
She pretended not to hear, and he saw the color mantling the creamy skin of her throat. He must have been wrong, he realized, about her posture. She carried herself proudly, as a well-made woman should. And the dark hair, now that it was no longer tucked behind her ears, softened the outlines of her beautifully plain face.

He said, filling the sudden silence between them, "You haven't told me how you managed to smuggle the necklace back into Lady Raimund's bed."

"But I didn't," she protested. "I merely returned it to her and threw both of us on her mercy. It was she who concocted the story that the necklace had never been stolen in the first place. She is a client of ours, and I happen to know that, in spite of her imperious airs, she is a very remarkable, kindhearted woman."

He put both his hands on her shoulders. "I know another remarkable woman, Blanche Wilmot," he said.

*Even a con man, it seems, is prone to miscalculate the prattle of a fellow yardbird, the inherent master of exaggeration.*




WALLY FIDLER was my prison pal at Dannemora during the eighteen months I spent there due to a miscalculation about a widow's susceptibility. He was a lean, nervous, intense individual, on the downhill side of a three-to-five bit, but frankly envious of my short-term status which was due to land me on the street again two months before he made it. "First time in my life I ever had anything worth a damn waitin' for me outside, an' here I'm hung up another four months," he moaned. "My Shirley's a redhead, see, and oh man, what a shape!"

His hands traced classic outlines in the air. "An' the smartest, sassiest, cutest, sexiest—"

I listened to him rave on about Shirley's virtues which, according to Wally, included not only all the ordinary feminine ones but a special few from the con man's lexicon. At first I listened idly, until I learned via the prison grapevine that Wally and his girl had scored heavily just before he fell on an unassociated charge, leaving him no opportunity to spend or blow his score before temporarily exchanging his name for a number. Of course his Shirley could be taking care of that little item for him, but if she wasn't—

I began paying more attention. I knew they'd been operating in the Washington, D.C. area, and one night after the movies he let it slip that the Parokeet Tavern in Georgetown had been their base of operations. I really didn't need to know any more, I decided, and I began to do some day-counting myself. If Shirley really was chuckleheaded enough to be hoarding Wally's assets for him until he got out, a technician should be able to move in and do himself some good.

The day I kissed off Dannemora I went down to the big town and put the arm on a shyster for a bankroll to use as front money. I'd been in and out of his pocket half a dozen times before, and he knew I always delivered. I caught the shuttle down to Washington, and before I'd even decided where I'd stay I took a cab out to the Parokeet Tavern, just to look the situation over.

It was a typical low-ceilinged, smoky cavern, and I had no difficulty in locating Wally's classy redhead. She was sitting at the bar, and I had noticed her rich sorrel hair and full, pouting mouth even before I heard the bartender address her as Shirley. From across the room her figure was as eye-catching as her clothing was flesh-strained, and her violet eyes looked out upon the world boldly. One thing I know is women, and this was certainly the type of female that Wally Fidler was most likely to have used in his campaigns.

When Shirley left the bar and went into the adjacent dining room, I followed in a few moments. From five tables away I studied her surreptitiously all during dinner, and for once I was forced to admit that a yardbird hadn't exaggerated about his woman. The girl was a knockout. I made sure I finished before she did, and when she emerged onto the street I was waiting at the corner in a cab. I wanted to know where she lived. I had no intention

of introducing myself to her as Wally Fidler's buddy from Dannemora. If she was really leveling with Wally, the information would slam the lock, a development to be avoided.

She hailed a cab, and my taxi followed hers across town to an area of the city in which urban renewal was still on the drawing boards. The redhead got out of her cab in front of a building that resembled a New York brownstone except for its dirty-gray color. The place looked like an old-style town house cut up into rooms or apartments. A flight of stone steps led up to the front door which was well above the street level, and Shirley ran up the stairs lightly, in a manner that did justice to the sum of all the moving parts. I made a note of the address and had my cabbie take me to the Pennsylvania Hotel where I registered in.

The next night I drove out to the Parokeet in a rented car, and when she entered the dining room I took a seat across the room from her again. For the next five nights I followed the same schedule, moving a table closer each night. Twice I gave her the opportunity to initiate an acquaintanceship with a word or a smile. Both times she stared right through me. Given the type, it was hard to understand. I would have bet good money that she'd lead from strength immediately—unless she was really saving it all for Wally, which I found difficult to believe. Still, it takes all kinds to make a world. Her standoffishness would only lengthen the campaign, anyway, because eventually I'd get next to her.

I stepped up the action. She always had a pre-dinner Manhattan at the bar, and I took a stool two removed from hers. When I paid for my own drink, I maneuvered my wallet so she couldn't help seeing its bulging dimensions, as well as the sheaf of phony credit cards in my business name. When I crossed her glance with mine afterward, nothing happened. Nothing. It was irritating. Not that I suffered any feeling of rejection: whatever my troubles in life have been, getting women hasn't been one of them. Classy or not, I needed the redhead like I needed a furry tail, except that she was Fidler's girl. It was a simple problem in logistics.

The following night the bar was busier and I took the stool beside hers. I ran through the wallet routine again, in slow motion, and when I turned toward her, there it was: she was smiling at me. Compared to her previous attitude, it was as though a light had come

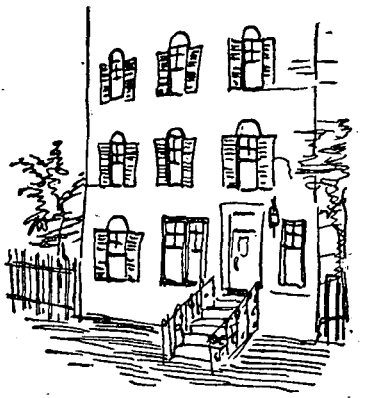
on suddenly in a darkened room.

"Do you happen to have a match?" she inquired throatily, waggling an unlighted cigarette between scarlet-lacquered fingernails.

"It just happens that I do," I said.

After two drinks, we adjourned to the restaurant side for dinner together. She managed the conversation as capably as I could have myself. We exchanged the usual lies, and I suggested an evening on the town, to which she was agreeable. It was late when I returned her to the flight of stone steps. She said goodnight firmly, and disappeared inside. That was all right; it was the first date. A week later when I was still getting the same brushoff, it wasn't all right. On the chance she was ashamed of her room, I drove out to a motel one night. "No," she said as I turned into the driveway. Not angrily. Not even excitedly. She just wasn't having any. It was exasperating, all the more so in that I knew I wasn't wrong in my estimate of the girl.

A few more days of this and I decided upon a frontal assault. Shirley had already told me about the rich old eccentric from whom she was renting a room, the woman who had owned the house from the days when it had actually been a town house. I went over one morning and asked to see a room. The elderly proprietress met me at the front door wearing something that resembled a Roman toga, even to the color which was a deep purple. She had two rooms vacant, but she couldn't decide if she wanted to rent one to me. It took an hour of playing the earnest, sincere young man to con-



vince her that she did. When Shirley put in an appearance that afternoon, I was installed two doors down the hall from her room.

She raised an eyebrow when she took in the situation. "You're—persistent, aren't you?" she asked.

"Only in a good cause," I buttered her up, and she smiled. We went to dinner together, and we continued to do the town together. I found, though, that when it came to nightly leave-taking, I'd merely

exchanged the street door for the door to her room. I never got inside it. I couldn't understand it. I knew in every fiber that my judgment of the girl was correct, so what was the holdout for?

I decided I'd had enough of this foolishness. One night when the house was quiet I went softfootedly down the hall to her door. I had a pick to use on her lock if necessary, but first I tried a plastic strip. It worked beautifully, but as I gently eased the door open it came to a stop against a chain latch inside which effectively barred entry. I re-closed the door after first making sure that the latch was the common type with one end anchored to the door frame and the chain riding in a track. The chain was able to be removed only from the inside when the door was closed. Or so the manufacturer thought. I knew my troubles were over.

The next day I assembled a thumb tack, an elastic band, and a paper clip undoubled at one end and formed into a hook. I put my own chain latch on and left the door ajar. I picked the lock of the bathroom I shared with the room beyond me, and went out the next room's door into the hallway again so I could approach my own latched door from the outside. I pushed the door open as far as I could, stretched my arm inside, and shoved the thumbtack into the center of the door at the level of the chain. I hung the rubber band from it, and pushed the tack all the way into the wood. I made a second hook on the other end of the straightened-out paper clip, hooked the suspended rubber band with one end and stretched it taut, then fastened the other end to one of the links in the chain latch. When I closed the door, the rubber band pulled the chain across the track and out of its slot. It dropped down inside with just a faint jangling noise. I made two more dry runs and then removed the apparatus.

That night I returned to Shirley's door. I had trouble with the plastic strip and was just about to shift to the pick when, on a hunch, I tried the door. It wasn't locked. The chain latch wasn't on. I walked right into her room with no trouble. This was more like it, and it was long past due. At dinner that evening I'd thought once or twice the redhead suddenly seemed more friendly, but I'd been so intent on my plans I hadn't paid much attention.

I went over to her bed, my slippered feet making no sound on the carpeting. In the dim light from the streetlight outside I could see her deep, even breathing. It

was a warm night, and she had on about the minimum in bedclothing and nightclothes. Scattered around the floor of the room I could see three half-packed suitcases. She must be going on a trip, I decided, and had finally made up her mind to see what she'd been missing.

I eased over to the bed and saw to it that her awakening sensations were not alarming. There could really be no problem, after all: even if I'd entered via manipulation of her chain latch, when fully awake her intelligence would tell her that getting rid of me noisily at that point would be an embarrassing bit of business for her. With the door unlocked and her expecting me, there was, of course, nothing to it. One or two more such rendezvous and if I knew anything about women, whatever Shirley knew about Wally Fidler's hiding places, I would know too.

When she patted my arm finally and slipped from the bed and went out into the hall, I tiptoed to the door after her to make sure she didn't go to the telephone. I couldn't picture her calling the police, and she never went near the phone. Instead, she opened a cabinet near the old lady's bedroom door and removed a bottle of whiskey.

When she re-entered the room, she went to the bureau, turned over two upended glasses, and poured liberally into them from the bottle. I could see her face in the boudoir mirror, and her expression was sweetly intent. She turned smilingly and handed me a glass. "A reward for patience and valor," she said archly.

I took a long, self-congratulatory swallow, then looked from the glass to the redhead. I can tell when a drink has been slugged as well as any man, but now, it seemed, a few seconds too late.

Shirley said softly, "So long, sucker."

I tried to stay on my feet, but I couldn't make it. The drug wasn't chloral hydrate; it was something more sophisticated. There was a sharp ringing in my ears, and a string of colored lights floated around the room. The ringing persisted, then quieted gradually, to be succeeded by sibilant voices all around me. I had the sensation of being lifted and carried, and I was in such bad shape that I somehow got the crazy notion that it was Wally Fidler who was carrying me.

Then the voices stopped, and the lights disappeared, and I saw and heard nothing at all.

I was wobbling around my own room in the morning, trying to pull myself together, when the police knocked at my door.

They had come in response to

an anonymous telephone call, they said. They said also, after a long time and a lot of questions I couldn't answer, that the old lady was dead—murdered. Brutally murdered.

They claimed I knew the old eccentric had a distrust of banks and kept her money in the house, and that was why I had moved there. When they printed me and caught up with my record, they claimed it even more. Even when they couldn't find the money, nothing I said could convince them differently. Not that I got to say much. The elderly proprietress had been a precinct captain's widow, as it turned out, and every time I opened my mouth the back of someone's hand caromed off it. Confronted by the rear heels of a mule, I can get the point as quickly as anyone. I stopped opening my mouth.

It was some time later that I found out Shirley had left a note in her room: "Dear Mrs. Mac: I've met a lovely man who might even marry me. If I'm late coming back from this unexpected vacation, clear out my place and put my things in the basement. Love, Shirley."

No one was looking for Shirley.

Why should they? They had me. I've had time to figure the thing now.

Fidler had me set up for the fall before I ever left Dannemora. He told me just enough about Shirley to make sure I'd look her up. With his sights already set on the old woman's money, he needed something to distract attention from Shirley, after the length of time she'd spent there, because a serious look at her by the police could easily have led back to him. When Fidler killed the old woman finding out where her money was, he must have congratulated himself on his foresight in having me available as a distraction.

I'd held up the operation in the beginning by not identifying myself to her. She turned on the candlepower in the Parokeet that night only because she'd been close enough to read my business name on my phony credit cards. She kept me at a distance originally because then I might lose interest and drift on before Fidler was released and arrived to drive home the nail. When they were ready to roll, she left her door open and there I was, ripe for plucking.

It's quite a saddle they've left me wearing. In the District of Columbia, a conviction of Murder One carries a mandatory sentence of the electric chair.

It's full summer now, but the days are getting longer and shorter at the same time.

*If there arises the necessity for rationalization, one must hasten to claim credit lest he find himself overcome by irrevocable debit.*


A REAL man wouldn't make those anonymous calls. It had to be a crank, some idiot neighbor trying to stir up trouble. John Roche stared at the phone. No, this time he wouldn't answer it.

Lighting a cigarette, he went to a window. The blind was half-open and he could see the houses on the far side of the block, windows alight beyond the lawns; his neighbors.

Which one? he thought, and caught himself. He wasn't going to be taken in by the anonymous caller.

He turned, his eyes drawn to the clock. It was one minute of eleven. Sixty seconds and the instrument would ring. The tension in John projected itself into the room, light and air became immobilized. He no longer recognized his surroundings.

The phone rang and he forgot his promise. He picked up the instrument. "Hello."

There was an interval of silence,

but that was usual. Then came the voice, familiar now, yet disguised, one of his neighbors and still anonymous. "Your wife, John," the caller said. "She saw *him* again the other night when you worked late. But don't blame her. He has


a way with the ladies. He's very clever."

"Wait a minute," John said. "Who are you?"

"A neighbor."

"That's not telling me anything."

"Perhaps not, but I'd rather not give my name. By the way, the fellow who calls on your wife, he also is a neighbor."

"Who is he?"

"You consider him a friend. He pretends the same, and . . ."

"How do you know all this?"

"I have eyes and I happen to know the nights you work late. So does your so-called friend. That's when he comes. I've watched him from my window. He's as regular as a clock and he always leaves a half-hour before you arrive."

John was gripping the phone. Lies. All lies. He couldn't believe a word of this, he wanted to slam down the phone, but there would be more calls. "Look, why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Because I'm your friend."

"If you really are, why don't you give me your name?"

There was a pause, then the caller said, "It would serve no real purpose. Besides, I don't wish to become involved. I think it sufficient that I've warned you. Perhaps you don't want to face the truth. I can't say I blame you for that, because it's painful. But can you continue to turn your back?"

John didn't reply. He cradled the phone, stared at the wall and it began to disintegrate, leaving a gaping hole through which he saw the street where he lived, his neighbors' homes. In one was the anonymous caller, in another a man who . . .

Thursday and Saturday nights John worked late in the city and arrived home at ten. On those occasions when he expected to arrive earlier, he would phone Grace and let her know.

It was on Friday night that he received the warning from the anonymous caller. The next evening he started for home early, without phoning Grace. At nine-fifteen he stopped at a neighborhood tavern and had two drinks. Ten minutes later he drove into his own block and parked across the street from his own house. He waited. No one came from the house.

At ten-thirty he stepped from his car, ashamed of himself for having distrusted Grace and angry for having been taken in by a practical joker. Grace was watching television when he entered the house.

"You're late," she said and, seeing the look on his face which she mistook for weariness, "Oh, you must have worked so hard." Getting up, she kissed him. "Here, sit down while I fix your supper."

At eleven the phone rang. Grace answered it, and the caller hung up. Exasperated, she turned to John and said, "Another one of those calls. They make me nervous. Can't we do something about it?"

"Not very much," John answered. "Anyway, it's probably nothing to worry about. Kids like to do things like that."

His words calmed her. A few minutes later she went up to bed. Although he'd put in a hard day, John wasn't tired. He remained in the livingroom, reading the evening paper.

A half hour later the phone rang again, and he picked it up. The anonymous one was on the wire. The anger in John stifled him for a moment; he couldn't find his tongue. The caller was speaking now, "Too bad nothing happened tonight. Your wife's boyfriend had an appointment elsewhere, but he'll drop in again. I hope you'll be waiting for him, like tonight."

"You saw me?"

"From my window. Well, it's late. Good night."

John put down the phone. Was this a continuation of the "joke"? He didn't know what to think, but his anger had gone. Who was Grace's lover? Which neighbor? He went to a window and looked out. A silent street, silent, secretive houses. There was no telling who came while he was out.

Thursday, at last, it came. John parked the car across the street from his house. He waited, so

tense that he couldn't smoke. Five minutes passed—an eternity. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead and yet he felt a strange coldness. Slowly it was taking possession of his body, his mind. Slowly he was preparing himself for what was to come. Tonight it would happen, tonight he was going to kill a man.

But which man? That was what disturbed him. If he knew, the task would be easier. More minutes passed. He was in agony. Time was slipping away with nothing happening. Would this be a repetition of Saturday night?

The sound of a door opening brought him alert. He turned, looked across the street. A man had appeared on the porch of his house. Now he was coming down the steps, hurrying, a dim figure emerging from the shadows. John recognized him when he reached the sidewalk.

"George!"

The man stopped, looked around. John called again and this time George looked directly at him, hesitated, then started across the street. When he reached the car, he looked in and said, "Oh, it's you. Why are you sitting here?"

For a moment John didn't answer. He stared at George. So you're the one, he thought. It no longer mattered that George and he were the best of friends. That was over. There was no feeling inside him, only a terrible gaping hollowness.

"Get in the car," he said.

"What's wrong, John?"

"Nothing. Get in the car." To emphasize the point and forestall argument, he lifted his hand. Light glinted on a black gun barrel. "Get behind the wheel."

George opened the door, slid behind the wheel and sat numbed.

"Now drive."

The command was puzzling, involving no destination. "Where to?" That rasping sound, was it his own voice?

"I don't know. Just keep driving."

"I'm . . ." George felt the pistol against his temple and went dumb. He didn't want to die. He didn't . . .

How dark and empty were the streets, thought John. Where was everyone? A falling star sliced the black heavens and vanished, the road sloped downward, trees were closing in. Ahead lay White Oaks, a patch of woodland that had somehow survived the march of the bulldozers.

"Where are we going?" George asked, and the pistol spoke, cold and hard against his temple. Black as the black sky, the woods loomed ahead. Not a light, not a sound, no

sign of humans, not even a parked car with lovers who might respond to a cry for help.

"Here," said John. "Stop here."

George braked the car. John climbed out, stalked to the other side and said, "Get out."

"Why?"

"Don't ask questions. Just do as you're told."

George hesitated and at last stepped from the car. A field lay before them, crossed by an irregular path which vanished in the yawning dark of the woods.

"Let's go," said John.

They crossed the field, following the contortions of the path, and finally the woods stood before them, a black wall of shadow; the trees were ancient, massive and doomed. The path, darker and thinner, led on into the woods and silence. Like a fallen giant, the tree came into view, dead, stripped of its bark, gleaming in its nakedness beside the path; an oak robbed of its last branch, twig and leaf, and still magnificent in death.

"Here," said John, and they stopped. Through the trees at a distance, random lights gleamed in the windows of houses. George thought of the falling star slicing the black sky, and fear enveloped him totally. He wanted to explain. He could explain, but John had warned him to keep his tongue. A madman with a gun. Don't antagonize him. The less said the better. But if he said nothing. . . . He waited.

George walked away from him, returned, his face emerged from the dark, a pale mask set with two black holes. "Turn around," said John.

An odd chilling request. "What for?"

"Because I said so."

The wrong thing to do, but how could he oppose the command? George turned, presented his back and began to tremble violently. Now he had to explain, do it quickly; words, an unfinished explanation enveloped by the crack of a pistol. He fell forward awkwardly across the dead oak.

The lights of the house looked different, brighter, the way they used to look. There was a spring in his steps as John mounted the porch; he had no feeling about the occurrence in the woods. In the dark, a dark form toppling and vanishing, his memory of the event was as vague as if it had happened long, long ago. The star had fallen from the black sky to the black woods, equating all things, no feeling for his dead friend. Friend? He slipped his key into the lock.

"Oh, here he is. George, what took you so long?"

John stepped into the living-room. Grace's face sagged. Roberta, George's wife, stared at him blankly. The lights in the room were already shedding their luster; the warm night air was suddenly chill. Grace and Roberta, like mannikins in a shop window, stared at him as if at a stranger. Sometimes one intrudes on friends, kin. This was an intrusion, but he could not excuse himself and retreat from the cold terror enveloping him.

"We thought you were George," Grace said. "He went down to the corner for ice cream and didn't return."

How could he when he was in the woods, lying behind a dead tree? Dead. A horrible mistake; he had never been Grace's lover.

"Could you go to the corner?" Roberta asked. "I know George likes to talk, but he's been gone so long."

John nodded, unable to speak. He went out the door and returned five minutes later to report that George had not been in the ice cream parlor.

"Then something must have happened to him," Roberta cried in alarm.

Murderer. He had murdered the wrong man. Now what? John wondered. Go to the police? He wasn't that brave. Let them point the finger and accuse him. No, he wouldn't tell. As long as he didn't, he knew he was safe. No one suspected him.

Safe? What of the anonymous caller who watched from his window along the block? Tomorrow someone walking through the woods would discover the body; everyone would know of the murder and the caller would pick up the phone to inform the police. But now, tonight, he had no knowledge of the crime and he would probably call as he always did. So there was still a chance. If he hadn't seen George enter the car, he couldn't bear witness. If he had? If he had, perhaps he would listen to reason, understand the terrible mistake, that his was an equal share of the guilt for what had happened. Perhaps that would silence him.

At eleven John was waiting, the phone within reach. Muted, the black instrument kept its silence. John sat rigid. An hour passed in an agony of slow minutes. Still no call and still he waited, not knowing it would never come, that the anonymous one was silenced, that his body, already chilled and rigid, lay sprawled beside the dead oak in the dark woods.

*One who ventures to inhabit the unguarded waterfront might well recognize the contingency of suffering eroding waters.*

# THE TROUBLE WITH

THE night was stifling, with hardly a breath of air astir and the humidity soaring. At one a.m. I gave up, climbed out of bed, showered, shucked into shorts, shirt and slacks and went down to my car. I figured to take a brief spin on some back roads to catch what little breeze there was.

It wasn't only the heat that bugged me and made sleep impossible. I was also short three thousand dollars in my accounts at the bank.

Ordinarily, a three-grand deficit wouldn't have panicked me; as Estates and Trusts supervisor, I'd frequently played with that much and more, betting legally at the track or illegally at a popular local roadhouse, the gaming facilities of which came under periodic attack but continued to flourish due to the greasing of certain palms in police circles. Of course, in my position I'd kept my wagering discreet, and I'd always carefully figured the time element, giving myself an ample interval for replacement of funds.

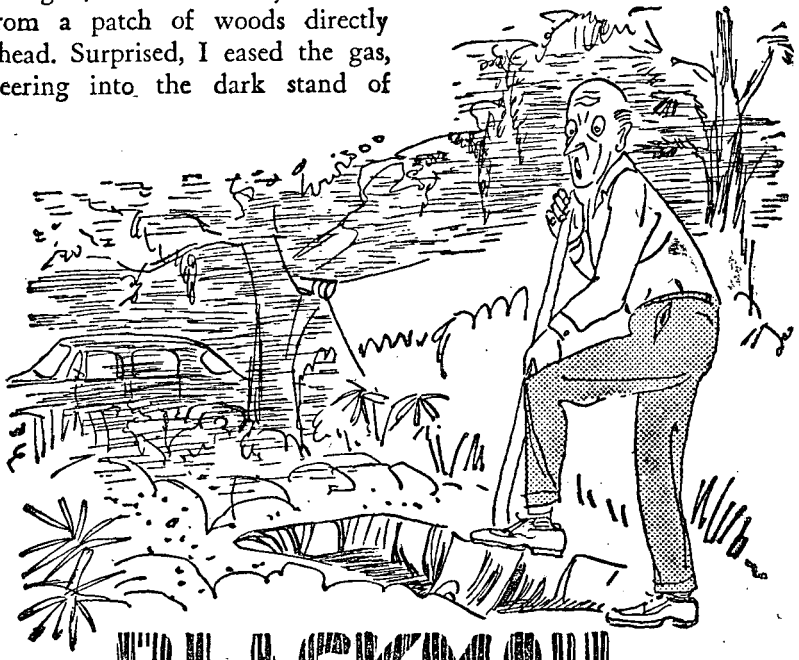
Now, though, I was fresh out of time; I'd learned through channels that the state examiners were scheduled to make a surprise appearance at the bank in two days. The paper work didn't concern me because I could juggle figures back to normalcy in a couple of hours. But the three thousand to go with those figures I didn't have —and couldn't raise in two days.

I could conceive of but one out: proffer accounts which *were* in order, try to stall the examiners until such time as I somehow could get an advance from my gambling connections.

I drove irritably, wrestling with my problem, not appreciating the slight breeze I picked up once I'd cleared town and was barreling over a secondary road. In my sour mood, I almost missed the flicker of light which suddenly showed from a patch of woods directly ahead. Surprised, I eased the gas, peering into the dark stand of trees and tangled underbrush as I drew abreast.

Momentarily, I thought I'd imagined the glimmer; only deep-shrouded foliage met my stare. Then from the shadowed center of the woods the light flickered briefly again.

Intrigued, I braked fully, cut my motor and lights, and climbed out. Immediate visibility was poor, with a quarter-moon riding low



# THE BLACKMAIL

BY CARROLL MAYERS

and partially obscured by storm clouds. Still, I could make out a rutted, weed-choked track of sorts paralleling, then curving into the dark stand of trees. More, crushed underbrush gave evidence of a vehicle of some nature using the track very recently.

I couldn't imagine a juvenile petting party visiting the woods. The area was too remote, practically inaccessible. But there were those signs of fresh entry—and that flickering light.

My curiosity built. Walking quietly, steps muted by the weeds, I went along the rutty path. Blackness was almost complete; for all my straining gaze, I could discern only gnarled trunks and drooping vines.

Abruptly, moonlight shafting through a rift in the clouds permitted me to see more. A car was pulled off the path, nosed into the heart of the woods. And beyond the car, in the beam of a small flashlight, a man in shirtleeves was busily digging into the ground with a spade.

I knew that man. Even in the murky moonglow there was no mistaking the sharp features, the balding pate of Town Councilman Roger Kobler.

Perverse satisfaction rippled through me. Kobler, unmarried and a man of considerable wealth in his own right, was unalterably opposed to his fellow citizens acquiring financial independence for themselves via the gambling route. An anti-vice crusader, he constantly sponsored the area's legislation against gaming. My stumbling upon such a character patently engaged in some sub rosa activity was indeed gratifying.

I moved into the small clearing. "Need any help, Councilman?"

My words had been casual, but their effect was shattering. Kobler stiffened as from an electric jolt; he bent over the spade immobile, only his mouth quirking. Then, slowly, he dropped the spade, straightened and looked at me, his thin features molding into an expression of utter despair. His lips continued to twitch but he could not speak.

I twisted the knife. "Digging for angleworms, Kobler?"

He had recognized me from seeing me at the bank; his voice, when he finally found it, was chokked. "I—I can explain this, Bridges."

He couldn't, of course; his frenzied diggings, the very nuance of his avowal shrieked complete incredulity to any explanation he might broach. But I nodded soberly. "Naturally," I said.

"It—it's not what you think."

"What *do* I think?"

"I mean. . . ." Kobler broke off, floundering, unable to continue dissemblance and also unable, I suddenly noted, to check his anguished gaze from covertly flicking sideways to his car.

I crossed to the sedan. Nothing appeared amiss on either the front or back seats. I opened the rear door, glimpsed a dark, blanket-wrapped bulk on the floorboards. When I bent, tugged at the blanket, one fold fell away; even in the shadowy half-light I could make out the mottled, contorted features of a blonde young woman.

"She's dead. I strangled her."

Behind me, Kobler voiced the admission dully. I turned, studied him. Now that the moment of discovery—and confession—was past, the man seemed drained of every emotion. His crushed mien gave no hint of justification, fancied or otherwise.

Already, a tiny bell was echoing at the back of my mind. "Care to tell me about it?" I asked quietly, dropping my sardonic tone.

He stiffened again, my casual reaction clearly not what he had expected. "Eh?"

"Your side of it."

My attitude left him uncertain; when he began to speak, his words were without animation, almost rote-like. "She came to town looking for work as a cocktail waitress. I met her one night in a parking lot when her car wouldn't start. She had a compelling vitality which fascinated me."

I let the euphemism ride. Obviously, the blonde had had a heady surplus of sex appeal Kobler hadn't experienced before and couldn't handle. It wasn't hard to surmise the rest, but I let him spell it out.

"And?"

He tongued dry lips. "I began seeing her secretly. We became involved. A month ago she told me she was going to have a child but that if I paid her two thousand dollars she would quietly leave town." Kobler's shoulders sagged. "She could have been lying, of course, but I couldn't risk a scandal, so I gave her the money. But she didn't leave town—and tonight she demanded two thousand more."

I nodded. "That's usually the trouble with blackmail," I said soberly.

A degree of justification finally sparked. "I realized she wouldn't stop there," he went on. "We argued. In anger, I slapped her and she spat at me. I lost my head."

The spark died; Kobler slumped against his car. "I was a fool," he finished bitterly. "She'd visited me secretly, as usual. She'd come to town a loner, a drifter. She could have left the same way." He made

a vague gesture to where he'd dug. "I thought perhaps if I buried her body, sat tight. . . ." His words trailed off. "I was a fool," he repeated.

That bell of mine was louder now. I shook my head. "Not necessarily," I said.

Momentarily, my inference didn't register; when it did, Kobler slowly pushed away from the car and peered at me. "Just what are you saying, Bridges?"

"Only that I figure your blonde leech asked for what she got," I told him. I indicated the spade. "Start digging again; we can be clear of here in twenty minutes."

He looked intently at me, then, wordlessly, picked up the spade.

My time estimate proved slightly optimistic. The underbrush was thorny, the ground hard. It was all of a half hour before we'd buried the body and replaced dirt and brush, leaving no obvious traces. Sweating profusely, Kobler stowed the spade in his car's trunk, gave me another close look. "And now?"

I wiped my brow. "Now," I said, "we both could use a drink." I smiled at him, added as if an afterthought, "I'll follow you to your place."

He drew a deep breath. "Of course," he said tonelessly, climbing into his sedan.

Kobler's inflection clued me. If he'd been somewhat uncertain of the script up to here, he wasn't any longer. His only doubt now was how big my bite would be. I didn't intend to keep him in suspense long. Three grand was what I needed to square myself at the bank, but that echoing bell, that stroke of inspiration called for a slight profit.

At his apartment, Kobler wasted little time in confirming his understanding. His eyes haggard over the rim of his glass, he asked simply, "How much, Bridges?"

I couldn't resist a final cat-and-mouse. "Eh?" I said.

He closed his eyes briefly. "Don't stall. Helping me, you've involved yourself in murder, become an accessory after the fact. A man doesn't do that without thinking of himself."

"You're a cynic, Kobler. *Some* men might."

He shook his head tiredly. "But not you. I know you, your future prospects. I think you helped me tonight because, somehow, you're jammed yourself, need some quick cash to protect those prospects."

I took a long pull at my drink; the liquor was stimulating. "Good thinking," I told him agreeably. "Since you put it that way, yes, I could use some extra money. Shall we say, five thousand?"

His smile was humorless. "As you pointed out earlier, there's a certain trouble with blackmail."

I put down my glass. "I said, *usually*," I corrected. "In my case, five thousand will end it."

"You're lying."

I held myself in check. "You have my word," I told him evenly.

Kobler sat motionless for several moments. Then, wearily, he got out of his chair and swung aside an oil painting to reveal a compact wall safe. When he thrust the money-packet into my hands, the feel of the crisp new bills was more stimulating than the liquor. "Good night, Bridges," he said heavily, his expression no less grim.

"Good night," I returned pleasantly. I left him looking after me with a bleak, impotent light building in his eyes. If he slept badly, I couldn't have cared less.

I was at my desk early the next morning. It took some deep concentration, some studied adjustments, but by the time the bank opened at nine I had carried it off: my accounts—*and* cash funds—were in complete agreement, would reveal no shortages.

I felt good. Despite my "word" to Kobler, I knew I'd struck an inexhaustible lode. I wouldn't be greedy, but any time I needed a thousand or so, the screws would be turned, but hard.

At ten-thirty, though, I received a jolt. I was on a coffee break, in a luncheonette next to the bank. The counter girl had a radio playing, and the news was broadcast as a special local bulletin.

Town Councilman Roger Kobler had committed suicide. An hour ago, a cleaning woman had discovered the body in his apartment, hanging from the shower curtain rod in the bath.

I realized then I might have anticipated Kobler's suicide. His act of murder, his attempted concealment of that act, and my own squeeze—which undoubtedly he'd correctly interpreted as but an initial demand, as the girl's had been—all had been too much for the man. After my departure, he'd brooded, and finally cracked.

I was badly shaken. Aside from that lode which I'd counted on, I now could be badly boxed myself. If Kobler had done any talking, had left any note explaining or justifying his action. . . .

I sweated through the balance of the morning, expecting any moment to be visited by the police. I wasn't. At lunch, I caught the noon newscast, and while Kobler's suicide was again mentioned, the account was routine. No suggestion of any extended investigation was detailed.

I began to breathe easier. When

I still had not been sought out by quitting time, conviction burgeoned stronger. By mid-evening I was convinced I was in the clear; Kobler had neither said nor written anything to involve me.

Around nine, I was relaxing with a gin and tonic when my apartment buzzer sounded. Answering, I was confronted by a lanky individual with a blond crewcut which suggested a freshman joe college, but he had a pair of shrewd, gray eyes which verified their owner had been in school a long time.

"Mr. Lee Bridges?"

"That's right."

He flashed an ID card. "Sergeant Cannon, Police Headquarters. I'd like a few minutes of your time."

My chest constricted, but I steeled myself. Until I knew the score. . . .

"Certainly, Sergeant," I said. "Come in. What's it all about?"

His manner was almost casual. "I was assigned to the Kobler case," he told me.

*So I was tied in*—but I still didn't know how much. I held on, feigning distaste. "Suicide's an unfortunate thing," I said. "I heard about it on the news."

I stopped, the possible inference of that "*was* assigned" abruptly washing over me. My pulse picked up a beat.

Cannon recognized my comprehension. "That's right, Bridges; this isn't an official call." His sudden smile was thin. "You might call it moonlighting."

I knew, then, and the irony left a sour taste in my mouth. Kobler's suicide had been assigned to and investigated by a wily opportunist, the like of whom, incidentally, was responsible for the flourishing of the gambling against which he'd crusaded. Sergeant Cannon was a crooked cop.

My armpits were clammy but I managed to return Cannon's gaze. "You're losing me, Sergeant," I said tautly.

He shook his head. "I think not. You've probably been hoping Kobler left no note, but he did." As he spoke, Cannon withdrew a folded sheet. "Besides a confession, it's quite explicit in naming you and how you dealt yourself in. The cleaning woman hadn't seen it. After I had, it—ah—got misplaced." Cannon paused, watching me. "Just to be sure," he added, "I checked the grave."

My temples pounded; I was hung up, with only one possible out. Unwittingly, I echoed Kobler's earlier phrase. "H—how much?" I stammered.

"I think a thousand's a nice round figure," he told me. "For a start. . . ."

*To one who may be unduly concerned with the threat of the diversion herein depicted, I would suggest the game of substitution.*


THE man stood hesitantly as he read and reread the lettering on the door: DAN MARTIN, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATOR. He glanced behind him. The corridor was empty. He tapped the door with timid knuckles and a firm voice told him to enter.

Dan rose from his desk and surveyed the visitor. He was in his early forties, gray at the temples, and with the beginnings of a comfortable paunch. He was also scared stiff. Dan catalogued him quickly as typical suburbia, mmeber of the country club, in the insurance business, officer in a service club, one jump ahead of the mortgage.

Dan shook the nervously damp hand that was extended.

The man's voice was almost treble with strain. "I'm Max Alvis."

"Sit down," Dan said, leaning back in his swivel chair.

Max perched on the edge of his chair as though he expected a surge of high voltage to pass through it at any moment. "I'm in trouble, I think. No, I *know* I'm in trouble, but I don't know how bad."

"What's your problem?"

Max glanced at the door as though seeking escape, then, deciding there was none, started talking rapidly. "You have to understand, it would never have happened if I hadn't been drinking. Normally, I'm a good family man. I'll admit, my foot may have slipped on occa-

sions, but I have a lovely wife and I'm a good family man."

Dan listened to the protest of innocence and decided that Max Alvis would cheat with his best friend's wife if he thought he could get away with it. He listened quietly as Max raced through his tale of misadventure. When he finished, Dan asked, "How much did she get you for?"

"Twenty-five thousand bucks!"

Dan's reaction was a long, low whistle.

"I had to borrow the money, and I can't afford it, but I was scared —I'm still damned scared. If that guy's dead, I'm in real trouble, regardless of the money."

"He's not dead," Dan laughed sympathetically. "You have been conned, my friend, very neatly, with one of the oldest confidence games in the business. Let's go over it again. You meet the girl in a bar. She gets real friendly, and you both get more than a little drunk, at least she pretends to be. Then you take her to her apartment, things get real cozy, and in walks another man. She screams, and he pulls her to her feet and starts slapping her around. Then he's suddenly on the floor with a knife in his belly and blood all over his shirt. She's hysterical, and you both get out of there.

"Then comes the clincher. She needs money to get out of town. You have to help her. She reminds you that you are involved just as much as she is. She even hints that it might have been you that had the knife. You're scared, and so you pay.

"Then you watch the papers. Three, four days go by, and there's nothing about a murder. You start to wonder. Then you come to me. Why not the police?"

"Because I thought he was dead!" Max tried to light a cigarette, but his fingers weren't up to the job. He broke it in half and dropped it in the ashtray. "He has to be dead! The knife handle was sticking out between his fingers and there was blood all over him!"

Dan snorted. "That was nothing but pure catsup. The knife was one of those trick jobs with a retractable blade that you can pick up in any magic shop. They look deadly, but the point's dull and the blade slides back up into the handle. That guy was washing up and changing his shirt before you were even out of the building."

"Then he's not dead?" Max was still dubious, but the sound of relief was in his voice.

"Not unless he got hit by a bus or something."

"That dirty witch!"

"So, you've been taken. You can go to the police, but I'm afraid it

won't do you much good. They've got your dough, and the police certainly can't get it back for you. Even if you can find them, what proof do you have about your story? It's your word against theirs. I'm sorry, my friend, but you've been had."

"That dirty witch," Max repeated. His face reddened as anger replaced fear. He sat seething, drumming his fingers on the edge of Dan's desk. "Get my money back. I don't care how you do it, just get my money back."

"How do you expect me to do that? I have nothing to go on. I don't know who they were. I know nothing, and even if I did, how would I go about getting your money back?"

"Figure something out," Max pleaded. "If you can get it back, we'll split. If I lose it all, I'm dead, but with half of it, I can manage. Try something, anything . . . There's half of twenty-five thousand bucks in it for you."

Now Dan was thoughtful. "Okay, we'll try. What did she look like?"

"She was in her middle twenties, well stacked, blonde . . ."

"Real or dyed?"

Max hesitated. "Dyed."

"Anything unusual? Something different that would help me spot her?"

Max closed his eyes, trying to visualize her. "She wore two rings on one finger, but she wore them on her right hand. I remember that because it seemed awkward, and she had a small mole on her breast."

"Oh, that's a great help."

"No, I mean you could see it. She wore a low cut dress and you could see the mole."

"It could have been painted on. Women do that—you know, paint on a beauty mark."

"No. It didn't rub off."

Dan smiled an evil grin.

Max bristled. "Look, mister, this may be funny to you, but there's no humor in it as far as I'm concerned."

"Sorry," Dan grunted. "How about the guy? What did he look like?"

"About thirty, dark hair—there was something funny about him—yeah, I remember. The tip of his ear was missing. Funny how that sticks in my mind. As scared as I was, I can remember that. It was his left ear, I think. That was it, his left ear. It looked like the lobe of his ear had been cut off."

"That could be a lead," Dan commented. "Give me your card and I'll contact you, but don't expect miracles. I have little to go on, but I'll see what I can find out."

They shook hands and Max left.

Dan dialed police headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Anderson. After a short wait, the lieutenant was on the line.

"Andy, this is Dan Martin."

"Yeah, Dan. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have anything in your files on a guy with a chunk of his left ear missing? He's in his early thirties, has dark hair."

"That's all?"

"That's all I have to go on."

"Okay. I'll run it through R and I and call you back in about twenty minutes." The lieutenant hung up.

Dan opened the bottom drawer of the file cabinet and took out a fifth of Scotch. He poured three fingers into a paper cup and added an equal amount of water from the cooler. Then he sat back and relaxed as he waited for Andy to call back. He was halfway through the second Scotch and water when the phone rang.

"I have a make on him, Dan. The name's Leo Privet. Six arrests on morals charges, but only one conviction. He served six months four years ago, but we have nothing on him since. He lives in Valley Stream, out on the island. No visible means of support. Has a small home there, but no wife. However, he does have a blonde housekeeper who's a knockout. This is a shady cat, Dan. What do you have on him? I'm curious."

"I don't know, Andy. Give me a couple of days to case the thing."

"Look, buddy, you must have something or you wouldn't have called me."

"I don't have a thing except a client. I don't even have a hunch. Do you have this Leo's address?"

"Yeah, 133 Aldon Street. That's a nice neighborhood, so take it easy."

"I'll be careful. And listen, Andy, if I latch onto anything you can use, I'll let you know right away."

Dan hung up and glanced at his watch. It was five-thirty. He finished his drink, threw the empty paper cup in the wastebasket and headed for the door, carefully locking it behind him. He entered the elevator and pressed the button that took him to the underground parking lot. The attendant brought his four-year-old sedan from the maze of cars and he slid under the wheel, dreading the ordeal that was to follow.

The car climbed smoothly up the ramp from the cool basement, and as Dan reached the street the searing heat blasted him. He inched his way with the crosstown traffic, and finally reached the bridge. It wasn't too bad after he was on the parkway. The air was cooler and he almost enjoyed the drive. There was still an hour of daylight left when he reached the turnoff to

Valley Stream. He swung off the main highway and became entangled with the local evening traffic, but only until he found a bar. Then he parked and went in to rinse the city from his mouth with a cold beer.

It was nearly nine when he left, and it was much cooler. He checked a town map at a nearby gas station and located Aldon Street. It was only two blocks from the bar. He cruised around the block, then parked three houses from 133 on the opposite side of the street. The evening was beginning to darken. He lit a cigarette and waited.

The blonde came out first. Dan didn't get a good look at her face, but her figure was a rare fascination. There was a brief flash of thigh as she swung into the seat of the sports car that was parked in the driveway, a quick snarl of the motor, and she was gone. Dan continued to wait.

Another half hour passed, then the garage door opened and a new convertible slid down the driveway, backed around, and smoothly took off past Dan. He couldn't see the driver's ear, but his hair was dark.

Dan reached into the glove compartment and took out a pencil flashlight, a strip of celluloid, and a pair of thin cotton gloves. Then he left the car and ambled across the street with studied nonchalance. When he reached the hedge at 133, he ducked into its shadow and quickly made his way to the rear of the house. He put the gloves on then, and the strip of celluloid opened the spring lock on the back door with ease. Guiding himself with sparing flashes of the light, he searched until he found what he was certain would be there, a small, neat wall safe in the study, unimaginatively hidden behind a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. He left everything undisturbed and drove back to Manhattan.

Dan called Max Alvis the next morning. They met at ten-thirty in a downtown sporting goods store, where Dan led Max to a large display of knives. "Pick out the one that looks most like the one she used," he said.

Max studied for a moment, then pointed. "That one is similar."

Dan called a clerk and bought the knife. When they reached the sidewalk, Max asked, "You find out anything?"

"A little," Dan smiled. "Just be patient. Excuse me now, I have some more shopping to do."

The next two weeks were busy ones for Dan. He alternated following the blonde and Leo. Finally a pattern appeared. The blonde would leave around nine in the

evening, drive to the station and take the subway to the city. She would stake out in one of the bars on Fifty-Seventh Street and look for a mark. Leo would leave about a half hour later and drive to the city. He would hover in the background and watch the progress the blonde was making. They made one hit the second week, and Dan followed it with interest.

He had to admit it was a smooth operation. The blonde played it real cool the first night. She and the mark became acquainted and had several drinks and a long conversation. Leo passed by for a visual check. When the blonde left, she left alone. She met the mark the following night. That gave Leo the whole day to check the mark's financial and marital status. When she left the second night the mark was with her, and Dan was an inconspicuous tail. He followed them to a nearby apartment house and waited in a doorway across the street. Leo showed up thirty minutes later, smoked a cigarette, then went upstairs. Ten minutes later the blonde and the mark hurried out of the building and into the mark's car. They sped off into the night. Dan still waited. Twenty minutes later, Leo followed leisurely and headed back towards the island.

Dan studied their timetable until their every move was predictable. Then he made his move.

The first step was to establish an identity. He bought a copy of the Times and went down the list of buyers that were in town for the various manufacturers showings, stopping at the name of Fred Hanson, Jr., representing Hanson's Furniture, Des Moines, Iowa. A check of the Dun and Bradstreet report showed the company to have a triple A rating. Dan decided to borrow the name of Fred Hanson for the next few days.

He went to the blonde's favorite bar that evening, purposely arriving early while the business was slow, and engaged the bartender in conversation. He dropped the name of Hanson's Furniture several times, along with a very broad hint that he wouldn't be adverse to some pleasant female companionship. He was on his third martini when the blonde arrived. She sat several stools away from him and he feigned disinterest as the bartender moved away to wait on her, but he watched them in the bar mirror. There was a rapid, muted conversation, then a nod from the bartender in his direction.

A little later, while the bartender was busy rinsing glasses, the blonde held an unlit cigarette and looked helplessly toward Dan. He stepped around the stools that separated

them and, flicking his lighter, offered the flame to her. As she leaned toward the light, he saw the birthmark Alvis had described.

"Waiting for someone?" he asked.

"No. Just having a quiet drink." She looked at him with candid directness, "It's lonely in the city sometimes."

"I know. I'm a stranger here myself," Dan lied. Then he asked in a hesitant voice, "Could I buy you a drink?"

"That would be nice."

Dan moved his drink next to hers and ordered another for them both. "I'm Fred," he said for openers.

"I'm Dolly. You going to be in the city long?"

"Just for a few days. I'll be going back to Des Moines after the show."

"The show?"

"Well, actually it's a market. The furniture manufacturers display their new lines twice a year, and we retailers pick out the things we figure will move, and then place our orders."

"You own a furniture store?"

Dan nodded, "Hanson's, in Des Moines. It's a pretty big operation. Dad started the business, but he's retired now. I have to carry the whole load."

"Gee, that's interesting. Where do they have this show?"

"At the Astor. It takes up the whole fifth floor."

The basic information had been delivered. Dan ad libbed from there on, dividing his attention between Dolly's mole and the mirror. He finally spotted the nicked ear. Leo Privet had arrived. Dolly gave no sign of recognition. Leo had one drink, looked Dan over carefully and left. Dan's conversation with Dolly continued for about fifteen minutes, then he looked at his watch.

"Where did this evening go? I'll have to be leaving. Nine o'clock comes awfully early. It's been nice talking to you, Dolly. I wish we could do it more often."

"I've enjoyed meeting you, too."

Dan hesitated with deliberate shyness, then he made the pitch. "Look, tomorrow's the last day of the show, but there's no reason I couldn't stay over. We could have dinner together and a few drinks. Or am I being presumptuous?"

"Not at all. I'd love to have dinner with you, but what would your wife say if she knew about this?"

Dan pondered that for a moment, then he grinned. "I won't tell if you don't."

Dolly giggled. "Okay, it's a date. What time?"

"Eight o'clock suit you?"

"That'll be fine. Here?"

"I can't think of a better place."

"I'll look forward to seeing you then."

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and, after one final glance at her mole, he left.

At nine-fifteen the next morning, Dan strolled into the lobby of the Astor, neatly dressed in a charcoal brown business suit and carrying a briefcase. He paused to buy a pack of cigarettes and glanced around the lobby. Leo was seated across the room, seemingly engrossed in the morning paper. Dan pressed the elevator button that took him to the fifth floor, walked down the corridor, then came back down by the stairway. When he returned to the lobby, Leo was gone. Dan grunted admiration of Leo's thoroughness.

He drove out to Valley Stream that afternoon and left the car at the parking lot at the station. Then he took the next train back to the city. It took twenty minutes longer to drive out than it did to come back. Dan figured that would be the extra margin of time that he needed.

Regardless of all the preparation, Dan was apprehensive as he waited for Dolly to show for their date. When she walked through the door, he exhaled and the tension left him.

After two martinis, Dan asked, "Where to for dinner?"

"There's a little Italian place near here. It's not real fancy, but the veal parmesan is delicious. You like Italian food?"

"It sounds wonderful to me. Shall I call a cab?"

"We can walk. It isn't far."

It was a quiet restaurant. Candlelight flickered across the red and white checked tablecloths, and subdued music filled the room. The food was excellent. They had a bottle of wine with dinner, then they danced. Holding her, her lush softness tantalizingly firm against him, made Dan wish that there could be another ending to the evening, something completely different than the one he had planned. But the hard facts remained. She was a phony. She and Leo had taken Max Alvis, and who knows how many more, on the same kind of bunco for which Dan had set himself up. He held her a little closer as they danced, aware that he was to be taken, just like the others. He was just another mark, as far as she was concerned. The realization cleared his mind, and he could proceed with his plan with a clear conscience.

Three drinks later, she put her hand on his knee and leaned toward him. A soft fuzziness had crept into her voice. "You're very sweet, you know. I like you." Her head was tilted and her lips were

temptingly close, eyes inviting.

"You're sweet too," Dan replied, then he kissed her.

"Mmmm," she cooed, "that was good, but people are watching. Let's go somewhere else."

"Where would you like to go?"

"We could have a drink at my

place. It isn't very far from here."

"That's a wonderful idea," Dan slurred. He got off his stool with studied unsteadiness. Dolly took his arm and they stepped into the warm night.

"Shall we take a cab?"

"Silly," she giggled, "it's just around the corner."

She clung to his arm as they walked, and her warmth pressed against him. He followed her up the stairs, admiring the view so much that he was sorry there wasn't another flight. She pretended to unlock the already unlocked door, and they went in.

It was an ordinary furnished apartment. The folding bed was open and made, with the covers turned down in invitation. Dolly fixed them a drink, then kicked off her shoes as they sat on the edge of the bed drinking it. Then she excused herself and went to the bathroom.

Dan moved quickly. He slid his hands under both pillows and found nothing. Then he turned up the corner of the mattress and saw the trick knife hidden there. He replaced it with the one in his pocket and waited. When Dolly came out of the bathroom, she reached for him.

"Be nice to me," she sighed, and Dan hoped that Leo would be a little late. He was gasping for breath when he heard a key turn in the lock and Leo entered.

Dan watched the action that followed with admiration. The acting was hammy, but effective. Leo pulled Dolly to her feet and slapped her hard. They struggled for a moment, then Leo gasped and sank to his knees, a red circle surrounding the knife handle he was clasping at his stomach. Then he fell forward and lay still.

Dolly was sobbing, "Oh, what did I do? We have to get away from here. Hurry!"

Dan hurried, and they ran down the stairs to the sidewalk. Then he took over with positive masculine protectiveness.

"This way, but don't run. Act natural," he commanded as he herded her toward the subway entrance. They caught the first train and rode to the next stop. Dolly was sobbing. "We get off here," Dan said. "Take hold of yourself." He took her arm and steered her through the short tunnel to where the Long Island express came through. Dolly continued her erratic sobbing even after they were on the train to the Island. She sensed that the play was somehow being taken out of her hands, but she had to make her pitch.

"I've got to get away. I killed him, I know I killed him. I'll have to have money," she gasped a beg-

ging sob. "You can help me, can't you? You *have* to help me!"

Dan's answer was a harshly blunt, "Why?"

That corked her sobbing and sugary vitriol couched her next line. "You were there with me, weren't you? It's your fault as much as mine."

"Is it?"

"And how about your wife? What would she say?"

Dan pretended to be in deep thought. "How much would it take for you to get away?"

"At least twenty-five thousand!"

Dan hissed a soft whistle through his teeth, "You mean that's all you'd need?"

"It doesn't matter where I go, but I'll need new clothes, a car, everything. I can't just start out again with nothing!"

"That sounds reasonable enough from your point of view, but I had something else in mind," Dan chuckled. "I was thinking of a figure in the vicinity of fifty thousand, but on *my* side of the ledger."

"You're insane," she hissed. "I can tell the police it was you who had the knife. You can fry for this!"

"No, dearie," Dan laughed, "your fingerprints are on that knife, not mine." He took the knife out of his pocket that he had taken from under the mattress. "Do you recognize this?" He pressed a button on the side and the blade slid out with a nasty snick. Then he pushed the point of the blade against his palm and it slid smoothly back into the handle. "I switched the knives, baby. You cut Leo real good. It's no game this time. This is for keeps."

Her face was ashen under the blonde hair. "You're lying, you've got to be lying!"

The train was stopping at Valley Stream. Dan took her arm and she was like a sleepwalker as he led her to his parked car. "Name it," he snapped. "Either we go to the police or to 133 Aldon Street. It's your baby, and my price is fifty thousand. Tonight!"

"I don't have it." She was sobbing in earnest now.

"You know where to find it."

"Leo would kill me."

"You're forgetting that Leo's dead. You killed him. Which way will it be?"

She got into the car. "Okay, you'll get your dirty money, you —you Judas!"

She trembled all the way to 133 Aldon Street. Dan didn't know if it was from fear or anger, and he didn't much care. She unlocked the front door and he followed her to the den. He pulled the picture away from the safe and de-

manded, "Open it. Make it fast."

There was fifty-three thousand in the safe. Dan counted out three thousand and gave it to Dolly. Then he unzipped one of the sofa cushions, took out the foam filler, and stuffed the balance of the money in the makeshift sack. "Let's go," he snapped.

"But my things!" she protested. "I'll need time to pack."

"You don't have time to pack. Your clothes won't mean a thing if the police get here before we're gone."

They left quickly and Dan drove her back to Manhattan. After he crossed the bridge, he swung south and took her to Grand Central Station. He locked the money-stuffed cushion cover in the car trunk, then took her to the ticket window. She bought a one-way ticket to Chicago, and he waited until she was aboard and the train was gone before driving back to his office. It was four-thirty in the morning.

He locked the office door behind him and stacked the fifty thousand in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. Then he poured a stiff shot of Scotch into a paper cup, tilted back in his chair, propped his feet on the desk and surveyed the shine on his shoes. It had been a profitable venture. He'd call Max Alvis in the morning and give him his twelve thousand, five hundred, and still have three-fourths of the fifty grand for himself.

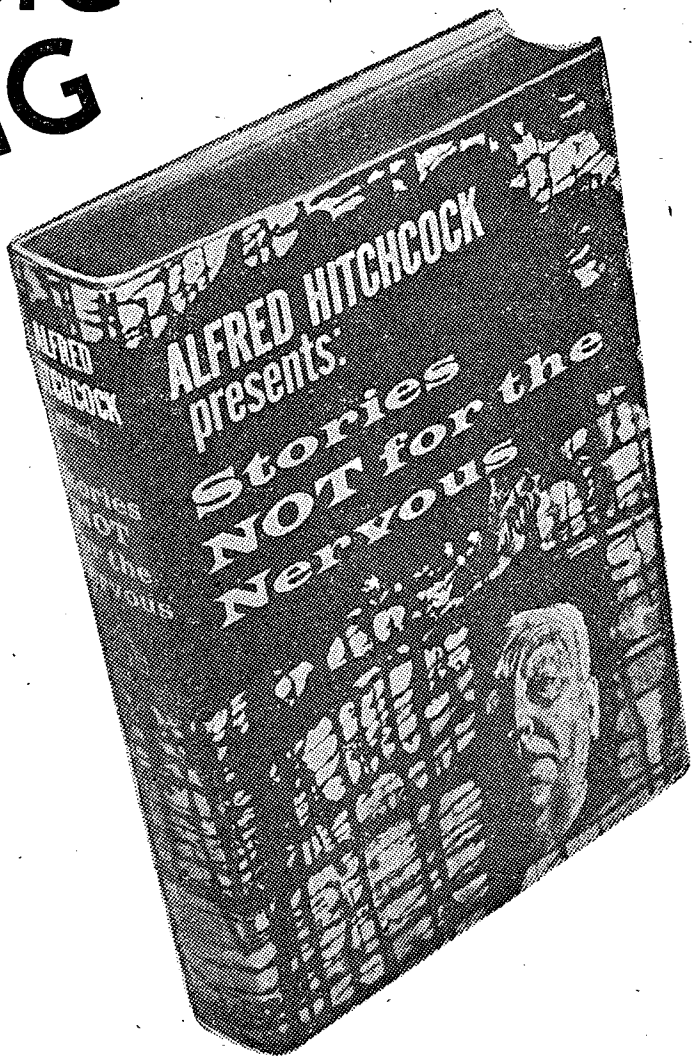
He sipped a toast to Leo. Poor Leo. . . . He'd be home by now, pacing the floor, wondering what happened to Dolly and all his money. He'd never know.

Then Dan gave a silent toast to Dolly. It had been a rotten thing to do, making her think he had substituted a real knife for Leo's trick one. The real knife that Max had seen him buy was in the desk drawer. He had used it only to have a pattern to go by when he bought another trick knife to replace Leo's. She'd never know that either.

Dan dropped the empty paper cup in the waste basket, folded his arms on the desk to cradle his head, and went to sleep.

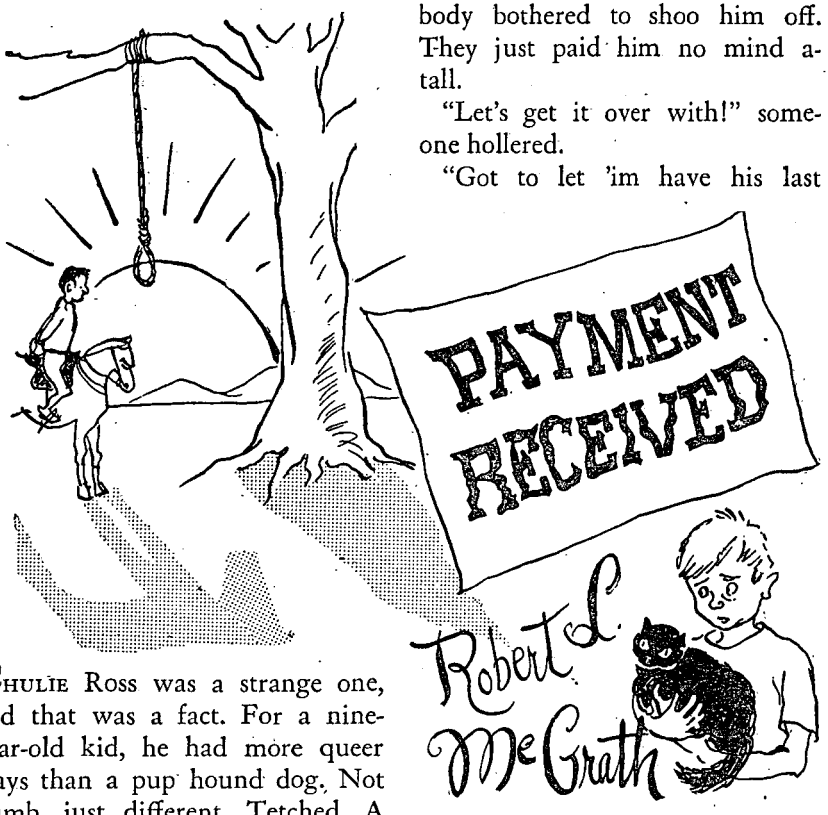
# BIG BIG BIG

## *Money Saving Offer*




**For details please see other side** ➡

*One's approach to settlement of a debt, real or fancied, particularly where the satisfaction is akin to vivification, is not to be criticized.*




CHULIE Ross was a strange one, and that was a fact. For a nine-year-old kid, he had more queer ways than a pup hound dog. Not dumb, just different. Tetched. A book-readin' kid. So nobody in Sunrise paid him much mind, and when he showed up luggin' this black kitten the mornin' they was fixin' for a necktie party with Tanner Higgins, the honor guest, nobody bothered to shoo him off. They just paid him no mind atall.

"Let's get it over with!" someone hollered.

"Got to let 'im have his last say," came another voice. "String a man 'thout his last say, an' his spirit'll dog you seven times seventy years!"

They were all there, all the men

from Sunrise: white-maned Rim Cutler—for lack of judge, preacher, marshal, and a few assorted officials, he filled whatever shoes was most needed at the time; tattooed Seth Anders—he'd sailed the seas to India, where a lot of odd Hindu notions rubbed off on him; God-scared Tanner Higgins—sometime schoolmaster, a quiet, still-water-runs-deep man, convicted of the murder of his best friend; and a baker's dozen other citizens, all het with the fever of gettin' it done before sunrise, in the town tradition.

"All right, men!" old Rim Cutler bellowed. "Reckon any man's got a right to his last say. Start sayin', Tanner, but make it fast. We ain't got all day."

"What's the use?" Tanner Higgins said, sittin' sorry on the horse, hands tied behind his back. "We've been through it all before."

"That all you got to say?" Rim Cutler asked.

"I didn't kill him!" Tanner Higgins yelled. "I didn't have anything to do with it!"

Rim Cutler juiced the dust with amber. "Then who did?"

"I've told you, I don't know!" Tanner shook his head, hopeless.

"Your ax, warn't it?" Rim Cutler said.

"Yes, it was my ax, but I didn't do it!"

"Your girl he was chasin', warn't it?"

"Yes, she was my girl! But I wouldn't kill a man over a woman!"

"Maybe money, then," Rim Cutler suggested. "Some says Jack Bronson had money. Maybe that was it."

"Look, for the last time, I didn't kill Jack! He was a good man, my best friend! I couldn't have killed him! I couldn't kill anybody!"

"We're wastin' time, Rim," Seth Anders cut in. "Sun's comin' up. Let's get this thing over with."

"All right, boys," Rim Cutler said. "Get that horse over here."

"Mr. Cutler, sir," a small, high-pitched voice broke in, insistent.

"What—Oh, go on home, Chulie. This ain't no place fer kids."

"Mr. Cutler, are you—you going to horsewhip Tanner Higgins?"

"Well," Rim Cutler looked around, uncomfortable, "I reckon you might call it that. Now git on home, where you belong."

"He didn't do anything, Mr. Cutler. He didn't."

"Say, will somebody take this blabbin' kid out of here?"

"He didn't kill Jack Bronson, Mr. Cutler. He didn't."

"Go on, git! This ain't no place fer a kid!"

Seth Anders' arm swooped

down to pull the boy up to the saddle, but the black kitten spooked and the tiny claws found home. "Ouch, you little son of a—"

"I know who did it," Chulie Ross said then, smoothin' the black kitten's fur. "I know who killed Jack Bronson."

For a moment there was no sound. "What was that again, son?" Rim Cutler could speak soft when he wanted.

"I—I said I know who killed Jack Bronson, and it wasn't Mr. Higgins."

"Huh!" Seth Anders snorted. "I s'pose you did it."

Chulie looked at him, strokin' the kitten, sayin' not a word.

"All right, son," Rim Cutler said. "You know who did it. You tell us about it."

"Do I have to?" Chulie looked around at them.

"Reckon you do, Chulie," Rim Cutler said. "We got to see justice done this day."

"It was—it was—" Chulie looked from man to man, and there was some squirmin' done.

"Come on, son. Speak up!"

"It was—him!"

A small finger pointed. Seventeen pairs of eyes, includin' the black kitten's, went to one man.

"Like hell it was!" Seth Anders exploded, face clouded red. "You gonna take that dummy kid's word? All you guys gone crazy?"

"Ain't said we would," Rim Cutler drawled, "but we ain't stringin' nobody this day. Sun's up."

The red ball in the east had cleared the rim. The eyes left Seth Anders, checked the dawn of day, then settled uneasy on each other, on Tanner Higgins, on Rim Cutler, on Chulie Ross and the black kitten.

"What makes you think Seth Anders killed Jack Bronson, Chulie?" Rim Cutler asked, gentle.

"I—I saw him do it," the boy squeezed out the words. "I—I was hiding."

"He's a liar!" Seth Anders put in, louder than need be.

"Chulie," old Rim Cutler spoke low, "you sure you know what you're sayin'? You sure you didn't —" he looked around at the rest, sober, "didn't read all this in a book?"

"I saw him do it," Chulie insisted. "Me—and Jack."

"Jack? You mean Jack Bronson?"

"No, Jack—my little black cat," Chulie said. "We saw him do it."

"Now why," asked Rim Cutler, patient, "would Seth here want to hurt anybody? Why would Seth want to kill Jack Bronson?"

The boy looked at Seth Anders, but he held steady. "Money," he said then. "It was money."

Seth Anders got down from his horse fast, reaching for the boy. The black kitten spooked again, spit, and barely missed hookin' the other hand.

"Jack, my cat, doesn't like him."

Everybody eyed Seth Anders now, and no mistake. His once-red face was white as the inside of a store-bought flour barrel.

"It—it's him!" A whisper rasped out of the throat of Seth Anders.

"What's the matter, man? You gone daft?"

"It—it's him—come back. Him! Him!" A cry, a sob in the early mornin'.

"Chulie," Rim Cutler said, "you take that kitten of yours and mosey over yonder a piece."

Dust squirted as the boy dragged himself away.

"Now," Rim Cutler bellowed, "you got somethin' you want to say, Seth?"

"I—I did it," the voice broke. "I did it! I didn't know he'd come back. I didn't know! I didn't expect that!"

"You use Tanner's ax?" Rim Cutler asked.

"I—I borrowed it. Didn't intend to kill 'im. Wouldn't give me the money," he said, whining now. "I didn't know—he'd come back!"

"Boys, I reckon we almost made a mistake," Rim Cutler said. "I reckon we owe Tanner Higgins here quite a debt. Reckon it'll take a passel of time to pay it off."

The man with hands tied behind his back was limp, his shirt dark with sweat. "I believe I owe a debt to Chulie Ross," Tanner Higgins said, quiet, "and maybe someone else, too." He looked up at the sky; the others turned away and looked at the ground.

"Reckon you better come with us, Seth." Rim Cutler motioned the rest. "Might as well head back." With a swipe of his knife, he cut the bonds on Tanner Higgins' hands. Then he slapped the man on the leg, hesitated a moment, and walked away.

Tanner Higgins waited, and when they were gone, got off the horse and walked slow toward the boy. "I want to thank you, Chulie," he said. "That was a brave thing you did." He held out his hand, and the boy grasped it, shy. "But you should have told them sooner, several days ago, when they had the trial. Why didn't you tell them sooner?"

"I—I didn't know what they were going to do," the boy said. "Mr. Higgins . . ."

"Yes, Chulie?"

"Mr. Higgins, what did Seth Anders mean when he said, 'It's him!' What was he talking about?"

"Well, Chulie, I think he figured that black kitten of yours

was really Jack Bronson, come back to haunt him. It's a thing they call reincarnation—sort of a superstition."

"Like black cats bring bad luck?"

"That's right, Chulie. Since your kitten is named Jack, and all, Anders thought Jack Bronson's spirit was right there in the cat, and was after him."

"Mr. Higgins, I'd like to tell you something."

"Yes, Chulie?"

"Jack Bronson couldn't be in this here kitten of mine. It's a she—her real name is Jackie—only I was afraid they'd laugh at me, so I called her Jack."

Tanner Higgins wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, again looked reverent at the sky.

"Mr. Higgins . . ."

"Something else, Chulie?"

"Yes, sir. I—I didn't really see Seth Anders kill Jack Bronson. I—I just thought maybe he did it."

"You—what?"

"I thought maybe it was him. He always poked fun at me—for reading."

"Oh." Tanner Higgins shook his head.

"Way I figure, maybe now you and I are even, Mr. Higgins."

"Even, Chulie? How do you mean?"

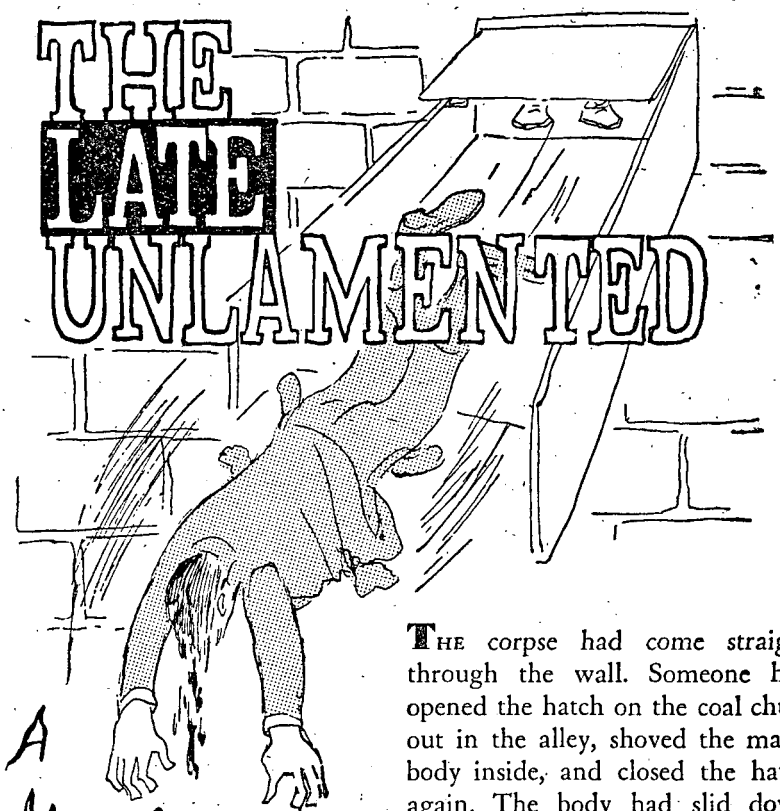
"I did you a favor," Chulie Ross said. "I paid you back."

"For what, Chulie? You didn't owe me anything."

The boy stroked the black kitten nestled in his arms. "Sure I owe you, Mr. Higgins. Don't you remember? You're the one who taught me how to read."

*Sturdy footwear and attention to detail become a wearer of the shield, but there is a time when 'taking ten' adds up to giving one his due.*

# THE LATE UNLAMENTED



A Novelette

THE corpse had come straight through the wall. Someone had opened the hatch on the coal chute out in the alley, shoved the man's body inside, and closed the hatch again. The body had slid down the chute, burst through the plywood cover at the other end, and fallen to the floor of what once had been an outsized coal bin but which was now a bright, den-type

room tricked out with what some Greenwich Villagers call "beginner's décor." There were splashy posters on the walls for bullfights in Spain and Mexico, and slightly smaller posters for auto races at Le Mans and Nürburgring, a pink-dyed fishnet draped across one corner, a boatswain's chair suspended in another, and the usual scattering of unframed abstractions and ceramic wall-pieces. On the table there was even a straw-jacketed Chianti bottle with a stub of candle stuck in the neck and

by Jonathan Craig

thick laps of tallow down the sides.

The DOA had been a tall, slope-shouldered young man with a thin, deeply tanned face a little too sharp-featured to be called handsome, with a small, crescent-shaped scar just above his right eyebrow.

"Any chance he could have got that head wound when he hit the floor in here?" I asked the assistant medical examiner who was kneeling beside the body for another look.

The M.E. shook his head. "He landed on his left shoulder and the left side of his head, Pete," he said. "That's obvious. But it was the clout in the *back* of his head that killed him—and that's something he had before he started down the chute."

"His neck broken?"

"No—and a broken neck he didn't need. I've rarely seen such a massive skull fracture, Pete. I can't imagine what could have inflicted it, but the bone is depressed in such a way that I'd say offhand it was something big and heavy and spherical. He hasn't been dead more than two hours, if that." He snapped his bag shut and got to his feet. "You understand I'm saying all this strictly as doctor to cop, so you can get started on your investigation. *Officially,* as a medical examiner, I haven't said a word, and won't, until after the autopsy. Right?"

"Right."

"You about ready to release the body? I could take it back to Bellevue with me and get right to work."

I gave him a transfer form, waited until he had signed it, and then called to the ambulance attendants who had been waiting just outside with their stretcher.

"See you, Pete," the M.E. said as he followed the attendants through the door. "I'll give you a buzz as soon as I finish."

"Thanks, Ed, I'll appreciate it." I glanced at my watch. It was a little past ten on as hot and muggy a New York night as I could remember. I started down the hallway toward the room where my detective partner, Stan Rayder, was talking with the young girl who had found the body and called the police.

Stan and I had arrived about an hour ago, noted the coal dust on the dead man's clothing and the splintered remains of the plywood cover that had once concealed the basement end of the coal chute, and then had gone out into the alley to check the iron door of the hatch. We'd found that the hatch opened easily, despite the rusty hinges, that the small amount of blood near the hatch meant the dead man had lain in the alley for a few moments while the hatch was being opened, but not necessarily that he had been killed there, and that the hatch was too encrusted with rust and dirt to take any fingerprints, even if the killer had left them.

Our search of the one-time coal bin had brought us nothing, and our search of the body very little more. Someone had removed everything from the pockets of the man's suit, leaving them turned inside-out, but had apparently forgotten to look in his shirt pocket, in which we had found an almost illegible phone number scrawled on the margin of a page corner torn from a Manhattan telephone directory.

When I reached the room where Stan Rayder was talking with the girl who'd found the body—her name, she'd told us, was Cloris Ramey—I saw that he had been able to calm her down considerably.

"Feeling a little better now, Miss Ramey?" I asked.

She sat in the exact center of a studio couch, her hands folded in her lap and her knees and ankles pressed tightly together, a gaunt, large-boned girl with a small, pale face, an unusually short upper lip, and moist, slightly protuberant gray eyes. She looked at me, nodded, and looked away again.

Stan Rayder had been sitting on the arm of an overstuffed chair opposite her. Now he got up, slipped his notebook into his pocket, and motioned for me to follow him out into the hall. When we were outside, he fumbled a cigarette from the pack in his pocket, lit it, and leaned back against the wall.

"It really hit her," he said. "Let's let her have a few minutes to herself." He looked as if he'd just been mildly surprised by something, an expression which is ha-

bitual with him, although he is probably the least easily surprised man I know. The truth is, Stan's whole appearance is deceptive. He's a long, gangling, prematurely gray young man who speaks softly and looks like he might be teaching college math and bucking for a Ph.D. But as many a hard-nose hood could tell you, he's got a body like a coiled steel spring and a built-in bomb in either fist.

"She able to add anything?" I asked.

He shook his head. "She thought she heard a sound in there, went down the hall, saw the body on the floor, and called the law. That's her whole story, and I believe it, all the way."

"You check on the other tenants?"

"Nobody else home, Pete. The old couple on the top floor is away for the summer. The two guys on the street floor work nights, and Miss Ramey's father is in the hospital."

"Which leaves us with only a phone number," I said.

"We've started cases with less."

"And got old before our time doing it." I took the page corner with the scrawled phone number from my pocket. "I'm going to find out who goes with this, Stan," I said.

"Yeah, I know," Stan said wryly. "Then you're going to leave me here with the dirty dishes while you go off to whoever-it-is's nice, air-conditioned apartment for a pleasant little chat." He shook his head. "It happens every time."

"Not all apartments are air-conditioned, Stan."

"The ones you go to always are. Me, I always end up in a Turkish bath."

I went back into Miss Ramey's room and called the telephone company for a cross-check on the number we'd found in the dead man's-shirt pocket. The check took less than a minute, during which time Miss Ramey's moist gray eyes never once changed expression, nor, so far as I could tell, even blinked. The name that went with the number was Leda Wallace, 834 West Houston. I wrote the name and address in my book, and put down Miss Ramey's phone number as well.

In the hallway again I told Stan what I'd learned, and then gave him one of the quickie Polaroid shots I'd had the photographer take of the dead man's face.

"I wonder if he ever looked that peaceful when he was alive," Stan said musingly.

"I doubt it," I said. "It's not that kind of world."

Eight thirty-four West Houston

turned out to be one of six identical new five-story apartment houses, shoulder to shoulder, an unbroken expanse of bright yellow brick six buildings wide, with nothing to distinguish one from the other except the numerals on the small metal plaques beside the six unornamented entrances.

The girl who answered my ring at the door of apartment 4-B was about twenty, a pale-gold blonde with dark green eyes under tarry-looking lashes and a profile straight off a cameo. Even in her bare feet she was very nearly as tall as I, which made her a pretty tall girl, and the body under the tight jeans and paint-smeared T-shirt had the completely feminine, yet firm-muscled, look of a girl who spends a lot of her time in swimming pools.

"Miss Wallace?"

"Yes."

I showed her my badge. "Detective Selby, Sixth Squad. I wonder if I could talk to you."

She started to say something, then changed her mind and stepped back to let me come inside. I took a seat at one end of a short, low couch, and got out my notebook and the Polaroid photo of the dead man.

She hesitated for a moment, absently wiping red paint from the back of her right thumb onto the already smeared T-shirt, then sat down at the other end of the couch and raised one eyebrow about a sixteenth of an inch.

"I hope this isn't going to take long," she said. "I'm really very busy, Mr. Selby."

I smiled, trying to keep it friendly. "Painting your apartment?"

"No. Christmas cards." She gestured toward a cluttered drawing board in the far corner of the room. "I do them by the gross, for this outfit out in Kansas City."

"Painting Christmas cards in August?"

"Yes. And at Christmas time I'll be doing ones for Easter."

"I see," I said, handing her the photograph of the dead man. "We're trying to identify this man, Miss Wallace. Do you know him?"

She took the photograph, glanced at it, and then handed it back to me, dangling it by one corner between thumb and forefinger, as if it had been a dead mouse. "So what has he done this time?"

"It's not so much a question of what he's done as who he is."

"His name's Cody Marden," she said. "Of course a lot of people call him by *other* names."

"No love lost, then?"

"Not a bit," she said, smiling faintly. "Why do you ask?"

"He's been killed, Miss Wallace."

The smile faded from her lips

and the green eyes seemed to grow a little darker. "Killed? Cody?"

"He was murdered. By whom, we don't know."

She looked away from me and nodded slowly, as if to herself. "It had to happen," she said. "Sooner or later, it had to."

"Why do you say that, Miss Wallace?"

"Because of the kind of person he was."

"He had a lot of enemies?"

"A lot."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"About six months ago. Last February sometime."

"And before that?"

"You mean, what kind of relationship did we have?" She laughed shortly. "I thought it was, quote, the real thing, end quote. I don't know whether he hypnotized me, or I hypnotized myself, or what. All I know is that I went around for three months in a trance. And then came, again quote, the awakening, end quote."

"About those enemies—any of them enemy enough to want him dead?"

She thought about it. "Well, *wanting* him dead and actually *making* him dead are two different things. When it comes right down to it, I guess the only two people I'm *positive* might kill him would be Fred Bennett and his wife Joyce. It's been six months since Cody left here, but even so—"

"Left the city, you mean?"

"He must have. Nobody I know saw or heard of him after that. Until you showed up tonight, I didn't know he'd come back. I'm amazed he had the nerve to come back."

"This Fred Bennett and his wife," I said. "What makes you think they might have killed him?"

"He gave them plenty of reason. Both of them. All the time Cody Marden had me in this trance, he was romancing Joyce on the sly. And then suddenly there's no more Cody Marden *or* Joyce Bennett. They've run off together. And not only that, but Cody's talked Joyce into cleaning out her and Fred's joint bank account."

"And Joyce? What would be her reason?"

"Cody made her the laughing-stock of the Village. All Cody'd been after the whole time was that bank account. The minute she turned it over to him, he ditched her and took off for nobody knew where. This was somewhere in Jersey, the way I heard it, and Cody didn't even leave her enough money for a bus ticket back to New York. She had to work a couple of days in a diner, just to

get the fare." She paused. "And Joyce Bennett just isn't the kind of person you can do that to. A real primitive type, you know—all emotion and no thoughts about anything. All you have to do is look at her cross-eyed and she's just as likely as not to explode right in your face."

"She and Fred go back together?"

"No. I hear she wanted to, but Fred told her where to go, how to get there, and how long she should stay."

"You know where Fred's living now?"

"The last I heard, he was at the Merrick, up on 14th Street."

"And Joyce?"

"I don't know. Someone told me she was waiting tables at that new restaurant that opened up where Jody's used to be. You know where I mean?"

I nodded. "We'll need a next-of-kin identification of Marden's body," I said. "He have any family or relatives in New York?"

"No. Not anywhere, so far as I know." She paused. "I just remembered something. Cody had a fight with a man once, an older man. We were walking down the street one night and this man came up and started cursing Cody and calling him a double-crosser and an ingrate, and then he tried to hit Cody. But Cody ducked and hit him instead and knocked him out. Later, Cody said he was somebody he used to work for."

"You don't know who he was?"

"No. It upset me so much that I . . . I recall he was middle-aged and pretty heavyset, but I don't remember his face at all. Maybe Ralph Tyner would know."

"Who's Ralph Tyner?"

"He used to be Cody's best friend. I guess you might say his only friend. He and Cody worked at the same place for a while."

"You know where I might find Mr. Tyner?"

"Six-eleven Court Street. He has the back basement apartment there."

"I see Mr. Tyner is a friend of yours as well."

"*Used* to be," she said flatly, and let it go at that.

I got to my feet, put my notebook away, and walked to the door. "Pending a next-of-kin identification, we'll need a tentative one," I said. "Would you want to make it for us? It'd be sometime tomorrow morning, probably."

"I wouldn't want to, but I will," she said.

"Good. We'll send a car for you."

"You'll find him, won't you?" she said. "The person who killed him?"

"We'll try," I said emphatically.

"I hope you don't," she said. "Whoever it was, he did the world a favor."

Leaving the air-conditioned lobby of Leda Wallace's apartment house for the moist heat of the street was like stepping from a butcher's walk-in refrigerator into a health club's steam room.

I wanted to talk with both Fred and Joyce Bennett as soon as possible, of course, and since the new restaurant where Leda Wallace had just told me Joyce was waiting tables was only two short blocks away, I decided to talk with her first. With the restaurant so near, and parking space in the Village almost nonexistent, I left the department sedan where it was, and walked.

I drew a blank. Joyce hadn't reported for work, and no one at the restaurant knew where she lived. I left one of my cards with a request that she call me, just in case she came in later, then went back to the car and drove up to the Merrick Hotel on 14th Street.

Another blank. Fred Bennett still lived there, I learned, but he had left the hotel sometime between six and seven and hadn't returned. I left another of my cards at the desk, got in the car again, and drove down to 611 Court Street for a talk with Ralph Tyner, the dead man's one-time best friend and fellow employee.

611 Court Street was a converted brownstone. In the six-by-six vestibule I found the mailbox with Tyner's name on it, pressed the button beneath it, and waited.

"Who is it?" a man's voice rasped metallically from the grill above the box.

I told him who I was and what I wanted. A moment later the door release buzzed. I walked to the rear stairway, went down to the basement, and walked back to the last door at the rear.

The man standing in the open doorway motioned me inside and gestured toward the nearer of two ancient, ratty-looking overstuffed chairs facing an equally ancient, ratty-looking davenport.

"Better take that one," he said. "The springs in the other one have got a life of their own." He was somewhere in his early thirties, with thick black hair so heavily pomaded it looked like wet tar, muddy brown eyes beneath an almost unbroken bar of eyebrow, and a small, blunt nose slightly canted to the left. He sat down on the davenport, pushed his legs out straight in front of him and eyed me expectantly.

"You know a man named Cody Marden, I believe," I said.

"That's right."

"A pretty close friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't say that. I know him. I used to run around with him, off and on."

"Seen him recently?"

"Not for months. Five or six, at least." He paused. "And now let me ask *you* a question. What's this all about?"

"Marden's dead," I said. "Murdered."

The muddy brown eyes narrowed defiantly. "I see," he said. "Then why didn't you say so straight out? Why back into it?"

"Relax, Mr. Tyner," I said. "This is a homicide investigation. That means asking questions—of you, and maybe a hundred other people. The way a cop asks them is up to the cop. Now you said you hadn't seen Marden for five or six months. During that time have you heard from him, or heard anything about him?"

He waited just long enough to let me know I couldn't crowd him. Then, "I *heard* from him today. He called me from Kennedy Airport. The phone was ringing when I got home from work, about a quarter of six."

"What'd he have to say?"

"Not much. He said he'd just got in and that he had to see me right away. I asked him what about, and he said he couldn't talk about it on the phone. He seemed pretty worked up. Scared or excited or something. He said he was coming right over, then hung up without even saying so long."

"No inkling of any trouble he might have been in or—"

"Nothing but what I told you. He sounded excited, maybe scared."

"I understand you and Marden worked for the same outfit."

"He was there for a few months, about a year ago, but they canned him. Clary Brothers. Wholesale perfume, by the gallon, barrel, or tank car. I'm still there."

"I had a talk with Leda Wallace a little earlier. She—"

"Leda, huh? So *she's* the one that sicked you onto me."

"She said Cody had a fight with a man he told her he used to work for. It might have been someone from Clary Brothers."

"I doubt it. I'd have heard about it, if it was. I think she must've meant Archer Hill. Cody worked for him awhile, too. Cody and Archer had some kind of trouble, I know; I didn't know they'd actually had a fight."

"Is Archer Hill a middle-aged man, pretty heavyset?"

"Yes. I only know him to speak to, though." He leaned forward. "Tell me something, Selby. Did Leda Wallace try nudging you into

the idea that I had anything to do with what's happened to Cody?"

"No."

"She didn't? I'm surprised she missed the bet. And speaking of fights, did she tell you about the beaut she had with some other girl over Cody? She clobbered the kid right into the hospital."

"She didn't mention it," I said. "What was the other girl's name?"

"I don't know. I'd never seen her before, and Cody said he hadn't either. She was just some kid that Leda caught giving him the eye—and *wham!* It was call the ambulance. She's got some temper, that Leda. I ought to know—I used to go with her."

"Before Cody moved in?"

"You could put it that way. Actually, he did me a favor. A girl with a temper like that, and as strong as she is . . . Uh-uh. Girls are trouble enough *without* muscles. She's a bomb that walks like a girl, believe me. Like I say, taking her off my hands was a favor."

"That's very interesting."

"She's a very interesting girl. Just don't forget to take along your flak suit."

"Was Marden in any trouble at the time he left here? Trouble that might still have been waiting for him?"

"I've sort of been going over that in my mind. The only thing I can remember is the way he acted once when he got a phone call from somebody named Eddie. I don't know what this Eddie's last name was, but he called Cody one night. Cody was staying with me for a few days while he looked around for another apartment, and this Eddie called one night, about two a.m. I answered the phone, and the guy says he's heard Cody was here and to tell him Eddie wanted to talk to him.

"He had one of these ice-water voices, gave me a chill just listening to it. So Cody says hello, and then he doesn't say another word. He just sits there getting whiter and whiter. Once he *tried* to say something, but he only croaked a little. I wouldn't kid you, the guy was so scared it was all he could do to keep from dropping the phone. And the second he put it down, he tore around here like a madman, getting his stuff together.

"I asked him what the score was, but all he said was that he had to get out of the neighborhood fast and that he'd call me the next day. He didn't, though. I never saw the guy again."

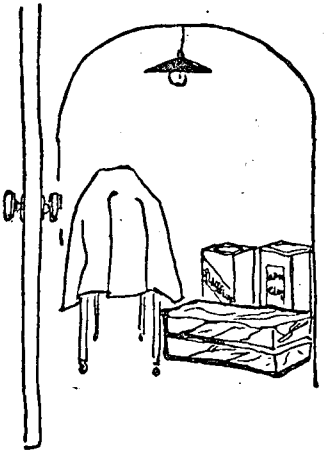
Above us, there was a sudden pounding of heavy feet, and a few seconds later the ceiling seemed to pulsate with the throbbing boom

of a string bass. Dum-de-dum-da!

"Funny, how those bull fiddle notes come through like that," Tyner said sourly. "That joker upstairs turns on his hi-fi the second he comes in. I'd have moved out, except for my wheel."

"Wheel?"

"Potter's wheel," he said. "That's it over there, beneath that piece of tarp. A basement apartment like this is just about the



only place they'll let you have one."

I turned to look in the direction he'd indicated. The wheel was in an alcove beside the hall door. I hadn't been able to see it when I came in, and I'd had my back to it since I sat down. On the floor around it were two big square cans, one labeled *Plasteline* and the other *White Clay,* and two suitcase-sized slabs of clay, variegated from gray to black, like marble.

"A hobby," Tyner said. "It helps me unwind sometimes."

I nodded, stood up, and turned toward the door. "I think that'll be all for now, Mr. Tyner," I said. "Thanks for your help."

I started to open the door, then moved to the right and bent down to take a closer look at the marbled clay. When I turned toward the door again, I almost collided with Tyner, who had come up behind me. His eyes were challenging.

"What's wrong?" he said tightly.

"Nothing," I said, surprised. "What made you think there was?"

He held his expression a moment longer, then laughed shortly and walked back to the davenport. "Just jumpy, I guess," he said. "My nerves have been shot all day. And then hearing about Cody and all. . . ." He shrugged apologetically. "Give the wheel a turn or two, if you want to, Selby. Be my guest. Knock out a few pots for your friends, acquaintances, and loved ones."

"Thanks just the same," I said, opening the door. "Maybe another time."

On my way up the stairs I tried to think of some reason for Ty-

ner's strange reaction to my interest in his clay, but I didn't worry it around too long. Maybe, as he'd said, his nerves were shot. And then again, maybe he, like everybody else, had certain areas in which he was just a little nuts.

There were two bars across the street from Tyner's brownstone. I went into one of them and used the phone booth to call Stan Rayder at the scene of the homicide.

"How's it going?" I asked. "You come up with anything?"

"No," Stan said. "In fact, we're buttoning up. I was just putting a police seal on the door when you called. How about you?"

"I'll fill you in at the squad room."

"Good enough. I'm leaving right now."

I walked into the squad room of the Sixth Precinct's stationhouse just as the minute hand on the big electric clock over the wall speaker took the final jerky movement that made it one a.m. Stan Rayder was already at his desk, feet propped up on the edge of his wastebasket, a bottle of soda in one hand and a candy bar in the other.

"I was meaning to save you halfers on this candy bar, Pete, but somehow I made a mistake and ate your half first."

I loosened my tie and reached into the top drawer of my desk for a cigar. "Any action around here?" I asked.

He shook his head, sucked the rest of the candy bar in his mouth, and chewed thoughtfully with that odd side-to-side jaw motion of his. "No, but give it time. How about filling me in?"

I told him about my talks with Leda Wallace and Ralph Tyner, and my attempts to see Fred and Joyce Bennett.

When I'd finished, Stan sighed. "Our dead man seems to have been a real lovable guy. The question is, how'd he keep from getting dead a lot sooner?"

"He does appear to have had a minor fault or two," I said. "Do me a favor, Stan? Get a file started on Cody Marden while I see if BCI's got anything on him."

Stan sighed again. "Always the dirty dishes," he muttered. "Every time."

I called the Bureau of Criminal Information and asked them to let me know what, if anything, they had on Marden. While I waited for them to call back, I glanced through the messages on my call spike, saw there was nothing important, then started leafing through the arrest flimsies, reports of unusual occurrences, and complaint reports which had accumulated in my IN basket, hoping to

find some happening in the precinct that might in some way tie in with our homicide.

There wasn't much—the normal number of larcenies and assaults, a couple of narcotics busts, and several family fracases, including one stemming from the theft of a bowling ball by two nine-year-old boys on the sidewalk only half a block from the scene of the murder which had precipitated a free-for-all by the entire families of both boys over the question of ownership, and still another family squabble half a block away which had ended in trips to the hospital for a man, his wife, and four in-laws. It seemed to have been a fairly slow night; at least there hadn't been anything I could reasonably relate to our homicide.

The phone rang. It was BCI, reporting that they had no arrest record for Cody Marden.

"No file on our boy, Stan," I said as I hung up.

"He's got one now," Stan said, crossing to the file cabinet to put Marden's folder away. "Oh-oh, Pete. We've got company."

I turned in my chair to glance toward the counter which runs across the squad room just inside the door. A young woman stood there, looking at me uncertainly.

"Yes, ma'am?" I said. "May we help you, assist you some way?"

"I wanted to see Detective Selby," she said.

I walked over to the counter, pressed the release button beneath it, and opened the gate. "I'm Detective Selby," I said. "Come in."

Once she'd been beautiful; now there were only traces, memories. The tiny-featured face beneath the blue-black hair had aged too soon, and the wide-set hazel eyes were twenty years older than the twenty years, at most, I was sure she had lived.

"I'm Joyce Bennett," she said in a tired, husky voice as I walked her over to my desk and pulled up a chair for her. "One of the girls over at the restaurant said you wanted to talk to me."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Mrs. Bennett, this is my partner, Detective Rayder."

"Howdy," Stan said, coming around to sit on the edge of my desk so that he could face her.

She nodded to him, crossed her legs, and sat toying with the handle of her large, white handbag. She had the manner of a schoolgirl called to the principal's office for disciplinary action.

"You've heard what happened to Mr. Marden?" I asked.

"Yes," she said tonelessly. "He's been killed."

"More exactly, murdered," I

said. "And since we don't know yet who did it, we have to ask a lot of people a lot of questions. We ask everybody pretty much the same questions, Mrs. Bennett, so don't think we're—"

"I'm not a kid, for heaven's sake," she said sharply, her eyes suddenly ablaze, her voice harsh. "You think I'm simple or something, you've got to talk to me like that?"

The transformation had been so abrupt and so complete that I heard Stan's quick intake of breath. Mrs. Bennett's mouth was twisted now, almost ugly, and I recalled that Leda Wallace had told me she was an emotional type given to exploding in people's faces.

"I was merely—" I began.

"I don't like cops coming around where I work, killing jobs for me, like you done. You wanted to talk with me? All right, so talk."

"Well, to begin with," I said, "when was the last time you saw Mr. Marden?"

"Six or seven months ago. In February."

"Is that when you and Mr. Marden were leaving town together, so to speak?"

"I see you've been talking to the right finks. Yeah, we was leaving together 'so to speak.' Only, *he* left for somewhere else, and left *me* in Garrensville, New Jersey."

"With your and your husband's bank account?"

"If you know it all already, why bother me in the first place?" She gestured toward my cigar. "That thing's making me sick to my stomach."

I put the cigar in the tray and pushed the tray to the far side of the desk. "You ever hear from Marden after that?"

"No. And I didn't want to. You want to know the truth? I'm glad he's dead. I just hope he didn't die too easy."

"And yet, at one time, you felt quite differently."

"At one time, sure. The guy made a fool of me, I admit it."

"You know anyone who might have wanted to kill him?"

"Me, for one. Only I didn't."

"Just for the record, where were you, say, from nine to ten tonight?"

"Nine to ten? In my room, up on 10th Street, having a few quiet beers with myself and minding my own business."

"You know a girl named Leda Wallace?"

"A little. A real uppity blonde. Thinks she's an artist. Big deal. The Village is full of them, blondes and artists both." She paused. "Now *there's* the woman

you ought to be talking to. She had a *thing* for Cody like nothing you ever saw. Cody told me all about her, how she was so crazy jealous of him and all. We laughed about it a lot. When she found out about Cody and me, she must've gone straight through the roof."

"You think she might have killed him?"

"Why not? Somebody did. Why not her?"

"You ever hear anyone threaten Mr. Marden? Your husband, for instance?"

"All I ever heard Fred Bennett say in the last six months is, 'Get lost.' I went crawling back to the guy, but he wouldn't even look at me." She crossed her legs the other way and sat drumming her fingertips on her handbag for a moment. "I mean, who's to blame him? I done him dirtier than any man could take, I admit it. But it was Cody Marden made me do it. It was his fault, the whole thing."

"Did Marden have any acquaintances named Eddie? Somebody he had reason to fear?"

"Eddie? I don't remember him mentioning any Eddie."

"We understand he had a fight with an ex-boss of his," I said. "Would you know anything about it?"

"I know about *one* fight he had like that," she said. "Archer Hill, the guy's name was. A big-shot art dealer or something like that. He the one you mean?"

"Maybe. Do you know what the fight was about?"

"Well, Cody bragged a lot. He was always crowing about how he'd outsmarted somebody, or how he'd done them out of something. Like that. Anyhow, while he was working for this Archer Hill, he found out somehow that the guy was having a couple of other art dealers' phones tapped—so he could know what prices they were getting and who their customers were, you know. That way, he could get the jump on them and steal their customers for himself. And so then Cody went to these other dealers and finked on Hill and charged them for the information. What that did to Hill when the news got out was a lousy shame. Cody said it practically ruined him."

"And he bragged to you about this, you say?"

"Yeah, and about how he knocked Hill cold with just one punch. Oh, he was the original sweet thing, Cody Marden was. He was so sweet that every time I think of him I want to throw up." She paused, frowning over at Stan. "What're you looking so surprised about?" she said. "I've been noticing it ever since I got

here. It's been quite obvious."

Stan grinned. "I always look this way, Mrs. Bennett."

"Yeah? Well, you ought to do something about it. It makes a person nervous."

"I'll get it fixed first thing in the morning," Stan said, still grinning. "If not then, I'll do it on my lunch hour."

"Was there anything else you wanted to tell us, Mrs. Bennett?" I asked.

She stared at me sullenly for a moment, then got to her feet. "Only one thing," she said. "After this, stay away from where I work. It don't look good, and I don't like it even a little bit. Understand? I already got all the troubles I need, believe me."

"We'll try not to bother you any more than we have to."

"Just let me be, that's all," she said, and strode out of the squad room with her shoulders squared and her jaw set hard, ready for anybody or anything.

Stan expelled a long sigh. "My kind of woman exactly," he said. "I wish now I'd saved her your half of my candy bar."

I relighted my cigar, hauled the Manhattan telephone book onto my desk, and turned to the *H's*. "I've got a strong urge to talk with this Archer Hill, Stan," I said. "After all, he did attack Marden once. Why not again?"

"Why not is right," Stan said. "But me, I'd put my money on Fred Bennett."

I found Archer Hill's number and address, made a note of them, and reached for the phone. The number rang a long time. Then, "Yes?" a man's sleep-blurred voice said irritably. "Who is it?"

"Mr. Hill?" I asked.

"Yes. Who *is* this? Good heavens, man, don't you realize what time it is?"

"Yes, sir, and I'm sorry to trouble you. This is Detective Selby, Sixth Squad. I'd like very much to see you, Mr. Hill."

"At this hour? What on earth about?"

"Cody Marden,"

"Marden! What about him?"

"He's been murdered."

It was a full ten seconds before he spoke again, but when he did his voice sounded very much awake. "I see," he said. "Do you have my address?"

"Yes."

"Very good. I'll be waiting for you."

Archer Hill was a big man in all directions, an easy two-fifty, and he looked even bigger in the awning-striped robe he'd put on over his pajamas. He was in his late fifties, with a round, baby-

smooth face, rheumy blue eyes, and a lot of iron-gray hair combed carefully with a wide-tooth comb.

"I put some coffee on," he said as he led Stan and me through his large livingroom to the bar at the far end. "I suppose you boys could use it. I know I could."

Stan and I took stools at the bar while Hill walked around behind it and poured out three cups of coffee. He put cups before Stan and me, sat down behind the bar, and nodded. "All right," he said as he spooned sugar into his cup. "Shoot."

"We understand Cody Marden used to work for you," I said.

"Yes. I'm an art dealer. Cody was my man-of-all-work."

"Seen him recently?"

"No. Not since the first of the year."

"Would that have been the night you had the fight?"

Hill nodded, smiling a little. "So that's it, is it? I was wondering why you'd want to talk to *me* about Cody." His smile widened, but not enough to reach his eyes. "Might one ask if that makes him a suspect?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "We merely—"

"I understand," Hill said. "As to your question—yes, that was the last time I saw him. A one-punch affair with, unhappily, Cody throwing the telling punch."

"You home earlier this evening, Mr. Hill?" Stan asked. "Between nine and ten?"

"Yes. I spent the evening with a book." He sat smiling at a point midway between Stan and me. "It would seem that although I am not *necessarily* a suspect, I am a suspect nonetheless."

"Just routine, Mr. Hill," I said. "Was Cody in any trouble that you know of? Any enemies? Anybody threaten him?"

"I never heard anyone actually threaten him, but I do know that two very angry men were extremely anxious to find him."

"Two?"

"Yes. Not together, though. They came separately. They thought Cody still worked for me, you see."

"Who were they?"

"The first to come was a Mr. Bender. No, not Bender. *Bennett.* That's it. Bennett. The other man was someone I should imagine you gentlemen would know much better than I. A loan shark called Denver Eddie. As disagreeable a person as I've ever met, I must say."

Disagreeable was hardly the word for Denver Eddie, I reflected. If he was the "Eddie" whose two a.m. phone call had left Cody Marden white and speechless and

sent him fleeing from his friend's apartment within minutes after "Eddie" hung up, I could easily understand why. Denver Eddie was vicious, even by loan-shark standards, a muscle-bound sadist well known on both sides of the law for the pleasure he got from collecting in mayhem what his victims were a bit too slow in repaying in cash.

"We know him," I said. "Cody'd borrowed money from him?"

"I would assume so." He paused. "This other man, this Mr. Bennett, seemed half-crazed. I mean that seriously. I wouldn't be at all surprised if the man were mad."

"And with good reason," Stan said.

"Pardon?" Hill said.

"Nothing," Stan said. "Just thinking out loud."

I finished my coffee and slid off the stool. "Was there anything you'd like to add to what you've told us, Mr. Hill?"

"No, I think not. I only wish I could be of more help."

I put one of my cards on the bar top. "If you do think of anything, give us a call."

"Of course, Mr. Selby," Hill said. "I'll be glad to."

When Stan and I reached the street, I went into a sidewalk phone booth and called the squad room to see if there had been any developments. The detective who answered the phone told me there had been a call for me a few minutes before from a man who had refused to give his name but had left a number for me to call. I dialed the number, and the phone was answered on the first ring.

"This is Detective Selby," I said. "Someone at that number asked me to call."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Selby," a man's high-pitched voice said. "This is Phil Joyner. I'm the night clerk at the Hotel Merrick. You were in earlier tonight, asking about one of our guests—Mr. Bennett."

"Yes?"

"Well, Mr. Bennett came in about ten minutes ago. I gave him the card you left for him, but he just glanced at it and laughed and threw it in the sand urn and went on upstairs." He paused. "I just thought you'd like to know."

"Thank you, Mr. Joyner," I said. "We'll be right over."

"I always like to do the police a favor, when I can. A man can't have too many friends, police friends, can he?"

"Better friends than otherwise," I said. "Thanks again."

"Anything new?" Stan asked as I came out of the booth.

"Fred Bennett just got back to his hotel."

"Fine. Let's go welcome him home."

"I think I'll let you do the honors solo," I said. "I want to take a crack at Denver Eddie, and the sooner the better."

"That shylock's a hard man to find, Pete, even in the daytime."

"Not tonight, he won't be. This is the high-roller night up at Joe Marcy's place on Central Park West. If there are only two people there, Denver Eddie will be one of them. He doesn't play, he just lends money to the losers."

"That's right," Stan said. "I'd forgotten."

"So you hit Fred Bennett, and I'll hit Eddie. Joe Marcy's place is a straight shoot from here on the BMT, so I'll take the train, and you can use the car. I can get up there faster on the subway, anyhow."

"What was Bennett's hotel again?"

"The Merrick, on 14th Street."

"I'm on my way," Stan said, turning toward the place where we had left the car. "But watch yourself with that Denver Eddie, Pete. The guy's a psycho."

As it turned out, Stan's warning about Denver Eddie had been wasted. And so had my trip up to 74th Street and Central Park West. Eddie had, for once, failed to show up for the high-stakes poker game. The game was just breaking up when I got there, and none of the players, including a couple of reliable stools, had seen Eddie all night.

As I came out of Joe Marcy's apartment house, I turned right, toward the BMT station at 72nd Street, and then, suddenly very tired, I crossed the street and sat down on one of the benches along the street side of the stone wall bordering Central Park. A ten-minute break for a rest and a cigar seemed to be very much in order.

On the next bench over a young couple sat entwined, oblivious to everything, including the fact that the park behind them was a nighttime jungle where cops walked only in pairs, and nervously even then.

I lit a cigar, leaned back, and tried to think of nothing. From beneath the street came a sound like faraway chain thunder—a subway train on its way uptown from the 72nd Street station.

"You hear that rumble?" the young man on the next bench asked his girl friend.

The girl giggled.

"When I was a little kid in Brooklyn," the young man said, "my old man used to tell me it was gnomes down there."

"It was what?" the girl said.

"Gnomes. You know, these little people that live in the ground. He said they had a bowling alley down there, and that's what that sound was—bowling balls rumbling down the alley."

The girl giggled again. "You better get me home," she said, "or *my* old man will—"

I sat up so straight and so abruptly that the girl broke off and both she and her friend craned around to peer at me.

Good Lord, I thought—*a bowling ball!* The medical examiner had said that Cody Marden's massive skull fracture had been inflicted by something big and heavy and spherical. And what better fitted that description than a bowling ball? Further, there had been a report at the squad room on the theft of a bowling ball on the street only half a block from the converted coal bin where Marden had been murdered, and within minutes after the act.

A stealable bowling ball being at that place at that time could be a coincidence; and then again, it could very well be the murder weapon.

"A nut," the young man on the next bench said as I started off at a fast lope for the subway station. "The lousy town's full of them."

At the squad room I stopped just long enough to pick up the report on the stolen bowling ball, and then I checked out a car and drove over to the headquarters building on Centre Street.

The Lost Property Unit signed the ball over to me and I took it to a desk to examine it, being careful not to add or obliterate any fingerprints. It had been in an old-fashioned round canvas bag with leather handles and grommets, a regulation black ball which hefted like a sixteen-pounder, showed a lot of use, and had been plugged and rebored. There was no foreign substance on the ball, and only a very small brown stain, which might or might not be blood, on the bag.

I had meant to trace the ball's ownership by its serial number, from manufacturer through retailer to buyer, but the fact that it had been plugged and rebored would indicate that it had changed hands at least once. Then I noticed the small gilt script—*Fitted by Francini*—stamped between the finger holes, which meant my check-out would be a lot faster and simpler. As a sometime bowler myself, I knew that Francini was a bowling ball mechanic for one of the city's posh sporting goods houses. He would have a record of his work, including the name of the person for whom it

was done, possibly remember him.

I left the ball and bag at the lab for examination, went downstairs, and drove back to the station-house. I started up the stairs just as Stan Rayder started down them.

"I hope you had better luck than I did," he said. "Fred Bennett checked out clean. At the time of the murder he was boozing it up in a bar with six friends, and all six of them and two bartenders besides are willing to swear to it." He shrugged fatalistically. "But that's the way it goes in the detective business. How about going down to the Blue Heaven for some coffee, Pete?"

"That, and a couple of country-style breakfasts," I said. "A couple for each of us, that is. We're going to need them."

"Oh? Why so?"

"We've got some very fast, hard work ahead of us, Stan," I said, "and we're going to be at it quite a while."

The work was as hard as I had expected it to be, and took even longer to complete. But after six hours of it, as we stood waiting at the door of Ralph Tyner's basement apartment, we at least had the satisfaction of knowing that we had done all we could do.

Tyner opened the door, frowned from me to Stan and back at me again, and then silently stepped aside to let us come in. His hair still looked like wet tar, but this time it was uncombed, and the muddy brown eyes beneath their single bar of brow were bloodshot and slightly swollen.

Stan and I sat down on the rat's nest of a davenport and Tyner, after a moment's hesitation, took one of the two battered chairs facing it.

"Well," Tyner said. "More questions, Mr. Selby?"

"A few," I said. "This is my partner, Detective Rayder."

Tyner nodded vaguely at Stan and his frown deepened. "Have you found out who killed Cody yet?" he asked.

"We think so," I said. "We found the murder weapon. A bowling ball. Turns out it was yours."

Tyner laughed, a little hollowly. "My ball was stolen weeks ago."

"It was stolen last night," I said. "Minutes after you used it to bash in the back of Cody Marden's head."

He half rose from his chair. "Are you out of your mind? I did *what?*"

"Stolen by a couple of small boys," I said. "You put it down at the mouth of the alley—why we don't know yet—and they grabbed

it and ran off with their prize."

Tyner shook his head pityingly. "Man, you *are* out of your mind, aren't you?"

"A bowling ball in its bag, swung by the handle of the bag like a club, makes about as deadly a weapon as—"

"You're crazy, I tell you!" Tyner said.

"Our lab men found two small pieces of Cody Marden's hair where they'd caught beneath the leather grommets on the handle of the bag," Stan said.

"Listen—" Tyner began.

"You told Pete you hadn't seen Marden in six months," Stan went on. "But you saw him last night. We know that because we found his fingerprints on a page of your phone book. The same page he tore the corner from after he wrote down Leda Wallace's phone number. The torn-off corner fits the rest of the page perfectly." He paused. "That puts Marden here in your apartment, Tyner, just before he was murdered."

"You came pawing around in here without a warrant?" Tyner said inanely. "How could you get in?"

"We had a warrant," Stan said. "And since you weren't here, we used a piece of celluloid in lieu of a key."

Tyner's lips moved, but he said nothing, stared straight ahead.

"And still another thing, Tyner," Stan said. "We checked with the people at the house where Cody was killed. We found out that you used to visit a girl there, and that you knew the layout of the basement, about the coal bin and all. But that was some time ago, and since then the coal bin's been made into a room. You thought you were sending Cody's body down the chute to an unused coal bin, where it'd be a long time before it was discovered. Right?"

Tyner shook his head. His face had the stricken look of a man tearing himself to shreds on the inside while others are doing the same thing to him from without. There are men who can deny their guilt and live with it until their last breath, but Ralph Tyner wasn't one of them. Regret and remorse and plain animal fear were breaking him, and breaking him fast.

"Then, too," Stan said, "we have a witness."

"Witness?" Tyner said thinly. "A witness?"

"Aside from the boys who saw you put that ball down at the mouth of the alley," Stan said. "The bartender at the place right across from the mouth of the alley saw the boys pick up the ball,

and then a few moments later he saw you come to the mouth of the alley and look after them, as if you were trying to decide whether or not to chase them. That puts you *and* your murder weapon on the scene at the time of the murder, Tyner. It wraps you up, signed, sealed, and delivered."

Tyner stared at Stan, then his gaze lowered to the floor and he sat motionless, staring at nothing.

"As you can see, we know who, where and how, Mr. Tyner," I said gently. "But what we don't know is why."

From somewhere across the city a siren keened, and then died away. Tyner shuddered a little, looking at his hands, breathing shallowly.

"Why did you do it, Mr. Tyner?" I asked.

He took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. "I was desperate for money," he said. "When Cody got here last night he was carrying two suitcases full of ambergris. A little over eighty pounds of it."

"Ambergris?" Stan said.

"It comes from whales," Tyner said. "You find it floating in the sea, or washed up on a beach somewhere. It's very valuable." He seemed to have been seized by a sudden compulsion to talk, as if he'd found an unexpected and welcome catharsis in it. His words now came rapidly, and his face became more animated. "It's used in perfume, to give it diffusiveness and a long life. The eighty-odd pounds Cody had was worth at least $25,000—probably closer to $30,000."

Stan whistled softly.

"It looks like fresh clay," Tyner hurried on. "That's it, over there by the potter's wheel in the alcove." He looked at me. "You did think it was clay, didn't you, Mr. Selby?"

I nodded. "And that's why you killed him. For the ambergis?"

"Yes. I work for a perfume company, as I told you last night, and I knew what it was and what it was worth. Cody said he'd shipped as crewman for a shrimper out of Tampa, and that the shrimper captain had found the ambergris in the sand somewhere on the coast of Yucatan. When the shrimper docked in Tampa, Cody waited until the captain had left the boat, and then he emptied his suitcases, put the ambergris in them, and took a cab to the airport. He caught the first plane he could get for New York, and called me the minute he got in."

"Why you?" Stan asked. "Because he wanted a place to hole up?"

"Yes, and because he wanted me to sell the ambergris for him. He

knew the Tampa police would have the New York police on the lookout for him. And there were other people here he was afraid of —Fred Bennett and this Eddie I told you about. Since I knew the perfume business and everybody in it, I could take my time and pick a buyer. Cody could pay me a percentage and still make more than he could have on his own."

"You say you were desperate for money?" I asked.

"I play the horses. I was in hock to bookies and loan sharks all over town, on the hook for over eight thousand dollars. It was just a question of days, hours maybe, before somebody's collector worked me over with a club—or worse."

"What happened after Cody made you this proposition?" I asked.

"I told him I'd go along with it —once he'd convinced me that I was the only one who knew he was in New York. I didn't even know I was planning to kill him until I suddenly realized I was thinking of the best way to do it. Not *whether* to do it, but *how* to do it. But I couldn't think of any way to get rid of his body.

"And then Cody, who'd been drinking ever since he got here, decided he wanted to see Leda Wallace. He said he could get over to her place by using the alleys, where nobody would see him. He tried to call her first, but the operator told him she had a new number, and he wrote it down on a corner he tore from a page in the directory. Then he decided he wouldn't call her after all, that he'd surprise her."

"And you followed him?" I said.

"Yes. I knew the route he'd have to take, and I knew that if I waited until he was almost there, I could kill him without having to worry about what to do with his body. So I got my bowling ball and put on my sneakers and trailed him. When he got to the right spot, I ran up behind him and swung the ball at the back of his head as hard as I could."

"By 'right spot', do you mean where the coal chute was?"

Tyner nodded. "I wanted to take all his identification and put his body in the chute. But just as I started to open the hatch, I heard footsteps at the end of the alley. I thought someone was turning in, so I dropped the body and grabbed my bowling ball and ran down to the other end. But nobody turned into the alley after all, so I put the ball down in a shadow and went back and finished the job.

"When I got back to the mouth of the alley again, my ball was

gone. I looked both ways, and I saw those kids running with it, but they were already half a block away and I was afraid to chase them for fear of calling attention to myself."

"Which would have meant connecting yourself with the murder weapon," Stan said. "Not to mention putting yourself at the scene of the crime at the time it was committed."

"Yes," Tyner said. "When I got home I put the ambergris on the floor there by the potter's wheel, where anyone but an expert would have thought it was just so much clay, and then I broke up Cody's suitcases and wrapped them in newspapers and put them in a trash basket four blocks from here."

There was a long silence. Ralph Tyner sat quite still, hands palm-up in his lap, staring at them with a faintly curious smile, as if he were wondering how such hands could have done the things they had done to Cody Marden.

I glanced at Stan and we got to our feet.

"Ready, Mr. Tyner?" I asked.

He stood up very slowly, his face still set in that small, wondering smile. "It was all like it was happening in a dream," he said softly. "It still seems like a dream. Even our talking about it like this. Everything. Just like a dream."

It wouldn't seem like a dream to him much longer, I reflected as we moved toward the door. The harsh awakening would come all too soon, and from then on Ralph Tyner's only dream would be a lifelong nightmare.

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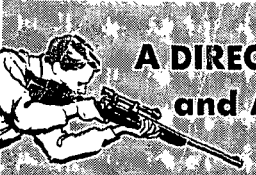

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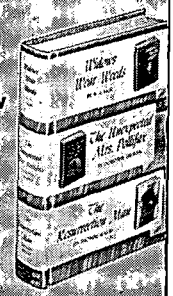


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