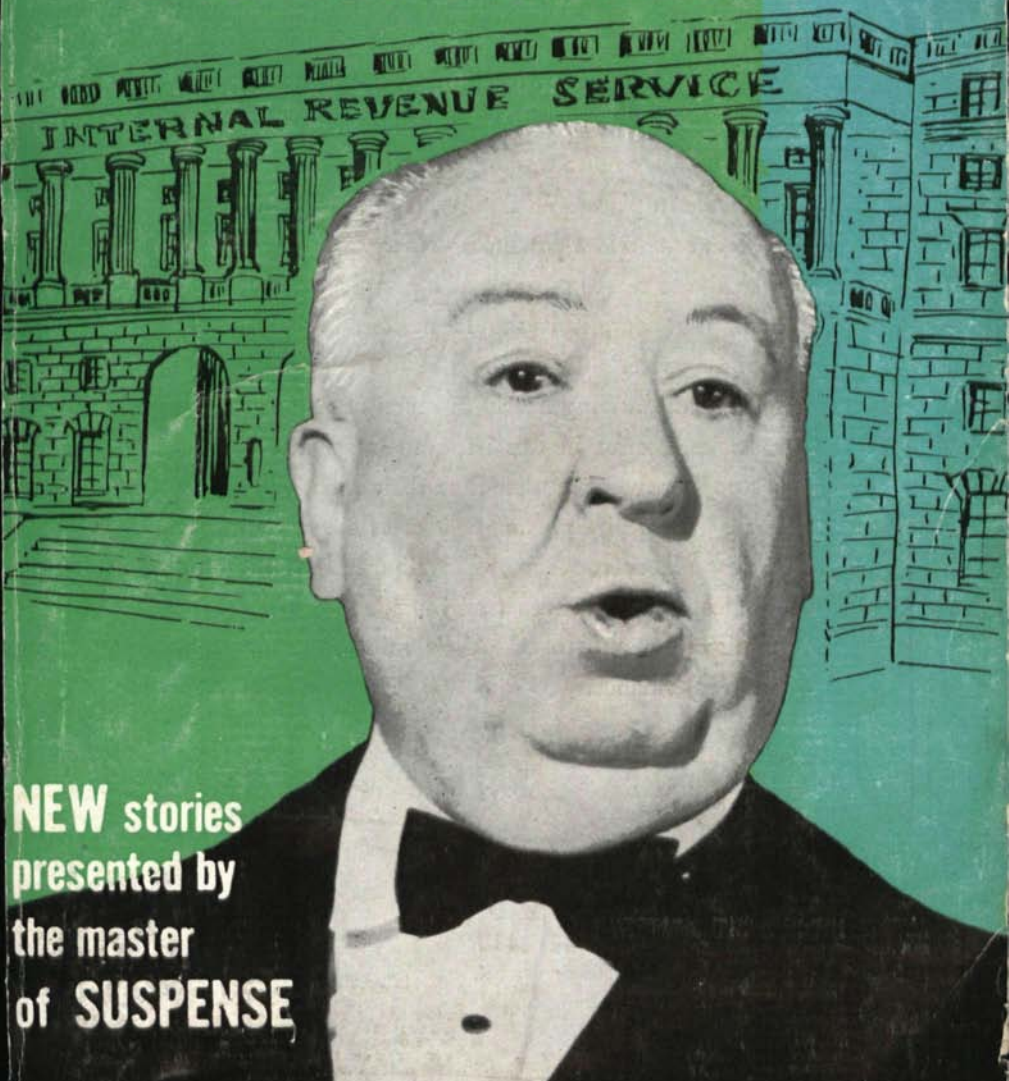


ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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

April 1967



Dear Reader:

Melting snows are dropping away from the shamrocks and all else that may have been concealed by a convenient drift during a long winter. The days are getting warmer—haven't you noticed? The heat, in fact, is becoming insufferable in places. While observing a man discussing a problem or two in a downtown office, I noticed he went from white to red to purple while perspiring freely. The sign on the door, if it should matter, read, "Internal Revenue Service."

With taxes drawing nearly as much attention as mystery stories, I offer in this issue an important message for those who would rather save their money.

There also are insights of politics as observed by laymen, farm labor problems, education, aid to the blind and, of course, many more, all intended to gladden the Administration and to take their minds off the strain of high(er) finance.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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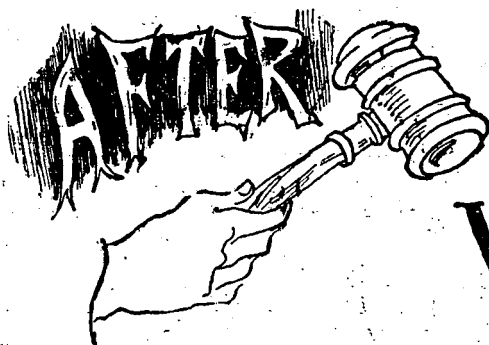
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One may attain legal exoneration at the point where investigation ceases, but personal vindication emanates only from verity.



THE VERDICT

By EDWARD
D. HOCH

NOT GUILTY," said the foreman, and a whisper of shocked surprise swept through the courtroom.

Edwin Kane smiled at the judge, then turned to the lawyer who stood by his side. "Thank you," he said simply. Then, as the judge adjourned the court, he walked through the bustle of shouting reporters to his wife's side.

"I knew you weren't guilty," she sobbed. "I knew they could never convict you."

"I wish I'd been as certain as you, Marjorie. Come on, let's go home."

But it wasn't to be that easy. One reporter finally cornered them on the wide marble stairs to the street.

"What's your reaction to the verdict, Mr. Kane?" he asked.

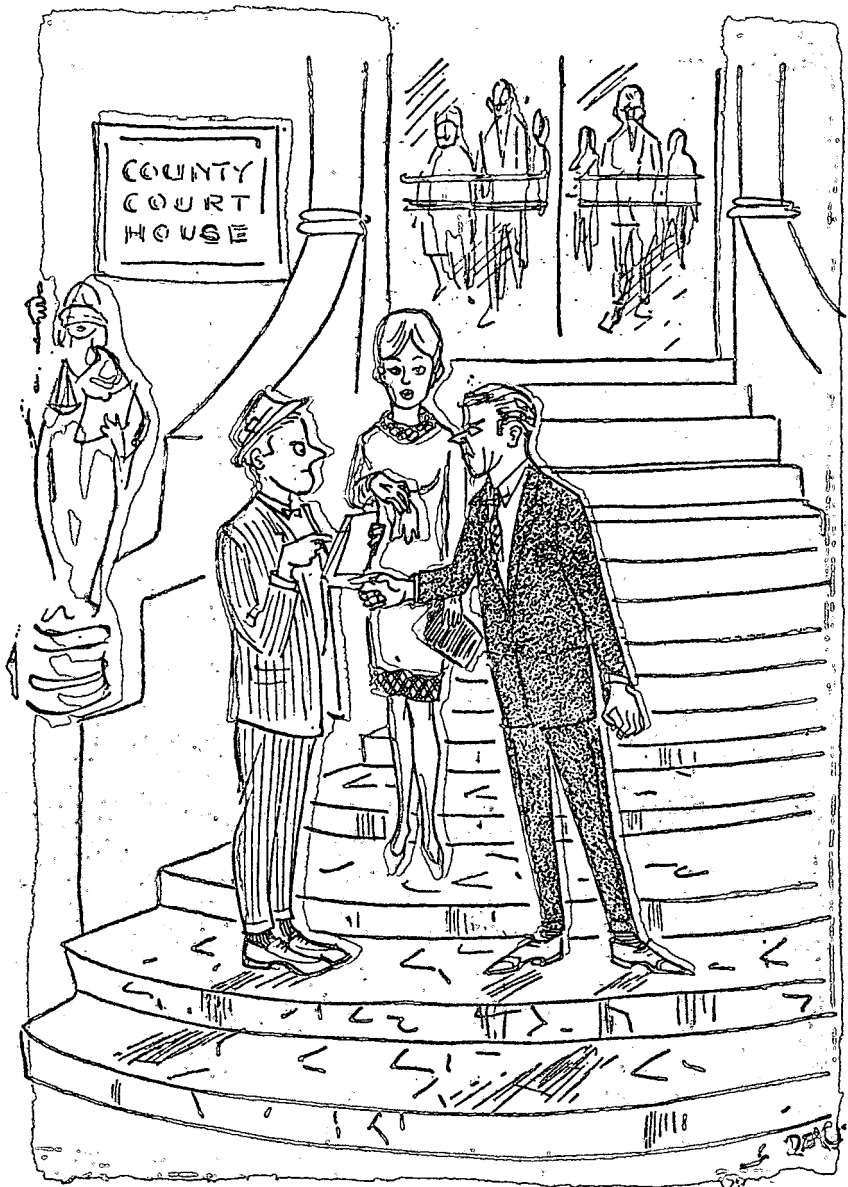
"I feel it is a complete vindication."

"Where do the police start looking now for Sheila's murderer?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Step aside, please. My wife and I just want to go home."

"Mrs. Kane, did you always have faith in your husband's innocence?"

Edwin stepped in front of the man. "Look, mister, I know you're



just trying to do your job, but I haven't been home in six weeks. Give us a break, huh?" Then he shouldered the man aside and pulled Marjorie along behind him.

"You should have let me answer the man, Edwin."

"Plenty of time for that. Maybe you can even sell your story to a magazine. *My Husband Was Tried For Murdering His Mistress.*"

"Edwin! She wasn't that!"

"The District Attorney seemed to think she was."

In the car, heading home at last, she said, "Anyway, it's all over now."

He was staring out the window at the passing landscape, watching the children on their way home from school, and the housewives returning from shopping. Such simple things, but he'd never expected to see them again. "It's not over," he told her. "Only the trial is over, nothing else. Didn't you hear the gasp from everyone when the jury acquitted me? Almost everybody in that courtroom thought I was guilty. They still think I'm guilty."

Marjorie was silent for a time, until at last she turned the car into the sloping driveway of their middle-class suburban home. "Do you think you can get your old job back, Edwin?" she asked him at last. He was a window trimmer

for a large, busy display company.

"Not a chance. When the judge set the bail so high to keep me locked up, they had to replace me with somebody else. They wouldn't take me back now. Nobody would."

"That's foolish. The jury acquitted you."

He followed her into the silent house, noticing the patterns of afternoon sun on the livingroom rug; back home, home to stay. "I've got to start all over again, Marjorie," he said. "Maybe we should move to another city, change our names, even my occupation . . ."

He left her in the kitchen and climbed the stairs to the bathroom. He had a headache, and he was very tired. The trial had lasted nine days.

Now, behind him, he heard Marjorie calling, "Edwin. Just a minute!"

But he was already in the bathroom, staring at the neat pile of razor, toothpaste, shaving lotion—the elements of his morning life. She'd brought some things to him at the jail, but these were the rest, assembled for discard, like his life. He turned in the doorway and saw her following him up the stairs. "Are my clothes packed too, Marjorie? Were you that certain they'd convict me?"

"Edwin, Edwin! It wasn't like

that! I was—straightening up.”

He sank down, sitting on the edge of the tub, holding his head in his hands. “Even you don’t believe I’m innocent. Even you!”

“Of course you’re innocent. The jury said so.”

“I won’t be innocent until the real killer is found. Not until then.”

“I’m sure the police . . .”

“I have to do something myself,” he decided suddenly. “Hire somebody.”

“A private detective?”

“No . . .” He remembered something he’d read in a recent newspaper, during his long days in jail. “That Australian fellow—the one who’s been touring the country, the one who uses clairvoyance to help the police solve crimes . . .”

“Do you think he’d come here, Edwin?”

“I could write and ask him.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in those things.”

He looked up at her from the edge of the tub. “I have to do something, Marjorie. I convinced a jury of my innocence. Now I have to convince you and the rest of the world.”

Captain Leopold’s office was at the rear of the second floor at police headquarters, overlooking the always crowded parking lot and the sunny plaza in front of the

courthouse. It was not an unpleasant view, and Leopold often relaxed by staring out the window at the hive of courtly activity. He’d seen many men come and go on those sun-streaked marble steps, and he’d just happened to be watching the day the jury acquitted Edwin Kane of the hammer slaying of Sheila Donewood. He was thinking of that day now as he pushed the buzzer to summon Sergeant Fletcher into his office.

“Yes, Captain? Time for your morning coffee?”

“Not yet. Sit down, Fletcher, and let me tell you my troubles.”

“Something in the morning report?” Fletcher lived for the present, not the past.

“No. The District Attorney was just on the phone. Remember Edwin Kane?”

“How could I forget? It’s only been a month or so since the trial. The D.A.’s office just sent the evidence back to us last week.”

Leopold shuffled through some papers at random. “Well, Kane visited the District Attorney yesterday. Seems he’s anxious to clear his name. He says he can’t get his old job back, and a lot of people still regard him as a murderer, despite the acquittal. He’s hired someone to make an independent investigation of the case.”

“A private detective?”

Leopold shook his head. "I only wish it were that easy. It's a clairvoyant, the John Bench who's gotten all the publicity."

"You're kidding!" It was all Fletcher could say.

"No. Kane and his wife are coming down here this afternoon with Bench. The District Attorney wants us to cooperate fully with them. That's it."

"What'll we do?"

"What we're told," Leopold said. "Dig out all the records on the Sheila Donewood killing, and the evidence—the hammer and stuff." He thought for a moment, then added, "And, Fletcher, why don't you contact the Australian police and find out what you can about John Bench. I don't always believe everything I read in the papers."

Even Leopold had to admit to himself that John Bench presented an imposing figure. The Australian was well over six feet in height, with thick black hair and heavy eyebrows that only served to accent the limpid depths of his eyes. One never noticed what he was wearing, or the way he walked. It was only his face that mattered, and those eyes.

"You would be Captain Leopold, the investigating officer," he said in a booming voice that fitted the rest of him.

"That's right. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bench." Leopold decided that he would make a perfect stage magician, and he wondered if perhaps that was all he really was.

Edwin Kane leaned forward in his chair, quietly insistent. "The District Attorney said you would cooperate with us, Captain."

"And I certainly will. Just what is it you wish?"

"To prove my innocence," Edwin Kane said simply.

"I thought the jury did that."

The slender man smiled. "Did they prove it to you, Captain? You're the man who arrested me."

"It was Sergeant Fletcher's case. I only helped out."

Edwin Kane reached over to take his wife's hand. "You have to understand what I've been through, Captain Leopold. Months in jail, the trial, now no jobs, no friends. I'm a branded man. Perhaps if we had children, we'd pull up our roots and move away, but I want to fight this thing. I want you to find the real murderer. That's why I've asked Mr. Bench to help."

Leopold turned now to the tall Australian. "And just how will you help, sir?"

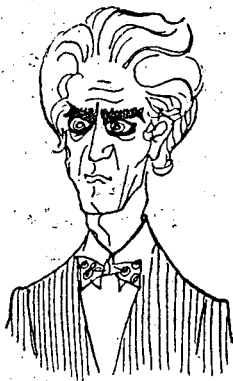
Bench responded with a smile, brief, utterly superior. "Surely you've read about me, Captain. I am in the nature of a clairvoyant.

Take me to the scene of the crime, let me handle the murder weapon, and I will give you a quite accurate description of your killer."

It was Leopold's turn to smile. "And what if he describes you, Mr. Kane?"

Edwin Kane was unruffled. "You still think I'm guilty, but I *know* I'm innocent. I'm willing to gamble on Mr. Bench."

"It's not really much of a gam-



ble," Leopold observed dryly. "You can't be tried again."

"I want to clear my name. Can't you understand that?"

"All right," Leopold said with a sigh. "I'll show Mr. Bench the murder scene personally."

"And the weapon," Bench said.

"And the weapon. I don't mind admitting we're at a dead end on the case. If you really can help, I'll be the first to acknowledge it."

John Bench stared down at him,

as if from a great height. "I can really help," he told them quietly.

Leopold left Fletcher at Headquarters, because he was well aware of the man's feeling on the Done-wood case, while Leopold himself might be able to present the facts with a bit more of an open mind. Kane and his wife were sent home, because both Leopold and Bench agreed they would add nothing to the investigation at this point.

"I've read about your past successes," Leopold told the Australian on the way to the motel. "That bushman killing, for example."

John Bench nodded. "Australia is an odd country, almost a world of its own, Captain. Its cities are as modern as yours, but the bush country is a whole different world. It is normal to me, but I think you would find it strange. It is a world where the seasons are reversed, where men hunt kangaroo almost to the point of extinction, where hordes of jackrabbits often threaten a man's livelihood. It is a world where the aborigines often live under the most primitive conditions, where men still 'point the bone' to dispose of their enemies."

"What brought you here?" Leopold asked. "Besides the money?"

"That was unkind," Bench said. "I see you are not a believer."

"Not of clairvoyance, no."

"In the bushman killing, I mere-

ly handled the club that had been used as a murder weapon, and I was able to give the authorities a quite accurate description of the criminal. He was a white man, an escaped convict who had been hiding out in the area for months."

"It must have been common knowledge in the area that he was still at large."

"I also told the police exactly where they could find him."

"One of the articles said you'd been a stage magician."

"Earlier, in my youth. I was many things before I began to realize my powers."

"What about the New Zealand thing?" Leopold asked, remembering another case the stories had mentioned.

"It was a bank robbery in Wellington. A teller was killed. Such crimes are almost unheard of down under. You Americans usually think of New Zealand as being an island a hundred miles or so off our coast. Actually, it's a pair of islands a full thousand miles away. I'd never been there, yet I was able to tell the police where they could find their man."

"You didn't have to visit the scene of the crime that time?"

"I relied upon newspaper photographs. It was after that case, and the subsequent news stories, that I decided to come to America. I have

been helpful in some minor things on the west coast."

Leopold turned the car into the driveway of the Sunnyside Motel. "How much is Kane paying you to come here?" he asked.

"I'd rather not say. You already regard me with suspicion, Captain."

"If he can afford a big bill from you, I wonder why he's so worried about not having a job. There are probably a dozen places that would hire him just for the publicity."

The car stopped and John Bench climbed out, seeming even taller against the open sky. "Your trouble, Captain, is the eternal policeman's view of the world. The victim and the criminal are only impersonal pieces to be moved on a chessboard of your own design."

"Maybe." Leopold scowled up at the sky. "But maybe that's the only way we get our job done. If we ever started feeling sorry for people . . ." He remembered once when he had, with a girl who turned out to be a murderer. After that, he never opened the door to his feelings.

"Tell me about the Donewood murder, Captain. Everything you can."

Leopold led him toward the motel office. "Sheila Donewood was a secretary in an insurance of-

fice, in the same building as Edwin Kane. They used to see each other on the elevator. One thing led to another, and he started playing around. This is where things get cloudy. He brought her here to the motel on at least two occasions, before the fatal night. We tried to prove more, but if they went elsewhere we couldn't find the place."

"Did his wife suspect?"

"Apparently not till he was arrested. Anyway, the fatal night was back in February. It had been snowing a little, but not enough to slow traffic. It was a Friday; all three of their visits had been on a Friday. Kane brought a bottle of Scotch, and they had a few drinks. The way he told the story to us—and at his trial—they had an argument about something and he ended the evening by walking out on her. He insisted she was still alive then, if a little drunk. He figured she'd sleep it off, and then go home."

They'd reached the motel office and Leopold stood aside to let John Bench enter first. The tall man had to duck his head a little as he went through the door.

Inside, a balding man with perpetual frown lines over his eyes looked up from the desk. "Captain Leopold! Not more trouble, I hope."

"No, no. We just want to see the

room again. This is John Bench. The motel owner, Ira Farrington."

The two men shook hands, almost reluctantly, and Farrington scratched at his high forehead with a pencil. "God knows I don't want any more trouble. First there was the murder and all, and then the trial dragging on and reminding everybody about it. That kind of publicity's no good in the motel business. Gets the place a bad reputation for family groups. With the summer coming on and all . . ."

Leopold interrupted. "Could you show us the room, if it isn't occupied?" He doubted if the Done-wood case would really hurt Farrington's business, but he didn't intend to argue with the man. He was anxious to end the thing and be rid of Bench.

"Sure. I'll get the key."

"And perhaps you could tell Mr. Bench how you happened to find the body."

They passed neatly tended flower beds as Farrington led them to the nearer of two low, angular buildings. The motel was not new, but the older type where cars were parked before each unit. The grounds were well kept and the place seemed clean enough.

"It was on a Friday night," Farrington recounted as they walked, dangling his keys so that they tinkled with each step. "They checked

in early, with a bottle, and I suppose I knew what they were up to. They'd been here once or twice before, always on Friday nights. Maybe about midnight or a little after I noticed his car was gone from in front of the place. I went over to see if they'd left already—this kind sometimes doesn't stay the whole night—and when nobody answered my knock I unlocked the door. She was there, on the bed, with her head bashed in."

"Fully clothed?" John Bench asked with a frown.

"She had her dress on, but her coat was still hanging up."

Leopold took over the conversation as Bench unlocked the motel room door. "She'd been killed with a hammer that we found next to the bed. There was no sign of assault or robbery, no sign of a struggle. Kane had registered under a false name, but Mr. Farrington makes a habit of writing down the license numbers of local cars."

The balding man nodded. "Most motels do it. Local people staying at a motel usually mean trouble, one way or another."

Leopold wondered, as he had before, what had happened to the vision of the Sunnyside as a family motel. "Anyway, we traced the number and picked up Kane at his home. At first he denied everything, but finally admitted having

an affair with the girl. He admitted being there and quarreling with her, but claimed he left her alive."

John Bench nodded, studying the little room, so much like any other. "So you tried him for murder."

"The District Attorney insisted, though I was worried about some of the evidence. We couldn't trace the hammer to Kane, and there was no blood on any of his clothing. Also, we had no real motive, even though he admitted to a quarrel. He said it was just a spat brought on by her drinking too much, hardly a reason for him to kill her." Leopold paused to light a cigarette as he glanced around the too-familiar room. "Kane's defense was that anyone could have entered the room after he left and killed her, and I guess the jury believed him."

"But the door was locked," the Australian observed. "She wouldn't have opened it to a stranger."

Leopold shrugged. Drunk, she might have done anything. She might have picked somebody up and brought him back there, though there hardly would have been time for that."

Ira Farrington tinkled his keys a bit impatiently. "I have to get back. Are you fellows finished?"

John Bench nodded slowly. His eyes seemed even deeper than before.

Outside, Leopold asked him, "Did you have any visions?"

The tall man smiled mirthlessly. "I am accustomed to disbelief. But you might look for a man with a flower."

"What?"

"A flower. Perhaps I can tell you more after I handle the murder weapon."

On the trip back to Headquarters, Leopold was silent. He didn't believe in the man for an instant, and he saw suddenly that he was being trapped into an impossible situation. If John Bench used his clairvoyance to produce a real suspect, Leopold would be forced to take some action. But what?

Back in the office, he sent Fletcher for the hammer. It was an ordinary sort, with a wooden handle and a dull metal head. John Bench hefted it a few times as he stared out the window.

"Flower," he said at last. "The man you want works with flowers—I'm certain now. He's of medium build, middle-aged, dressed in work clothes. The hammer belonged to him. He has other tools as well." Then he added, "And dirty hands."

"Where can we find him?" Leopold asked, playing along.

"He . . . lives not far from the motel, and he knows Ira Farrington. He's taken money from Farrington."

Sergeant Fletcher listened to it all in amazement. "That's just like in those Sherlock Holmes stories!" he muttered in admiration.

"If it's true," Leopold cautioned. "Get on the phone and ask Farrington if there's anybody that fits the description."

John Bench sat down, the same slight smile upon his lips. They waited.

In a few minutes Fletcher was back, looking puzzled but admiring. "It checks out, Captain. There's a guy named Walt Wilder who does the gardening at the motel."

Walter Wilder was called Walt by everyone who knew him, because he was that sort of a person. He was in his late fifties, and was stocky, going on fat. His home was a few blocks from the motel, and from it he conducted a sort of local landscaping service. He cared for the motel grounds, and also managed to tend a dozen or so neighborhood gardens. He was not an intelligent man, but he knew enough to be frightened by Captain Leopold's visit.

"Now, Walt," Leopold reassured him, "there's nothing to worry about. It's just that we've reopened the Donewood case and we're talking to people who are connected with the motel. You do gardening

and such for them, don't you?"

The man rubbed a grimy hand across the stubble on his chin. "Not in the winter, I don't. She was killed in the winter."

"But you're around there? You have access to the room keys?"

"I never took a key."

"I didn't say you did," Leopold told him quietly. "Do you have any tools here?"

"Gardening tools."

"A hammer?"

The man chuckled at the question. "Everybody has a hammer."

"Could I see yours?"

Walt disappeared into a back room of the little cottage and returned through the clutter clutching a hammer. It was somewhat similar to the murder weapon, but much newer. The head was still shiny. "Here it is."

"Did you have another one? An older one?"

"Sure, a long time ago."

Leopold sighed and tried another angle. "Are you married, Walt?"

"No."

"Ever were?"

"Long time ago. My wife left me. She said I'd never amount to nothing."

"Go out with girls?"

"At my age?"

"Where were you on the night Sheila Donewood was murdered, Walt?"

"I don't know. Don't remember."

"I'll have to ask you to come downtown for some more questions."

Fear now was on the weather-beaten face. "You arresting me?"

"Nothing like that, Walt. What would we arrest you for?"

What, indeed, Leopold asked himself. He felt he was being drawn against his will into an uncharted maze from which there was no exit.

Sergeant Fletcher was waiting for Leopold in his office, looking disturbed. "That Bench has been talking to reporters," he said.

"I figured he would. That's why I went out to see Wilder. I brought him in with me."

"Anything there?"

"Probably not, but he's the sort of person the papers might hop on. All they'd need would be a little encouragement from Bench. These clairvoyants are always great Sunday supplement stuff."

"Could we trace the hammer to him?"

"We couldn't trace it to Kane. What chance would we have tracing it to anyone else? It was just an old hammer that had seen a lot of use. Maybe the killer brought it, or maybe he just happened to have it with him."

Fletcher frowned. "Farrington

must have had a hammer around his office. This Wilder could have picked it up along with the key."

Leopold only grunted about that. He was already thinking of something else. "Dig out the trial transcript, will you, Fletcher? I want to go over it again."

Fletcher was back with it in ten minutes, but he had more bad news as well. "The reporters got a picture of Walt Wilder. They're going to print it, along with Bench's vision."

"Let them. There are still libel laws."

When the late editions hit the street, the phone began to buzz on Leopold's desk. First the Commissioner, then the District Attorney. Did they have any sort of a case against this Wilder man? No, he'd already been released after questioning. Did they have a case against anybody? No, Leopold admitted, not even any good ideas.

But the city was stirred up once more. John Bench went on the eleven p.m. news to repeat the bit about the man who worked with flowers, while Leopold settled down to study the transcript of the trial. He needed a break, and he needed it soon.

One morning newspaper carried an editorial demanding an immediate investigation of Walt Wilder's background, hinting that he'd

once been confined to a mental institution. They were careful not actually to mention him by name, but they were still skirting dangerously close to libel. Leopold read it and crumpled the paper in disgust. He was about to phone the editor, whom he knew slightly, when Marjorie Kane called.

"Yes, Mrs. Kane?"

"Edwin and I have seen the papers and talked with Mr. Bench. Why haven't you arrested this Wilder man?"

"We need evidence, Mrs. Kane. Juries don't convict on the supposed visions of a clairvoyant. Wilder had no motive to kill the girl."

"Who did have, besides my husband?"

"I'm busy right now, Mrs. Kane. I'll be happy to talk to you later." He hung up, feeling a twinge of guilt at having cut her off, but anxious to complete his call to the newspaper.

First, though, he buzzed Fletcher and asked him about the report of Walt Wilder's confinement. "I was just checking on that myself, Captain. The guy had a nervous breakdown twenty years ago, just after he got back from the war. Nothing unusual, no signs of violence. That editorial was stretching a bit far."

"I thought so. All the same, we

should have known about it first, before the papers." His brief anger had died a bit, and he decided to skip the call to the editor. "Come in for a minute, will you, Fletcher?"

When the sergeant was seated opposite him, Leopold took out the trial transcript and passed over a section he'd marked. It was part of Ira Farrington's testimony about finding the body: "Mr. Kane and the girl had a small overnight bag with them when they checked in. I looked out once and thought I saw him putting it in the back of the car. The next time I looked out, the car was gone, so I naturally figured they'd left. I went over to check the room and unlocked the door when nobody answered my knock. It was just a bit after midnight. I turned on the light and there she was, on the bed. She was fully clothed, but without her coat. She'd been hit on the head with a hammer, and there was blood all over. The hammer was on the floor, near the overnight bag. Her coat was still there, but his was gone."

When Fletcher looked up from the transcript, Leopold asked, "Does anything strike you odd there?"

Fletcher scratched his head. "I don't know."

"Look at it this way; if Kane

didn't kill her, the murderer had to be either someone who was hanging around the motel and happened to catch her alone, or someone who had purposely followed the two of them there. In either case, the killer had to have the hammer with him, or available. If . . ."

The telephone buzzed and Leopold picked it up. He listened a moment and then passed it to Fletcher. "An answer to your Australian cables about John Bench. You'd better get it now."

Fletcher was back in a few minutes, holding the lengthy message. He was smiling. "Wait till the papers get ahold of this!"

But before the papers were told anything, Leopold visited John Bench at his hotel. The room was expensive, and he wondered if this would all go on Edwin Kane's bill. "I wanted to talk to you again," he told the Australian.

The tall man smiled. "Go right ahead."

"Things are moving fast in the case."

"I'm pleased to hear it. Has the Wilder man confessed yet?"

Leopold leaned back in his chair. "No. I don't think he will. I don't think he's guilty."

"Oh?"

"We heard from the Australian police, Mr. Bench. Your reputation

isn't nearly so firmly established down there as you'd like us to believe. In fact, they say you're nothing but a stage magician with a few clever tricks."

"It was a trick to identify Wilder without ever having seen him?"

Leopold took out his cigarettes. Somehow he felt sorry for the man. "A trick, yes. You saw the carefully tended flower gardens at the motel—we both did—and you knew there must be somebody hired to take care of them. Your description, medium height and middle-aged, could have fit almost anyone. These days, middle-aged can mean anybody from 30 to 65. You could tell from the appearance of the gardens that no kid was doing the work. Actually, your description wasn't even all that good—Wilder turned out to be stocky and nearly 60—but you got by with it. And naturally the gardener would have tools, naturally he'd dress in work clothes, naturally he'd have dirty hands, and he'd be in the neighborhood, and he'd known Farrington, and he'd take money from Farrington. Your whole vision was a phoney, Bench."

"You'd find it difficult to prove that."

"Maybe not so difficult. You told me about a couple of cases in Australia, the ones that had been writ-

ten up in the magazines and newspapers, but the Australian police give different versions. Everyone knew about the escaped convict in the bushman killing, and you didn't really tell them where he was hiding. As for the New Zealand thing, there was a radio report of a suspect's arrest before you actually made public your description. It's been like that all along. Bits of information, good guesses, vague generalities, and you get the reputation of being a clairvoyant."

"What about all the magazine stories?"

"The Australian police claim they wrote to the largest American magazine that published a story about you, noting fifteen factual errors, but the magazine didn't bother to retract its story. In these things, the retraction never catches up with the initial sensation anyway. A couple of imaginative feature writers did stories on you, and the rest of it grew from there. Australia's too far away from many writers to do firsthand research."

"What are you going to do?" John Bench asked. He seemed to have lost all his vigor, and even his eyes were subdued.

"Try to clear Walt Wilder's name, after what you've done." Leopold stood up. "Right now that's more important to me than

clearing your Edwin Kane's name."

"How are you going to do it?"

"By finding the real murderer of the Donewood girl."

Once somebody had told Leopold that he had only one fault—he didn't like to be proved wrong. Perhaps it was a natural fault, but he had to admit it existed. He'd been known to go into a severe depression following the rare jury acquittals of cases on which he'd worked, not so much for his own sake as for those people whose lives he'd affected. He could almost understand Edwin Kane's hiring of someone to clear his name, and perhaps he could understand the mind of someone like John Bench as well.

"Is Farrington outside?" he asked Fletcher later that afternoon.

The sergeant nodded. "He's waiting."

"All right, let's go over it again before I have him in. It all boils down to two things: the hammer, and the motive. She wasn't attacked or robbed. She fought with Kane and he left. Then what?"

"You mentioned Farrington's statement earlier, Captain."

"Right. Kane said he left Sheila in the motel room to sleep it off. If we believe him, we can pretty much assume that she didn't go out to a bar and pick someone up. She wasn't able to. So the killer

came to her door and found her in the room, half asleep and quite drunk. Who? Wilder? There'd be no reason for a gardener to be hanging around in the winter, and certainly no reason for him to have a hammer with him. The light in her room was out, remember, and I think Kane testified at the trial he turned it out when she collapsed on the bed. So with the car gone from in front, Wilder or any other prowler would have no way of knowing anyone was inside. Since that room can be seen from Farrington's office, it's the last one a sneak thief would pick."

"So where does that leave us?" Fletcher asked. "We went over a lot of this ground before."

"It leaves us with our same two possibilities, narrowed a bit. The killer is no sneak thief or casual prowler or barroom pickup. He's either someone who came to that room for a specific reason, on business, or someone who followed Kane and Sheila there."

"Farrington?" Fletcher breathed the name.

"What motive?" Leopold tapped a cigarette. "But ask him to come in now."

The motel owner seemed tired and nervous, and he dropped into the chair with something like relief. "I hope this thing is almost over. The summer tourist season

is just beginning, you know . . .”

“Just a few questions, Mr. Farrington. At the trial, you said you saw Kane put something in the back of his car. How long was that before you noticed he was gone and went to investigate?”

The balding man shrugged. “Ten minutes, maybe. Like I said at the trial.”

Leopold remembered the defense attorney arguing it would have been just time enough for the murderer to arrive and kill Sheila Donewood. “Were the lights on then?”

“I guess so, sure.”

“Then Kane went back into the room.”

“Maybe. That doesn’t prove anything.” The man was growing nervous again.

“Say,” Fletcher said, interrupting suddenly, “we’ve been looking for someone who could have followed them to the motel, someone with a motive to kill her. How about Kane’s wife?”

Leopold frowned at him. He didn’t like this sort of thing in front of Farrington. “I considered her from the beginning. But a hammer is hardly a woman’s weapon, and she’d have no way of knowing Sheila would be left alone like that. Besides, Sheila would have had to let her into the room, and she’d probably have

started screaming right away at the sight of Kane’s wife, even if the hammer were out of sight.”

“Who does that leave?”

Leopold leaned back in his chair. “It leaves Mr. Farrington here, staring out the window at Kane putting something in the back of his car. By the back, I imagine you meant the trunk?”

“Yes.”

“Funny we didn’t ask you that before. But it wasn’t the overnight bag, of course, because that was found in the room with the body. If Kane wasn’t putting anything *in* the trunk, he must have been taking something *out*.”

“What?” Fletcher had come forward suddenly in his chair.

“We couldn’t trace the hammer to Kane, but he was a window trimmer for a display company. What would almost certainly be in the trunk of his car?”

“A hammer!”

“*And* probably a drape or cloth of some sort to keep the blood off his suit! During the ten-minute period when the murderer must have arrived with his hammer, Edwin Kane went out to get something from his trunk, then returned to the room—and that trunk almost certainly contained a hammer! Kane’s whole hiring of John Bench was just a clever device to help convince the public—

and maybe his own wife—of his innocence." Leopold was on his feet. "Come on, Fletcher. We're going out there."

"He can't be tried again."

"I just want him to know we know," Leopold said.

The evening was warm, and Edwin Kane was at the little workbench in his garage. When he heard Marjorie come through the open door from the driveway, he asked, "Who was on the phone?"

"John Bench. He wanted to tell us he's leaving town."

"Without his money?"

"He said he'd send a bill."

"Oh." Kane bent down to drive a nail carefully into the display he was making. He had to keep his hand in, until a job turned up.

"Edwin?"

"Yes?"

"Edwin, I didn't want to mention this before, but what happened to all the things that were in the trunk of our car?"

"What? What things?"

"Your tools, and those colored drapes; your window-trimming things."

"I guess I cleaned it all out."

"Edwin, you had a hammer in there, didn't you?"

"I might have." He raised his hand.

"Not that one. Another one."

"Do you still think I killed her, Marjorie?"

"I've thought so all along. I was willing to play your game, but not now—not when the papers think that gardener killed her. You can tell them the truth. They can't touch you now."

"Marjorie!" He felt the tears at his eyes, knew suddenly it had all been for nothing, all that money for John Bench, for nothing.

"I thought I could live with it, but I can't, Edwin. I want a divorce."

"But . . . but . . . I did it for you! She wanted me to marry her, wanted me to leave you. When I refused, she said she'd tell you everything. I couldn't stand that, Marjorie. I couldn't stand the thought of losing you."

"I'm leaving, Edwin," she mumbled, suddenly frightened, backing away.

"I couldn't stand it. I got the hammer from the trunk, and the cloth to keep the blood off . . ."

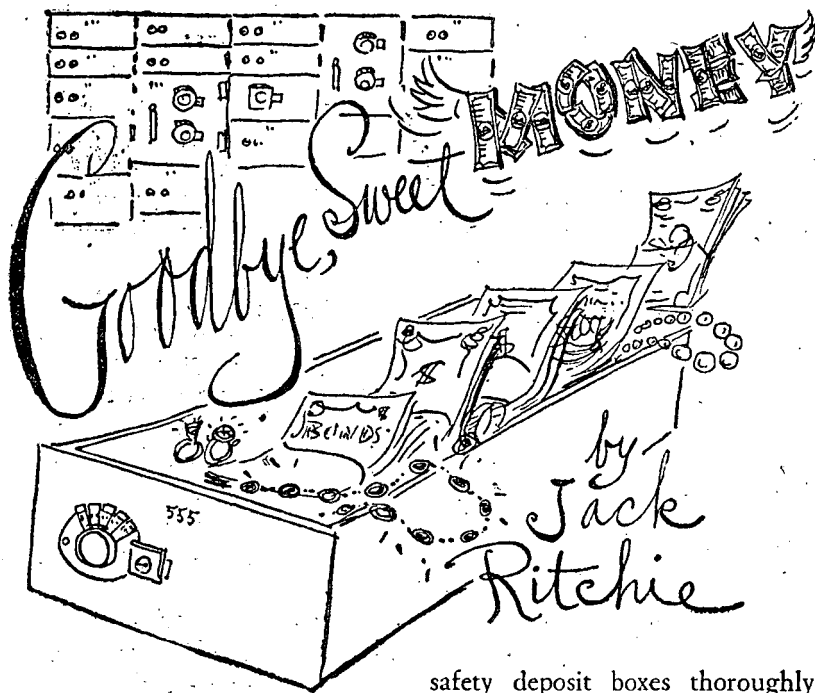
"Edwin . . . !"

"She screamed at me just like that." He'd forgotten the hammer in his hand until that moment, until he saw it raised high in the air, coming down fast.

"Edwin!"

He was still standing over her body when Leopold and Fletcher turned into the driveway.

The bite of a flea is uncomfortable, to be sure, but at least it lacks the piercing anguish of the whole dog.



SERGEANT Harrison came into Peabody's office, nodded in my direction, and then spoke to Peabody. "You're positive nothing was taken from the vault itself?"

"Positive," Peabody said. "It was untouched. But unfortunately the thief did manage to rifle most of the

safety deposit boxes thoroughly."

"Anything besides cash missing?"

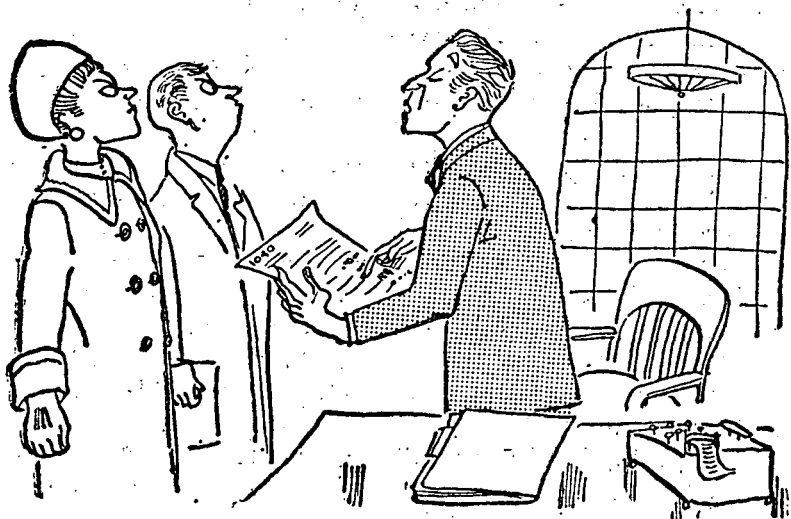
"I haven't interviewed all of the victims yet, but so far it appears that he specialized in cash alone. After all, we're just a branch bank in the suburbs. We don't have all that concrete and metal and the elaborate alarm systems the main office has," Peabody said.

Harrison gloomily agreed. "Apparently he broke into the safety deposit box room after the last employee left Saturday afternoon. He had all of the weekend to work, and I guess he did." Harrison

Dr. Reagan and his wife were both in their late twenties.

"Just what kind of a bank do you run here?" Reagan demanded.

"It's a branch bank," Peabody said. "We don't have the metal



chewed his cigar. "Have you figured out how much money was stolen?"

"Not yet," Peabody said.

After Harrison left, Peabody's secretary, Miss Hinckle, came into the room. "Dr. Reagan and his wife are here."

Peabody sighed. "I simply hate speaking to angry people."

Miss Hinckle was plain, protective, and soothing. "Just try to think of it as part of the job."

"I'll try to, Miss Hinckle," Peabody said. "Please show them in."

and the concrete and alarms . . ."

Mrs. Reagan was as angry as her husband. "But you *do* have insurance, don't you?"

"Good heavens, yes," Peabody said. "We're insured to a fare-thee-well. However, concerning cash in safety deposit boxes, the coverage does not . . ." He stopped. "By the way, what did you lose? Jewelry? Bonds?"

"Good hard cash," Reagan snapped. "Forty thousand dollars."

Peabody raised an eyebrow. "Really? Are you *positive*?"

Reagan exploded. "You're damn right I'm positive."

I cleared my throat. "Dr. Reagan, according to our records, you finished your internship fairly recently and have been in private practice three years." I consulted a sheet in my folder. "During those three years, you earned the aggregate sum of \$37,583.57—upon which you paid income taxes."

Reagan frowned. "Who the devil are you?"

Peabody spoke up. "Oh, I'm sorry, but I forgot to introduce Mr. Anderson. He's from the Bureau of Internal Revenue, and it seems they're interested in safety deposit box robberies, though I don't know exactly why."

"To be specific, Dr. Reagan," I said, "the Bureau is curious as to how you managed to save \$40,000 on an income of \$37,583.57?"

Dr. Reagan's face slowly whitened. He wet his lips. "Save? Did I say anything about *save*? I *inherited* the money from my Aunt Bessie."

I drew a ball-point pen from my pocket. "Could I please have the full name of your Aunt Bessie? And the date she died? We like to check up on these things, you know. Of course you paid the inheritance taxes?"

Dr. Reagan began to perspire. He looked to his wife for help.

She laughed lightly and quickly. "Dear, you've been talking about inheriting the money for so long that sometimes you actually *believe* that it's already happened. But Aunt Bessie is still alive and kicking. Remember?"

Reagan wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Then how do we explain to the man how . . ."

"We *saved* the money, dear." Her voice was commanding. "And it wasn't *forty* thousand dollars. It was *four* thousand—on which we paid the income tax. Do you *understand*?"

He still seemed about to protest. "*Dear*," his wife said firmly, "what *real* difference does it make to us now whether it *was* or *wasn't* forty thousand? It's all gone now anyway and evidently not covered by the bank's insurance—and you wouldn't want to go to jail for avoiding income taxes on an *imaginary* forty thousand dollars, now would you, Henry?"

He shook his head numbly. "I guess not, dear."

"And besides, Henry," his wife said, "just remember there's more where that came from."

He brightened. "That's right. If it took me only three years to . . ." He stopped, his face clouding. "But what about socialized medicine?"

His wife took him by the arm.

"We'll cross that bridge another time."

When they were gone, Miss Hinckle reappeared with coffee and sandwiches. "Time for a little break. No sense in overdoing things."

"Miss Hinckle," Peabody said, "I don't know what we'd do without you."

It took Peabody and me three days to interview all of the robbery victims and when we'd finished, I made the drinks.

"What does the total come to?" I asked.

"Our patrons claim they lost a total of two hundred and ten thousand dollars."

"And how much did we *really* get from those boxes?"

"Four hundred and sixty thousand dollars, thanks to tax dodgers like the Reagans and others."

"Good," I said. "That leaves us a net profit of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I'll wrap up the other two hundred and ten thousand and send it to the police with an anonymous note saying that my conscience has been both-

ering me and I've decided to return the full amount. The case will not exactly be marked closed in their files, but no one is going to bother too much trying to catch the thief after the money has been returned. The heat will be off, so to speak."

Peabody smiled. "I have the feeling, though, that *some* individuals might have their doubts about whether *all* of the loot has actually been returned."

"In that case, they may take it up with the Bureau of Internal Revenue, though I have the strange suspicion that none of them will." I sipped my martini and smiled faintly. "For my part, it seems only reasonable that I ought to get fifty percent of our profits."

Peabody looked innocently at the ceiling and said, "Obviously my share ought to be fifty percent also."

"Not so fast, gentlemen," Miss Hinckle said firmly. "Since it was *my* idea, and I'm the one who brought the two of you together, we share and share alike."



It seems inadequate to identify one who takes advantage of circumstances, with little regard for principles or consequences, as an opportunist.

THE MOST UNUSUAL SNATCH

THEY grabbed Carole Butler a few minutes before midnight just a block and a half from her own front door. It never would have happened if her father had let her take the car. But she was six months shy of eighteen, and the law said you had to be eighteen to drive at night, and her father was a great believer in the law. So she had taken the bus, got off two blocks from her house, and walked half a block before a tall, thin man with his hat down over his eyes appeared suddenly and asked her the time.

She was about to tell him to go



By
Lawrence
Block

buy his own watch when an arm came around her from behind and a damp cloth fastened over her mouth and nose. It smelled like a hospital room.

She heard voices, faintly, as if from far away. "Not too long, you don't want to kill her."

"What's the difference? Kill her now or kill her later, she's just as dead."

"You kill her now and she can't make the phone call . . ."

There was more, but she didn't hear it. The chloroform did its work and she sagged, limp, unconscious.

At first, when she came to, groggy and weak and sick to her stomach, she thought she had been taken to a hospital. Then she realized it was just the smell of the chloroform. Her head seemed awash in the stuff. She breathed steadily, in and out, in and out, stayed where she was and didn't open her eyes.

She heard the same two voices she had heard before. One was assuring the other that everything would go right on schedule, that they couldn't miss. "Seventy-five thou," he said several times. "Wait another hour, let him sweat a little. Then call him and tell him it'll cost him seventy-five thou to see his darling daughter again. That's

all we tell him, just that we got her, and the price. Then we let him stew in it for another two hours."

"Why drag it out?"

"Because it has to drag until morning anyway. He's not going to have that kind of bread around the house. He'll have to go on the send for it, and that means nine o'clock when the banks open. Give him the whole message right away and he'll have too much time to get nervous and call copper. But space it out just right and we'll have him on the string until morning, and then he can go straight to the bank and get the money ready."

Carole opened her eyes slowly, carefully. The one who was doing most of the talking was the same tall, thin man who had asked her the time. He was less than beautiful, she noticed. His nose was lopsided, angling off to the left as though it had been broken and improperly reset. His chin was scarcely there at all. *He ought to wear a goatee, she thought. He would still be no thing of beauty, but it might help.*

The other one was shorter, heavier, and younger, no more than ten years older than Carole. He had wide shoulders, close-set eyes, and a generally stupid face, but he wasn't altogether bad-looking. *Not*

bad at all, she told herself. Between the two of them, they seemed to have kidnapped her. She wanted to laugh out loud.

"Better cool it," the younger one said. "Looks like she's coming out of it."

She picked up her cue, making a great show of blinking her eyes vacantly and yawning and stretching. Stretching was difficult, as she seemed to be tied to a chair. It was an odd sensation. She had never been tied up before, and she didn't care for it.

"Hey," she said, "where am I?"

She could have answered the question herself. She was, to judge from appearances, in an especially squalid shack. The shack itself was fairly close to a highway, judging

from the traffic noises. If she had to guess, she would place the location somewhere below the southern edge of the city, probably a few hundred yards off Highway 130 near the river. There were plenty of empty fishing shacks there, she remembered, and it was a fair bet that this was one of them.

"Now just take it easy, Carole," the thin man said. "You take it easy and nothing's going to happen to you."

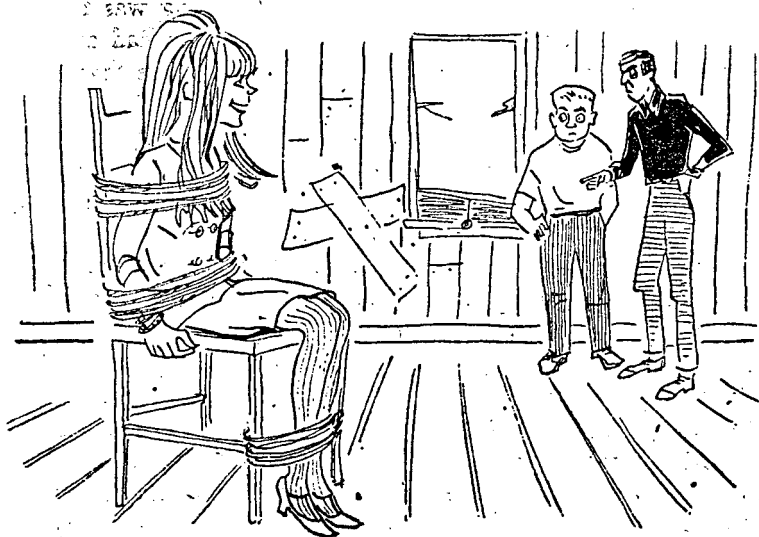
"You kidnapped me."

"You just take it easy and—"

She squealed with joy. "This is too much! You've actually kidnapped me. Oh, this is wild! Did you call my old man yet?"

"No."

"Will you let me listen when



you do?" She started to giggle. "I'd give anything to see his face when you tell him. He'll split. He'll just fall apart."

They were both staring at her, open-mouthed. The younger man said, "You sound happy about it."

"Happy? Of course I'm happy. This is the most exciting thing that ever happened to me!"

"But your father—"

"I hope you gouge him good," she went on. "He's the cheapest old man on earth. He wouldn't pay a nickle to see a man go over the Falls. How much are you going to ask?"

"Never mind," the thin man said.

"I just hope it's enough. He can afford plenty."

The thin man grinned. "How does seventy-five thousand dollars strike you?"

"Not enough. He can afford more than that," she said. "He's very rich, but you wouldn't know it the way he hangs onto his money."

"Seventy-five thou is pretty rich."

She shook her head. "Not for him. He could afford plenty more."

"It's not what he can afford, it's what he can raise in a hurry. We don't want to drag this out for days. We want it over by morning."

She thought for a minute. "Well,

it's your funeral," she said pertly. The shorter man approached her. "What do you mean by that?"

"Forget it, Ray," his partner said.

"No, I want to find out. What did you mean by that, honey?"

She looked up at them. "Well, I don't want to tell you your business," she said slowly. "I mean, you're the kidnappers. You're the ones who are taking all the chances. I mean, if you get caught, they can really give you a hard time, can't they?"

"The chair," the thin man said.

"That's what I thought, so I don't want to tell you how to do all this, but there *was* something that occurred to me."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, first of all, I don't think it's a good idea to wait for morning. You wouldn't know it, of course, but he doesn't have to wait until the banks open. He's a doctor, and I know he gets paid in cash a lot of the time, cash that never goes to the bank, never gets entered in the books. It goes straight into the safe in the basement and stays there."

"Taxes—"

"Something like that. Anyway, I heard him telling somebody that he never has less than a hundred thousand dollars in that safe. So you wouldn't have to wait until the banks open, and you wouldn't

have to settle for \$75,000 either. You could ask for an even hundred thousand and get it easy."

The two kidnappers looked at her, at each other; then at her again.

"I mean," she said, "I'm only trying to be helpful."

"You must hate him something awful, kid."

"Now you're catching on."

"Doesn't he treat you right?"

"All his money," she said, "and I don't even get my own car. I had to take the bus tonight; otherwise you wouldn't have got me the way you did, so it's his fault I was kidnapped. Why shouldn't he pay a bundle?"

"This is some kid, Howie," the younger man said.

Howie nodded. "You sure about the hundred thousand?"

"He'll probably try to stall, tell us he needs time to raise the dough."

"So tell him you know about the safe."

"Maybe he—"

"And that way he won't call the police," she went on. "Because of not paying taxes on the money and all that. He won't want that to come out into the open, so he'll pay."

"It's like you planned this job yourself, baby," Ray said.

"I almost did."

"Huh?"

"I used to think what a gas it

would be if I got kidnapped. What a fit the old man would throw and everything." She giggled. "But I never really thought it would happen. It's too perfect."

"I think I'll make that call now," Howie said. "I'll be back in maybe half an hour. Ray here'll take good care of you, kitten." He nodded, and was gone.

She had expected that Howie would make the call, and was glad it had turned out that way. Ray seemed to be the easier of the two to get along with. It wasn't just that he was younger and better-looking. He was also, as far as she could tell, more good-natured and a whole lot less intelligent.

"Who would have figured it?" he said now. "I mean, you go and pull a snatch, you don't expect anybody to be so cooperative."

"Have you ever done this before, Ray?"

"No."

"It must be scary."

"Aw, I guess it's easy enough. More money than a bank job, and a whole lot less risk. The only hard part is when the mark—your old man, that is—delivers the money. You have to get the dough without being spotted. Outside of that, it's no sweat at all."

"And afterward?"

"Huh?"

The palms of her hands were

moist with sweat. She said, "What happens afterward? Will you let me go, Ray?"

"Oh, sure."

"You won't kill me?"

"Oh, don't be silly," he said.

She knew exactly what he meant. He meant, *Let's not talk about it, doll, but of course we'll kill you. What else?*

"I'm more fun when I'm alive," she said.

"I'll bet you are."

"You better believe it."

He came closer to her. She straightened her shoulders to emphasize her youthful curves, and watched his eyes move over her body.

"That's a pretty sweater," he said. "You look real good in a sweater. I'll bet a guy could have a whole lot of fun with you, baby."

"I'm more fun," she said, "when I'm not tied up. Howie won't be back for a half hour. But I don't guess that would worry you."

"Not a bit."

She sat perfectly still while he untied her. Then she got slowly to her feet. Her legs were cramped and her fingers tingled a little from the limited circulation. Ray took her in his arms and kissed her, then took a black automatic from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"Now don't get any idea about

making a grab for the gun," he said. "You'd only get hurt, you know."

Later he insisted on tying her up again.

"But I won't try anything," she protested. "Honest, Ray. You know I wouldn't try anything. I want everything to go off just right."

"Howie wouldn't like it," he said doggedly, and that was all there was to it.

"But don't make it too tight," she begged. "It hurts."

He didn't make it too tight.

When Howie came back he was smiling broadly. He closed the door and locked it and lit a cigarette. "Like a charm," he said through a cloud of smoke. "Went like a charm. You're okay, honey girl."

"What did he say?"

"Got hysterical first of all. Kept telling me not to hurt you, that he'd pay if only we would release you. He kept saying how much he loved you and all."

She started to laugh. "Oh, beautiful!"

"And you were right about the safe. He started to blubber that he couldn't possibly raise a hundred thousand on short notice. Then I hit him with the safe, said I knew he kept plenty of dough

right there in his own basement, and that really got to him. He went all to pieces. I think you could have knocked him over with a lettuce leaf, when he heard that."

"And he'll pay up?"

"No trouble at all, and if it's all cash he's been salting away, that's the best news yet: no serial numbers copied down; no big bills; no runs of new bills in sequence. That means we don't have to wholesale the kidnap dough to one of the Eastern mobs for forty cents on the dollar. We wind up with a hundred thousand, and we wind up clean."

"And he'll be scared to go to the police afterward," Carole put in. "Did you set up the delivery of the money?"

"No. I said I'd call in an hour. I may cut it to a half hour, though. I think we've got him where we want him. This is going so smooth it scares me. I want it over and done with, nice and easy."

She was silent for a moment. Howie wanted it over and done with, undoubtedly wanted no loose ends. Inevitably, he was going to think of her, Carole Butler, as an obvious loose end, which meant that he would probably want to tie her off, and the black automatic on the table was just the thing to do the job. She stared at the gun, imagined the sound of

it, the impact of the bullet in her flesh. She was terrified, but she made sure that none of this showed in her face or in her voice.

Casually she asked, "About the money—how are you going to pick it up?"

"That's the only part that worries me."

"I don't think he'll call the police. Not my old man. Frankly, I don't think he'd have the guts. But if he did, that would be the time when they'd try to catch you, wouldn't it?"

"That's the general idea."

She thought for a moment. "If we were anywhere near the south end of town, I know a perfect spot—but I suppose we're miles from there."

"What's the spot?"

She told him about it—the overpass on Route 130 at the approach to the turnpike. They could have her father drive onto the pike, toss the money over the side of the overpass when he reached it, and they could be waiting down below to pick it up. Any cops who were with him would be stuck up there on the turnpike, and they could get away clean.

"It's not bad," Ray said.

"It's perfect," Howie added. "You thought that up all by yourself?"

"Well, I got the idea from a

really super-duper movie . . ."

"I think it's worth doing it that way." Howie sighed. "I was going to get fancy, have him walk to a garbage can, stick it inside, then cut out. Then we go in and get it out of the can. But suppose the cops had the whole place staked out?" He smiled. "You've got a good head on your shoulders, kitten. It's a shame—"

"What's a shame?"

"That you're not part of the gang, the way your mind works. You'd be real good at it."

That, she knew, was not really what he'd meant. *It's a shame we have to kill you anyway, he meant. You're a smart kid, and a real cooperative kid, and even a pretty kid, but all the same you're going to get a bullet between the eyes, and it's a shame.*

She pictured her father, waiting by the telephone. If he called the police, she knew it would be all over for her, and he might very well call them. But if she could stop him, if she could make sure that he let the delivery of the ransom money go according to plan, then maybe she would have a chance. It wouldn't be the best chance in the world, but anything was better than nothing at all.

When Howie said he was going to make the second phone call, she asked him to take her along. "Let

me talk to him," she begged. "I want to hear his voice. I want to hear him in a panic. He's always so cool about everything, so smug and superior. I want to see what he sounds like when he gets in a sweat."

"I don't know . . ."

"I'll convince him that you're desperate and dangerous," she continued. "I'll tell him . . ." she managed to giggle, ". . . that I know you'll kill me if he doesn't cooperate, but that I'm sure you'll let me go straight home just as soon as the ransom is paid, as long as he keeps the police out of it."

"Well, I don't know. It sounds good, but—"

"It's a good idea, Howie," Ray said. "That way he knows we've got her, and he knows she's still alive. I think the kid knows what she's talking about."

It took a little talking, but finally Howie was convinced of the wisdom of the move. Ray untied her, and the three of them got into Howie's car and drove down the road to a pay phone. Howie made the call and talked for a few minutes, explaining how and where the ransom was to be delivered. Then he gave the phone to Carole.

"Oh, Daddy," she sobbed. "Oh, Daddy, I'm scared! Daddy, do just what they tell you. There are four

of them and they're desperate, and I'm scared of them. Please pay them, Daddy. The woman said if the police were brought in she would cut my throat with a knife. She said she would cut me and kill me, Daddy, and I'm so scared of them . . ."

Back in the cabin, as Howie tied her in the chair, he asked, "What was all that gas about four of us? And the bit about the woman?"

"I just thought it sounded dramatic."

"It was dramatic as a nine-alarm fire, but why bother?"

"Well," she said, "the bigger the gang is, the more dangerous it sounds, and if he reports it later, let the police go looking for three men and a woman. That way you'll have even less trouble getting away clear. And of course I'll give them four phony descriptions, just to make it easier for you."

She hoped that would soak in. She could only give the phony descriptions if she were left alive, and she hoped that much penetrated.

It was around three-thirty in the morning when Howie left for the ransom. "I should be about an hour," he said. "If I'm not back in that time, then things are bad. Then we've got trouble."

"What do I do then?" Ray asked.

"You know what to do."

"I mean, how do I get out of here? We've only got the one car, and you'll be in it."

"So beat it on foot, or stay right where you are. You don't have to worry about me cracking. The only way they'll get me is dead, and if I'm dead you won't have to worry about them finding out where we've got her tucked away. Just take care of the chick and get out on foot."

"Nothing's going to go wrong."

"I think you're right. I think this is smooth as silk, but anything to be sure. You got your gun?"

"On the table."

"Ought to keep it on you."

"Well, maybe."

"Remember," Howie said, "you can figure on me getting back in an hour at the outside. Probably be no more than half of that, but an hour is tops. So long."

"Good luck," Carole called after him.

Howie stopped and looked at her. He had a very strange expression on his face. "Yeah," he said finally. "Luck. Sure, thanks."

When Howie was gone, Ray said, "You never should have made the phone call. I mean, I think it was a good idea and all, but that way Howie tied you up, see, and he tied you tight. Me, I would have tied you loose, see,

but he doesn't think the same way." He considered things. "In a way," he went on, "Howie is what you might call a funny guy. Everything has to go just right, know what I mean? He doesn't like to leave a thing to chance."

"Could you untie me?"

"Well, I don't know if I should."

"At least make this looser? It's got my fingers numb already. It hurts pretty bad, Ray. Please?"

"Well, I suppose so." He untied her. As soon as she was loose he moved to the table, scooped up the gun, wedged it beneath the waistband of his trousers.

He likes me, she thought. He even wants me to be comfortable, and he doesn't particularly want to kill me, but he doesn't trust me. He's too nervous to trust anybody.

"Could I have a cigarette?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, sure." He gave her one, lit it for her. They smoked together for several minutes in silence. *It isn't going to work, she thought, not the way things are going.* She had him believing her, but that didn't seem to be enough. Howie was the brains and the boss, and what Howie said went, and Howie would say to kill her. She wondered which one of them would use the gun on her.

"Uh, Carole . . ."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Just forget it."

He wanted her to bring it up, she knew. So she said, "Listen, Ray, let me tell you something. I like you a lot, but to tell you the truth I'm scared of Howie."

"You are?"

"I've been playing it straight with you, and I think you've been straight with me. Ray, you've got the brains to realize you'll be much better off if you let me go." *He doesn't, she thought, have any brains at all, but flattery never hurt.* "But Howie is different from you and me. He's not . . . well, normal. I know he wants to kill me."

"Oh, now—"

"I mean it, Ray." She clutched his arm. "If I live, Dad won't report it. He can't afford to. But if you kill me—"

"Yeah, I know."

"Suppose you let me go."

"Afterward?"

She shook her head. "No, now, before Howie comes back. He won't care by then, he'll have the money. You can just let me go, and then the two of you will take the money and get out of town. Nobody will ever know a thing. I'll tell Dad that the two of you released me, and he'll be so glad to get me back and so scared of the tax men he'll never say a word. You could let me go, Ray, could-

n't you? Before Howie gets back?"

He thought it over for a long time, and she could see he wanted to. But he said, "I don't know, Howie would take me apart—"

"Say I grabbed something and hit you, and managed to knock you out. Tell him he tied the ropes wrong and I slipped loose and got you from behind. He'll be mad, maybe, but what will he care? As long as you have the money—"

"He won't believe you hit me."

"Suppose I *did* hit you? Not hard, but enough to leave a mark so you could point to it for proof."

He grinned suddenly. "Sure, Carole, you've been good to me. The first time, when he made that first phone call, you were real good, Carole. I'll tell you something, the idea of killing you bothers me. And you're right about Howie. Here, belt me one behind the ear. Make it a good one, but not too hard, okay?" and he handed her the gun.

He looked completely astonished when she shot him. He just didn't believe it. She reversed the gun in her hand, curled her index finger around the trigger, and pointed the gun straight at his heart. His eyes bugged out and his mouth dropped open, and he just stared at her, not saying anything at all. She shot him twice in the center of the chest and

watched him fall slowly, incredibly, to the floor, dead.

When Howie's car pulled up she was ready. She crouched by the doorway, gun in hand, waiting. The car door flew open and she heard his footsteps on the gravel path. He pulled the door open, calling out jubilantly that it had gone like clockwork, just like clockwork, then he caught sight of Ray's corpse on the floor and did a fantastic double-take. When he saw her and the gun, he started to say something, but she emptied the gun into him, four bullets, one after the other, and all of them hit him and they worked; he fell; he died.

She got the bag of money out of his hand before he could bleed on it.

The rest wasn't too difficult. She took the rope with which she had been tied and rubbed it back and forth on the chair leg until it finally frayed through. Behind the cabin she found a toolshed. She used a shovel, dug a shallow pit, dropped the money into it, filled in the hole. She carried the gun down to the water's edge, wiped it free of fingerprints, and heaved it into the creek.

Finally, when just the right amount of time had passed, she walked out to the highway and kept going until she found a tele-

phone, a highway emergency booth.

"Just stay right where you are," her father said. "Don't call the police. I'll come for you."

"Hurry. Daddy. I'm so scared!"

He picked her up. She was shaking, and he held her in his arms and soothed her.

"I was so frightened," she said.

"And then when the one man came back with the ransom money, the other man took out a gun and shot him and the third man, and then the man who did the shooting, he and the woman ran away in their other car. I was sure they were going to kill me but the man said not to bother, the gun was empty and it didn't matter now. The woman wanted to kill me with the knife but she didn't. I was sure she would. Oh, Daddy—"

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

She showed him the cabin, and the two dead men, and the rope. "It took me forever to get out of it," she said. "But I saw in the movies how you can work your way out, and I wasn't tied too tight, so I managed to do it."

"You're a brave girl, Carole."

On the way home he said, "I'm not going to call the police, Carole. I don't want to subject you to a

lot of horrible questioning. Sooner or later they'll find those two in the cabin, but that has nothing to do with us. They'll just find two dead criminals, and the world's better off without them." He thought for a moment. "Besides," he added, "I'm sure I'd have a hard time explaining where I got that money."

"Did they get very much?"

"Only ten thousand dollars," he said.

"I thought they asked for more."

"Well, after I explained that I didn't have anything like that around the house, they listened to reason."

"I see," she said.

You old liar, she thought, it was a hundred thousand dollars, and I know it. And it's mine now. Mine, mine.

"Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money," she said. "I mean, it's a lot for you to lose."

"It doesn't matter."

"If you called the police, maybe they could get it back."

He shuddered visibly, and she held back laughter. "It doesn't matter," he said. "All that matters is that we got you back safe and sound. That's more important than all the money in the world."

"Oh, Daddy," she said, hugging him, "oh, I love you, I love you so much!"

*The redeeming qualities of some men are like a fire alarm: For
Emergency Use Only.*



By
Richard Hardwick

THE low bluff of St. Lucy Island loomed up in the night ahead of the bateau. Moss Clinton, his eyes cat-sharp in the darkness, stood with one calloused hand braced on the tipped-up outboard, letting his gaze sweep slowly along the shore.

Above the faint rim of sandy beach the live oak forest traced a ragged silhouette against bright the brittle stars.

"Yonder's the creek, Sam, off to your right. We didn't miss it more'n fifty yards."

Sam Butler, his huge forearms resting on his knees, grunted. He flexed his hands on the oars and dipped the blades into the black water of the sound. Then he paused and cocked his head.

"You hear that, Moss? Boat comin'?"

"Hell, yes, I hear it! Now git this bateau in the creek!"

The big fellow needed no further urging. He laid his massive back into the stroke and the heavy cypress hull shot forward, a swirl of phosphorescence boiling astern.

It was past two o'clock, a couple of hours since dead low water. With an occasional glance over his shoulder, Sam Butler sent the bateau scudding between black mounds of exposed oyster bank. The sound of the engine was louder now, and from beyond the southward curve of the shore the bright stab of a searchlight raked across the sound and along the bluff.

"Senator's goin' to one hell of a lot o' trouble to catch poachers, ain't he, Moss?"

The bateau slipped into the

mouth of the creek, threading the narrow channel. The pungent muck banks and tall spartina grass seemed to close in and hover over them on both sides. The searchlight from the boat in the sound swept across the marsh above their heads.

"We just did make it," Sam muttered.

They were safe enough now from the boat out there, which suited Moss just fine. He had learned a hard lesson about St. Lucy Island not many months ago, after Bart Cowan, the Senator's caretaker, had come upon him while Moss was loading the last of three prime deer into his bateau. Poaching, that was what Bart and the circuit judge agreed it was, and Moss helped out on the county roads for sixty days as a result.

Moss hadn't lost any sleep about the name they put on it. To him it amounted to nothing more than poor luck. With St. Lucy the best deer territory in the state, and Moss with a steady, good paying market for venison, the answer was to be more careful in the future.

Fundamentally, Moss Clinton was a law-abiding man. He had no quibble about the Senator owning the island. As far back as most folks remembered, the Parker

family had owned St. Lucy. It was just that Moss didn't figure the old boy owned the wildlife, and so he helped himself to that bountiful harvest whenever he took a notion, much to the chagrin of both Senator Parker and Bart Cowan.

"That old tree still there?" grunted Sam Butler. "Damn if I c'n see it!"

Moss was the eyes, Sam the muscle. "It's there. Dead ahead."

The tree, a huge, ancient salt cedar, had toppled from the bluff where the creek had cut back and eroded the high ground at the first turn.

Sam shipped his oars and the bateau glided in among the tangle of limbs. Moss guided through, pulling and pushing on the branches until the boat grounded against the mucky sand at the foot of the bluff.

"They couldn't pick us outta here with a dozen o' them lights," the big man chuckled.

Moss was well aware they wouldn't be seen. The thing troubling him was, "Wonder who the blazes that is out there?"

The sound of the engine told him it was a diesel, coming along slow. The white slash of light swung over the marsh again, paused briefly at the creek mouth on the dark reefs of the oyster

bank, then passed on. After a while the faint outline of the boat itself appeared, moving along well clear of the shallows.

"Can you make it out, Moss?"

"Yeah. Looks like one o' them Coast Guard utility boats." He rubbed a bristled cheek thoughtfully. "Now what's he lookin' for out there?"

Sam knew the Coast Guard wasn't in the business of tracking poachers, and he breathed easy. "Hell, Moss, he's prob'ly huntin' some o' them fancy yacht folks that's gone and got lost or stuck on a mudbank someplace."

"Don't much figure they'd be lookin' in the trees on the bluff for a boat," Moss replied. (The Senator was an important man. He'd been in Washington longer than most, and some mighty big meetings had taken place on St. Lucy Island over the past thirty or so years. Maybe there was something going on over at the Senator's lodge.)

"You figure something's wrong, Moss?" Sam asked, gazing up at the shadowy form of his partner. "Say . . . the old devil has all the pull in the world. You don't reckon he's fed up with me an' you huntin' out here, do you, and gone and got a gov'ment boat lookin' for us?"

"We ain't big enough fish for

that, Sam, just small fry. We ain't much more'n a couple o' thorns in Bart Cowan's hide. Now, if that was Bart or some o' his boys out there, I'd be thinkin' different."

Sam chuckled appreciatively. He turned and crawled across the seat toward the shore. "Let's git movin', then. It's nigh onto three, and sunup's around six."

Moss picked up his old Springfield and Sam his double barrel 12-gauge, and after burying the anchor in the sand against the incoming tide, they scrambled up the eroded face of the bluff to the forest. The crescent moon, invisible from the creek, hung like a golden scimitar above the distant trees beyond the marsh. Almost directly beneath the moon several pinpoints of light showed nearly half a mile across the bight of the marsh.

Moss lifted the rifle and cupped the scope to his eye. The light to the left would be the floodlight at the end of the Senator's dock. The others would be various lights about the lodge.

"Well, now," he said, steadying the rifle, "what ya make o' this, Sam? There's two guys sittin' out on the end o' the old man's dock."

"So what? Prob'ly fishin'." He opened the breach and dropped a pair of shells into his shotgun. "Come on, Moss, let's get them

deer 'fore it gets light. Let's go—"

"Not yet, Sam. I got the feelin' something's goin' on out here. I think we best be sure 'fore we go unlimberin' these guns . . ."

His voice trailed off. Something moving slowly along on the moon track of the eastward stretch of the creek had caught his eye.

"Look yonder," he said, pointing with the rifle barrel. "What's that?"

Sam Butler followed the direction of the gun. After a few seconds he saw what Moss was talking about. "Damn if you ain't right jumpy," he said. "Might be a couple o' minks or coons."

Moss watched the two objects, moving along slightly faster than the tide. Moonlight glinted briefly off one of them and Moss lifted the rifle quickly again and found them in the scope just as they rounded the bend and, out of the moonlight, disappeared in the darkness.

"Sam . . . Sam you're gonna think I'm crazy, but you wanta know what them things was down there! It was *men*—two men in divin' gear!"

"Moss," Sam Butler said evenly, "you ain't sneaked along a bottle o' whiskey 'thout tellin' me, have you? If you ain't, then yeah, I'd say you *was* crazy."

"That's what it was. One of 'em

had his face mask pushed back, and just 'fore they rounded the bend he pulled it back down."

"Now come on, Moss," the big fellow said uncertainly. "What would divers be doin' in the creek? It don't make no sense!"

"Hanged if I know what they was doin' down there. All I know is they was *there*."

Sam decided to let it go. "Okay, Moss, if'n you say so. Come on, now, and let's get them deer and get off this island."

"You wait here for me. I'm gonna run over to Pembroke Creek and see what's at the public boat landin'."

"Moss . . . that's more'n two miles over yonder! Be past four o'clock when you got back here! If you're so all-fired spooky about this place tonight, I say let's get on back to the mainland now!"

"The boat landin's closer than the lodge, time you circle clear around the marsh. You just sit tight, and mind you, no shootin' till I get back. Not even if an eight point buck walks up and spits in your eye!"

Moss Clinton knew the forests and savannahs and swamps of St. Lucy Island far better than Bart Cowan or the Senator or anybody else did. He had to, doing all his prowling there at night over a fifteen year span. He was a natural

night creature, the same as a possum or coon, or one of the great horned owls that went *hooing* through the night in search of prey.

He moved like a shadow through the forest, padding easily along broad grassy glades beneath the liveoaks, through scattered tufts of palmetto scrub, stunted in the eternal shade of the forest floor. He circled a cattail marsh and heard an old 'gator go lunging away through the shallows.

All this was Moss Clinton's world, the rivers, woods, and swamps. The only time he ever left it was when he joined up with the Marines more than twenty-five years ago. They sent him off to boot camp and then out to the Pacific islands, which was about the same thing as tossing Br'er Rabbit into the briar patch. Like everything that happened to him, Moss took it all in stride and made a fine accounting of himself. Five years after the war was done, they managed to track him down to his shanty boat on a backwater of the Altamaha and gave him a medal.

He had some of that old feeling this night, that everything wasn't right and something might have to be done about it.

The glimmer of lights filtered through the forest long before he could see the boat dock on Pem-

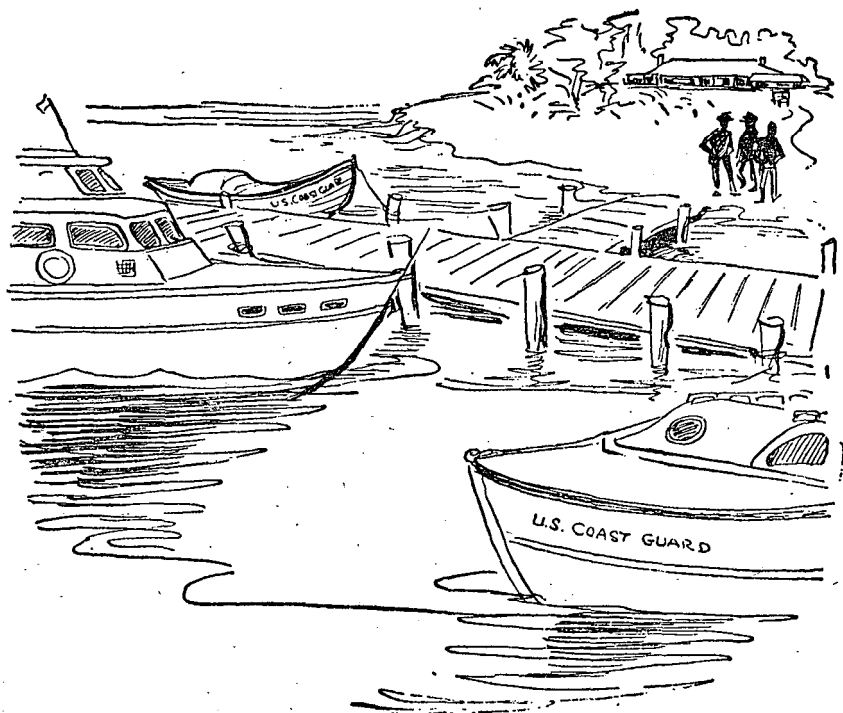
broke Creek. He approached warily and settled himself behind a palmetto clump at the edge of the clearing. What he saw backed up his suspicions. There was something big going on. A large yacht and two Coast Guard boats lay alongside the dock. Three men in civilian clothes stood talking near the dock, each carrying a revolver in a shoulder holster.

It was a good thing they hadn't gone blasting away at deer; they'd have had an army down on them.

As Moss watched, a jeep came

bouncing along the crushed shell road from the lodge and three men got out. Changing of the guard, Moss thought, harking back to his service days. The others got in the vehicle and headed back.

No sir, St. Lucy was no place for a couple of river rat poachers tonight, Moss said to himself as he slithered back into the deep shadows. There'd be other nights. He turned and trotted into the black forest silent as fog, and worked his way back to his partner.



"Whadya see over there, Moss?"

"Enough, Sam. Couple o' more Coast Guard boats, and men that's got gov'ment wrote all over 'em."

"That's enough for me," Sam Butler said, hauling himself up from where he'd been dozing against a fallen pine. "Let's ske-daddle."

Moss sat down on the pine trunk, propping his rifle against it. "I got to thinkin' on the way back here, Sam. Them divers in the creek down there, the Navy had fellas like that back when I was in the Marines. They'd slip in amongst the Nip beach defenses and blow 'em up so's we could get ashore."

"This ain't no time for tellin' me your war stories." Sam scooped up his shotgun and took the shells out. "It's gonna start gettin' light in another hour, and we don't want Bart Cowan catchin' us out here in daylight."

"I ain't tellin' you no war stories. I'm just tellin' you what I know. I'm stayin' here. You take the bateau and come back for me after dark."

The big fellow blinked. "I hear you right, Moss? You—you say you're stayin' out here?"

"Somethin's wrong. I got a feelin'."

Sam Butler groaned and lowered his huge bulk down again. "I

ain't leavin' without you, Moss. And that's a fact."

Soon, beyond the marsh and the distant trees, the sky turned to pearl over the ocean. As the light grew, day creatures began to stir on the marsh. Egrets stalked the shallows of mudbanks. From the wracks of dead spartina, marsh hens cackled like gossips over a back fence.

A faint spiral of smoke lifted above the trees around the lodge. There would be some mighty fine eating going on over there, and Moss Clinton's mouth watered just thinking about it.

He slid the rifle barrel across the pine trunk and settled his eye to the scope. He could make out the long narrow pier that extended into the creek from the lodge grounds.

"Sam . . ."

The big fellow was snoring gently, and Moss reached over and shook him by the shoulder.

"Huh? What's a matter, Moss?"

"Tide's gettin' about right for trout and reds in the creek. There's some skiffs and that blue fiberglass job o' the Senator's hangin' at the end o' the dock."

Sam grunted and closed his eyes again.

"Most folks around here know the creek's as good a place as there is for trout and reds, wouldn't you

say so, Sam? We all know that."

He grunted affirmatively.

"And the Senator allus takes his comp'ny out fishin' on the creek at high water . . ."

He let the rifle swing a bit to the right. The scope gathered sufficient light so that Moss could recognize the familiar form of Bart Cowan dipping live bait out of the tank and dumping it into a pail.

"Yep," he said, "they're fixin' to go out."

"Is that how come we stayed here, Moss? Just so's we could watch the Senator and some o' his bigshot buddies go fishin'?"

Moss ignored the question. "The tide musta been floodin' for a couple o' hours when I seen them divers. They coulda come clear through the creek from the ocean in that time."

"That's real interestin'," Sam said. "But how come anybody'd do a fool thing like that?"

"Just what's been botherin' me, Sam," Moss said, half to himself. "They'd have to have a helluva good reason . . ."

There was activity on the high ground at the other end of the dock, and Moss let the scope drift over. He could make out figures moving about beneath the live oaks. Some of them started out onto the dock. He picked the Senator out easily by the flowing mane

of white hair. A couple of men moved past him, and then another tall figure appeared.

Moss Clinton's eye blinked rapidly in the scope, and a low whistle escaped his lips. "Big, did I say, Sam? *Man*, this ain't nothing but the *biggest!*" He pushed the rifle toward his partner. "Take a look!"

Sam pulled himself around and put his eye to the scope. It took him a moment to find the target, but when he did he lowered the rifle slowly and stared at Moss, incredulous. "It's . . . it's *him!*"

Moss already had the rifle to his shoulder, peering across at the dock. The tall man, a ten-gallon Texas hat perched at a jaunty angle, draped an arm across the Senator's shoulder and they started out toward the boat, side by side.

"That's *it!*" Moss snapped. "That's it, sure as hell! I gotta stop 'em!"

"Wh-what's *it?*" Sam asked suspiciously.

"That's who them divers was after. There ain't but one thing they coulda been doin' in that creek . . ." He chambered a cartridge and slammed the bolt home. Range? Six hundred yards, maybe a little more. He adjusted the scope and slid the rifle across the pine trunk again.

"Moss . . ." Sam said with great uncertainty. "You—you ain't fixin'

to shoot that dern thing, are you?"

The crosshairs came to rest on the bow cleat of the Senator's fiberglass boat, and Sam Butler's answer came with the heavy crack of the rifle.

"Great guns, Moss! You're gonna get us killed!"

Moss wasn't listening. He watched the windshield of the boat shatter, two feet left of his target. *Not bad for the range*, he thought. Chambering another cartridge, he let go the second shot.

The sound of his first shot had sent everybody off the dock in no uncertain manner, and now an answering volley came potting across the marsh.

"You crazy nut!" wailed Sam, scuttling down behind the fallen tree. "What're you tryin' to do!"

Slugs whirled past like angry hornets. Moss squeezed off his fourth and fifth shots, and with the last he saw the bow cleat burst loose from the boat's deck.

"That got it! Now, Sam, we'll see if I was right!"

Sam Butler's curiosity was strong enough for him to risk the

shots from the lodge. Exposing as little of themselves as they could, the two poachers watched the Senator's baby-blue pride and joy go drifting off on the last of the flood tide. The boat moved away from the line of skiffs, caught an eddy and spun slow and graceful as a ballet dancer.

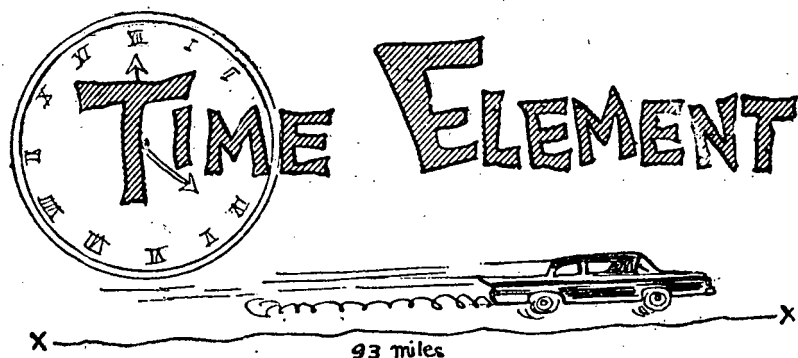
Then everything flew up and out in a great geyser of water, followed a second or two later by the reverberating thump of the underwater explosion.

Hunks of blue fiberglass were still splashing down in the marsh and creek as Moss heaved a sigh and leaned back against the pine trunk.

"That's what them divers was doin', podner," he said. "Booby trappin' the Senator's boat." He probed his breast pocket for a cigarette and lit it, trying to ignore the shaking of his hands. "We best leave these guns right here and start hikin' over towards the road." He turned and grinned at Sam Butler. "We wouldn't want to run into no trouble, would we?"



When a man was rid of a wretched marriage and immediately wed again, Samuel Johnson observed it was the triumph of hope over experience.



LEWIS found her serving drinks in one of the third-rate lounges in downtown Carson City. She was dressed in typical cocktail waitress garb: a yard of material cut low at the top and high at the bottom, set off by black lace stockings and high heels. Her face was heavily made up.

Lewis sat down at a small table next to a bank of slot machines and lighted a cigarette. He followed her with his eyes until she noticed him and came over.

"You told me you worked in a dress shop," he said tonelessly. His glance swept the cheap little lounge. "Some dress shop."

"Jobs are scarce, Lew," she said

quietly. "This was the best I could do and still live close to the prison. I would have told you, but I didn't want to make it any harder for you than it already was. I'm sorry."

"Sure," he said, tonelessly again, the same low, steady voice she had listened to across a glass partition for six years. She bit her lip briefly, then forced a half-smile.

"Do you want me to get you a drink?"

Lewis shook his head. "Against parole," he said.

"Oh." She thought for a moment, then said, "How'd you know where I was?"

"Your landlady told me." Lewis looked down at her long, slim legs,

up at her creamy bare shoulders. "Don't you get cold in that outfit?"

"No. I only get cold at night, when you're not with me." She bit her lip again, this time to hold back tears. "I said I was sorry."

Lewis saw that she was about to cry, and his face softened. Easy, man, he told himself. It's been six years for her, too. He got up and touched her cheek very gently. He smiled. "Forget it, kid," he said. "It's all over now anyway. When are you through here?"

"Three more hours."

"Okay. I'll be waiting outside.

Draw your pay tonight; you won't be coming back."

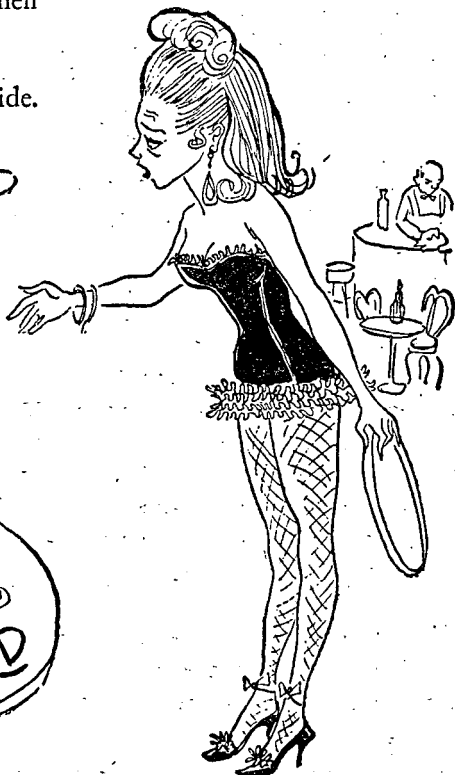
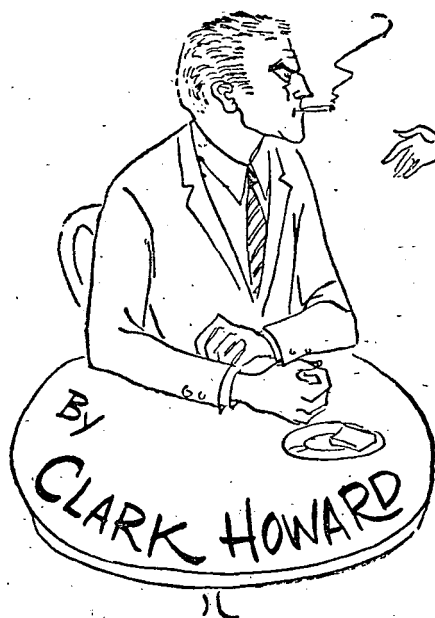
"All right." As he turned to leave she touched his arm and stopped him. "Lew?"

"Yeah?"

"It's been a long six years, hasn't it?"

Their eyes met and locked nakedly. Lewis swallowed dryly.

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "Al-



most as long as the next three hours are going to be."

She squeezed his arm and he walked away.

The next afternoon she and Lew were on a half-empty bus heading downstate to Las Vegas. They sat far to the rear where they could talk privately.

"What's in Las Vegas?" she asked him.

"A guy," he told her simply.

She did not question him further; she knew what he meant. There was always a guy, every time. He had a pawnshop or a poolhall or sometimes just a room somewhere. He was a contact, and through him Lew would obtain a gun and a car and maybe front money for a job that had been set up. It had been the same after Joliet, the same after Raiford, and now it was the same again after Carson City. She wondered if it would ever change.

"Do you have to see him, Lew?" she asked impulsively.

He looked at her, a long, penetrating look, as if he might be weighing her sanity. "Sure I've got to see him," he told her. "It's all arranged, he's expecting me."

"All right, Lew. I just asked."

She turned to the window and watched the bare, dead Nevada wasteland go past. How long had it been, she wondered, since they

left southern Illinois? Fifty years, a hundred? It seemed like that. How many bus rides had there been? She thought back to the first one, the bus ride up to Chicago where they'd spent their first year together. Then there was her own bus ride twice a month down to Joliet for three years. Then a long one together to Miami, and another two years together before four years of twice-monthly bus trips to Raiford from Gainesville, where she had lived then. And then the longest one of all, the bus ride all the way across country to Reno, where they'd had another year, such a very, very short year; and then six long, lonely years of taking the extension bus from Carson City out to the rock fortress at the edge of town.

For every day in prison for him, it had been an hour on some bus for her. Plus the cheap housekeeping rooms, the solitary meals, the cold beds.

And now they were starting it again, on a bus on the way to Las Vegas—for Lew to see a contact.

Lew walked into the grimy, cluttered little office that set in a back corner of the Las Vegas used car lot. A short, ferretfaced man with a blond mustache looked up from behind a newspaper.

"Help you, friend?"

"I'm Lewis. You get a message I was coming?"

Ferret eyes swept him from head to toe, and white, even teeth smiled a false smile of friendship at him.

"Yeah, I did. I sure did. Sit down."

Lew turned a straight chair around from the side of the desk and sat down. He sat on the edge of the chair; he didn't plan to stay long.

"How's everything with—"

"Fine, just fine," Lew cut him off. "Can we get down to business?"

"Whatever you say," the short man shrugged.

Lew leaned forward, forearms on knees. "I'll need a .38 with a four-inch barrel, and a car with enough guts to make ninety-three miles in sixty minutes."

"The iron I can have for you tomorrow," the short man said. He got up from the desk. "You can look over the wheels right now."

Lew followed him outside to the lot. He picked out three cars he had been familiar with the last time he was on the street. He asked about the mechanical condition of each, took two of them out for test drives, and settled on a '59 sedan with an overhead V-8 and good rubber.

"I'll make out a standard contract on the car," the short man

said, "just in case it gets picked up. I'll say you gave me two hundred down and I carried the balance on payments. Got that straight?"

"Got it," Lew said. "What time tomorrow for the rest of my order?"

"Anytime after noon."

Lew nodded. "The sooner the better."

Lew liked quiet when he worked on the details of a job, so he went to the public library. He sat at a back table in the reference room, with several encyclopedia volumes open in front of him for effect. Behind the books he studied a roadmap.

Driving southeast from Las Vegas, he saw, it was twenty-three miles to Boulder City. Three miles before getting to Boulder, however, another road cut almost directly south through fifty-five miles of wasteland; completely open, uninhabited country. At the end of the fifty-five miles, the road intersected a state highway that dropped nineteen miles down to the banks of the Colorado River.

There was a small town there at the edge of the big river, a town called Bullhead City. It was, as Lew had been told, just a two-block strip of stores and supply houses for fishermen, surrounded for the most part by trailer homes, summer cabins, and a sprinkling of perma-

nent residences. Lew was not interested in Bullhead City itself, however, because he would never see it. His journey would terminate four miles before the road reached Bullhead; it would terminate at a point where the road crossed the Colorado River, at the site of Davis Dam.

Davis, one of several dams that intermittently controlled the flow of the Colorado River, was the nucleus of the Nevada-Arizona irrigation project. The project used the big river-boundary between the two states as a source of power and water for a vast agricultural endeavor aimed at turning the wasteland of both Arizona and Nevada into productive farmlands.

The operation was under control of a federal agency, the Bureau of Reclamation. Its headquarters was at the dam site, along with a government compound of homes for some three hundred laborers and soil experts and maintenance men who worked up and down the river for fifty miles in each direction.

Next to the big dam was a neat, white building that served as the administration office of the project. In a corner of the first floor of that building was a payroll office that twice each month disbursed some sixty thousand dollars to the workers of the Colorado River project.

The men of the project were paid in cash. To the nearest dollar, they received their wages in currency in brown pay envelopes. This departure from the usual federal policy of paying by check was due to the comparative isolation of the project community, and to the fact that Bullhead City had no banking facility. A government agency bank was maintained as a convenience for the workers, but only for savings or the purchase of money orders. But nowhere in the immediate vicinity was there any business with sufficient cash to accommodate the financial demands of three hundred men averaging one hundred dollars per week net salary. In short, the men of the Davis Dam project had no place to cash a paycheck; thus did the government resort to brown pay envelopes containing cash.

An armored truck from Kingman, thirty-three miles to the east, delivered the money sack at ten o'clock in the morning on the first and fifteenth of each month. The bag was deposited in a safe in the project payroll office; a safe equipped with a time lock. The lock was set for four p.m. When the safe unlocked automatically at four, three payroll clerks—one man, two women—had one hour in which to sort the envelopes into a dozen separate project work

groups. These assortments were placed in individual metal payroll boxes. At five o'clock, the foreman from each work group arrived and picked up the box for his particular crew.

Very impressive, Lew decided as he sat in the library going over the plan. From the outside it looked like real tight security: armored transport to get the bag there; time-locked safe to keep it in. Then it's divided into a dozen different boxes for distribution, and the boxes are put in the care of a dozen different guys. Yeah, it'd look damn near impossible, all right, to some punk who got the idea to knock it over; some punk without enough sense to figure that it would take an hour to sort three hundred pay envelopes into twelve different groups, and that the stuff had to be *out* of the fancy safe while it was being done; some punk who didn't see just how weak that little hour made the whole security plan, who didn't see the beauty of what could be done in that hour by a fast operator. Well, he concluded, that's the difference between a punk and a professional.

He checked the roadmap again. The dam was ninety-three miles from Las Vegas. Driving down would take him about an hour and forty five minutes; driving back,

considerably less. Coming back, figure the nineteen miles up from the dam site to the open road would take twenty-five minutes. Then for the fifty-five miles north, along a straight, flat road through open country, really clipping along at 75 or 80, figure forty minutes.

The Boulder Highway was as far as he had to make it to be safe. Once he hit that busy artery, he would become lost in the traffic bound for Las Vegas. So he needed sixty-five minutes to get home free.

Now he studied the timing intently. If he walked into the payroll office at about six minutes to four, that fancy time-lock would open just about the time he got the three clerks used to the idea that they were being had. He figured it would take the six minutes to get them down on their faces and get their wrists and mouths taped. Then about five more minutes to grab the money sack, get back out to the car and be on his way.

He'd have fifty-five minutes left. Fifty-five minutes before the twelve foremen arrived and blew the whistle. Fifty-five minutes—and he needed only sixty-five. An almost perfect time element; only ten minutes in the red.

Lew smiled. With any kind of luck at all, he might even pick up those ten minutes somewhere along the way. If he didn't, well, not

much could be done in ten minutes anyway. It would take at least that long to get the alarm on the air. Yeah, he decided, the time element was fine, almost perfect.

Lew sat back in the library chair and sighed contentedly. This time it was going to be a good one, a very good one. This time he was going to make it—sixty thousand dollars—in cash.

"We'll be checking out of here tomorrow night," Lew said that evening.

"So soon?"

"Yeah. I'll be gone from one until about five-thirty tomorrow. When I get back, it'll all be over. We'll go straight to the bus depot."

The bus depot. She sighed quietly. She was sitting at the cheap vanity in the cheap little motel room, brushing her hair. Lew was lying on the bed behind her, smoking a cigarette. She watched him in the mirror.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Phoenix," he answered absently. In his mind he was going over the plan. Pick up the gun at noon; stop at a drugstore for a roll of two-inch tape; have a light lunch somewhere and maybe one drink to relax him; then a nice leisurely drive down to Bullhead City; spend a little while scouting the area of the

dam, checking the road, getting the feel of the layout—then, at three fifty-four sharp, walk in and take over the office.

The setup was almost too easy, almost too pat, too perfect. If it hadn't been set up by a professional, he might even be inclined to worry about it, just a little . . .

"Why Phoenix?"

"What?" Lew looked over at the woman, his thoughts momentarily interrupted.

"Why are we going to Phoenix?"

"Oh. Because that's the first bus out of the state after I get back tomorrow. I want to get out of Nevada as soon as possible; I'll be a parole violator day after tomorrow. We'll head somewhere else from Phoenix."

His mind returned to the plan. When it was all over, when he had grabbed the money bag and beaten that ten minute time element back to the Boulder Highway, when he was back in Las Vegas, back in the clear, he would pull into an alley somewhere, cut open the bag and dump all the pay envelopes into a mailing carton he had prepared and stashed in the trunk of the car. He would seal up the carton, slap on a pre-addressed mailing label and drive to a branch post office he had picked out. He would send the box to himself care of General Delivery in Phoenix.

If the take comes to sixty thousand, he figured, his end will be a nice little bundle. Fifteen grand would go to the guy in Carson City prison who had engineered the deal, and another five would go to the slob at the used car lot for overhead. That would leave forty thousand bucks clear. A very nice little bundle . . .

"Where will we go after Phoenix?"

Lew looked up, his thoughts interrupted again. A slight frown of annoyance crossed his face. He was not used to having a woman around to ask questions. Cellmates, with whom he had lived most of his adult life, never asked questions.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Why? Does it matter?"

"No," she said quietly, "not as long as we're together. Nothing has ever mattered to me except being with you. You know that, Lew."

"We'll be together," he assured her matter of factly.

She stopped brushing her hair and turned on the vanity bench to face him. "I know we'll be together, Lew," she said carefully. "I just wonder for how long."

"What kind of a question is that?" Lew demanded.

"It wasn't really a question at all," she said. "It was just a

thought." She was measuring her words to say what she wanted to say in exactly the right way, because she'd waited so long to say it.

"I ran away with you when I was sixteen years old, Lew. Sixteen years old. We had one year together in Chicago before you went to Joliet. We had two years together in Miami before you went to Raiford. And we had one year together in Reno before you went to Carson City. I'm thirty-three years old now, Lew, and since I was sixteen we've had just four years together. *Four years*, Lew. The other thirteen years I've been alone. On the outside. Waiting. Waiting for you to get out."

She put aside her hairbrush and looked down at her hands. There were a few signs of wrinkles already.

"So I was just wondering," she quietly concluded, "how long we'd be together this time—before I have to start waiting again."

Lew got up from the bed and walked over to the window. Across the court and beyond a darkened parking lot, he could see some of the big bright lights of Fremont street. He put his hands on the windowsill and gripped it until his knuckles turned white.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

He watched her vague reflection

in the window. She looked down at her hands again, at the wrinkles that were showing their first signs. She did not answer.

"I could go out and get a job," he said, "but it probably wouldn't last long. You know me; never could keep a job very long. Always something comes up—don't like the work or the pay or the guy in charge; always something."

Lew pursed his lips in thought and ignored her reflection to look past the window at the lights again. There were a million lights out there; a million lights that flickered and flashed while a million dollars—much more, probably—passed across the felt-topped casino tables. A hundred thousand eyes watched the spin of a roulette ball or the turn of a card or the roll of dice, and every two eyes that watched concealed a mind hoping that maybe *this* spin or *this* turn or *this* roll would be the beginning of a killing. A big killing. Because that, after all, was what life was all about: just making that one big killing.

"We could maybe find us a little place somewhere," Lew said, looking back at her reflection again. "A room or an apartment. With both of us working, we'd get along okay for a while. But then I'd quit my job and start spending the money faster than you could make

it, and we'd get behind in everything. First thing you know, we'd be up against it good, and I'd end up pushing a gun across the counter of some liquor store for a couple of hundred bucks to carry us. It'd be so easy I'd do it a second time and a third, and pretty soon it'd be every other Thursday night'd be stickup night. Until one Thursday night I'd fall. After that—"

"I know," she said. "I know what comes after that. I remember how it was after Raiford. The last time we tried."

"Yeah." Lew nodded his head very slowly. He turned to face her. "You just got burned, kid, when you got me; you got burned bad. Some guys have got a—a kind of strength, you know. They can cut whatever life dishes up for them. Me," he shrugged, "I can't do it. I'm one of the weak ones."

He turned back to the window again. Across the room, her quiet sigh reached his ears and cut him deeply. But there was nothing he could do about it.

"You don't think we could try again?" she asked.

Lew shook his head. "Wouldn't do no good. I couldn't make it."

A long time passed with neither of them moving or speaking. Then she got up and walked over and stood next to him by the window.

"Do what you have to do then," she told him.

Lew nodded. He said nothing. He kept staring at the million lights of Fremont street.

Lew drove up to the compact little Davis Dam administration building on the Arizona side of the Colorado River. He parked in the visitor's section alongside, backing in so that the car faced the road. He cut the motor and looked at his watch. It read three fifty-one. Taking a deep, nervous breath, he got out of the car and walked into the building.

Exactly three minutes later he was inside the payroll office with the door closed at his back and the gun in his hand leveled at the man and two women who faced him.

"Very quiet," Lew said in his flat monotone. "Just keep it very quiet."

His eyes swept the room: three desks, a telephone on one; a single window facing the front of the building; no sign of any alarm system. Everything looked neat. The safe stood against the back wall. A rectangular table next to it held the twelve closed money boxes in even, straight rows of three each. *Just waiting to be filled when the safe opens at four*, Lew thought, *but they won't get filled today.*

Lew directed his attention to the

man, who stood calmly apart from the two nervous women. He was a tall man, grayhaired, with the ruddy face of a fisherman.

"You going to give me any trouble, mister?" Lew asked.

"Not me, son. You got enough already."

"Sure, sure," said Lew. He waved the gun slightly. "Face the middle of that wall," he ordered the man, "and you two women each get in a corner. All of you put your hands behind your backs."

Keeping a watchful eye on the man, with the gun handy under his belt, Lew taped the wrists and mouth of the first woman, then stepped in a wide circle around the man to bind and gag the other one.

"Okay, you two can sit down in your corners," he told the women. "You," he said to the man, "down on your face, hands behind you."

The grayhaired man turned to face Lew. "Look, lad," he said calmly, "why don't you forget this? There's going to be twelve men walking into this office about two minutes from now to pick up their payrolls—"

"Don't try to con me, old man," Lew interrupted. "The only thing that's going to happen in two minutes is that fancy safe of yours is going to open. Now get down on the floor!"

"You're making a mistake, son,"

the man argued calmly. "You don't want any shooting with these women in here, do you?"

"Listen, you," Lew snarled, "I'm going to walk out of here the second that time lock clicks and I get that sack of money out. Now I'm either going to tape your hands and mouth or I'm going to bust you over the head with this gun, one or the other." He glanced at his watch. "It's one minute to four, so you make up your mind right now which way it's going to be."

"I said you were making a mistake," the old man told him calmly. "It's one minute to five, not to four. There's a clock over the door behind you; see for yourself."

Lew frowned. He stepped quickly to the side of the room where he could see the man and the door at the same time. Above the door he saw an electric clock with the hour hand pointing to five, and the minute hand poised a fraction of an inch before twelve. Lew stared at it incredulously. "What the hell—"

"This here's the Arizona side of the river," the old man said. "Mountain Time over here; hour earlier on the Nevada side."

"But it—it can't be—"

"You can check the safe if you want; it's been open for an hour. Matter of fact, the pay envelopes are already in those boxes on the

table." The old man glanced out the window. "And here come those twelve men I told you about. You ain't planning to do no shooting with these women in here, are you?"

"Huh? Oh. No," Lew shook his head numbly and lowered the gun to his side. "No shooting. I'm not that dumb."

The old man nodded and leaned back against the wall.

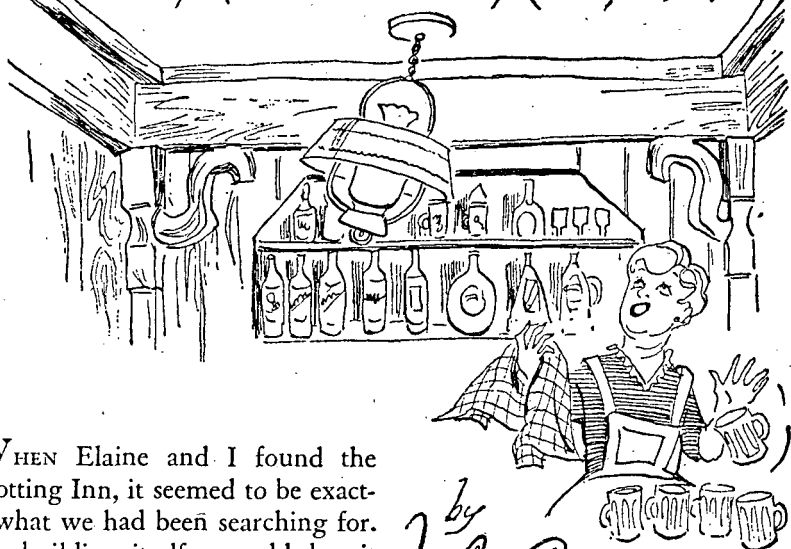
The thought of trying to make a run for it passed briefly through Lew's mind, but he knew it would be useless. Even if he made it away from the dam, they'd still get him on the road. He needed fifty-five minutes to get away safely; that was the whole key to the plan, that fifty-five-minute time element. No, he sighed heavily, he wasn't going anywhere.

He heard footsteps and muted voices as the twelve men came down the hall outside the door.

Well, he shrugged, that's that. His mind returned to Las Vegas, to the cheap little motel room, to the woman. If he remembered correctly, the Arizona prison was in a town called Florence, fifty miles or so south of Phoenix. *Maybe, he thought, she can get a job in Phoenix, in a dress shop or someplace, and still be close enough to visit me. She could always take the bus down . . .*

Expediency, one learns, does not indubitably insure improvement on the status quo.

POLTERGEIST



WHEN Elaine and I found the Trotting Inn, it seemed to be exactly what we had been searching for. The building itself was old, but it seemed to be fairly sound. The kitchen was adequate and the equipment was in good shape. Of course, the bar was in need of re-decorating and there were plenty of improvements that could be made, but we had plenty of time for that. The bar did a good day

by
W. Sherwood
Hartman

business and the evenings took care of themselves with the restaurant trade. We were close enough to Gettysburg to have the advantage of the summer tourist trade, and were surrounded by small towns that would give us enough business to carry us over during the off season. We were also close enough to Baltimore to be assured of a fresh supply of seafood, the specialty of the house. The owner wanted to retire and the price was reasonable. With a generous assist from the bank, we bought the place.

The first few weeks were pretty hectic. Elaine and I are retired show people and the transition into cook, waitress, and bartender wasn't easy, but the old owner stayed on to help until we got into the swing of things. After a month went by, we were on our own and things had moved into an easy routine. That's when we first heard it . . .

As I said before, the Trotting Inn is an old building. There's a stairway from the kitchen that leads upstairs to an apartment, but many improvements were needed to make it liveable so we decided to wait until after we had the business area refurbished to our tastes before we would undertake remodeling that area. After the first inspection, neither of us had been up there.

It was late on a Saturday night.

The last customer had gone and I had locked up. Elaine was washing glasses back of the bar and I was cleaning up in the kitchen. We were both tired, and except for the soft sound of our labor, everything was quiet. Then, from above, there was a solid thump and a sound like an eerie gnome in the throes of agony. The groan faded into silence, but there was a shattering crash in the bar as Elaine dropped a tray of glasses. She spun around the corner into the kitchen and into my arms, shivering like a trapped rabbit. I'll admit I was a bit shaken myself, but I had to rationalize. We'd been busy that night, and it was possible that someone had wandered past me unnoticed in search of the men's room and had gone through the kitchen, up the back stairs, and had fallen asleep in one of the old beds up there. There's no outside entrance to the upstairs, so no one could be trying to break in.

I managed to calm Elaine, then turned on the lights in the stairway and went up. I entered the apartment expecting to find a drunk on the floor, but there was no one. I looked under the beds, in the closets; I searched the place thoroughly. It was empty. There was absolutely no one there, and I went downstairs to reassure Elaine.

We had cleaned up the broken

glass behind the bar while I tried to explain that the noise must have been caused by a shift of the timbers in the old building, or that maybe the vibrations of the trucks passing on the highway had caused an old box to fall. Elaine finally had her nerves under control and we were laughing about the whole thing when we left. She got in the car and I switched the lights out inside. Then, just as I was about to turn the key in the lock, I heard the silliest giggle from upstairs that ever came out of nowhere. I locked the door and we went home.

The next three weeks were busy ones. We became acquainted with the local people and were happy with the way they accepted us. The Pennsylvania Dutch are easy to get along with if you don't try to press yourself on them. They like to be a little aggressive with their friendship, and will adopt an outsider like he's their own if he just stands back and waits. Things were working out real fine.

It was a Thursday afternoon when I heard it again. Elaine had gone to Hanover to shop and I was alone at the bar with Cy Rouser, one of the regulars. He lived his life on a farm about three miles east of the Inn. Now his two sons were running the place and he had time on his hands. He'd had two

double shots of bourbon, two beers, and a pair of crab cakes for lunch, and was sitting at the end of the bar with his head in his hands, asleep, when I heard the second thump from upstairs.

Cy cocked his head toward the ceiling, grinned, and said, "That's our old buddy."

I started through the kitchen toward the stairs, but Cy called me back. "There's nobody up there," he said. "That's a poltergeist!"

I went back to the bar. "Cy, just exactly what is a poltergeist," I asked, "and what the hell is it doing upstairs over my barroom?"

"It ain't nothing to worry about . . . It's been here ever since this place was built. My Daddy used to tell me about it when I was just a little kid. A poltergeist ain't nothing but a friendly sort of a ghost. He don't bother nobody. He just likes to make a little noise once in a while to get some attention. You know, like he wants you to know he's there . . . There ain't an inch of harm in a poltergeist!"

I tried to accept Cy's explanation, but it wasn't easy. The noises from above were baffling in their irregularity. It would be a quiet afternoon and sounds like rolling BB shot would tinkle across overhead. Then it would be a crowded Saturday night and the sounds from above would be like King Kong was

wrestling with Superman. I had checked time after time, but nothing moved on the second floor. Even the dust lay static. I finally gave up and decided to live with it. I even stopped checking the second floor, and we began to use the stairway to store beer cases. Business was good and I wasn't about to let any silly ghost interfere with it, but it was still disconcerting to be watching a ball game in the afternoon on TV and have the sounds of a roller derby roar down the ceiling during the commercials.

The odd thing was that few of the customers, except for the regulars, noticed the noises. The regulars would cock their heads with a knowing smile and listen, while the others would continue eating or drinking as though nothing were amiss.

Then the thing started with the J. W. Dant bottle. Dant is a good sour mash whiskey, but we have very few bourbon drinkers in the area and the bottle had never been opened. It stood on the top shelf of the back bar with the other slow moving whiskeys and was dusted every Monday and Thursday.

I had opened up on a Tuesday morning and my first customer had asked for rye and soda. I put ice in the glass, poured a shot over it, reached under the bar for the

soda—and came up with the bottle of J. W. Dant. My first thought was that Elaine was trying to be funny and had switched the bottles. The soda bottle was on the shelf where the Dant belonged. I put the Dant back on the shelf, and took the soda bottle back to the bar. Then there was a noise upstairs like a door slamming, giggling, and the rattle of tiny feet running across the floor. I heard them, but the customer didn't seem to hear a thing.

Kenny, my extra bartender, came in at eleven to help over the lunch hour, and I took a break to squeeze past the beer cases in the stairway and make my umpteenth inspection of the upstairs apartment. . . . It was like I figured. No one was there and nothing had moved. I walked through the deserted rooms mumbling to myself and scolding half out loud. Then, as I closed the door and started back downstairs, I heard the giggling again.

From there on, it turned into sort of a game. Most of the time the Dant bottle would be where it belonged, but then I would find it in the refrigerator. The next time it would be wedged behind some beer cases in the walk-in cooler. Then it was in the kitchen with the dinner plates. One morning I found it perched regally on top of

the juke box. I found myself loudly berating my unseen tormentor and was usually answered with a tittering silence, although sometimes I seemed to get through and would be rewarded with a gentle thud from above, or a silly giggle.

After a while, the poltergeist seemed to tire of the game and several weeks went by with the Dant bottle staying in its normal place. I was honestly getting bored by the lack of activity. Then I opened up on a Saturday morning and found the bottle in the center of the bar, open and half empty, with a shot glass beside it and a chaser glass with an inch of water in the bottom. I yelled toward the ceiling, "I don't mind your silly games, but if you want to drink my whiskey, drink bar whiskey. This stuff's expensive!"

The whole upstairs exploded into a series of thumps and happy giggles. I didn't give it the satisfaction of going up to investigate . . . A customer came in, and the upstairs was quiet for the rest of the day.

It was a busy Saturday and I had little time to contemplate the alcoholic apparition that resided above me. It was a tired one o'clock on Sunday morning when Elaine went home. Kenny had almost everything cleaned up and

he left at one-thirty. The few customers that were left gradually drifted out until I was left with two late drinkers, neither of whom seemed to be very talkative. I poured myself a nightcap and prepared to outwait them.

They were both strangers to me. The one at the right end of the bar was thin, in his middle thirties, and had a nasty scar under his left eye. The other one appeared to be younger and was built like a weight lifter.

The thin one finished his drink and nodded for a refill. Then he said, "Give us all a drink."

I gave him another, refilled the chunky one, and poured another for myself. Then, when I looked up, I found myself staring into the business end of a .38.

"Okay," the thin one said, "let's lock the place up. We don't want any more company tonight."

The tone of his voice and the deadly whiteness around the knuckles of the fist that held the revolver didn't leave any room for argument. He followed me into the kitchen and I turned the key in the lock of the back door. He stayed on my tail as I flipped the spring locks on the side door and the front. I turned off the outside lights and went back to the bar. The chunky one had a revolver in his hand too. I was buttonholed.

"Look," I said, reacting as any normal coward would in a similar situation, "take whatever you want and leave. I'm not looking for any trouble."

"You hear that, Joe?" the tall one snickered to his buddy. "He wants us to leave. Ain't that the funniest?" Then he turned to me and I felt a shiver through my spine as I looked into his eyes. They were ice blue and had the chilling finality of an obituary column. "You don't mind if we finish our drink before we go, do you? We might want to stay around for a while."

The chunky one just grinned and they sat toying with their drinks. I poured myself another, figuring that if I were on the way out, I might as well ease the pain.

"Move away from the cash register," the thin one said, and I moved to the lower end of the bar near where he was seated. "Now get the money," he instructed his buddy.

The chunky one came back of the bar, took a paper bag from under the shelf and started scooping the bills and change into it.

Then there was an explosive bang from upstairs like someone was slamming a door in anger. The chunky one froze at the register.

The thin one stared at the ceil-

ing. Then he turned to me and his eyes were searing with hate and fear. "Okay, wise guy! Who's up there?"

I knew it was useless to tell the truth. "General Custer's ghost and a whole tribe of Indians!" I shouted.

"I'll damned soon find out, you nut!" he screeched at me as he jumped off the stool and went tearing back through the kitchen and up the stairs.

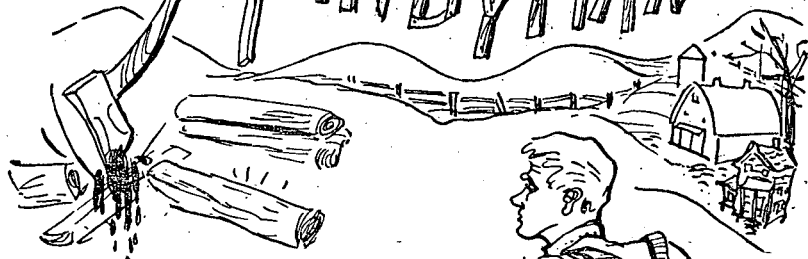
There followed an avalanche of beer cases and a smothered cry. The chunky one brushed by me and the bottle of J. W. Dant fell off the top shelf just in time for me to catch it and smash it over chunky's head.

As he slumped to the floor, I got his gun and stepped into the kitchen. All that was visible of the thin one was his hand and the gun. The rest was buried under cardboard shells and empty beer bottles. I stepped on his wrist, took his gun away, and called the State Police.

It was about a month later when Elaine suggested that we remodel the upstairs apartment and live there in spite of old buddy, instead of driving back and forth from town. I rejected the idea as being too expensive but, in reality, I didn't want to lose the present tenant . . .

The very next time someone remarks, 'That ain't hay,' I may take him even more than literally.

THE HANDYMAN



The man in the witness chair twisted the stained, broad-brimmed hat in big-knuckled hands. His weathered features took on a pale hue. "Well sir, it was pretty bad. About the worst I've ever seen, I reckon, in all my years lawing."

The prosecutor asked, "Bad in what way, Sheriff?"

"Why, the blood. Blood on the bed, even on the walls . . ."

At the defense table the defendant shuddered, drew a deep breath, and shuddered again. He leaned over and whispered to his attorney, "I remember."

*By
Clayton Matthews*

The defense attorney swiveled his head. "You remember? Everything?"

"It was mention of the blood that brought it all back."

The lawyer shot to his feet. "Your Honor! I beg the court's pardon for this interruption, but I would like a short recess. My client is . . . uh, feeling ill."

There was a brief silence, then the gavel fell. "Very well. Court will stand in recess for fifteen minutes."

Quickly the lawyer hustled his client into the anteroom off the courtroom. When the door was locked behind them, he said, "Then this amnesia, or whatever it is, was real? You haven't been faking?"

"I haven't been faking."

"All right. Then talk. But if you're lying to me—"

"I'm not lying. I remember everything. I wish to God I didn't!"

Spring weather in north central Texas is deceptively mild. The days of March can be quite warm, but a blue norther can boil up any time and send the temperature plummeting thirty degrees within an hour.

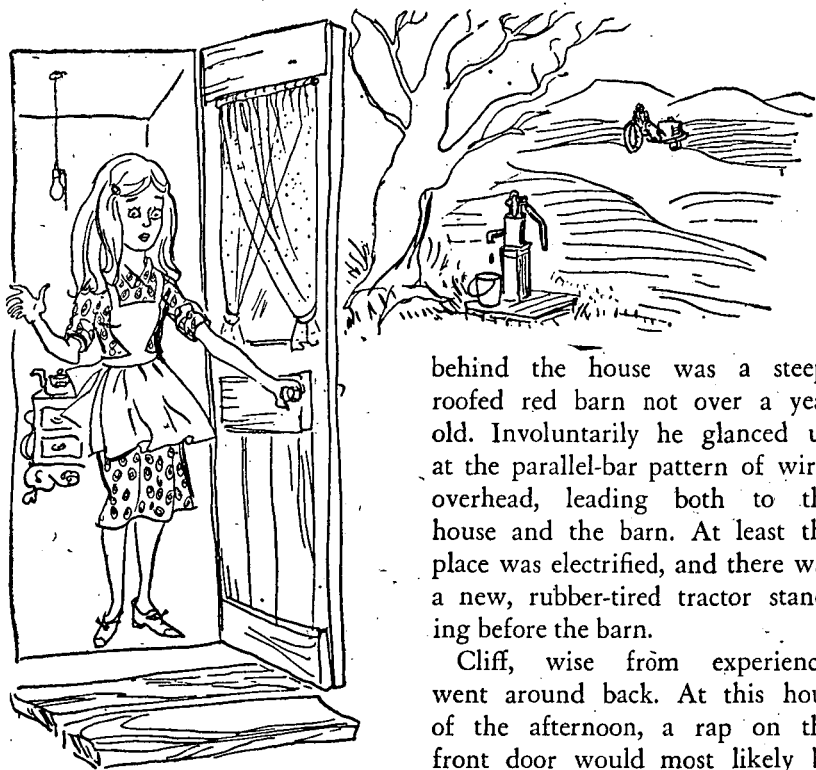
On such a day it was that Cliff Dandoy first saw the Ledbetter place. He had left the main highway, as he liked to do, some miles

back and was hiking down a gravel road, khaki shirt open at the throat, shoulders loose under the warm sun, knapsack strapped to his back, canvas-cased guitar slung over one shoulder.

Cliff was slender, quick, rawhide-tough, with eyes a deep blue and hair as blond as harvest wheat, and was just short of thirty. By many he was considered a transient farm worker. To Texas folk, he was a handyman, an extra hand hired to do seasonal farm labor. Cliff thought of himself as a troubadour, an unfettered soul, going where the wild goose goes.

At the last farmhouse where he had inquired about a job they hadn't needed a hand, but the woman had provided him with a lunch of cold fried chicken, cold biscuits and a slab of peach pie. He sat under a tree beside the road and ate the lunch. Finished, he smoked his pipe and dozed for a little while. When he awoke, he saw the norther, stretching from horizon to horizon, a solid blue cloud moving fast like smoke billowing in advance of a prairie fire.

Cliff knew what a norther could do. He had wintered in the Rio Grande Valley where winter clothes were rarely ever needed. One of his traveling-on moods had seized him, and he had walked north early. He had no warm



clothes with which to weather a norther. He had to find shelter before nightfall or risk freezing to death, but there wasn't a farmhouse in sight.

He started walking. After an hour he rounded a bend in the road and saw the Ledbetter place. The house, he learned later, was close to a hundred years old. It looked it. It hadn't been painted recently, if ever. A porch ran the length of the house, with a rain cistern at the east end. Fifty yards

behind the house was a steep-roofed red barn not over a year old. Involuntarily he glanced up at the parallel-bar pattern of wires overhead, leading both to the house and the barn. At least the place was electrified, and there was a new, rubber-tired tractor standing before the barn.

Cliff, wise from experience, went around back. At this hour of the afternoon, a rap on the front door would most likely be considered a peddler's knock and be ignored. He knocked on the kitchen door, waited a moment and knocked again.

The door swung open, and he saw the heat-flushed face of Kate Ledbetter for the first time. She was tiny, lithe, with long blonde hair and eyes the color of wood smoke, and wore a shapeless house dress that nonetheless revealed a figure adequately curved. She couldn't have been much more than twenty.

She pushed a strand of moist

hair out of her eyes, saying, "Yes?"

"Ma'am, I was wondering if you'd be needing a hand around the place?"

"You'd have to speak to Troy about that. Troy's my husband." Then, as though fearful she had somehow discouraged him, she added quickly, "We did let a man . . . go, just last week."

She smiled shyly, and it seemed to Cliff that the smile cost her an effort, as though she hadn't smiled for some time.

"I reckon your husband's out in the fields?"

"He's somewhere on the place, but I can't say just where." She shivered suddenly, hugging herself, and Cliff realized that the front of the norther had struck. The sun had disappeared, and a cold wind was pushing against the house.

She stepped back inside. "It's going to be freezing out there soon. Why don't you come into the kitchen and wait? Maybe you'd like a bite?"

Cliff never turned down food; no matter how recently he'd eaten, the involuntary omission of meals being commonplace in his life. Her pecan pie was delicious, the glass of milk cold and foaming fresh.

The kitchen, while sparkling clean, had a primitive air about it.

There was an ancient refrigerator that, when on, thumped like a jukebox; it was the only electrical appliance in sight. The cookstove was a huge wood range, and in the sink was a hand pump, not faucets. On the stove a tub of water heated. The splintery floor was slightly damp, and Cliff surmised she had been scrubbing it, hence the heat-flushed features when she answered the door.

Apparently she spoke only when spoken to and, since reticence was a normal condition with Cliff, they waited mostly in silence. Yet it wasn't at all uncomfortable. Cliff fired his pipe and smoked while she worked about the kitchen. Once or twice he heard her sigh and looked up to find her standing at the window over the sink, gazing out. The full fury of the norther worked on the old house now, setting up ghostly creakings and groanings.

Then, again at the window, she said, "He's coming. Troy's coming."

Troy Ledbetter wasn't at all what Cliff had been expecting. He was a slight, wiry man, an inch shorter than his wife and, it was Cliff's guess, perhaps twenty years older. His features were pale. Most men who spent their working days in the fields under the scald of the Texas sun had skin a

dark red, the backs of their necks also red and cracking like baked earth. Ledbetter's expression was mild, and gentle brown eyes peered out at Cliff from under the bill of a baseball cap.

When his wife had explained Cliff's purpose, Ledbetter said, in a voice as mild as his manner, "I reckon I still do the hiring, Kate."

Her hands fluttered. "I know, Troy, I know. But I just thought you'd—"

"You just thought," Ledbetter said tonelessly. He switched his gaze to Cliff. "It so happens I do need a man. Handle an axe?"

"I've used one."

"Not much field work this time of the year, reckon you know, but I'm clearing timber off thirty acres by the river for fall planting. If you want to work the timber, I might keep you on until fall harvest time, which means you have a job until winter sets in, you care to stay that long?"

Cliff didn't take offense. A transient farm hand was expected to move on whenever a whim struck him. He said, "All right, you've hired a hand."

Ledbetter's nod was meager. "There's a spare room down the hall you can use, and you'll take your meals with us. Supper soon ready, Kate?"

His wife, at the stove with her

back to them, said in a muffled voice, "Yes, Troy." There was a fear in her. It didn't show in the way she spoke or acted but in a certain tenseness that had come over her the moment her husband had entered the kitchen.

As Cliff picked up his knapsack and guitar case, she faced him. "You play and sing, Mr. Dandoy?"

"A little of both." He smiled. "Dogs howl and cats scamper, but I manage to entertain myself."

He felt certain she wanted to return the smile, but her husband was watching, and she didn't.

Cliff awoke sometime in the night. The norther had blown itself out, and the old house was still. He thought a cry had awakened him. He dismissed it as the residue of a dream, and yet, just before he drifted into sleep again, he thought he heard muffled weeping.

Kate Ledbetter was an excellent cook. Breakfast was a stack of wheatcakes and thick slabs of smokehouse ham. Ledbetter ate with his eyes cast down, rarely speaking. Kate didn't sit with them. She moved back and forth from the table to the stove, serving them. Cliff knew this wasn't a cruelty practiced by Ledbetter; it was customary. She would eat later, when they were gone.

He wanted to ask her to sit and

eat with them, but he knew it wouldn't do. He did say, leaving the table, "Best tasting breakfast I've had in a while, Mrs. Ledbetter."

She didn't blush coyly and look away. She met his gaze levelly, searching for mockery. Finding none, she did, then, glance away with a flutter of hands.

To ease her embarrassment Cliff turned aside, fumbling for his pipe, and saw Ledbetter watching them, a slight smile curving his thin lips.

The day was clear, the sky scoured clean of clouds, and a little crisp. Cliff was given two sharpened axes by Ledbetter and shown the area to be cleared of timber, an S-shaped section of river bottom. The river was a narrow, deep-running stream. The timber was live oak, black oak, a scattering of mesquite and a snarl of underbrush. It took Cliff a couple of hours to settle into a working rhythm. By mid-morning he had warmed up enough to remove his shirt.

At noon Kate came out with a hot lunch. She stared at the smooth skin of his heaving chest, then quickly averted her gaze.

Cliff accepted the lunch with a grave, "Thank you . . . Kate."

She nodded, smiled briefly and fled. He stared after her for a mo-

ment, shrugged, and sat down to eat.

The Ledbetters baffled Cliff more and more as the days passed. They didn't speak a dozen words to one another during the day, at least not in his hearing, and Cliff very much doubted they were more loquacious when he wasn't around.

Their evenings were spent in the parlor, Kate with a lap piled high with mending, Ledbetter poring over farm journals or equipment catalogs. They didn't have a television set, not even a radio. Cliff owned a transistor radio and he brought it into the parlor on the third evening. At the sound of music Kate glanced up from her mending with an anticipatory smile, a smile that quickly died as she looked at her husband. Cliff was stubborn: he stayed for an hour. Ledbetter didn't say a word; as near as Cliff could ascertain he never once glanced up from his journal perusal, but Cliff felt his disapproval as powerfully as if the man had shouted it at him.

Cliff never carried the transistor into the parlor again. In fact, he never went into the parlor again. He remained in his room, listening to the radio or idly strumming on the guitar and singing softly to himself.

The morning after that particular evening, he managed a moment alone with Kate. He said, "Would you like to listen to my radio here during the day?"

Eagerness swept her face, was instantly gone. "No, Mr. Dandoy. It's nice of you to offer, but I have too much to do to bother with such things."

Most farmers Cliff had worked for had possessed a radio to catch weather reports and crop prices; even those too stingy or too poor to own a TV had that, at least. Then he discovered that Ledbetter had a radio on his tractor on which, apparently, he received all the reports he deemed necessary.

That, of course, was only another bafflement. Ledbetter owned the latest in farm equipment: two tractors, disk plow, row-top planter, hay baler, and others, but the very few appliances in the house were falling apart, the furniture ancient and worn thin with repeated polishings. Kate housecleaned with a broom, dust mop and dust cloth. And their only means of transportation was a ten-year-old pickup.

Cliff's first conclusion was that Ledbetter was of some religion that frowned upon electrical appliances and electronic entertainment. His first Sunday there disabused Cliff of that notion. The Ledbetters

didn't go to church. After breakfast Ledbetter went to the fields and Kate worked around the house. Their only concession to the Sabbath was Ledbetter's gruff remark, "It's Sunday, Dandoy. You don't need to work today."

It was on the tip of Cliff's tongue to say, "Well, thanks a *heap*," but he doubted it would be received in the proper spirit, so he said nothing.

It wasn't a household he would, ordinarily, be happy in, and he would, ordinarily, have taken his leave after the first week. Yet he remained, angry with himself for doing so, and even more furious because of the reason. He was in love with Kate Ledbetter. It was ridiculous, idiotic, insane. She hadn't given him the slightest encouragement, yet he sensed she somehow knew.

By June the weather had warmed sufficiently for Cliff to sit on the porch evenings and play and sing. He knew Kate was listening. He halfway expected Ledbetter to object, but the man said nothing.

It was a week before Kate ventured out to sit on the porch and listen, hands folded in her lap. The light was out in the parlor. Ledbetter had gone to bed, which he did early seven nights a week.

This also puzzled Cliff—that

Ledbetter would go off to bed and leave Kate alone with the hired hand—but he didn't question his good fortune.

Kate said nothing at all during those first few evenings. Then one night Cliff stopped playing and leaned back to gaze dreamily at the full moon, and Kate said softly, "Play another sad song for me, Cliff."

It was the first time she had called him by his first name. Cliff turned to her and said urgently, "Ah-h, Kate, Kate!"

He half-started to his feet, but she was gone with a pale flutter of hands, vanishing into the dark inwards of the house like a wraith.

Days, weeks passed. The weather heated steadily, and then it was summer. Cliff's axe flashed in the sun, and trees fell like columns of soldiers shot down one by one. Crops grew toward the sun. Thirty acres of alfalfa Ledbetter had planted on river bottom land would soon be ready for mowing and baling.

Evenings, Cliff played and sang on the porch, but to himself. Kate didn't join him again, and didn't call him Cliff again. Always, "Mr. Dandoy."

Cliff wanted to leave. He stayed on, cursing himself for a fool.

One unusually hot day, Kate was a little late bringing his lunch.

He had been burning piled underbrush near the river and was sweaty, covered with a dusting of ash. The water looked cool and inviting. Every night now he swam awhile in the river before going up to the house.

On an impulse he stepped out of his shoes and socks and dived into the water. The trousers didn't matter; they would dry within a matter of minutes in the sun. He came up snorting, blowing water. He heard clear, ringing laughter. He saw Kate on the river bank. It was the first time he'd heard her laugh.

She said, "You look like a little boy caught playing hooky."

It was never quite clear in his mind what prompted him to say what he did next, but something told him this was the right time, the right moment for them. He said, "Come play hooky with me, Kate, dress and all. The sun'll dry it before you get back to the house."

Without hesitation she set the lunch pail down, unlaced and removed her sneakers, then cut the water in a perfect dive.

For a time they frolicked like children. Kate was good in the water. Cliff was sure she forgot everything but that moment in that little time. She laughed and yelped and splashed.

Finally they staggered up the slippery bank. Her hair clung to her head like seaweed. Her dress was plastered to her figure. She was a mess.

She was the loveliest thing Cliff had ever seen.

With a groan he reached for her. "Kate, Kate! I love you. You *must* know that!"

She came into his arms willingly, her mouth raised, seeking. Then she tore away with a strangled cry. "No, no! I won't be responsible for another death!"

He stared at her, blinking. "Kate . . . What in God's name are you talking about?"

She stood with her face turned away. "There was another man before you came . . ."

"I know that. You told me your husband let him go."

"That's what I told you," she whispered, "but I think Troy killed him!"

"Killed . . ." Cliff caught her chin and forced her face around. Her eyes were clenched shut. "What *are* you talking about? Why would he do a thing like that?"

"Troy caught us laughing together. That was all it was, Cliff. I swear there was nothing else!"

"All right, I believe you. Go on."

"Well, the next morning Joel was gone. Troy told me he had left in the middle of the night."

"How do you know he didn't?"
"He left a suitcase full of his things."

"That could well be, if your husband scared him enough. Why do you think Ledbetter killed him?"

"Because . . ." She shivered. "I just know!"

"That's only a woman's reason, Kate."

"He was a drifter. No folks, nobody. No one would ever miss him."

"Kate, I don't like Troy Ledbetter, but that could be because of the way I feel about you. Even so, I can't see him killing a man."

"You don't know him, that's why. He's stingy and mean, all knotted inside like a fist!"

"Why did you marry him, Kate?"

Orphaned and left penniless when her parents were killed in an automobile accident four years ago, Kate had looked upon Troy Ledbetter's proposal of marriage as her salvation. At seventeen, in her last year of high school, she hadn't known which way to turn. Troy was well thought of, a prosperous farmer; he was clean, frugal, and seemed a kind of gentle man. She hadn't loved him, of course, but maybe love was for the storybooks and the movies. Four years of marriage had taught her that the frugality was stinginess, the gentle

manner a facade concealing an infinite capacity for small, subtle cruelties. For instance, they lived seven miles from town; twice a year Troy drove her into town and allowed her to buy a few clothes. He did all the other shopping, and all spare money went for machinery and farm improvements. Too, of late he had become unreasonably jealous.

It was a story as old as time and as such was suspect. Cliff couldn't keep the skepticism out of his voice. "If he's like you say, why didn't you leave him? Run away, if nothing else?"

"I've thought of it many times, but he swore he'd find me and kill me. I believe him."

Cliff knew that she did believe this. Whether it was true or not really didn't matter. She was just as frightened.

"Kate, you haven't yet said. Do you love me?"

"I . . ." She gazed up at him, eyes suddenly enormous. "I don't . . . It's wrong, Cliff!"

"It's no more wrong than you being married to him," he said soberly, "not loving him and believing the things you do about him. Look, I'll go to Ledbetter and tell him about us, then I'll take you away."

Her hands fluttered wildly. "No! He'll kill you, Cliff!"

"Kate, listen to me now," he said gently. "I've been a drifter, too. I've had no reason to settle. Now I do."

Apparently those were the words she needed to hear. Her resistance crumpled. In his arms she still trembled, and he knew she hadn't overcome her fear of Ledbetter, but she obeyed him without question when he told her to put on the sneakers, and she snuggled her hand trustingly in his as they walked back to the house.

They didn't have to look for Ledbetter. He had started baling hay that morning. Cliff didn't hear the tractor motor as they walked to the house; evidently Ledbetter had gone in for lunch. He came out of the kitchen to meet them as they approached.

Kate's hand leaped like a frightened bird, and Cliff closed his tightly, holding her by his side. "Ledbetter, Kate and I love each other . . ."

"Just like those songs you sing, eh, singer?" Ledbetter said mildly. The man's eyes had the glassy, bottomless look of marbles, and Cliff knew that Kate had reason to fear him.

Cliff said, "We're leaving together. This afternoon."

"That so?"

Cliff stood away from Kate,

stood loosely, ready to meet Ledbetter's attack. He was confident he could defeat the man in a fair fight.

But Ledbetter was looking at Kate. "You're my wife, Kate. You belong to me, just like this farm and everything on it. I'll kill the man who tries to take anything of mine."

"You can't stop us, Ledbetter, with threats or anything else." Cliff glanced at Kate. "He's just trying to scare us, Kate. Can't you see that?"

Ledbetter still didn't look at him. "Kate, you know I mean what I say."

Kate's hands fluttered. One went to her mouth. She gnawed on her knuckles. She stared at Cliff, her eyes alive with fear. "Cliff . . . I'm sorry! I can't! I just can't!" Her breath caught in a sob. She broke toward the house, running awkwardly.

Cliff took a step after her, then turned toward Ledbetter.

The man's features were void of triumph. He could have been discussing the weather. "I'll expect you gone, singer, when I come in tonight. You have a month's salary coming. Why don't you try singing for it?" He wheeled and started off, never once looking back.

Cliff gazed after him for a mo-

ment, then plunged into the house. Kate had barricaded herself in the bedroom. Through the door he pleaded, cajoled and threatened.

Over and over she said the same thing, "Go away, Cliff! Please go away!"

Finally he knew he had lost. Maybe she had never intended going away with him at all. He trudged to his room, packed his knapsack and left. As he walked up the road, he heard the tractor chugging down by the river.

After an hour's walking, he began to think more clearly. Slowly the realization came to him that Kate's fear had been more for his safety than her own. He should have known that all along. His anger had blinded him.

He turned and started back. He would take her away with him even if he had to carry her. He had been gone over two hours by the time he saw the house again. He heard the stutter of the tractor in the field long before he glimpsed the house.

The back door was open, but Kate wasn't in the kitchen. He went through the house calling her name. There was no answer.

He found her in the bedroom, almost cut in half by a shotgun blast.

Cliff groped his way outside and was violently ill. The distant

whine of the tractor motor, rising and falling, rasped across his raw nerves. He knew Ledbetter had killed her. He would come home tonight, pretend to find Kate dead and blame it on his hired hand who had fled.

But why? Why had he killed her?

Cliff started toward the field, staggering at first but gaining strength as he went.

The tractor pulling the hay baler was at the end of a windrow and was executing a wide turn to start on a new one. At the sight of Cliff, Ledbetter halted the tractor, but didn't shut off the motor. As a result the baler, connected to the tractor drive shaft, continued to run, the auger flashing in the late afternoon sun.

Ledbetter said calmly, "I didn't expect to see you again, singer."

"Why? Why did you do it, Ledbetter?" Cliff had to shout to be heard over the tractor motor and the baler. "She wasn't going to leave you!"

"Oh, but she was. She was packing to leave when I went back to the house for a minute." For one of the rare times Cliff saw the man grin. "She waited until sure you'd gone. Didn't want you hurt, she said. She was going off by herself."

Through a shimmering haze of

fury Cliff reached up and caught Ledbetter by the shirt front and hauled him down off the tractor seat . . .

His lawyer said, "Then you killed him?"

"Yes, I killed him," Cliff said. "Oh, yes, I killed him."

"But the body? It was never found. The sheriff looked everywhere. You're being tried for killing Kate, I guess you know now. Since you wouldn't, or couldn't, tell us what happened, the sheriff figured you also killed Ledbetter and buried him somewhere."

"The baler? Is it still in the field?"

"No, the tractor and the baler were driven into the barn the next day. But the hay's still there. It rained that same night and ruined the hay."

"The rain," Cliff mused. "I guess it rinsed away the blood."

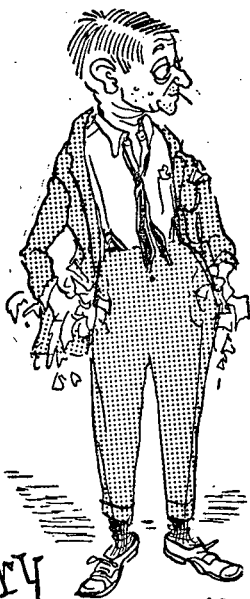
"The blood?"

"Ledbetter loved his machinery, you know, more than he ever did Kate." Cliff looked at his lawyer without expression. "When I pulled him off the tractor, I hit him once, knocking him into the hay baler. I could have saved him, I guess, but I didn't try. Tell the sheriff he'll find what's left of Troy Ledbetter in the last two bales of hay from his machine."

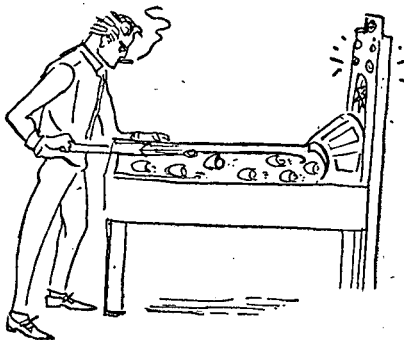
One who knows from whence the next meal cometh is, indeed, well endowed.



IN
LIEU
OF



By
Jerry
Jacobson



BEFORE taking Solly upstairs they divested him of his valuables, his belt, his watch, his wallet, his shoe laces, while Lieutenant Mandeville, that grinning supervisor, watched at a corner of the booking desk, informing Solly in Cool Cop

Dialogue how this third time wasn't going to be very charming. Solly hadn't made a mistake but he had run into a bit of bad luck. He'd turned an unfavorable corner—G Street, after the robbery—and had run like a boy to his father, right into Mandeville's arms. Now Mandeville was playing the lucky nab to the hilt.

"Solly's going bye-bye for a good long time this stretch," he goaded, putting ten fingers in front of his eyes to indicate bars. "Up the river of no return. Third conviction and nobody waved good-bye."

Solly Halpar leered at the loose-jawed face grinning out from between fleshy fingers. He wouldn't be grinning if he knew about Heddeker, but nobody knew about Heddeker, the little wall-eyed bum, with that ancient hair greased like a seal's and that sen-sen breath that knocked you back a foot, and those pants pockets sprouting slips of papers like a scarecrow sprouting hay. Even Solly could not place where that little rat-faced creeper had come from. Heddeker had merely popped up like a weed that afternoon while Solly babied a pin-ball machine at The Big King Penny Arcade, hanging on his shoulder like lint, making Solly so nervous he blew three one-dollar payouts and then told the little creep if he didn't blow he'd send

him head first through the back-glass.

"Free country," Heddeker had said. "Two-time losers think twice before they start throwing people around. Had a two-timer in here last week. Very unreasonable man. Brought his magnets along and tried to make a fortune off Number 12 down there. Well, Number 12's still around, but not the two-timer."

"So you know I'm a two-timer," Halpar said, as he watched his fifth ball plunk into the three as though it had a brain. He needed a two. "So what?"

"So, it's a situation nobody should live with," Heddeker said. "I wouldn't wish a life like that on a dog. You walk on eggshells, you sweat blood wondering if anybody saw you pulling a jaywalk, or hangin' a little, paper 'cause you need five bucks for odds, and ends to last you through the weekend."

"The next time I'm not planning on making any slipups."

"Who plans? You take a nice little ride in the country with the wife and kids and you plan on having an accident? You get outa bed in the morning and you plan on coming down on a shoe and breaking your neck? Who plans?"

"Nobody plans on that," Halpar told him.

"I do, Halpar," said the wheezy

little voice now, with an ironic lilt of the good salesman. "That's my business, my stock in trade. I plan for other people's slipups. I coulda planned for Magnet Man's slipup, only he didn't listen. Now he's got his own private number across his chest, all his until the day he dies."

"I think I know that racket," Halpar said, as he slipped a fresh nickel into his machine. "You give me protection for a price. You keep me out of jail—only you're about as close to the action as those draft-protection guys were during the war. You take the money, just like them, only you don't do a thing for it. You work percentages. A lot of them are gonna keep out anyway, and the rest—well, that's the breaks. Am I right?"

"Yes, I thought you'd see it that way; just like Magnet Man."

"The only way I see it," Solly told him, pushing the little creep aside, "is you're trying to pick up some change with a phony scheme. Well, go pedal it on the other side of the street because nobody in here is buying."

"Of course, if you wanna brush me off without listening," Heddeker said, "brush. But you got free information coming. It don't cost you nothin' but time."

Halpar wasn't going anywhere, and his luck with the pinballs was

colder than a polar bear in the Bering Straits. "Okay, so inform," he told Heddeker. "I'm listening."

Heddeker took two steps toward Solly. His voice had the tone of a tout releasing his best tip of the week. "What would you say," he told Halpar, "if I were to tell you I could get you out of that ninth floor jail in the City Municipal Building, as easy as water coming out of a faucet?"

"I'd say you'd been spending too many hours out in the sun," Halpar said. "I been in that can. There are only two kinds of people ever go in and come back out—cops and corpses."

"Just like Magnet Man," Heddeker said, with contempt. "You listen but you don't hear. I said I know a way."

"I heard you," Halpar told him. "I listened, I heard, but I don't believe. You figured out a way how man can fly, right? Because from nine stories up that's the only way out."

"That way and my way," Heddeker said. "My way's simpler."

"And more expensive?"

"Everything in this world costs," Heddeker said. "I gotta eat, same as the next guy. But what I got to sell is worth the price."

"And what would that be?" Halpar asked.

"Same as for everybody else."

First, a flat \$200. That buys you the plan. Then you pay me ten bucks a week every week you're out of jail. It's like insurance. You don't like the rates, then you cancel your policy. But it's a cheap deal. First, it's cheap because anybody else is gonna want a heckuva lot more for the risk, and second, you got security. You know how it is when you get tapped. They arrest you so fast you think you're in an old Keystone Kops movie with the picture speeded up. You haven't got time to work a deal. With me you don't need time. It works automatically, just like one of them inventions by Rube Goldberg. In the event of "A", then "B", followed by "C" and so on. The wheels start turning the second they drop those cuffs over you."

"What makes you think after I buy your plan I won't find me an outside man of my own?"

"You might," Heddeker admitted, "but I doubt it. First, because I'm cheaper, and second, who do you know you can trust? The only guys you know are cons, and one con trusts another about from here to the street. Now, with me you got strict, business trust. I got no axes to grind, no grudges to settle. You buy the plan and pay the premiums and in the unfortunate event of time-three, I go to work and have you back on the street in

six hours. You can't beat that."

"And just how many—policy holders are in your fold right now?" Halpar thought to ask.

"As of right this minute, none," Heddeker said in all honesty. "It's a special thing. I only offer it to two-time losers. The others usually turn it down. They don't feel the panic of being a Third-Time Charlie. They don't need it. For them the sun's out and the birds are singing, but for guys like you, Halpar, the clouds are here to stay."

Whatever it was—panic, need, or just idle curiosity—Solly Halpar bought and was surprised. Heddeker's plan, for all its seeming mad confusion on a dozen separate slips of paper, looked amazingly workable. For all his seediness, his roustabout offensiveness, the little bum seemed a genius. He had, for instance, discovered from someone that the mattresses on the bunks in the cells on the ninth floor contained in their soft, downy stomachs a network of fine cording, not strong enough to convey a human being down the side of a building, but perfectly strong enough to transport items up. Heddeker had merely coupled this fact with the knowledge that one bank of the ancient jail's cells were exterior ones, shielded from the outside world by bars and a half-inch

of chicken-wired glass. Precisely six hours after the moment of Solly's arrest (Heaven forbid) Heddeker would be in the alley toward which that bank of cells faced, waiting patiently for Halpar to attach the cording and send it down. Then Heddeker would attach hacksaw blades and enough strong rope to reach the ground, give a yank and then disappear. The only rub in the plan was the fact that Halpar might not be placed in one of those exterior cells, but he had an 80% chance, and that was better than no chance at all.

Solly had made five weekly payments to Heddeker when his path crossed with Big Mike Leftky's and Ed Sevro's. They were fresh from their first stretch and eager to make a hit. Bankmen, good ones, came wandering down the pike very seldom and Halpar, feeling far more secure now than at any time since his release, felt like some action.

"Sevro is a good little driver," Leftky said when the three of them got together in Leftky's walk-up, "but not reckless. He knows what calculated speed is and his brain is a road map."

"Does he help with the heist?"

"Everybody does his part and the driving is Sevro's. We split three ways even. You and me pull the job and Sevro rolls us out from

under. I already picked us a spot, the downtown branch of Mutual Trust & Savings. It looks perfect. It's surrounded by one-way streets and the traffic at midday is always light. I think we can go."

"The downtown Mutual Trust & Savings," Solly repeated. "Sounds good. How much can we get?"

"Two minutes worth," Leftky said. "If we work fast that oughta come to a cool \$50,000. Six cages. We take nothing under a five dollar bill."

"You sure got a lotta guts jumpin' in like this," Sevro told Solly, admiringly. "You're a two-timer, ain't you?"

"And working on three," Solly said. "That's right."

"Well, you got a lotta nerve and I gotta give you credit," Sevro told him. "Most two-timers wouldn't so much as think about a job this big. You must have rabbits' feet all over you."

"I know somebody who does a lotta business with people in high places," Solly told them. "I get nabbed and I'm out in six hours."

"On the level?" Leftky said, his eyes widening with interest. "You know somebody who can spring you? Just like that?"

"Just like that," Solly told them, watching for the inevitable envy.

"Let us in on the guy's name," Sevro pleaded. "Maybe he can

throw a little of that influence our way, too."

"Sorry," Solly said. "He only takes special cases."

"We're special cases, ain't we, Solly?" Leftky said. "Come on—who is he?"

Solly lifted his balding head toward the bare ceiling, as though imagining the wall down which he would come if this job went wrong and said, "All I can tell you is he's a very highly trained person in a very special job-skill area. *Very highly trained.*"

"We've replayed the film of the robbery, so we know Sevro and Leftky were in on it with you," Mandeville said. They had been in Interrogation twenty minutes now and Mandeville was getting just a little impatient. He stubbed out his fifth cigaret and lit a sixth, placing the tempting pack on the table where Solly could be tortured by its presence. "Solly, where do you get all of this cool for being a third-timer?"

"I was born cool," Solly told him, stretching out on his chair. "I come from a long line of cool customers."

"You also come from a long line of saps, Solly," the lieutenant said. "Sixty-three thousand, that was the take, according to news reports. Sevro and Leftky get the

loot and you get the rap. You're holding an empty bag, Solly, a lifetime guarantee and an empty bag."

"I'll get my share when I get out," Solly said. "I know how to contact Sevro and Leftky."

There was a moment of silence. "When you get out?" Mandeville said. "You don't seem to understand, Solly. This is it, for you; the final curtain; the end."

Solly released a lazy smile and yawned widely. "Isn't it about time for me to get upstairs to my cell?" he asked Mandeville. "I've put in a long day at the bank and I'm really dead. I need some sleep." *Heddeker, that sleezy, little genius!* thought Solly as he continued gracing the room with his grin. *Standing there, like just another rummy, in the entry hall of the building, winking at Solly as he was escorted inside with a uniformed policeman on each arm. It was almost like playing a game of Monopoly and drawing the Get Out of Jail card!*

"I don't suppose you're in the mood to tell us where Sevro and Leftky are headed with that money," Mandeville said.

Solly chanted, "They went to the Animal Fair—the birds and the bees were there—and the big baboon, by the light of the moon—was combin' his auburn hair."

The cell Mandeville dumped him

into couldn't have been more opportune. It was an outside cell facing Marapole Alley. Six hours from the minute of his arrest would place the moment of his freedom at 6:59 p.m. exactly.

About one-thirty, Solly forced a rip in his mattress and began taking out the fine cording. He sat with his body between the slashed, mouthlike scar and the door to his cell while he worked, using the distance between his right fist and right elbow as a measuring device with which to count out one hundred and eighty lengths—the one hundred and eighty feet from his ninth floor tomb to the ground, whistling *Whistle While you Work* so happily the loser in the cell next to him told him very impolitely that if he didn't stop he'd tear down the wall and rip out his throat. But Solly whistled on.

By three o'clock he had enough cording. He stuffed it all back into one corner of the slashed mattress, turned it over, then sat on his handywork to wait for 6:59.

At four o'clock Mandeville paid him a visit, leaning on the bars like a visitor to the city zoo. Solly had been dozing.

"Getting jumpy yet?" Mandeville asked. "Beginning to get the three-time loser's sweat, Solly?"

"I don't sweat," Solly said, "I come from a long line of cools,

remember? A line of top cools."

"So you told me before."

"Right now, I'm just resting. I had a pretty good lunch and now I'm just taking it easy."

"That's good, Solly," Mandeville said. "You do that. You get all the rest you can because in another seventy-two hours we go to trial. After that, nobody rests. After that, it's just one hectic thing after another right into the big-house."

Solly swung to the edge of his bunk and found Mandeville's eyes between the bars. "I once knew a guy in the army, coulda been your twin brother, Mandeville. Everything broke just right for this guy. Nearsighted clerks kept leaving his name off K.P. rosters, company officers kept catching him at his best moments, privates and corporals from rich families kept betting into his full-houses at barracks poker parties."

"That's a funny story, Solly."

"Then one day this friend of mine finds his name on a very special Special Order . . . to the most miserable, nerve-racking duty station in the entire U.S. Army area of occupation. Know what happened to him? Got Section-Eightened out as a psycho. Just couldn't take a rotten break. Couldn't handle it."

"Is this where I laugh, Solly?"

"That guy is you, Mandeville,"

Solly said. "One of these days, cop, everything you touch is going to start to turn to rust and sawdust. You're gonna land on your nose instead of your feet and then you won't be sane enough to walk the loneliest beat in the loneliest section of town. They won't even be able to trust you to do that."

Mandeville smiled the pained smile of a father observing his uncooperative child. He slapped his palm on the bars. "See you in court, Solly."

Solly gave Mandeville his best dead-fish smile to take back downstairs. "If I'm not there, cop," he said lazily, as he tumbled back onto his bunk, "start without me?"

At 6:58 precisely, in the dim isolation of his cell, Solly fished the length of mattress cording from its hiding place and went to the window of his cell. Outside light was beginning to dim, the city's sounds diminishing to occasional blasts of automobile horns.

Removing his left shoe, Solly poked a small hole through the chicken-wired glass. Then, like a fisherman, he began to let out the slender cord as his eye caught the giant-faced clock on the main spire of the railroad depot moving to 6:59. The timing was perfect and though he was fishing blind, he could almost see Heddeker as the little mole scurried down the alley,

the assortment of apparatus tucked inside his coat as he made his way toward the descending line.

Silently, every muscle and nerve in his body tightening with hope, Solly waited for the gentle tug. Come on Heddeker, you greasy little genius! Be there! Be there!

Then his hand felt the subtle pull. Wait, wait—wait until Heddeker had a chance to tie his bundle securely. Solly counted off fifteen seconds and then the solid jerk came. He started pulling, reeling in for all he was worth, his excitement making the load seem weightless. With each long pull he counted off a yard—twenty twenty-one, twenty-two—finally the magic number, and then his catch was coming through the jagged star of broken glass. Attached to the end of the cord was only a wad of paper. Solly, unfolding it and reading feverishly, almost without comprehension, watched the words group into meaning as they raced across his eyes:

"Solly: Please forgive this one, small bit of infidelity, but I didn't know the take was so large. A stoolie steered me to Leftky and Sevro. After my position statement, they thought \$10,000 was not too high a price to pay to buy up your policy. Please see things my way, Mr. Halpar. I gotta eat, same as the next guy. (Signed) Heddeker."

Sportsmanship may be credited as the factor which allows the emergence of two winners, despite the score, from an onerous duel.

THE POWER OF DEDUCTION

By
John Reese



THE furniture in the office of Captain Dudley A. Shaw, commander of the homicide squad, consisted of his desk and swivel chair, three straight chairs, and two

filing cabinets, all of gray steel. On this late winter day there was also a wheeled cabinet of pale green steel. Its metal sides had several cloth-covered openings for microphones and speakers. It was a tape recorder, the latest and most versatile made, and the department's

innovation, its pride and joy.

"We appreciate your coming in," Captain Shaw said, "but I wonder if we could ask another favor of you, and record this interview?"

The woman across the desk from him smiled faintly. "What you mean is that you want to bind me under penalty of the law, isn't that right?" she said. "No, I have no objection. I consent."

Everyone in a murder case always knows more law than the Supreme Court, but the dangerous thing here was that Miss Grace Waggenreid might know just as much as she thought she did. Shaw avoided the eyes of Foukes and Sibley, the detectives working the case, who sat behind her, and who had warned him that this woman was nobody's patsy.

"Do you want your attorney?" he asked.

"Why should I? Am I under arrest?"

"Not at all, but if you feel that you—"

"Am I under suspicion?"

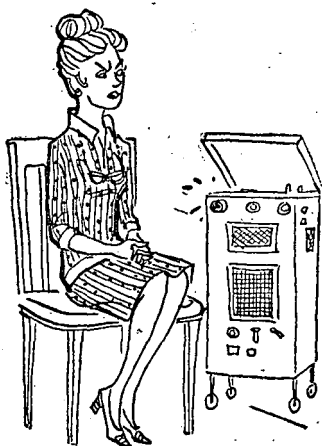
"In any unsolved homicide, we regard—"

"Everyone as being under suspicion," she finished for him. "That doesn't answer my question. What you're really trying to do is trap me in a lie, and I resent it, but I do not wish to call my attorney. Please proceed."

This was going to be a difficult one. Shaw raised the lid of the cabinet and snapped the switch. "Thank you. It takes a minute to warm up. Please speak in your ordinary speaking voice when we begin. Looks like we might be getting a break in the cold snap, doesn't it?"

She did not reply, although he thought she may have winced at his misuse of "like." A small glass eye in the cabinet began to glow yellowly. The seconds plodded on. Shaw studied the woman in his mind, having already memorized her image. He was fairly sure she was doing the same with him, and he doubted that she was particularly impressed by his rank and authority.

Dudley Shaw was young to be a captain. He had been divorced a year, long enough for women to



have become a problem to him. Strong and healthy and lonely, with a good job, he knew he was vulnerable. He had something to offer a woman—nothing great, but something. He was afraid of offering it to the wrong woman and taking another lifetime mauling.

He was on guard against all women, and this primly provocative witness was dynamite. The file disclosed that Miss Grace Waggenreid was thirty-five and unmarried. It also showed that she was, past extenuation, a doctor of philosophy who made \$270 a year more than a police captain. She wore a two-piece suit of some silk material, a hat, and carried gloves, a touch of formality alien to this office.

She was not beautiful, but Shaw would have bet that even young men watched her. Her figure was good, if too militarily carried; her eyes were blue, but too penetrating; but it was her skin that intrigued him. He had never seen clearer or firmer skin, and the years had failed to rid him of the notion, no doubt acquired in childhood, that a clear skin meant a clear conscience.

The sallow glass eye turned white-hot and began blinking. Shaw turned a knob to start the reels of tape. "I guess we're ready," he said. "Will you identify yourself, or shall I do it by questioning

you? Your name, vocation?"

"I am Grace Waggenreid, principal of Woodrow Wilson High School," she said. "Home address, 4552 London Street, apartment nine. Is that sufficient?"

"Yes, thank you. I am Captain Shaw. Also present are Sergeants Bayard Foukes and Donald Sibley, assigned to investigate the homicide of Edward Julius Persinger, also known as Ned Persinger."

She glanced behind her. It was only a quick, darting movement, and her face, when she looked back at Shaw, was grave. But he knew she had been startled and amused, and he knew why and did not like it. Detective Dudley Shaw had his problems with the futile, crafty, and often stupid Foukes, but he was a hard worker and he could not help his name. Certainly this flourishing PhD was in no position to patronize a policeman.

"I believe we're all identified," Shaw said. "Now will you tell us, as briefly as possible, what you know about the death of Ned Persinger?"

"I'm sure I can condense it by now, I have told it so many times," the woman said. "On the evening of December tenth, I remained late in my office to complete some long statistical reports. At about eight o'clock, the janitor, Mr. Norman Roach, came in and asked me if I

knew it was snowing. I thanked him and told him my car windows were closed.

"He was the only person I saw. At about nine-twenty, he returned and said he had been outside, and had found a man's body under my window. He said he didn't recognize the man. I phoned the police, and then went with Mr. Roach to assist, if I could.

"I recognized the man as Mr. Persinger. I was sure he was beyond help, although I observed no death-wound. I remained with Mr. Roach, beside the body, until the police arrived. Oh yes! I noticed there was fresh snow on the body, but also considerable snow under it."

She crossed her handsome, silken legs. "I believe that's it, but I'll answer any questions you care to ask."

"There are one or two things," Shaw said. "First, tell us how you happened to recognize the dead man, please."

"Early in the term, I had requested interviews with the parents of the Persinger children."

"Did such interviews take place?"

"One did, with Mr. Persinger only. He told me his wife was a mental patient in the state hospital."

"Did you determine that this was

true?" Shaw questioned doggedly.

"Not personally. A social worker in Home Service, at school district headquarters, did so."

"Did you later know when Mrs. Persinger was given a probationary release from the hospital?"

"Why, I remember I knew it. I believe it was a routine check by the same social worker, in November. A copy of her report would come to me."

"The Persinger children were delinquents?"

She said warmly, "By no means! I was giving them individual help, and they responded well. I asked Home Service to drop the case, but I was overruled by the Manual of Procedure. I'm sure you're familiar with the functional rigidity of bureaucracy. Once the engine starts, no power on earth can stop it. It's an old problem, isn't it? The machine runs us, instead of serving us."

"Sometimes, yes," he said. "But why did you oppose further investigation of the Persinger kids?"

"Social work has two purposes—investigation and correction. The facts were in. I had assumed responsibility for correction. I felt that these two bright youngsters had enough problems, that's all."

"What problems do you mean? That their mother was a mental case? They had a father, hadn't

they?" Shaw persisted further.

She made an impatient gesture with her gloves. "Must we play games, Captain? You know the Persinger children were badly neglected, and I know that you know it. Doctors at the state hospital say it was his abuse, physical as well as mental, that caused his wife's breakdown. As for the children, day after day they came to school with no breakfast, and their clothing was a constant humiliation. What are you trying to trap me into saying?"

"Nothing, Miss Waggenreid, nothing," he said. "What I'm getting at is this—you're fond of those children?"

"Very fond of them!"

"You wanted to take them in after this homicide, and when the court refused permission, you had your lawyer file a petition for *habeas corpus* to get them out of Juvenile Hall, and when that was turned down—"

Again she interrupted to finish a sentence for him. "I appealed. I will appeal to the United States Supreme Court, if necessary. The environment there is bad, very bad, and I happen to have room for them in my apartment. Exactly what has this got to do with the homicide?"

"Well, it just strikes Mr. Foukes and Mr. Sibley that this is a little

unusual, for a school principal."

She raised her eyebrows. "It does? I neither explain it nor apologize for it."

"You're not married. Have you ever done this before? I mean take two stray kids into your home and then—"

She cut in sharply, "If you mean to psychoanalyze me, to prove a spinster's frustrated mother-instinct, we can terminate this right now! I deal with children, you with criminals. I'm not going to be badgered because my outlook is somewhat less vengeful than yours. And may I add that I have no patience with amateur psychologists, official or otherwise. I don't mind your jangling handcuffs at me—one expects that. But 'captain' is not a scientific title."

The reels of tape spun on blankly for a moment. Then Shaw said, "Referring back to Ned Persinger, do you know what kind of work he did?"

"I believe he was a used car salesman."

"You believe? Didn't you, in fact, buy a car from him?"

"Yes, I did."

"Was this before or after you saw the social worker's report on the home and the parents?"

"After."

"You knew his reputation, and still bought a nearly-new luxury

sedan from him in spite of it?"

"I assume you want to know my motives. I needed a car, and having always driven economy models, I became infatuated with this one. Also, someone would get a handsome commission, and I hoped to benefit those children."

"And did they receive any benefit from it?"

"They did not! Whatever he did with the money, not one cent went on those children!"

"Now, where was Mrs. Persinger at the time you bought the car, on October twenty-fifth, wasn't it?"

"About then. She was in the state hospital."

"Did Persinger demonstrate the car to you?"

"Of course. Three times, I believe."

"When did these demonstrations take place? After school? At night, perhaps?"

She leaned forward, eyes glinting angrily. "May I ask what you're trying to determine, Captain Shaw?"

He breathed deeply and took the plunge. "I'm going to ask you if Ned Persinger ever made a pass at you."

"To answer that," she said contemptuously, "I must ask you the police definition of the term, 'pass'."

"I'll accept your definition, Miss

Waggenreid. Just yes or no."

She betrayed no embarrassment. "Then yes, he did. If you enjoy details, he stopped on the stadium road to let me take the wheel. Instead, he began telling me how lonely and deprived he was—the usual. Then he—"

"Excuse me. Please tell us what you understood him to mean by that word, 'deprived'."

She flushed. "Is it necessary to use clinical terms to a grown man? You should be professionally, if not personally, familiar with that venerable gambit."

"I'm familiar with it. Did he then proceed to use force and violence?"

"Not enough to endanger me, I assure you."

"In short, what did happen?"

"In short, he tried to kiss me. In short, I hit him on the nose, with my fist. In short, he resumed the demonstration of the automobile. Impeccably!"

Another moment of silence. "Now, in a discussion with Sergeant Foukes, you described Persinger as a 'soybean Tarzan'. We're not quite clear on the meaning of this term. Did you mean you found him physically attractive?"

"Heaven forbid!" The witness glanced back with loathing at Foukes. "I'll try to reduce it to basic English. In my job, I often find myself using the slang currently in

vogue with high school students. Soybeans are used in synthetic chemistry. I believe 'phony' is an approximate synonym, but it lacks the derisive quality of 'soybean,' don't you think?"

"I'm asking you. Then you did not find Persinger physically attractive—is that your meaning?"

She snapped, "I meant that he thought he was overpoweringly, irresistibly masculine—that untidy oaf with the unclean collars! For the record, let me say I think any normal woman would find him offensive and repulsive."

"Yet you let him demonstrate the car again, and you still bought it, didn't you?"

Rapidly and without hesitation she said, "I had no idea what I was letting myself in for when I became so attached to Robert and Sandra Persinger. I failed to help them by buying the car from their father, true. But I would risk a great deal more, in physical danger, the ignominy of this idle interview, and money, to get them out of Juvenile Hall. I can take care of myself, do you understand? They can't!"

"I see."

She said softly, "Do you really? I wonder if this isn't the real difference in our orientation. You have two people behind bars. They're only children, aged sixteen and thirteen. To me, that's the im-

portant thing. But to you, it's the bars that count—isn't that right?"

"If you want to interrogate me, I'll be glad to oblige," Shaw said. "But can't we do it some other time?"

"Sorry," she replied, in an unrepentant voice.

Shaw leaned back in his chair. "Miss Waggenreid, do you mind telling us who you think killed Persinger?"

She looked startled. "Why—why, I have assumed that it was his wife. Wasn't it?"

"Why do you assume that?"

"The papers said her house slippers showed she had been out in the snow. She was totally detached—I mean unable even to answer questions," she said uncertainly.

"She was, and is, in what the psychiatrists call a catatonic trance state, and that's what puzzles us. The man was shot in the spine, at contact range, with a .22 pistol. You couldn't be expected to hear its report. Since he was wearing an overcoat, you couldn't be expected to see the very small and almost bloodless death wound.

"The point is," Shaw said harshly, "the fatal shot was precisely placed. We can't understand how a woman in a catatonic trance could approach by stealth, kill him with such precision, and then not merely escape, but dispose of the gun. It

has never been found, you know. How could she do that, in her mental condition?"

She could hardly wait to answer. "I don't know that she was in such a condition at the time. I assumed it was the act of killing her husband that caused the condition."

"That's one theory. But we can't prove it."

"Why try?"

"How's that?" he asked.

"Why bother, when there will be no arrest, no ordeal by trial, no human sacrifice to balance the police books? Isn't your elaborate, psychoanalytical reconstruction merely a subterfuge to distract attention from your failure to find the gun?"

"No, let me finish!" she said crossly, as he tried to interrupt. "The Persingers lived six blocks from the school. The papers said that less than an hour of the poor woman's time is unaccounted for. How far could she wander in that time? If the police are unable to canvass the area, I'm sure my senior boys would volunteer to do the job."

He controlled himself. "We're short of manpower for such searches, but we tried. When we didn't find a gun, we were forced to speculate that she might not have had one. At this time, I will ask you if you own, or have ever

owned, a .22 pistol, Miss Waggenreid."

She too seemed to take time to control herself. "I do not own a .22 pistol. I have never owned one."

"Let's assume you're right, and his wife did kill him. Why do you think she did it?"

"How do I know? If you must speculate, he had abused her vilely for years."

"Exactly! Then why kill him now?"

She shook her head. "You go ahead and speculate and psycho-analyze. I prefer to deal in facts."

"All right, the facts are that the children had dinner that evening with a family across the street, because their parents were in another row. We know the Persingers were alone at about seven o'clock. Obviously, at some later time, he went out. If his wife killed him, we're forced to assume that at this hour she could still think and act, however wildly.

"So we assume that she approached by stealth to where she could put the muzzle of the gun against his spine, pull the trigger, and escape. But why that night? And why under your window? You and I know her husband had made a pass at you. Perhaps she—"

She cut in, "If you're suggesting jealousy as her motive, I concede that it is possible. But other than

what I have told you, I can't substantiate your theory."

"It's not our theory," he said gently. "Mr. Foukes and Mr. Sibley don't believe this is what happened. The next question I am going to ask is one your attorney might advise you violates your constitutional rights. At this time, I again remind you of your right to counsel."

She shook her head, but her eyes remained fixed warily on his. "First, let's hear the question."

"Very well. Does the name J. Ware Imring mean anything to you?"

She uncrossed her knees in a motion that was like a spasm, and cried out, "What—what in the world has that got to do with this case?"

He went on relentlessly. "Mildred Vance—does that name mean anything to you? Before you commit yourself, let me tell you that on the date you give as your date of birth, the records in the state of your birth disclose that Mildred Aileen Vance was born to Clarence James Vance and Lois Agnes Waggenreid Vance. Mildred Vance was graduated from high school at the age of sixteen, that fall entering college. The record shows that J. Ware Imring, forty and twice divorced, was her instructor in creative writing.

"The record shows that Imring was dismissed that spring. Colleges keep these things pretty ambiguous. The reason for dismissal is recorded as 'attempted misconduct with girl students below the age of consent.' Mildred Vance was a witness at his personnel committee hearing.

"The record shows that she did not return to college that fall. From December six to December ten, inclusive, she was a patient at Mercy Hospital. Those old records have been destroyed as obsolete. The physician who admitted her is dead. We don't know why she was hospitalized. Her name appears only on the credit records, with a maternal aunt, Grace Waggenried, as guarantor of her bill.

"During that period, three infants were born at the hospital. One, a boy, was born to an unmarried girl who signed the child away for adoption without seeing it. The adoption records, including the birth records in such cases, are sealed by statute in that state.

"Other records show that in July, Mildred Vance sued to change her name to Grace Waggenreid, her aunt of that name being appointed guardian *ad litem* for legal purposes. The record shows the petition was granted, and under that name, she entered the state university that fall.

"So we're not theorizing when we identify you as the Mildred Vance who testified against Professor Imring. It would be easy for us to close the Persinger case by concluding he was killed by a woman of infirm mind, one incompetent to defend herself. Before we do that, I want to ask you three more questions, which I have in written form. A copy will be supplied to your attorney, but for the present records, I will now read them aloud:

"One, what were your relations with J. Ware Imring? Two, did you or did you not give birth to a male child on December ninth of that year, and acquiesce to its adoption by persons unknown to you but approved by the court? Three, did you or did you not, to obtain possession of the Persinger children, lie in wait for Edward Julius Persinger and, willfully and feloniously, and with malice aforethought—"

"Stop! Stop that!"

Miss Waggenreid had sat rigidly still, pale-faced, eyes blank. Now suddenly she shot to her feet, her face red and tears glittering in her eyes.

"Oh what stupidity, what malice, what prurient, vicious cruelty!" she cried. "I see now why you have been too busy to find the gun!"

"Will you answer the questions?"

Shaw said. "Never mind your . . ."

Back went her head. "I will not even remain in this room. If you detain me, it will be by force."

"We're not going to detain you, Miss Waggenreid," he said wearily. "You're quite free to go. Again, I wish to thank you for coming in."

Foukes made a clumsy plunge to open the door for her, but she got to it first. It closed on her sleek, silken hips, and they heard her heels clicking swiftly down the hall. The reels of tape spun on and on.

"Her possessiveness about those Persinger kids always did bug me, skipper," Foukes said. "A woman who had an experience like hers, so young—she's not going to have a normal outlook toward men or children, either one. Her kid would be a few years older than the Persinger boy, and she can afford anything she wants now. The aunt died last year and left her eighty odd thousand dollars."

Shaw hit the button that extinguished the hotly-blinking white eye on the tape recorder.

"Find that gun!" he said.

The nineteenth day following was a Thursday. At 4:45 p.m., Captain Shaw walked down the deserted main hall of Woodrow Wilson High School and opened

the principal's door. The girl receptionist, whose duties were part of a secretarial course, practiced her smile on him. Shaw raised his eyebrows intimidatingly, and walked past her into the inner office.

Miss Grace Waggenreid was at her desk, talking on the telephone. Her self-control did not falter when she saw him close the door behind him, but she terminated the call quickly and folded her hands on the desk in front of her. Her expression became as stiff and unyielding as her spine.

"Well, Captain Shaw? What is it?" she said curtly, before he could speak.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but I'm due back at the office. I thought you were entitled to know that we found the gun in the catch-basin of a storm drain, in the same block as the Persinger house."

Her expression did not change, nor her posture. All she said was, "Indeed!"

"Yes. We can't trace it to Mrs. Persinger. We can't trace it to anybody, although a couple of people tell us they heard Persinger himself mention owning a .22. We can't trace Mrs. Persinger's movements. Nobody was on the street because of the snowstorm. Even if she recovers her mind, she'll probably never remember anything."

She reached for the phone again.

"Excuse me. I believe I should call my attorney."

"Not necessarily," he said quickly. "The tape of your interrogation has been destroyed. You're completely in the clear."

She took her hand away from the phone and folded both hands on the desk again, like a school principal. "Should I thank you? How sweet of you to tell me I am no longer a murder suspect! What about the Imring affair, and my legal alias—surely you're not dropping them!"

He said stiffly, "Miss Waggenreid, I know a lot about you that ordinarily I wouldn't want to know. Your father was a man like Persinger. Your mother was a Waggenreid, a good name where you came from. Nobody could blame you if—"

She interrupted him imperiously. "To spare you the strain of further psychoanalytical divination, I think you'll find I had already made my way pretty well, on my own, before my aunt asked me to take her name. I did not do so to hide my identity but because my aunt, whom I loved very much, was the childless, frustrated old maid you think me. Also, you exaggerate, as usual, when you compare my father to Persinger. In any event, none of this was ever germane to the homicide your detec-

tives were supposed to be investigating."

"No," Shaw said doggedly, "but I'd do the same thing again, if I had to. Before I hang a murder on a sick woman, everybody else in the case has got to stand up and be counted. That's rough. But murder is never a joke, and you're the one who involved yourself in this one, by making a crusade out of those kids."

"Then exactly why are you here?" she said.

"Because tomorrow night is the last opera of the season, and I got some passes. I don't suppose those kids ever heard an opera, and I thought you might like to take them."

"The opera," she said, unyieldingly. "That's right, it does close tomorrow, doesn't it? With *Faust*."

"That's right, *Faust*."

She shook her head. "Thank you, no."

"Miss Waggenreid, I only thought—"

"That now that I have the children, I would subject them to an hour of compulsory culture. Is *Faust* a favorite of yours?"

"No, it's just that I—"

"Really! What do you dislike about *Faust*?"

He said, "Have your fun. I was passing up the last basketball game of the season, but if you—"

"Oh? How many passes do you have for the opera?"

"Four," he said, without thinking.

"Thank you for asking us. But those children, and *Faust*? Never!"

"I understand. How are the children?"

"Far more contented and relaxed than I had dared to hope, but I'm extremely relieved you're closing the case. Thank you so much for telling me," she said. "And by the way, to tidy up your record, it was an infected ear."

"What was?"

"The reason I was in Mercy Hospital. *Attempted* misconduct is insufficient to support the conclusion your Sergeant Foukes drew. I hope he doesn't lose confidence in his deductive powers because of this. As for me," she said, "the police point of view continues to amaze me. In this connection, there is one more question I think I should like to ask you."

"I asked for it," he said. "Go ahead."

Her hands were still folded, but she had relaxed her military posture, and as her color rose, he thought he had never seen such clear, firm, pretty skin. "Do you think," she said, "that with your rank and prestige, you could get four passes to the basketball game?"

The words, "an excellent marriage," are said to contain more wicked worldliness than any others one ever hears spoken.

UNDER the CIRCUMSTANCES



by Bob Pirstow

SAY, now, it's a lovely day. Just lovely. We're a bit early though. See there, that man is still carrying flowers into the church. Beautiful the way the sunlight makes the petals so much brighter. I imagine the church will be radiant with them. And such a perfect day.

What say we go into this little restaurant and have a cup before the funeral? I'd like to tell you about Roger Cherry.

Right over here by the window, don't you think, so we can look across at the people going in. Two coffees, Miss. Black? Yes, both black.

Actually I think Roger was very clever the way he planned the whole thing. It just didn't occur to me that he was figuring so carefully, but then that's a fault of mine, you know, not properly evaluating the other man.

I knew very little about what was going on in the office except that there were some whisperings that Roger had become interested in Lilly Hancock. I suppose they were careful, because I didn't hear very much of it and even after I did I searched his face for . . . Lord knows what . . . signs, I suppose, written on his face telling about the jolly fun of an affair. Nonsense. They covered it very well, but when rumors like that persist, even when so apparently unfounded, one can usually figure something is going on. Say there, people are going in now. This is going to be quite a ceremony this afternoon.

Where was I? Yes, Roger and Lilly. Well, the way I understood it, Claudia, Roger's wife, was an extremely possessive woman. Ter-

rible fault to have, you know. She was a combination mother and top sergeant, they said, though I was never particularly aware of that. Roger certainly didn't need a mother or a sergeant. He needed a lover. Too bad more wives can't pretend to be mistresses to their husbands. Might be a good idea to tear up the marriage license after it's legal and all. Have a ceremony and burn it. Then pretend to live in delicious sin.

Anyway, I'm certain Claudia didn't know about Roger's affair with Lilly. At least if she suspected, it didn't show in any way, but Roger must have known his wife wouldn't let him go. He must have sensed that if he tried to approach the thing in a civilized manner, she'd make a terrible mess of it. So . . . well, what then but to murder Claudia? It sounds incredible, doesn't it—Roger Cherry, just that way? Murder Claudia. But I'm convinced that's what he decided to do.

Roger's idea, obviously, was to create an accident and then, free of Claudia, marry Lilly; but a really first-rate accident—something unusual so the police couldn't touch him. And *that* he did. Amy and I spent the weekend with them, you know. We were there when it happened and I want to tell you, Roger didn't miss a trick. My hat's

off to him. Not everyone can do it.

You understand this can't go any further than the table right here. The way it's turned out, it's strictly conjecture, because the police couldn't do a thing and Lord knows you can almost get sued for even thinking slander these days. I'll be frank, I don't know how long Roger had been seeing Lilly—some months—but we can say that the affair developed to the point that Roger wanted out of his marriage and I've told you how messy Claudia would have been inclined to make that.

Amy and I came into it when Roger invited us to spend the weekend up at Silver Lake. He suggested we each rent a cabin and make a weekend of it, fishing, partying a bit. That was fine with us. When we agreed, Roger seemed quite pleased. Now that I look back, it's clear he used us for cover.

At any rate, we piled into his wagon and drove up to the lake. Roger reserved two cabins about sixty yards from each other and that Friday night he set up the murder alibi. Amy and I were over at their cabin . . . everything fine, it seemed. Roger made over Claudia, and I couldn't have any choice but to give the facts as I saw them. Obviously, Roger Cherry was very much in love with his wife. Very clever.

Well, those cabins don't have natural gas. They use propane, you know, bottled gas. That evening when it got cool, Roger turned on the stove . . . and this was while Claudia was out of the room. He called my attention to the fact that the rubber hose connecting the stove was worn. Yes, it was worn. I *saw* it. Propane is very explosive stuff, you know, and when it blows . . . terrible thing.

That evening we had a few drinks and Roger asked the girls what they wanted to do in the morning. Nothing important—a ride in the boat later—so Roger suggested we let the girls sleep late while the two of us went out on the lake early to catch a few black bass. That sounded good to me, so he said we'd go *promptly* at six. The wives winced at that and Claudia said she wasn't about to get up and fix breakfast at that hour. Roger laughed and said there wasn't any need because we'd be back to have breakfast later.

That's where he was smart. He said he'd plug the hot plate with the coffeepot on it into the clock radio. That way, when Claudia awoke, she'd have a cup made—to music—and we'd all eat a big breakfast later. Claudia loved that idea.

And that's how he set it up. I wouldn't have any choice but to

corroborate all the circumstances that led to the explosion. My friend, when the cabin exploded . . . honestly, I've never seen anything like it. The whole cabin . . . up . . . one big whoof. Incredible!

Nobody's to say for certain, but I've figured it like this. Roger got up early—I imagine about five-thirty or so, because at six he was rapping on my cabin door, anxious to get out on the lake in the boat. I suspect that after he got up and dressed he set the clock radio—this is an educated guess because Roger's obviously not telling anybody—but I think he set it to turn on exactly an hour later, at seven o'clock, and my guess is that he had the radio volume turned all the way down so as not to awaken Claudia at all. Then when the radio came on, of course, it would also automatically throw the electric current to the hot plate which was plugged into the radio.

My guess is he put a small piece of paper under the coffee pot so when it began to glow the paper would catch fire and make a flame. He just needed a spark anyway. After he had set the radio to go off at seven, he went into the other room and twisted that frayed rubber hose to the stove until it began to spew propane into the room. He figured the gas would stay low in

the room because propane is heavy, and Claudia wouldn't notice it, and then in about an hour there'd be enough gas accumulated to cause quite an explosion. Claudia would be blown to her reward, leaving Roger free to marry Lilly. Very neat . . . especially when I have to back up his story about the frayed stove hose and the coffee idea he'd rigged up for his beloved wife. The police can suspect forever, but for proof . . . impossible.

Let's see . . . I can finish this before we go across to the service. Won't take a minute. That morning, as I said, Roger rapped on our cabin door and we went out in the boat. We fished a while and after an hour, about seven, Roger was squirming all over the boat. Very nervous, he kept looking back across the lake—but nothing had happened. We fished for another thirty minutes, and he was coming apart. Said maybe we ought to get back. He figured something went wrong, you see.

So we went back, but it took us almost half an hour to get across the lake because the confounded motor didn't want to start. It was almost exactly *two* hours from the time I'd left my cabin until I pulled the boat up to the dock, about eight o'clock. Roger got out, staring at the cabin, shaking his head. I asked him what was wrong

but he didn't answer me. I was tying the boat and suddenly Roger ran up the hill and threw open the door to the cabin. It must have been the gust of wind from the door . . . and perfect timing. The place blew up while he was standing in the doorway. It was absolutely incredible.

All in all, Roger made only one miscalculation. Yes, let's go now. I can finish as we go in. He failed to consider just how lazy his wife was. Apparently Claudia roused a bit when Roger was dressing, then waited until he'd gone and set the clock exactly an hour later for eight o'clock, to steal a little extra sleep. I figure she came out of her regular sleep about the time the clock radio should have triggered the explosion, according to Roger's plan, and she smelled the gas. It fright-

ened her, so she went over to our cabin. Ironically, Claudia was coming out of our cabin to *tell* Roger when he ran inside. Two hours exactly . . . and the coffeepot had come on and the fan of oxygen when he threw open the door . . . I guess that did it. The bit of paper flamed and that was the end of Roger.

Listen, the organ is playing. We'd better get inside. Lean closer . . . that's Claudia there in front with the veil. She's quite broken up, still doesn't suspect. Over there—no, the next to the last pew—that's Lilly. Pretty, isn't she? I understand she's taking it very hard.

Let's sit back here. My, what an array of flowers. You know, both women genuinely loved him. But then, that's hardly compensation . . . under the circumstances.



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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

The distressing implications of an issue, it seems, can be circumvented by subtle intuition rather than by any major premise.

A Woman's Intuition



by
Richard
O. Lewis

WE all felt sorry when we learned that Dolly Daniels' husband, after a prolonged illness, had died, leaving Dolly a legacy of accumulated debts and four sons. But we were pleased, of course, when she decided to return to Hillcrest—about the only thing she could do under the circumstances—to live with her father. For a while it looked as if things were going to work out all right for her. Her father was living on a small pension, and Dolly had picked up several jobs about town—but it was not destined to be quite that easy.

Less than a year after her ar-

rival her father died, and the only inheritance she received from him was the small house in which they lived and the furniture—along with a small mortgage and a funeral bill which left her somewhat further in debt than before.

Dolly weathered this second blow and continued working at her various jobs: assistant teller to old Opperinga at the bank from nine till two, assistant postmistress at the postoffice during the rush hours of afternoon mail from two till four, and waitress at the White Spot, a cafe in connection with the Hillcrest Motel, from five till nine. All in all an eleven-hour day, with a bit of washing, ironing, mending, and some housekeeping thrown in for good measure.

If anyone should wonder how Dolly could possibly stand up under the continuous grind, the answer was quite simple; she had to! It takes a heap of money these days to feed and clothe four growing boys, and when one does not have that heap of money—except inversely in the form of debts—one must do the next best thing, like it or no.

Fortunately, the boys were well disciplined and realized their obligations to their mother and to each other. Otherwise, there could have been no chance for survival.

None of Dolly's diverse jobs

paid too well, and anyone who gave the matter a thought knew beyond doubt that hers was a losing battle. Like Sisyphus, the harder she tried to push the stone up the hill, the farther back it rolled. Even so, she never gave up. She asked for no quarter and accepted no charity; the battle was hers, and she accepted it. She had brought four boys into the world, and she was determined to give them the advantages of education, along with a feeling of self-respect both for them and for herself.

So Dolly worked and smiled and had a cheery word for all. At thirty-five, she was slim and trim, with light brown hair and eyes of blue, a most desirable female. But behind those large eyes of beautiful blue, one could sense there lurked a tigress, a tigress who would protect her cubs against all perversity no matter what the risk might be to herself.

There were but few eligible bachelors in town, and when one of them, Ed Bauerman, began to turn his attentions toward Dolly, we all felt that this, indeed, could be a solution to her problems, that something good would come of it.

But nothing did. The romance, if it could be called such, came to an end almost as quickly as it had begun. No one knew why, of course, but anyone with as much

brains as a sparrow could easily guess. Ed Bauerman probably had no intention of taking on the responsibility of four growing boys and a debt-burdened wife; and Dolly could see no point in pursuing an enterprise devoid of a goal.

Even so, Dolly was not without dates. Most of the transients who stopped overnight at the motel ate at the adjoining White Spot, and Dolly was not the kind of woman whom a man looked at but once. She could probably have had a date every night in the week if she had so desired, or if she were that kind of girl. But she didn't, and she wasn't. She selected her occasional dates quite carefully, and the evening out consisted of no more than a movie or dance followed by a late supper. No one could censure Dolly for her actions. She had an air of respectability about her, and everyone realized that she could never hope to find a mate if she kept herself continuously locked up and hidden away in a protective shell.

When Dolly accepted a date one night in early May with a man who had registered at the motel under the name of Gerald Steiner, no one gave it a second thought. Mr. Steiner, seemingly in the lower forties, dressed quite well, had a pleasing personality, and drove a

late model car. He'd be gone soon.

But when Mr. Steiner's stay at the motel lengthened through the first week and well into the second week, and the dates continued, we naturally began to wonder; and when Dolly invited him into her home the following Sunday for dinner, and he took her and the boys for a long drive into the hills, we began to feel rather positive that Dolly was about to solve a major problem.

Personally, I didn't like Gerald Steiner. I didn't know him very well, of course, but I'd met him a few times at the White Spot where I drop in occasionally for lunch or a cup of black coffee. He was affable enough, but maybe that was just the point. Maybe he was too affable, too worldly, too smooth; or maybe it was something else, something I didn't care to admit even to myself.

Always, when Dolly passed my office promptly at 8:45 on her way to the bank, we greeted each other in friendly fashion. "Morning, Chief," she would say, flashing me her wondrous smile. "Morning, Dolly," I'd say, grinning back.

She always called me Chief; possibly because it was her way of trying to make me feel important, and possibly because the title was just as good as any other, con-

sidering that I am the entire police force of Hillcrest.

As Steiner's stay extended into a third week, I noticed that a decided change had come over Dolly. Oh, yes, she still had the same friendly smile and the cheerful greeting, but she seemed more relaxed, more sure of herself, and all the stars of the heavens had begun to twinkle in her eyes, stars that I am certain had not been there for a long time.

I was happy for her, yet I was also afraid. Dolly was falling hard, too hard. What if Steiner were merely selling her a bill of goods? What if, some early morning, he would simply pull out of Hillcrest and leave her faced with a world filled with shattered dreams? I hated to think of the bitterness and hopelessness it might bring her. She had already had her full share of reverses.

I kept trying to tell myself, it wasn't really any of my business. Then came the morning of May 22, a date that I would long remember.

I had just brought my chair out from the office to the sidewalk, preparing to soak up a bit of spring sunshine while reading the morning paper, when Dolly came down the street.

"Morning, Chief," she said.

"Morning, Dolly," I said, grin-

ning as usual, forgetting the news.

My eyes followed her down the street, but it wasn't until after she had disappeared around the corner toward the bank that I realized she hadn't looked directly at me or given me her usual smile. Well, maybe she had been preoccupied with something, or maybe she was tired from staying out too late with her boyfriend.

I sat down, tilted my chair comfortably back against the wall, rustled my paper into position, and once again tried to tell myself that Dolly's affairs were none of my concern.

Several people came by and a few of them stopped to chat for a minute or two. At precisely 9:30 old Opperinga came pacing by, trying as usual to combine a brisk constitutional with his customary coffee break. He disappeared into the little cafe a few doors down the street, and I went back to my paper.

I had just turned to the second page when the muffled pistol shots rang out, three of them in quick succession. My feet had hardly hit the sidewalk when the burglar alarm at the bank began to set up a clatter. I reached the corner in nothing flat, swerved around it, and went pounding down the street, dragging my pistol from its holster as I went.

Two women were standing at the door of the bank, gawking inside. I brushed past them and shoved the door open, pistol ready.

There were no customers in the bank. Dolly stood just behind the grille of her teller's cage, her face so white that her lipstick and blue eyes contrasted with it in vivid colors. In one trembling hand she held a nickel-plated revolver. A few feet away from her, face down upon the floor, was the crumpled figure of a man clad in coveralls. An automatic pistol lay on the floor a few inches from his extended right hand, and clutched tightly in his left hand was a bulky paper bag.

I approached him cautiously, alert for any sign of movement, but when I got close enough to see the holes in his head, I knew he wasn't going to move for a long time—not under his own power, at least. I turned him over gently, pulled the mask of black cloth down—and found myself looking into the face of one Gerald Steiner.

Opperinga came rushing in just then, his thin face flushed, his glasses sagging down near the end of his nose, and his chest heaving from the block-long run he had just made. He spotted the paper bag almost instantly, ran over to it and jerked it away from the

clenched fist. Then he shut off the noisy alarm and shooed the spectators out the door.

"Call Doc," I said, "and tell him to bring an ambulance."

I looked up at Dolly. She was staring down at Steiner, her face even whiter than before. She seemed in a state of shock, about ready to collapse.

"I'll have someone take you home," I told her. "I'll try to get in touch with you later."

We took the body to the funeral parlor, and I told Doc he had better call on Dolly as soon as possible. Naturally, I was worried about her.

I took the things from Steiner's pockets, picked up his car from



where it was parked near the bank, motor still running, and got the rest of his belongings from the motel and took them to my office. Then I began going through the stuff in an effort to find out where he was from and who was next of kin.

I didn't find out where he was from. Neither did I find any next of kin—or any kin; no permanent address; no identification except a driver's license that seemed to have been tampered with. It was obvious Steiner hadn't wanted anyone to know anything about him, and it was also quite possible that Steiner wasn't his real name.

But if not Gerald Steiner, then who?

I went rapidly through all the WANTED posters I had on hand. Finding nothing among them that threw any light on the case, I knew, there was only one way to find out. I took some equipment to the funeral parlor and lifted a clear set of fingerprints.

I sent the body to the morgue at the county seat to be put on ice, and was interviewed by the sheriff, the state police, several newspaper reporters, the mayor, and at least a dozen nosy citizens. As a result, I missed my lunch entirely, and I didn't get the fingerprints into the mail until late afternoon. Then I



went back to my office, closed the door against intrusion, and sat down to do some thinking about a few things that had been bothering me right along.

Foremost was the fact that I couldn't imagine Dolly killing anyone merely because of a bank holdup, not the sweet Dolly with a smile and a good word for everyone. I could feature her stepping on the alarm button or rushing to the door to get the license number of a fleeing car. But I couldn't quite picture her firing three shots into a man's head, bank robber or no.

Too, there was the gun itself. I picked it up from the desk where I had laid it earlier in the day and

broke it open. Three shots had been fired. Where had the gun come from? It was not quite in keeping with old Opperinga's nature that he would place a gun in Dolly's cage with the express purpose of her having a shoot-out with whatever bandits or bandit happened along. Opperinga probably didn't even own a gun, and Dolly was certainly not the type to be toting one around with her.

But the big question was: did Dolly know, before fingering the trigger, that the man behind the mask was Steiner?

I was still chasing the questions through my head when the door swung open and a paper boy tossed me the evening edition of the *Gazette*.

The paper had played it big, of course. There was a two-column head:

MOTHER OF 4 SHOTS HOLDUP LOVER

And a sub-head:

BRINGS GUN TO BANK ON A HUNCH

I read the story through. It made much of the fact that the bandit had turned out to be Dolly's boyfriend, but there wasn't much in it that I hadn't already known—or guessed. A masked man had walked into the bank when Dolly was alone and had forced her at gun point to put all

the available paper money into a bag. Then, just as he had turned away, she had jerked a gun from a place of concealment and had shot him three times. There had been more than \$12,000 in the bag, and among the various pictures was one of old Opperinga magnanimously handing Dolly a bonus check for the heroic recovery of the money, a check for the sum of \$50. That was Opperinga, all right—a heart almost as big as that of a cucumber. But the thing that bothered me most was the fact that Dolly had brought the gun to the bank that very morning merely (as the paper stated it) *on a hunch!*

I went out and got something to eat, took a thoughtful stroll in the gathering shadows of evening, and came back to the office again.

Well, I couldn't put it off any longer. As city marshal, I couldn't just sit in the office as if nothing had happened. I had to ask Dolly some questions of some kind whether I wanted to or not, take down some statements.

During a moment of resolution, I finally called her and explained the situation to her. "Just routine questions," I said. "Something for the records."

"All right, Chief," she said, after a brief hesitation, "but I had better come to your office if we are to

have any privacy. People have been running in and out all day."

"I'll pick you up in twenty minutes," I said.

Less than a half hour later, Dolly was seated in a chair across the desk from me. Her face was still pale, and her blue eyes were somewhat veiled. Otherwise, she seemed to be standing up quite well—considering that she had shot her boyfriend that very morning.

"The gun," I said, getting right down to business. "Where did you get it?"

"From home," she said. "It belonged to my father."

"And this morning was the first time you had ever taken it to the bank?"

She nodded.

"Did you know that Steiner—or anyone else—had planned to hold up the bank this morning?"

She looked straight into my eyes. "Now, how would I know a thing like that?" she said. It was a good question.

"Did he ever tell you anything about himself? His background? What he was doing here?"

"He said he was a salesman and that his company was opening up this area as new territory. Since Hillcrest was near the center of the territory and seemed a quiet and inexpensive place to live, he

was staying at the motel until—well, until he could find a more suitable place. . . ."

She broke off and stared at her folded hands in her lap. "I—I realize now," she continued, "that—that he was lying."

"You didn't quarrel? Have a fight or something?"

"N-no, we were getting along very nicely."

"Look, Dolly," I said, a note of apology creeping into my voice, "I feel rather like a heel asking you all these questions, and I'm really not trying to give you the third degree, but I'm just a little puzzled. The bank has been here for nearly a hundred years, and today is the first time that an attempted holdup has occurred. You have been working there for two years without ever taking a gun along. Yet, today, the first time in the history of the bank that a holdup takes place, you just happen to have brought a gun with you. Why?"

Dolly looked up slowly from her hands, and as her eyes met mine for a brief instant, I am certain I caught sight of the tigress lurking there. "Just call it a woman's intuition, Chief," she said, levelly.

Well, that was that. I took her home. Case closed.

It would have remained closed

too, if it hadn't been for the letter I received four days later in relation to the fingerprints I had sent in. I opened the long envelope in the privacy of my office, and as I began reading the contents, little prickles began playing around at the base of my skull. Just as I had suspected, Gerald Steiner was not the man's real name. His name was Stanton C. Stenford, and he was wanted by the FBI for—among other things—robbery, kidnapping, and murder. He had an army record. He had been wounded in the Korean affair, and from the position of the wound, it was quite obvious that he had not been facing the enemy at the time. After his discharge, his fingerprints had turned up in connection with one burglary, one bank robbery, and the kidnapping of a small boy. He had received a sizable amount of ransom money for the boy, and three days later the boy had been found—dead.

Unfortunately, there were no mug-shots of Stanton C. Stenford available. Enclosed was a WANTED poster bearing a composite picture of what Stanton C. Stenford was supposed to look like; but the likeness was certainly not a good one, and that was why I had not recognized him when searching through my own files for information concerning Ger-

ald Steiner. It was easy to miss.

I sat down behind my desk and brushed a hand up my brow and over the top of my head. In bold letters on the poster was the statement: \$10,000 REWARD.

The parents of the boy had obviously put up the money to give impetus to the search for the killer; and now the money would be handed over directly to Dolly.

Naturally, I felt elated for her; if anyone in the world could use the money to advantage, Dolly was certainly the one. How fortunate that she had just happened to bring the gun along that morning . . .

Wait a minute! There was the subject of the gun again! I had accepted Dolly's explanation about the presence of the gun, but now it seemed that this "woman's intuition" thing was being carried a bit too far. Dolly must certainly have known *something* that she hadn't wanted put into the records. But what?

In spite of not wanting to build any kind of case against her, my mind kept toying with certain annoying questions. Had Dolly known that Gerald Steiner was really Stanton C. Stenford, murderer? Had she known about the reward? Had she suspected that he intended to rob the bank that morning or sometime soon?

I began speculating. Dolly worked at the post office afternoons. The post office received WANTED posters. Dolly worked evenings at the White Spot which was frequented by the itinerants stopping over at the motel. Because of her proximity with them, she had developed a special interest in the posters—especially those mentioning rewards. Stenford, alias Steiner, had come along and had made a play for her. She had fallen hard, and a marriage seemed imminent. Then, at the last moment and just before the attempted robbery, she had discovered his true identity and realized that he had just been playing her along. The tigress within her had leaped to the fore, and she had . . .

No! No good! If she had discovered his identity, she would have come directly to me with positive proof—and collected the reward! Anyway, she had no way of knowing his true identity. He certainly wouldn't have told her, and she definitely couldn't have recognized him from the composite on the poster.

I picked up the poster and scanned it again for some clue. Suddenly, a possible answer to all my questions became startlingly clear!

But, no! How absurd! I crushed the poster in my hands, wadded it into a shapeless mass, and slammed it angrily into the waste basket.

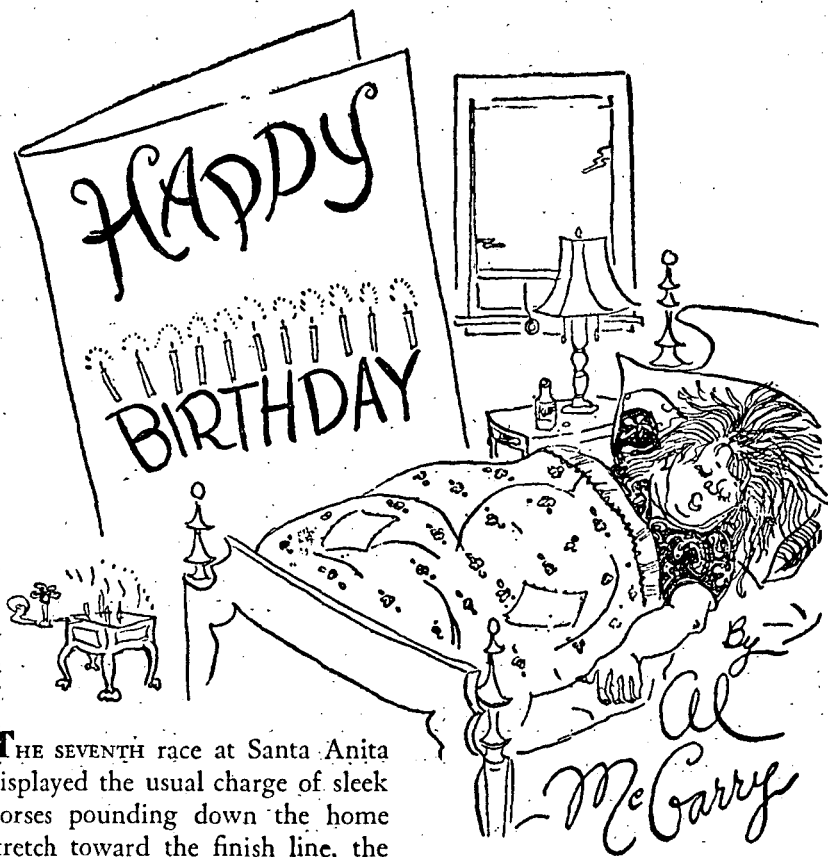
Dolly's smile is still as vivacious as before, she still has a good word for everyone, and she is still one of the most beloved and respected women in Hillcrest. Yes, I have spent several enjoyable Sunday afternoons with her lately, and I find that her four boys are truly delightful.

The case, I might add, is definitely closed. It was just as Dolly had said—a *woman's intuition*.

You see, the only way she could possibly have discovered the true identity of Stenford was through that war scar, the perfect crescent, on his left hip. And you know and I know and everyone in Hillcrest knows that Dolly is just not that kind of a girl!



The flair some people have for appropriate gifting never fails to astonish me, as it might, for a time, the receiver.



THE SEVENTH race at Santa Anita displayed the usual charge of sleek horses pounding down the home stretch toward the finish line, the jockeys urging them on with slashing quirt or slapping hand to squeeze the last bit of energy from their rapidly tiring muscles as the crowd screamed, leaped up and

down and shouted encouragement. Then it was over and most of the losers let their useless tickets fall into the litter at their feet.

The reaction of Herbie Cain, however, was not quite so philosophical. Herbie was a pudgy little man and as his watery, blue eyes gazed at the stubs in his hand there was a look of almost disbelief on his ruddy face. Sir Knight had run a bad fourth. That just couldn't be, Herbie reasoned. Hadn't he spent three hours yesterday working out his dope sheet? He had done it furtively, of course, so Agnes wouldn't know, but he had been thorough, very thorough.

Herbie scowled dourly as he made his way to his old car in the parking lot. Sir Knight hadn't won in the seventh, he reflected bitterly, and neither had Carol's Choice in the third or Bull Moose in the fifth, all of which added up to the fact that Agnes would certainly carry out her threat when she found that forty-five bucks of the property tax money she was saving was gone.

A tight, anxious feeling came over Herbie as he joined the line of outgoing cars. He had to get home before Agnes suspected where he had gone. Meanwhile, if she discovered that almost half of her tax money was missing he wouldn't have a home to go to anymore. She had warned him last week about gambling and he knew for sure she meant it this time.

He fumbled for a cigarette, took

a cheap lighter from his pocket and spun the wheel several times before the flame caught weakly. His fingers were shaking as he inhaled deeply and his anxious feeling gave way to a cold chill of fear. He couldn't get along without Agnes. If he had to find a job he knew what that would be—a couple of days here and there until he got fired. He'd been through years of that until he met Agnes fourteen months ago when the local unemployment bureau had sent him to her house to do a little clean-up job she wanted done.

The fat old bag was fifty if she was a day, Herbie decided when he met her, and her place wasn't much either—just an old two-bedroom frame on the edge of a hill in East Los Angeles. It had seen its best days, the paint about gone, the plumbing not too good and the heating system just two ancient and illegal open gas heaters.

"My husband died three years ago," Agnes told him, "and the place needs a cleaning up. The stuff in the garage can be thrown out except for a trunk of old clothes of my husband's which the salvage people can have, and then I have some repairs in the house, too."

So Herbie forced himself to the unpleasant task of working, but took some consolation from the

fact that he got twelve bucks from a secondhand store for the old clothes. It took two days to clean out the garage, which any kid could have done in one, and another week to clean up the yard and paint the kitchen, all of which should have taken about three days. But Agnes didn't seem to mind. The first day she fed him at noon, then it got to be all three meals. Herbie got to like the idea except that Agnes would be talking all the time, and he could see the woman was desperately lonesome. She wanted someone to talk to, so he puttered, ate her cooking and drank her beer.

Now as Herbie pushed the jalopy down the freeway his mind went back to those first days. Who would have ever thought that he would have married her? A guy of thirty-seven—no, thirty-eight tomorrow. Agnes had mentioned his birthday just last week. That had been before the big blowup over his gambling. They had been through it before but outside of that things had been pretty good for him, Herbie had to admit. Agnes' husband had belonged for thirty years to some lodge which had an annuity fund for widows, and that, along with his life insurance and a clear house, was enough for Agnes to get along and support Herbie, too. She gave him

a little spending money and the most she insisted on was that he mow the yard, trim the shrubs and do a little painting now and then.

Of course, Herbie had insisted on a few things too, before he married her, like having the house put in joint tenancy and being named as beneficiary of her five thousand dollar insurance policy. In the flush of getting married to a younger man and the relief at not having to face any more desperately lonely years Agnes had consented.

Yes, Herbie reflected now as he approached the off-ramp, things had been good until he got into her purse a couple of times, and then lately there was that bad check which Agnes had to make good. Of course, he'd intended to have the cash to cover it but that was the day King Pin lost the only race he had lost all year. That was what finally cooked it, that check.

"I'm warning you, Herbie," Agnes had told him flatly, "the next time you gamble you're leaving this house, bag and baggage, and I'll get a divorce."

Herbie stirred uncomfortably behind the wheel. The old specter of work arose to haunt him along with the memory of his dingy room on Bunker Hill, and a grim desperation came over him. There

was a horse running tomorrow that couldn't lose. He'd have to lift the rest of Agnes' money and get it on his nose so he could get all her money back before she found out. The idea gave him new confidence. She didn't even know that he knew she was keeping the tax money under the liner of the top dresser drawer.

The house was quiet when Herbie parked in the driveway, then entered through the kitchen. Agnes must still be napping, he decided. The doctor had given her a prescription for sleeping pills some time ago and she took one each afternoon. He went into the short hall and gently opened the bedroom door. Agnes lay there on the bed with a light cover over her. She lay on her side with her mouth open. Her gray hair was splayed over the pillow like a string mop and her fat face was sagging so that the upper side was drawn and out of shape.

Herbie shuddered. She looked dead lying there. Suddenly the thought came that he wished she were dead. That would solve everything for him! Then he noticed the smell of gas in the room. Agnes had turned the heater on for a while and not shut it off tight enough. Herbie had borrowed some tools from Mr. Castenaga next door to fix it, but the

valve just wouldn't seat right. You had to twist the handle down very tight. Herbie pressured it down now until it seated, then turned back to Agnes. A wild thought struck him. Maybe Agnes *was* dead. Maybe the escaping gas had ended—

The heavy figure on the bed moved and Agnes sat up. "Oh, it's you, Herbie," she yawned. She glanced at the clock on the dresser. "My goodness, it's late. Why didn't you wake me up before?" Then her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Or did you go out to that racetrack again?"

"Of course not, dear," he scoffed. "That's all over, you know that."

"You were gone when I laid down at one o'clock," Agnes said accusingly.

"Sure, and I was back before two," Herbie lied. "I just let you sleep, that's all."

Agnes sidled off the bed. "What do you want for dinner? I got hamburger or canned spaghetti and meatballs."

"Whatever you want, Agnes." Herbie left off the 'dear' this time, thinking that too much of that might get her suspicious again. Yet it was evident during dinner that Agnes was still not entirely satisfied.

"Where did you go before I laid down for my nap?" she asked

again, more emphatically now.

"Why, I was helping Joe Barnes move some stuff," Herbie replied easily. Joe bought and sold old stoves and washers and Herbie helped him on occasion. It occurred to Herbie that he would need the same excuse to get to the track tomorrow so he added, "He's got some more stuff to move tomorrow."

"Is he going to pay you?"

"Well, you know Joe. Maybe a buck and a couple of beers. But it's something to do while you're sleeping."

As they got up from the table Herbie reached for a cigarette, took out his lighter and spun the wheel a few times until Agnes, with a sigh, handed him a book of matches. They sat down to talk and it was not until Agnes was watching her favorite program that evening that Herbie was able to lift the remaining sixty-five dollars from the dresser drawer. Three nice twenties to bet and a five spot for gas and a ticket. Already Herbie could see *My Destiny*, a long shot and a sure thing, streaking across the finish line to win the first race tomorrow. He'd get to the track, bet the race and be home before three o'clock. Then he'd put the tax money back, all of it, and the rest would be his. The idea made him feel better again.

It was when they were going to bed that night that Agnes reminded him again of his birthday. "It's tomorrow, Herbie," she announced, and there was an excited happiness in her voice. "I got you something nice."

Herbie thought cynically that what he would really like would be a date with that big blonde waitress at Harmon's Bar, but he went along with it. "That's wonderful, dear," he gushed. "I can hardly wait."

The next morning dragged and every time Agnes went into the bedroom Herbie broke out into a cold sweat. But each time Agnes came out she went on with her housework, and he breathed more normally again behind the morning paper. They had lunch and Herbie glanced furtively at his cheap wristwatch.

"Guess I'll go along, dear," he told Agnes. "Joe will be waiting. Just have a good nap while I'm gone."

Agnes yawned. "I'm sure I will, Herbie, but wake me up when you come in. I want to give you your birthday present this afternoon." Her fat face lit up with excitement and her brown eyes grew brighter. Sometimes Agnes looked almost pretty, Herbie had to admit. Then she said, "I've been saving up for the taxes, you know;

and I want to be sure to send in a money order this afternoon, too. Don't forget to remind me, Herbie."

Herbie almost choked on his last swallow of coffee. "Yes, dear," he replied with a forced smile. "You take your nap. I'll wake you up."

The horses were just going on the track when Herbie scurried through the turnstile. The tote board showed My Destiny at thirty-to-one and Herbie chuckled as he approached the betting window. "Sixty bucks on My Destiny to win," he announced.

He turned to see the horses just entering the starting gate. My Destiny was straining at the reins, anxious to go. The jockey momentarily reached down to straighten a stirrup when the gong rang and My Destiny sprang forward like a coiled spring. The jockey, unseated, spun across his rump and fell in a heap just outside the starting gate as My Destiny went to the front in a burst of speed.

The roar of surprise from the crowd changed to good-natured cheering as My Destiny, riderless, burned up the backstretch ahead of the pack. He was two lengths ahead at the far turn and when he crossed the finish line he was three lengths ahead of the favorite. The crowd roared its approval, then quieted down to see what the track

officials would decide as a winner.

Herbie had stood dumbfounded during the entire action but now he spun around to stare at the numbers going up on the board. There was no question about the race. The next three horses behind My Destiny were declared win, place and show. The pudgy man rushed to the ticket office. "My Destiny!" he shouted hoarsely. "I want my money back!"

"Sorry," the ticket man said. "Threw his rider. Happens once in a while."

"But—but—" Herbie stammered, then bitterly he turned away to stumble toward the exit. My Destiny had won. He would have won even with a rider, he told himself. He had picked a thirty-to-one shot only to be cheated by fate. Well, if he did it once he could do it again. All he needed was the money, but Agnes—He was in for it now for sure!

His hands shook on the wheel as he approached the freeway. When Agnes woke up he would have no place to go, no place to eat, no place to sleep. The prospect appalled him. If only something would happen so she wouldn't wake up at all! The gas might leak and—

A thoughtful, scheming light came to Herbie's watery eyes. The gas *could* leak. He could *make* it

leak. With Agnes gone, he'd have a house and enough money from her insurance to bet long shots until he made a million. He'd buy a big car and take Harmon's blonde out for a weekend. He'd sell winning tips on the races. Hadn't he picked My Destiny at thirty-to-one? So the jockey fell off. Just a bad break. He glanced at his watch. Two-fifteen, and Agnes wouldn't sleep longer than four-thirty. He'd have to work fast. As he drove the freeway Herbie's mind began to concentrate on something besides horses for once.

He found himself suddenly concentrating on murder.

It wouldn't be hard, he convinced himself. Just sneak in and crack the gas valve while Agnes slept, then later turn it down to where it felt like it was shut off but wasn't. The police wouldn't question how Agnes died. People suffocated all the time from illegal heaters. Mr. Castenaga could testify it had been leaky for a long time.

A problem sprang to Herbie's mind. How would he be able to get back into the bedroom again to shut the gas down without being gassed himself? A little smile came to his ruddy face. There was a surplus store on Second Avenue where he had seen gas masks for a buck apiece. They were trying

to unload them with a scare sign, something about civilian defense. Herbie swung off the freeway toward the store. He made his purchase, then drove to within two blocks of home, where he parked on a side street.

Agnes was still asleep when Herbie went quietly in the back way and into the bedroom. The heater had been going again as there was a trace of gas in the air, but Agnes had left the window open and as Herbie tiptoed to close it he observed her heavy breathing. Agnes had her mouth open and her twitching lips gave evidence of the deep sleep caused by the sleeping pill. Carefully Herbie opened the gas jet of the heater, then softly stepped into the hall and gently closed the door tightly behind him.

He left the house, walked to his car, then drove up to Joe's second-hand store. Joe was working on a washing machine when Herbie came in and they talked while Joe worked. Herbie looked at some used stoves, and all in all managed to kill forty-five minutes before he decided to leave.

As he drove toward home Herbie began to feel pretty good about his smart thinking. He could establish that he had been to the track as the ticket seller would remember him asking for his mon-

ey back, and the time he spent with Joe would cover the rest of the time his wife was sleeping. He wasn't worried about anybody having seen him walk to the house earlier. The hill was on one side and the Castenagas, who lived on the other side of a high, board fence, could not see across to the driveway. They could hear his car, however, so this time Herbie drove in noisily and slammed the car door as he slipped the gas mask under his coat. "He came home a little after four," the Castenagas would tell the police.

But once inside the house Herbie's actions became more cautious. He had read the directions on the cannister of the mask and now he slid the bottom valve to make it usable before going down the hall to listen at the bedroom door. He heard nothing, but the gas was so thick it was forcing itself out through the keyhole under pressure.

Herbie slipped on the mask, pulled the door open, slipped inside and closed it again. Through the plastic window of the mask he could see the form of Agnes on the bed. He bent over her a moment to see that she was not breathing, her eyes were staring blankly, her fat cheeks were splotched with red and her tongue was sort of bunched up behind

her relaxed lips, her mouth open.

Herbie carefully turned down the heater to where it was presumably off but still leaked, since there would have to be some smell of gas in the room after he let the rest of it out as he intended to do over the next few minutes. He straightened up and saw a card on the dresser, and thought he had better read it in case Agnes had written something he would not want the police to see. But it was just an ordinary birthday card on which Agnes had scrawled 'Happy Birthday to Herbie' and signed it 'Love from Agnes'.

He put the card down, then noticed the little package behind the card. Through the window of the mask Herbie observed it curiously as he undid it. It was a little metal figure of a horse sitting on its haunches and it seemed to be some kind of salt shaker. Herbie held it up, fully absorbed in contemplating its design. He fingered the horse's head, looking for the holes, then noticed a little button at the horse's shoulder. Herbie pressed the button and the horse's head snapped back to emit a shower of sparks against a tiny wick.

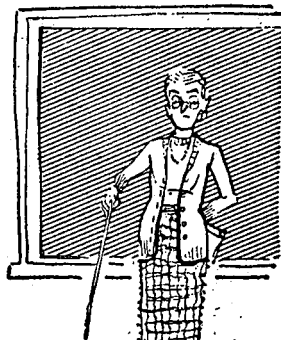
In that last split second of consciousness Herbie realized that his present had been a cigarette lighter which he had always needed—until now.

It is an endearing practice to grant one's elders a small concession to their better judgment.



SEE AND

TELL



By
Mary
Linn Roby

PETER DOUGLAS MOREHEAD was on his way to school when he saw Miss Finch lying in the ditch, her head sticking out of the new tin culvert under Warren Road. Miss Finch's eyes were closed and she looked very peaceful with her long yellow hair spread out among the daisies and the buttercups. Still, even Peter, who was only seven, knew that a ditch was a very strange place for a grown woman to go to sleep.

His first thought was to make his way down the slope and wake her up. On the other hand, he was late for school as it was, and if Miss Finch were anything like his father, it would take any amount of shaking to stir her. Besides, Pe-

ter did not particularly care for Miss Finch. Everyone in the village knew that she did not like children, and once, when Donald Allen's ball had been accidentally thrown over her hedge, she had pretended not to be able to find it.

Peter took another look at the

white face among the flowers, and felt a vague sense of disquiet. If it had been mid-afternoon on a hot, sunny day, he could have understood anyone wanting to take a nap on the ground. He had done

it often enough himself during the past summer. Peter smiled, remembering how the fat, white clouds had twisted themselves into the oddest shapes. But Miss Finch could not be particularly cozy on a



cold morning like this. Besides, it had rained the night before, and the ground must be very damp. Peter wondered if she had been sleeping there all night.

He took a few steps toward the ditch, then came to an abrupt halt as he heard the school bell ring. Glancing down the hill he saw there were no children in the fenced yard. His heart began to pound. He had been late once this week already, and his father had told him that if it happened again he would have to be punished. Turning, he began to run down the road as fast as his fat legs would carry him.

The morning was so exciting that Peter completely forgot about what he had seen. After reading, there was clay modeling, and he was able to make a very successful elephant which even Miss Simpson grudgingly admitted to being able to identify. Peter spent a long time adding a beautiful long trunk which curled about the elephant's front feet and, before he knew it, it was time to take out his red arithmetic book.

Adding was always difficult, and Peter's head was feeling a bit muzzy when Miss Simpson announced that it was time for 'See and Tell.'

"What have you got to tell us about today, Susan?" she said in

her harsh voice. "Come up front, and remember to speak clearly and distinctly."

Susan's story was a long, rambling description of a trip she had taken recently to her grandmother's home in the next town, and Peter found his attention wandering. People didn't want to listen to dull stuff like that, he decided. People wanted to hear about something with a bit of excitement to it. He searched his mind for something to tell about in case Miss Simpson should call on him. He had stolen an apple from Mr. Rheardon's store on Tuesday but, of course, one couldn't tell about things like that, no matter how superior a story it might make compared to that drivel that Susan was spouting. Then there was his frog, Sam. Sam had died last night, and Peter had found him in his box, stiff and cold. At first he had thought Sam was asleep, but then . . .

An idea came to Peter just as Susan finally brought her tale to an end. Raising his hand high, he began to wave it wildly. Miss Simpson's smile reflected the weary patience of the true professional.

"I'm sorry, Peter," she said, "but you know that we don't volunteer for 'See and Tell.' That wouldn't be fair, because some people find

it a good deal easier to talk than others—and those people would be talking all the time.”

Her expression left Peter in no doubt as to the category into which he fell. His face grew hot. He hated Miss Simpson. She couldn't stop him from talking.

“But I saw something important this morning!” he blurted. “I saw Miss Finch. She's lying dead in the ditch up at the top of Warren Hill!”

He looked around the room expectantly, only to find that his colleagues not otherwise engaged in such pursuits as tying their shoe laces together, or breaking their pencils against the desk, did not seem particularly impressed. The cumulative effect was one of vague expectancy, as though they were waiting for him to go on.

“That's all there is,” Peter assured them angrily. “My frog Sam died last night, and so I ought to know a dead person when I see one.”

He turned back to Miss Simpson and found that she was responding with all the intensity he could have desired. Her eyes were wide and staring, and her mouth hung open. Peter smiled at her.

“You nasty little boy!” she shrielled. “To tell such a lie!”

Peter scowled. Miss Simpson was rather nasty herself when aroused.

Still, he was no coward. “I did not tell a lie!” he shouted defiantly. “Miss Finch is dead in the ditch. I saw her on the way to school!”

Miss Simpson lost control altogether at that point. Despite his surface bravado, Peter turned cold inside.

“You march right down here!” she shrielled. “Right down to the front of the room, Peter Morehead! We'll see . . .”

Suddenly her voice dwindled into quiet. The children's heads turned as though operated on a single pivot. Mr. Payson, the principal, was standing in the doorway. His smile was as toothsome as ever, but it had a certain set quality.

“Well, well,” he said in a friendly voice that deceived no one. “What seems to be the problem here?”

“It's Peter Morehead, Mr. Payson,” Miss Simpson said. She was breathless, as though she had been running, and her face was very white. Almost as white as Miss Finch's, Peter reflected. “He's been trying to frighten the other children during ‘See and Tell.’”

Mr. Payson eyed her pensively for a moment, then turned to stare at Peter, who smiled hopefully, attempting to display a similar number of teeth. He was no longer cold inside. He knew the principal,

both from personal contact and reputation. Mr. Payson did not believe in losing his temper. Mr. Payson was always reasonable. Most important of all, he seemed to be more interested in finding out why you did a thing than in punishing you for it. His own classes were the most disorderly in the building as a result.

"It seems strange that Peter would try to do a thing like that," Mr. Payson said. He sucked air through his teeth, making a strangely exotic sound "Why don't we get together and talk about it for a few minutes, Peter?"

He gestured invitingly toward the door, and Peter marched up the aisle and through it, smirking triumphantly at Miss Simpson as he passed her. Behind him he heard someone giggle.

"Now, what's all this about your running amuck during 'See and Tell'?" Mr. Payson said when they were cozily settled in the tiny office that was musty with the smell of chemicals and littered with books.

Peter sat up very straight and pressed his knees together. "I just told about something interesting that I saw on my way to school this morning," he said, assuming his most innocent expression.

"Well, it couldn't have been anything so very dreadful then," Mr.

Payson said jovially. "Just what did you see?"

"A dead body," Peter said succinctly. "In the ditch."

Mr. Payson's smile faded. Peter noted with considerable interest that, although his mouth was more or less closed, his teeth seemed still to protrude from odd corners. "A body!" the principal exclaimed. "Was it a dog? Or someone's dear pussycat? Poor Peter. I imagine it was a horrid shock."

Peter stared at Mr. Payson angrily. Why did everyone insist on treating him like a baby? Someone's dear pussycat! "It was a woman," he announced stiffly. "It was Miss Finch who lives in the red brick house near the bridge. She was lying in the culvert with her head sticking out into the ditch. And she was dead. Just like Sam."

If Peter had not known better, he would have thought Mr. Payson was about to shout at him just as Miss Simpson had. The principal leaned forward in his chair until his forehead nearly touched Peter's. "And who is Sam?" he demanded, not at all pleasantly.

Peter began to wonder if he had gone too far. Perhaps one death at a time was all these people could bear to hear about. "My pet frog,"

he said apologetically. "Just an old bullfrog, sir."

Mr. Payson exhaled loudly and sat back in his chair. His eyes and nose and teeth seemed to pull into his thin face. His mouth curved in a weak smile. "I'm beginning to understand," he said, rubbing his hands. "When did your pet die, Peter?"

"Last night, sir. I went to get him out of his box, and he was stiff and cold."

"Frogs are cold-blooded creatures even when alive, of course," Mr. Payson said, unable to resist a touch of pedagogy. "Still, I suppose that is beside the point. The important thing is that you lost your little pet. I expect you were very upset."

Peter shook his head, puzzled. "Not especially, sir," he said. "There's a pond behind our house. I can get another."

Mr. Payson nodded his head approvingly. "Stout fellow," he said. "That's the spirit. There's no sense in showing how we feel these losses, is there? Now, the next thing I'm interested in is why you decided to say that Miss Finch is dead. Why not Miss Simpson? Or, for that matter, me?"

"But you and Miss Simpson aren't dead," Peter said plaintively. "Miss Finch is. Dead in a ditch."

Mr. Payson assumed what was

for him a most threatening expression. "I think we've heard quite enough of that, Peter," he said. "Now, tell me, do you like Miss Finch?"

Peter decided to be honest. "Not particularly," he said. "She kept a ball once when it happened to go over the hedge."

"I see," Mr. Payson said. He sounded very satisfied. "That will be all, I think, Peter. You may return to your room. I'll explain to Miss Simpson later."

"Explain what, sir?"

The principal rose. "Perhaps," he said, "your fault lies in carrying things just a bit further than they should go, Peter. It's very understandable that you would rather think of Miss Finch as being dead than your pet frog; a simple case of transference; no crime in itself. We all do it—attempt to avoid reality when we can't face up to the facts. Still, I don't expect you to understand all this mumbo jumbo. The point I'm trying to make is that now you should try to accept your pet's death. As you say, one can always get another frog. But one would be hard put to find another Miss Finch. Eh? Eh?"

Mr. Payson broke into a high cackle of laughter, all the time urging Peter across the room and to the door. "Now you trot along back to your class, my boy," he

said. "We'll have a nice long talk again one of these days."

Peter marched past him, down the corridor, around the corner and out the front door of the school. Once in the yard he broke into a run. Frustration burned inside him.

At the top of Warren Hill, he panted to a stop. At first, looking into the ditch, he could see nothing but grass and flowers. Then, moving to the right a bit and craning his neck, he saw her. Her eyes were still closed and she was very white. Still, Peter decided, before going on it was best to make certain.

Picking up a small rock, he hurled it expertly, grinning with satisfaction as it struck the mark. No, Miss Finch was dead all right. If she had been sleeping that would have awakened her, and no mistake.

The other side of the hill was taken at a trot. He had, he knew, discovered something of considerable general interest, and he expected to be given credit for it. Now the thing was to find someone who would believe him.

Miss Dewlap was standing in her front garden, wearing a pair of rubber waders which encased her legs, including her ample thighs, in glossy vermilion. Her torso was obscured by a man's red

and black checked shirt, and her gray hair had been freshly cropped close to her scalp. A cigarette drooped from her lips as, balancing herself with one arm, she flung the other forward to cast a fly neatly into a pot of geraniums nearly thirty feet from where she was standing.

Peter watched her reel in her line with open admiration, Miss Finch temporarily forgotten.

A gruff baritone aroused him. "Decide to give school a miss today?" Miss Dewlap inquired.

Peter nodded, instantly recalled to the immediacies of the moment. "It's Miss Finch," he gasped. This time he had decided not to be so casual in his presentation of the facts. Perhaps if he showed a touch of panic he might make himself more believable.

Miss Dewlap leaned her fishing rod against the side of the cottage and ambled over to the low hedge, her rubber waders making a pleasant swish-swish as her upper legs rubbed together. "She lives next door," she told Peter, removing what was left of her cigarette from the side of her mouth. "What do you want her for?"

"I don't want her," Peter said in a shrill voice. "She's dead!"

Miss Dewlap said a word that Peter had never heard before with great emphasis.

"It's true," he continued, being careful to maintain the mood. "She's dead in the ditch at the top of the hill!" Gesturing dramatically with one hand, he rubbed his eyes with the other and made sobbing noises.

Miss Dewlap was undeceived. "Cut out that nonsense," she commanded, leaning over the hedge and tapping him sharply on the shoulder.

Peter recognized authority in a voice readily enough, even though he did not often hear it. Obediently he abandoned pretense. "It's true," he said. "Honestly. I saw her on the way to school. I told Miss Simpson, but she called me a liar. Then I told Mr. Payson, and he said I was just upset because Sam is dead. But I'm not, and she is. Dead, that is."

Miss Dewlap eyed him reflectively. "Well," she said, "I'm not going to call you a liar, boy, although I've heard about some of the tricks you've been up to lately."

"Aren't you going to call the police?" Peter suggested hopefully.

The stout woman laughed and lit another cigarette, striking the long wooden match on the back of her waders. "Drat you, boy! Tell you what. You come in the house and have a piece of cake."

This time Peter's tears were real enough. "You don't believe me!" he bellowed. "No one believes me!"

Miss Dewlap said nothing, propelling him grimly through the door and into the fond embrace of a small, excited dog. "Down, Percy!" Miss Dewlap boomed, pushing the animal aside. "Peter doesn't want you lapping his face."

"But—" the boy began.

"You sit down here," Miss Dewlap told him, pulling out a chair from the red kitchen table. "Here's a knife and here's the cake plate. Cut yourself a big piece, and keep Percy company while I trot over next door and see if Miss Finch is home."

"She's not," Peter wailed. "She's lying—"

"I know, I know," Miss Dewlap growled. "Dead in a ditch and all that. Still, I'll just make certain that you're pulling my leg, if you please."

For the first moments after the door slammed behind her, Peter amused himself by trying to picture anyone pulling Miss Dewlap's leg. Then he took the cover off the cake plate and looked at the shocking pink confectionary inside. Perhaps it was the memory of the white face among the flowers, or perhaps it was Miss Dewlap's reputation as the poorest

cook in town; whatever the reason, Peter could not face any sort of gastronomical trauma. Cutting a large piece of the sticky substance, he put it on the floor where Percy attacked it with gusto.

The dog was just lapping up the last pieces when Miss Dewlap returned, her face white and drawn. Taking a big brown bottle out of the cupboard, she spattered some liquid in the bottom of a glass. Peter watched while she emptied it in one gulp.

"You had me worried for a while there, boy," she said. "You lie like a trooper, don't you?"

"But I'm not lying!" Peter told her. For one incredible moment he thought she might have found Miss Finch in her kitchen next door, going about her usual chores. But he couldn't have been mistaken! He simply could not have been. He still remembered how the stone had bounced off that white face.

"Well, her best suitcase is gone, the brown leather that she paid too much for, and a good many of her better dresses are missing," Miss Dewlap said. "I expect she went to see her family. They live in Maine somewhere. Percy!"

Grabbing the dog from the floor, Miss Dewlap clutched him to her substantial bosom. Bits of pink clung to his whiskers.

"He's not supposed to have anything rich!" she announced in an outraged voice. "Besides, that cake was meant to be a treat for you. Ordinary little boys like cake! Now, Peter Morehead, I think I should take steps. Little boys who lie can cause a good deal of trouble."

Taking Peter by the collar, she marched him out of the house and down the street. Miss Dewlap had forgotten to remove her red waders, but the swishing sound was no longer comforting. Peter was all too familiar with the characteristics of adult anger.

"Now," she said, depositing him in front of his house, "there's your father coming home for lunch. I suggest you wait here while I tell him what you've been up to."

Peter tried hard not to listen, but the words, 'truant,' 'liar,' and 'mischiefmaker' intruded themselves on his consciousness. Then Miss Dewlap was marching back up the street, and his father had him by the arm.

The licking was administered in the shed with an expertly applied shingle. Peter cried copiously, and shouted, too, since these reactions were all part of long established custom. He was not, however, particularly hurt.

"You get inside and eat your

lunch," his father told him, "and then back to school you go. We'll hear no more of this nonsense about Miss Finch. I know very well why you're saying what you are. You didn't like the woman, and you have some crazy notion that it would be nice if she were dead. But what you're spreading, my boy, is a malicious rumor, and that sort of thing can do a good deal of damage. First thing you know, your friend, Miss Finch, will be starting slander proceedings against me."

Peter nodded his head. He ate his lunch in downcast silence, while his parents exchanged meaningful glances over his head, and then it was time to return to school.

It was a lonely walk since the children stayed for lunch at school. Peter was the only person walking up Warren Hill in the hot noonday sun. When he reached the top, he tried to force himself to stroll on, but his feet had minds of their own.

It was difficult to see Miss Finch now. Some of the grass which had been depressed by the dew that morning had sprung back, and if Peter had not known she was there, he doubted whether he could see her now. But then, she wasn't supposed to be there. Everyone had assured him that she

was not. Peter felt a little tingle of self-satisfaction go up his spine. He knew he was right about one thing, at least. She *was* in the ditch. As to whether she were dead . . .

Gingerly, he let himself down over the bank, smelling the sweetness of hog grass and buttercups. Miss Finch's eyes were closed. Peter knelt down and touched her skin. It was as cold as Sam's had been—dead or alive.

Now that he was close to the woman, Peter could see the little hole in the side of her head. There was blood around the hole. Peter knew blood when he saw it, and nothing would make a little hole like that besides a bullet.

Miss Finch had been shot to death in the ditch!

Peter felt a glow of satisfaction. He had been right then, all along. This morning it had seemed absolutely necessary that everyone acknowledge that he was right, but now he had learned a valuable lesson. It didn't matter whether anyone else knew the truth or not, as long as he was certain. As for the others, they had said that she was gone, and that, thought Peter happily, was the way it would be.

Disregarding the dirt he was accumulating on his clothes, Peter climbed the other side of the culvert. Glancing down at the school,

he saw the children still playing in the yard. There would just be time for what he had to do.

The inside of the culvert was very dark and damp, and a little frightening. Peter crawled forward, groping with his hand for what he knew he must soon touch.

Suddenly there they were—Miss Finch's feet! The neat patent leather was smooth beneath his fingers. Her legs were like solid slabs of ice, and just as heavy. It was more difficult than Peter had thought, pulling absolutely dead weight. He inched her toward him—one, two, three pulls. Then, breathing heavily, he backed out of the culvert and into the sun.

The children had disappeared. The bell must have rung while he had been underground. But this was far more important. Now there was no sign of Miss Finch except for the nice leather suitcase that Miss Dewlap had mentioned, but it was easily pushed inside the culvert, too.

Peter felt a great sense of accomplishment. Now Mr. Payson and Miss Simpson and Miss Dewlap and his father could all be right. They would never again hear anything else about Miss Finch. In a few months, even the little that was left of her would not exist. Peter knew about such things. Once he had found a dead cat in the

woods behind his house, and had made a point of going back to see it every week or two throughout a long summer. If Miss Finch were like that cat—and Peter expected that she was—there would not be much left of her by fall.

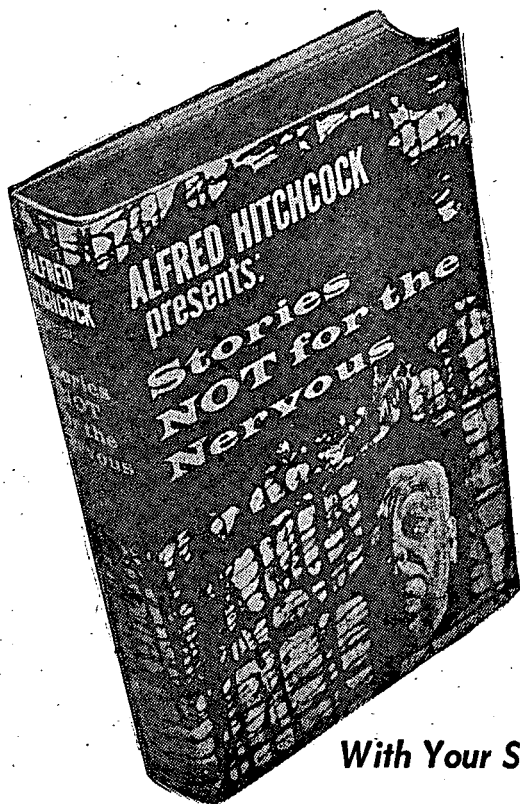
Patting the grass and flowers into place until it looked as though no one had ever been there, he clambered up the side of the bank. One final look and, with a grin, he started running down the hill.

The first class after lunch was always Reading. When Peter noisily threw open the door to the classroom, Miss Simpson was sitting at her desk with a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* propped up in front of her. Miss Simpson was always saying what a wonderful thing adventure was, but Peter knew now that she meant only the kind that came in books.

"Well, Mr. Morehead," she said in a voice that was so sweet that it made chills go up and down Peter's back, "it's nice to see you again. We might as well not wait for 'See and Tell.' I imagine you can't wait to tell us what new, exciting thing has happened to you."

Peter grinned at her so broadly it seemed as though his face might split. He was much too grown-up for silly children's games now. "Nothing happened," he lied happily. "Not a single thing."

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Speaking parenthetically, not being one to cultivate controversy, the odds seem to favor reverse psychology.

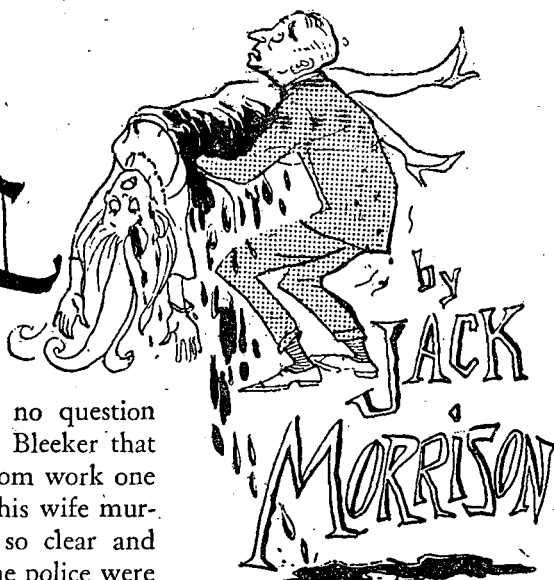


Good for the Soul

AT FIRST there was no question in the mind of Julius Bleeker that he had come home from work one afternoon and found his wife murdered. It all seemed so clear and simple, but later, as the police were questioning him, he found he had doubts. The police were very clever and displayed a deep insight into the dark corners of the human mind, far more than Julius would

have thought to give them credit for.

In the beginning, the facts seemed clear enough. Julius Bleeker, forty-six, a minor clerk in a large insurance office, rode the same 5:16 p.m. commuter train he always took to the suburban com-



munity where he lived, got off the train and walked, as he always did, the five blocks to the modest, two-story home where he and his wife, Dora, had lived for five years.

They had not had any children.

Mrs. Bleeker hadn't wanted children and Julius had bowed to her wishes. He always bowed to her wishes. He had moved to the suburbs when he much preferred the apartment where they had lived in the city; he bought a car they couldn't afford, a flashy red convertible that Mrs. Bleeker, an attractive blonde of thirty-five, thought went well with her looks and personality; and he bought other things, none of which he could afford on the salary of a minor executive, to please her. Her appetite for acquisition seemed to be without bounds, however, and there was always something else she wanted.

Julius saw that the red convertible was parked in the driveway as he walked to the front door. The door was not locked and he entered. Immediately he realized something was wrong. The rug inside the front door was askew, something his wife, a very orderly person, would not have permitted. He entered the livingroom and was horrified to find it a shambles. Furniture was overturned and lamps and vases shattered on the floor. He didn't see his wife's body immediately but he saw blood, lots of it, on the rug and on the furniture and even up the walls. Then he saw her feet protruding from

behind an overturned chair. He approached gingerly, his heart pounding, hardly daring to believe what he was seeing, what was happening to him. Even when he looked down upon his wife's bloody body, it was as though it were happening to someone else (as he later expressed it to police), almost as though he were a spectator watching a play, watching an actor playing out this drama. It was, as a detective carefully explained it to him, an example of what tricks the human mind can play on a man.

After calling the police, Julius got the irrational idea that he should move his wife from the floor to the sofa, so that she would be more comfortable, and he remembered (at least, he thought he remembered) bending down and trying to pick her up; but she was too heavy for him and all he had succeeded in doing was getting blood all over his hands and clothing.

Later, while the police laboratory men and the homicide detectives bustled about, Julius was introduced to a Lieutenant Chase, a man in his late twenties, neat and well dressed, who looked more like a youthful corporation lawyer than a homicide detective. Polite, well spoken, obviously educated, he took Julius into the dining room

and they sat and smoked cigarets while they talked. Julius had quit smoking shortly after his marriage because Dora thought it was a messy habit, but he smoked the cigaret Lieutenant Chase now offered him and he enjoyed it, although inhaling made him a little dizzy.

Chase took a preliminary statement from Julius, then excused himself, and Julius was left sitting in his own dining room for well over an hour. Now and then, he got a glimpse of Chase in the livingroom, usually talking on the telephone. When the detective finally returned, Julius asked him how much longer the investigation was going to take. After all, he said, he had to start thinking about practical matters—funeral arrangements, insurance, notifying friends and relatives.

Chase was very understanding. The investigation most assuredly would be expedited. In the meantime, he had to ask Julius some more questions, but he preferred to do it at police headquarters where they would be free of interruptions. It was then that Julius realized for the first time that he might be considered a suspect in his wife's murder.

"Say, listen," he interrupted Chase, "you aren't trying to imply that I—that I killed my wife, are

you? You can't be thinking *that*."

"Of course not, Mr. Bleeker," Chase said, dismissing the thought with a wave of his hand. "But you understand we must have every scrap of information we can lay our hands on. Sometimes the most insignificant fact can lead directly to the solution of a crime. That's why we ask a lot of questions, some that might even seem inconsequential or silly to many people."

So Julius agreed to accompany Chase to police headquarters. There, he was placed in a small room in the homicide section and left alone.

"Just make yourself comfortable, Mr. Bleeker," Chase said. "I'll be back in a minute."

The room in which Julius found himself was not designed for comfort. It was bare except for a table and two straight-backed chairs. The lone window was made of frosted glass so that it was not possible to see out, and there were the unmistakable shadows of bars beyond the glass. Julius sat down and wished Lieutenant Chase had left him some cigarets. He suddenly had a tremendous craving for cigarets.

Julius had no watch so he did not know precisely how long he remained alone in that room. After what seemed like an hour, he decided to take matters into his own

hands and find out what was going on. When he tried the door, he found to his horror that it was locked. He was locked in that room like a common criminal!

Several minutes later, Chase returned. He came in briskly and seemed cheerful.

"Sorry to keep you waiting like this, Mr. Bleeker," he said. "Some odds and ends of the investigation to tie up. How about a cigaret?"

"I'd love one, thanks." Bleeker accepted the cigaret and Chase lit it for him with a lighter which he snapped open and shut with sharp, efficient little movements.

"What's the idea locking me up like this?" Julius asked. "You're treating me like a suspect."

"Not at all, Mr. Bleeker," Chase said. "Just routine, that's all. We can't have people wandering around the squad room. We want them to be where we put them. Every little bird in its proper cage, you know."

Julius didn't care for the analogy, but he let it pass. He and Chase sat opposite each other at the small table. The smoke from his cigaret climbed lazily in the dead air of the room.

"What did you do with the knife, Mr. Bleeker?" Chase asked him.

Julius experienced a sensation in his midsection as if Chase had just stabbed him with the very knife

he was so bluntly inquiring about.

"What are you talking about?" he asked the detective.

"The knife you used on your wife, Mr. Bleeker," Chase said. He was very calm and spoke in the same cordial tone as before. However, his eyes had changed. They had taken on a cold, hard look. "We haven't been able to find it anywhere."

"Now, look," Julius said, "if you're joking, I'm not amused. I loved my wife very dearly."

It was strange, but Julius didn't sound very convincing, not even to himself. He felt, in fact, guilty. The sensation of guilt crawled up his spine like a sudden infestation of lice; it invaded his stomach, it caught in his throat, and it made him begin to perspire.

"Now, Mr. Bleeker," Chase said, looking down at his fingers which he had carefully interlaced on the table, "we are prepared to accept the fact that you actually believe that."

"What?"

"In your conscious mind, that is," Chase said. "Deeper down, in the subconscious layers, you know you did it. Why else would you be perspiring so? Look at your hands. They're fluttering like butterflies."

Julius, his hands shaking, clutched them together to stop it. His cigaret slipped from his fin-

gers, rolled across the table and dropped to the floor. He ignored it.

"What are you?" he asked weakly. "A psychiatrist, or something?"

"No," Chase said, "just a policeman. But policemen nowadays are trained in psychology as well as detection techniques, Mr. Bleeker. Without this kind of education, many cases, such as yours, would elude us entirely. Normally, there



is nothing more convincing than the story of a man who himself believes he is telling the truth, but the modern policeman realizes there are different kinds of truth. There is subjective truth. That is, something that an individual believes is true but which may not necessarily be true. And then there is objective truth. That is harder to find."

Julius shook his head in agita-

tion. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "May I have another cigaret?"

"Of course." Chase gave him another cigaret and again lit it with a snap and a flourish of his lighter. "Your wife didn't permit you to smoke, did she, Mr. Bleeker?"

"How did you know that?"

"Well, there wasn't a single ashtray in the house, yet here you are smoking like a chimney."

"I—I had quit for a while, and Dora never smoked."

"I see." Chase slipped the lighter back into his pocket. "Now, to continue. We all know how the human mind can block out unpleasant or shocking experiences so that we cannot remember them. It's a survival technique.

"In your case, for instance, your mind has blocked out the fact that you killed your wife and has substituted a different set of experiences entirely. You have put up a curtain of illusion between yourself and the truth. You and I together will tear that curtain away and you will find, Mr. Bleeker, that it is far better to live with the truth than with a lie, no matter how harsh and horrifying that truth may be."

"Now look, Lieutenant," Julius said, "this has gone far enough. I clearly remember coming home and discovering my wife's body.

Nothing could be clearer to me than that memory."

"Of course," Chase said, smiling broadly. "I don't doubt that for a moment. That's the way the mind works. But let's just make an experiment, shall we? If you're innocent, you have nothing whatever to fear."

Julius shrugged, but he felt uneasy. He inhaled the cigaret smoke and was hit by the dizziness again. Through it came the lieutenant's face, the eyes watching him coolly, the thin line of his jaw set firmly.

"You knew, of course, that your wife was having an affair with another man," Chase said.

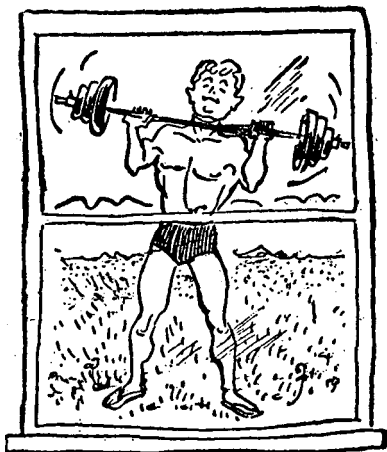
"What!" Julius exclaimed. "I knew no such thing."

"Well, if you didn't know, Mr. Bleeker, you're the only one in your neighborhood who didn't. We talked to some of your neighbors and they all seemed to know about it."

"Who—who was it supposed to be?"

"Why, your next-door neighbor, Henry Glenside."

"Glenside!" Of course, Glenside. Julius should have known. A picture of his tall, handsome neighbor appeared in his mind. Always in the backyard working in his garden or cutting the grass, stripped to the waist, showing his muscles. Glenside lifted weights.



With the first warm days of spring, he was out sunning himself, getting the rich tan he kept far into the autumn. Vain devil.

"You knew it was Glenside all the time, didn't you, Mr. Bleeker?" Chase said. "Think about it. Tear away the curtain of illusion. You knew it all the time."

"No! No, I didn't." But he must have known. He couldn't have been that blind. Julius remembered, now that he thought about it, a few little incidents that had slipped his mind: how he had caught his wife watching Glenside out the window; how Glenside's eyes would follow Dora when she went into the yard; some little remarks by the neighbors.

"They had been having an affair for some time," Chase said. "A matter of months. The anger built up gradually inside you. At first,

you tried not to believe it but the evidence mounted up. Little things, adding up. You were brooding about it at work. Your work suffered."

"What makes you say that?" Julius said, startled.

"Our men talked to your superior at the insurance company. He said you hadn't seemed the same lately. Said you were distracted, nervous and irritable."

It was true, Julius thought. He hadn't been the same lately, but he blamed it on other things. Yes, he had been having headaches and he hadn't been sleeping well, brooding. He must have been brooding about Dora and Glenside.

"You began to ask yourself why you put up with it," Chase went on. "After all, she was spending you into bankruptcy. She denied you every small pleasure. The little resentments began to emerge and nibble at your consciousness like mice—nibbling, nibbling."

He could almost feel it. Not mice, though. Rats—great, ugly rat-like thoughts tormenting him night and day—and he had forgotten about it until now.

"Today was the last straw," Chase said.

"What happened today?" Julius asked, eager now for more information.

"You made a phone call home

and there was simply no answer."

"I did? Yes, I remember now. That's right. I thought it was strange Dora wasn't home. I always called her at two."

"You realized that she no longer cared enough for you to be home waiting for your regular call," Chase said. "You realized where she probably was. Next door."

"No!"

"Your boss saw you try to make that two o'clock call and he saw how agitated you were. When you went home, you were burning inside. Burning."

"I don't remember . . ."

"Think, Bleeker! Think! Stop blocking out the truth. You entered the house and confronted your wife with your suspicions. What did she do? Laugh at you? Admit it and dare you to do something about it?"

Julius's heart was pounding. His mouth was dry, his throat constricted. He saw himself in the livingroom with Dora.

"You hit her," Chase said. "Perhaps she hit back. You struggled."

He could see it. Yes, he could see it.

"In your fury, you got a knife from the kitchen and stabbed her with it. Again and again you stabbed her. What a release that was. All the pent-up anger came out. You thrust again. Look at

yourself. You've got her blood all over you!"

"Yes!" Julius exclaimed. "That's the way it happened. I remember now. I killed her. I stabbed her. I hated her. I remember now that I hated her!"

Julius' voice broke and he buried his head in his arms on the table and sobbed. But he felt better. Oh yes, he felt better now that it was out. He felt as if an immense, festering wound had just been lanced and the evil and poison was pouring forth. But now the wound had to be cauterized. Now he had to be punished for his evil deeds.

He wasn't aware that Lieutenant Chase had left the room, responding to a light rap on the door of the interrogation room. When he next looked up, the door was open and Chase was coming back in.

"Okay, Mr. Bleeker," Chase said, "you can go."

"Go?" Julius said, bewildered. "What do you mean, go?"

"They just found your wife's killer," Chase said. He looked very disappointed. "A burglar with a

long record has been picked up, and the knife was found on him. Seems your wife surprised him in your house and he panicked."

"But—that's impossible."

"Oh no. He's positively identified. They found his fingerprints in your house."

Julius rose slowly from the table.

"No," he said. "There's some mistake. I killed my wife. I remember it all very clearly now. I did it."

"No, you didn't, Mr. Bleeker," Chase said, a kindly smile on his youthful face. "We just used a little psychology on you, that's all. We showed you some things about yourself that you hadn't realized were there. You'll be better for knowing the truth, Mr. Bleeker. Believe me."

"No! I did it! I did it and I want to be punished. I'm guilty!"

"Get him out of here, boys," Chase said to two husky policemen outside the room.

All the way to the street Julius kicked and struggled and screamed out his guilt—but no one believed him.



A witness need not possess mental gigantism to describe amply a person who has been open to adequate examination.



DOWNSTAIRS in the hallway the telephone was loudly jangling, and Mrs. Maggie McSweeney, sleeping soundly after a night of unusual and exciting happenings, awoke with a start. She hustled into bathrobe and slippers and went to answer it. Taking down the receiver, she heard a voice say, "Mrs. McSweeney? This is Captain Jenkins of the south side police station. We want a little more help from you."

"More help, is it?" she answered. "I sure gave you all I had last night. I phoned you from the Penfield Building right after poor

Mister Leeming was beaten up and robbed. Then, when you got there, I told you what I'd seen and heard. And now, when I'm tryin' to get me rest so I can go back to work this night, you say you want me again?"

"Yes, Mrs. McSweeney, we have one more idea to try, and it needs your cooperation. We'll be right

over to get you." A click ended the conversation.

Mrs. McSweeney hung up and returned to the bedroom. Oh, why wasn't Timmy here to help her at a time like this! That stubborn Irish husband of hers for nigh on fifty years, who had walked out on her because he thought that maybe he could find a job elsewhere and not have to accept what he called "government handouts." "Then, me darlin'," he had said, "I'll be sendin' for yez!" But not a word in several weeks, and Maggie's old heart was longing for him.

She dressed slowly, thinking of those happy, scrappy years of married life. Then the police car was at her little cottage, and a few minutes' driving took her downtown to the south side police station.

She was ushered into the office of Captain Jenkins whom she had met for the first time only a few hours before. Two other policemen were seated by the wall, and at the captain's table, with a drawing pad before him, was an alert, young-looking man who greeted her with a friendly grin.

"This is Johnny Close, the newspaper artist of the Journal-Times," explained the captain. "He helped solve the Stallard kidnap case last fall. Johnny drew a picture of the kidnapper from the description

given him by little Nancy Stallard's schoolmates. It was so like the fellow that we had him back of the bars right here in a couple of weeks. Now, if we can just get a good picture of the Leeming robber, we ought to be able to find *him*, too."

Close moved over beside Mrs. McSweeney and patted her rough, wrinkled hand. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I know you want to catch that robber, just like we do. So you describe again what you saw, I'll draw the picture, and I'm sure we'll get results."

"Well, sir," she said, "right now I'm doin' night cleanin' in the Penfield Building. I knew Mister Leeming was workin' late 'cause he told me to leave his office be. So I just worked on the rest of 'em. When I was through, and was puttin' me stuff away in the broom closet at the end of the hall, the door started to swing shut on me. Just then, through a crack in the door, I seen a tough lookin' feller comin' out of the Leeming office and go hustlin' down the stairs. I ran back into Mister Leeming's office and there he was, on the floor, blood all over his head. So I picked up the phone and called the police."

"Good work!" complimented the captain.

"But what we want now," add-

ed Close, "is a picture of the missing man."

"The—the missin' man!" For just a few seconds, Mrs. McSweeney's thoughts seemed to wander.

"Sure!" answered Close. "I'll draw a picture of the man who ran away, just as you describe him. We'll broadcast that picture all over the country. That way we expect to catch him."

"You—you think your picture can do that?"

"You bet! It sure will find him!"

So, slowly and deliberately, Mrs. McSweeney related a word picture, and the artist sketched the details as she gave them.

"He was a stocky built man, maybe five feet, eight inches. His hair was red and thick, a bit gray 'round the ears—"

"Had he no hat?" asked Close.

"Hat? Oh—oh, no! And his face was round, with a short stubby nose, like—" She looked around and her gaze fastened on one of the policemen. "Well, like that gentleman by the wall."

Officer Harris, with a smirk, acknowledged the title.

"Was he a young man?" asked Close.

"Oh, no, sir; maybe sixty or better."

"Uh-huh! We'll put in a few wrinkles."

"His chin was kinder heavy,"

Mrs. McSweeney continued. "Eyebrows kinder bushy. Upperlip long. And—and I guess that's all."

Close had been sketching in all the details, and now he showed her the result. Mrs. McSweeney studied it carefully.

"Yes, that looks pretty much like the feller," she said. "Make the neck a bit shorter. And that ear—that was kinder thick."

The captain smiled, and then turned a sterner face to the men in the room. "You boys could take a lesson from this lady. She really sees things when she looks at them!"

Mrs. McSweeney blushed with embarrassment. "Well, captain," she explained, "I had me glasses on, and the hall lights were pretty bright."

When the picture was finished, Maggie agreed that it really was a pretty good likeness.

Then things moved fast. The Journal-Times ran the Johnny Close picture in the late editions. Next day other papers printed it. The radio used words, and television showed the likeness. No man living above ground could have escaped such an intensive hunt.

Just one week later, Mrs. McSweeney's telephone rang again and she heard Captain Jenkins on the line.

"Well, Mrs. McSweeney, your picture sure helped us solve the Leeming case . . . Yes, we've got the man all right; he was picked up on the west coast. He was flown in last night. We'll be right over to fetch you for final identification."

So once again Mrs. McSweeney was hustled down to the south side police station, but this time her emotions were strangely mixed and her heart was beating a little faster.

Suddenly the door burst open and into the room stumbled two husky policemen hanging onto a human cyclone who struggled and swore by all the Irish saints that someone would pay for this outrage.

Maggie McSweeney rose to her feet, and the happiness in her heart brought light again into her old eyes. The prisoner turned and saw her.

"Oh, Maggie, joy o' me heart," he cried. "I dunno what you're doin' here, but I'm sure glad to see yer. I've a pretty good job lined up, darlin', and I was all ready to send for yez. But yesterday the cops swooped down on me, said I was under arrest, and flew me in here."

She moved over and laid hands on his shoulders. "Oh, Timmy," she said, "I've missed you so

much! Especially nights when me feet are cold. So when they asked me to describe the man I saw coming out the Leeming office, I—well, I just couldn't resist the temptation. I told them a picture of *you*!"

"What!" With a roar, both the captain and Johnny Close jumped up but before they could more adequately express their feelings, a policeman hurried into the room and whispered into the captain's ear. The anger in his face slowly turned into a wide grin.

"Well, folks," he said, "I guess this winds it up! The Leeming office robber has been arrested. He was caught trying to sell Leeming's expensive Swiss watch. So that's that! And now, you McSweeneys had better beat it before I arrest you for juggling the scales of justice!"

"Thanks, Captain, and—and God bless you," said Maggie. "I would have told you the truth about that robber feller anyhow." She turned to the newspaper artist, and laid a hand timidly on his shoulder. "And, Johnny boy," she said, "don't feel badly 'cause I gave you a bum steer. Just remember that you made an old woman very happy . . . Come along, Timmy darlin'. There's a lot to do before we start for California."

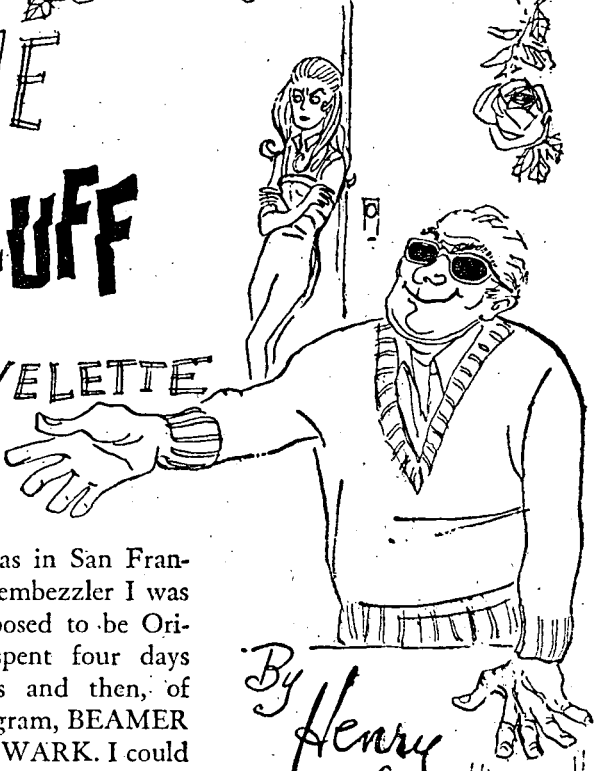
*One's perception of sound may sharpen with loss of sight, but
wise counsel often remains inaudible.*



THE BLUFF

A NOVELETTE

WELL, there I was in San Francisco. Beamer, the embezzler I was tracking, was supposed to be Orient-bound, so I spent four days checking terminals and then, of course, got the telegram, BEAMER CAUGHT IN NEWARK. I could think of worse places to end a wild-goose chase, so I decided to stay in town and look up old friends. That's how I came to call



By
Henry
Slesar

Captain Trager. I hadn't seen the old man in five years, not since I gave up municipal for private work. He didn't sound any different on the phone, but he was different, and he let me know it right away.

"I'm blind, Rick," he said. "When I said I'd be glad to see you, it was only a figure of speech."

I swallowed hard and hoped the wires wouldn't carry the sound. Tough Joe Trager with a tin cup? I was sorry I'd called. I didn't want to see Trager now, to face the man I was sure he had become—angry, bitter, and oversensitive to pity.

That was the second wrong guess I made in San Francisco.

The Tragers lived in a small white house in Sausalito. There was more garden than house. Somebody was nuts for roses, and they climbed, rambled, and clung to everything in sight. When I drove my rented car up the driveway, a slim girl in a pair of bright yellow overalls came out of the front door. She went back inside when she saw me, giving me a flash impression of annoyance. The impression held when I rang the doorbell and she answered. She had the face of a frowning angel, and the overalls weren't sloppy enough to conceal her sweet shapeliness.

"My father's expecting you," she

said flatly. "You're Richard Ring, aren't you?"

I let her show me into the old man's study. Even when I had shared the same duty roster with Trager, I'd never been invited to his home. He was jealous of its sanctity. Or maybe he'd wanted to keep his daughter out of the sight of impoverished rookies like me.

"Dad," she said, and the old man got out from behind the battered desk. A big smile creased his broad face and he pushed a shovel-wide hand directly at me. His skin was tanned and his hair was sun-bleached. Add those dark glasses, and he looked like a millionaire right off a yacht.

"How'd they pry you out of New York?" he said, throwing questions fast. "How do you like the private eye racket? How about a drink? Hey, Evvy, get this man what he wants."

Evvy, leaning against the doorway with folded arms and thinned lips, asked, "And what does the man want?"

When we had our drinks, Scotch for me and Trager's usual sour mash, I told the captain about Beamer, about my last four years, about my divorce. The last item made him grin.

"Hey, that's great, Rick, glad to hear about it. I've been looking for some sassy single guy to come

along and take this woman off my hands." He didn't know Evvy was no longer in the room. "How about her, Rick, is she gorgeous or not?"

"Gorgeous," I said, and meant it.

"Do me a favor and marry her. That's the worst part of this blindness. Evvy clucks around me like a mother hen from morning to night. Hey, Ev—"

"She's not here," I said gently, and Trager's mouth drooped a little.

"Propose to her, Rick," he said gloomily. "There's nothing worse than a self-sacrificing woman. Propose and get her out of this house. You still good-looking?"

"My nose got pushed around a little."

"They don't come more beautiful than Ev. She's the image of her mother."

His hand went unerringly to the hinged leather frame on the desk. I recognized the photos from Trager's precinct days—his daughter Evelyn as a charmer of ten; a misty portrait of Sylvia, his wife, stunning despite a dated hairdo, a movie queen rival. Trager never tired of boasting about her beauty; maybe I would be the same way if I married her daughter . . . I pushed the crazy thoughts out of my head, and asked him the only

important question of the night.

"What happened, Joe? The eyes?"

He laughed, and made the swivel chair creak. "I walked into a door," he said.

I left Trager's study twenty minutes later, no wiser than when I arrived. The captain had made me promise to come again before I headed back east, and I said I would. In the hallway, I went looking for my raincoat in the closet, but I couldn't find it. So I went looking for Evvy. There was a swinging door halfway down the hall, and I could hear the sound of a cup rattling in a saucer. I pushed open the door.

It wasn't Evvy. It was a woman in a faded, dirty wrapper. She was so skeletal I could hear the bones click on the crockery in her hands. And that face! It was a summary of all the nightmares of my childhood, a raw, red patchwork of flesh and gristle, an unhealed wound. It was a face intensified in horror by the luminous brown eyes that looked out wildly from the prison of the ruins.

I said something. God knows what. If she heard me, she didn't reply. She stared at me with stricken eyes and gave a soft, animal moan. Then she did what I wanted to do. She turned away.

I went back into the hallway. Ev-



vy was there, and from her expression it was evident she knew of my encounter. She found my coat for me (it was there all the time; I was just myopic in my nervousness) and saw me to the door. On our way out she said, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"If Mother frightened you," she said.

"No," I lied. "Of course not. Say, are you the gardener in the family? Those are beautiful roses."

Her look was pure contempt. "Goodbye, Mr. Ring," she said. "Have a nice trip back to New York."

Of course, I didn't go back. There were two things in that house in Sausalito that held me like a magnet. One was Mystery, and the other was Woman; or maybe they're the same thing. I concentrated on the latter, hoping to solve the first, but when I called Evvy Trager and asked her to dinner, she gave me a cool, reproachful "no." I phoned again a day later. When she said "no" once more, I called a florist and had him deliver a single rose to her door. In a house strangled by roses, it must have seemed inappropriate if not inane. But women! It did the trick.

The restaurant was a cozy one overlooking the bay. She showed up in a colorless, shapeless dress, with a neckline up to her chin. She

looked beautiful in the camouflage.

"You see, I'm tired of Daddy's tricks," she said wearily. "For a year, he's been dragging home marriage candidates. Before he was blinded, he wouldn't *think* of bringing home a cop, but even *that* principle's been sacrificed."

Delicately, I pointed out that Trager hadn't dragged me, I had dragged myself. Not so delicately, she asked me if Trager hadn't tried some matchmaking.

"Sure," I admitted, "but you think I needed *him* to tell me? Listen, *I've* got eyes." Then I grabbed one of her small hands and held on. "Now you tell me why Joe doesn't."

She was a little startled by my approach, but it worked.

"You must have heard of Wolf Lang," she said.

I nodded. Lang was in the gangster hall of fame, or would be. I wasn't even sure he was still alive.

"He's alive," Evvy said icily. "Sick, but alive. They keep him in an iron lung at some private hospital. Funny, isn't it? All those state and federal efforts to put him in prison, and polio does it. Who says there isn't any justice?"

"I never said it."

"I do," Evvy Trager said. Then she asked for a drink.

It seems Trager had been after Lang. That wasn't surprising.

When Lang moved his famous Three-P operation (policy, pot, and prostitution) to the west coast, the Department assigned a task force to keep Lang in line. They weren't out to "get" him; all they hoped to do was contain him. But they didn't figure on Joe Trager's highly-developed sense of moral outrage, or on his intelligence as a detective, because Trager had found the key to Wolf Lang's future jail cell.

Trager never leaked too many details, but somehow he had managed to put his hands on some concrete facts about Lang's dirty business. Day after day, he put together the pieces for presentation to the D.A.'s office. He kept his work quiet, but not quiet enough. My opinion? He told one cop too many.

One night—it was in June, Evvy said, a balmy June night—Trager was sitting in his study, hunched over the casebook he was completing on Lang, when the doorbell sounded. He paid no attention to it. His wife Sylvia went to answer it. Then he heard her scream. (The neighbors reported hearing it, too, a siren wail of anguish and horror.) He rushed to the hallway. He saw Sylvia with her hands to her dripping face, shrieking, her body twisting in pain. He looked toward the doorway, and caught a

glimpse of a grinning, sideburned young man holding a tumbler in his hand. Most of the clear stuff in the glass was gone, but there was enough left to dash into Trager's eyes. The howl of his agony and rage joined the terrible sounds that split the peaceful neighborhood air that night.

He was blinded. The acid burned swiftly into the retinas of his eyes, just as they burned into the flesh and bone of his wife, burning away every trace of her beauty.

"Sixty seconds," Evvy said bitterly. "In one minute that man destroyed my family. Blinded my father and disfigured my mother. I was away, taking a postgraduate course at the time. You can imagine what kind of homecoming I had."

"I never heard about it," I said. "It must have hit the papers big if Wolf Lang's name was in it."

"But it wasn't," Evvy said, even more bitterly. "His name was never mentioned. There wasn't any proof. Dad's case wasn't half completed, and he couldn't identify the acid-thrower. How could he? He was blind."

"And your mother?"

"She might have seen his face. We don't know. Since it happened, Mother's been—quiet." Evvy picked up her chin and looked at

me steadily. "She was a beautiful woman, you know. Vain, too, I suppose. At the beginning, we tried plastic surgery, but there was something about her skin; it wouldn't heal. If anything, it made things worse . . ."

I let her hand go. "Can I say something stupid?" I asked. "I'm sorry, Evvy. For all of you. Now tell me if there's anything I can do."

She looked at me for a while, and decided to smile. "You can order me a steak," she said.

The next afternoon, there was a message at the hotel desk from Joe Trager. He was going to see a Doctor Salzinger in the Medical Arts Building on South Street. A friend was going to deliver him, but he wanted to know if I could pick him up at four and drive him home. I called Trager and said I would be there.

I got to the building a few minutes early and waited for Trager in the lobby. I took the opportunity to check out Salzinger's specialty with the elevator starter. The doctor was an eye man, which made sense—almost.

Trager came into the lobby, holding a cane but barely tapping it on the marble floor. For so new a recruit, he was uncannily mobile. I stepped up to him and he said, "Rick? Nice of you to meet me."

Then gently but firmly he disengaged my helping hand and went out alone.

On the drive home I asked, "Why do you see this guy Salzinger, Joe?"

"He's an eye specialist."

"So what?"

Trager chuckled. "I forgot what a clever boy you are, Rick. Why does a blind man need an eye doctor?"

"All right. Why?"

"The retinas aren't completely burned out. I still see light. I've been hoping, maybe—to see more."

"Does Salzinger think that's possible?"

"Can you wait twenty minutes?"

"Sure," I said.

His sense of timing was good. It was just twenty minutes later when we entered the livingroom of the Trager house. Evvy was waiting for us; I wasn't sure, but I thought I saw Sylvia, too, moving quietly in the shadows of the hall, unwilling to be seen. Then Trager made his announcement.

"I'm going to see again," he said.

Evvy did exactly what I thought she would do: she burst into tears. I was feeling choked up myself. Trager held his daughter for a while, patting her shoulder.

"Joe," I said, trying to sound a cautious note, "are you really sure?"

"Salzinger was waiting for some tests to be completed. He wants me to have one more examination tomorrow morning; maybe I'll con you into driving me, Rick."

"My pleasure," I said.

"When, Daddy?" Evvy asked "When will you see again?"

"Hard to say. Next week, next month, maybe longer. But it's for sure, darling. For dead sure . . ."

I picked Trager up at the house at ten the following morning, and found out what an apt phrase that was. When he told me the truth, I wanted to slam on the brakes and turn the car around. But I didn't do anything; I just sat there, steering grimly, under the spell of the old man's iron personality.

"It was a lie, Rick. There's no examination this morning. I'm never going to see."

I said something that doesn't look good in print.

"I know how you feel," Trager admitted. "But I've been thinking up this scheme for a long time, Rick; I needed a little help, that's all. I couldn't trust the guys in the department. There isn't one who wouldn't have blabbed the truth."

"But *why*?" I asked, afraid that I already knew the answer. "Why this phony story?"

Trager smiled. "I'll give you five minutes to guess. I always thought you were smart."

I didn't need five minutes. "Wolf Lang," I said.

"You get a B-plus," the old man grinned. "I don't expect to trap Lang himself with this trick. Lang is too busy trying to breathe his way out of that mechanical lung. But his acid-throwing boy is going to be very upset when he hears I'll be able to make visual identification."

"But you won't be."

"He won't know that. Nobody will, not even my own family. Only you and me, Rick."

"Look, Captain—"

"I've already sent word to the papers, Rick, about how I'm looking forward to the opportunity of seeing a mug book—of pinning that acid-throwing creep."

"You know what he'll try to do, don't you? He'll try to knock you over before the sight comes back."

"Yes," Trager said quietly. That was exactly what he expected.

"You think you can trap this guy by setting yourself up as a target? It won't work."

"Not if I was alone, no."

"Then what are you planning to do? Have the house surrounded by cops?"

"That wouldn't work, either. I can't make it *too* tough for the guy to get at me, or he'll never make his play. I've got to handle this cool, you see?"

"Cool is right," I said tightly. "He'll cool you—with a long-distance rifle or something like that."

"I'll keep to the house. He'll have to come in after me, and he will. I can think of half a dozen ways. Maybe disguise—a messenger, repairman, something like that. He'll try, Rick, don't worry. And when he does, we'll nail him."

"We?"

Trager's grin had a malicious twist. "Didn't I tell you? I'm hiring your services, private eye. My money's as good as anybody's."

I never yet turned down a job.

When we got back to the rose-covered cottage, I saw that Trager had company. There was a prowler in the driveway, and four cops, three in plainclothes, scattered around his livingroom.

"Welcoming committee," I said.

"They must have read the paper," Trager said.

He was right. The story was already in the afternoon edition. I saw a copy of it on the coffee table.

The four cops stood around and shuffled their feet and tried to think of the right thing to say. The smartest of the quartet was a lieutenant named Crispin, a blond Eagle Scout type who couldn't take his eyes off Evvy, which didn't endear him to me. They all said nice, dull things, but it was Crispin

who added, "That wasn't a smart idea, Joe, letting the paper know about this. You should have waited till your sight came back and the guy was identified."

"I'm not worried," Trager told him.

"Well, we are. Captain Gershon is, too." He slid an eye in Evvy's direction. "Gershon thinks we ought to be looking after you."

"You know what Gershon is?" Trager said pleasantly. "An old lady. You tell him not to worry. I've hired myself some protection."

They all looked me over.

"His name's Ring," Trager said. "You want to know anything about Rick Ring, you look up the department's citation records. You won't worry about me then."

"I still don't think it's enough," Crispin said, still aiming at Evvy. "I'll drop by once in a while to see how things are going."

"That's nice of you, Bruce." "Wouldn't you know he'd be called Bruce?"

When they were gone, Evvy said, "Is it true, Dad? Is there any danger?"

"Danger? From Wolf Lang?"

"But that man who threw the acid, he might—"

"That's why Rick's here," Trager said. "To protect me. And he can't do that unless he sticks around, so fix up the guest room,

sweetheart, okay?" he requested.

"I don't think I'll sleep upstairs," I said. "If you can arrange it, I'd rather bunk down here."

"Smart idea," Trager said. "But I warn you, Rick—that couch is pretty old."

"I'm no baby, either," I said.

I don't sleep well on sofas, but sleep wasn't part of this job. I took off my jacket and tie and stretched out, making sure my shoes didn't mess up the upholstery. You can't go without shoes on a stakeout.

I was still awake around two, my mind busy with thoughts of all the mistakes I'd made in my life. The worst one, of course, was my marriage. That made me think of Evvy, and Evvy made me think of Sylvia and that nightmarish face. Suddenly, I was afraid of the dark. Sounds silly, I guess, a cop afraid of things that go bump, but that's how I am.

Just as I lit the desk lamp, I heard a noise somewhere in the house. I clicked the switch the other way and put the room back in darkness.

It was a door-closing kind of sound. I cursed my stupidity in not making a door check before hitting the sack. Why did I think tomorrow would be plenty of time?

I slipped my automatic out of its holster and moved into the front

hall, my eyes accustomed to the dark. I paused at the front stairs and listened. It could have been an innocent night sound, of course; somebody walking the floor, a trip to the johnny, anything.

Then the rifle cracked, and glass shattered.

My first thought was of Trager, so I hit the stairs at full gallop. The first person I saw on the landing was Evvy, looking wild and beautiful in her nightgown. I asked her which was Trager's room, and she pointed without answering.

I threw open the bedroom door, expecting anything—even a corpse. But the captain was alive. He was leaning against a wall, both hands flat against it. He was frankly scared, and I didn't blame him. The window had been half shot away by the force of the rifle bullet. I went into the glass-strewn room and took a look at the outside view. Whoever had fired that shot had been right below the window.

"Rick?" Trager said evenly. "Where's Evvy?"

"She's okay," I said. "You hit anywhere, Joe?"

"No. I was just getting up to get some water. He must have seen me crossing the window. I heard something down there, moving around; my ears have sharpened up since the eyes went."



"Dad!" Evvy flew into his arms. "I'm fine," he told her soothingly. "I'm okay, Ey. You go look after your mother and stop worrying about me."

"You shouldn't have told the newspapers!" she sobbed. "They'll kill you now, they'll have to!"

"Nobody's going to kill me, sweetheart. Now go see to your mother."

Evvy threw me a scornful look with a clear message: *Where were you, bodyguard?* Then she went

to see her mother. The noise and horror hadn't disturbed Sylvia; there must have been too much remembered horror in her mind.

In the morning, I told Trager I didn't want the job. "I can't handle it," I said. "This decoy stuff doesn't work, Joe. If somebody wants you dead, he'll get to you. That's too high a price to pay for catching the guy."

"I'm willing to take the chance," Trager grunted. "Why shouldn't you be?"

"Because I like your daughter," I said bluntly, "and if you get knocked off under my protection what do you suppose she'll think of me?"

Trager laughed. "And what'll she think if you run out on me?"

He had me both ways. I scowled and said, "Okay. But if I'm going to camp out here, I'd better check out of my hotel. Think you can stay out of trouble for two hours?"

"Sure," Trager grinned.

I drove to the hotel, packed, and turned in my key. When I came out of the front door, there was a prowler car nudging my rear bumper. A blond head looked out the window.

"Hey, Ring."

"Hello, Crispin," I said. "Why aren't you catching stray dogs?"

He glared at me and said, "How are things at Trager's?"

"Evvy's fine. That answer you?"

"Don't get wise with me, Ring."

I shrugged. "The old man's okay."

"No trouble?"

I hesitated. It was a temptation to tell him the truth, to let the police take on the official burden of Joe Trager's safety. Maybe it was the wrong kind of loyalty to keep my mouth shut, but that's what I did. "No trouble," I said.

Then I drove to the little white house, and found more of it. Joe Trager had been shot.

The real trouble I had was with calming Evvy. Trager himself wasn't hurt; the bullet had only grazed his right leg. He had treated and bandaged the wound himself without calling in a doctor. That was important to him, of course; doctors have to report bullet wounds.

I asked Trager how it happened.

"I was in the study," he said.

"Evvy was upstairs, and Sylvia was in the garden, tending the flowers. That's all she cares to do now, raise those roses . . ."

Now I knew how the garden grew.

"I was sitting at my desk, when I heard this sound outside. It was Sylvia crying. I haven't heard her cry since—well, for a long time. So I got up and went to the door."

"You mean you went *outside*?"

"Yes, I went outside!" Trager said testily. "I'm telling you my wife was crying!"

The look on his face choked off my complaints.

"I didn't take more than two steps when I heard the shots. The first one hit my leg and made me sit down. That was lucky. The second went into the door. Here, I pried it out for you." He handed me a spent bullet.

"It's a slug from a .38," I said.

"That's what I figured."

I had a thought, but didn't give it words.

"Go on," Trager said, mind reading. "Say what you want to say."

"All right," I answered. "It *could* have come from a police special."

"You've got crooked cops on the brain," Trager said. "Wolf Lang didn't have that many friends."

"I'm not making any guesses except this one: you keep up this hoax, you're going to get killed."

Evvy came in. If she was close to hysteria before, she was deadly calm now. "I'm through with this game, Dad," she said. "I'm going to call the police."

"No, sugar," Trager said casually, "you won't do that."

"You need *help*! You should be in protective custody or something until your sight comes back."

"That might be weeks or months. The force isn't going to tie up good manpower for an indefinite period. Besides, I have Rick here."

"Can Rick watch you indefinitely?" Then she appealed directly to me. "Maybe he'll listen to you. Will you please make him *listen*?"

I looked at her beautiful, pleading eyes, and didn't know what to say. I knew what I wanted to say, of course. *Envy, I love you.* But it wasn't the time or place. By now, I realized there was only one thing to do. I had to see Wolf Lang.

The place was called the Tobach Memorial Hospital, and it looked like an expensive place to die. The lawns were manicured, and the doctors and nurses seemed to have been turned out by MGM. There was everything but Muzak in the corridors.

Lang had a large private room in the west wing. I don't know why he needed a large room. Except for one or two hours a day, he lived inside a metal box. The respirator was a sleek, shiny business, almost beautiful. It made something regal about Wolf Lang's large, lined, homely face above the rubber collar.

Lang hadn't voiced any objections to seeing me. I think he was

glad of the company. "Nobody comes around any more," he said. "Not even my loving wife, that—" He said an unflattering word about his wife, and added a few more for his friends and former gang associates. "Listen, you know who turned out to be my best pal since I got into this joint? Some punk from the D.A.'s office who keeps coming around hoping I'll spill something valuable." Lang chuckled, trying to see my face in the mirror over his head. "I keep stringing him along, just for company. You're a cop too, right?"

"Right," I said. "Private investigator."

"Good!" Lang said. "Maybe I'll string you along too."

"I'm also a friend of Joe Trager's," I said. Then I told him why I was there. Lang listened without comment. I met his eyes in the mirror, and they didn't blink unnaturally.

"You got me wrong, friend. I ain't putting the finger on nobody," he said.

"There have been two attempts on Trager's life already. So far, the police don't know about them. That's why you haven't been bothered."

"They can't bother me," Lang said bitterly. "Nothing bothers me in this box, you hear? Listen, you know how long I been in this

thing? Five months. I'm almost bald on the back of my head from lying down."

"Joe Trager's no threat to you. That's what I came to tell you. It's all a bluff. He can't see. He won't ever see again."

"Don't talk threats to me, pal. I can't get worried. Guy like me, in the prime of life, and look what happens? Nobody gets polio no more, only me."

"Maybe you haven't made a contract to kill Trager," I said, "but your boy may be doing it on his own."

"Boy, what boy?"

"Your acid-throwing friend."

"My friends throw it, but nobody ever proved that on me."

"Look," I said, leaning so close that I fogged up the mirror, "you're asking for more trouble than you can handle. If Trager gets killed, a lot of people will be sore at you, Wolf. They might even forget their manners. They might just come around here and—kick the plug out of your machine. Who knows?"

A light mist of sweat appeared on Lang's forehead. He reached for the nurse's call button, but I put my hand on his wrist.

"I'll do that," I said. I took a cloth and wiped his face gently. "You don't have the kind of protection you used to have, Wolf.

Your friends don't think of you anymore. You're an easy mark. This box . . ." I knocked on it, ". . . could make a nice coffin."

"Get out of here."

"Tell me about your boy, Wolf."

He met my eyes in the mirror. Maybe he saw how serious I was. "His name was Helfant," Lang said. "He liked to be called Duke. I didn't send him with the acid, that was his own idea. He thought he'd be doing me a favor, that I'd be grateful. I threw him out on his ear, you ask anybody."

"And where's Helfant now?"

"Who you asking? I'm an invalid, what do I know?"

"Somebody knows, Wolf."

"Last I heard, he was picked up on a narcotics charge. Go ask the cops."

"All right," I said.

I did ask. I telephoned headquarters and got Crispin on the line. I asked him about Duke Helfant and, after a while, he confirmed the narcotics story. Then he told me some news that made my whole day seem wasted.

"Helfant's dead," Crispin said. "He was knifed in the prison yard by another con. What's Helfant got to do with this?"

"Nothing," I said, feeling very tired.

It was dark when I returned to Sausalito. At Trager's there was

only one light, burning in the study.

When I went in, Trager was on the sofa, nursing his leg. Evvy had been reading to him, and I took a quick look at the title. It was *Ivanhoe*.

"It's all about these knights," Trager said cheerfully. "You know, they weren't much different from cops."

Evvy said, "I don't see the resemblance, except they were pretty thick in the head, too."

I asked Trager if I could talk to him alone. Evvy took the hint and left.

"Where you been all day, Rick?" he asked.

"Out," I said. "Talking to people."

"What kind of people?"

"Joe, did you see the guy who threw the acid?"

"Only for a flash. I doubt if I could pick him out of the mug files, even if my sight did come back."

"Do you remember anything? His hair color?"

"Sort of dirty blond. Long sideburns."

"How about his eyes?"

"Nothing."

"Height, build?"

"Medium height, on the thin side."

"Nothing else?"

"No," he denied laconically.

I took out the notes I had made during my conversation with Crispin. "Ever hear of a hood named Duke Helfant?"

"No."

"He worked for Wolf Lang for a while. Then he quit or got fired, and went to work as a pusher."

"Don't know him."

I rattled the paper. "Helfant was five feet nine, weighed around a hundred and thirty, blond hair, long sideburns."

"So?"

"He might have been the acid-thrower, Joe. But there's one problem. He's dead."

"Then he's not the acid-thrower. Who said he was?"

I answered carefully. "Wolf Lang said so, Joe. I went to see him today. I went to the hospital and told him the truth—that he won't do himself any good by killing you. That it's all a bluff."

For a moment, I thought Trager was going to take my news in stride. But then he said, "Go on and get out of here, Rick. I don't want you in my house anymore."

"Wait a minute, Joe—"

"You heard me! I don't like Judases. I asked you to help me because I thought you were my friend."

"I am your friend. That's why I don't want to see you kill your-

self, and that's what you're doing."

"I don't need friends like you."

"I had to tell him, Joe. The only thing is, I don't think he believed me. He might still be sending somebody after you. The only way you can convince him now is by admitting the truth yourself."

"Get out, Rick, will you, please?"

"You're not just blind, you're stupid!" I was shouting now. "Don't you see nobody can help you but yourself?"

"That's right, and when the acid-thrower comes around to get me, I'll be ready for him."

"Without eyes?"

"Yes!"

"You won't have a chance!"

Suddenly, he reached up and turned off the single lamp in the room. We were plunged into blackness.

"Hey," I said, "what's the idea?"

"You really think I can't take care of myself?"

Something slammed into me and knocked me against the wall. All the air in my lungs exploded out of my mouth. It was Trager, of course, proving himself; I could feel his strong arms looping through mine and then his hands meeting at the back of my neck in a full nelson.

"Let go!" I managed to say.

"Joe, are you nuts?"

"Fight back! Get out of this!"

I squirmed, and managed to slip one arm out of his grasp; or maybe he allowed it. But I was free, and heading across the floor toward the light switch. Trager was faster. He caught me and spun me about; his intuition was good. I could hear him chuckle as he clipped me neatly on the jaw. I fell against a small table, knocking some items to the floor. There was a table lighter among them. I picked it up and lit the flame. I saw him coming again, but I had time to move aside. Nevertheless, he managed to circle my waist. I dropped the lighter, and picked up a heavy-based vase from the mantelpiece. I raised it over his head.

"All right," he panted. "I've got you now, Rick."

"Okay," I said. "So you've got me."

"Did I prove my point? Did I?"

I jiggled the vase in my hand, knowing I could take him out with one blow. Of course, I didn't do anything.

"You proved it, Joe," I said.

Trager released me, breathing hard. "Now you can get out of here," he said. "I don't need you anymore, Rick."

"Do I get my suitcase back?" I asked.

It was almost ten o'clock when

I got back to town. Luckily, I decided to check in at the same hotel that had housed me on my arrival in San Francisco. I say "lucky" because it made it easier for Evvy Trager to find me.

It must have been two in the morning when the phone rang. I recognized her voice at once, even with the distortion of frightened urgency.

"Rick, I think there's somebody in the house!"

"Call the cops," I said.

"I wanted to! Dad won't let me. He's just sitting in the study in the dark, with a rifle on his lap. He won't even let me turn on the lights."

"Don't," I said warningly. "It's his only advantage."

"Rick, you've got to come back!"

"Evvy, don't you see it's no use? He'll have to call the police. He'll have to tell the truth about his eyes."

"What do you mean, the truth?"

I took a firm grip on the phone receiver. "He's bluffing, Evvy. He lied to you and everybody else. He's not going to see again. He told that story just to make the acid-thrower show himself."

"Oh, Rick! How could you let him do it?"

"Evvy," I said incautiously, "I did it for a ridiculous reason. I

did it because I'm crazy about you."

There was a five-second pause, and then she said, "Please come back, Rick. I need you."

How could I say no to that?

I did one smart thing before leaving the hotel: I borrowed a flashlight from the desk clerk. It was about time I did something clever.

When I approached the Trager house, I saw that I would need it. There wasn't a glimmer of light anywhere in the house, not even much of a moon to brighten the scene. I parked the car at the end of the driveway, and walked the rest of the way.

Just as I came up to the front door, as if the killer had been waiting for my stage entrance, a shot resounded within the little white house. I tried the door but it was locked. I pounded on it three times and Evvy opened it. Maybe it was only fear that made her throw herself into my arms when she saw me; whatever it was, I enjoyed it.

"That shot—" I said.

"It was Dad. He thought he heard someone."

I walked into the house and turned on the flashlight. I heard Trager's deep growl, "Shut that damned thing off!"

"Joe," I said, making him out

in the hallway, "what are you—"

"Is Evvy with you?"

"I'm here, Dad."

"Get upstairs like I told you!"

Evvy squeezed my hand and went to the stairs. By now, my eyes were more accustomed to what little light the house held, and I could discern the rifle in Trager's hand.

"He's in the house, Rick," the captain said. "I heard him moving around in the cellar and went after him. I took a shot, but I didn't get him—"

"Let me go look," I suggested.

"Be careful. And no lights!"

"I won't scare him off," I said.

I headed for the back hallway and the door to the cellar. The beam of my flashlight moved over the cellar steps as I descended them. The basement was full of the usual junk, some discarded lampshades, storm windows and a few rusty screens. There was a small mound of white dust where Trager's rifle bullet had dented the wall. Nothing else.

As I started up the stairs again, I heard the click of footsteps overhead. "Joe?" I said, but I knew it wasn't Trager's heavy tread.

I opened the cellar door cautiously. It was only a dark blur across my peripheral vision, but I knew that someone had just moved down the hall. I pulled the

automatic from the holster and went in the same direction. I heard something creak. I whirled, and realized that the swinging door of the kitchen was still swinging.

I didn't want to go into that kitchen; there might be death waiting for me on the other side of the door. I couldn't help thinking about Evvy, and not wanting to die right now, but I remembered why I was there, and nudged the door open with my right foot. At the same time, I flicked on the bright beam of the flashlight and aimed it like a weapon.

In the circle of light, the eyes round with fear or something worse, was the nightmare of Sylvia Trager's face. It was her eyes that betrayed her, that made clear her purpose in prowling through the darkness; her eyes as much as the police revolver that she clutched in her bony hands. For a moment, I thought she meant to fire the gun and have me removed from her tormented world, just as she wanted Joe Trager removed. But she didn't shoot. She stood frozen in the light, and moved her ghastly misshapen lips in an effort to form words.

"Mrs. Trager," I whispered, "please put down the gun." Still she didn't move, and I quietly said, "Sylvia." Then for the first

time I heard her speak, very softly.

"Please," she said. "Please, doctor," she told me.

"It's all right, Mrs. Trager," I said. "You can give me the gun now."

"I have to do it," she moaned. "I *have* to kill him, don't you see? It's the only thing to do."

"But why?" I asked. "In Heaven's name, *why*?"

"I can't let him see me. You know that. He's never seen me like this, but now his sight's coming back. No, no! I'd rather he was dead . . ." She spoke softly, almost reasonably, appealing to me for understanding.

I did understand. "Give me the gun, Sylvia," I said.

"Please." She raised her hand to her face. "Turn off the light."

I flicked the light off, and it was

stupid of me. In the sudden return of darkness, she moved quickly. Before I could stop her, she was pushing against the swinging door. I grabbed her arm, and she turned and slammed the revolver against the side of my head with ferocious force. I tried to stay conscious as I staggered back against a cupboard, making the dishes rattle.

Then there was a sound I didn't want to hear: the explosion of gunfire, shots fired and returned, and I knew that the antagonists had finally come face to face. I went out of the kitchen and into the study. My hand found the light switch, and in the light I saw the outcome. Trager's bluff had worked; his enemy was dead—and now I faced the job of telling him who it was.

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