ALFRED

NOVEMBER 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

November 1966

Dear Reader:

This is approximately the anniversary of my encounter with a most captivating lady. I was motoring in the country one night when a tire punctured, and she swept by. Shrouded in fashionable black, with a matching pointed hat which I took to be the latest from Paris, she offered to conjure up my auto club if I would repair a household appliance; a typical feminine wile.

Through the forest lay her provincial retreat, where an heirloom kettle bubbling in the fireplace discharged a heady aroma. Her evening meal evidently was under way.

The faulty appliance, described as a meat slicer, stood hulking in a dim corner, its steel blade glinting at its summit. The basket, it appeared, had come loose. I was applying my efforts to its repair when I perceived the automated cleaver was stamped with the words, "French Revolution surplus." I almost (see artist's conception on cover) ducked in time.

Although for a moment I lost my head, I recovered my senses, apologized for my untidiness, and offered to send a plump repairman in my place. She was admirable about the whole thing, but so are the executioners that follow herein.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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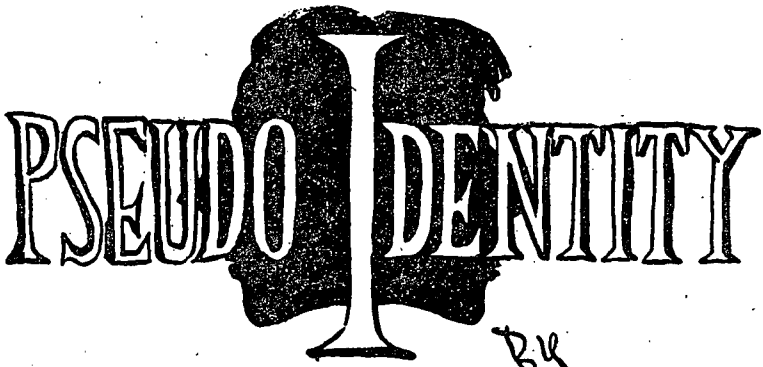
The experience of our protagonist might well effect a diminution of schizothymic ventures.



BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

SOMEWHERE between four and four-thirty, Howard Jordan called his wife. "It looks like another late night," he told her. "The spot TV copy for Prentiss was full of holes. I'll be here half the night rewriting it."

"You'll stay in town?"

"No choice."

"I hope you won't have trouble finding a room."

"I'll make reservations now. Or there's always the office couch."

"Well," Carolyn said, and he heard her sigh the sigh designed to reassure him that she was sorry he would not be coming home, "I'll see you tomorrow night, then. Don't forget to call the hotel."

"I won't."

He did not call the hotel. At five, the office emptied out. At five minutes after five, Howard Jordan cleared off his desk, packed up his attache case and left the building. He had a steak in a small restaurant around the corner from his office, then caught a cab south and west to a four-story red brick building on Christopher Street. His key

opened the door, and he walked in.

In the hallway, a thin girl with long blonde hair smiled at him. "Hi, Roy."

"Hello, baby."

"Too much," she said, eyeing his clothes. "The picture of middle-class respectability."

"A mere facade. A con perpetrated upon the soulless bosses."

"Crazy. There's a party over at Ted and Betty's. You going?"

"I might."

"See you there."

He entered his own apartment, tucked his attache case behind a low bookcase improvised of bricks and planks. In the small closet he hung his gray sharkskin suit, his button-down shirt, his rep-striped tie. He dressed again in tight Levi's and a bulky brown turtleneck sweater, changed his black moccasin toe oxfords for white hole-in-the-toe tennis sneakers. He left his wallet in the pocket of the sharkskin suit and pocketed another wallet, this one containing considerably less cash, no credit cards at all, and a few cards identifying him as Roy Baker.

He spent an hour playing chess in the back room of a Sullivan Street coffee house, winning two games of three. He joined friends in a bar a few blocks away and got into an overly impassioned argument on the cultural implications of Camp; when the bartender ejected them, he took his friends along to the party in the East Village apartment of Ted Marsh and Betty Haniford. Someone had brought a guitar, and he sat on the floor drinking wine and listening to the singing.

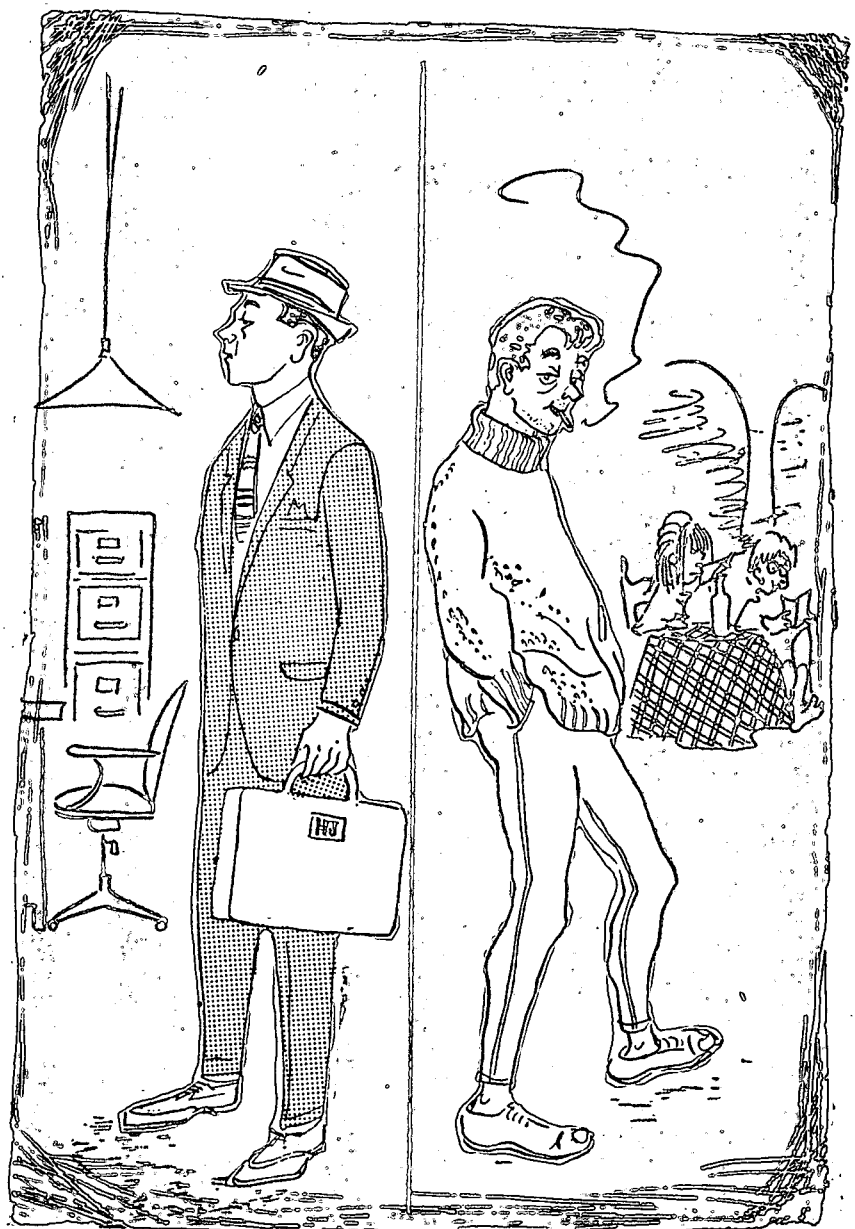
Ginny, the long-haired blonde who had an apartment in his building, drank too much wine. He walked her home, and the night air sobered her.

"Come up for a minute or two," she said. "I want you to hear what my analyst said this afternoon. I'll make us some coffee."

"Groovy," he said, and went upstairs with her. He enjoyed the conversation and the coffee and Ginny. An hour later, around one-thirty, he returned to his own apartment and went to sleep.

In the morning he rose, showered, put on a fresh white shirt, another striped tie, and the same gray sharkskin suit, and rode uptown to his office.

It had begun innocently enough. From the time he'd made the big jump from senior copywriter at Lowell, Burham & Plescow to copy chief at Keith Wenrall Associates, he had found himself working late more and more frequently. While the late hours never bothered him, merely depriving him of



the company of a whining wife, the midnight train to New Hope was a constant source of aggravation. He never got to bed before two-thirty those nights he rode it, and then had to drag himself out of bed just four and a half hours later in order to be at his desk by nine.

It wasn't long before he abandoned the train and spent those late nights in a midtown hotel. This proved an imperfect solution, substituting inconvenience and expense for sleeplessness. It was often difficult to find a room at a late hour, always impossible to locate one for less than twelve dollars; and hotel rooms, however well appointed, did not provide such amenities as a toothbrush or a razor, not to mention a change of underwear and a clean shirt. Then too, there was something disturbingly temporary and marginal about a hotel room. It felt even less like home than did his split-level miasma in Bucks County.

An apartment, he realized, would overcome all of these objections while actually saving him money. He could rent a perfectly satisfactory place for a hundred dollars a month, less than he presently spent on hotels, and it would always be there for him, with fresh clothing in the closet and a razor and toothbrush in the bathroom.

He found the listing in the classified pages—*Christopher St, 1 rm, bth, ktte, frnshd, util, $90 mth.* He translated this and decided that a one-room apartment on Christopher Street with bathroom and kitchenette, furnished, with utilities included at ninety dollars per month, was just what he was looking for. He called the landlord and asked when he could see the apartment.

"Come around after dinner," the landlord said. He gave him the address and asked his name.

"Baker," Howard Jordan said. "Roy Baker."

After he hung up he tried to imagine why he had given a false name. It was a handy device when one wanted to avoid being called back, but it did seem pointless in this instance. Well, no matter, he decided. He would make certain the landlord got his name straight when he rented the apartment. Meanwhile, he had problems enough changing a junior copywriter's flights of literary fancy into something that might actually convince a man that the girls would love him more if he used the client's brand of gunk on his hair.

The landlord, a birdlike little man with thick metal-rimmed glasses, was waiting for Jordan. He said, "Mr. Baker? Right this way.

First floor in the rear. Real nice."

The apartment was small but satisfactory. When he agreed to rent it the landlord produced a lease, and Jordan immediately changed his mind about clearing up the matter of his own identity. A lease, he knew, would be infinitely easier to break without his name on it. He gave the document a casual reading, then signed it 'Roy Baker' in a handwriting quite unlike his own.

"Now I'll want a hundred and eighty dollars," the landlord said. "That's a month's rent in advance and a month's security."

Jordan reached for his checkbook, then realized his bank would be quite unlikely to honor a check with Roy Baker's signature on it. He paid the landlord in cash, and arranged to move in the next day.

He spent the following day's lunch hour buying extra clothing for the apartment, selecting bed linen, and finally purchasing a suitcase to accommodate the items he had bought. On a whim, he had the suitcase monogrammed "R.B." That night he worked late, told Carolyn he would be staying in a hotel, then carried the suitcase to his apartment, put his new clothes in the closet, put his new toothbrush and razor in the tiny bathroom and, finally, made his bed and lay in it. At this point Roy Baker was no more than a signature on a lease and two initials on a suitcase.

Two months later, Roy Baker was a person.

The process by which Roy Baker's bones were clad with flesh was a gradual one. Looking back on it, Jordan could not tell exactly how it had begun, or at what point it had become purposeful. Baker's personal wardrobe came into being when Jordan began to make the rounds of Village bars and coffeehouses, and wanted to look more like a neighborhood resident and less like a celebrant from uptown. He bought denim trousers, canvas shoes, bulky sweaters; and when he shed his three-button suit and donned his Roy Baker costume, he was transformed as utterly as Bruce Wayne clad in Batman's mask and cape.

When he met people in the building or around the neighborhood, he automatically introduced himself as Baker. This was simply expedient; it wouldn't do to get into involved discussions with casual acquaintances, telling them that he answered to one name but lived under another, but by being Baker instead of Jordan, he could play a far more interesting role. Jordan, after all, was a square, a Madison Avenue copy chief, an animal of

little interest to the folksingers and artists and actors he met in the Village. Baker, on the other hand, could be whatever Jordan wanted him to be. Before long his identity took form: he was an artist, he'd been unable to do any serious work since his wife's tragic death, and for the time being he was stuck in a square job uptown with a commercial art studio.

This identity he had picked for Baker was a source of occasional amusement to him. Its expedience aside, he was not blind to its psychological implications. Substitute *writer* for *artist* and one approached his own situation. He had long dreamed of being a writer, but had made no efforts toward serious writing since his marriage to Carolyn. The bit about the tragic death of his wife was nothing more than simple wish-fulfillment. Nothing would have pleased him more than Carolyn's death, so he had incorporated this dream in Baker's biography.

As the weeks passed, Baker accumulated more and more of the trappings of personality. He opened a bank account. It was, after all, inconvenient to pay the rent in cash. He joined a book club and promptly wound up on half the world's mailing lists. He got a letter from his congressman advising him of latest developments in Washington and the heroic job his elected representative was doing to safeguard his interests. Before very long, he found himself heading for his Christopher Street apartment even on nights when he did not have to work late at all.

Interestingly enough, his late work actually decreased once he was settled in the apartment. Perhaps he had only developed the need to work late out of a larger need to avoid going home to Carolyn. In any event, now that he had a place to go after work, he found it far less essential to stay around the office after five o'clock. He rarely worked late more than one night a week—but he always spent three nights a week in town, and often four.

Sometimes he spent the evening with friends. Sometimes he stayed in his apartment and rejoiced in the blessings of solitude. Other times he combined the best of two worlds by finding an agreeable Village female to share his solitude.

He kept waiting for the double life to catch up with him, anticipating the tension and insecurity which were always a component of such living patterns in the movies and on television. He expected to be discovered, or overcome by guilt, or otherwise to have the error of his dual ways brought forci-

bly home to him. But this did not happen. His office work showed a noticeable improvement; he was not only more efficient, but his copy was fresher, more inspired, more creative. He was doing more work in less time and doing a better job of it. Even his home life improved, if only in that there was less of it.

Divorce? He thought about it, imagined the joy of being Roy Baker on a full-time basis. It would be financially devastating, he knew. Carolyn would wind up with the house and the car and the lion's share of his salary, but Roy Baker could survive on a mere fraction of Howard Jordan's salary, existing quite comfortably without house or car. He never relinquished the idea of asking Carolyn for a divorce, nor did he ever quite get around to it—until one night he saw her leaving a night club on West Third Street, her black hair blowing in the wind, her step drunkenly unsteady, and a man's arm curled possessively around her waist.

His first reaction was one of astonishment that anyone would actually desire her. With all the vibrant, fresh-bodied girls in the Village, why would anyone be interested in Carolyn? It made no sense to him.

Then, suddenly, his puzzlement gave way to absolute fury. She had been cold to him for years, and now she was running around with other men, adding insult to injury. She let him support her, let him pay off the endless mortgage on the horrible house, let him sponsor her charge accounts while she spent her way toward the list of Ten Best-Dressed Women. She took everything from him and gave nothing to him, and all the while she was giving it to someone else.

He knew, then, that he hated her, that he had always hated her and, finally, that he was going to do something about it.

What? Hire detectives? Gather evidence? Divorce her as an adulteress? Small revenge, hardly the punishment that fit the crime.

No. No, *he* could not possibly do anything about it. It would be too much out of character for him to take positive action. He was the good clean-living, midtown-square type, good old Howie Jordan. He would do all that such a man could do, bearing his new knowledge in silence, pretending that he knew nothing, and going on as before.

But Roy Baker could do more.

From that day on he let his two lives overlap. On the nights when he stayed in town he went directly from the office to a nearby hotel,

took a room, rumpled up the bed so that it would look as though it had been slept in, then left the hotel by back staircase and rear exit. After a quick cab ride downtown and a change of clothes, he became Roy Baker again and lived Roy Baker's usual life, spending just a little more time than usual around West Third Street. It wasn't long before he saw her again. This time he followed her. He found out that her lover was a self-styled folksinger named Stud Clement, and he learned by discreet inquiries that Carolyn was paying Stud's rent.

"Stud inherited her from Phillie Wells when Phillie split for the Coast," someone told him. "She's got some square husband in Connecticut or someplate. If Stud's not on the scene, she don't care who she goes home with."

She had been at this, then, for some time. He smiled bitterly. It was true, he decided; the husband was really the last to know.

He went on using the midtown hotel, creating a careful pattern for his life, and he kept careful patterns on Stud Clement. One night when Carolyn didn't come to town, he managed to stand next to the big folksinger in a Hudson Street bar and listen to him talk. He caught the slight Tennessee accent, the pitch of the voice, the type of words that Clement used.

Through it all he waited for his hatred to die, waited for his fury to cool. In a sense she had done no more to him than he had done to her. He half-expected that he would lose his hatred sooner or later, but he found that he hated her more every day, not only for cheating but for making him an ad man instead of a writer, for making him live in that house instead of a Village apartment, for all the things she had done to ruin every aspect of his life. If it had not been for her, he would have been Roy Baker all his life. She had made a Howard Jordan of him, and for that he would hate her forever.

Once he realized this, he made the phone call. "I gotta see you tonight," he said.

"Stud?"

So the imitation was successful. "Not at my place," he said quickly. "193 Christopher, Apartment 1-D. Seven-thirty, no sooner and no later. And don't be going near my place."

"Trouble?"

"Just be there," he said, and hung up.

His own phone rang in less than five minutes. He smiled a bitter smile as he answered it.

She said, "Howard? I was wondering, you're not coming home tonight, are you? You'll have to

stay at your hotel in town?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've got a lot of work, but I hate to be away from you so much. Maybe I'll let it slide for a night—"

"No!" He heard her gasp. Then she recovered, and her voice was calm when she spoke again. "I mean, your career comes first, darling. You know that. You shouldn't think of me. Think of your job."

"Well," he said, enjoying all this, "I'm not sure—"

"I've got a dreary headache anyway, darling. Why not stay in town? We'll have the weekend together—"

He let her talk him into it. After she rang off, he called his usual hotel and made his usual reservation for eleven-thirty. He went back to work, left the office at five-thirty, signed the register downstairs and left the building. He had a quick bite at a lunch counter and was back at his desk at six o'clock, after signing the book again on the way in.

At a quarter to seven he left the building again, this time failing to sign himself out. He took a cab to his apartment and was inside it by ten minutes after seven. At precisely seven-thirty there was a knock on his door. He answered it, and she stared at him as he dragged her inside. She couldn't figure it out; her face contorted.

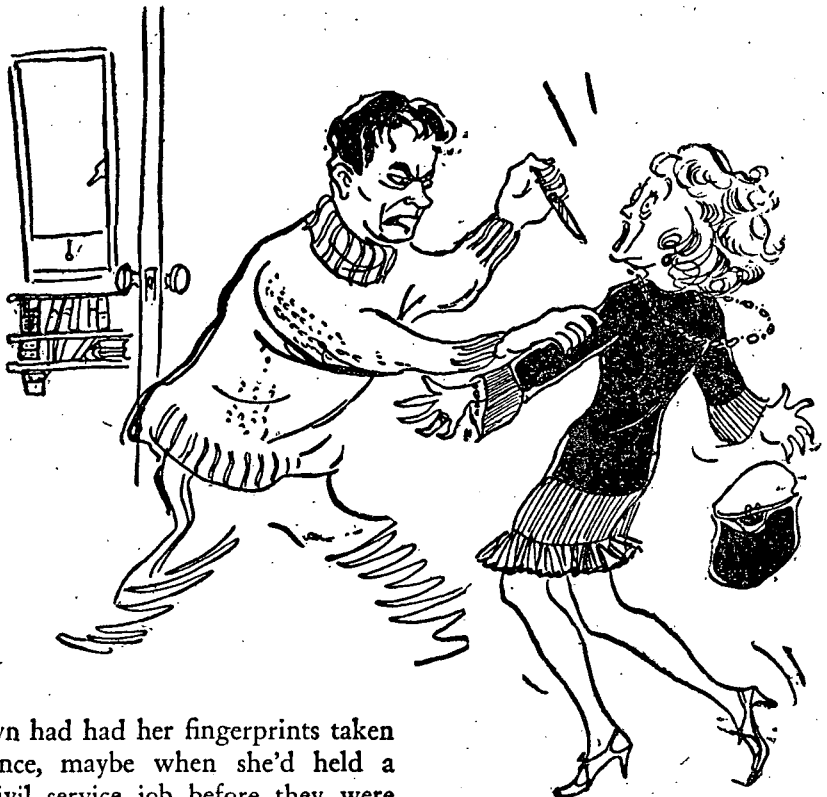
"I'm going to kill you, Carolyn," he said, and showed her the knife. She died slowly, and noisily. Her cries would have brought out the National Guard anywhere else in the country, but they were in New York now, and New Yorkers never concern themselves with the shrieks of dying women.

He took the few clothes that did not belong to Baker, scooped up Carolyn's purse, and got out of the apartment. From a pay phone on Sheridan Square he called the air terminal and made a reservation. Then he taxied back to the office and slipped inside, again without writing his name in the register.

At eleven-fifteen he left the office, went to his hotel and slept much more soundly than he had expected. He went to the office in the morning and had his secretary put in three calls to New Hope. No one answered.

That was Friday. He took his usual train home, rang his bell a few times, used his key, called Carolyn's name several times, then made himself a drink. After half an hour he called the next door neighbor and asked her if she knew where his wife was. She didn't. After another three hours he called the police.

Sunday a local policeman came around to see him. Evidently Caro-



lyn had had her fingerprints taken once, maybe when she'd held a civil service job before they were married. The New York police had found the body Saturday evening, and it had taken them a little less than twenty-four hours to run a check on the prints and trace Carolyn to New Hope.

"I hoped I wouldn't have to tell you this," the policeman said. "When you reported your wife missing, we talked to some of the neighbors. It looks as though she was—uh—stepping out on you, Mr. Jordan. I'm afraid it had been going on for some time. There were men she met in New York. Does the name Roy Baker mean anything to you?"

"No. Was he—"

"I'm afraid he was one of the men she was seeing, Mr. Jordan. I'm afraid he killed her, sir."

Howard's reactions combined hurt and loss and bewilderment in proper proportion. He almost

broke down when they had him view the body but managed to hold himself together stoically. He learned from the New York police that Roy Baker was a Village type, evidently some sort of irresponsible artist. Baker had made a reservation on a plane shortly after killing Carolyn but hadn't picked up his ticket, evidently realizing that the police would be able to trace him. He'd no doubt take a plane under another name, but they were certain they would catch up with him before too long.

"He cleared out in a rush," the policeman said. "Left his clothes, never got to empty out his bank account. A guy like this, he's going to turn up in a certain kind of place. The Village, North Beach in Frisco, maybe New Orleans. He'll be back in the Village within a year, I'll bet on it, and when he does we'll pick him up."

For form's sake, the New York police checked Jordan's whereabouts at the time of the murder, and they found that he'd been at his office until eleven-fifteen, except for a half hour when he'd had a sandwich around the corner, and that he had spent the rest of the night at the hotel where he always stayed when he worked late.

That, incredibly, was all there was to it.

After a suitable interval, Howard put the New Hope house on the market and sold it almost immediately at a better price than he had thought possible. He moved to town, stayed at his alibi hotel while he checked the papers for a Village apartment.

He was in a cab, heading downtown for a look at a three-room apartment on Horatio Street, before he realized suddenly that he could not possibly live in the Village, not now. He was known there as Roy Baker, and if he went there he would be identified as Roy Baker and arrested as Roy Baker, and that would be the end of it.

"Better turn around," he told the cab driver. "Take me back to the hotel. I changed my mind."

He spent another two weeks in the hotel, trying to think things through, looking for a safe way to live Roy Baker's life again. If there was an answer, he couldn't find it. The casual life of the Village had to stay out of bounds.

He took an apartment uptown on the East Side. It was quite expensive but he found it cold and charmless. He took to spending his free evenings at midtown nightclubs, where he drank a little too much and spent a great deal of money to see poor floor shows. He didn't get out often, though, because he seemed to be working

late more frequently now. It was harder and harder to get everything done on time. On top of that, his work had lost its sharpness; he had to go over blocks of copy again and again to get them right.

Revelation came slowly, painfully. He began to see just what he had done to himself.

In Roy Baker, he had found the one perfect life for himself. The Christopher Street apartment, the false identity, the new world of new friends and different clothes and words and customs, had been a world he took to with ease because it was the perfect world for him. The mechanics of preserving this dual identity, the taut fabric of lies that clothed it, the childlike delight in pure secrecy, had added a sharp element of excitement to it all. He had enjoyed being Roy Baker; more, he had enjoyed being Howard Jordan playing at being Roy Baker. The double life suited him so perfectly that he had felt no great need to divorce Carolyn.

Instead, he had killed her—and killed Roy Baker in the bargain, erased him very neatly, put him out of the picture for all time.

Howard bought a pair of Levi's, a turtleneck sweater, a pair of white tennis sneakers. He kept these clothes in the closet of his Sutton Place apartment, and now and then when he spent a solitary evening there he dressed in his Roy Baker costume and sat on the floor drinking California wine straight from the jug. He wished he were playing chess in the back room of a coffee house, or arguing art and religion in a Village bar, or listening to a blue guitar at a loft party.

He could dress up all he wanted in his Roy Baker costume, but it wouldn't work. He could drink wine and play guitar music on his stereo, but that wouldn't work, either. He could buy women, but he couldn't walk them home from Village parties and make love to them in third-floor walk-ups.

He had to be Howard Jordan.

Carolyn or no Carolyn, married or single, New Hope split-level or Sutton Place apartment, one central fact remained unchanged. He simply did not like being Howard Jordan.

Addicts of alliteration will, I trust, unearth a few chuckles in the following natty necromantic numismatic nuance.

By James Holding

It's FUNNY how some little thing like a word or a movement can suddenly bring alive again in your mind an incident from your past that you haven't even thought of for years. That's what happened when I paid the bald paunchy bartender for my Negroni.

With an hour to kill in a strange town, I dropped into a place near the railroad station called Gallagher's Tavern. It was empty. At two-thirty in the afternoon there wasn't a soul in the joint aside from me and the bald bartender. I sat up on a bar stool and ordered a Negroni.

"A Negroni," he confirmed, giving it an upward inflection that could have been contempt. He began to mix it for me quite adeptly.

I suppose it isn't the commonest drink in the world, a Negroni, but it's my favorite—ever since I heard it referred to somewhere as "a velvet hammer". I like the phrase,

even if I'm not crazy about the flavor. I'm an admirer of phrases. In fact, I much prefer alliteration to alcohol, expressive English to expensive Scotch. Most of my friends call me "Professor" Carmichael for that reason. I talk like a professor, they say. I don't really, but they think I do which comes to the same thing. I'm not a bona fide professor, of course; more like a student—of the fast and easy buck.

But the bartender didn't know anything about that. He just thought I was some kind of a nut for ordering a Negroni at two-thirty in the afternoon.

I took a sip and looked around the tavern. It was a crummy place, shabby and depressing, but I only wanted to kill an hour.

When I turned back to the bartender, he was looking at me. "That'll be sixty-five cents," he said.

I was surprised. "I just may have another," I said. "You want me to pay you drink by drink?"

"If you don't mind," he said. "It's a rule of the house. With a clientele like mine, I can't be too careful."

I happened to be in funds, so I handed him a twenty dollar bill with a careless gesture.

He took it and turned toward his cash register on the backbar. Then he made one of those little unexpected movements I mentioned a moment ago. He held my twenty dollar bill under the electric droplight behind the bar and took a good long look at it, front and back. His action brought vividly back to me, even after fifteen years, my first timid venture into, well, call it crime.

"What's the matter?" I said, amused. "Is that a rule of the house, too? I can assure you the twenty is perfectly good."

He nodded and rang the register. "It's legit," he agreed. Without apology he placed my change before me on the bar.

Now my memories, stirred up by the fellow, were rushing through my mind with the warm nostalgia a middle-aged libertine must feel for his first teenage romance. I said to the fat bartender, "What's your name?"

"Bothwell." For the first time, he allowed a touch of emotion to enter his voice. "Crazy name for a bartender, isn't it?"

"Not at all. It's a solid, rather imaginative name, it seems to me. Perhaps your folks had a liking for Mary Queen of Scots?"

This erudite reference went over his head. "I wouldn't know," he said. "I never knew them."

I clicked my tongue. He began to polish an old-fashioned glass

with a soiled rag. "You know, Bothwell," I said tentatively, "what you just did with my twenty puts me in mind of something that happened to a friend of mine some years ago."

He raised one eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yes. Fellow named Hank. He's dead now." I felt an almost overpowering urge to talk about it. The fellow's name wasn't Hank. Nor was he dead. He was actually a man named Carmichael, currently killing an hour in a strange town. "Would you care to hear about it?"

Bothwell was not an eager audience. "Suit yourself."

"Well," I said, "to judge from your recent reaction to my twenty dollar bill, you can distinguish a counterfeit bill from a good one." I decided to show off a little. "But do you know the approximate total of counterfeit U.S. bills produced in 1945, say, when World War II was ending?"

Bothwell shook his head.

"A mere $59,000. And do you know that this modest production of counterfeit money swelled to $2,200,000 in fiscal 1961?"

Bothwell grunted. I couldn't tell whether he was bored or impressed by my knowledge.

I went on, "And do you know, further, that counterfeit output has now reached the rather staggering total of over four million dollars a year? Over four million dollars!"

"What are you," Bothwell said, wiping off the bar with the same soiled rag he had used on the old-fashioned glass, "a Fed?" He said it with the air of a man who doesn't care much either way.

I laughed. "No. I pick up a lot of odd information in my job, though."

I expected him to show a little interest in what my job was, but he didn't. So I trotted out another interest-stimulator. "Back during the Civil War, do you realize that 33% of all the notes issued by our state banks were believed to be counterfeit?"

Bothwell grunted again. So I gave him the story-starter. "And did you know, Bothwell, that the rapid advance of technology in the printing industry has made counterfeiting so simple that even a twenty-two year old kid, still wet behind the ears, can successfully engage in it, given the proper opportunity and the necessary initiative?"

"Now that," said Bothwell, "I didn't know."

"Neither did my friend Hank," I said, "until he saw it in the *Financial Journal* one day while reading over the shoulder of a man in the subway."

I thought this a rather provocative introduction to the story. Both-

well, however, seemed unmoved. He raised his other eyebrow at me, that was all.

I went on anyhow. "My friend Hank was very young in those days, twenty-two. He was holding down his first job after graduating from Dartmouth, a very menial job; messenger boy, printer's devil, boy-of-all-work in a printing plant. It was a university press, the printing establishment of a famous college, as it happens. Hank started at the bottom, but he intended to work up as fast as possible to the top, so he read extensively in the field of printing and studied the various printing processes diligently. He asked his boss, the plant manager, a fellow named Colbaugh, as many technical questions about printing and plant operations as chance allowed, and he observed, with an unusually keen eye, how the craftsmen in the plant went about their various jobs. Thus, despite the fact that he served in a very minor capacity indeed, he soon won the attention and approval of the plant manager, Colbaugh."

"That figures," said Bothwell. I smiled. He was at least listening now, and I still had half an hour to kill.

"Yes," I said. "Hank was accorded a sign of this approval one evening. Colbaugh invited him to his home to show him his collection of coins, something Colbaugh had never done before for any six-month neophyte in the plant. Colbaugh was quite a collector. He specialized in nickels, for some reason not clear to Hank. Hank couldn't fail to notice, though, the almost avuncular attachment—there was no other phrase that described the old boy's attitude so aptly—to a batch of perfectly ordinary old nickels whose purchasing power was so low as to be well beneath the notice of an ambitious lad like Hank. Nevertheless, Hank pretended an interest in Colbaugh's hobby out of politeness, and Colbaugh went into considerable detail about one particular coin he desperately wanted in his collection: some nonsense about a buffalo nickel with only three legs. Hank paid very little attention until Colbaugh casually remarked that the coin would cost him in the neighborhood of $360 to acquire because of its rarity."

I paused, waiting for Bothwell to say something, to evince some surprise, perhaps, at the high price of old coins. He put down his rag, braced himself on both stiff arms against the bar, and looked at me. He was interested, obviously. But he said nothing.

"'Three hundred and sixty dollars!' Hank said to Colbaugh in

amazement. 'You mean one little five-cent nickel is worth that much?' Colbaugh said sure, and that he had paid Goodblood & Co., his coin dealer, a lot more than that for some of the coins in his collection. Hank went home to his rented room on the West Side that evening quite impressed. And it was the very next morning, on his way to work on the subway, that Hank happened to read that article in the *Financial Journal* I told you about, Bothwell."

After asking my permission with his eyebrows, Bothwell lit a cigarette. He exhaled a long plume of smoke and said, "I was wondering when you'd get back to that."

He went up a notch in my estimation at once. He seemed to have at least a rudimentary appreciation of how a competent story-teller constructs a yarn. I nodded and took another sip of my Negroni.

"As I told you, Bothwell, the *Financial Journal* article dealt with counterfeiting. From it, Hank learned for the first time that the old-time counterfeiters had to be true artists. They were forced to hand-etch the design of a ten or twenty dollar bill on steel engraving plates—a delicate, painstaking, time-consuming process—and then print a few bills at a time on a flatbed press. It took months, sometimes years, to make a few thousand dollars worth of passable counterfeit bills. But, said the article, the development of offset lithography has changed all that. Modern highspeed printing equipment now permits the counterfeiter to turn out counterfeit bills at a furious pace, and with a fairly high average of accuracy, too. All you have to do, the article went on, if you want to be a counterfeiter today, is to expose a few genuine bills to chemically pre-sensitized plates—as simple as taking a snapshot, Bothwell—then mount the plates on a press, push a button, and presto! Instant money! Counterfeit, of course. But passable, spendable money."

Bothwell, for him, grew animated. "No kidding?" he said.

"No kidding. Well, when Hank read this over his fellow commuter's shoulder, he suddenly realized that here, presented to him upon a printing platen, so to speak, was the opportunity of a lifetime. And do you know why, Bothwell?"

Bothwell shrugged.

"You won't believe it," I said, remembering the exquisite thrill that had accompanied my own realization of the fact fifteen years ago, "but the university printing plant in which Hank had been laboring so faithfully for six months, was an *offset* plant! Think of it, Bothwell. All the equipment for do-it-your-

self counterfeiting handily available to him every day!"

"Pretty lucky."

"Hank thought so. Through incredible luck, he believed, he had been selected from the thousands of other young businessmen in the city as the specially favored darling of destiny. His mind filled at once with golden dreams of affluence. He would produce millions of counterfeit dollars and become one of the world's richest and most influential men. He was sure of it. So wasting no time, he made his first move in that direction that very day. On some pretext or other, he borrowed the plant manager's key to the back door and had a duplicate made of it during his lunch hour. And that night, he became one of the first practitioners of what I understand is today called 'Moonlighting', Bothwell. You are familiar with the term?"

Bothwell nodded.

"Yes, well, beginning about midnight that night, with the help of his key to the plant's back door, Hank instituted a night shift in the plant—a one-man night shift. He was it. Alone in the plant, and calling on all his hardly-accumulated knowledge of offset lithography, it took Hank only a few nights to prove that the *Financial Journal* article had told the unvarnished truth. On his fifth night trick he turned out four hundred dollars worth of very creditable twenty dollar bills in six minutes by the clock."

I paused briefly. Bothwell swished his dirty rag across the bar in front of me and glanced into my glass to see if I was ready for a refill. I wasn't. I drink Negronis rather slowly, because I don't much care for their taste. Or did I mention that? Bothwell lifted one eyebrow at me again. I took it for an invitation to continue.

"So there was Hank," I said, "with four hundred dollars in hand and the prospect of millions more where they came from. As any twenty-two year old would be, he was wildly impatient to start spending this easy wealth. And what do you suppose he hit upon as an exciting way to pass his first counterfeit bills?"

With the long-suffering air of a man answering the silly questions of a child, Bothwell obligingly said, "What?"

"Did I tell you that Hank was a lad who dearly loved the little ironies of life? No? Well, he was That's why he decided to spend his first homemade money for one of those three-legged buffalo nickels that his boss, Colbaugh, was so pathetically eager to acquire for his collection. It struck

Hank as a truly beautiful bit of irony to pay three hundred and sixty dollars in phony twenty dollar bills for five cents worth of genuine money in coin, you see? Especially as the five cent coin, because of its rarity, could undoubtedly be exchanged at any coin dealer's or collector's for three hundred and sixty dollars in *genuine* twenty dollar bills which Hank could then spend with far more safety than counterfeit ones. Do you follow me, Bothwell?"

Bothwell pursed his mouth and made a deprecatory gesture with one hand.

Mollified, I continued, "In a way, this was a pleasing concept, don't you agree? And completely workable, too, as Hank discovered when he visited a coin dealer named Petrarch, whose name he had picked from the Yellow Pages because Petrarch's shop happened to be near Hank's rooming house on the West Side. There was something about Petrarch, a slender dark-haired man, that inspired immediate confidence in Hank, so he left an order with Petrarch for a three-legged buffalo nickel in good condition. Petrarch accepted a twenty dollar deposit. *Not* one of Hank's homemade bills, of course. And promised Hank to have the coin in hand for delivery in a week's time. It seems he knew just where to put his hand on a three-legged buffalo nickel in the collection of a recently deceased collector, which was being sold off piecemeal to settle up the estate."

Bothwell took another peek into my Negroni glass. I covered it with the palm of my hand and kept talking.

"Hank went back to his moonlighting and happily manufactured a million dollars worth of bogus twenties while he was waiting for the week to pass. During that week, too, he developed a sense of caution. He decided that once he had cashed in his three-legged buffalo nickel for genuine dollars, he would use the money to transport himself and his counterfeit fortune to another city where he would be completely unknown and thus better able to devise a safe and practical method for disposing of it." For the sake of suspense, I stopped talking and drank the last of my Negroni.

Bothwell said grudgingly, "Very smart."

Ostentatiously I looked at my wrist watch. "Well, sure enough, when Hank went back to Petrarch the coin dealer at the end of the week, the precious three-legged buffalo nickel was waiting for him in a neat glassine envelope with the price stamped on the flap—$360. Hank handed Petrarch sev-

enteen counterfeit twenties, thanked him, and left his shop. He felt very exhilarated. He had successfully withstood his baptism of fire. A sense of euphoria filled him."

"What's that?" Bothwell asked. He was hooked now, I saw, listening with both ears.

"Well-being," I explained. "And no wonder, eh?"

Bothwell slowly wiped up a nonexistent stain on the bartop.

"I suppose you can guess what Hank did next, can't you, Bothwell?" I asked.

"Sure. Tried to sell the three-legged buffalo to Goodblood & Co."

I rotated my empty glass on the bar and let the tension build. When I looked up, Bothwell was staring straight at me. "That's right," I said, "but I'll bet you can't guess what happened next."

Bothwell's rag stopped in midswipe. "You want me to try?"

I nodded. It was a patronizing nod, I'm afraid.

"Okay," Bothwell said. "Hank offered his three-legged buffalo nickel to Goodblood & Co. for $360 dollars. But they wouldn't buy it. Right?"

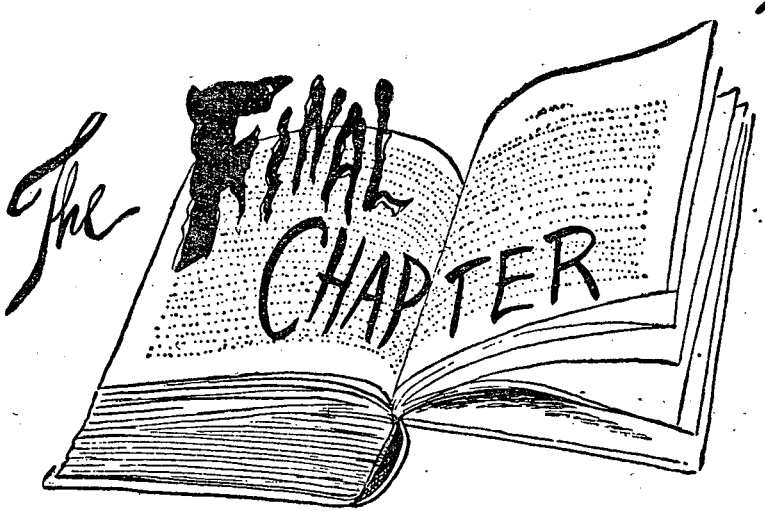
I goggled at him. Could he be brighter than he looked? "That's right," I admitted, slightly nettled. "But I'll lay you six, two and even that you can't guess *why*. That's the whole point of the story."

"I'll take that bet," Bothwell said without a moment's hesitation. "The three-legged coin was a counterfeit. Petrarch had merely removed the fourth leg from the buffalo on an ordinary buffalo nickel, and sold it at a fancy price to a sucker named Hank."

I gaped at Bothwell as though he had two heads. "How," I managed to get out at last, "could you possibly know that?"

He grinned at me, showing a set of shiny dentures. "Speaking of life's little ironies," he said, "why did you think I took such a close look at your twenty when you paid for your drink? I've lost my hair and I've gained fifty pounds, but my last name is still Petrarch. How about another Negroni, Hank? On the house?"

Only when one walks in another's shoes will he feel the pinch, but there may also be blisters he had not foreseen.



BY RICHARD O. LEWIS

I SUPPOSE there is hardly a newspaperman alive—or dead—who hasn't at one time or another dreamed of writing The Great American Novel, the masterpiece that could free him from the rat race for all time and earn him the envy of his fellow scribes. I am no exception.

One reason why I hadn't already written TGAN was simply that, like most of the other hopefuls in the trade, I spent too many of my off hours in Tuffy's Tavern discussing national politics, foreign policy, the right to protest, blondes versus brunettes, and similar important things instead of grasping my typewriter firmly between my knees and slugging away hour after hour with unbounded determination.

But the main reason, I kept telling myself, was that I didn't have anything world-shaking to write about, and until I did, there was no point in wasting paper and type-

writer ribbons. Yet my mind kept groping and seeking, waiting for the one big idea that would make my efforts worthwhile, the novel that would practically write itself.

When the final episode of the Mike Kelson affair broke suddenly into headlines in every major newspaper in the country, I began to wonder if this might be just the thing for which I had been waiting. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that at last I had the real thing. Briefly, the story was this:

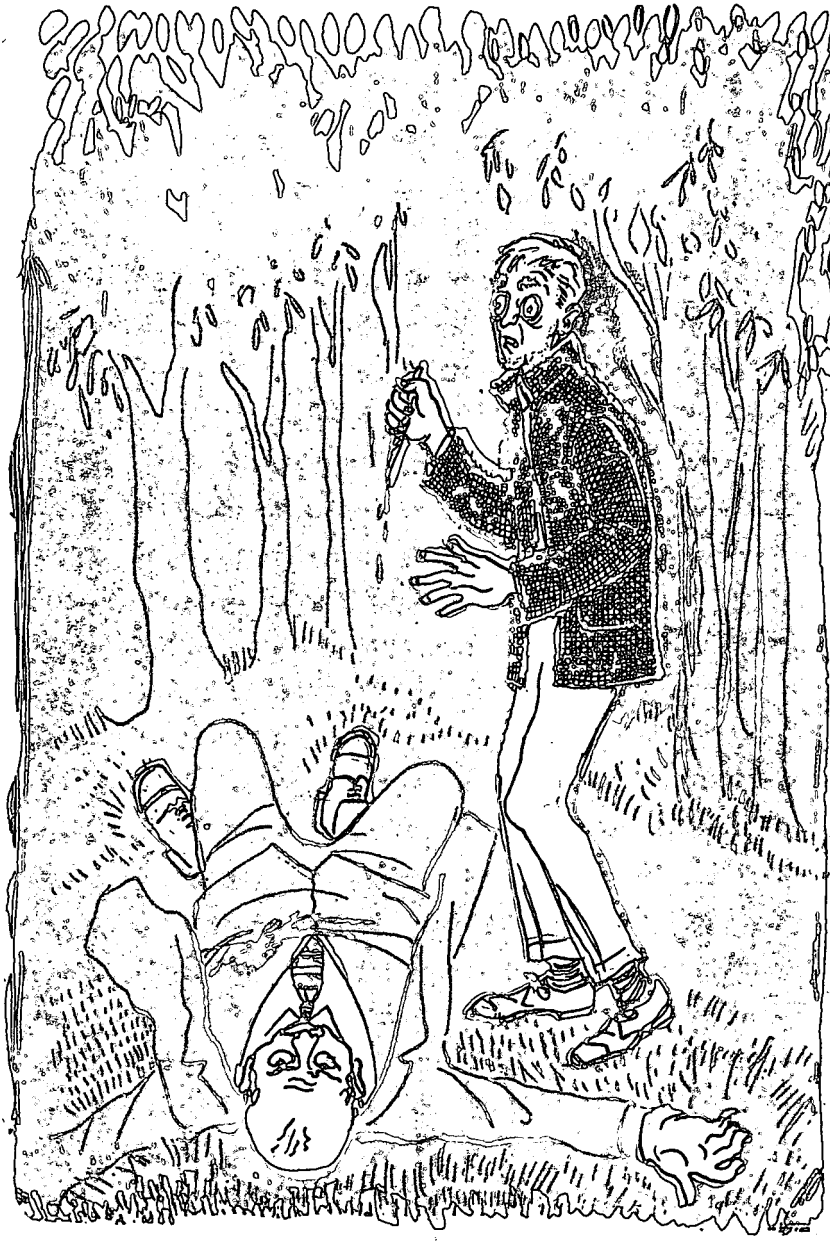
Mike Kelson, a victim of the slums, had chosen—or had been forced into—a life of crime from the first days he had been able to walk the streets. By the time he was thirty, he had many arrests to his discredit, a few convictions for petty larceny, and a prison term of a few years.

Then had come the fateful night in the park when Officer McClasky, on routine patrol, heard what he described as "a shriek of pain" coming from a dense growth of small trees, and made haste in that direction, gun drawn. Approaching the area, he heard sounds of a struggle, and when he finally broke in upon the scene, he saw a man lying in the grass, his heart pumping out its last lifeblood from a hole in the chest. Standing over the man was one Mike Kelson, a knife in his hand, its thin blade still dripping blood.

No one had believed Mike's story, of course, that he just happened to be passing through the park that night when he heard whimperings coming from behind a clump of trees. Thinking that it might be some lost pet in trouble, he'd gone to investigate and found a young girl lying on the ground, most of her clothing off, and a man standing over her with a knife held to her throat. No one had believed that Mike launched a swift attack, that the man turned upon him with the knife, that the girl gathered her things about her and fled, and that the knife had, during the struggle, found its way into the man's heart.

Of course not. Mike had a police record; the dead man, one Bertram C. Mackless, had been a respected citizen. And so, the gas chamber for Mike.

Then, two days after the news of his execution had hit the papers, the hysterical girl was in police headquarters, sobbing out her story: Mary Hegthorne, fifteen years old; a sheltered life with a strict aunt; dragged into the bushes at knife point; raped. She was certain the man would have killed her to prevent identification if it hadn't been for the other man who had rushed in and leaped upon



her tormentor. She had screamed, gathered her things together, and fled into the night. Shock; a trip to Europe and back with her aunt. Shame had sealed her lips; she had told no one of her experience. She had read nothing of Mike Kelson's trial, known nothing of his sentence until she read of his trip to the gas chamber and a recapitulation of the entire affair. Then, after two days of hysteria, she had run to the police.

That was the story—Mike Kelson, wrong guy, wrong side of the tracks, wrong side of the law, wrong side of everything until he had done the one heroic thing, the saving of a girl's life, which, ironically enough, had landed him in the gas chamber instead of earning him a hero's medal.

So I fell to work, gathering from the various morgues all the newspaper accounts I could find concerning the event and the characters involved; and in my room, making outlines and pounding the typewriter until Charley horses made a racetrack between my shoulders. I even went so far as to stay completely away from Tuffy's Tavern.

Word got around that I was writing a book, and immediately my fellow workers began regarding me as something distasteful that had recently been rejected from Mars. If you have ever written a book or tried to write one, you'll know what I mean—the little sidelong glances as you pass, the secret nudges in the ribs behind your back. Writing a *book? Him?* HAW!

You'll also know how I felt when, after a prolonged period of the hardest work I had ever done in my life, the book suddenly turned to ashes in my hands. Worthless junk, not even worth the cheap paper I had written it on. All I had been doing was a rehash of all the news stories, making a glorified news account of something everyone had already read! It was anticlimactic, no guts to it.

It was then that I began slipping down into the bottomless pit of black despair, but I couldn't give up. I had to finish it to prove something to those clowns at the office. Either that or put up with their jibes for the rest of my days among them.

I didn't go to Tuffy's to drown my sorrows. Instead, for the first time in my life, I faced the issue squarely and fought it through, night after night, until I finally found the trouble. Mike Kelson was but a puppet character. I had not made of him a sympathetic character with whom the reader could identify. The whole thing

lacked emotional impact. I had written a news story from my head rather than a drama from the heart. I needed to emphasize the miscarriage of justice, of course, but most of all I needed to let the reader feel as Mike must have felt during those final days in the death cell, waiting for help, waiting for someone to realize the truth, and knowing that each day of waiting was just one more day toward the gas chamber. I needed a final climactic chapter, one with emotional punch.

Even though the thought left me cold and jittery, I knew exactly what I had to do to get the proper atmosphere for that final chapter . . .

I arrived at the office early the next morning and walked directly into Editor J. T. Tallman's glass-enclosed cubicle. "Look, J. T.," I said, "I need a two-week vacation." He looked up at me, his thin brows arching high over his little pink eyes. "With pay," I added.

"You've been on vacation with pay ever since you've been here," he said.

I ignored the insult. "This is important. I'm writing a book."

Tallman nodded. "I know. The Great American Novel."

I didn't exactly like the way he said it. "It could be just that," I pointed out, "or it couldn't. It depends upon how much cooperation I get from you." Then I told him exactly what I wanted.

When I had finished, he looked at me as if my words had convinced him of a certain mental condition he had long suspected. "You're nuts!" he said. "Anyway, I couldn't do it."

"Then all the noise you have been making about all your influential friends on the outside, the big shots you've been clowning around with, has been just so much hot air," I pointed out.

He looked at me speculatively for a long time, one corner of his mouth—the corner with the cigarette in it—curved upward toward the left eye that was closed against the spiral of smoke.

"You don't carry enough weight," I said. "You just can't swing it!"

That did it. If there is one thing that J. T. can't pass up, it's a challenge. That's probably why he is one of the best editors in this part of the country.

Two days later, I found myself in a private cell in death row of the state prison. I had notebooks and pencils, and wore a gray uniform bearing the number 242403. In my cell was a toilet, a lavatory, paper drinking cups, a cot, and a chair.

Supposedly, only J. T. Tallman,

Warden Simms, and the watchdogs of the cells knew I was here, and only Tallman and Simms knew *why*. I had been admitted under strict conditions of secrecy. Upon release, I was never to divulge that I had been in the place. I was here only to get the feel of things; nothing more. To get the emotional impact . . .

I began getting the emotional impact almost immediately. It was the death-like silence of the place, the silence of a tomb. The low moaning sound, almost inaudible, that came from the cell directly ahead of mine seemed only to accentuate that silence rather than to dispel it. That would be Bostwell. The warden had given me a brief rundown on him. He was on his way out. Exactly five days from now, he would traverse that last long mile that led to oblivion.

There were only the two of us in the "row," and we were cut off from the rest of the prison—the rest of the entire world—by a great door of steel at the end of the corridor. We were isolated, in a strange limbo between the living and the dead.

I set to work, writing down the description of everything about me, everything I could see. I further tried to put myself into the position of a condemned man, and capture my own feelings.

After a time, I began to get jittery and realized I needed a smoke. I had half a pack of cigarettes with me, but no matches. No matches were allowed to the condemned, nothing with which he could set fire to his bedding or clothing. There was nothing else with which he could hurt himself—no glass, no rough edges in the cell, nothing. Even the shoes were of soft felt. Ironic! A man condemned to die cannot do so at his own hands. He must wait, wait for the exact date, the precise hour. His life no longer belongs to him; it belongs to the state.

I tore open the end of one of the cigarettes, stuffed shredded tobacco into my mouth, and wrote in my notebook again. I was not to be granted any special privileges during my contracted stay, and I realized that going without a smoke for a full week might turn out to be an ordeal in itself.

A few minutes later, half sick, I spewed the sodden tobacco into the lavatory and rinsed my mouth.

I heard the steel door swing open, and went to the bars of my door. An officer was wheeling a small wagon with two trays of food along the corridor. I looked at my wrist. No watch. But since I had already had breakfast and lunch before being admitted, I guessed this to be the evening

meal, but I wasn't very hungry.

A tray was pushed through the horizontal aperture of my door. I reached for it and found myself looking directly into the eyes of Officer McClasky, who had arrested Mike Kelson in the park that night, the officer I had panned unmercifully in some of the later articles I had written. If he recognized me, he didn't show it, and I carried the tray to my cot, sat down beside it, and began eating. The food was neither good nor bad; it was indifferent, just something to keep life going until the state ended it. A gob of mashed potatoes and colorless gravy fell from the tip of my fork of pressed paper. For some reason, my hand trembled.

Finally, I lay back on the cot, which was neither hard nor soft, but was just something for a body to rest upon until it went to its final rest. I lay there for a long time looking up at the yellow ceiling and wanting a smoke.

Yes, my articles concerning the behavior of Officer McClasky had been far from flattering. I had accused him of not being able to tell the difference between the cry of a frightened young girl and "a shriek of pain," as he had put it. I had accused him of not giving enough credence to Mike's story to make the slightest on-the-spot investigation. Actually, I had just the same as blamed Officer McClasky for Mike Kelson's trip to the gas chamber, and now he was my keeper. I didn't know whether he had fled from the city force to take refuge here in the state prison because of my articles or not. Perhaps he had merely wanted to change jobs. But it didn't really matter. It was over and done with.

Yet, my thoughts kept troubling me . . .

I suddenly found myself sitting bolt upright on the edge of my cot, the hair of my cropped head tingling. The scream that had brought me out of a fitful sleep had been inhuman, animal-like. Even before its reverberations had ended in the corridor, it came again, and again, each unearthly wail louder than the one before it.

Then came the words, high pitched and shrieking: *"Help me! Please! Somebody help me! I am not supposed to die! I didn't do it! I am innocent!"*

Then the screams again, on and on until the steel door grated open and the night guard entered. He was followed by a slight man carrying a black bag—the medic, I guessed. They went into Bostwell's cell, and I could hear Bostwell pleading with them.

After the guard and the medic had left, the screaming slowly sub-

sided into the monotonous moaning that had preceded it.

So this was the way it was! The last mile! Knowing that death was rapidly approaching and that no earthly power could forestall it, yet the hope, the pleading, the senseless shouting against deaf ears . . . And Bostwell had four more nights to go, four more nights filled with hideous nightmare.

The next night, the screams and the pleadings were even worse. Spine-chilling! Nerve-shattering! Again they continued until the medic and the guard had come and gone.

The screaming began earlier the next night, screams of a dumb animal being tortured beyond endurance, and accompanied by a constant thudding as if someone were beating the door and the bars and the walls with bare fists. The screams, shrill, stabbing, soul-piercing, continued even after the medic arrived. Then there was a shuffling sound.

I got up from my cot and went to the door just as the guard and the medic were dragging Bostwell past, still screaming. I couldn't see his face. His head was hanging down between the two men who were dragging him along, his feet scraping the floor. I could see the number on the back of his sweat-stained shirt. He was just a number now, not a man; number 22220.

The corridor door clanged shut, cutting off the screams, and I sat trembling on my cot. Bostwell, with still two nights to go, had cracked up completely. I wondered what they would do with him now. Special medical attention?

I didn't sleep that night. I sat on the edge of my cot, cold with sweat and dying for a smoke. I put some shreds of tobacco in my mouth for a while, then spat them out on the floor. So this was what Mike Kelson had gone through—the utter despair of knowing that no one was likely to come to his aid!

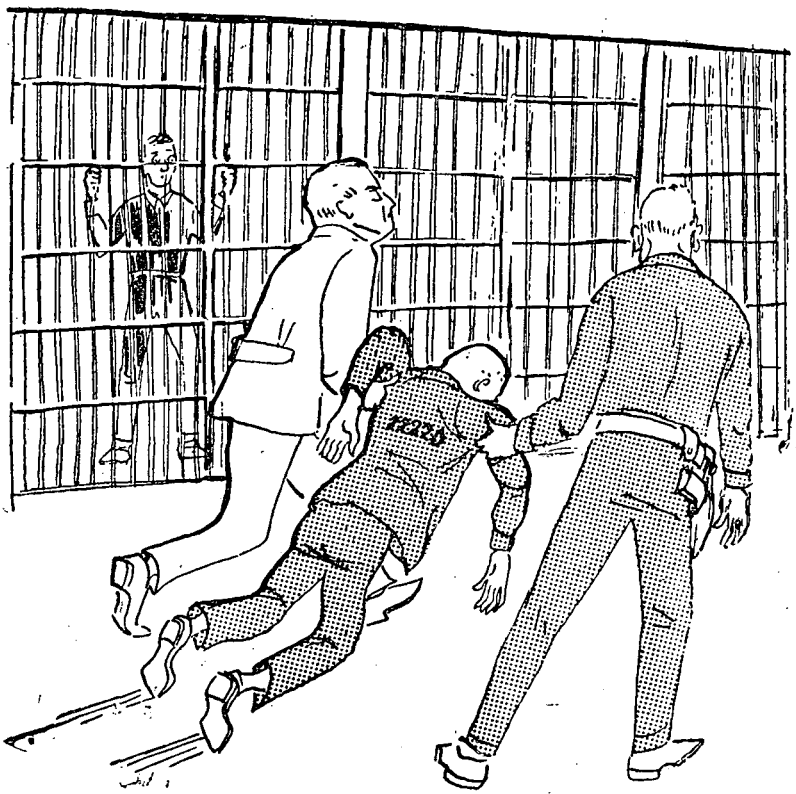
Yes, I had what I had come for, the full emotional impact, the final chapter of Mike Kelson.

Suddenly I realized that I wanted to get out of the place. If they brought Bostwell back, I couldn't stand the screaming for two more nights. If they didn't bring him back, there was certainly no point in sitting and twiddling my thumbs for the four days I had left on my contracted stay.

"Tell Warden Simms I'd like to be released now," I told the guard who shoved my breakfast through to me.

His pointed face twisted itself into a questioning stare.

"I'm supposed to be here for a week," I said, "but I want to get



out now. Tell the warden. He'll understand."

A half hour later he came back, a bundle of clothing under one arm, and unlocked the door. "This way," he said.

I picked up my notebooks and pencils and hurried after him, more than glad to quit the place. I had begun to develop a bad case of the creeps, and I didn't like it.

He unlocked the door to another cell. "In here," he said, tossing the bundle of clothes onto the bunk.

It wasn't until after the door banged shut behind me that I realized the cell was the one recently occupied by Bostwell, and that the clothes on the bunk were merely

a fresh uniform, meant for me.

"That won't be necessary," I said, wheeling about. "Just as soon as you see the warden—"

"Warden's not here. On vacation."

"Well, somebody must be in charge. Tell him I want to get out! Or call J. T. Tallman, editor of the Gazette!"

"Not allowed to carry messages for the prisoners," he said, turning away. "Against regulations."

"Hey!" I shouted after him. "Hey, listen—"

It was like shouting at the back side of a wooden Indian. The steel door clanged behind him, and then there was silence.

I sat on the edge of the cot for a long time, my brain alive with thoughts that were rapidly becoming distasteful.

After a while, for want of anything better to do, I changed clothes, taking a long, thoughtful time between each of the articles. Finally, I sat with the shirt across my knees, staring into space. It was the end of the week. Perhaps the warden had just gone somewhere for the weekend, would be back tonight or tomorrow. Anyway, J. T. would probably call before long to see how I was getting along. Nothing to worry about, really. I picked up the shirt. A tremor shot through me and the shirt flew from my trembling fingers to the floor. On the back of the garment, in bold, stark numerals, was the number 22220!

I leaped from my cot to the door. The corridor, the entire cell block, was empty and silent as a tomb. There was no one to call to. *And I had been handed the uniform of a man who was condemned to die within two days!*

Wobbly legs took me back to the cot again. What had happened to Bostwell? Where was he? Had he died from shock or something? In any event, why had I been given his number? Prisoners do not have their numbers changed! They are given a number when they come in, and they have the same number when they go out. Someone had made a mistake. That was it—just a mistake. Someone had gotten the shirts mixed up.

I don't know how long I sat there before I heard the door at the end of the corridor swing open and clang shut again. I jumped up and saw McClasky coming along with the little wagon and my tray of food. McClasky! There was the answer! I hated to ask a favor of him after those articles I had written, but . . .

"Look, McClasky," I said, as he stopped in front of my bars, "you know me, don't you? I'm Bill Hendricks of the *Gazette*. I wrote

some articles about you in connection with the Mike Kelson affair. I'll—I'll admit they didn't cast you in a very good light, but . . ." I hesitated. "You *do* know me, don't you?"

He pushed the tray of food through, and his eyes met mine. They were of an opaque gray that veiled whatever was behind them. "I never heard of you before in my life," he said evenly. "To me, you're just a number. Number 22220."

He wheeled away, leaving me stupefied, with the tray in my hands. "Hey!" I shouted finally. "Hey, McClasky! You've got to get word to the warden—"

The steel door swung swiftly shut behind him as if to prevent the silence of the place from escaping through it.

I didn't eat the food. I put the tray on the cot and sat beside it. McClasky was lying! Certainly he knew me! That number on my shirt was no mistake. McClasky knew about the number, knew I had been given the shirt . . .

I put my elbows on my knees, rested my head in my hands, and felt the hair wriggle around at the back of my skull as if it had a will of its own. Surely McClasky wouldn't . . . Not just because of some articles! No! Anyway, he couldn't get away with it! Yet . . .

Maybe those articles had really hurt him, had shattered his pride. The warden was away. After it was all over, it would go down in the records as a grievous error, and McClasky would receive a severe reprimand.

But that wouldn't do *me* any good!

I leaped to my feet and went to the door. I grasped the bars and tried to shake them. I screamed at the steel door at the end of the corridor—and my screams echoed back, mockingly.

I paced the floor. There was little else I could do until McClasky returned for the empty dishes. I would have it out with him, tell him I knew what he was up to.

McClasky didn't return until he brought my evening meal, but he did not come alone. He brought a husky guard. They unlocked my door, and the guard came in and gathered up my discarded clothing and the tray.

"Look!" I began. "You've got to —" I realized instantly that he was paying no attention to me. I began screaming at him and beating his arms with my fists. "Listen to me! You've got to see the warden or whoever is in charge—"

He went out the door, and I knew he had no intention of listening to me. He had heard it all before. I was merely doing what

Bostwell had done before me, what Kelson had done, what all the others had done. He was used to it. The condemned always screamed at him and struck out at him. *It was all in a day's work!*

I fell to the cot, sobbing, and heard the steel door at the end of the corridor close the silence in upon me again.

That steel door! Beyond it was the outside world, a world quite oblivious of what was happening to me. I had to get a message through that door somehow!

I sat for a long time, my mind in a turmoil, before I had an idea. It was a poor one, but it might gain the attention of someone, somewhere. I would simply write the whole story down on a page of my notebook, about the book I had been working on, about how Tallman and Warden Simms had arranged for me to come here for atmosphere, and how, for some reason, a mistake had been made. I would end it with a plea for help. I would make two copies; one I would place on my tray beneath the dishes so it would reach someone in the kitchen; the other I would give to the morning guard and depend upon his curiosity to force him to read it.

I picked up one of my notebooks, turned to a clean page, and looked for a pencil. The search became frantic. Then I flung the notebook from me and sank down to the cot again, for my pencils were gone. The guard had picked them up along with my discarded clothing. The condemned was not permitted anything with which he might injure himself! His life belonged to the state!

Sleep was fitful that night and filled with a procession of nightmares I shall not attempt to describe. Through it all was the moaning, the pitiful moaning that was coming from somewhere deep within myself. But I couldn't stop it; in a way, it was the only comforting outlet I had for the emotions that seethed within me.

Now I could think of only one possible way of getting a message through that door: the morning guard. I would get something through that weasel head of his even if I had to drive it in by sheer force of lung power!

I was ready and waiting for him hours before he arrived, and when I heard the big door swing open, I was at the bars of my cell.

"Look!" I began shouting as he came down the corridor with his little wagon. "I am Bill Hendricks of the *Gazette!* I am not Bostwell! Go to someone who is in charge and tell him—"

"Take it easy," he said, his pointed nose twisting sideways as

he lifted my tray from the wagon. "Your troubles will soon be over. You're having company this afternoon."

"Company?" I took the tray automatically, backed slowly to the cot, and sat down. *Company!*

Suddenly my troubles melted away. I set the tray aside, paced the length of the cell and back. I kicked the hated shirt—number 22220—across the floor and laughed at the ceiling. Warden Simms or J. T.—one or the other of them—coming to see how I was faring. Wouldn't they be surprised! And wouldn't McClasky have a lot of explaining to do!

I hadn't eaten for a long time, had no desire for breakfast, but I drank the small carton of muddy, tepid coffee.

When McClasky shoved my tray through the door at noon, I shoved it back at him with appropriate words as to what he could do with it. I could wait. I knew exactly what I was going to do as soon as I got back to town. I was going to Tuffy's and lap up a few beers, then I was going to search out the biggest steak I could find and top it off with a good cigar.

It seemed hours before I heard the big door swing open and clang shut again, followed by footsteps echoing down the corridor. I hurriedly gathered my notebooks and stood up, ready to go, just as my cell door swung open.

I found myself face to face with a tall, slim man who was wearing a long gown-like robe and a white collar that was turned backward. I gaped.

"Come," he said, his voice deep and comforting. "Let us sit down."

We sat on the edge of the cot, facing each other. There was no chair in the cell. Too dangerous!

"And now, my good man," he said, "is there something you wish to tell me?"

Was there! I told him the whole story, from beginning to end. "And so," I finished, "you've got to tell the warden."

He nodded sympathetically. "The warden isn't here at present, but I am certain he will be back tonight." There was a moment of silence. "You have nothing else to tell me?" he asked, finally.

"No," I said. "Except that I'm damn glad the warden is going to get back tonight!"

He summoned the guard, and went out, then turned to face me through the bars. "I wish to inform you," he said, "that you may have anything you desire for your evening meal—anything within reason, of course. It is customary and fitting . . ."

My body turned to slush ice.

He must have noticed the pal-

lor of my face. "Have courage, my good man," he soothed. "We will be with you in the morning to comfort you every step of the way."

My fists, clutching the bars, grew bloodless, and my head drooped forward to my arms. *He hadn't believed a word I had told him!*

I made another frantic try when McClasky brought my evening tray. He looked through me as if I had already ceased to exist. I hurled the tray away and watched its glutinous burden drip listlessly from the far wall.

I sat on the cot, trying to regain control of my trembling body. The warden would be back tonight. I sat there waiting through a black eternity that seemed to have no end before I suddenly realized that the arrival of the warden would do me no good. He would have no way of knowing what was happening to me!

Leaping from my cot, I reached the door. I had to let him know! I began screaming then, screaming at the steel barrier, trying to pierce it—and my screams echoed hollowly through the corridor, unheeded. I looked for something with which to make noise. There was nothing. I tried to tear the bars from my door. I beat them with my fists. Someone, somewhere, had to hear me . . .

After long ages, the door at the end of the corridor swung open. The night guard came, and with him was a slight man with a little black bag. They opened the door and came in, and I clutched the guard and screamed at him. "Go get the warden! Tell the warden they have the wrong man—"

I felt the needle go into my bare arm. It must have contained a terrific jolt, for the faces of the two men began to swim out of focus only seconds later. They eased me to the cot and left me there to drift through a cloying fog. I was only dimly aware of the clanging of the great door, the door that shut out all reality and all hope.

I did not quite go to sleep. As I floated along through the timeless hiatus, the irony of it all came to me, over and over again, torturing me beyond reason. I had come here to experience the last emotions of Mike Kelson, to experience how he had felt when, after doing the one heroic thing in his life, he had written his own final chapter. Now I was going through precisely the same experience, the experience that would be the final chapter of my own life—all because I had been trying to do the one worthwhile thing in life I had ever attempted . . .

They came for me early in the morning, three guards and the man in the black robe. I screamed at them and fought them, but they pulled me bodily from the cell and dragged me down the corridor, feet trailing. I had heard of men who faced the firing squad without blindfold, of men who mounted the scaffold, unhooded, to fling defiance at their tormentors until the very last. I was made of less stern stuff. They dragged me the entire length of the corridor, away from the steel door, and into a dimly lighted room. In the gloom, I saw a row of hazy faces: spectators; witnesses to the fact that the state had satisfied the dictates of society at the promised time and with the greatest dispatch.

They forced me into a little room, a box-like affair within the larger room, and shut the door behind me. My legs were of water, and I fell to my knees, groaning. I could smell the gas then. The gas? No! It was my imagination. The gas would be odorless. It would creep slowly upon me, within me . . .

I tried not to breathe, and found that I had lost all control over the trembling of my body. I closed my eyes. I waited, trying to force my mind into blankness.

When I opened my eyes again, the door stood open. Bewildered, I got slowly to my feet and staggered toward it. I took hold of the edge of it and stepped through.

The outer room was brightly lighted now, and I saw the row of faces again. There was an officer with a discarded cloak of black on a chair beside him. There was McClasky, and Warden Simms, and J. T. Tallman. They were all grinning like apes. All except J. T.—and he was laughing his silly head off.

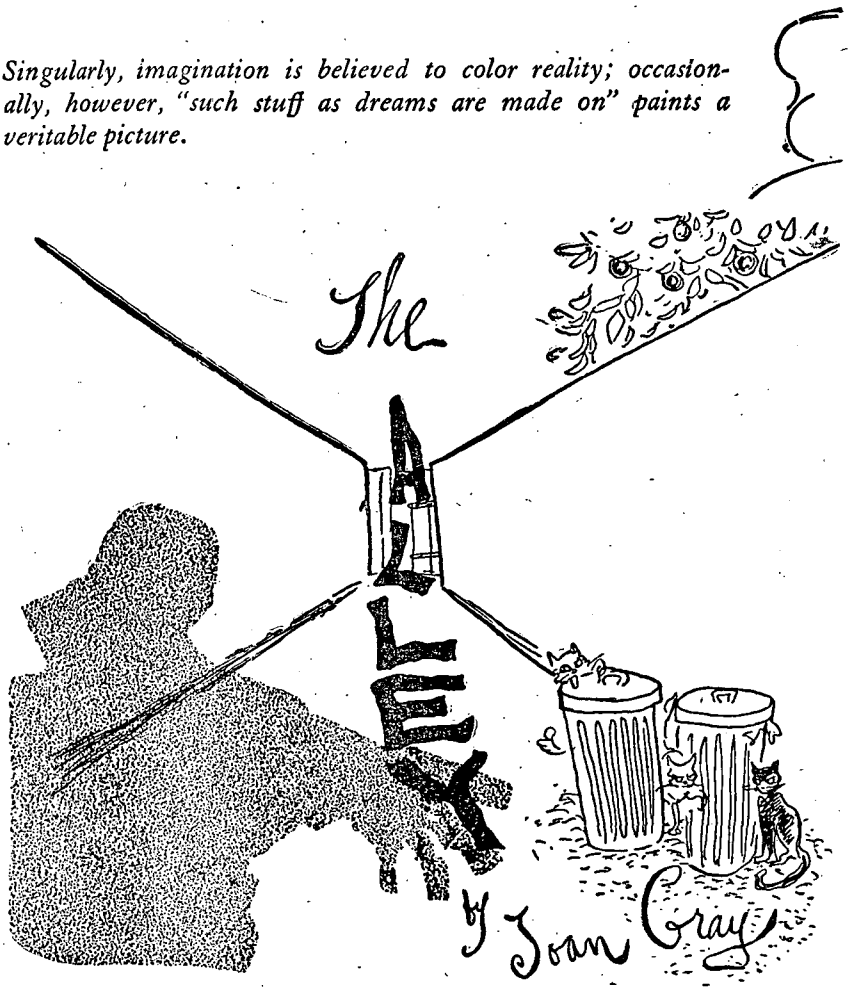
Had I got the emotional impact I had been seeking?

Certainly! Thanks to J. T. and his clownish—and very influential—friends.

And am I now going to finish The Great American Novel?

Certainly! Just as soon as I sober up and my hands quit shaking so much . . .

Singularly, imagination is believed to color reality; occasionally, however, "such stuff as dreams are made on" paints a veritable picture.



AT THE END of our garden was a high brick wall, on the other side of which was The Alley, a strange no-man's land. The Alley, deeply mysterious, was as remote to us as the jungles of Africa.

We were never allowed to go into The Alley, nor could we look into it. Even if we climbed the apple tree, all we could see was the top of two brick walls; ours and the one at the bottom of the garden on the other side of The Alley.

Weird noises used to come from The Alley—clatterings and bangings, shufflings and rustlings.

"Why can't we go into The Alley, auntie?" we asked.

"It's not safe," was all she would say.

Not safe. Once John and I went down to the bottom of the garden in the dark and stood by the wall, listening for something from The Alley. Nothing. Then, suddenly came a terrible scream, a wailing that kind of died away into moans. We fled back to the house, pursued by the silent echoes of the sound.

Then came the time of the man in the mackintosh. We weren't told anything about him—except that if we saw a man coming towards us and he was wearing a dirty brown mackintosh, we were to turn and run—but we listened while the grown-ups were talking. We didn't understand though, except it was something awful this man in the mackintosh did.

After that we saw him everywhere; down the street, across from the school, outside the store. How we ran! Our feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. Finally, we would stop running. We could run no more.

Then Mary said her mother had seen the man in the mackintosh in The Alley behind our house. We stayed away from the bottom of the garden. In the afternoon, after school, we would try to go in the front door instead of the back.

Elsie, the maid, would get very cross. "If you think I'm going to come all the way from the kitchen just to open the door for you two, you've got another think coming. You come in the back tomorrow, you hear!"

One night Pat didn't come home. Pat was our dog. He was always home by dark.

John said, "Let's go to the front gate and look around." We sneaked out and, as we turned the corner, there was this dark shape on the other side of the gate.

In our mad rush back to light and safety we trampled over Uncle's precious begonias. The front door was locked. We rang the bell and banged and banged the knocker. We could hear the squeak of the gate opening, heavy feet crunching on gravel.

Elsie was furious. "I'm going to tell your aunt about this."

"But Elsie, it's the man in the mackintosh. He's coming in the gate."

Elsie opened the door again. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Chard. That's the second time that boy has missed us this week. Ever so good of you, I'm sure. Oh, Mr. Chard, you are a one. Well, on Tuesdays I could. Tuesday's my night off.

And every other Sunday, of course."

Elsie's cheeks were pink as she closed the door and put the evening paper on the hall table. She was singing to herself as she went back to the kitchen. She had forgotten about us. Uncle didn't forget though. He was very angry when he saw his begonias the next day.

He said we wouldn't be allowed to go to the bazaar. We didn't mind this because church bazaars weren't much anyway, with some grown-up always telling you to *Shush,* and *Be Quiet* and *Stop Running, Dear,* but I had wanted to be in the play. We were going to rub brown stuff on our faces and be cannibals on an island, and some missionary was going to land and read to us; not a real missionary, of course, but Hazel Swanson's father who had a ginger moustache. Hazel was going to sing in the play, "O Happy Day!" and John was going to shoot peas at her from behind the cannibals. John said Hazel was stuck-up and he figured a few peas would take her down a peg.

Instead, we had to stay with Elsie and eat supper in the kitchen by the fire. We had poached eggs and purple jelly and made toast holding the bread to the glowing coke. Uncle always said coke was good enough for the kitchen, and coke really was better than coal for toast. Elsie even let us read her magazines, which showed she was in a good temper. Auntie was always telling Elsie to keep 'those dreadful magazines' in her room so we wouldn't see them, but when she and Uncle were out for the evening Elsie would sometimes give us a whole pile of them.

The stories were all about things grown-ups did. There was one, "The Desperate Adventures of Vera Delaney." Vera was dark, with mysterious eyes and a hard face. I used to wonder if I would have mysterious eyes when I grew up, but I didn't know about the hard face. Mine always felt soft when I touched it.

Vera had a friend, a sweet gentle girl whose name was Barbara Leslie, but everybody called her Babs. Babs was engaged to marry Jim Fenwick, but Vera was mad about him too and was always telling him lies about Babs, which of course he didn't believe. Then one night in the pouring rain Vera pushed Babs into the pond and held her down under the black water. . . .

John said suddenly, "There's someone in the hall."

We looked out. It was Elsie and Mr. Chard and he was pushing her and she'd push him back.

Grown-ups do strange things. We watched a while.

We couldn't hear what they were saying till Elsie exclaimed, "What do you take me for, I'm sure! Ssshh, the children will hear you. Mr. Chard, you're hurting me!" Then they saw us. "Get back in the kitchen," cried Elsie.

We closed the door quickly. When we opened it again the hall was dark. "There they are," said John. "Outside."

The front door stood open and the wind blowing in was cold. I slipped up and closed the front door very quietly. "Now she'll have to go around." We laughed all the way back to the kitchen.

It got so that Mr. Chard would come around on Thursday nights. Thursdays Auntie and Uncle had a committee meeting at the church. We didn't mind. Elsie gave us magazines to read, and Mr. Chard would rattle the silver in his pocket and give us a coin apiece before we went up to bed.

Sometimes I had strange dreams. One night I dreamt I was thirsty and got up and went down to the kitchen for a drink of water. The stairs creaked in my dream just like the real stairs. It was very dark in the kitchen, except for the pale glow from the grate.

Then, as always in dreams when you know ahead of time what's going to happen, I knew someone was coming. It was Uncle George. He had a flashlight, and he looked right at me as he went by. He went on through the back door and out into the garden and I followed because I had always wanted to go outside in my dressing-gown and slippers with my night-gown trailing the ground. I could see the flashlight bobbing along the path. Uncle George went on down to the very end of the garden, climbed the wall and disappeared. In the dark I almost fell over the ladder propped against the wall. I had started to climb, when from The Alley came strange sounds—scuffling, violent whispers, and a dull thudding like beating on the ground with a shoe.

Frantically, I jumped down and tried to push the ladder over. Falling, it clattered and scraped against the wall. It took a long time falling. I could hear it all the way back to the house. At the door I looked back and could see a small circle of light probing the darkness. That was all my dream.

The next morning there were strange men in the hall. John and I went into the dining room, but it was cold in there. The fire hadn't been lit. Yesterday's grey ashes still filled the fireplace.

Out in the kitchen Aunt Mary was getting breakfast. "Elsie hasn't

lit the fire in the dining room," John announced.

"Elsie isn't here," said Aunt Mary. "Elsie's—Elsie's gone away." Her eyes were red, which was queer in a grown-up.

A policeman came through the door. John wants to be a policeman some day.

"Now, we know, see," said John.

"What do you know, son?" asked the policeman.

"Betty always said policemen took their helmets off indoors, but I said how could they when the helmet's part of the uniform."

Uncle George came into the kitchen with the two men from the hall.

"I'd like to ask the children some questions," said one.

"No," said Aunt Mary sharply. "This has nothing to do with them."

"I'm sorry, madam, but they may have heard something."

Through the window I could see another policeman in the garden. I had a sudden happy feeling we wouldn't be going to school that day.

One of the men said, "I'm going to ask you children a question. Think carefully before you answer. It's very important."

Aunt Mary said quickly, "It's about Elsie. Elsie had an accident last night—in The Alley. But Betty and John are not allowed in The Alley. In any case, they were already in bed and sound asleep."

The man repeated patiently, "Think carefully before you answer. We believe there may have been someone with Elsie, a man. Do you know the name of any man Elsie knew that she might have met in the alley last night?"

I was cracking the top off my egg. "It was Uncle George," I said, with mysterious eyes and hard face. The egg was hard, too.

It was so quiet I thought they hadn't heard, but when I looked up they were all staring at me. "I was getting a drink of water in the middle of the night and Uncle George went outside and climbed a ladder over into The Alley. Then I heard them talking, Uncle George and Elsie. She kept saying, 'It's all your fault. You've got to help me. Don't you understand, I'm stagnant.' And he was terribly cross. And then I pushed the ladder down . . ."

Aunt Mary said shrilly, "There's no ladder at the bottom of the garden. Is there, George?"

Uncle George said nothing.

Aunt Mary said slowly, "We wouldn't have one in case the children . . ."

Uncle George cleared his throat. "I kept it lying down, behind the bushes."

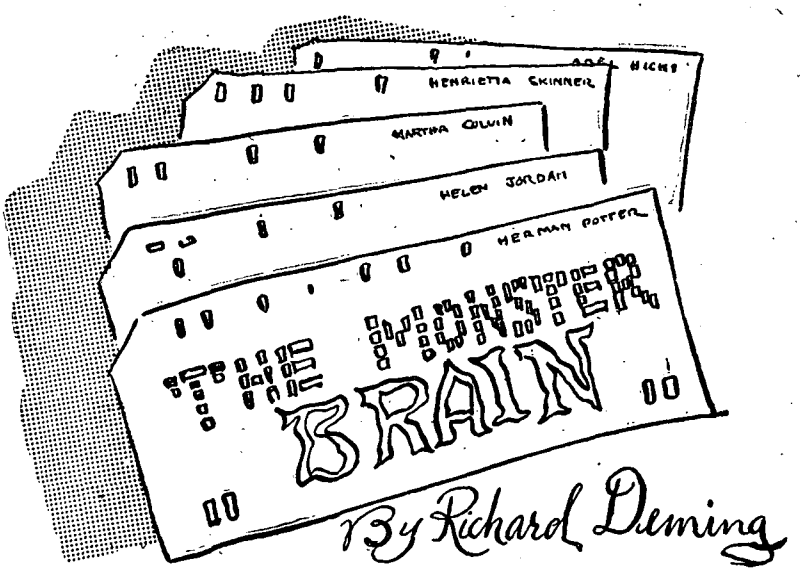
Aunt Mary said, "Oh, George, why . . ."

He said dully, "I had to have it. For the trees."

I said, "May I have another piece of toast, please?" They seemed to like my dream.

Uncle George left with the men and we never saw him again. We never saw Elsie again either, nor the man in the brown mackintosh. But we see Mr. Chard often. He's ever so nice. He gives us money all the time.

Despite the brazen inroads of automation in certain pursuits, it remains man's nature to venture, for ample recompense, through the forest of electronic impedimenta.



MODERN society has become so automated, it's amazing how many of the things one does are later scrutinized by an electronic computer. For example, for some time now our state headquarters of the National Association of Underwriters has been routinely feeding punch cards into a computer for every insurance policy issued, and for every claim filed in the state. The data which comes out is mainly useful for statistical purposes, but once in a while something will spill out which suggests a possible insurance fraud. When that happens, the information is relayed to the association's investigative division, which is where I work.

One Monday morning in mid-October I came to work in a bad mood. Anita and I had gone round and round again the night before about getting married. As usual, the argument had centered

about the lack of future in working for a salary and ended with the ultimatum that she would never marry a man who couldn't support her in luxury.

Sally, our blonde receptionist said, "If that's a hangover you're suffering, Mr. Quinn, you'd better get over it in a hurry."

"It's not a hangover," I said, glowering at her. "It's just the normal distasteful expression I can't keep from my face every time I look at a member of the female sex. And why should I get over it, even if it were a hangover?"

"You had another fight with your girl," she said. "The chief wants to see you."

I smoothed my expression before I entered the chief's office. He doesn't like to see anything but happy faces.

Ed Morgan is chief of the investigative division. He's a grizzled, barrel-chested man of sixty who has headed the division for twenty years and has the reputation of being able to smell an insurance fraud clear across the state. I had been working under him for seven years, since I got out of college, and had become his most trusted investigator.

"Sit down, Tod," he said. "I've got a routine investigation for you. I doubt that anything will come of it, because I can't work up much of a hunch about it, but the computer people sent some data over, and we have to check it out."

If Ed Morgan didn't sense a possible fraud from whatever it was the computer had divulged, there probably wasn't any. But a lot of our investigations are based less on outright suspicion than on mere thoroughness. We turn up the number of fraud cases we do because we investigate everything which seems even a little off key in insurance claims.

"What did the monster brain turn up this time?" I asked.

"Well, as you know, one of the items keyed on every punch card involving claims is cause of death. Some statistician was tabulating causes of death throughout the state for the past twelve months, and seems to think he found something interesting when he came to typhoid fever. Typhoid is rare these days; there were only seven deaths from it last year in the whole state. Five of them were in the same community. Each was insured by a different carrier, but through the same insurance broker. Each policy happened to be for the same amount too: ten thousand dollars. Headquarters thought the coincidence of cause of death, the insured amount and the broker being identical in all five cases might interest us."

He handed me a couple of sheets of paper on which a resume of the data from the punch cards had been typed.

The five decedents who had been insured were an eighty-year-old man whose beneficiary had been his son, three women whose beneficiaries had been their husbands, and one eighteen-year-old boy whose beneficiary had been his father. All five policies had been written on different companies by a broker named Paul Manners. The deaths had all taken place during a period of about a month from the middle of July to the middle of August. The addresses of both the deceased and the beneficiaries in all cases were either R.D. 1 or R.D. 2, Heather Ridge.

"Obviously a rural community," I said. "Where's Heather Ridge?"

"I didn't know either until I looked it up," the chief said. "It has a population of seven hundred and is the seat of Heather County."

"I don't know where Heather County is either," I said.

Morgan grinned. "I'm not surprised. It's back up in the hills with the moonshiners. The population of the whole county is only about twenty-five hundred. There isn't even a paved road in the county, although the map shows a couple of presumably good gravel roads. There's no railroad line to Heather Ridge, and a bus only twice a week, so if you find you have to go there, you'd better drive."

I glanced at the resume again. "Whoever sent this over has a hole in his head. So the place had a typhoid epidemic this last summer. That's the logical time to have one. This Paul Manners wrote all the policies because a place that size wouldn't have more than one insurance broker. And the amounts being the same don't mean anything. Ten thousand dollars is the most common amount of life coverage."

"Exactly my reasoning, but we've turned up frauds with less to start on. It shouldn't take you more than a few days to check it out. You may decide after examining the claim correspondence that you don't even have to visit the place."

"Okay," I said, rising. "I'll get on it right away."

In the outer office the blonde Sally said, "You look a little more cheerful now, Mr. Quinn. Is your opinion of the female sex improving?"

"It's just that I have a happy assignment," I told her. "If things work out the way I hope, I'll be able to send a lovely young widow to the gas chamber."

She made a leering face at me.

The insurance carriers all had branch offices in Blair City, fifty miles away. I drove over and by mid-afternoon had examined the files on all five cases..

Everything seemed in order. There was a certified copy of the death certificate in each case, all stamped with the notary seal of an Emma Pruett of the Heather County Clerk's Office. Each had been signed by the same doctor, Emmet Parks. Checking the policies, I discovered all had been taken out during the previous January and February, and all physical exams had been made by Dr. Emmet Parks. Again this wasn't too coincidental. It was hardly likely a town of seven hundred would have more than one doctor.

The relatively short time the policies had been in force made me decide to check a little more deeply, though. I revisited each insurance office and asked to look at the canceled claim-payment checks. I was startled to discover that in each case the checks had been endorsed to Dr. Emmet Parks and then cashed by him at the same bank in Holoyke.

I checked my road map and discovered Heather Ridge was about sixty miles from Holoyke. Now why were the checks all endorsed to the doctor, I wondered, and why did he go sixty miles to cash them instead of cashing them in Heather Ridge?

By the time I got back to the state capital, it was too late to do any more that day. I phoned Anita to see if she were interested in going out to dinner, but she was just as icy as the night before. She hung up on me.

I spent a miserable evening brooding over what kind of business I could go into which might make the kind of money Anita demanded. I couldn't think of any. My education was in liberal arts, and my total experience was in insurance investigation. I finally gave up and went to bed.

The next morning I was at the office of the State Medical Society when it opened.

Dr. Emmet Parks proved to be a member in good standing, and had been for twenty years. He was fifty years old, and had never practiced anywhere but Heather Ridge. He was the only physician in all of Heather County.

If there was fraud connected with the five insurance claims, the only way I could see it had been worked was by mass murder. It seemed highly unlikely that a reputable physician would be a party to that, and equally unlikely that even a rural physician would misdiagnose five murders in a row as

typhoid fever. Besides, since each beneficiary was different, it would involve the collusion of all five in murder.

Still, Parks' signature on all the claim-payment checks bothered me. I decided to keep checking.

When I left the State Medical Society Office, I visited the licensing bureau at the Capital Building. Insurance broker Paul Manners had passed his state examination and had been licensed only the previous November, which made the relative newness of the five policies considerably less suspicious. Since he couldn't have started selling insurance earlier than November, all it seemed to indicate was that he was a pretty hot salesman.

Checking his file, I discovered he was married but had no children, had a high school education and had been a part-time farmer for the past twenty-five years. During the same period he had worked half-time as a farm appliance salesman in a store in Heather Ridge. According to his application, he planned to continue his part-time farming, but drop his extra job when he became an insurance broker.

A certified true copy of his birth certificate, again bearing the notary stamp of Emma Pruett, showed he had been born in Heather Ridge.

His three references rated his character high. One was from a Reverend Donald Hartwell, one from County Judge Albert Baker, the third from Dr. Emmet Parks.

While it was standard procedure for people to give their family physician's name when references were required, the frequency with which I was running into Dr. Emmet Parks' name began to intrigue me.

I took rather detailed notes of the information about Paul Manners contained in his file.

From the Capital Building I went back to association headquarters and gave a computer operator a question to ask the monster brain. Its answer lessened my suspicion. In addition to the five typhoid cases, Paul Manners had placed twenty other policies with various carriers since he had been in business, and all of these insured were still alive. It looked more and more as though the insurance broker had merely had the misfortune to start business in a territory where previously no one had ever been approached by an insurance salesman, had done remarkably well with his virgin territory, but had immediately run into an epidemic.

If it hadn't been for Dr. Emmet Parks' signature on all the claim-payment checks, I would have

dropped the matter right there. But I had to check that out. I decided to visit Heather Ridge.

I drove up on Wednesday, arriving in the middle of the morning. The town was a good forty miles from the nearest main highway, back up in the hills in rugged, sparsely settled country. The last thirty miles I traveled on washboard gravel road, and I didn't see a single other car. As a matter of fact, except for power and telephone lines strung on poles alongside the road, I saw few signs of civilization. Occasionally I spotted a farmhouse or a barn, but most of the time the view from the winding mountain road was of steep hills densely covered with pine.

I didn't see any heather, and Heather Ridge itself turned out to be in a valley instead of on a ridge, although there was a sharp, jagged ridge just north of it.

Later I learned the town and the county had been named after Amos Heather, a trapper who back in the mid-1800s had stood off an Indian attack from it for seven days before he finally lost his scalp.

The town was like something from the last century. There was a town square with a squat, one-story, red-brick courthouse in its center. A half dozen overalled old men chewing tobacco lolled on the low wall edging the courthouse lawn. There were a few tired-looking business establishments ringing the square, but there were no shoppers on the street. Only two vehicles were in sight, both parked in front of the courthouse. One was a 1932 pickup truck, the other a Model T.

The tobacco-chewing old men regarded me with silent speculation when I parked and entered the courthouse.

There was a long corridor running the length of the building, with offices off it on either side, labeled with the familiar titles you see in any courthouse. Most of the doors stood open so that I had to pause and look in to read the lettering on the doors. The sheriff's office was to the left just inside the main entrance, and directly across from it was the district attorney's office. Both were empty. I passed other empty offices labeled TAX ASSESSOR, REGISTRAR OF MOTOR VEHICLES, COUNTY RECORDER, COUNTY CLERK and CORONER. Opposite the coroner's office was an empty office labeled COUNTY JUDGE, and a small, equally empty courtroom.

By then I was halfway down the corridor, and I finally found some sign of life. In a small alcove, behind a counter flush with the left


INFORMATION

wall of the corridor, a young woman sat before a telephone switchboard. She was a rather plain-featured brunette of about twenty-one or two. A sign hanging above the counter said INFORMATION.

"Morning, miss," I said. "Is the courthouse closed today?"

"Oh, no," she said with a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Where is everybody?"

"Oh, they're all available." She indicated the switchboard. "I can have any official you want over here in ten minutes. They don't hang around here because we have so little business."

She laughed at my quizzical expression. "Kind of throws you at first, doesn't it? It took me some getting used to when I first came here. I've been in this job only a year. I'm from Holoyke. When I answered the ad for a secretarial position, I didn't realize I'd be practically running a whole county, but I'm clerk of the court, secretary to the D.A., the county clerk, the county recorder and the coroner, registrar of motor vehicles, switchboard operator and information clerk. My name's Emma Pruett."

The woman whose notary seal had been stamped to all the death certificates, I remembered. I said, "Doesn't anybody but you work around here? You're the staff?"

"When it's necessary. The population of the whole county is only about twenty-five hundred, and all the county jobs except mine and the sheriff's are part-time. The D.A. has his private law practice, for instance, and so does the county judge. The recorder of deeds runs a general store. The coroner's a practicing physician, and so on. The salaries of none of them are more than a few dollars a month. They hired me to coordinate things. I always know where to reach everybody when something comes up. The sheriff's usually around, but he happens to be over at the coffee shop at the moment."

It seemed a rather loose way to run a county government, but with such a small tax roll, it was a lot more practical than paying the salaries of a lot of full-time employees who had nothing to do.

I said, "If you're secretary to the county clerk, I guess you won't have to phone anyone. I just want to look up some death records to establish some insurance claims."

I handed her one of my cards and she studied it with interest. Then she got up from her chair, raised a gate in the counter and stepped out into the corridor. "Just follow me, Mr. Quinn."

She led me to the door labeled COUNTY CLERK and into the

room. Moving behind a counter there, she asked, "What year?"

"This one. July and August." I took out my list and looked at it. "The first one is Herman Potter, died July ninth."

"I remember that name," she said, lifting a large ledger from beneath the counter. "He was the first typhoid death. Only eighteen years old, too." She located the proper page and reversed the book so I could examine it.

After studying the entry, which matched my notes in every detail, I said, "Next is Mrs. Henrietta Skinner, July fifteenth."

She found that entry for me and it also checked out. Mrs. Martha Colvin, Mrs. Helen Jordan and Abel Hicks, who had died respectively on July twenty-first, August third and ninth, also checked out.

"Thanks," I said. "Do you happen to know an insurance broker named Paul Manners?"

She furrowed her brow, then shook her head. In an apologetic tone she said, "No. I know all of the townspeople by sight, but I still don't know all their names. Does he live in town?"

"His address is R.D. 1."

"That would be Ridge Road," she said. "He probably lives on a farm out that way. I don't know many of the farmers around here."

"Where do I find Doctor Emmet Parks? Is his office nearby?"

"Doc? Just go east on Main Street one block. It's a big frame house on the left. You can't miss it, because it's being remodeled into a new clinic and there'll be workmen around. It's also right next door to the post office."

I thanked her again, left the courthouse and drove one block east on Main. It wasn't hard to spot the doctor's house. The framework of a long, one-story addition was attached to one side of it and a couple of workmen were lathing the inside walls. Just west of the house, on the side opposite the new addition, was a small, one-room frame building with a sign above the door reading U.S. POST OFFICE.

Parking across the street, I went over and climbed the porch steps. The two workmen stopped pounding and one of them called, "If you're looking for Doc, he's next door at the post office."

At that moment a thin, elderly man carrying a cloth bag emerged from the post office. He was followed by a stocky, gray-haired man with a thick chest. The latter was in shirtsleeves and was smoking a pipe.

As the elderly man tossed his cloth bag into the back of a jeep parked in front of the post office and climbed under the wheel, the

pipe smoker said, "See you this afternoon, Joe." Then he glanced over at the porch and spotted me. As the jeep drove off, he came over and mounted the porch steps.

I asked, "Are you Dr. Emmet Parks?"

He took his pipe out of his mouth to examine me, then gave me a pleasant smile. He radiated such good nature, I instinctively liked him on sight.

"That's right, young fellow. What can I do for you?"

I handed him a card. "I would like to discuss some death certificates you recently signed in connection with some insurance claims."

After studying the card, he dropped it into his shirt pocket. "We can't talk over all this pounding," he said, indicating the two workmen, who had resumed nailing lath to the inside walls. "Come inside."

He led me into the house. The front room was set up as a waiting room, but no one was in it.

As we passed through this room to an office, he said with a touch of ruefulness, "I'm not snowed under by patients, despite being the only physician in this county. The people around here are too infernally healthy."

Inside the office he rounded a battered old desk to seat himself behind it and waved me to a chair. Beyond the office wall we could still hear the pounding of nails, but it was muffled enough so that we didn't have to raise our voices.

After relighting his pipe, he said, "I'd guess you about twenty-seven, Mr. Quinn. That close?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Married?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Don't wait too long," he advised. "Eventually you reach a point where you suddenly realize your chance to marry is gone. I've reached it. It gets rather lonely rattling around all alone in this big house. And it'll be even bigger when the clinic's finished. It's too late for me to start hunting for a wife now, so all I have to look forward to is a lonely old age. Don't make my mistake."

I thought of Anita, and wondered if I would still be trying to talk her into marrying me when I reached the doctor's age. "I'm agreeable to marriage," I said, "but my girl doesn't think I make enough money. She wants me to go into some kind of business for myself before she'll say yes."

"Beware of women with expensive tastes, Mr. Quinn. The more money you make, the more expensive their tastes become."

"This one is worth it," I assured him.

"The romantic faith of youth," he said with a rueful smile. "I won't burden you with more advice, because you wouldn't take it anyway. Now what death certificates do you want to ask me about?"

"Five deaths from typhoid this last July and August. Herman Potter, Henrietta Skinner, Martha Colvin, Helen Jordan and Abel Hicks. They were all insured for ten thousand dollars, each by different carriers, but through the same insurance broker, Paul Manners."

He took a puff of his pipe. "Uh-huh. What about them?"

"You were the medical examiner for each application, and also signed all five death certificates."

"Naturally. I'm the only physician in the county. You'll also find my signature on the coroner's reports if you want to check. I'm county coroner."

"It wasn't that which brought me here," I said. "All five claim-payment checks were endorsed to you and later cashed by you at a Holoyke bank. Can you explain that?"

Instead of seeming offended, the doctor looked amused. "You came all the way from the state capital just to ask about that, young fellow? They were cashed in Holoyke because that's where I have my account. Heather Ridge doesn't have a bank, and Holoyke is the nearest one. As to why they were endorsed to me, you don't know much about this country, do you?"

"Not much," I admitted. "It strikes me as a little backward."

"It's a century behind the times, Mr. Quinn. Back here in the hills people like lots of room, and don't trust the outside world. The farms in this area are huge, and largely uncultivatable. Three-fourths of the land is either heavily wooded or straight up and down. Geographically we're the seventh largest county in the state; in population we're the smallest. Farmers around here sometimes go months without seeing anyone but their own families. They've largely been forgotten by the outside world. Social workers never come prying into the hill country to make sure kids are attending school. Our illiteracy rate is probably fifty percent, although I don't believe anyone has ever bothered to make a survey. Begin to understand?"

"I'm afraid not," I confessed.

"Hill people don't put their money in banks. They hide it under the flooring. That's why there's no bank here. It wouldn't have enough customers to support it. Most hill people wouldn't have the faintest idea of how to go about cashing a check. They endorsed

them over to me so I could cash them in Holoyke and bring back the cash in hundred-dollar bills."

"Oh," I said. The explanation was that simple.

After a moment of thought, I said, "I guess that clears it up. I may as well see Paul Manners while I'm here, though. How do I find him?"

"You don't. He and his wife are in Florida for the winter."

I raised my eyebrows. "Do people from around here ordinarily vacation in Florida?"

He grinned. "Only Paul. He hit a windfall by becoming an insurance broker, because this is virgin territory. A lot of the townspeople have carried insurance for years, of course, but I doubt that any of the people back in the hills have ever before been approached by an insurance salesman. They wouldn't have bought from a stranger anyway. Paul was born and grew up in this area, and knows everybody in the county, so they trust him. I guess his commissions financed his Florida vacation."

"Well, I suppose it isn't really necessary to see him," I said. "Everything seems to be on the up-and-up."

"You may as well complete your investigation while you're here," Dr. Parks said. "It would be too bad if your superiors weren't satisfied, and sent you all the way back to dig some more. I have to make a call near the Potter place. Suppose you ride along and talk to the father of the Potter boy?"

Ed Morgan liked investigations to be thorough, and I thought I should interview at least one of the five beneficiaries to make sure the doctor was telling me the truth as to why all the checks had been endorsed to him.

"All right," I agreed.

Dr. Parks had to make a call at a farm a few miles out Ridge Road, where a child was in bed with measles. I waited in the car while he was inside. Afterward we drove about four miles farther on, to a well-kept farmhouse.

A tall, knobby-jointed man of about forty-five came from the barn when the doctor drove into the yard. I could also see a woman peeking through the curtains of a kitchen window, but she must have been too shy to come outside, because she stood there without moving all the time we were in the yard.

Dr. Parks introduced the man as Sidney Potter. He shook hands with me diffidently, obviously ill at ease in the presence of a city man.

"Mr. Quinn is an insurance investigator, Sid," the doctor explained. "He wants to ask some

questions about young Herman."

Sidney Potter's expression became sad. "The boy was only eighteen, Mr. Quinn. I only took out the insurance on him to save money for him to buy his own farm some day. I got another boy twenty, and I couldn't leave them both this farm. Doc advised me as how insurance was a way to save, not just get death benefits. I bought it for that, not to make a profit on my own boy's death."

"I understand," I said.

"We all tooken sick, but the Lord chose to save me and Minnie and our older boy, and just took Herman. Doc says the fever was from the well. He had me put some stuff in it, and we ain't had no trouble since."

"All the others were traceable to well water too," Dr. Parks said to me. "I've had them all treated and have been regularly testing the water, as well as the water from other wells all over the county. I'm county health officer, among my other duties."

I wanted to nail things down completely, since I had gone this far. I said, "You got your ten-thousand-dollar insurance payment all right, didn't you, Mr. Potter?"

The man gave me a suspicious look.

"Mr. Quinn works for the insurance company which sent you the money," Dr. Parks explained, not quite accurately. "He merely wants to make sure you got the check." He turned to me. "We don't have much theft around here, but naturally no one advertises keeping a lot of money around the place. No one aside from me knows Sid was paid an insurance claim. He's naturally a little hesitant about admitting it to strangers."

"I see. I won't tell anyone but my office, Mr. Potter. You did receive the check then?"

"Yeah," he said reluctantly. "Ten thousand dollars, for which I thank you kindly. I had Doc cash it for me over to Holoyke. It's hid real good, so you don't have to worry about nobody but me and Minnie ever finding it."

"That's all I wanted to know," I told him. "I guess that winds up my investigation, Doctor."

As we drove away, the woman was still peering through the kitchen curtains. Glancing back, I saw a boy of about twenty emerge from the barn, from where he apparently had been watching us all the time we were in the yard. When I called him to the doctor's attention, he glanced over his shoulder.

"That's Sid, Junior," he said. "The older boy. He's as shy of out-

siders as his mother. You noticed her standing in the kitchen window, I suppose."

"Uh-huh," I said. "I can understand how an insurance salesman from outside wouldn't stand a chance in these parts."

It was time for lunch when we got back to town. The doctor invited me to lunch with him and took me to a coffee shop on the square, presumably the same one where the sheriff had been when I visited the courthouse.

Dr. Parks knew every customer there, and introduced me to all of them. I met the sheriff, a fat, elderly man named Tom Gaines, District Attorney Charles Hayes, who was a middle-aged balding man, and an assortment of farmers and merchants. We sat at a table with the sheriff and the D.A.

Emma Pruett came in as we were ordering. "Hi, boss," she said to Dr. Parks, then smiled at the district attorney. "Hi, boss."

We all rose and the sheriff pulled up a chair for her to join us.

"Sheriff Gaines is about the only person at the courthouse who isn't my boss," she said to me. "I'm everybody's secretary or assistant."

"That's right, you do work for Dr. Parks, don't you?" I said. "You told me you were secretary to the coroner, among your other duties."

"Plus secretary to the county health officer and the county clerk." she said. "He's all three."

"You're county clerk?" I asked the doctor in surprise.

"We all wear multiple hats around here," he said with a grin. "County clerk is quite an important job. It pays a hundred and twenty dollars a year."

"Doc is also postmaster," District Attorney Hayes said. "He practically runs the county."

I gave the doctor another surprised look.

"That's a tough job too," he said. "The mail truck from Holoyke arrives at ten each morning. Sometimes there are as many as a dozen letters and packages. I sort the mail from about ten to ten-fifteen, and an old fellow named Joe Husbands delivers it. Joe's on duty at the post office, except when he's delivering the mail, to weigh packages and sell stamps. He gets maybe six customers a day."

"This is a real active place," Sheriff Gaines said sardonically. "I made eight arrests last year, all either for public drunkenness or disturbing the peace."

After lunch Dr. Parks drove me back to his house, where I picked up my car. I was entering the square, with the intention of driving around it and continuing on out of town, when I suddenly remembered a remark Sidney Potter had made, and also a comment the doctor had made while we were at the farm. A fantastic thought occurred to me. Changing my mind, I parked in front of the courthouse.

This time Sheriff Gaines was in his office. He gave me a smile of welcome.

"Sheriff, do you know Paul Manners?" I asked.

He looked blank. "Manners? No, I don't believe so."

"He's an insurance broker. Lives out on R.D. 1, or so I was told."

He gave his head a puzzled shake. "Only one I know around here who sells insurance is Doc. Parks. He even sold me my policy."

My thought hadn't been so fantastic after all. In fact, it had been the logical answer.

"Thanks," I said, and left the office.

Emma Pruett was again behind the information counter.

"May I bother you to look at some more records?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "It's a relief to have something to do for a change."

We returned to the county clerk's office. Consulting the notes I had taken on Paul Manners, I first looked up his birth registration. He was recorded as having been born on April 2, 1918. On his application for an insurance broker's license, he had listed his wife's maiden name as Gertrude Booker and her birth date as June 4, 1920. Sure enough, that record was on file too.

Just to see how thorough the doctor had been, I had Emma check for their marriage record. I didn't know the supposed date of marriage, but I guessed it would be no earlier than 1936, as Gertrude would have been sixteen then. Starting with that year, Em-

ma checked forward. The record showed they were married in 1940.

I had Emma check for the birth records of all five persons whose death claims had been paid, and found them all in order too. I had no doubt that in the cases of the eighty-year-old grandfather and the three married women, I would find birth records of their spouses and marriage records, but I didn't bother to look for them.

"Is there more than one undertaker in town?" I asked Emma.

"No, just Gerard Boggs. He's out past Doc Parks on East Main about a block and a half."

"Thanks," I said. "You've been very helpful."

I had a brief visit with the undertaker, then returned to the doctor's house. He seemed a little surprised to see me, but he courteously invited me into his office.

When we were both seated and he had his pipe going, I said, "I was on my way out of town when something Sidney Potter said, and something you said a few moments later, recurred to me. Potter said you had advised him that insurance was a way to save, and not just get death benefits. He didn't say Paul Manners advised him. He said *you*. I might have passed that, merely assuming Potter had come to you for advice after being contacted by the insurance salesman, if you hadn't mentioned a few moments later that no one but you and Potter knew he had received an insurance check. Now why wouldn't Paul Manners, who sold the policy and no doubt helped Potter prepare his claim, know that he'd received payment?"

The doctor puffed at his pipe and gazed at me through the smoke. "I forgot about Paul. Of course he'd know."

I grinned at him. "You're going to fight until you're counted out, are you, Doctor? I've been back to the courthouse since I last saw you. You did a remarkable job on the records. It's a matter of legal record that Paul Manners and his wife were both born, grew up and married. All five of those typhoid cases have their lives carefully recorded too. On paper they were all born, grew up, married and died. Except for young Herman Potter, of course. He was just born, grew to eighteen and died."

The doctor hiked his eyebrows. "What are you talking about?"

"I just came from Boggs' Funeral Home. He remembers conducting a funeral for Herman Potter, but he never heard of the other four typhoid victims."

Dr. Parks pursed his lips.

"Furthermore, neither Emma Pruett, Sheriff Gaines nor Gerard Boggs ever heard of Paul Manners,

which is a little odd considering he's the only insurance broker in the county, was born here and lived here all his life. Sheriff says you've been selling insurance."

"Hmm," the doctor said.

"It was quite clever of you to take me to see Mr. Potter. Herman Potter actually did die from typhoid, didn't he? I suppose that's what gave you the idea for the others. You created your own little typhoid epidemic by insuring, and later killing off, people who never existed except on paper."

Dr. Park's pipe had gone out. He relit it and puffed it slowly.

"Why did you risk taking me to see Potter, Doctor? I was ready to leave town. You must have sweated all the time we were there, hoping I wouldn't mention Paul Manners. And later, at the coffee shop, you must have sweated even harder."

He took his pipe from his mouth and regarded me with rueful sadness. "Impulse, Mr. Quinn. I hadn't thought it through. It seemed wise at the time to lull your suspicions completely, in case future claim payments in this area later came to your attention. The danger of your mentioning Paul Manners to Potter simply didn't occur to me until after I had extended the invitation. Inviting you to lunch was another mistake. I really didn't want to, but unfortunately I'm innately courteous, and I didn't know how to get out of it."

I studied him with a mixture of amusement and admiration. "This is the most brilliant insurance fraud I've ever run into, Doctor. You rightly guessed that insurance companies wouldn't be suspicious of claims where the doctor who originally examined the applicant also signed the death certificate, particularly from a community this small. But you knew they would never stomach the doctor also being the man who sold the policy. You created a Paul Manners on paper, boned up to pass the state insurance exam and took it in his name. As postmaster you catch every bit of mail coming into Heather Ridge. When letters addressed to the people the fake Manners had given as references came from the state licensing bureau, they were never delivered. You simply forged answers and sent back glowing recommendations. In two cases, that is. You had also given yourself as a reference, so you didn't have to forge that answer. In the same way, you caught the claim payment checks mailed to the mythical beneficiaries of the four mythical decedents. How many of the other policies you've written are on mythical people?"

"About half," he said in a low voice. "I've actually sold only elevens and other produce. Up until others are rather a financial burden. I've been planning to record a few more deaths."

"Why did you do it?" I asked. "A doctor shouldn't be that hard up for money."

He snorted. "In this area the doctor gets paid in eggs and chickens and other produce. Up until now I've really needed my salary as postmaster and the fees from my various county jobs. Besides, I wanted to build my clinic."

After a pause, he added candidly, "A little greed entered into it too. I've set aside only half the money, so far, for the clinic. I've earmarked the rest for the traveling I've always wanted to do. I don't suppose you're open for bribery?"

I examined him for some time, and silence built between us. Finally I said softly, "Try me."

"Hmm," he said. "How much?"

"Let's consider the service I can render, in addition to merely keeping my mouth shut, before we arrive at a figure," I said. "If I go back and give Paul Manners a clean bill of health, it's extremely unlikely you would ever be caught again. Even if something roused the association's suspicion again, almost certainly I would be the investigator sent, since I'm already in on the ground floor."

He gave me his most charming smile. "Your readiness to be bribed leads me to suspect you're thinking of your expensive young lady. It won't solve your problem, of course, because no matter how much you earn, she'll always want more. That's your affair, however. How much?"

"Fifty-fifty, including the forty thousand you've already taken."

He pursed his lips. "I've earmarked twenty-five thousand of that for the clinic. Also the premiums on my fictional policy holders are quite a drain, and I don't feel expenses should come all from my share. There's only about ten thousand left to divide."

"All right," I agreed. "I'll settle for five thousand now and fifty percent of all future take, less premium costs. That suit you?"

"It's considerably better than going to jail," he said with a smile.

I rose and held out my hand, palm up. "Now if I may have my first five-thousand-dollar fee, I'll be on my way. I'll be in correspondence with you."

Parks got the cash from the bedroom, and we parted cordially a few minutes later, me with five thousand dollars in my pocket and considerably richer future prospects.

Devotees of the hirsute groups, hearken well, "Even a single hair casts its shadow."

The Courtship of Jingoe Moon

by De Forbes

JENNY ROSE was her name and she was born without a hair on her head. Furthermore, not a hair ever grew and so it was fortunate that her father was Kingman Rose who was wealthy because he owned a movie studio, and who owned a movie studio because his father had created a movie studio out of an orange grove before Kingman Rose was born.

From the time that Jenny was two or so, and the specialists had convinced her mother that the little girl would never grow hair, she had worn wigs; handmade wigs of fine human hair, curled and set, kept on a wig block at night. Sometimes Jenny would awake in the darkness and cry out in fear, seeing the head, her head, there on the bureau, but her governess in those days was Miss Higginbotham, a no-nonsense English nanny who firmly believed that all American children were spoiled beyond redemption, so the head was never moved. Eventually, Jenny learned to stifle her cries, turn them into little whimpers and, at last, to keep them quietly loud inside.

Her first wigs were blonde. Her mother chose this shade because she kept her hair a careful color called Bashful Blonde and since Kingman Rose had turned gray early in life, it seemed that they looked well together as blonde-grays, made a matched set as it were. Later, as Jenny approached her teens, her mother ordered darker wigs on the supposition

that it would seem more natural since most blonde children became brownettes as they grew older.

Jenny was wearing pigtails when she fell in love with Gary Brant. He was making a picture (on loan) at her father's studio and he came to dinner one night.

He had such beautiful hair, dark, with distinguished touches of gray, and crisply waving. His lean, charming face grew bright from the warmth of his white-toothed smile. He recited the poem "Jenny Kissed Me" to her and she sat, tongue-tied, hopelessly lost in a surge of feeling she had never felt before, not for her mother nor her father, nor for anyone else. He was an angel, come to earth in the person of man with beautiful thick black and silver hair.

After school in those days she would order Collins, the chauffer, to take her by the studio and she would stand, a little brown pigtailed mouse, just watching him work. But all too soon the picture was finished and Gary got married again and went away, breaking Jenny's twelve-year-old heart.

Her next love happened without her even meeting the man. She'd gone with her parents to a preview and there he was, on the screen. Curt Dancaster was his name and he was on the fair side with strong, vigorous waving hair. His face was strong too, ugly sometimes, but gentling before her very eyes. He was wonderful, to Jenny's eyes, and she plotted to plant the idea in her father's mind that Curt should do a film for him.

"He's formed his own company," answered Kingman Rose crossly. Many of the stars were getting restless, were thinking of the vast amount of profits they imagined but never saw, were beginning to resent those profits. "And why shouldn't I make a buck?" Kingman grumbled to Mrs. Rose. "I put up my money on the gamble. I'm the one that takes the chances. Why shouldn't I make dough?" But Jenny paid little attention. She'd discovered where Curt's pictures were made, and she boldly and freely used her father's name to gain access.

"Yeah?" Curt was reported to have said when he was told that Kingman Rose's daughter was often on the set. "What does *she* want?"

What Jenny wanted was the pleasure of watching him, particularly when he made screen-love to his leading lady and she ran her fingers through his vigorous hair.

The day was bleak indeed when the company went on location, but Jenny's despair this time was of shorter duration because Jeter Fellers came almost immediately into

her life. He'd come over from England to make movies, and her father and mother gave a party for him. He wasn't as handsome as Gary nor as virile as Curt, but he had a wonderful kooky sense of humor and all that marvelous hair.

It was, incidentally, about this time that Kingman Rose was considering Jules Benner for a big part, and Jenny felt pleased later when she realized that her out-of-hand rejection of Mr. Benner had greatly influenced her father's decision. She *was* growing up.

Jenny now had several wigs, all the same tawny red-gold that she had decided was her color, but in different styles. One was even long and free-flowing, the hair caressing her neck and hanging down her back. She loved this wig and wore it so often that sometimes it didn't get cleaned and set as often as it should.

Bert Morris, from the Broadway theatre, seemed to Jenny the most perfect of her romances to date. He was younger than the others, short but still tall enough for her, and he had a great deal of hair, growing almost down his forehead. Now that she was nearly eighteen, she'd begun to feel that all this worship from afar left something to be desired so she plagued her father to ask Bert to take her out.

"What? What are you talking about? He's much too old for you. He's older than he looks, and you're only a child. Why don't you go out with boys your own age, somebody from that expensive school I send you to?"

Jenny blinked at him. She'd never even looked twice at one of them, those crew-cut callow youths. Nor, to be honest, had they paid much attention to her. She was sure they knew at school that she wore a wig, although how they knew was a mystery because she certainly had never told anyone. She'd learned about that when she was a very little girl and Bobby Bevans had pulled her wig off in kindergarten.

"Well, if you don't ask him to take me out, at least invite him to a party here at the house. I think he's cute."

Her father made some maybe-yes, maybe-no retort and Jenny saw that she would have to work on him further but in the midst of her planning, two things happened that changed her world.

Her father began producing television shows, and the Aphids came to America.

When the Aphids arrived in New York, hardly anyone in the United States had ever heard of them. As Jenny put it, "The sheep were Beatle minded." But, after an appearance on nationwide televi-

sion, they were the hottest attraction since Alvin Cresley. (Jenny once had a yen for him, but he kept pretty much to himself so it came to naught.)

Kingman Rose, urged by Jenny, flew to New York to meet with the Aphids' manager and came back triumphant. He had signed the Aphids for a series of three TV specials, and they were coming to Hollywood to make them.

Jenny knew, at once, that this was fate. She'd watched them on television and had been instantly attracted to all four of the boys, Tommy, Al, Ian and Jingoe. Their hair was longer than any of their competitors, for one thing. When she heard of their imminent arrival, she bought all the new fan mags, hot off the presses to meet the demand, and read every word.

Tommy was married, Al had a girl. That left Ian and Jingoe and, after careful consideration, Jenny chose Jingoe Moon. Of the four hirsute lads, he had the longest hair.

Neither Kingman Rose nor any member of his family went to the airport to meet the Aphids. There to rush them through thousands of screaming girls were motorcycle police and plainclothesmen and Dana Fielding, Kingman's faithful assistant. The plan was to form a flying wedge of policemen, hustle them out to a black limousine with side curtains, have the entire caravan roar off between shrieking motorcycles until out of sight, stop, switch the Aphids to Dana's plain blue four-door wagon, and send cycles and limousine, sirens ablare, into the city. Dana would bring Tommy, Al, Ian and Jingoe to the Rose house.

He did, only there was one hitch. There was a girl with them. Her name was Pert Tanny and she was Jingoe's fiancee.

Jenny's father said, "This is my wife, Mrs. Rose, and this is my daughter Jenny." Jenny, wearing her long, long hair, looked into Jingoe's gray-green eyes and was mesmerized. But her ears still worked well enough to hear, "Fiancee—Jingoe—Pert Tanny," and her eyes, when she moved them from Jingoe's face, could still examine and evaluate. What she saw spelled danger.

Pert was small and cuddly-looking. Her hair was the color of wheat, straight, shoulder length and shining. Her eyes were like blue star-sapphires and her figure was terrific, built on a small frame. Jenny could see that even her father, who was accustomed to glamor in strong doses, was impressed.

Since the Aphids were not safe from their public in a hotel, it had been arranged that they would

stay with the Roses. Room was found for Pert, and the five of them retired to freshen up after their cross-country plane ride.

Dana, looking disheveled and bedazed, asked for a straight Scotch to tide him over. "I've never seen anything like it," he muttered. "Even with cops all around us, they nearly tore us to pieces. Even me." He ruefully examined a rip in his jacket. "Really rough."

"I didn't realize that Jingoe was engaged," Jenny said casually. "Where did he meet her?"

"She was secretary to a publicity man in New York. According to Tommy, who says Jingoe is impulsive, but unlucky, it was love at first sight. 'We were beginning to think we'd never get the bloke married,' was the way he put it."

"Are they planning a wedding soon?"

"I'd guess so. Plans are for her to go back to England with them as soon as they finish their TV specials."

Jenny nodded pleasantly. Three weeks was all she had; three weeks in which to eliminate Pert Tanny and get Jingoe Moon for herself.

First she tried her father. "Don't you think it's bad policy for Jingoe to get married now? For his image, I mean. You know how girls are. They like to dream that somehow, somewhere he might pick them—if he is still single."

"Aw, that stuff's old hat. Marriage doesn't mean what it used to in this business. Too many divorces. The fans never give up. They figure he might be free any day."

No help there. He wouldn't raise a finger or put a foot down. Besides, to be practical, Jenny wasn't sure Jingoe would let anyone dictate to him. These young Englishmen seemed to have definite minds of their own.

The next step was Pert herself. Sunning beside the Roses' pool in their bikinis while the boys were busy rehearsing, Jenny and Pert indulged in girl talk. Jenny, observing the most satisfactory bulges in Pert's brief, white two-pieced suit, thought that her own designer-model in turquoise silk was adequately filled. Obviously if Pert were in absentia, Jenny could fit into the vacancy that would ensue, to wit: into Jingoe's arms.

"You know, Pert, I think you could make a career for yourself out here. My father was saying last night that you should have a screen test. If you're interested, I'd be glad to talk to him."

Pert shook her pretty head. "Not me. I never was the career girl type. I only went to work because I had to. Now, I'm perfectly happy to give it up and marry Jingoe.

And to live in England! I've wanted to go to London ever since I can remember. Now I'm going to live there! With Jingoe Moon! I can hardly believe it."

Jenny leaned back on the chaise and closed her eyes. She had expected it. She herself would have felt exactly the same way. But she had to try, because her only alternative took a bit of doing. Oh, it could be done, of course. But once begun, there was no backing out. For that reason, she wanted to be certain that Jingoe was worth the game.

She observed him as a part of the group. The others liked him. All their 'in' jokes revolved around Jingoe. That spoke well for his day-to-day relationships.

She watched him with Pert. He was considerate, willing to please but not wishy-washy in the least. Jenny approved. No girl wanted a man she could walk all over.

She liked the way he played his guitar and sang. He had a habit of tucking his chin in and dropping his head that caused his long reddish hair to fall forward over his face. It affected her, caused a strange excitement in her. When her father brought home a rehearsal tape, she ran it over and over in the den movie studio, all night long, for her private ecstasy. That's what the excitement turned out to be when she could put a name to it, ecstasy.

When dawn came, she turned off the projector and put the tape away. One week was nearly gone; one week of the three. Time to be practical. There were barely enough days left. Jingoe had noticed her, but that was all. Four-

teen days should be sufficient, should allow ample time, must allow ample time. But only if Pert departed from the scene—today.

The accident happened late that afternoon. The Aphids were down at Television City with Kingman Rose, taping the first of the spectaculars. Mrs. Rose had gone, as she did every Friday, to have lunch and bridge with her women's club. Denny, the gardener, was mowing the green expanse of lawn on the south side of the house, away from

the pool. He said later that Mr. Rose had ordered him to do so. "Looks ragged as hell out between the house and the tennis courts," was the way Mr. Rose put it, according to Denny. "Jenny and Mrs. Rose were remarking on it at breakfast."

Denny's story was, in fact, the most important testimony at the inquest. "This Miss Tanny, she was a house guest, stayed out by the pool a lot. Sometimes she'd get in the water, sometimes she'd just lie out in the sun with oil all over her. I don't think she was too good a swimmer. Whenever I saw her in the pool she was always hanging around the shallow end, hanging onto the edge.

"I had my lunch at noon," Denny continued, "and then I went back to my mowing. Miss Jenny wasn't feeling very well. I could see her sitting in her room in the morning, and then in the afternoon I got a glimpse of her lying in bed resting. Sleeping. When I came back from the tennis courts, I rolled them while I was at it, she was sitting up again, reading a book or something. No, she didn't see me, she had her back to me all the time. What do you mean by asking me that like I really didn't see her? I was there all afternoon, just like I said I was. You're not going to get me mixed up in this thing! That's how it happened."

The coroner, having murmured soothing words, urged Denny to tell of his discovery of the body.

"It was about four o'clock. Cook was having her afternoon nap. She sleeps for a couple of hours every day, regular as rain, so I didn't see nobody when I trundled the mower clear around the house out to the toolshed. I put it inside and went by the pool to my quarters over the garage. I found her then, floating on her face, dead as a mackerel, her yellow hair floating like seaweed on the water. It was awful, your honor. Something awful!"

The audience in the courtroom murmured in sympathy, and the verdict was death by accident.

"Jingoe," Jenny touched him gently on the arm, "I'm so sorry. If only I'd been feeling better that day, it never would have happened."

"You mustn't blame yourself, Ducks." Jingoe looked down at her soulfully. His long hair fell slightly forward over his face, and Jenny sighed.

The wedding, although of necessity impromptu, was quite a gala affair. There wasn't time to have a wedding gown made but Jenny was sincerely pleased to wear one, slightly altered, once worn by

vivacious Doris Gay in a movie.

Tommy served as best man and Ian and Al ushered. Guards at the gate and special police around the grounds kept out the riffraff, and the half a hundred invited guests seemed to enjoy themselves immensely under the huge tent set up on the south grounds near the tennis courts.

A helicopter flew the newlyweds to their honeymoon haven, Kingman Rose's little hideaway in the valley. As the chopper's blades cut through the bright blue sky, Jenny smiled at nothing, only half-listened to Jingoe's enthusiastic questions to the pilot. He had never flown in a copter before.

It had all worked perfectly. Who was it said all that foolishness about how the best laid plans of mice and men backfired on you? Mice and men, perhaps, but not Jenny Rose. Jenny Moon, she amended. Mrs. Jingoe Moon. The Mrs. Jingoe Moon.

People weren't meant to bear affliction for nothing, she mused. Take the matter of her hair. If she hadn't had a wig, she wouldn't have had a wig block. And, if she hadn't had a wig block and a wig, she could never have made Denny think she was sleeping in her room when she was actually in the pool pulling Pert under the water by her thick, shining hair.

She'd propped the wig on its form on the bed pillows, turned it away from the picture window, pulled the covers up to its chin. Pillows made the rest of 'Jenny', too. 'Jenny' could be clearly seen from the south lawn, she knew. She knew because she'd tested the arrangement before she'd needled her father into sending Denny to mow the south lawn.

No one could say she hadn't a head on her shoulders. Stifling an impulse to giggle at the dreadful pun, she only smiled more broadly as the copter settled toward earth.

"Cor!" said Jingoe when they got inside the ranch house. "This is a bit posh, isn't it, luv?"

"It's all right. Darling, we'll use two rooms, shall we? I don't mean to sleep in." She lowered her eyelashes. "I mean for our clothes, and to dress in." She blushed. She could feel her face grow warm and she was somewhat proud of her accomplishment.

Jingoe looked at her, frowned for a moment and then his face cleared. "That's a good thought. In case you—either of us is a bit shy, eh? Show me m'room, m'lady." He picked up two of the bags and followed her down the hall.

"There's a connecting bath between," she pointed out before

they entered their separate rooms.

"I'll knock when I'm ready." Jingoe grinned at her. Then he sobered, said, "You're sure you love me, Jenny? I can't quite believe it, you know."

"You have no idea how much."

"Good-o. I shan't be long," and he vanished behind the cypress door.

He kept calling to her as she changed into her lace negligee and gown. "Jolly well set up, this place. Silver doodads on my dressing table. Comb and brushes, even a letter opener."

"Yes." She slipped a cap of white lace roses over her head. There was a fringe of bangs across the front. It looked quite nice, she decided as she reached for the letter opener. Her father had slipped her an envelope as they were leaving and she was sure it contained money. But then she remembered she must hide the wig on its block in the closet, at least for now. She'd debated telling Jingoe but instantly discarded the idea. If she were terribly clever (and wasn't she?) he need never know.

She was opening the envelope when Jingoe said, "Ready or not, luv, here I come!"

"I'm ready, darling." She pushed at the flap with one finger, peeked in. Yes, it was a check. Dear father.

"Jenny, there's something I should tell you, I know you won't mind . . ."

She looked up at a stranger. Gone was his lovely hair, and left in its place was a half-bald head, thin stringy hair combed carefully back from a receding, no—receded—hairline; white skinned, shiny, an egg of a head fringed with sparse hair.

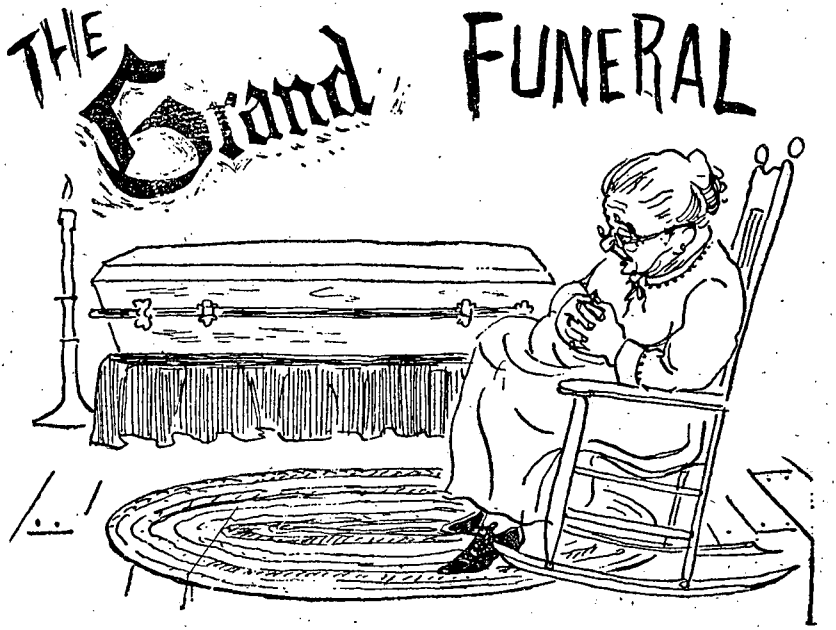
Jenny clenched the letter opener in her right fist and started toward him.

"We had to do it, you see," Jingoe was saying. "It was the Beatles that began it. After them, we knew we couldn't get a leg up without long hair. The others could grow it, but me . . ." He shrugged and grinned sheepishly, "So I got me this," and he held it up in front of her, his beautiful hair. It moved gently in the breeze as though it were alive.

The subject of a dirge is not necessarily required to be present at the festivities but, logically, neither can he with discretion be allowed to mingle with the guests.

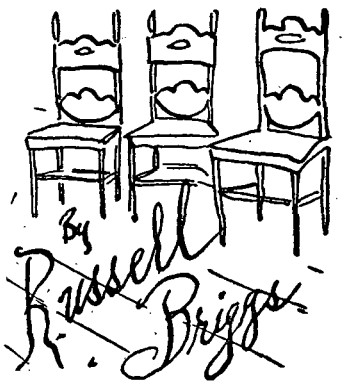
THE chunky little woman sat half crumpled in her timeworn rocking chair clutching a smoldering pipe, a great furrow making and breaking across her wrinkled brow. "Where is that boy, Maude?" Her mouth gummed the words as she spoke. "Ol' Flirt ain't never left me alone so long b'fore."

"Now, Grammy," said Maude as she shook the grate on the black cook stove and brushed back a straggling gray clump of hair with the back of her thin wrist, "Flirt's jest out hollering around in that new jalopy of his. Don't worry your head about the boy. He ain't of no consequence anyhow. Besides, he'll be home directly as soon as he gets a whiff of this supper



here. Now you just wait and see!"

The old woman's eyes peeked over the top of her spectacles. Most of what used to be called the *twinkle* was out of them now, but part of the time she still did manage to grasp the gist of what went on around her. Where her grandson, Flirt, was concerned, she was always more or less aware. "He's been gone the better part of two days now, ain't he? And don't you go around saying Flirt is a no-good, missy." The pipe crackled as she took a brisk draw on it, showing the spunk that her sons and daughters and grandchildren had



always expected and got from her.

"Sorry, Ma. But he's only been gone for a while. You've jest had a couple of naps since he left this morning." Maude wiped her hands on her apron and went to the door of the farmhouse. A car had just pulled up outside and she could tell by the sound of its engine that it was one of those newer models. Maude frowned as she usually did when she was tired. "Stay put, Grammy. I'm going t' see who it is. Ain't Flirt—I kin tell by the sound."

The screen door squawked as she stepped out on the cement block porch. By the twilight of the ember sky toward the west the yard broke up into dark shadows and dim primrose highlights. A few stars were making their first blinking appearances. Maude recognized the sheriff's patrol car by the outline of the siren on its top.

"Hello, Maude." The sheriff stepped up onto the small porch. He twisted the end of his metallic gray moustache and looked down at Maude sadly. "Well," he sighed, "I guess we always knew that one of these days I'd be paying you this visit."

Maude wiped her eye with the tip of her dirty apron. Her voice was barely audible. "It's Flirt. Is it bad?"

"'Fraid it's the worst."

"Wreck?"

"Found his car off the ravine road. Burned up."

"Oh, no." Her voice trailed off into a whisper.

"Weren't much left of him, Maude."

She slowly looked up at the sher-

iff. There were no tears. Rather, her face merely carried a blank look that said finally it had happened—what she always knew would happen sooner or later.

"Did Flirt have any kin other than you and Grammy? You're his aunt, ain't you?"

"Yes. His pa an' ma, my sister, and most of the kids live over in Randall County. Flirt lived with Ma and me because he was Ma's favorite grandson. Guess his folks ain't seen him for a long time though."

"Well, I'm real sorry to have to bring you and Grammy such bad news. Dern kid—must'a been doin' about ninety." The sheriff shook his head and exhaled with a soft whistle between his two large front teeth.

Maude sniffed. "Well, Sheriff, I ain't really ashamed to say it, but it don't touch me real hard that the boy is gone. It's jest going to be hard telling Grammy, that's all."

"Guess I know what you mean, Maude. Grammy won't do nothin' foolish, will she? You ain't got sleepin' pills or—"

"No, Sheriff. Jest some rat poison in the kitchen, and I don't expect that would occur to her."

"Let's hope not, eh?" He turned and stepped down off the porch. It was almost dark now. "The county'll take care of the remains if you like. 'Course you can always have a little funeral of your own anyway."

"Thank you, Sheriff." Maude pushed open the tattered screen door, and went back into the house.

"What was it, girl?" squeaked the old woman. "Did I hear ya mention Flirt's name out there?"

Maude walked slowly around behind the rocking chair and leaned on its high back, gently rocking the chair and the old woman to and fro. Her eyes stared into space. "Grammy," she finally said, "it appears that the Lord has taken young Flirt home."

"Eh? What's that ya said about my Flirt?" The old woman stopped the rocking by stomping both her feet onto the wooden floor with a thud.

"Now you rest back here, Ma." It was no use trying to be subtle with the old woman. Maude knew she would have to make it clear to her and then try to divert her attention so that bearing the reality of it would make a smaller load for the frail old shoulders.

"Flirt's gone and got killed in that car of his, Ma."

The silence spread long and dark like a night sky, and the old woman sat in it rigid as a granite gravestone. Maude walked around in front of her. The old woman stared straight ahead. Only God knew what thoughts wove in and

out of the ancient recesses of her mind. Her face had frozen into an expressionless pucker.

Maude knelt in front of the old woman. "Ma, we'll have a beautiful funeral for him. Been a long time since we had a funeral. Think of it—everybody knows that Flirt was your very favorite. Everybody—all our kin—the whole town will come to the funeral. And they'll all see you because everybody will want to pay their respects to you, Grammy. And it'll be a grand funeral. Won't be nobody who's anybody that'll miss it. Do you see it, Grammy—the grand, beautiful funeral we'll have for Flirt?"

Finally, the old woman's eyes warmed; the hint of a smile formed on the crinkled face. "Yep. An' we'll have the folks over from Randy County."

Maude knelt higher on one knee. It was going to work. Grammy wouldn't get depressed again until after the funeral. By then she could think up something else to divert the old woman's senses. "And we'll have some big suppers—and all the folks will be gathered around here. We can light the fireplace. And the preacher will be here to talk to all of us. And those—"

"Yep, we kin have that special funeral breakfast where everybody brings some cookin' from their own kitchens. Won't it be fine!"

By noon the following day Maude had an inexpensive, empty casket set up on a low bier in the parlor. Maude was tired. She had sat up with Grammy most of the night talking funeral, and now, while Grammy slept, she had made most of the arrangements for the bodyless funeral to be conducted from the farmhouse. The undertaker had understood the situation, and plans were being readied for ceremonies to commence in the evening. A number of guests were expected and the preacher would be on hand to pray with the mourners for the departed. Then Maude remembered she had to go into town to pick up some flowers and get some last-minute extra groceries for the grand meals that would have to be prepared.

The old woman awoke shortly after Maude's departure in the dilapidated 1940 station wagon. She toddled into the parlor and viewed the casket and the arrangement of chairs and benches with a gleeful smile. This would be an enjoyable weekend. As she moved about the room surveying her domain, the old screen door screeched and footsteps plodded into the kitchen.

"That you, Maude?" The old woman cocked her head for an answer.

"No, Grammy. It's me—Flirt."

"Flirt?" The old woman looked

at the casket and mumbled to herself. She scurried to the kitchen. "Why, Flirt! What you doin' here?"

"I'm fixin' t' get me something to eat."

The old woman watched him for several minutes suspiciously. Flirt was supposed to be dead. If he wasn't dead, what would happen to the funeral? "Where ya been, boy?" she asked.

"Oh, over at a gal's place—spent the night there. Her brother never came back with my car so I had to walk home through the woods."

The old woman moved with resolution. "Well, you *must* be hungry for sure. Let ol' Grammy rustle you up something to eat."

The shadows were laying long across the yard when Maude pulled in. The station wagon's radiator was hissing and steaming, and Maude looked almost as sorry as her car as she toted the brown paper bags into the house. "You're up, I see," Maude nodded at the old woman who sat in her rocker near the casket. "Lookin' good, too."

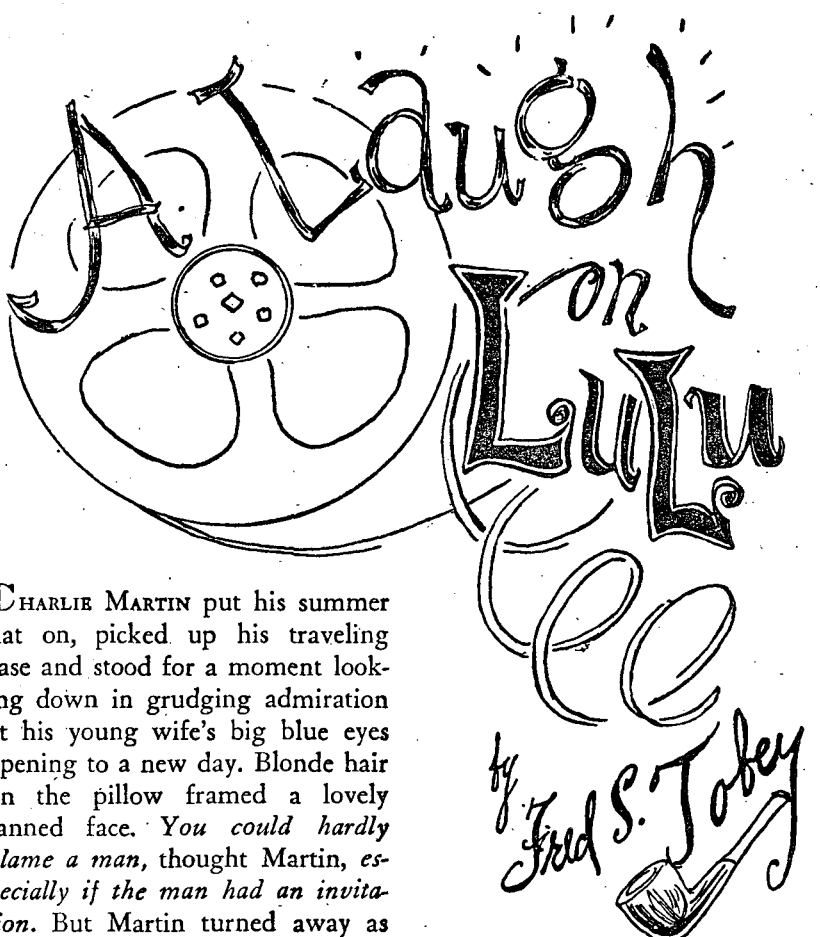
"Here, let me have those flowers. I'll fix 'em by the bier." The old woman took the small basket and jiggled the stems around enough to spread the blooms. She placed them and then moved them. She stepped back and viewed her work, and then placed them again. In this fashion, the old woman continued to tidy up around the casket until Maude had finished her chores and had seated herself with a heaving sigh.

"Folks'll be startin' to come soon," said Maude. She pulled herself out of her chair, left the room, and quickly returned with an armful of miscellaneous clothing and odds and ends. "Going to put his personal things in the casket before the folks start coming."

She opened the lid. The clothes and loose objects dashed to the floor and sprawled all about. Maude gasped. "It's Flirt!"

The old woman rocked back in her chair, then looked up, exhaling a puff of pipe smoke. "Course it's Flirt, missy. We're having *his* funeral, ain't we?"

Since walls may be endowed with ears, it is quite likely they may be gifted with other anatomical structures as well.



CHARLIE MARTIN put his summer hat on, picked up his traveling case and stood for a moment looking down in grudging admiration at his young wife's big blue eyes opening to a new day. Blonde hair on the pillow framed a lovely tanned face. *You could hardly blame a man,* thought Martin, *especially if the man had an invitation.* But Martin turned away as his wife raised her head for a parting kiss.

"I'll see you tomorrow night," he said, moving toward the door.

He did see her the next night, but she was not nearly as pretty, for by the next night Lulu Martin was dead of strangulation.

Detective Lieutenant James Malloy pushed past the small knot of people at the entrance to the apartment building. In the short corridor inside, a uniformed patrolman was standing by the open door of one of the ground floor apartments.

"Sergeant O'Neill here?" asked Malloy, as he approached.

Before the patrolman could answer, a man in civilian clothes appeared in the doorway.

"Come on in, Chief," he said. "I want to give you a run-down on this case before the man who lives here thinks of getting a lawyer to spring him loose from our boys down at the station."

"Ah," said Malloy. "One of those things." He lowered his unwieldy bulk into the biggest chair he could find, and Sergeant O'Neill pulled another around to face him.

"Here's the situation, Chief," said O'Neill. "A woman was strangled to death here last night. For a while I thought I was going to have the case wrapped up, but it didn't turn out that way. My best suspect is the man who lives in the next apartment, and I think he was about ready to confess, but now he's clammed up. Everything points to him though, so we took him in and booked him, and he was arraigned this morning. I was about ready to clear out of here, figuring we had all the evidence we were going to find in this apartment, but then something new came up. It's about tape recordings, and I'm lost when it comes to that stuff. I know you learned radio in the Navy so I figured you'd be right at home with it."

Malloy grunted. "I learned about passing the buck in the Navy too, but go ahead anyway."

"I'll hit the high spots first," O'Neill said, "and then fill in where you want. This apartment has been occupied by the Martins, Charles and Louise—Lulu, they call her. A young couple, no children. Last night Martin got home from a two-day business trip and found his wife strangled to death."

"He can prove he was away, I suppose?"

"I'll say he can. He has so many witnesses to prove he was in Schenectady that I wonder if he didn't think something was going to happen here. But let me give you the 'who's who' in this thing first, Chief, and then we can kick the details around. OK?"

"Go ahead, Frank, speak up."

O'Neill began flipping the pages of his notebook. "Let's start with Mrs. Martin. Twenty years old, born in the western part of the state—Milbury, if you know where that is. Won some local beauty prizes. Quite a dish, I'd say, from the snapshots. Dropped out of high school and came down to the city to model clothes for a department store. I guess the modeling didn't pan out, because pretty soon she went to work on assembly at Modern Electric. Then she got engaged to a guy named Billings, a shipper at the Modern Electric plant. Threw him over after a while and married Martin, probably because Martin talked faster and looked like a better meal ticket —that's my guess. They moved in here right away, about a year ago.

"Let's take Martin next. Martin is twenty-eight, a little fellow physically, but a real hotshot, a fast talker. Drives a fancy convertible. Strictly a self-made guy—put himself through radio school nights by working days selling hardware on the road. Then he switched to selling radios, and now he's what he calls a 'rep'—an agent for different electrical lines, or 'electronics', as he calls it. To hear him spout the jargon, you'd think he was a scientist at the university.

"I guess Martin has been doing pretty well, from the look of his car and the furnishings in this apartment. They tell me Lulu liked fancy stuff, and I guess Martin enjoyed spending the dough on her."

"Martin and his wife were getting along OK then?"

"If you let Martin tell it, yes. No marital problems, he says. He said goodbye to her at seven-thirty in the morning, drove to Schenectady, worked the territory, stayed overnight, drove back yesterday and got here about six p.m. He has plenty of good witnesses all along the way to prove he never got back here until then. He says he rang the apartment doorbell first, then used his key to get in. Just as he unlocked the door, a middle-aged woman named Ella Bellow, who lives in one of the upstairs apartments, looked down from the second floor landing and said she hoped everything was all right in his place, because there had been some strange noises in there the night before. Martin came in here and found his wife dead, slumped in that chair over there by the wall. She had a robe on over a nightgown."

"What about this Ella Bellow who spoke to him? Did she follow him in here?"

"Tried to, she says, but he had closed the door. She knocked a couple of times, and finally he

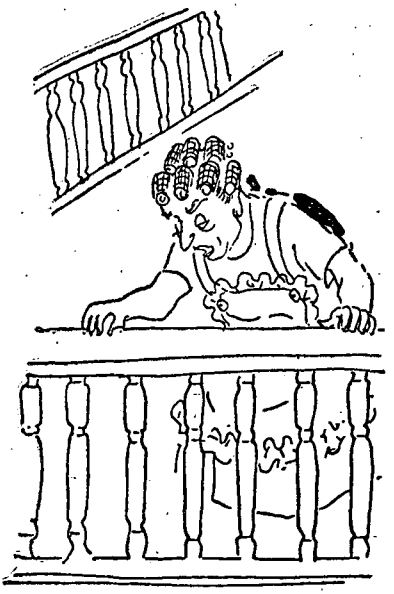
jerked the door open and said, 'My wife has been murdered!' "

"How long had she been dead?" Malloy asked.

"The doc says eighteen to twenty hours, which puts it at ten o'clock the night before, if you split the difference."

"All right. Now, who's your suspect, this man who lives in the next apartment?"

O'Neill flipped a couple of pages in his notebook. "Kenneth Pelham, thirty-two, a bank teller over at the Harley Street Trust. Lives in the apartment on the other side of that wall. Pelham is a big guy physically—" O'Neill looked up from his notes momentarily. "By the way, so is Billings, her ex-boyfriend at Modern Electric, but Billings is kind of the Greek god type, while Pelham runs to a good deal of fat as well as height."



"Just what, if anything," asked Malloy somewhat testily, "does the size and shape of these people have to do with the case?" He shifted his heavy frame to a different position on the inadequate chair.

"Only that it seems Lulu was one of these baby-doll girls who like to have big men around, Chief. Martin, who is a little bantam, resents them, I think. He calls Pelham 'Fatso'. Also, if Pelham did grab Lulu by the neck, he's big enough to have choked her with-

out half trying. That's a point, you know."

"All right, all right." Malloy shifted around in his chair some more. "But why do you suspect Pelham? You haven't told me that."

"Martin put us onto him—said he had suspected this character for some time of having a yen for his wife, and he'd warned her to keep the doors locked when he was away. He said the man had the reputation of having an uncontrollable temper, and had been in an institution for a while after some episode of violence. Naturally when we started questioning people in the building, this man's place was one of the first we went to. He's a bachelor, by the way, lives by himself.

"He didn't answer his bell, but we thought we could hear somebody in there, so we kept on making a racket at the door, and finally he came and opened it. He looked as if he hadn't slept for days, and he wasn't answering any questions at first, but the lab boys got busy and found his prints all over the Martin apartment, including some good ones on a briar pipe we picked up under that divan over there. When I showed him the pipe I thought for a minute he was going to confess, but all of a sudden he said he remembered he hadn't seen that pipe for a week, he'd lost it somewhere, and then he said if we wanted the man who'd killed Lulu, why didn't we go and see her old boyfriend, Billings? I asked why should I do that, and he said, 'Because Billings was here last night, that's why.' I asked him how he knew, and he said he heard him in here, talking to Lulu. She was calling him 'Billyboy', he says, and that's a pet name she used to have for Billings, when she was going around with him."

"How could he have heard that from the next apartment?"

"There's no soundproofing in these walls, Chief. I guess the builders are trying to cut costs these days."

"How does it happen that Pelham and Billings and Martin all know each other?"

"This bank where Pelham works is near Modern Electric. The plant workers cash their checks there, and Pelham got to know Lulu and Billings that way. Then, when Lulu married Martin and they were looking for a place to live, Pelham told them about this apartment, which was vacant, next to his."

"So you followed up on Billings. Any luck?"

"Not as far as pinning anything on Billings goes. What Pelham probably didn't know is that Bil-

lings had been on the night shift for a week, and there are at least ten people to testify that he couldn't possibly have been over here anywhere near the time Lulu was killed. Either Pelham was just looking for a scapegoat, or else he really did hear somebody in here and thought it was Billings. But Billings produced an interesting bit of information."

"What was that?"

"He admitted he had been seeing Lulu since she got married, but said he had steered clear recently because Lulu told him Martin had bugged the apartment with a tape recorder and microphones, and caught them one time when he was off on a trip.

"'She told me Martin said he'd kill her if she ever saw me again,' Billings said.

"Chief, if Martin really bugged the apartment and made some tapes, and we could find them, we might get a clue to what happened to Lulu. Martin swears he never did any spying, says either Billings is lying about it, or else Lulu gave him that story to keep him from bothering her. But Martin has been acting as if he couldn't wait for us to get out of here. Maybe there's something he wants to get at, wants to get rid of, but if it's a tape I don't know how to locate it. He's got hundreds of them in that big closet over there, along with his other electrical stuff."

"So you took Martin down to the station to give yourself a chance to hunt around for a sound tape that might have some evidence on it?"

"To give *you* a chance, Chief."

"Thanks a lot," said Malloy, then put his hands on the arms of his chair and used them to help him work his frame out of it. "Let's go take a look at Martin's electrical stuff. I might get some ideas for my own hi-fi hookup."

The sliding doors of the big closet disclosed an impressive array of sound equipment, including rows of shelves reaching to the ceiling, the shelves stacked with discs on edge, and reels of tape in boxes, the latter neatly numbered. Under a turntable and a tape recorder were a number of drawers. Malloy rummaged briefly through the electrical goods they contained, then picked up a small loose-leaf notebook and opened it.

"Index to the boxes of sound tape," he said. "May be helpful, though I don't imagine he'd list what we're looking for."

"There's something under the recorder there," said O'Neill. "Looks like a loose reel of tape." He put a finger under the recorder and managed to push the reel out. There was another behind it and

he fished that out with his pencil.

Malloy put one of the reels on the machine and got a scratchy rendition of Waring's Pennsylvanians playing Dardanella, followed by other numbers of the same early vintage. The second reel produced a succession of old-time vocal recordings.

"Funny those would be tucked in there," said Malloy, "when he's got everything else so neat. They sure aren't bug tapes."

Looking around the inside of the closet, Malloy reached up and poked at the cut end of a wire protruding from a hole in the plaster. "Microphone cable," he said. "Clipped off with cutters. Maybe our friend Martin did have the place bugged. At least we can find out where the cable goes. That wall would go with the Martins' bedroom, looks like. Where would the other side of it be, Frank? A room in Pelham's place?"

"Pelham's livingroom," said O'Neill. "There's a long closet there, matching this one. The wall where that wire goes is common between the Martins' bedroom and Pelham's livingroom."

"Then with a sensitive mike, Martin could have been able to record what went on in Pelham's place, as well as his own."

Malloy pulled at the end of the cut cable and a large piece of loose plaster fell toward him, hanging downward on a flap of the heavy paper, printed to imitate cedar, with which the inside of the closet was lined. He continued pulling the wire until he had withdrawn about three feet of it. Then he stopped.

"What is it?" O'Neill asked, straining to see past Malloy's shoulder. "What's he got there for a mike? Something special?"

"Holy catfish," said Malloy. "Well, I suppose I could have guessed."

Martin was furious. "What is this—Russia?" he wanted to know. "What's the idea of holding me here in the station with a guard over me? You've got absolutely no right—"

"Now, Mr. Martin," Malloy said placatingly, "Sergeant O'Neill felt he should hold you as a material witness to assure us of your testimony, but we now feel satisfied that you will be cooperative, and you are free this moment to go anywhere you choose."

"You mean I can go home right now?" Martin's belligerence began to subside.

"If you like. However, if you have the patience to give us a little assistance first, it might help to clarify the case against Pelham."

"What kind of assistance?"

"Pelham is being questioned over at the courthouse. He is uncooperative. If you were present he might be more inclined to give us straight answers."

"He's guilty as hell in my opinion. I'll do anything I can to help you prove it."

"That's what I hoped. So come along over with us for a few minutes."

At the courthouse jail they found Pelham sitting opposite a plainclothes detective at a long table. A stenographer was taking notes, while a uniformed patrolman paced back and forth slowly behind Pelham. The bank teller sat with his heavy shoulders hunched forward and his eyes fixed on his hands in front of him.

Malloy signalled Martin to sit at the end of the table, three chairs away from the prisoner.

"Mr. Pelham was arraigned this morning, Mr. Martin," Malloy said with a deceptive politeness that was capable of inducing a case of the shakes in some of his older ac-

quaintances, "and on the basis of our evidence the court found cause to hold him for the murder of your wife."

A look of relief appeared on Martin's face.

"However," Malloy went on, "certain allegations are being made that you can help us to clear up. For example, Mr. Pelham states that a man named Billings was in your apartment the night your wife was killed. Mr. Billings denies this, and furthermore claims that Mrs. Martin told him about a tape recording that you made of an earlier visit of his to your apartment, while you were absent."

"That's ridiculous," said Martin. "I never made any such tape, though I suppose Lulu might have told Billings something like that if he was annoying her and she was trying to scare him off. My wife was a very attractive girl, Lieutenant. Men were always bothering her. But anyway, it would be crazy to say I made a tape recording while I was away. I would have to be there to start the thing going, wouldn't I?"

"Oh, I guess you could do that with a timer. For a man with your knowledge of electronics it would be routine to start and stop a recorder about the time you thought something would be happening." Malloy turned to Pelham. "Mr. Pelham, what makes you so sure Billings was in the Martin apartment that night?"

Pelham looked up. "I told the sergeant I heard them talking in there and she was calling him 'Billy-boy'."

Malloy stepped to a desk at the side of the room and lifted an open newspaper, disclosing a small tape recorder. He flipped a switch to start it going.

"Did you hear something like this?" he asked.

As the reels began to revolve, a woman's voice came from the speaker, first in words that sounded like a whispered endearment, then dissolving into soft laughter.

Something about the words or the voice brought both Pelham and Martin to their feet, but the patrolman standing next to Pelham pressed the bank teller back into his chair again. Malloy turned off the recorder.

"So," said Martin, "you snoopers got to my tapes, did you?"

"There were one or two that seemed worth asking you about. Do I understand you are now saying you *did* make some recordings?"

Martin sat down. "Well, so what if I did? Is there anything illegal about making recordings in your own home?"

"Ordinarily, no. Nevertheless, I

believe it is time to point out to you that the stenographer is taking notes, and that anything you say here may be used in court."

"That's all right," said Martin. "It adds up to murder by Fatso there, any way you look at it."

"If by Fatso you mean Mr. Pelham," Malloy said, "I am now going to ask him to listen to a little more of this tape, and see what further comment he may wish to make." He turned the switch.

The woman's voice was back again, but stronger now and with a note of eagerness. "Oh, Billy-boy, you're so wonderful, so wonderful!"

A man's voice came out, muffled but loud. "We'll travel all over the world when we get the money, pet. Are you sure Pelham doesn't suspect a double-cross?"

Laughter from the woman, then some unidentifiable but suggestive murmurings. After a moment the man's voice came in again, strongly but as if spoken into a barrel. "You're right, darling. Pelham is too dumb to catch on. Just play along with him until he cleans out the bank and you and he get to Mexico. Then I'll meet you there and we'll get rid of the fat slob for good."

Pelham, listening, turned to look at Martin. "So you had your spy machine going that night, too, did you, Martin? Why did you wait till now to—"

Sergeant O'Neill interrupted. "Would you tell us about this little trip you and Mrs. Martin were planning, Pelham—financed by your bank?"

Pelham was looking at his hands again, rubbing the thumb of his left hand slowly back and forth across the palm of his right. "Yes, I'll tell you about it," he said, after a moment. "I figured out years ago how to swindle the bank, but it was just kind of a game then; I never really thought I'd do anything about it. But then Lulu came along and changed everything. I never had anybody like Lulu in my life before. She used to ask me in for a drink when Martin was away, and one night I told her about my scheme for embezzling money from the bank, and she said if I'd do it she'd go away with me, anywhere in the world.

"A few days ago she told me Martin had been bugging the apartment with microphones, and we'd have to quit seeing each other, except outside, until we were ready to go. I didn't know how she dared to let Billings in there that night. I guess she just didn't have much sense."

Pelham stopped talking and dropped his head into his hands.

"I suppose you know what's on

the rest of the tape, Mr. Pelham," Malloy said. "Must I play it?"

"No, no!" Pelham protested. "I don't want to hear it. I think I would have told you anyway, sooner or later. When I heard Lulu scheming with Billings to kill me after she and I got to Mexico with the money, I lost my head. First I ran to the Martins' patio door, but it was locked. I pounded on it but nobody came. I realized Billings might be getting out by the front entrance, so I ran back through my own apartment and went to the Martins' front door. That was locked, too, but after I banged on it for a while, Lulu came and opened it and let me in. By that time Billings had plenty of time to get away over the patio. Lulu acted like I was an intruder and swore Billings hadn't been there. I don't remember much then, except I know I grabbed Lulu by the throat, and by and by she was limp and I couldn't bring her to."

At the end of the table, Martin stood up. He appeared distraught. "Well, there's your confession," he said. "I'm going to leave now. I can't stand any more of this."

"You wish to go to your apartment?" Malloy asked.

"What do you care where I'm going? You've got your confession from Pelham."

"True. But if you are hoping to get that speaker out of your wall before we can find it, I might save you the bother. We did find it."

For a moment Martin looked as if he were going to have to sit down again, but he remained standing. "Speaker?" he said. "Why, you lousy snoopers!"

"Yes," Malloy said. "We snooped around in your closet and came upon the end of the wire that you clipped off. I imagine you meant to retrieve the speaker when you cut the wire, but your nosey neighbor, Ella Bellow, was rapping at the door and you had only a few moments. By the way, when you hid the sound tapes in the boxes that you took the old jazz tapes out of, you should have put the index in your pocket. With that index, after finding the jazz tapes loose under the recorder, it wasn't too hard to zero in on the tapes we were looking for. For a starter, we just looked up 'Waring.'

"But I'm ashamed to say I did expect a microphone to come out of that hole when I pulled the cable, and I was quite surprised when I got a speaker instead, complete with an acoustic mounting board to direct the sound toward Pelham's apartment so your wife wouldn't notice it. That was ingenious, Mr. Martin, and it showed careful thought."

"It was a joke," said Martin.

"The whole thing was just a joke on Lulu and Pelham."

"Is that so? Then you carry your humor to extraordinary lengths, Mr. Martin. We now know that you did 'bug' your apartment, learning that your wife entertained both Billings and Pelham on separate occasions. The record of this is on your tapes. You also discovered that your wife was inducing Pelham to rob his bank so she could run away with him.

"By editing the tapes and adding to them, you made up a composite tape of your own, dubbing in the part where Billings is supposed to be planning a double-cross with your wife. That item was original with you, Mr. Martin. In that section the voice is yours, if one listens carefully, though you did a fair job of making it sound like Billings. Of course, you knew it would be further muffled and modified when it was played back for Mr. Pelham's benefit through that speaker you planted in the wall.

"You then went away on a trip, setting a timer to play the tape that night, and taking care, no doubt, to warn your wife again that the apartment was 'bugged,' thus ensuring that she would keep Pelham out of the place and exciting his interest in anything that might be going on. That all adds up to quite a lot of work for a joke, Mr. Martin. How does it strike you?"

"It's not up to you to say how much work I'll do for a joke."

"Again, true," Malloy continued. "However, it was well known to you—and I am saying this for the record—that Mr. Pelham sometimes became violent when aroused. You knew, as did other tenants, that he attacked a rent collector who woke him up from a Sunday nap, and on that occasion it was you yourself who told the building manager that Pelham had been under observation after he pummeled a fellow-employee at the bank during an argument."

"Look, I'm just about sick of talking about this," said Martin. "You've got Pelham's confession and you've got nothing on me. All I did was try to play a joke. I put Pelham's real love scene with Lulu on the tape, so when Pelham heard it, thinking it was Billings, he'd really be listening to Lulu and himself. I thought that would serve him—"

Everyone had forgotten to watch Pelham, but at this point something made Martin turn to look at him, and the little man's face froze. The bank teller, understanding for the first time the full extent of what Martin had done to him, was rising from his chair. The patrolman assigned to guard him made a grab for him again, but Pelham

sent the man sprawling with a sweep of one hand, and in another second he had Martin by the throat and was pounding his head with murderous impact against the table top. Soon there were men pulling at Pelham like tugs around a ponderous liner, and by sheer force of numbers he was finally subdued and maneuvered back to his chair.

Martin stood uncertainly by the table, coughing and choking as if he were about to be ill. "Going home now," he mumbled, one hand fingering his throat.

"I'm afraid not," Malloy said. "We now have enough evidence to hold you, Mr. Martin."

Surprise restored some of the life to Martin's voice. "Hold *me?* You're crazy. You can't prove I did anything but play a joke."

Malloy held up a hand. "If it was a joke, Mr. Martin, why did you plant Pelham's pipe in your apartment?"

Martin straightened up in astonishment, and the hand that had been nursing his neck dropped to his side. "What the hell do you mean?" he said. "I don't know anything at all about anyone's pipe."

"Your neighbor Ella Bellow says you do. Miss Bellow appears to have been fascinated by what has been going on in your place since you moved in, Mr. Martin, and I doubt that you have done much of anything recently that she doesn't know about. When the sergeant and I talked with her today she recalled that last Monday, when she was watching from her own patio above, you carefully picked up a pipe from the table on Pelham's patio, and after looking around to see if anyone were watching, hurried back to your own apartment with it."

"Why, that sneaking, snooping—"

"You wanted that pipe so there would be sure to be some evidence that Pelham had been in your apartment, but instead, it provides the evidence that you meant to incite Pelham to kill your wife. The law says that makes you at least as guilty as he is. Mr. Martin, we are holding you, along with Mr. Pelham, for the murder of your wife."

Perseverance is certain to be rewarded if ". . . pullin' de grapevine shakes down a few bunches at leas'."

The Grapevine Harvest

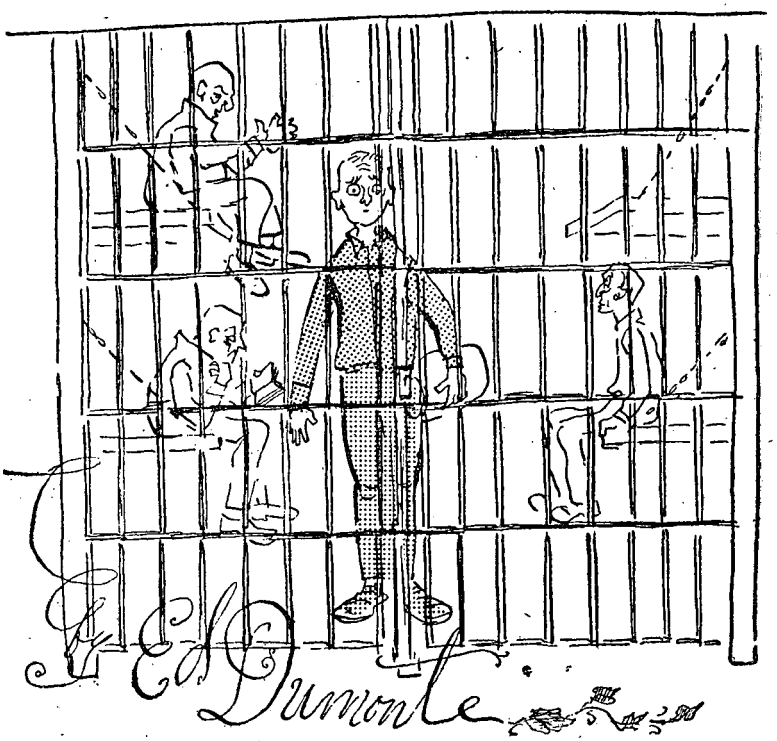
THE guard called, "Stand away from the doors!" and threw the switch that electrically opened the half dozen doors of the cell block. The boy standing outside the cell at the end of the block stepped inside the cage and the door slid into place behind him. Inside the cell, the boy watched the barred door roll across the opening he had come through and heard a note of finality in the snap of the electric lock.

The cell, nine feet wide by twelve feet deep, contained four bunks. The boy threw the roll of bedclothes he carried up to the top bunk on the right side, the only unoccupied one. Stepping on the foot of the bunk, he swung himself up and straightened out the bedding as best he could.

The three men in the cell had pointedly ignored the boy's entrance and continued their conversation. The man on the top bunk on the left side of the room was telling a story that seemed to involve considerable quantities of girls and booze, an interruption by a police patrol car and a good deal of violence. A skinny, sandy-haired man in the lower bunk had stories that matched or excelled each of the other's exploits, while a man wearing glasses in the lower right bunk read a paperback novel and looked up only for an occasional

halfhearted jibe at the other two.

After a few minutes the lights in the cells went out, leaving only the inspection lights in the corridor burning, and the conversation continued in semi-darkness. Gradually the silences between the stories became longer than the stories, and soon the men were asleep. If anyone heard a slight sniffling sound from the upper right bunk, it wasn't mentioned.



In the morning, Don was awakened by a rough hand on his shoulder.

"Hey there, boy, it's chow time," Charlie said. Don opened his eyes slowly and stared into the man's broad, dark face. "It ain't much, but it's all we got to offer."

"Hey, Charlie," the skinny man said, "I'll trade you my bowl of cereal for whatever fruit we get this morning. Sight unseen."

"Not me you won't, Red," Charlie said as the two left the cell. "I

wouldn't trade you rocks for diamonds without knowing what your angle was. You have a dishonest face."

When Don sat up in his bunk the cell was empty. He stared blindly at the wall of bars that formed one side of the cell and a wave of nameless terror swept over him. Fighting back a sensation of choking or suffocating, Don jumped down from the bunk and hurried out into the corridor.

The corridor, too, had a wall of bars. On the other side—the outside—a group of a half dozen trusties filled metal trays with food and passed them through a narrow slot in the bars of the room that served the prisoners as a dayroom.

Don fell into the chow line and accepted one of the trays. Some of the men stayed in the dayroom to eat at the single, long table that ran almost the entire length of the room. Others drifted away to their cells.

Don went back to his cell and sat on the edge of one of the lower bunks. He put the tray on his lap and stared at the bowl of cereal, the two pieces of cold toast, the orange, and the tin cup of coffee as though he didn't know what they were for.

After a moment the man with glasses came in with a tray and sat down to eat. Between bites he looked up from his food to study Don's face.

"The food's lousy, as usual," he said at last, "but you might as well eat it, kid. It's the only way to get rid of the stuff."

Don looked blankly at the other man, his mind still dazed by the things that had happened to him.

"Name's Wilson," the man muttered, turning away from the pain and bewilderment in the boy's face. "First day's always the worst. Get used to it after awhile."

"Seems like our roommate ain't much of a talkin' man," Charlie said, leaning against the door frame of the cell. Red stood behind the big man, peering at the boy through the bars. "But he don't need to be. Grapevine's got the word on him."

"His name's Markham," Red said. "Don Markham, nineteen. Waiting trial for grand theft. Seems like he copped a big rock from a jewelry store where he worked."

"First fall, too," Charlie went on. "Nothing on his record at all. He never even stole an apple from a peddler's cart. That's what comes of trying to get a home run off the first ball that's pitched you."

"I didn't do it," Don said quietly. When no one paid any attention to him, he raised his voice. "I said, I didn't do it! I never stole

a thing from old man Clemson. And he knows it."

"Sure you didn't, kid," Red said, his voice reeking with sympathy. "Just like Charlie here didn't stomp up those two cops, and Wilson didn't pigeon-drop that old lady out of her bankroll. And I certainly never forged those lousy five checks."

"You're only charged with forging three checks," Charlie pointed out.

"Well, I didn't forge five of them!"

"But I didn't," Don said. "I didn't even know the store had been robbed until the police arrested me. I'm innocent."

"So are we all, so are we all," Wilson murmured.

"I'm not," Charlie told them. He added, with a touch of pride, "I'm a victim of my environment."

"What's the story?" Wilson asked. "Stickup?"

"Not on your life," Red told him. "A real pro-type job. A fake break-in, a torch job on the safe, and one helluva good 'Who, me?' act."

"According to the police report," Charlie continued, "a squad car was sent to the jewelry store of Rudolph Clemson at 7:04 A.M. yesterday. The rear door had been jimmied open and the safe cracked. All that was missing was an unset five carat diamond valued at $25,000."

"Twenty-five grand for a five carat rock?" Wilson seemed incredulous.

"It's not a real big stone," Don put in, "but it's perfect. I've examined it with a loupe, a beautiful emerald-cut, blue-white diamond without a flaw."

"A couple of detectives arrived after the cops radioed in the story," Red picked up the narrative. "When the kid came to work they put the arm on him. He was indicted yesterday afternoon, his trial comes up next month."

"So what tripped him up?"

Charlie said, "First, the detectives found that the door wasn't really forced. Somebody put a few jimmy marks on the outside, then opened the door with a key or picked the lock, and there was something funny about the safe. The combination had been worked on the outside door, but an inside compartment had the lock burned out. According to the old man, the kid knew the combination but didn't have a key for the inside door, where the more valuable stuff was kept. Then, too, he didn't have an alibi. Gave 'em the 'home-in-bed' routine."

Wilson was silent a moment, looking Don over. Something like amusement touched the corners of

his mouth, then became a grimace.

"Looks like they got you pretty well fitted for that suit you'll be wearing for the next ten to twenty years," he said, "but I must admit it was a pretty good try for a beginner. You start big."

"I tell you I didn't take it," Don pleaded. "I wouldn't even know what to do with a $25,000 jewel."

"I bet I could think of a couple of interesting things," Red said wistfully.

Charlie was more helpful. "Why didn't you take it to the guy you sold hubcaps to as a kid? He might know somebody who could handle something that big."

"Hubcaps?" Don asked in bewilderment.

Charlie threw up his hands in despair.

"You know, the kid has a point," Wilson said thoughtfully. "After all, a diamond is no more use to you than a piece of glass unless you know how to peddle it. You say nothing else was taken, Charlie?"

"Only the big rock."

"Red, if you were in that safe what would you take?"

"Everything I could carry."

"Yeah, so would I. Once you've gone to the trouble of getting the box open, why not take all you can get away with? Did the fuzz find the rock?"

"Not a smell," Charlie said. "The kid didn't tip a thing; played clam all day yesterday. This Clemson bird even said he wouldn't press charges if the stone is returned."

"He just said that to impress Carrie," Don said. "He doesn't want her to know we had that fight last week."

"Who is Carrie?" Wilson asked.

"Carrie's his daughter. Last week I told him I wanted to marry her and she wanted to marry me. He said he wasn't going to let his daughter marry any wet-nosed, uneducated, talentless punk. But I'm not talentless; I'm a good jewelry designer, and I'll get better. I could support Carrie on what I make working at designing, and go to school nights. But Mr. Clemson wouldn't listen to me and pretty soon we were hollering at each other."

"So the way it looks," Wilson said, "the kid and the old man fight over the girl. In a few days, to get even, the kid breaks into the store to steal something—not a lot of little stuff he could get rid of at any hock shop, but a pretty good-sized stone that even a reputable fence might balk at handling.

"Because he's ignorant, he pulls the job so everything points right to him. He doesn't even bother to arrange an alibi for himself. Then he hides the diamond so well that

even the cops can't find it, and he doesn't crack under a full day of interrogation. When the old man offers to let him go if he'll return the stone, the kid refuses and decides to take what will almost certainly be a long prison term.

"Does anybody else notice a strong aroma of fish?"

"Long dead and not buried deep," Charlie agreed.

"Oh, I don't know," Red wasn't convinced. "Maybe that baby face conceals a wealth of criminal cunning."

Three heads turned to scrutinize Don carefully. Three heads turned away, shaking slowly in disbelief. That baby face didn't conceal a wealth of anything.

"You know what that means, don't you?" Wilson asked, as wheels in his head meshed into gear and began spinning rapidly.

"It means the kid was framed," Charlie said.

"Yeah, that too, but I had something more important in mind."

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that there is a $25,000 diamond floating around unaccounted for. Think about it."

All through lunch they thought about the $25,000 diamond. When the metal trays were returned to the dayroom and the men came back to their bunks for afternoon naps, they dreamed about the $25,000 diamond. It was a pleasant thought and it inspired sweet dreams.

After the evening meal had been served and the men had returned to the cell, they again began to talk about the $25,000 diamond.

"I think," Wilson said, "we're all agreed that the kid was framed." He waited for affirmative nods from the others before continuing. "And it doesn't have the mark of a professional job." More agreement. "Our logical conclusion, therefore, is that the old man did it himself to get the kid out of his hair."

"But that's silly," Don protested. "Why would he want to steal something so valuable from himself?"

"Forget it, son," Charlie said. "We'll explain it all to you later."

"All of which seems to indicate," Wilson went on, "that this Clemson bird has a good healthy instinct for larceny. That's good. That's the kind of man I like to work with, and I have an idea we may be able to transact a little business with Mr. Clemson."

"How can we do anything from in here?" Don asked.

"Well, there are ways, and there are ways," Wilson told him. "I have a few friends on the outside and some of them owe me favors."

"I have a few friends," Red said, "that I can buy favors from."

"I have a few friends," Charlie

said, "who'll do me favors . . . or else."

"And I have a scheme," Wilson concluded, "that is going to lose us all one friend."

Wilson outlined the scheme to the others, and the men spent the rest of the night making and coordinating their plans.

In the morning, after breakfast, there was a note concealed beneath Charlie's hand when he passed his tray through the bars to the trusty. The trusty took the note down to the ground floor kitchen where the trays were washed and slipped it to a cook's helper, also a trusty, who got it out of the building by pushing it through the heavy mesh covering a storeroom window.

Red asked for and received permission to make a phone call to his sister to have her bring some things he needed.

Wilson made arrangements to meet with his lawyer.

Don spent the day drawing. First, he sketched the Clemson diamond, then he designed a pendant incorporating two five carat diamonds. Red, too, was busy with pen and paper that day. The first document he created was an ownership history of the Clemson diamond. The second, with the help of notes and other handwriting samples found in Don's wallet, was a bill of sale in the amount of $25,000 signed by 'Rudolph Clemson.'

When the lawyer arrived later that day, Wilson was taken from the cell and led to a conference room. Under the desultory eye of a guard, Wilson and his lawyer, a tall, heavyset man with thinning hair and clear, grey eyes, were able to discuss Wilson's forthcoming trial. To make himself clear, Wilson made notes of significant points on the back of several sheets of paper he had. The lawyer glanced at the notes, placed the papers carefully in his briefcase and soon thereafter left the prison.

Back in the cell, Wilson was exultant. "The job is under way, boys. The seed is sown and soon the harvest shall be reaped."

"I don't see how anything can come of all this," Don said. "Old man Clemson will never admit he took the diamond, and unless he does, I'll never get out of here."

"Then let me try to explain it to you," Wilson said patiently. "We're pretty sure Clemson stole the diamond in order to collect the insurance and did it in such a way as to make you appear guilty. We want to get our hands on that stone—to steal it, you understand? —but we don't know where Clemson may have put it. To find out, we have given a man a description and your sketch of the diamond so he can get a synthetic stone that

closely resembles it. Then . . ."

The tall, heavyset man with thinning hair and clear, grey eyes gave Mr. Clemson his card: Alan Roland, Investment Consultant.

"I do hope you'll be able to help me, Mr. Clemson. I've been to practically every jeweler in town without success."

"I'm sure I'll be able to help you, Mr. Roland," Clemson said, rubbing his fat hands together and beaming confidently. "My shop may not be large, but it has a wide variety of quality merchandise."

"Yes, but my problem is somewhat unusual, I'm afraid. You see, I must duplicate a particular diamond—a rather large diamond."

Roland removed a small velvet packet from his coat and slowly unfolded the cloth. In his hand he held what appeared to be a five carat, emerald-cut diamond. He held it out for display briefly, then folded the cloth and replaced it in his pocket.

The smile left Clemson's face at the sight of the stone, and his eyes bugged in astonishment.

"Why, what's the matter, Mr. Clemson? Are you ill?"

"No . . . no," Clemson stammered. "It's just that . . . For a moment I thought I recognized the stone."

"No, Mr. Clemson, you must be mistaken. A man of your reputation would have no knowledge of this particular stone. It was, umm . . . imported into this country only last week."

"You mean it was . . ."

"I didn't say that," Roland said quickly. "It was merely that when I was offered the stone I recognized it immediately as something I've wanted a long time, and asked no questions. Well, what do you say, Mr. Clemson? Can you find me a mate for this little beauty?"

"No, I cannot," Clemson said in a voice meant to end the interview. "As you say, it is a difficult jewel to match. I don't know where such a diamond might be found."

"I was afraid not," Roland sighed, his face downfallen. "I need that particular stone very badly. You see, it is to be a part of . . . Here, let me show you." Roland took a sketch from an inside pocket and spread it on the desk between them. "The pendant is a part of a jewel collection that was in my mother's family for generations. The collection is still complete, except for this one piece which was stolen long ago and presumably broken up by the thieves for easier resale. I have been hoping to reconstruct the pendant and give it to my mother for her birthday this year. When I found the first stone I thought I had a

chance, but now I see I'm no closer than I ever was."

Roland looked across the desk at the other man, his face a mask of despair, his voice filled with tears. "I tell you, Clemson, I'm a desperate man. I'd pay forty thousand dollars to have such a stone. But it must be soon."

"Forty—" Clemson's ruddy face paled slightly, his fingers gripped the edge of the desk. "Forty thousand. Wait, don't leave, Mr. Roland! Ordinarily I would not do such a thing, but for a man in your desperate circumstances, perhaps—just perhaps—I may know of such a diamond."

"I would be eternally grateful to you."

"This must be done in the strictest confidence, you understand?"

"Confidence is precisely what I had in mind, Mr. Clemson."

"The stone is, as you say, of uncertain origin. It must be a cash transaction, and I can guarantee you nothing except that the stone is genuine."

"Yes, of course, I understand."

"It might be best to conduct our business someplace other than my store. My home, perhaps. Would that suit you?"

"Your home? Certainly," Roland said, "but it must be quickly. Would tomorrow morning be too soon?"

"I think it can be arranged. Tomorrow morning, then, at my home."

"Once we have an idea of where the diamond will be, it's easy," Wilson said. "With the layouts you've given us of Clemson's store and home, it'll be a simple matter for Charlie's men."

In the dark of night, three men stealthily approached the back door of the house. One of the men crouched over the door lock with a flexible wire pick and a penlight. Soon, all three disappeared into the house.

They walked quickly through the house to the study, entered it and closed the door behind them. They pulled a picture aside to reveal a recessed safe. The man who had opened the door started to work again.

When the safe was open, they removed a small, black leather box and opened it to reveal an emerald-cut diamond cushioned in a nest of purple velvet. In the pale glow of the penlight the stone sparkled brilliantly. They removed the stone and replaced it with another that was almost identical, then put the box back in the safe, and left the house.

"With the synthetic diamond in place of the real one," Wilson said,

"and nothing to indicate he's been robbed, Clemson will never know what happened. With the bill of sale Red made out, our man will be able to sell that stone for almost full market value. And when the insurance investigators turn up the diamond and the bill of sale—and you may be sure they will—they'll know Clemson was pulling a fast one and trying to frame you, and they'll set you free. Now, do you understand?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Don said glumly. "But it all sounds so—criminal."

Wilson and Red and Charlie looked at each other in amazement. It had never been presented to them in quite that way before.

A couple of days later, a trusty who worked in the garage servicing the city's squad cars removed a rear hubcap from one of the cars. From inside the hubcap he took a small, oilskin wrapped package that had been taped there. When he was returned to his cell for lunch he gave the package to one of the sweepers.

Somewhere in the course of the sweeper's regular rounds, the package slipped from his pocket and an accidental bump of the broom pushed it through the bars from the corridor to the cell block.

Charlie, who happened to be sitting with his back against the bars, laid his hand over the package and casually got up to walk to the back of the cell. The men gloated silently as Wilson riffled through a stack of bills.

That evening the grapevine brought the news that Don was going to be released. He rolled up his bedding and placed it on the floor in front of the door. Wilson caught his shoulder and turned him around to talk to him.

"Hey, kid, I've got something to tell you," he began. "I was supposed to . . . That is, the boys told me to say . . . Well, it's a wedding present for Carrie."

He thrust a small roll of bills into the boy's hand and walked back to his bunk.

The guard called, "Stand away from the doors!" and threw the switch that electrically opened the half dozen doors of the cell block. Don stepped outside the cage, and the door slid into place behind him.

The guard led Don to the end of the corridor and unlocked the solid steel door leading out of the cell block. Don looked back, but the men in the cell at the end of the block were paying no more attention to his departure than they had to his arrival. He walked out of the cell block, and the huge door clanged shut behind him and was locked.

One who is a persistent slave to unrestraint is apt to learn ultimately the folly of his unstinting bondage.

THE CHIMNEY

by L. Oliver

BART FARNSWORTH rattled the damper of the bedroom fireplace and cursed it almost gently. After all, it was his own fault the old flue worked badly, but a man doesn't spend money on a house he's deserting.

"Old place'll burn down around your ears one of these days," the furnace man had told him, "unless you spend two, maybe three thousand on those chimneys."

Funny how that single remark had triggered Bart to action. Well, that on top of Jane's, "Why should I divorce Chet? He isn't buying me minks maybe, but if I wait for you to inherit that bank, I'll be too old to wear them."

The two remarks combined, about a year ago now, had set him in action. Almost before the furnace man had left the house that fall afternoon, Bart had started exercising his creativity on the bank's books. Now the small bundle of pa-

pers burned merrily. Bart smiled as he watched the evidence of grand larceny disappear before his eyes.

It had been almost too simple, but then he prided himself on meticulous attention to detail. Even as he milked the bank, reinvesting the capital privately elsewhere, he got himself elected city treasurer. That way he was able to rob not only the Farnsworth Bank but Bayton Village as well. He had completed both jobs skillfully.

The bank losses wouldn't be discovered before the state auditor's arrival, unlikely before another five weeks. The full extent of the village losses would surely be discovered simultaneously. And *full* extent, it was! With every appearance of wisdom he had managed to forestall the new addition to the Junior High. Money kept in the coffers—for himself! In the face of some pretty outspoken criticism, he'd even carried the day against the water system the village had planned to install this past summer.

"We can't run a decent fire department with a pumper tank on a truck," Mac Donohue, the fire chief, had argued. "Why, we have to go back to the creek to refill that darn tank half a dozen times during a fire."

"Yeah, it's all right for you, Bart," Pete Smith had backed up Mac. "You've got a pond out back, but without a water system and fire hydrants the rest of us might as well have a bucket brigade for a fire department."

Still when Bart had forced the issue to a vote—immediate water plus an increase in taxes versus another postponement—Bart won. The village waterworks would wait and the village treasury stay intact—for him!

So Barton Farnsworth could now disappear from Bayton Village, and the wealthy Martin Craig would appear, elsewhere, to live in luxury with his beautiful blonde wife.

He smiled as he checked his watch. Five-fifteen on a Friday afternoon. At five-thirty Jane would come out of the door of the house next door, after leaving a note for Chet saying she'd had an urgent call from her sister, Marge, that the children were sick and she'd gone to help Marge for the weekend. With luck, Chet wouldn't suspect anything before Sunday night. By then Bart and Jane would be out of the country. He'd thought of everything.

He frowned slightly as he saw Jane close the back door of her house and start across the yard. She was fifteen minutes early. Probably nervous; no need to be.

He set a screen across the fireplace and started out to meet her. At the door he paused, returned to a chest of drawers, extracted a small revolver, then left the bedroom. He got downstairs as she let herself in the back.

"Bart?" The late afternoon sun glinted on her blonde hair.

"You're early, darling."

"I phoned Chet. I knew he'd phone Marge's if I just left a note."

"For pete's sakes, I told you—"

"We haven't time to argue. He insisted on coming home to drive me over."

"You should have stopped him!"

"We've got to get away right now. I left a note saying Marge's husband picked me up."

"Of all the stupid—"

"Don't be angry with me, please. I'm so scared, Bart."

"Baby!" He wrapped her in his arms. She was the one thing that could melt him to insensibility. He kissed her fleetingly, then more slowly. He had waited so unbearably long. It was all so near. Before he released her he heard his name.

"Bart! Bart Farnsworth!" It was Chet's voice, loud and excited.

"Bart, he's coming!"

"Shut up. He couldn't know."

"I was afraid he'd guess. He was suspicious."

"Stay here. I'll handle this."

His mind worked coolly even as he heard Chet bang through the door, run into the livingroom and back out to call up the stairs. "Bart!"

Bart stepped from the back into the wide front hall. "Yes, Chet?"

His neighbor turned, face distorted even before he glanced down to see the glint of the gun. There was a look of shock, nothing more, before the single report crumpled Chet's body.

Bart grabbed his trench coat from the closet and wrapped it around the man before blood touched the carpet. His mind was racing. "Jane, get in the car. I'll handle this." It was all to the good. Dispose of Chet's body and it might be weeks before Jane was missed. But where? Not in the house. When he was missed, they'd check here and find Chet. Where?

The fish pond, of course. Once, the big, oval old-fashioned pool had been kept clear and sparkling. But you don't bother about a fish pond you're leaving, more's the luck! The water now was dirty, leaf-blanketed. Feeling almost no strain, Bart lugged the heavy body to the back door. He wouldn't be seen through the trees. Two scrolled, white iron benches sat on either edge of the pond. He dropped Chet onto one, lifted his legs and quickly but securely fas-

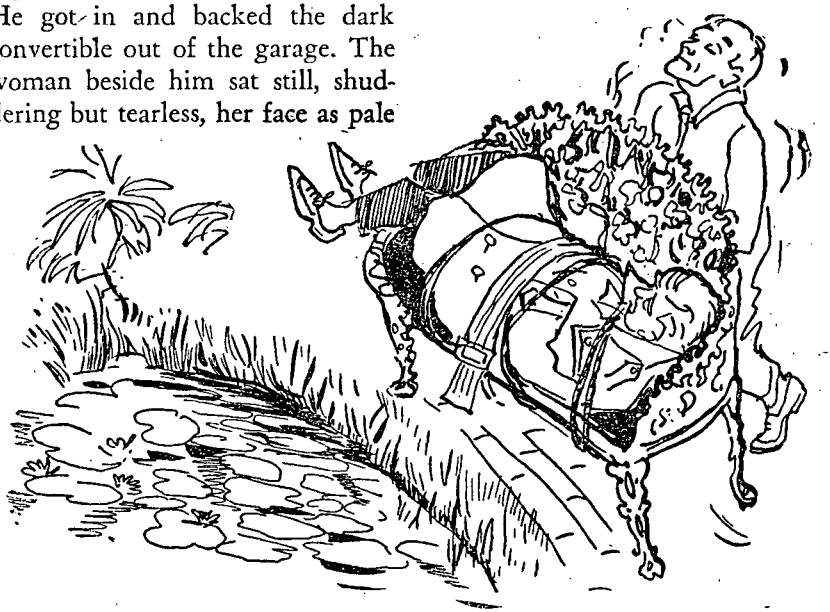
tened the body with the belt of the trench coat to the bench. With a strength he never knew he had, he heaved the love seat over the edge of the pond. It sank. The murky waters closed over it. Almost immediately the blanket of leaves began to sift back from their disturbed position. It would be months, maybe years, before the pond, fed by rains and winter snows, would disclose its ugly secret.

Bart felt jubilant. It was almost too perfect.

He ran back through the house, locking doors. The door between the house and garage was self-locking. He slammed it behind him. He got in and backed the dark convertible out of the garage. The woman beside him sat still, shuddering but tearless, her face as pale as her hair. Now even she was trapped, and could never leave him. Oh, this was perfect!

He stopped the car and went back to pull down the garage door. Take it easy; no need to rush. Two hours to drive to Chicago and make their plane—plenty of time. He walked back to the car and, keeping it in reverse, started back out the drive, around the bend of the house, and almost collided with the rear end of the Bayton Village Fire Department pumper backing in.

He leaped from the convertible as Mac Donohue and several firemen dropped from the truck.



"What are you doing? Get out of here. I've got a plane to make." He might as well have been trying to shout down the wind. Nobody heard; nobody answered.

Two slickered men ran toward the house with a hose. Two others had already reached the fish pond with the suction hose that fed the pumper tank.

"Didn't you hear me? I've got to get out of here!" The sound of the truck's pump motor drowned him out. He looked around. The drive led nowhere but forward into the garage or backward into the truck.

"Mac! Pete! Listen to me."

"Take it easy, Bart." It was Pete Smith, appearing around the side of the truck. "We'll do our best. You're just plain lucky, boy, that Chet could see the blaze on the roof from his driveway. Must've started in the chimney."

"Chet?"

"He warned you, didn't he? He put in the call and said he was racing over here in case you were home, maybe sleeping."

"Chet! Chet came because he saw a flame?"

"Now pull yourself together. Sure, I know what this place means to you, but as I said, you're lucky. Chances are we can save it if the water in the fishpond holds out."

Bart felt the shaking where it started, at his fingertips. He felt it travel through his hands, up his arms, felt it pass down his body till he shook, all of him, violently, his entire body pulsing, beating, thumping in rhythm with the motor of the pumper.

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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

The degree of contrition one feels, it seems, is relevant to the attributive transgression.

By Clayton Matthews

WARD ROBERTS, forty-five, a bachelor, a tax consultant and investment counselor, had his own small firm, quite successful, with five employees. He was content with his life. He liked the neatness, the dependability, the symmetry, of figures.

If Carla Strong, recently widowed, in coming to his firm for help in making out her income tax return had chosen a time some weeks earlier, it was likely Ward would never have met her. But Carla came the week of April fifteenth and the firm was snowed under. Ward happened to have a few minutes to spare between appointments, so—kismet, or so Ward liked to believe in the weeks that followed.

Carla was a natural blonde with a bubbling, freshly-scrubbed beauty, but a real scatterbrain about money matters. Her bookkeeping was atrocious. To Carla, a receipt was something you used as a cooking guideline; guideline, because it wasn't in her to follow any instruction, printed or otherwise, exactly. Her person was immaculate, but her housekeeping was not, and

she was always late for appointments. Fifteen years younger than Ward, she looked even younger. Her first husband, dying of an early coronary, had left her a small fortune that Ward felt certain she would have frittered away, if she hadn't been fortunate enough to come into his office.

She was, in short, all the things Ward was not, but he found her wholly delightful, and he tumbled into love with all the tumult that accompanies a first love. It was his intention to propose in the proper surroundings, with candlelight and wine, a bird under glass, perhaps even violin music in the background. It didn't quite work out that way.

He made reservations in the right restaurant and telephoned instructions to the maitre d' as to exactly what he wanted. But Carla was late; not a few minutes late which might have been all right, but an hour and a half late, and the restaurant Ward had selected took a very dim view of late arrivals. They never held a table over thirty minutes.

Carla was properly apologetic about her tardiness and she had used the time to good advantage. She glowed, she sparkled, she was gorgeous, and Ward's annoyance slunk away without a whimper.

The restaurant they finally dined in was clean, the food more than adequate, and the words fell from Ward's lips without benefit of candlelight: "Carla, will you marry me?"

"Of course, Ward."

He gulped, he felt himself turning pale, he stammered. "You will?"

"Darling, did you think I wouldn't?" Her hand floated across the table and came to rest in his. "I thought you'd never ask me."

More was said, endearments exchanged, eternal fidelity sworn, plans made, but such was Ward's ecstatic state he had little clear recollection.

When the waiter came with the check, Ward double-checked the figures, consulting the menu he had requested to be left at the table for just that purpose.

"Why do you always do that, darling?"

Ward didn't look up. "Do what?"

"I've noticed you always total up a check. Don't you trust the waiter?"

Ward glanced up with just a twinge of irritation. He forced a smile. "It isn't a matter of trust, dear. Everyone's capable of error."

"I've wondered, is all. I know you're not stingy."

Perhaps it was her last remark

which prompted Ward to tip twenty per cent instead of his usual fifteen.

Carla suggested a wedding date one month hence. Ward was agreeable.

They had their last evening out together three nights before the wedding. This time Carla was on time and they dined at the restaurant Ward had originally picked as the site for his proposal. They dined well and wined well, and were bubbly with wine and honeymoon anticipation as they rode the elevator up to Carla's floor.

Carla had forgotten her key. She dumped the contents of her purse on the floor and rummaged. From all fours she glanced up at him and giggled. "It ain't here, darling. It just ain't."

"Don't you always check for your key when going out?" he asked, a slight edge to his words.

She smiled serenely. "Who checks?"

Ward always did, but he thought it perhaps undiplomatic to bring that up just then. Instead, he went about unearthing a building super who was grumpy at being routed out of bed at one in the morning.

The honeymoon went swimmingly. The days were glorious, the nights even more so. Ward acquired a mahogany tan and didn't think it possible to love anyone as much as he did his lovely Carla.

A couple of flies buzzed into the ointment in the form of telephone calls from the office. He'd left a number where he could be reached in the event the necessity arose. Carla thought he should have shut himself away from all such mundane considerations, but a man couldn't expect a woman to understand things like that, especially a woman like Carla.

Ward still totaled checks and made sure they weren't locked out of their suite. Carla voiced a few comments but always in a good humor.

They had decided to consolidate their two apartments into one large apartment, in a modern glass-and-steel building out on Wilshire. Arrangements had been made before they left for furniture for the new apartment, their personal belongings moved in, even their mail forwarded.

The first item requiring Ward's attention on their return was a stack of mail, some addressed to him, some to Carla, some to Mr. and Mrs. Roberts.

Carla groaned. "You open them, darling. Mine will be mostly bills, anyway. I'll leave all that in your very capable hands."

Ward attacked the mail with good spirits, good spirits which rapidly turned into dismay. He had

assumed Carla's bills would be for clothes, et cetera, purchased for the wedding and the honeymoon. Ward had a horror of unpaid bills. His horror was doubled when he discovered some of Carla's bills dated back before he even knew her. Most creditors threatened dire consequences unless payment was prompt. A number of the threats were directed to the immediate attention of Mr. Ward Roberts. With what he considered admirable restraint, Ward called this to Carla's attention.

She pouted prettily. "You know how I am about money, darling. Just don't fuss so."

The new apartment had His and Hers bathrooms. Ward liked his toilet articles arranged just so in the medicine cabinet, so he could, if the necessity ever arose, find his razor in the dark, said razor always in the far right corner of the second shelf.

Two weeks after their return, he went into the bathroom one morning, reached for the razor and his fingers closed on nothing. He finally found it on the bottom shelf behind a bottle of mouthwash. It was without a blade, and he was positive there had been one in it when he had put the razor away. He was careful about things like that. He asked, quite casually, "Carla, have you been using my razor?" He hoped she hadn't.

"Yes, darling," she said blithely. "Mine is rusted shut. I used yours to shave my legs."

He concealed a shudder. "I like my things, razor included, kept in the same place."

"Darling, there's no need to raise your voice." She arched her eyebrows at him. "A fuss over a silly old razor?"

After a dangerous moment, he said, "Perhaps you're right. I've lived alone too long."

"That's it, darling. We'll both have to adjust a little."

It seemed to Ward *he* was doing all the adjusting.

Carla was a clutterer. She hit a room like a tornado. Sometimes, when they'd been out to dinner and came home late, she'd start undressing the moment she entered the front door and leave a trail of discarded clothes behind her all the way to the bathroom.

Ward began cleaning up after her, even emptying ashtrays. He got to the point where he would empty an ashtray holding only one cigarette. Carla chided him. He started doing it furtively behind her back. The fact that he didn't smoke caused him to feel even more guilty.

Now, instead of locking herself out, Carla developed the annoying habit of leaving the apartment

door unlocked when she went out. Ward began doublechecking the door, turning the knob twice to make sure it was locked.

Often Carla would leave dinner dishes overnight in the sink, especially if she'd had a few drinks. One morning Ward got up earlier than Carla. When she came into the kitchen, she found him elbow-deep in dishwater.

"Ward, what on earth are you doing?"

"Washing last night's dinner dishes."

"Darling, I always do that after you've left for the office."

He said stiffly, "I don't like to get up in the morning and find the sink full of dirty dishes."

"Ward . . ." She sighed. "We simply have to talk."

She plugged in the coffee, helped him with the rest of the dishes, then led him to the table. She poured coffee for them and sat down across from him. "Ward, we have to reach an understanding. You're driving me out of my mind, emptying ashtrays behind my back . . ."

He was driving her out of *her* mind?

". . . checking door locks. Like the other night when we went out, you started worrying if you'd locked the door. You turned around and drove all the way back. Now I know I'm sloppy about some things and I know you developed certain habits living alone, but sometimes you're a fussy old maid!"

Ward sat up indignantly.

She reached across to pat his hand. "Now don't get all fussed. We have to look at this sensibly. We're intelligent people. We have to adjust or we'll be at each other's throats in no time at all. If I make a real effort to be less sloppy, can you try and be less picky, less demanding?"

Ward slowly relaxed. He found himself nodding agreement. They were adults, they were intelligent, and Ward was honest enough with himself to admit that perhaps he was too set in his ways. There was no reason he could see why he couldn't change. It wasn't even teaching an old dog new tricks; it was more a matter of forgetting old habits.

Both made a conscious effort. On Ward's part it was more than that. He set up a bookkeeping system, a double column, a list of Carla's bad habits and a list of his old-maidish efforts to counteract them. He prided himself on the fact that he soon had crossed out more items in his column than in Carla's.

Yet it seemed to work. There were no more dirty dishes left

overnight, ashtrays rarely overflowed, and his razor wasn't disturbed once. Ward paid Carla's overdue bills without comment, and forcibly restrained himself from double-checking the door. There were a few lapses, naturally. Carla forgot occasionally and left a discarded garment on the living-room floor, and Ward sometimes absentmindedly emptied an ashtray.

One evening, nine months after Acapulco, Ward took Carla out to dinner and a show. They came home late and found the apartment door standing wide. Carla's mink coat and jewelry were gone, the silverware missing, as well as several of Ward's good suits, and a hundred dollars in cash.

After the first questioning and subsequent apartment check by the police, a young officer huddled with Ward and Carla in a quiet corner, notebook across his knee.

"Now, Mr. Roberts, we have a list of everything missing. But there's a puzzling thing.—You stated you and your wife came home and found the door wide open. Yet there are no signs of the door being forced, the lock being jimmied—"

Ward, head down, hands locked together in his lap, whispered, "I'm afraid I left the door unlocked, officer, when we went out."

Carla gasped. "Ward, you mean you actually went away and left the apartment unlocked?"

It was then that Ward decided he had to kill her.

Carla said, with a little laugh, "Of course, officer, it's partly my fault, looking at it one way."

"How's that, Mrs. Roberts?"

"Well, you see, I have this bad habit of leaving doors unlocked when I go out. My husband is just the opposite. He double-checks. He fusses so it got on my nerves. We made a pact. I'd try not to leave doors unlocked, and he'd stop checking so carefully." She laughed again. "So tonight the shoe's on the other foot."

The officer smiled broadly, as though he could easily forgive her any such small transgression.

But it was too late for Ward. He could never find it in himself to forgive her. He could, of course, divorce her.

Automatically his mind set up a double entry column. A divorce wouldn't be easy to get. He had no solid grounds. On the surface, theirs seemed an ideal marriage. He supposed he even loved her still. Divorce would be expensive. He was confident he could safely predict Carla's reaction. His asking her for a divorce would hurt her; she wouldn't be able to understand it. But once her initial hurt was

past she would demand, and likely get, a huge settlement as a price for his freedom.

On the other side of the column: Carla's demise. Everything solved with one slash of the pen. And it would cost nothing. On the contrary, he would gain considerably financially. Carla had no relatives. Her first husband's fortune would fall to Ward, and judicious investment could double it within a few years. Not that Carla's money was any inducement for killing her; it was simply a dividend accruing from the larger purpose of ridding himself of Carla before he began skittering up the walls like a frightened bug.

Killing her presented no great problem that he could see, requiring no elaborate, intricate plan. He knew very little of murder, but it seemed to him the more involved the plan the more likely eventual detection.

The same things that weighed against him getting an easy divorce were in his favor. What possible motive could he have for killing her? They were happily married. He didn't have a girl friend, and Carla didn't have a lover. And, although not wealthy, he had no immediate need of Carla's money, which was his anyway, for all practical purposes, so long as they remained married. Carla had early turned it all over to him to invest. He had control of it and could do with it as he pleased.

Somewhere he had read that the police look for three things in a murder suspect: motive, opportunity, means, in that ascending order.

Motive? Insofar as the police were concerned, none. The opposite, in fact.

Opportunity? He had to have the opportunity, of course; he couldn't kill her long distance, unless he devised some exotic method which he had no intention of doing. He knew the police viewed a perfect alibi with suspicion. The thing he had to do was make the opportunity, at the same time make it appear he hadn't availed himself of it. Tax deadlines were approaching, and this gave him a reasonable excuse to work evenings at the office. He had before his marriage; no reason why he shouldn't now. And he had, in those days, sent his staff home and worked alone until midnight. This was what he started doing now, working later and later and always alone, after everyone had gone. Carla understood and was very sweet about it.

He waited a little over a month, working late four or five nights a week. Almost every night when he came home Carla was already asleep. Twice during those weeks

Ward found the apartment door unlocked when he got home.

Finally he selected the evening. His dinner was brought in from a restaurant up the street. He ate heartily, disposed of the dishes and left the office by the back door. He left the office lights burning. The likelihood of anyone coming to see him, or telephoning, at that hour was remote. It was a small risk he was prepared to take. He could always maintain he had been too busy to admit visitors or answer the phone. His staff could testify that this wasn't at all unusual.

The parking lot behind the building was dark, and there was an alley, walled by business firms also dark at this hour. The alley emptied out onto a busy street a long block away.

It was early, shortly after nine, when he parked two blocks away from the apartment building, but he couldn't risk a later hour. By the time he'd accomplished his purpose and returned to the office, it would be ten or later. He used his key to let himself in the rear door of the building and walked up the three floors instead of using the elevators. The short time he'd lived there he'd met only a few people casually. If he encountered anyone on the stairs, he would say the elevators had been busy and then postpone his plan until another night. Another time, same plan. He met no one. There were four apartments on his floor. The corridor was empty. The apartment door was locked; he entered very quietly. There was a small light in the foyer, enough to guide him toward the bedroom. He drew on a pair of gloves as he crossed the livingroom. Not that it mattered about his fingerprints, but a prowler would certainly wear gloves, smearing door knobs. The bedroom door stood open, light spilling out. Ward hid his gloved hands behind his back, arranged his features in a smile. There was no need. Carla slept, her hair loose about her face.

Ward approached the bed on tiptoe. As he stood above her, Carla stirred, sighing as though his shadow disturbed her, and he froze. The faintest hint of her breath, martini-scented, reached him, and he knew there was little fear of her awakening.

He took the other pillow, his pillow, one end in each hand, and folded it across her face. At the same time he slammed a knee into her stomach, bearing down with all his weight.

Carla convulsed, thrashing wildly, a muffled sound coming from her. She struggled furiously for a minute or so, but her strength ebbed fast. Ward held the pillow

over her face long after her struggles ceased, held it there until his arms grew numb. Finally he straightened up, leaving the pillow over her face.

He glanced around the room. On the nightstand beside the bed was an ashtray full to overflowing, as well as another full one on her dressing table. With a feeling of satisfaction he dumped the contents of both ashtrays into the wastebasket, scouring them reasonably clean with tissue. Thank Heaven, he wouldn't be confronted with *that* problem ever again!

Then he tipped the nightstand and lamp over onto the floor, disarranged the bedclothes a little more. He dumped all of Carla's jewelry into a brown paper bag he'd brought along for that purpose. Her purse was on the dressing table. He upended it, taking all the money he could find.

He started out, then hesitated beside the bed, his gaze on her diamond engagement and wedding ring. For the first time he felt a stir of repugnance. He decided against it. The rings wouldn't come off easily, if at all. Carla had gained weight since her wedding day.

He went out quickly then, turning out all the lights and smearing doorknobs with his gloved hands. He left the apartment door standing wide and hastily departed.

His luck held. He met no one on the stairs going down or in the alley outside. Trash barrels lined the alley; trucks would be by in the morning for the weekly pick-up; that was the reason Ward had selected tonight. At the end of the alley he paused by one barrel, raised the lid and rammed the bag, crumpled into a wad, deep in the trash. The odds against the trash men opening every paper sack in a barrel were prohibitive.

Frugally he kept the money. There was no way it could be identified.

Ward was back in his office at a quarter past ten. He even managed to get some work done before the phone rang. He let it ring six times before he picked it up and said in an annoyed voice, "Yes?"

A crisp voice asked if he were Ward Roberts of such-and-such an address on Wilshire. When Ward admitted that he was, the crisp voice said, "I'm Lieutenant Carter of the LAPD. Perhaps you'd better come home at once, Mr. Roberts. Something has happened to your wife."

Ward had been halfway expecting the announcement to come from an officer rapping at his office door, with a police car purring at the curb. The fact that he had been notified by telephone he ac-

cepted gratefully as a good sign.

The apartment thronged with police, both in and out of uniform. Lieutenant Carter was thin, slight, middle-aged, very polite but with a disconcertingly direct gaze. After Ward, demurring that he'd rather do it now, had made the formal identification of Carla, Lieutenant Carter placed him in a quiet corner of the livingroom, fired questions at him in between the times he was called away into the bedroom. Twice he was gone for a long time. Ward early volunteered the story of apartment burglary and Carla's habit of leaving the door unlocked. Lieutenant Carter said he would contact the investigating officer.

After more than two hours all activity suddenly ceased. Carla had been taken away, and all the police were gone except Lieutenant Carter and two of his men. The lieutenant dropped down on the couch beside Ward. He took out a pack of cigarettes, offered one to Ward.

"I don't smoke, Lieutenant."

"That's right, you don't. I noticed that. In your shoes, I'd've consumed a pack or more with all this waiting." The lieutenant fired his cigarette and leaned back with a sigh. "I've talked to the officer who investigated the burglary, Mr. Roberts. He confirmed the fact that your wife admitted her habit of leaving doors unlocked. The front door was open tonight, by the way. That's how your wife was discovered. A woman who lives on this floor saw the door open, ventured in, found your wife and called us."

Ward said carefully, "That's what happened then? A prowler found the door open and—"

"That could be the answer, yes. Your wife's purse had been rifled, her jewelry box empty. I suppose she replaced most of the missing items after the insurance was paid?"

"I believe so. I'm not sure I can list all the things missing."

"No need right this minute, Mr. Roberts." The lieutenant was studying his half-smoked cigarette. "You know, it's an odd thing, your not smoking."

"What's odd about that?"

"There were two ashtrays in the bedroom. Both were empty, wiped clean. That seemed a little odd. If you'll pardon my saying so, your wife didn't strike me as an immaculate housekeeper, yet both ashtrays were clean. Now even a finicky housekeeper who smokes will have a last cigarette before going to bed, perhaps even *in* bed. Being curious by nature, I searched and found several cigarette butts in the wastebasket. Two different brands.

And several were without lipstick smears. Undoubtedly smoked by a man . . ."

"But that's impossible! I don't smoke. I told you!"

Lieutenant Carter glanced up. He said softly, "So you did, Mr. Roberts. With that fact in mind, I did some thinking, some more snooping. You see, the woman who found your door open was coming home, not leaving."

"I fail to see—"

"She had gone out an hour earlier on an errand. At that time she saw a man leaving your apartment. What's more, she had seen this man on two other occasions recently."

Ward was drowning in a tide of outrage. "Carla and another man! I don't believe it. It's simply not true!"

"I'm afraid it is, Mr. Roberts. Checking through your wife's purse, I found a telephone number tucked away. I've been talking to the man whose number it is. When he learned he might be under suspicion of murder, he talked freely. He met your wife a month ago and has been in your apartment several times. They hadn't quarreled, and he claims it was no intense love affair. He swears he didn't kill her, and I'm inclined to believe him. You know what I do believe, Mr. Roberts?"

Ward wasn't really listening. Carla had a lover? It was inconceivable!

"At the start, I could uncover no motive for your killing your wife —but now there is one. You discovered she had a lover. Tonight, you waited until he left, killed her, then tried to make it appear a thief had done it. You candidly admit to having no alibi, no verification whatsoever that you were in your office all evening. It's only a hunch, but I believe you may have gotten rid of the jewelry close by. Some of the boys are out searching now."

What was this man saying? That he had killed Carla because of a lover? Ward couldn't let him think that. No matter what happened he couldn't let him think that.

He leaned forward. "It wasn't like that at all, Lieutenant. Let me tell you how it was . . ."

As Publilius Syrus restrainedly noted two thousand years ago, is is a very hard undertaking to seek to please everybody.

CHARLES REID lit a cigarette and squinted his pale blue eyes against the smoke. He smiled across the table at his companion.

"Look, Mac," he said, touching his nose with a well-manicured

THE PREDATORS

By Geoffrey Knighton

finger. "Clean, see?" The smile widened on his fleshy, tanned face. "I appreciate your concern, old pal, but there's nothing to worry about as far as I'm concerned. Sure, I've done some work for Gellman—I am one of his lawyers, you know—but everything's strictly on the up-and-up. Whatever happens to Gellman when he gets in front of this Senate subcommittee, I'm in the clear."

The other man looked doubtful. The lean, thin-lipped face, with its dark, hooded eyes and sleek, black hair was in direct contrast to the bluff, open countenance of his companion.

"I hope so, Charles. They're going to get Gellman, you know. Make no mistake about that. Senator Crane's a tough apple, and he means to flush out all these supposedly retired mobsters who are moving in on legitimate business. Gellman's the logical place to start." He toyed with his coffee cup. "You tell me you're in the clear. Fine. I'm just a cop, and it's not my place to make any judgments, but I'm going on loan to the subcommittee, and if they turn up anything, I'll have to act on it. I'd hate to find myself coming after you. I wouldn't want to see you do anything foolish."

Reid leaned back in his chair and brushed a hand through his wiry gray-flecked, light brown hair.

"I appreciate the word, Mac." His tone was serious. "I really do. I've seen it coming, though." He glanced at the check and tossed a couple of bills on the table. "If this committee turns over enough rocks, it's bound to find some bugs. I won't be one of them. I wouldn't know about Gellman, Mac, but I'm in the clear." He pushed back his chair and stood up, a bulky, agile man in immaculate gray worsted. His grin was boyish as he reached over and punched the other man lightly on the arm. "So don't worry, Lieutenant! You won't be tracking down your old boyhood pal!"

The two men walked from the restaurant.

"Well, thanks for the lunch, Counselor," said Mackenzie. "Just remember what I told you. The mud's about to fly. Don't do anything foolish."

Reid snapped a mock salute. "Yes, sir, Lieutenant, sir! Like driven snow, that's me!" He turned to hail a passing cab. "See you on the weekend, Mac. Take it easy, eh?"

Mackenzie stood still on the sidewalk as the cab drew away, a speculative expression on his saturnine face. He shrugged thin shoulders and headed for his car.

Back in his office, Reid canceled

his appointments and spent the afternoon going through the Gellman file. Eventually he had a sheaf of about a dozen documents and letters which he had removed from the folders. These he put in his briefcase to take home with him. By five-thirty he was satisfied there was nothing in his records that would mean trouble for him if Gellman got into difficulties with the Crane Subcommittee.

Driving home to Cherryhill, Reid reviewed his position. No doubt about it, it was going to be touch and go.

If Gellman goes down, he thought, *I'll drop $45,000 a year, and there isn't a lot I can do about it. If I try to cover for Gellman, some of the mud's going to stick to me.*

He pulled off the turnpike at the Cherryhill exit, decided against stopping at The Pub for a drink, and headed home.

He thought about Eva, who was away at the Coast for a few weeks with her sister. Lovely, tawny Eva, happy as a summer breeze with her new home, her country club and her committees. Eva, who had stuck with him through the lean years at law school and the frustrating early days of his practice, sharing his determination and his ambition. She, too, was beginning to reach her goals.

Whatever happened to Gellman, Reid was determined to stay in the clear. He realized he'd better start looking around for some more clients.

By the time he turned into his long driveway, Reid was confident he could ride out the coming storm. It would be a rough ride, maybe, and he might get a rap on the knuckles for dubious ethics, but that should be about all. If Gellman did take a fall, there didn't seem to be any way he could take his attorney with him. That was the important thing.

In his house, he locked the briefcase away in a desk drawer, showered and changed, then drove to the country club for a solitary dinner.

It's a lucky thing Eva's away, he thought, on his way back to the house. *Not that she'd panic, of course, but her upper-echelon respectability was still new enough that she'd be upset if she knew it was being threatened.*

He had just let himself in his front door when the phone rang.

"Mr. Charles Reid?"

"Yes."

"My name is Nelson, Mr. Reid." The voice was clipped, businesslike. "I'm an attorney. I wonder if you can spare me a few minutes."

"Now?"

"Yes, if it's convenient."

"Well, I really don't think—"

"Just let me say first, Mr. Reid, that I'm with the Crane Subcommittee. I think you'll be interested in what I have to say." There was a pause, but before Reid could break in, Nelson continued, a vague threat in his voice. "I think you'd prefer to hear it at home instead of your office—or mine."

Reid was silent, fighting a sudden panic.

"Mr. Reid? Are you there?"

"I was just trying to imagine what you could have to say that would be of any conceivable interest to me, Mr. Nelson." He hesitated, but the other man said nothing. "However, I suppose you'd better come on out. Where are you now?"

"Just off the turnpike. I'll be with you in ten minutes or so."

Nelson was a slight, intense young man with thinning blond hair. Well-groomed in a lightweight gray suit and highly polished black shoes, he looked efficient and, somehow, deadly. He didn't offer to shake hands, but smiled at Reid as he spoke.

"I won't keep you long, Mr. Reid. When you hear what I have to say, I think you'll be glad you were able to see me tonight."

"I admit I'm intrigued." Reid smiled in return. He led the way to the study at the back of the house and waved Nelson to a deep leather chair. "Well, Mr. Nelson, what can you tell me about the Crane Committee that's important enough to bring you all the way out to the sticks?"

Nelson looked at him steadily. "If I may say so, Reid," he began, "we'll save ourselves a lot of time if we dispense with the fencing. You know as well as I do that Gellman is your most important client. We both know he's going to be called in front of the Subcommittee. And you can take it from me, we're going to get him." He raised a hand as Reid began to protest. "This is off the record, Reid. I just want to clear the air. Gellman hasn't got a chance. By the time we get through with him, he'll have five different sets of cops looking for him."

Reid struggled to keep his voice steady. "I still don't understand why you're telling me all this, Nelson. After all, you said it yourself. Gellman's a client of mine. I'm bound to use anything you tell me, if it will help him." Nelson's lips curved in a grin.

"Don't worry. I'm not about to show you any cards—not that I think it would make any difference in the long run." He leaned forward in his chair. "Because I think you're going to help us get Gellman."

"Are you out of your mind?" Reid's voice cracked.

Nelson shrugged. "No, I don't think so. I know quite a lot about you, Reid. We've checked you out pretty carefully. You've come a long way in three years. You're ambitious." He looked slowly around the room. "And I don't think you'd risk losing all this just to help Gellman, not when you know he hasn't got a prayer anyway."

Reid got up from his chair and walked over to the window. "Let's assume for the moment," he said, not turning around, "that you do get Gellman. What makes you think you can take me with him? I've got nothing to hide."

The other man nodded. "Right. You've been careful. I don't think we can hang anything on you."

Reid took a deep breath.

"But," continued Nelson, "we could make you look pretty sick. We could get you on the stand and take you through every little deal you've handled for Gellman. The Reardon Electric shuffle, the real estate monkeyshines out at Lakeside. Oh, I know!" He raised his voice as Reid opened his mouth to speak. "We won't find a thing in your records, even if we did bother to subpoena them. As I say, I don't think we can get you for anything criminal. In a way, though, we can do worse from your point of view. We can make you look like an incompetent lawyer. You may not go to jail, but you'll be through as far as the big clients are concerned."

"That's ridiculous!" The fear was growing.

"Is it?" Nelson's voice was hard. "We can make you look pretty inept. Think about it for a minute, Reid. We don't have to worry about burden of proof in a subcommittee hearing. We don't have to have evidence of what happened. We know about these little deals of yours, and that's all we need. We'll make you look pretty sick by the time we get through with you. The big money boys wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You'll just be written off."

In spite of himself, Reid shivered. He turned to face Nelson. "What do you want me to do?"

Nelson stood up. "I want everything you've got on Gellman. Everything. Not just what we'd find if we went into your files, but all the nasty little details, the pressure-points and the strong-arm routines. Chapter and verse, Reid. The whole ball of wax."

Reid went back to the desk and slumped in his chair. "I still can't figure this out," he said. "You say you're going to get Gellman. Why come to me? You must have all

the evidence you need without me."

Nelson grinned. "I'm plugging all the rat-holes, my friend. I want Gellman sewn up so tight he can't move an inch." He walked over and leaned on the edge of the desk. "It's quite simple," he went on. "I'm ambitious, too. This Gellman investigation is going to be a sensation, and I'm going to be sure I look good in it. That's why I'm willing to make a deal with you." He paused, and stared thoughtfully at Reid. "You give me everything you've got on Gellman and you don't even take the stand."

Reid was scornful. "And just because I'm not a witness, you think nobody'll know I shopped him? How green do you think I am? Gellman would crucify me!"

"He won't be in a position to crucify anybody, Reid. He's going to be too busy worrying about his own skin. If anybody crucifies you, it'll be me. You don't have much choice, do you?"

"I see." Reid's voice was bitter. "So this is the way you people operate: blackmail; guilt by innuendo. I had the idea this was the kind of thing Senate committees were supposed to stop."

"Don't be fatuous! This isn't official and you know it. This isn't the Subcommittee. This is me. I told you I'm going to look good in this thing." Nelson looked steadily at the other man, contempt in his expression. "I'm not after you, Reid! You're not big enough! Give me Gellman, and you can come out of this smelling like a rose, for all I care." He held a card over the desk. "You think about it, my friend. When you decide to play along, call me. My home number's on the back. Just don't take too long." He turned and walked toward the door of the study.

"Just a minute." Reid stood looking at the card. "Suppose I go along with you on this, and Gellman finds out before the hearings. My life wouldn't be worth a dime."

"I don't see how he can find out. Still, if you come through for me, I'll have somebody keep an eye on you."

"One other thing," said Reid, as they went down the hall to the front door. "Suppose I'd taped this little conversation, Nelson. It would make you look pretty sick in front of your fine, upstanding committee."

Nelson grinned and shrugged. "Oh, I thought of that. I'm not worried. I never figured you to cut your own throat. One thing I'm sure of—you'll look after yourself." He opened the door, nodding at the card in Reid's hand. "I'll be hearing from you. Just re-

member, you haven't much time."

Reid stood on the front steps, watching as the other man drove away.

What the hell am I going to do, he thought. *There has to be a way out. I can't go in front of that committee; Nelson would murder me. If I went on the stand and took the Fifth, it would look even worse.*

He walked slowly back to the

study and poured himself a stiff drink.

Suppose I do go along with Nelson. It would be rough for a while, but at least I'd save my hide. I can afford to take it easy for a few months, maybe take a trip with Eva.

He sat down at his desk.

Would Nelson keep his word? He'd have to. His hands weren't all that clean. What could he do?

If I turn him down? He shuddered at the vision of what could happen at the hearings.

For over an hour he sat slumped at his desk, trying to bring some sort of order to his thoughts. He found himself remembering anew the struggle of his early days in practice, and speculating on the grim prospects if he refused Nelson the information he wanted.

I can't do it, he thought desperately, *I can't go back and start again. I've just got it made.*

He reached for the phone and dialed Nelson's home number. He recognized the high, clipped voice that answered on the third ring.

"You know who this is?" he asked. There was a short laugh.

"I sure do, my friend."

"I've decided to sell you that load of paper you want."

"I'm glad to hear it." Nelson's voice was matter-of-fact. "When can I get delivery?"

"What's the matter with right now? I've got it all right here, and I'd just as soon get the deal cleaned up as quickly as possible. Why not come and get it?"

There was a pause at the other end. "I'm tied up right now." Another pause. "Tell you what, though. There's somebody here with me who could come out and get it. Matter of fact, he's a friend

of yours. Says he had lunch with you today."

Mackenzie. That would be a little embarrassing after all the protestations of innocence. Still it would get the thing over and done with. "Fair enough," he said. "It'll take him about an hour to get out here. I'll be waiting for him."

"Good." Nelson chuckled. "You made yourself a good deal, Mr. Paper-peddler. See you around."

Reid hung up and sat for a moment, staring vacantly across the room. With a shrug, he unlocked a drawer and took out his briefcase. He sorted the papers and began writing explanatory notes.

"If I'm going to do it, I might as well do it right," he said to himself. "Whole hog!"

He wrote steadily for an hour, and was slipping the papers into a manila envelope when he heard a faint noise from the front of the house. He listened. A click reached his ears. Somebody had turned a light switch. He opened the desk drawer and lifted out a .38 revolver. Dimming the light on the desk, he pushed his chair back and got to his feet. He crossed the room and flattened himself against the wall by the door. Heart pounding, he strained to catch the sounds as the intruder made his way through the house toward the study.

Mac, most likely, he thought. *But why doesn't he just walk in? It couldn't be one of Gellman's boys. Or could it?*

He heard the whisper of shoe on carpet. A dim figure eased through the door. Reid raised his gun. The pale light from the desk lamp fell on a thin-featured face.

It was Mackenzie.

Reid let out his breath and lowered his gun. "Mac! Are you nuts? Pussy-footing around like a two-bit burglar. You nearly got your head shot off!"

"You want to advertise this business, Counselor?" Mackenzie's voice was mild. He nodded toward the front door. "You don't know who might be watching." He looked at the bulky envelope on the desk. "Driven snow, eh, Charles? This the stuff I'm supposed to collect?"

Reid put the gun back in the drawer, then tapped the envelope. "Take care of them, Mac. It's my neck if they get into the wrong hands. They're red hot. I sure hope Gellman doesn't get to hear about this."

Mackenzie looked at his friend, his thin lips twisted in a sardonic smile. "How does it feel, Charles?" He picked up the envelope. "Here's the stuff that clinches the case against Gellman. Remember? The guy who put you in this house,

gave you just about everything you have. How does it feel to blow the whistle on him?"

"Aw, Mac! Come on, now! You've been around. Don't try to tell me you've got any illusions left. Gellman's going down anyway. It's not going to make it any worse if I tell them what I know." He looked helplessly at Mackenzie. "What choice have I got? What good does it do Gellman if I go with him?" He turned to the bar-wagon. "How about a snort, Mac? I can sure use one." He laughed. "You scared me. For a while, there, I thought maybe Gellman had sent one of his boys over."

"Well, you know, Charles, that's just what he did." Mackenzie's tone was flat, expressionless.

Fear struck at Reid. Suddenly, his mouth was dry. He gaped at Mackenzie.

"You didn't really think you'd get this stuff to the Subcommittee did you, Charles? Didn't you know Nelson was bluffing?" He tapped the envelope. "Without this all they can do is spank Gellman."

"Mac!" Reid felt as though he were choking. "Mac! Who told—"

"Oh, *I* told him, Charles, right after Nelson told me. And he did send one of his boys—me." He drew a gun from his pocket. "I warned you not to do anything stupid. Remember?"

Reid's face was ashen. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. His hands, trembling, were held out to Mackenzie. "Mac! Think what you're doing! Nelson knows you're here. He sent you. You're supposed to protect me. He'll know."

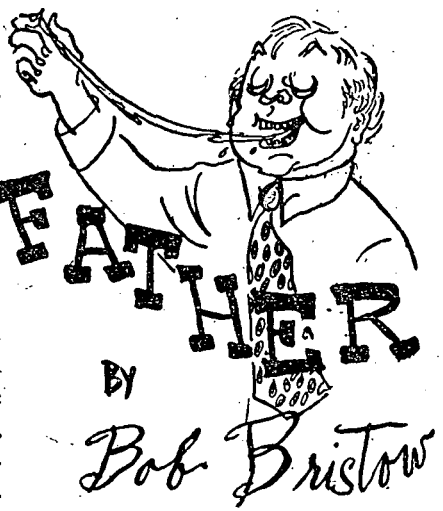
"Sure, he'll know, because I'll call him. Too bad, but I found you dead when I got here. The papers were gone. I'll be upset, believe me." He raised his gun.

"Mac, wait! You can't!" Reid was sobbing. A nerve high in his cheek began to twitch and his mouth loosened with fear. "All our lives, Mac, we've been friends. You can't kill me! It's treachery!"

A sharp, barking laugh came through Mackenzie's clenched teeth. "That, my friend," he said, as he squeezed the trigger, "is the name of the game."

One is never quite aware of what goes on in the mind of a child until his thoughts are translated into action.

LIKE SON, LIKE FATHER



BY Bob Bristow

THIS morning they came and took me from the office, loaded me into the limousine between the two hoods who shackled my legs. Now they sit with revolvers nudging against my ribs, while Giuseppe Pareto sits in the front seat talking about how they are going to do away with me. Giuseppe enjoys this in a grisly way because, as he said, his son would approve of the disposal plan.

So it is all but over, and it occurs to me that after many fruitful years with the syndicate, the problem grew not from me, really, but out of the Organization itself. Nepotism—that was my undoing. Terrible weaknesses develop in organizations in which relatives automatically qualify for the privilege of leadership and authority.

Nepotism has always provided the Organization with knotty problems, and Mateo Pareto would have been a magnificent case against the system. In exchange for the security advantages of the exclusiveness of a family-operated "Our Thing", there is always the disadvantage of the son or brother or nephew who is neurotic, stupid, or incapable. Mateo Pareto was a little bit of all of these. He was at

best a harmless nut and at worst a ghastly liability when one deals in contracts involving human life, as we do.

That, you see, was my end of it. Little as we like to have certain enforcement powers within the group, it has been necessary to maintain sessions of a high court which punishes certain improprieties; which is to say, at times it is necessary to obliterate some of our own people for the common good.

I am, or was, the head of the enforcement division for the East Coast and it has been my job to direct these activities. I am informed who must "go", and I award the contracts to those in my group whom I deem most capable of performing the act.

There is a secondary function of my group. New members of the syndicate are often assigned to my squad so that as they are absorbed into the Organization they are, at the same time, implicated deeply. A man who has pulled the trigger is not likely to betray his own participation in the Organization; and a man who has pulled a trigger has participated in an object lesson which demonstrates that he who betrays or fails is contracted. He knows the severity and efficiency of the Organization because at one time he was the muscle that made it function. It is a very thoughtful initiation process and, as newspaper stories occasionally point out, quite an efficient system.

So, I was living a rather pleasant existence last year when I received word that the Organization was sending me Giuseppe Pareto's son, Mateo. Mateo had finished college somehow, with a degree in engineering, and was now ready to begin the career for which he was born. It was obvious to most of us that Papa Giuseppe must have paid handsomely to get Mateo through because one place we are not "in" is college. Mateo was just twenty-six when he joined us, and the first time I saw him I knew we had a problem. He came into my office, sat down, and at my urging began to discuss college.

He was not very impressive physically, about five-six, already a bit fat, his hair thinning badly just like his father's. His laugh was almost a snort, something like *haw haw haw . . . heh heh heh . . . harrrrrrrunt.* Ghastly.

"You received a degree in engineering. That's right, isn't it?"

Mateo thrust a stick of gum in his mouth and chewed it, swinging open the jaws widely, exposing great black fillings in his teeth. "Yeah . . . I liked that. Like makin' bridges and . . . you know."

"What else did you do, Mateo?"

"Oh . . . I was active in dem-

onstrations." He popped his gum.

"What kind of demonstrations?" I asked, feeling uncomfortable.

"Any kind. Tell you the truth, it's like a parade. Just get out and have a hell of a time."

I drew a slow breath. "We don't go much for that, Mateo. That sort of thing attracts attention. We like to remain very discreetly in the background. You understand how this would be advantageous."

He took the gum out of his mouth, turned it over between his thumb and forefinger, squished it one way and another, then put it back in his mouth and worked at it pleasurably. Nothing I'd said seemed to make an impression.

"I know," I said, taking a different tack, "that your father expects great things from you. You know also that I send reports on your progress, and these will be good reports if you play it the way the Organization wants it played."

Mateo scratched himself, smiled, and said very softly, "If my old man knew you were threatening me with that garbage, he'd raise hell. You know that?"

I leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. I thought about having a nut son of a very big man in the Organization on my hands—a nut kid, nut rebel, nut engineer.

So that's how it started. Mateo soon became the biggest headache ever assigned to me. A week after he'd been sent down to Atlanta he got himself arrested. Arrested! Nearly an unheard-of thing, and he'd done it gorgeously. He'd gotten himself picked up on Peachtree Street with a carload of girls, everybody drunk, and pulling one of those dolls with a length of rope behind the convertible while she tried to water ski on a skateboard. Huge picture in the newspaper. Just what we needed. I called New York.

"Listen," I said to a spokesman for the Organization, "I'm not a psychiatrist or a nursemaid. You send me this clown down here and he starts acting like a nut. Gets himself arrested and his picture all over the front page of the *Constitution* while pulling some broad in just a bra . . . on a skateboard. What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Julio, he's Giuseppe's *son*."

"Dammit, Nero was somebody's son too."

"It's a problem, I know, Julio, but I'm sure Giuseppe would be forever grateful to you if you'd season the boy, polish him up."

"It's hopeless," I said.

"Giuseppe . . ." he said very softly.

I nodded into the phone. The message was clear. "Okay. I'll get

him out of this and quiet it down, but this boy has got to come around soon before he splits everything."

"You fix it up, Julio. You take care of it."

"Yeah." So I got this overgrown Huckleberry Finn into my office after two thousand dollars worth of discreetly dropped bribes had quieted the episode, which was not easy to do because it was the kind of stunt that was colorful and captured the imagination of the reporters.

"What in the hell did you think you were doing?" I asked Mateo.

"We was just . . ."

"We *were*," I said. "You got an education, so use it."

He popped some gum into his mouth and shook his head. "That embarrasses me, Julio. Don't do that please." Then, having softened up the gum, displaying his molars, he explained. "It was just a lark. We was drinking and this babe got hot and took off her blouse while we was riding around and somebody saw a kid on a skateboard and we bought it from him, I think, and got a rope and . . . there she was. It was pretty funny."

I leaned forward across the desk. "Do you want to make it, Mateo?"

"Sure." He took out his gum and measured its consistency with thumb and forefinger again, displaying the technique for me, then put the gum back in his mouth. I nearly swooned. Was I looking at a kid in knee pants with a thyroid problem, or was this supposed to be a grown man attached to a very sensitive end of the Organization? Neither, I decided. What mattered was, this was Giuseppe's boy and Giuseppe loved him and wanted him, somehow, to make it.

I decided that idle hands get into trouble and the thing to do was get our boy Mateo involved in a problem. We'd gotten word on one of our boys at the port in Savannah who had managed to get his own hand in the till and was siphoning off the gravy before reporting to the Organization, which kind of dishonesty is not tolerated. His name was John Turpin, and New York had told me to contract him right away. I called in Sandy Coleman, one of our seasoned boys, and Mateo. I briefed them about Turpin, and when I finished I asked them if there were any questions.

Sandy Coleman just smiled, very gently, and started to get up to go but Mateo . . . he raised his hand like in the first year chemistry class and he asked, "How?"

"That's your problem," I said. "Just so it's right and clean."

"Who's to decide?"

"The two of you," I said finally.

Mateo looked at Sandy and started taking out a piece of gum. "Listen," he said, "how about letting me figure it out?"

Sandy looked questioningly at me. While he was a very, very efficient man, unfortunately he was not high on the ladder and, knowing that Mateo was Giuseppe's boy, he sensed the fat cat aspect of the situation.

"Within reason," I said to Sandy. "Right and clean."

They left Atlanta and slipped into Savannah to do the job. A week passed and all was quiet, and I was beginning to feel like maybe Mateo was going to make it. But I got up the morning of the eighth day and opened my newspaper to read, in headlines two inches deep, a report of John Turpin's death.

Unbelievable. It was just incredible. John Turpin had died following a fall. It was witnessed by *twelve thousand* people attending a fair outside Savannah. He fell out of a small private airplane six thousand feet, with a kiddie umbrella tied to his hand for a touch of humor.

As I read the story, sweat broke out all over me. The plane had been stolen. It was found later in an abandoned field, burning. Nobody had observed the pilot either stealing or leaving the death plane.

By the time I reached the office the phone was ringing. It was New York.

"What is this, pushing Turpin out of an airplane in front of twelve thousand people?" I was asked.

"I didn't know that was going to happen," I said.

"Julio, you *should* know, don't you think?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"No buts."

"But," I insisted softly, "we let Mateo figure it out."

"Oooooooh."

"I'm telling you, I've got something here."

"It's terrible. It's liable to hurt us bad, but I'm afraid of Giuseppe. He'll rationalize this somehow."

"Maybe get Mateo out of here?" I suggested.

"Sit on it," I was instructed.

Which I did, until about noon when the door opened and in came Sandy Coleman looking pretty thoroughly frightened, and Mateo Pareto looking very pleased.

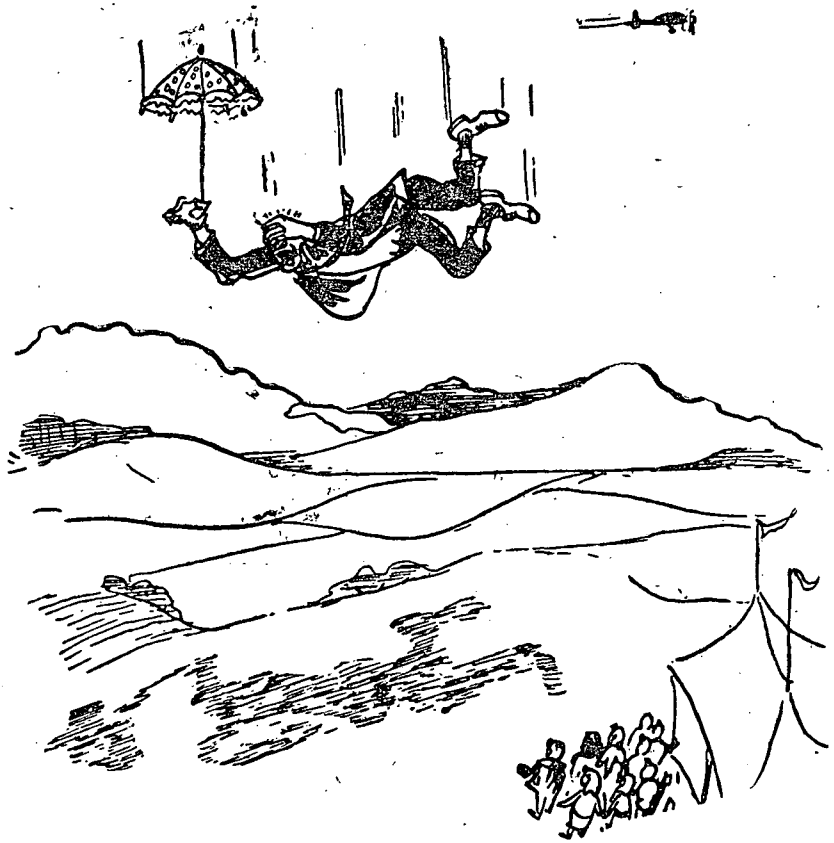
"Why?" I asked.

Mateo sat down and smiled. "It was beautiful. Wasn't it beautiful?" he asked.

"It was *loud*, Mateo."

"It was poetic," he said.

"Listen, it's headlined everywhere this morning. They have a



thousand men trying to find you, and if you made even the slightest slip they'll knock on your door and you are dead. Do you know that, Mateo? *Dead!*"

He laughed, and Sandy Coleman wiped his jaw nervously because what I'd said went for him too.

"How come?" I asked. "How come the airplane bit?"

"Well," Coleman said softly, "we did just like you said. It was right and it was clean. I made sure of that, but what you hadn't said was to make it quiet. That's what I wanted Mateo to do but he said that wasn't part of it. So he got this idea about the plane and . . . what could I do?"

Mateo was grinning. "Beautiful, hey?" he said.

I gave it up. This was going to have to move upstairs. The newspapers were full of the murder, and obviously it took them only until the second edition to figure out that John Turpin was involved in some waterfront activities connected with organized crime. The papers concluded that this was a gangland murder, exactly the sort of notoriety we abhor. The presence of the kid umbrella excited a righteous rage editorially, so much that the men at the top asked me to fly up to New York to talk about it. It was an especially touchy meeting because Giuseppe would be present and he had enough Eastern power to swing a lot of weight. Still, the boys did not like this business of shoving people out of an airplane into the headlines.

They called me into the meeting. The chairman greeted me warmly, passed a glass of Scotch to me and informally asked me about the contract. It grew very quiet in the room, and I was conscious of the anxious expression on Giuseppe Pareto's face.

"It was a mistake," I said. "I admit that, but I think it was clean. It will die down in a little while when nothing develops. And nothing will. The boys covered themselves well."

The chairman leaned toward me. "Who carried out the contract?"

Giuseppe blinked slowly and his face was grave. I had to walk a tightrope. "Coleman and Pareto."

"Who had the idea?" the chairman asked.

"They shared the idea," I said, and I thought Giuseppe breathed a little easier, though I imagine he figured he could weather this inquiry anyway.

"You approved it?" the chairman asked.

"I gave them the freedom to operate. I didn't know until it was over."

"I'd check next time," the chairman said evenly.

In a few minutes I was dismissed. I waited outside in the lounge. When the meeting broke up, Giuseppe came by, gave me an intimate wink, and went on.

I was about to leave when the chairman pulled on his overcoat and gestured me over. He put a cigar in his mouth. His eye was steady on me and his voice very soft. "Hit Mateo. It's better now than later. He's going to wreck something if we don't make it clear it's an accident. I'll take care of you."

"Mateo?"

He slapped me on the shoulder. "You take care of it personally." He went to the door and moved out quickly as it was opened for

him, his command an ultimatum.

I was terrified. It was the most dangerous assignment I'd ever had because if I failed—not in killing Mateo but in making it appear an accident to Giuseppe—he'd see that someday, down the line, I got mine. And if I failed the chairman, if Mateo somehow beat it—the chairman would remove me to prevent a vendetta. It was such a terrifying assignment I knew I could not afford to have any help. I couldn't mention it to a soul. I'd have to depend on my own ingenuity all the way.

On the return to Atlanta I began to isolate the problem. It had to appear to be an accident. It had to be so conclusive that I'd be free of suspicion. But Giuseppe not only was no dummy, but he would be suspicious of anything that happened to Mateo and if anything happened to him, Giuseppe would look first to me.

I considered many possibilities. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that when it happened I had to be involved in a manner that would clear me of suspicion. I thought about it for several days and suddenly it came to me. It was perfectly beautiful. I set it up carefully.

When I was ready, I called Mateo one afternoon and told him I needed a companion on a little trip. I picked him up in my car and in an hour and a quarter we had traveled the highway up to north Georgia where the hills grow tall. I found the isolated mountain road I'd looked for and turned off the highway. Mateo was so stupid or perhaps naive, that he didn't even suspect this was his last ride. I suppose he felt so safe under Papa Giuseppe's wing that he assumed the chairman wouldn't go over him.

But when I stopped at the spot I'd chosen, a sharp turn around a high curve that dropped off two hundred feet, Mateo turned to me curiously as I pulled up the emergency brake.

"How come you're stopping?" he asked.

I drew my revolver. "This is for you, Mateo."

"You're crazy. My old man . . ."

"Will never know, Mateo. It's an accident."

He started to unfasten his seat belt. As he reached down, I swung with the pistol and caught him beside the temple. He let out a small, childlike groan and slumped in the seat. I got out fast, opened the trunk and removed the can of gasoline and the cotton rag. I returned to the car, released the brake, backed a few feet, raced forward toward the drop-off, then skidded the car on the gravel un-

til it stopped a couple of feet from the edge. I got out, dropped the car in gear, and let the idling engine pull it over the edge. Mateo rode it down, a hundred and fifty feet.

When the car stopped rolling I grabbed the can of gasoline and raced down the hillside until I reached it. The car had not started to burn but I could smell gasoline leaking. I opened the can quickly, sprayed the gasoline around to make sure it got a good start. Then I backed away and partly soaked the rag. I buried the can quickly, and then used my cigarette lighter to ignite the fumes in the rag. When it was burning thoroughly, I drew a deep breath and plunged the flame against the flesh of my face. The pain was incredible. I screamed as I moved the searing flames across the side of my head, singeing my hair, feeling the flesh melt. Then I grasped the flames with my hands until I was all but maddened by the agony. This done, I tossed the flaming rag toward the car and moved away, writhing in pain, as the car ignited. In a few moments I had crawled painfully to the top of the hill. Below me the car burned furiously, and inside the great wall of flame went Mateo.

I collapsed beside the skid marks where it appeared the car had slid over the embankment. After ten minutes or so the flames could be seen from the highway, and someone drove up to where I was lying in agony. Two mountain boys reached me. The first thing I said was, "Please, get my friend out before he burns to death."

They started toward the car, then turned back. "Sorry, it's too late," one of them said.

"Come on," the other said. "We've got to get this one to the hospital. He's hurt bad. Look at that face."

And that was it. The car was removed after Mateo's body was examined. The body was burned so badly the report only suggested he'd been knocked unconscious when the car rolled down the embankment and had died in the fire that followed.

They asked few questions. It took three months for me to recover completely. I was in terrible pain for a long while, but I knew that was the price I had to pay to make the assassination appear to be an accident.

I received flowers from the chairman. Inside there was a card which I cherished. It read, *I'm terribly sorry that Mateo was lost and that you were so seriously injured in the accident. I hope you have a speedy recovery.* And the word, the sweet promise of my future

with the Organization for my dedicated service was secreted in the word *accident.* Because in that, I had created a masterpiece. At least, so I thought until Giuseppe came in this morning with two of his boys. He sat down as one of his men drew a revolver.

"It was good," he said abruptly, "but I was suspicious. Funny how a suspicious man notices things. I noticed, for example, that the car had turned over on the driver's side when it rolled down the embankment. You didn't know that, did you?"

"That's not true," I said, trying desperately to remember. "I climbed out the window."

"So you said," Giuseppe nodded, "but I located the wreckage of the car. It wasn't burned on the driver's side. How about that? It had to be lying on that side."

"It was terrifying. I . . . maybe I climbed out Mateo's side."

"Yes," Giuseppe said softly. "If you'd been four feet tall and maybe a hundred pounds, you did."

"What do you mean?" I asked. The hood with the gun was grinning. I could feel the sweat running down my neck.

"I mean the window was only halfway down, burned permanently in that position. You couldn't climb through it to save your life . . . then or now."

"It's not true," I said lamely.

Giuseppe shrugged. The other hood opened the door. When he came back in he had the rusted gasoline can in his hand. "I figured you'd need something like this. It took a while, but we found it out there."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

Giuseppe grinned. "Something special. Something for Mateo. Something he'd like, I think."

And so we are on the way to a private airplane. One of the hoods can fly it. *We are going up six thousand feet over Atlanta,* Giuseppe said. And there is nothing I can do. Nothing—but sit here and hold the kid umbrella they taped to my hand and stare at the flimsy satin cloth.

To negate "A ghost is a ghost is a ghost," (to parody the late Miss Stein) one must be insatiably curious and remarkably discerning.

IT WAS the evening of the 31st day of October, Halloween, when, round-eyed and babbling with excitement, the group of teenagers burst into Marty's Cafe on Main Street with the wild story of a strange glow that supposedly was hovering over Elliott Reedy's grave. All were amused except Jarvis Osage, who had been caretaker at Reedy House for all of my fifty-one years and for as long as most persons in town could remember.

"Laugh, fools!" Jarvis shouted. "But heed my words! Elliott Reedy has come back for his missus!"

Jarvis vanished from the cafe, leaving the rest of us briefly sombered by his peremptoriness. One of the teens caught my arm and begged, "You're the newspaperman in this town Mr. Mulden! You go look! We're tellin' the truth! There's a glow, and it's just . . . it's just sorta danglin' there

A NOVELETTE By

over old man Reedy's grave. Golly, Mr. Mulden, what if Jarvis Osage is right? What if Elliott Reedy has come back? What if his ghost is—"

"Son," I broke in with a smile that was purposely condescending, "rest easy." I took two one-dollar bills from my wallet and told Millie, the waitress, to take orders from the kids. "I'll take a look," I told the boy, leaving the counter stool and winking at a group of men huddled in one of the booths. The men grinned and said nothing.

The night was cloudy and unusually warm for the time of year, but I could smell a change in weather coming as I crossed the sidewalk and got into my car. I drove east slowly, under the illumination of the town's new mercury vapor street lights, toward the cemetery. I was positive youth and Halloween magic had produced hair-trigger imaginations among the teenagers, but I was curious, too. Elliott Reedy had been our town's best friend, he had died an unnatural death, and many in town still contended—a long time later now and in spite of the inquest finding of suicide—that his death had been murder at the hand of his daughter Harriet.

I shook my head in compassion. Poor Harriet.

In July of 1964, Harriet, long termed "wild," was driving the car that had crashed from a highway at a high rate of speed and had left her father crippled. Elliott had become confined to a wheelchair, Harriet had escaped permanent injury, and the town had broiled in accusation; Harriet Reedy's irresponsibility had finally produced irreparable damage. Then, two months later, came the unforgivable tragedy. Harriet had been left at Reedy House one evening to care for her father, while her mother had gone to bridge club, but Harriet had left the house to meet clandestinely Nicolas Joppa, one of the town's young marrieds. Given the opportunity, Elliott, who had difficulty but was capable of moving the wheelchair, had turned on the gas jet of an open fireplace and had died.

There were whisperings of murder the following day, sibilantly muttered suspicions that it was Harriet who had closed the house and turned on the gas jet, but at the inquest young Nicolas Joppa

MAX VAN DERVEER

had finally come forward shamedly to admit that he and Harriet had been together during the hour of death. Harriet's name was legally cleared, but Harriet became an exile. She attempted to weather the withering chastisement of the town and her mother, but had finally gone away.

The cemetery was on my left now. I slowed the car, turned from the street, coasted through the open gateway, and left the street light. The moon burst suddenly from behind the clouds and cast a sheen that glittered against the headstones as I rolled along the narrow concrete drive that bisected the cemetery. Elliott Reedy's grave was deep in the recess, but visible from the drive. I saw nothing hovering over it, not even the ground mist we sometimes get in the fall months.

The next morning Will Miller, who had been sheriff in our county for twenty-one years, entered my office at the newspaper plant and the crooked grin on his large face was enough to tell me he had heard the stories. "Well, Carter?" he said, the grin widening.

"No phenomenon," I assured him.

Frances Reedy, Elliott's widow, was next. She telephoned. "Young imaginations, Frances," I told her.

"My phone has been ringing off the wall, Carter," she complained.

"Well, you know how the town is. Have you heard from Harriet lately?"

"N-no . . . no, Carter, I haven't."

"You will one of these days."

"I truly hope so."

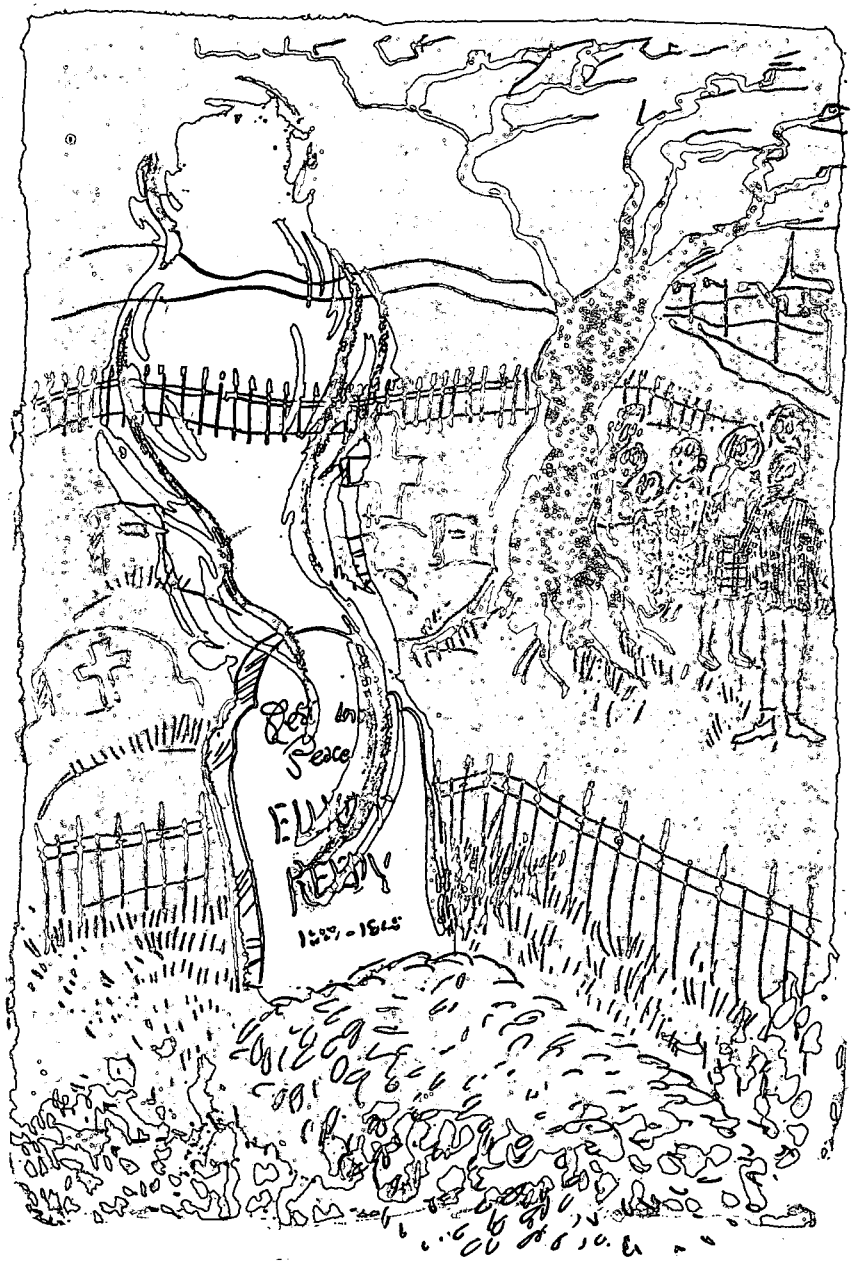
My phone seemed to ring constantly that day, and each caller wanted to know the same thing: had I seen the glow over Elliott Reedy's grave? Six o'clock and the locking of the plant door finally brought temporary relief. There was no phone in my car. But when I entered the bungalow where I had lived alone for eleven years, I was again summoned. I had five calls that evening before Omer Brown's excited voice filled my ear.

"Carter, you should drive out to the cemetery tonight!" he said. "It's there! I saw it! And it looks like it came right up out of Elliott's grave!"

"Now, Omer—"

"I tell you I saw it, Carter! I only made this run into town to call you! I'm going back out there!" Omer Brown, the town welder, was a stable man.

I left the bungalow and drove faster than normally. It was a few minutes past ten o'clock and the clouds had returned after a bright day. The night was black. There were several clusters of huddled



spectators when I arrived at the cemetery. I left my car and immediately saw the glow. It was large, shaped like a giant teardrop, bluish in color and seemed to hang over Elliott's headstone.

Then I heard the siren. It came from the business district and was moving west. Murmurs came from the clusters of people around me. There was a shuffling of feet and bodies. The sound of a siren in our town was almost as foreign as a ghost light in the cemetery.

I drove back into the business district and followed the line of cars up the hill. My heartbeat quickened. Reedy House, stately in old-world elegance, gabled, pillared, shuttered, was on the apex of that hill. The line slowed and jerked along, and then I was in front of Reedy House. The official county sedan was parked in the driveway. I braked behind it and moved on long strides toward the light coming from the windows of the house. Our night marshal was standing lone guard duty at the front door.

"What is it, Herb?" I asked, jogging up the wide, concrete steps.

"Mrs. Reedy," he said in a voice that cracked. "She's dead."

Frances Reedy was stretched out, face down, on the floor of the library. The lower two-thirds of her body was on the carpeting, the upper third on the hearth of the fireplace. Her arms were spread wide over her head, her fingers were clawed, as if she had attempted to dig into the hearth. She was fully dressed. There was a small, maple stool turned on its side near her feet.

Will Miller was taut. "It looks as if she was standing on the stool and attempting to reach something on the mantelpiece when the stool overturned," he said grimly. "Jarvis found her just like this."

I looked at Jarvis Osage, the only other person in the room. He sat on the front edge of a wing chair, his knees spread, his elbows braced on those knees, and his weathered face buried in his big hands. He did not look up.

"Doc's on his way," Will said. "I phoned him."

Doc Blake, the town surgeon and the county medical examiner, pronounced the official death, and then told Will, "In layman's language, Sheriff, death was caused by the striking of the head on a hard surface. In this case, the hearth. I'd say death was instantaneous."

Will turned to me. "The daughter will have to be notified," he said.

"I can take care of that," I said flatly.

Jarvis Osage broke in then. His

face was drawn. His eyes looked hollow as he stared at us and hissed, "I told yuh, Carter Mulden! I told yuh Mr. Elliott was comin' for his missus!".

I placed a long distance call from my bungalow to Harriet Reedy at her mountain retreat but did not get an answer. I kept repeating the call until two o'clock in the morning before giving up. I retired but my sleep was fitful. One ear was tuned for the ring of my phone, but Harriet did not return my call until almost ten o'clock in the morning. When I told her what had happened, she said she would be at my newspaper office in three hours.

She arrived in the middle of the afternoon, and sat in the chair in front of my desk, straight, tall, lightly tanned, a volatile girl of twenty-six years who, to my knowledge, had never turned to cosmetic or costume accessory to enhance a rural beauty. "Thank you for calling, Carter," she said. "No one else in this town would have." The attempt to fashion a smile did not hide the bitterness.

"I tried last night," I told her.

"I spent the night with a friend," she said. "How did it happen?"

I explained, but didn't tell her about the phenomenon at her father's grave. I saw no sense in cluttering a tragedy. When she asked if I would help her make the funeral arrangements, I agreed.

She nodded. "You are a good man, Carter Mulden. I like you. What would you think about my moving back into Reedy House now? It will be mine."

I could not hide my surprise and she almost smiled.

"I am writing a novel," she said. "That's what I've been doing all of these months. The inheritance from father, and now from mother, will give me the time."

I had no doubt it would, but I remained silent.

"Look," Harriet said with an abrupt imperious thrust of jaw, "in the beginning, mother blamed me for father's death. The two of us could not live together in the same house. But later, recently, she relented. I heard from her frequently, and in those letters she asked me to return to Reedy House. I didn't because I was happy where I was. I have the letters if you—"

"There is no doubt in my mind, my dear," I interrupted gently. "I knew your mother. But I must say you gave her very little hope. She seldom received a letter from you. She—"

"I didn't write because I didn't know what to write. I wanted to return here, but I was afraid of the town."

"And you are not now?"

"Suddenly, contradictorily, no."

"Its attitude has not changed. People here are slow to forget and forgive, Harriet. It's an inborn nature."

She looked at me briefly and then she stood. "I thought you might be the one person in town who would welcome me," she said.

"I am, but you must be aware of the bitterness, Harriet."

"I did not kill Father."

"So it was determined at the inquest, but—"

"I loved him, and I *was* with Nicolas Joppa that night," she said as if to reassure me.

I nodded. "I remember his testimony."

She met my look. "Does Nicolas still live here?"

"Yes," I said softly, "and he still is very much married."

Harriet's eyes flashed. "Good grief, Carter, you don't think I . . ." She paused, and then she drew a deep breath. "Carter, Nicolas was a mistake, and mistakes are not to be repeated. Not by me. I've changed."

I continued to hit hard. "But does the town know that?"

"So I am to be condemned without trial?"

"Unfortunately," I said, suddenly feeling a bit chagrined.

"Then I'll fight," she said firmly. "I'll kick, scratch, claw—"

She cut off the words abruptly, her cheeks pink with anger. Her eyes snapped, and she paced the confines of my small office. Suddenly she was facing me again. "I'm going up to the house now."

"Shall I phone Jarvis Osage?" I asked. "It could prevent a scene."

"He has to face me sooner or later, Carter."

"I wasn't thinking of Jarvis, my dear. I was thinking of you."

"I'll handle Jarvis," she said flatly, and left my office.

I sat for several seconds in deep thought. Jarvis Osage's faithfulness to Elliott and Frances Reedy through the years was equalled only by his intense dislike for their progeny. There could be an explosion. I used the telephone and Jarvis answered immediately at Reedy House. The explosion came after I had explained. "Damn!" he said thickly. "Why did she have to come back? She's no good! She never has been!"

"The point is, Jarvis, she is back, and she plans to remain."

"Damn!" he repeated, breaking the connection.

It became obvious that night and the next day, that any thought Harriet Reedy had entertained about my being her one friend in our town had been disintegrated by the discussion in my office. She did not call for assistance in preparing

for her mother's funeral, nor did I see her. Will Miller phoned once in that interim and asked if what he had heard about Harriet planning to move back into Reedy House was true. I relayed what she had told me, and then said, "But she easily could have a change of mind after the funeral, Will."

"The town, you mean?"

"Towns can be sadistic."

Later that afternoon I walked into Marty's Cafe for a cup of coffee and found him straddling a counter stool. I expected more questions about Harriet, but he fooled me.

He said, "Understand you were one of those who saw that glow out at Elliott Reedy's grave the other night, Carter. I went out to have a look for myself last night, but I didn't see a thing. It's sure got the town talking. That, and Frances Reedy's death."

"There has to be a simple explanation, Will."

"Yeah," he agreed. "But what?"

I shrugged. "I want to say phosphorus, a coating of phosphorus on the headstone that gives off the glow at night, but how would it get there? Why hasn't it been seen before now? More logical is *ignis fatuus*."

"Huh?"

I chuckled. "Fool's fire. It's a form of light common in swampy or marshy areas. It's caused by spontaneous combustion of methyl gases sometimes given off by decaying plants and animals."

He shook his head. "I appreciate your vast knowledge, Carter, but may I point out that this isn't swamp country."

"Agreed," I said. "Okay, I was merely seeking simple explanation."

Will finished his coffee, and abruptly switched the conversation. "You got a few minutes to stop in at my office?"

"Sure. What's up?"

His eyes flicked around the cafe. "Not here," he said and I knew the first flash of misgiving. The feeling became stronger as we walked to the courthouse building, but Will did not say anything until he was seated in the ancient swivel chair behind his desk. We were alone in the office, far out of earshot of anyone.

"Carter," he said flatly, "something about the death of Frances Reedy is not right. She died, okay, just like Doc Blake told us the other night. She cracked her head against the hearth of the fireplace and the blow killed her instantly. It's official now. Doc has signed the papers. But something isn't right. I can feel it in my bones."

Will Miller was not a man to

joke about anything, and I remained silent.

"You know, of course," he continued, "that I am one of those who have always thought Harriet Reedy turned on the gas that killed her father. I'll accept her being with Nicolas Joppa while Elliott died, but I thought then, and I still do, that she turned on the jet, closed up the house *and then* met Nicolas."

"She was cleared, Will," I said thickly.

"Yes," he said, nodding, "but I can have my opinion. Elliott Reedy was in a wheelchair, granted. He had mobility. But it is also a fact that mobility was limited. Elliott had difficulty moving himself about."

"But he *could* move," I said. "I saw him do it many times. Yes, he was almost totally paralyzed, but the man had determination. It was slow, it was tedious, but those paralytic hands *could* move the chair enough to get to the jet in the fireplace. He *did* have the ability to lean out of the chair, turn on the jet and then back away, knowing that he would not have the strength to return."

"All right, Carter, I have to accept that theory now. It's a verdict in the books. But set up a hypothetical case with Frances Reedy. Let's say that Elliott's death came about *my* way, and let's say that Frances Reedy *knew* it happened as I think it did. Let's say that was the *true* reason for Harriet leaving town. Let's say—"

"You're talking murder, Will," I broke in.

"Certainly, I'm talking murder! I'm saying that Harriet killed her father and her mother knew it! I'm saying that Frances Reedy would not jeopardize her daughter, but that the relationship between the two finally became so strained that Harriet had to kill her mother. You told me you could not find Harriet by telephone the other night. On the other hand, when you did get her, she came here in the matter of three to four hours. All right, think about this, Carter Mulden! Harriet Reedy could have slipped into town, had a fight with her mother, jerked the stool out from under her, causing her to fall, or she could have struck Frances with something, killing her, then planted the stool, and left town again! That could be the reason you couldn't reach her when you called. Harriet could have been in a car, running away from murder!"

"Absurd, Will," I said softly.

"Is it?"

It was not. And deep down inside, I was disturbed. Will's specu-

lation—and that's all it was, speculation—harassed. I had difficulty concentrating on anything the remainder of that day, and that night I could not sleep. I rolled and tossed in my bed, and I knew that Harriet Reedy could have killed her father. I knew that she could have killed her mother. Will had made it that simple.

A few minutes after midnight I dressed and left the bungalow. Perhaps a drive would help settle my thoughts. I cruised the town slowly. The streets were quiet and empty. The night was bright and cold. Our change in weather had arrived. The first fall snap was on us, along with the brilliant moon. I drove out past the cemetery, made a U turn, and returned to the open gateway. I turned into the cemetery and coasted to the spot from where I could see Elliott Reedy's grave and the open, freshly-dug grave beside it. There was no glow over the area this night, but I saw a hunched figure dart from Elliott's headstone, and my heart lurched.

I called out. The figure continued to run, hunched and dodging between the graves.

I am not one to chase through a cemetery at midnight. I drove back into the business district, parked my car in an official county stall in the deep shadow of the courthouse building, and waited. From my vantage, I had a clear view of most of the business district. The person I wanted came along on foot in about twenty minutes. Harriet Reedy, a coat collar turned high against her head, her hands deep in pockets, walked swiftly over the deserted sidewalk. I let her get into the next block before I went after her. I eased the sedan along the curbing and called out, "I'll give you a ride home, Harriet."

She was sullen, but she seemed relieved when she was seated beside me. "It was you," she said.

"Yes."

"You frightened me," she said. "That's why I ran."

"Why were you out there?"

"I couldn't sleep, not with the funeral tomorrow. I needed a walk, and I've heard about this strange glow that has appeared over father's grave. I went to see for myself."

"Was there a glow?"

"No. You've seen it, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Some in town say it is father returning for mother."

"Harriet, you can't believe in that nonsense."

"No, I don't believe in it, but I had to see."

"And you saw nothing."

"Carter, I'm sorry for my actions toward you the last two days. I have been wrong."

"It's all right, Harriet. I understand."

"I doubt that you do," she said. "You see, I loved father and mother deeply. And I like this town, in spite of what it is doing to me. It is the only town I've ever known. But—"

"The people may come around eventually, Harriet."

"Will they, Carter?"

Truthfully I did not think they would, but I hoped there might be forgiveness in the hearts. I hoped that eventually those hearts would accept and slowly open to the girl who needed understanding more than anything in the world. Looking at the faces surrounding us while I stood beside Harriet at the fresh grave the following afternoon, I knew my hopes were for naught. The eyes did not follow the coffin in its slow sinking into the grave. The eyes were fixed on Harriet. And that night I had to face reality. I had to warn her.

To some in our town, light in the windows of Reedy House was now sacrilegious; to others, it was an ill omen. A flame of ugliness had been rekindled. I sat on a counter stool in Marty's Cafe and listened to the cracklings as I dawdled over a cup of coffee. The town was now like a restless volcano. There was a frothing in its bowels. It seemed Harriet's name was on everyone's lips, and there was a seething undercurrent of vindictiveness that might easily erupt into a mob act.

"Carter?"

The terse summons behind me triggered instinctive caution. I turned on the stool to look at the four men crowded into the booth. They were large men, weathered autochthons who by temperament, habitat and teaching were peaceful men, born and reared in the uncluttered environment of our part of the country, but who, by these

same common factors and an animal instinct to weed out and rid themselves of infringement on their peace, could be religious on Sunday and killers on Monday.

"Come here, Carter," Omer Brown, the largest of the four and a man capable of leading, said.

A silence settled on the cafe. Through it came the sounds of general shifting of bodies in the booth, the brushing of shoulder against shoulder, but the faces remained impassive. Only the eyes mirrored the decision that had been made. The eyes glittered with determination.

Omer Brown said bluntly, "There ain't a one of us who didn't owe Elliott Reedy somethin'—still would if he and his missus were alive—but you were his good friend, Carter. Before your wife passed on, you four, the Reedys and the Muldens, were like four beans in a pod. Therefore, you also know Harriet Reedy better'n anyone in town."

Omer Brown paused briefly and I stood in silent acknowledgement.

"So," he continued, "we've decided you're the one to tell Harriet Reedy we don't want her back in our town. We want her to get out. Go away. Tomorrow."

The decision was not surprising, but the enormity of their propriety, now that it was in the open, was appalling. I took a few moments to allow it to soak in before I asked, "Is it your decision to make, Omer?"

"Yes," he said flatly.

"Why?"

"Because we live here."

I inventoried the other faces in the booth. The glittering eyes were fixed on me. No one moved. I looked around the cafe. There were other groups of perturbed, and Millie, the waitress behind the counter. They were stone. They were waiting.

"You are wrong," I said finally. "All of you." But there was only silence when I walked out of the cafe.

The apex of Reedy Hill was beautifully silent and deeply shadowed in the fragile moonlight that night as I drove up on its summit. The street was deserted, and there was a tranquillity that belied the roiling within the confines of the street lamps below. It was a tranquillity that could mesmerize a man. I wallowed in it momentarily, then came alive with the appearance of the shadowed figure of a young man scurrying along the sidewalk. There was a furtiveness about him I did not like. I had not actually seen him turn onto the sidewalk, but I was sure he had come from the rolling lawn that fronted Reedy House.

I stopped the car and called out curiously, "Hello, there."

The man hunched deeper into himself and broke into a sprint, disappearing quickly down the hill.

I sat staring after Nicolas Joppa and foreboding became a weight on my shoulders.

Five gas wall lanterns illuminated the vastness of the pillared concrete porch that stretched across the entire front of the house. On other occasions, I had known warmth and comfort and serenity sitting in the light of those lamps. Not this night. There was a sudden chill in my bones. I stood at the paneled door and abruptly turned to the front lawn again. I wanted to find Nicolas Joppa out there with a ready and logical explanation. The lawn was dark and empty.

I put a thumb against the button of the door chimes and heard the faint, lyrical chiming deep inside the house. The door did not open. I thumbed the button a second time. Nothing. The foreboding became heavier. I tried the doorknob and found that it would turn. I inched the door open to the thick carpeting and soft lights of the wide hall that ran through the length of the house.

"Harriet?" My voice and her name died almost instantly, and there was only the utter silence.

I entered the house and closed the door quietly behind me, then stood with my hands on the knob and leaned my shoulder blades against the paneling. The silence pressed in on me.

"Harriet?" Nothing.

I entered the spacious, lamp lighted front room to my left and found it neat and empty. I turned back into the hall. The door to the library opposite me was open. It was where Elliott and Frances had died. I surveyed the signs of Harriet's occupancy: the standard sized typewriter with paper rolled into the platen, the scattered sheets of typed manuscript on the desk, the ashtray heaped with cigarette butts. I went to the foot of the wide stairway and stood there staring up its length. What would I find if I went up those steps?

I started to turn back to the front door, but stopped. I went up the steps and searched the rooms of the second floor. I did not find Harriet.

Then I noticed the door at the far end of the corridor. It was wide open, inviting me as if by design, and for some reason I did not understand, the invitation chilled me. I moved toward it slowly. Light illuminated steep wooden steps that had to lead into the attic. I felt clogged with premonition, and I

mounted the steps as if walking to my own doom.

Harriet Reedy, impeccably neat even in death, dangled from the end of a new rope that had been looped over and fastened to a rafter.

Will Miller was not fooled. Nor was I. Harriet's death was murder.

"That chair being tipped on its side as if she had kicked it out from under her was amateurish," Will said. "Like the stool at her mother's feet. And that knot," he

continued, "That was a true hangman's knot, Carter. Not everybody can tie 'em."

He turned on the swivel chair behind the desk in his courthouse office and stared out the window. It was the morning after Harriet's death. The day was brilliant and tranquil, but the town was on its ear. Death had jarred it out of its sense of predictability, and someone had again seen the glow over Elliott Reedy's grave the previous night. The talk about Elliott's ghost returning for his kin was gaining stature.

Out of the silence, Will said, "I checked out Harriet's story, Carter. I drove up into the mountains to the lodge where she has been living. She was telling the truth. She was sleeping with a friend the night her mother died. A girlfriend."

There was another silence. Then he had me on my ear.

"You know how to tie one of 'em, Carter?" he asked.

"What's that?" For a moment I had lost his train of thought. My mind was cluttered with the image of young Nicolas Joppa running away from Reedy House.

"A hangman's knot," he said.

"Yes," I said slowly, frowning.

"Where'd you learn?"

"I really don't remember," I said carefully. "It must have been when

I was a kid, sometime, I suppose."

"Durn things," he muttered, nodding. "I never could get the hang of 'em." He blew cigar smoke at the window.

I said, "Speak your mind, Will."

His bulk turned the swivel chair slowly until he was facing me again. He drew on the cigar and studied the ash forming on the lighted end. "I guess what I'm thinking is," he said, "I don't know where to start on this thing. Harriet Reedy is dead and there's plenty of folks in town who think she should've been dead a long time ago. But I also gotta look at this from the standpoint of her mother being murdered, and then someone trying to put the blame on Harriet by making her look like a suicide."

"An entire town filled with potential murderers, Will?" I said. "That's fantastic."

"Not too," he said, "when you consider the mood of the town."

"But a moment ago you were including me."

He sat silent for a long time, his large face wrinkled. Then he shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "You had a son once, Carter," he said carefully, "an only child. The boy drowned in his ninth year when he fell from a raft into the river. I remember that day. He had been forbidden to go on that raft, but a girl named Harriet Reedy took him on it anyway."

"I did not kill her, Will."

The silence that settled around us this time became mountainous. Will stared. I stared. It was as if each was attempting to see behind the eyes of the other. Will finally broke. He sat back in his chair with a heavy sigh and said, "I got you riled, didn't I?" He almost grinned.

"You did."

"But you realize what I'm up against."

"Who has purchased a length of rope in the last couple of weeks? How many business places in town offer rope for sale? Four, perhaps five?"

Will reached for the telephone on his desk. "Yeah, the rope was new," he said softly. "That's darn good thinking, Carter."

The only trouble was, the last rope sale anyone could remember making had occurred almost a month earlier, and it had been a coil of one hundred and fifty feet to a farmer who resided in the next county.

Was this the moment for me to speak Nicolas Joppa's name?

The phone on Will's desk jangled and he swept it against his ear. Listening to his grunted conversation, I knew it was the county medical examiner on the other end

of the line, making his report.

When Will put the phone together, he said, "Doc says there's a bruised spot under Harriet Reedy's jaw. He figures she was struck, then strung up."

Carefully I asked, "Nicolas Joppa served a hitch in the Navy, didn't he?"

"Yep," he frowned.

"And sailors know the various knots, learn how to tie—"

"Yep."

"I saw him at Reedy House last night."

Nicolas was frightened and indignant when we accosted him in the D&H Hardware where he had been a clerk since graduating from high school in 1959. It was the noon hour, twelve to one, there were no customers, and Nicolas was the only employe in the store, as he was every day from twelve to one. He attempted to lie. "You didn't see me, Carter Mulden!" he said with color flooding his face. "What are you tryin' to do to me?"

"You want me to ask your wife if you were home all evening?" Will asked him, nonplussed.

"You leave Cassandra out of this, hear?" the young man rasped.

Nicolas Joppa was rigid with rage. "It's my word against his!" he shrilled at Will, while stabbing a finger at me.

"I saw you, Nicolas," I said flatly. "You were coming away from the house."

"I was walking *past* the house!" he yelled.

And then his jaws snapped shut, and we were standing in the ringing silence of the store as Nicolas struggled in the consternation of being caught up in the prevarication.

"All right," he said sullenly. "I heard Harriet had come back to stay. I didn't know why. I thought . . ." He hesitated, sought words, then continued belligerently, "I thought maybe she came back to make trouble for me."

"What kind of trouble?" Will asked gently.

"Well . . . I thought maybe she was gonna try to cause trouble between me'n Cass."

"Why would Harriet Reedy want to do that?"

"I . . . dunno. Maybe she was holdin' a grudge or somethin'. You know, maybe she was still thinkin' about how I had to tell them at that inquest how she and I were . . . were out together the night . . . the night her daddy—"

"Nicolas, your testimony at the inquest was on *behalf* of Harriet," I put in. "Without it, she might have been charged with murder."

"Yeah." He shuffled nervously.

"If anything, Harriet was grateful. After all, you could have de-

nied being with her that night."

The shuffling increased as he struggled in the mire of a guilty conscience. "Well," he said defensively, "Cass forgave me once. I don't figure she would again."

"So you went up to Reedy House," Will prodded.

"I saw the lights," Nicolas mumbled. Then he looked Will straight in the eye. "But I didn't talk to her," he said defiantly. "I went up, okay, but I couldn't make myself go to the door. I was . . ." He shot a glance at me. "I was standin' out front, tryin' to make myself go on, when I saw the headlights comin' up the hill. They scared me, and then when I recognized Carter's car, I ran."

"Did you see anyone else around there?" Will asked.

"N-no." Nicolas shook his head doggedly. "Nobody but Carter in his car."

Will looked at me. His brows were lifted. He remained silent, but I knew he was debating. Nicolas Joppa could be lying. He'd had the opportunity to kill Harriet. He could have taken a length of rope from the hardware store without anyone knowing. He could have gone up to Reedy House, accosted Harriet, struck her and fashioned the clumsy attempt at making her death appear to be suicide. That attempt was just amateurish enough to be Nicolas Joppa's doing. On the other hand, it was difficult for me to accept a guilty conscience over a brief infidelity as motive for murder. And there was the death of Frances Reedy. Had it been murder or accident?

I walked out of the store. Will remained inside a few seconds before joining me in the warm sun. He lit a cigar, listened to my reasoning and nodded thoughtfully.

We walked to Marty's Cafe where, over hot beef sandwiches and milk, he surprised me. He said, "Actually, Cass Joppa might have more reason than Nicolas to want Harriet out of the way."

I pondered it. "Fear of losing her husband?"

"Well, he showed an interest in Harriet once. And with her returning . . ."

Will became silent, and I attacked my sandwich. Then I bobbed my head at the wide back of a man straddling a counter stool. "He also had an interest, remember?"

Will frowned at Philip Gunzan, a bachelor of mid-thirty years, manager of the lumber yard and Cassandra Joppa's brother.

"At the inquest?" I prodded.

Will's frown deepened. "I remember Pip was angry," he said in a guarded tone.

"And after?"

Will was thoroughly puzzled.

"Pip Gunzan threatened Harriet," I said, refreshing his memory. "Told her to leave town."

"Yeah," Will said thoughtfully. "But I always figured that was his anger talking."

"I'm sure it was," I agreed. "But the threat was made. And he *did*—still does, I imagine—blame Harriet for that business with Nicolas. Pip always felt she enticed his brother-in-law into their rendezvous."

"So do a lot of other folks. And plenty of those folks made threats, too," Will hedged.

"But Pip *is* Cassandra Joppa's brother, and we all know how protective he can be when it comes to Cass," I pressed on.

Will sat back in the booth and relighted his cigar. "Carter, if I didn't know you, I'd think you were trying to pin Pip Gunzan to a wall."

I shook him off in exasperation, but I couldn't resist the dig, "Haven't you grabbed at a few straws today, too?"

He had every reason to be irked, I suppose, but he grinned wryly, then left the booth. "Come on, Sherlock, let's go over to my office."

Pip Gunzan turned on the stool with a one-sided grin for us, but his eyes were hard as he said, "Sheriff, my ears are burning. I didn't get all of that conversation, but I got enough to get the gist."

Will stared at him, and I knew he was organizing his thoughts. Then he said, "All right, you overheard, Pip, so maybe we can make all of this a bit easier for both of us. Were you home last night?"

"I was not," Pip said, clipping the words. "I was fishing at the river."

"Anyone see you there?"

"Four or five."

"They know you?"

"Who in this town doesn't?"

"What time did you go fishing?"

" 'Bout seven o'clock."

"So you're getting excited about nothin', aren't you, Pip? You couldn't very well have killed Harriet Reedy."

"Which doesn't mean I won't pat the guy, or the ghost, who did on his back," Pip Gunzan said icily.

Will rocked the big man back on his heels then. He said, "You might start with your brother-in-law, fella."

Pip wasn't ready for that one, and we left him sitting there on the stool with his mouth open and his eyes changing expression. Outside, Will clamped down hard on his cigar. His greeting to Omer Brown, who was turning into the cafe, was a grunt. Omer shot me a significant look. "Looks like somebody beat you up the hill last night, huh, Carter?"

Before I could retort, he was inside Marty's, and the door had closed behind him. I went after Will who already was stomping across the street.

He was angry when I caught up with him. "Do you suppose, Carter," he growled, "you could be right about Pip? The guy is big enough, strong enough. And he sells rope at the lumber yard, doesn't he?"

"Let's think about it," I said.

But there was no time for thinking. Jarvis Osage was waiting for us in Will's office. He was sitting back in Will's chair and staring out the window, a thin, gnarled celibate of sixty-odd years, with a full head of bushy white hair and bright eyes that would never tell anyone what was going on behind them. He turned at our entry, but he did not leave the chair. "Saw you two comin' over from the cafe," he said grimly, "so I waited. What am I to do about Reedy House now? Close it up?"

"Leave it as it is for a while, Jarvis," Will said. He looked at me. "Incidentally, what does happen to that place now? I don't know of any blood relatives."

"Neither Elliott nor Frances had brothers or sisters," I said. "I imagine everything went to Harriet. It's a question now, I suppose, of whether or not she ever bothered at any time to have a will drawn."

Jarvis Osage sniffed loudly. "Not her," he said disdainfully. "She wouldn't have sense enough to think about anybody but herself."

I had to defend her. "Did you ever allow yourself the opportunity to get to know her, Jarvis?"

His eyes narrowed and his lips became a thin line. "She was a blight on the mister and missus from the second she was born," he said viciously.

"Funny, I knew Elliott and Frances all of my life, and I never—"

"Not like I knew 'em!" Jarvis Osage interrupted stoutly. "They was decent folks! They treated a man right! They—"

"And Harriet didn't treat you right?"

He reverted. "She shouldn't have been," he said sullenly. "That's all."

"Because she was independent?"

"Huh?" Jarvis Osage squirmed in puzzlement. "I dunno what you mean by that, Mr. Mulden, but—"

"I mean she thought and acted on her own."

"Yeah, she sure did that, all right."

"She wasn't always right, but she wasn't always wrong either."

"It was wrong when she was born to the mister and missus," Jarvis said peremptorily. "Look what she done to them!"

"Jarvis, Will and I want to know one thing. Did you kill her?"

He was out of the chair. His eyes were bright slits and his face was livid. "Mr. Mulden," he said in an angrily controlled voice, "all of a sudden, I don't like you."

"Did you kill her?"

He came around the desk and walked to the door. Suddenly he stopped and looked at us over his shoulder. "Not me, Mr. Mulden," he said. "It was the mister's ghost. The mister had a right to kill her any way he could."

And then Jarvis was gone.

We stood for several seconds in silence before Will finally went around his desk and sat down with a heavy sigh. "Everybody sure is on edge today," he commented.

"Was I too far out?" I asked, still ruffled.

He puffed on the cigar. "No," he said slowly. "I've been thinking about Jarvis too."

"I'm not sure he is capable of murder, but . . ."

I didn't finish it. I sat in the chair in front of the desk, and Will grunted, "I can say the same thing about every living soul I know, Carter."

"I think Jarvis at one time expected to inherit Reedy House," I said, more to myself in thought than to Will Miller.

"About that place, Carter," he said, "what does happen to it? The furniture? Harriet's things?"

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

"Do you suppose Harriet might have left a will?"

I shrugged.

"I'm interested," he said thoughtfully.

"We can look. We can begin at the house. There's a wall safe."

"And just how do we get into it?"

I pondered. No one I knew would have the combination to the safe. Of course, Elliott, Frances, or Harriet might have left it noted somewhere, but we could look for days and not find the secreted numbers.

"There's Omer Brown," I said finally.

"You mean cut into the safe." Will considered it for a moment before he said, "I guess it might be important. Let's go over to Marty's and get Omer."

I begged off. "I want to stop at the newspaper. Got a couple of things that need checking. I'll meet you at Reedy House in twenty minutes."

It was one-thirty in the afternoon when I again walked out of the newspaper office and drove up the hill. The car reflected in my rear view mirror was not the sheriff's sedan, and I frowned at the reflection until I recognized Nico-

las Joppa. He braked behind me in the drive at Reedy House and left his car quickly. He was waiting on the grass for me when I left my car. He looked angry, and I hesitated.

"Come on, come on," he said truculently. "This ain't gonna take long, Carter Mulden. How come you were makin' me out a murderer to Will Miller?"

I took a second to glance around. Nicolas and I seemed quite alone in the sparkling sunlight.

"Are you a murderer?" I asked him carefully.

He launched a looping swing with his right arm. At fifty-one, I didn't have the agility of my youth, but he was so wide open in his attack it was very little trouble to step inside his blow. I rammed both palms into his middle and pushed him away. He yelped, his fist grazed my shoulder and then he was stumbling backward, off-balance. He sat down hard on the grass. An oath erupted from him, he scrambled around until he was on his hands and knees, and I prepared for his second onslaught. Will Miller stopped it. He rocked the official sedan to a halt behind Nicolas Joppa's car, and he was with us in an instant.

"What's going on here?" he snapped.

I told him. I expected another eruption from Nicolas but it did not come.

"You wanna explain, Nicolas?" Will asked.

"No," the young man said sullenly.

Will paused, then said firmly, "You're gonna have to come with me, Nicolas. I don't like the way things are adding up."

"You mean you're arrestin' me?" Nicolas bleated.

"I'm not gonna put you on the book till I talk to you," Will said. "But you gotta go to the office with me."

"Do you want me, too, Will?" I asked.

"No. You and Omer see what you can do with that safe. I'll be back."

"Do you think Nicolas killed her?" Omer Brown asked, after we had watched Will and Nicolas drive away.

"You never know about people, Omer," I said as we went up to the house.

I used the front door key Will had left with me, and five minutes later Omer Brown had a portable cutting rig set up in the library.

Suddenly we were interrupted. Jarvis Osage appeared in the doorway. He looked angry. "What you two think you're doin'?" he snapped.

I told him.

He colored with rage and came across the room. "You ain't gonna tear into nothin'. Ain't you got no respect for this place or the dead?"

He went to the safe and dialed the combination. When he swung the door open, I stared at him.

"The mister once gave me the combination, in case of emergency," he said sourly.

I searched the safe then and found nothing but a few papers that had no bearing on murder.

Will Miller returned to the house and was disappointed when I told him what I had found. Then he said, "Amos Rand. Amos has been the Reedy family attorney for as long as I can remember. We should have gone to him in the first place."

Amos was a wealth of information. After the accident, Elliott had put everything he owned in his wife's name, and then Frances Reedy, in the event of her death before Elliott or Harriet, had drawn a will, leaving seventy-five per cent of the estate to Elliott and twenty-five per cent to Harriet. Then had come Elliott's death and Frances Reedy's bitterness. She had changed the will, leaving the entire estate to Jarvis Osage. Time, however, had healed the wound, and on the morning of her death she'd had a third will drawn, leaving $2,500 to Jarvis and the remainder to her daughter. Amos said he had no knowledge of a will drawn by Harriet.

"Where are those wills, Amos?" I asked.

"I have copies filed here and, of course, Frances had copies."

"She kept them at Reedy House?"

"She could have," he said, "or in a bank safety deposit box. I don't know."

"If she kept them at the house, they probably would have been in the wall safe, right?"

"I would think so," he said.

"I didn't find them."

He seemed genuinely surprised. "You have been in the safe?"

Will explained quickly, but Amos Rand did not like the entry. "I assume," he said a bit stiffly, "you found the money."

"What money?" I asked, snapping erect.

"Frances kept a considerable amount of cash in that safe," the attorney said. "Too much. Normally, it was around $10,000."

"Will?" I said, arching a brow at him as my thoughts churned.

"With you, Carter," he said, leaving his chair. He remained silent until we were outside and seated in the county car. Then he said, "Ten thousand dollars. What are you thinking, Carter?"

"We have to make two assumptions. One, Jarvis Osage knew

about the wills and changes and, two, he knew about the money in the safe."

"Go on."

"Frances died the day she had a third will drawn. Jarvis, who once had been going to inherit a fortune, now was to be given a pittance in comparison. He became angry, struck Frances, or jerked the stool from under her, causing her death. He made that death look like an accident, and took the money from the safe. Remember, he knew the combination, and at that moment ten thousand dollars was much more than he was to inherit. Then Harriet returned to Reedy House and—here we have to assume again—Harriet knew her mother kept a large sum of money in the house, did not find it, and questioned Jarvis. Jarvis became frightened, killed her, and attempted to make her death look like suicide."

We found Jarvis at Reedy House. He was sullen, and when he reluctantly opened the front door to us, it was as if we were invading a sanctuary.

"We came for the money, Jarvis," Will said bluntly.

He jerked and his eyes became glittering slits. He almost crouched.

"Where is it?" Will demanded.

Jarvis broke. He attempted to bolt, but Will Miller was quick. He caught Jarvis' right arm and spun him into a wall. I moved in on the other side and captured a wrist. Jarvis was like an animal. He snarled and struggled savagely. Then, abruptly, he was finished. All of the tension and fight left him, and he sagged. He confirmed my thinking about the deaths of Frances and Harriet Reedy in broken words that were almost a babble, before surprising us. He said he had turned on the gas that had killed Elliott Reedy. He had watched Harriet leave the house that night. Elliott was suffering, and it was not right the man should suffer. He had put Elliott Reedy out of his misery.

We took Jarvis Osage to a cell in the county jail and an angry Nicolas Joppa was allowed to go home. Now there was only Harriet's funeral ahead. I had assumed the responsibility for that funeral, and that night, while settling details with the funeral director, I received the call from Will.

"Elliott Reedy's ghost is back," he said wearily. "The glow. I'm going out to the cemetery and settle this thing. Do you want to come along?"

He picked me up in the county car. It was a raw, misty night, almost foggy, and the reflection of the car headlights bounced high against the mist as we drove to the

cemetery. There was a single cluster of citizens huddled a safe distance from the glow.

Will and I walked around and around Elliott's grave, studying the glow in silence. Occasionally the glow seemed to flicker. Then I stood back and inventoried the other headmarkers in the area as I recalled the other nights the glow had been visible.

"If there is moonlight . . ." I murmured.

"What?" Will asked sharply.

"The glow appears only on cloudy nights," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Almost. At least, I remember that it was cloudy when the kids were out here that first night, but the moon had broken through the clouds by the time I arrived."

"You could have something, Carter," Will admitted, nodding.

"Then it has to be a reflection," I said. "A reflection that becomes obliterated when there is light."

"Okay, I'll buy," Will said.

"Get a blanket from your car."

We tried several headstones before we found the right one. It was several yards to the right of Elliott's grave, but by placing the blanket over the stone we eliminated the glow.

"I don't understand," Will said, shaking his head.

"I think I do," I said, grinning suddenly. "Our new street lights. They are mercury vapor, and somehow they cause the reflection on cloudy nights. Elliott's ghost is no more than a reflection."

I removed the blanket from the headstone and the glow reappeared.

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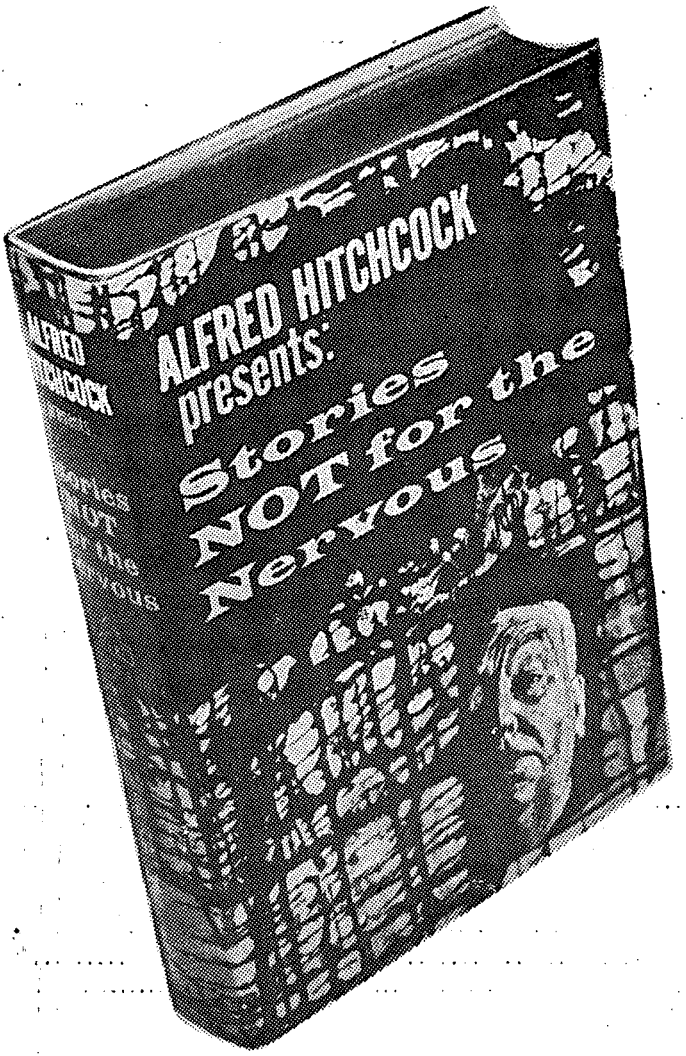

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