

ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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



July 1967

Dear Reader:

While many of us regard vacation trips and weekend jaunts by automobile as commonplace, it remains a mystery to me how our forefathers were able to complete their myriad deeds with the conveyances of their time. What, for instance, was used to carry off the final step of a Victorian homicide? Imagine attempting to conceal the obvious portion of the perfect crime on the floor of an open surrey. The terrain must have become terribly cluttered at times.

Whether the automobile in the stories herein is actually used for purposes other than pleasure, in virtually all of them it is at least implied. In some it is an essential part of the plot, and more often than not is used to fulfill the action. So the next time you get behind the wheel, remember that your car is more than a dangerous weapon—it is often one's final conveyance as well.

Now ride with this month's entourage of friends and foes, beginning with the timely lead story of patriotism, if you wish to call it that, on the Fourth of July.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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One might casually deem patriotism, loyalty, and ethics as virtually synonymous, yet it seems circumstance can evolve a taxonomic distinction.



SINCE it was a holiday, the Fourth of July, the ancient Pokochobee County courthouse was deserted when I got there, except for the sheriff's office on the ground floor. Sheriff Ed Carson was slumped behind his desk, half asleep.

He managed to open one eye and ask, "Lon, what're you doin' here at the courthouse on a holiday mornin'?"

"I got a pile of paper work

about waist-deep on my desk upstairs," I said. "Thought I'd try to get caught up."

"Huh," Carson grunted. "Too bad there ain't a few voters here to see how their county attorney works for 'em."

The phone rang before I could think of a good retort. While Carson took the call, I shucked off my slicker and shook it. Rain had been falling off and on all morning

from a dank, overall gray sky.

Carson was saying, "Sheriff's office. What? What's that?"

I started to sit down, planning to cadge a cup of coffee before going upstairs to my own office. Then I noticed the sheriff's craggy face. He was wide awake now. He gestured to an extension phone on a nearby desk.

I took it up, got it to my ear in time to hear a man's voice: ". . . field office—he's here—tell them—"

There was a choking sound, a series of rattling coughs.

"Who is this?" Carson said. "Listen, try to—"

maybe. Beginning to see little green men."

"Maybe," the sheriff said, but not as if he meant it.

He took a battered coffeepot from a hot plate on a corner of his desk, poured two steaming cups, pushed one toward me. I sat down and reached for a cigarette.

"Heading this way," I said, "and if he doesn't make it, tell 'them' somebody is here. At some field office—"

Carson and I both jumped as we heard the distant thud of the courthouse's back door slamming shut. Heavy footsteps echoed along

by ELLIJAH ELLIS

"No time. Heading for your office—if I don't make it—tell them he's here. Didn't think he'd shoot—but he did . . ."

Another cough, and the line went dead. Carson and I looked at each other.

"Now what?" I asked.

Carson put down the phone, frowned.

I went on, "Some guy celebrating the Fourth with a few fifths,

the long, now deserted corridor.

The sheriff grimaced. "That's Buck. He's been out chasin' some kids who were throwin' firecrackers at cars on the highway south of town."

A moment later, Buck Mullins lumbered into the office. The big deputy's black slicker glistened wetly. "No luck, Ed," he said. He saw me. "Well, if it ain't Mr. County Attorney hisself. How's tricks,

Lon? Anything up your sleeve?"

I grunted. Carson told the deputy about the strange phone call, asked if Mullins had any idea what it meant. He didn't. The three of us talked it over, and got nowhere.

"Feller said he was shot?" Mullins asked.

"Somethin' like that," the sheriff said.

Taking my coffee, I went over to look out the tall, dingy windows behind Carson's desk. There wasn't much to see; the wide sweep of sodden lawn scattered with trees; beyond, the street that formed the east boundary of the courthouse square. There was little traffic. Most of the downtown stores were closed for the holiday.

It was eleven-thirty. Ten minutes since the phone call. To heck with it. I'd finish my coffee, go up to my office on the third floor, and plow into that pile of paper work. Then something outside caught my eye.

A gray sedan was coming north along the rain-slick street. It was going too fast, and suddenly it swerved to the left, jumped the curb, and came on across the lawn. Spatters of mud flew as its churning wheels cut a path diagonally across the lawn toward the back of the courthouse.

I yelled, "Some idiot—"

The car went into a skid and crashed broadside into a massive

oak tree. Almost before the sound of the crash had died away I was headed for the office door, followed by the sheriff and Buck Mullins. Outside, we went a short distance along the graveled driveway that bisected the square just behind the building. Then we cut across the lawn toward the car, about fifty feet away.

As we hurried across the wet grass, I fleetingly noticed a pickup truck stop on the street and a man get out to stare toward the wrecked car. Other people were coming out of a bar on the far side of the streets.

There was no sign of anyone inside the car.

Then, just as we got there, a hand appeared—a hand smeared with crimson, forefinger extended. The finger touched the inside of the windshield glass and made a downward stroke, then another stroke, at a right angle to the first.

Abruptly the hand dropped from sight. Carson yanked open the door on the near side and we looked in at a man sprawled across the front seat on his back. There was a great deal of blood.

Mullins whistled softly. "He didn't hit the tree that hard. What a mess!"

"Go call Doc Johnson," Carson snapped. "Ambulance, fast!"

The deputy wheeled and headed



back for the courthouse at a lumbering trot. From the looks of the man in the car, I didn't think there was any need to hurry.

Carson confirmed this a moment later. He turned to me, wiping his hands on the front of his khaki shirt. His face was set in grim lines. "Dead. I don't know how he made it this far. Got a bullet hole in his belly big as—" He broke off, shook his head.

I stared down at the dead face. I'd never seen the man before. He appeared to be in his thirties, with a stubble of black beard and close-cropped hair.

"Think it's the guy who called?" I asked. "He sure seemed to be trying to get to the courthouse."

"Yeah, I know who it is," Carson muttered. "I should have guessed, when he called—mentioned the 'field office'. He was—"

Approaching shouts interrupted him. A dozen or so people were converging on us from the street. I knew most of them—beer-hall loafers curious to see what had happened. Carson and I tried to keep them back, but it wasn't easy.

One man, especially, seemed determined to get a look at the car, and the silent figure inside it. He shoved past me and peered into the car. A burly man, wearing faded jeans and a denim jacket, I recognized him as Jack Beasley, one of

the county's more unsavory citizens.

"Get back out of there, Beasley," I told him.

He gave me a sour grin. "Sure, Mr. Gates. It's just that this feller here almost run into me a couple minutes ago, down the street. What is he—blind drunk?"

The sheriff had overheard. Buck Mullins had returned from phoning the doctor. Leaving the big deputy to handle the crowd, Carson stepped over to Beasley.

"What was that?" Carson snapped. "What'd you just say?"

"Nothin'. Feller came barrelin' through the intersection down yonder, just as I was turnin' into State Street. Damn near plowed into my truck. I figured he'd end up like this, the way he was drivin'. Is he—"

"Go on about your business, Jack," the sheriff said.

Beasley's eyes narrowed. Then he shrugged and turned away. "Cops," he muttered, then walked slowly toward the street and the old pickup truck I'd noticed earlier.

Now an ambulance howled into the driveway behind the courthouse and skidded to a stop. Dr. Johnson, who served as the county coroner, got out and waddled toward us, a squat, paunchy man enveloped in an ancient raincape

the size of a tent. He was followed by two men carrying a stretcher.

"What's goin' on?" he wheezed, when he reached us. He spied the man inside the car. "A wreck, eh?"

"Not exactly," Carson said quietly.

The doctor, with some effort, managed to lean inside the open car door. After a moment he growled, "Ha! See what you mean."

He worked over the body a few minutes, then straightened and turned to us.

"Save it, Doc," Carson said, with a nod toward the crowd.

Dr. Johnson said, "Yeah." He stepped to one side.

The sheriff went through the dead man's pockets. He came out with a shabby billfold, a handkerchief, some loose change, cigarettes and matches. That was all.

When he'd finished, Carson told Dr. Johnson that the ambulance attendants could take the body over to the undertaking parlor on the north side of the square.

He sent Buck Mullins along with orders to stand guard over the corpse. "Once the man's laid out on the slab, you keep people away from him," Carson added. "Nobody's to come near him till you hear from me. Nobody."

The big deputy nodded, and plodded after the doctor and the

two attendants carrying the sheet-draped stretcher.

Once the body was gone, the crowd broke up, moving toward the street and the beckoning doors of the bar on the far side. Finally, Carson and I were alone.

"Now, who is that guy, and what the heck is going on?" I asked. "You said you knew him—"

"I never saw him before today," Carson broke in, "but I recognized him from the description the FBI office in the capital gave me—three days ago."

I blinked at the blood-spattered car. "FBI?"

"Uh huh. This man—name was Ditman, Kenneth Ditman—he was down here on some kind of undercover hocus-pocus." As he talked, the sheriff went over the interior of the car. "Ditman was an agent. He was lookin' for a suspect. Don't ask me who, what or why. The feller I talked to on the phone wouldn't tell me. Just asked me to help out, if Ditman should ask for help. Otherwise, stay strictly out of it."

Carson went around to the back of the gray sedan and opened the trunk. There was nothing inside but the spare tire and a few tools.

"So he was an FBI agent," I said. "Why all the secrecy, I wonder?"

Carson slammed down the

trunk lid and frowned. "I don't know. Ditman was posin' as a out-of-work drifter. Whatever he was after, it must've been awful hush-hush."

"And it got him killed," I said.

"Uh huh. Well, there ain't anything here that I can find. Let's get back to the courthouse."

We walked across the lawn, and just as we reached the back door rain started to come down again.

We went inside and along the musty corridor to the sheriff's office. Carson mused, "What Ditman meant on the phone was that if he didn't make it here to us, call the FBI field office in the city and tell 'em the feller they been lookin' for is in Monroe, or in this vicinity."

I said, "It'd have been a lot simpler just to tell us what had happened—and who had shot him—instead of trying to get here in that car."

Carson shrugged. "Yeah. But neither one of us has ever been shot through the gut with a heavy-caliber bullet. I got an idea, though, that you ain't likely to act too rational, afterwards, if you act at all."

I couldn't argue with that.

Inside the office, Carson sat down at his desk and picked up the phone. He called his other deputy, who had evidently had the

day off, and told him to report for duty. Then he called the Monroe town cops, asked for their help. While he was at it, he arranged to have the wrecked car towed to the police garage and placed under guard.

In the meantime I used another phone to call Dr. Johnson. He told me there wasn't much doubt about the cause of Ditman's death. The FBI agent had been shot through the upper abdomen and bled to death.

"I got the slug," the Doc added. "A .45, copper jacket. Made the devil of a hole. The man couldn't have lived more'n twenty or thirty minutes after he was hit, if that long. An' to drive a car—well, he must've been a tough one."

I agreed, and we hung up. The noon whistles were blowing. It was barely half an hour since I'd seen the gray car swerve off the street and onto the courthouse lawn.

Carson put down his phone, and sat for a moment gnawing at the ragged fringe of his pepper-and-salt mustache. "Now for the FBI," he sighed. "This ought to be something." Taking up the phone again, he placed a long-distance call to the state capital.

I remembered the dying man's last act, tracing a sketchy letter "L" on the windshield of his car, using

his finger for a pen, and his blood for ink.

I mentioned it to Carson. "Why don't you ask them if it has any significance to them?"

Carson frowned at the smoke rising from his cigarette. He shrugged, and said, "Okay. You never know with these people. It might be some super-secret code or—" He broke off. "I think the call's gone through."

I got on the extension phone.

The special agent in charge at the field office was cordial—until he found out what Carson had to tell him.

"When did this happen?" he barked.

"Don't know," Carson said. "He called my office here about eleven-twenty. Accordin' to the doctor, it couldn't have been more'n ten or twenty minutes before that when he was shot. Shot once, with a .45."

The FBI man repeated slowly, "A .45? I see . . . Are you sure the dead man is Kenneth Ditman?"

"I ain't certain sure of anything, except he fits the description you people gave me before, and he had a billfold on him with papers in it identifyin' him as 'J. T. Harris', which is the alias you said he'd be usin' here."

A brief silence. Then the FBI man said, "I see. You have any leads on the killer?"

Carson's seamed face reddened. "If you fellers had seen fit to let us country hicks in on what you were doin', there might not have been any killin'."

"Alright, take it easy," the agent said. "We were trying to keep this as quiet as possible. But if the subject has turned killer, all bets are off, I guess. The man we want is named James Thomas; age, twenty-four; height about five-ten, weight about 160 to 165. Blond hair which he has probably dyed brown or black. Clean shaven when last seen, and may or may not be wearing heavy horn-rimmed glasses. Gray eyes, sallow complexion, no visible scars or marks."

Carson had been busily scribbling all this down in his own peculiar brand of shorthand. Now he said, "Okay. This James Thomas, what did you want him for?"

Another silence. "The nominal charge was assault, and flight to avoid prosecution," the agent said slowly. "He shot a man in Washington, D.C. With a .45, by the way. The victim will recover but he—"

"Ditman won't," Carson put in. "You tellin' me all this secret hocus-pocus was just to nail a feller wanted for assault with a deadly weapon? Come off it."

The special agent obviously did-

n't like it, but finally he unloaded. "James Thomas is the son of an official in the State Department. He has some pretty odd ideas—so odd that he and his father have been alienated for some years. Young Thomas was mixed up with a group of shady organizations in Washington. Let's face it. The kid is a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. Though that didn't come out until last week, when he left Washington after breaking into his father's home and stealing a batch of secret files that the elder Thomas had taken home to work on. In the process, James Thomas shot a servant who caught him in the act."

I spoke up for the first time. "You mean this guy is some kind of spy?"

"Who is this?" the agent snapped.

"Alonzo Gates, Pokochobee County Attorney," I snapped back. "Any objections?"

"You might have mentioned there was a third party on the line. This is still highly confidential—"

"Oh, brother," I said.

The sheriff came on as peacemaker. "Let's calm down, fellers. Let me get it straight. What the FBI actually wanted this Thomas for was espionage?"

"More or less," the agent said,

still a little huffy. "The papers he stole were actually of no real value. But the point is, Thomas plans to leave the country. He left a letter for his father, explaining what he intended to do. It was one of the filthiest documents I ever read, full of psychotic ranting and raving. He's headed for Cuba. From there Red China or Russia, whichever makes the highest bid for him. You can understand the value he would be to them, because of who his father is."

No one spoke for a moment.

"So that's why you all wanted to nail him with as little fuss as possible," the sheriff said.

"Exactly. The elder Thomas is a good man, a valuable man. If it comes out his own son is a defector to the communists, it'll not only ruin him, it'll throw suspicion on the whole State Department, the whole Federal government, perhaps. That kind of mess we can do without."

I had to agree with that. "What now?"

"No question about that now. He's murdered a Federal agent. We'd traced him from Washington to your state. We had an idea he was holed up somewhere down there in your section, but thought he was probably farther east, which is why only one agent came into your particular area. We were

wrong. We'll have men in there as soon as possible. Meanwhile, get after Thomas. No holds barred."

"When can we expect your people?" I asked.

"How's your airport there?"

Carson gave a loud snort. "Mister, this town has a population of thirty-five hundred, countin' dogs and cats. Our airport is a pasture east of town. At the moment, I'd say it's about knee deep in mud."

"Well, as quick as agents can get there—two or three hours, I suppose."

At my prompting, the sheriff asked the special agent about the capital "L" that Ditman had scrawled in blood. The agent had no idea what, if anything, it meant.

As they finished their conversation, I noticed that Carson's second deputy, Jack Avery, had come into the office. He didn't look happy about being called in on his day off.

Carson turned to Avery and began rattling out orders. The deputy lost his reproachful glare. He was soon busy at the radio transmitter-receiver over in a corner of the office.

Following Carson's directions, he put an all-points bulletin on the air. If James Thomas was still in the general area, there was a chance he'd be picked up—but I wouldn't have bet on it.

"He sounds like a real nice, clean-cut boy," I said.

Carson grunted, "Yeah. The kind they make up folk songs about. Probably be a big hit in Peking. Providin' he gets there."

The sheriff got to his feet. "I'm goin' to try to find out where Ditman made that call from. You want to come along, or go on upstairs to your paper work?"

"Very funny," I said, and we left.

The only question, once we were in the sheriff's county-car, was which way to go.

"He was coming north along State Street when I first saw him," I said, "so I guess we start south."

Carson agreed. We drove slowly southward along State, through the downtown area below the courthouse square, which took perhaps three minutes, then on into a residential area.

"Course, if it was a regular workday, and the weather was good, there wouldn't be much of a problem," Carson said. "But it bein' a holiday, with most places closed, and lousy weather besides that—"

He left it at that. I knew what he meant. The combination of a holiday and rain had made the streets of Monroe practically as deserted as a graveyard at midnight.

Though in a way, as I pointed out to Carson, that was a help to

us. There wouldn't be many places where the FBI agent could have found a public phone. About the only places open were the taverns and a few gas stations.

Unless he had called from the place where he was shot, which was unlikely, he must have used a public phone, and that from somewhere he wouldn't be noticed. Otherwise, we would have heard about it by now.

"It took him ten minutes gettin' from where he called on down to the courthouse," Carson said. "But we don't know how fast he was goin', or which direction he came from before you saw him, or if he stopped again."

"Yeah. Wait a minute, though. That bum, Jack Beasley, said Ditman almost ran into him at the intersection this side of the courthouse, so evidently Ditman was coming from the south then."

Carson growled, "I wouldn't believe anything Beasley said if he swore on a stack of Bibles shoulder-high."

We passed the city limits, and State Street widened slightly and became a bumpy, blacktopped highway. There were few houses this far out, but there were a couple of service stations. We stopped at each one. No luck.

"Heck, we might as well go back to town. Try some other direction,"

Carson said. "Nothing out here."

"The intersection with the east-west highway is just ahead, and there's a gas station there," I said. "Let's go that far, anyway."

Carson shrugged. We drove on to the point where the two highways crossed. The station there was closed. A sign in the window read: Gone to Celebrate the Fourth.

There was an outside phone booth. The door was folded open. Carson and I left the car, went over to look inside the booth.

There were smears of blood all over it.

Carson said, for both of us, "I'll be damned."

The bloodstains were still damp to the touch. I looked at my watch. Twelve-thirty. We'd left the courthouse about fifteen minutes before.

Heavy mist began to sift down from the gray sky overhead. We went back to the car. Carson pounded a fist against the steering wheel. "Which way did he come?"

I looked around. There was little to see. The deserted gas station; the intersection of the two highways; open fields stretching away on all sides; a couple of farmhouses in the distance to the south.

I remembered aloud what Dr. Johnson had said, that Ditman couldn't have lived much more than twenty or thirty minutes after

he was shot. Ten of those minutes were accounted for.

"Damn it, I know," Carson said. "Right now, we're not more'n a few minutes drive from where Ditman got it. But which way?"

I looked south, then east, then west. It was a three-way tossup. If we had plenty of men to spread out from this point, we might get somewhere.

But we didn't have plenty of men. And we couldn't expect reinforcements from the FBI for another couple of hours.

Which way? South, east, or west?

In an agony of frustration, I stared out at the mist. Slowly my eyes focused on the trickles of moisture worming down the outside of the windshield. I punched a finger against the windshield and made a downward stroke. Then another at a right angle to the first, making an "L".

Carson stared, lifting shaggy eyebrows.

"If this was a map," I said, "I'd have just marked a course south—then east."

"I know you ain't been drinkin', so you must be crazy."

"Could be," I agreed. "But you said yourself that Ditman wasn't in any shape for clear and rational thinking. Maybe, to him, it seemed like a good idea to try to leave us

a map, only he didn't have time to finish it."

The sheriff started the car. At the intersection we turned east. "Might as well both act crazy," he muttered. "And I just thought of something."

"What's that?"

"Jack Beasley has a store about ten miles down the road here. Remember this mornin', how all of a sudden he popped up, just after Ditman's car hit that tree?"

I did remember. And I remembered that Beasley, in his old pick-up, had been right behind Ditman on State Street.

"But hell," I said, "if Beasley was mixed up in this, would he have followed Ditman into town, without trying to stop him? Not to mention getting out of his truck and calmly coming over to see if Ditman was dead or alive. No, I can't see a bum like Beasley having any part of killing a Federal agent. That's way out of his league."

Carson grunted. "Yeah—if he knew it was an FBI man. But suppose he didn't know? Suppose he took Ditman at face value, just another drifter passin' through."

I chewed on that as the car sped along the highway through the deepening gray mist.

James Thomas was the one who fatally wounded the agent. Ditman had made that reasonably clear on

the phone. But that didn't rule out the possibility that Thomas had an accomplice. In fact he must have. Someone in the area had been providing him with food and shelter.

But Jack Beasley? As I'd said, hiding out Federal fugitives, and being involved in the murder of Federal officers was way out of his league—if he knew what he was doing.

Jack Beasley was a cheap crook, and not very good at it. The county jail was practically a second home to him. Bootlegging, receiving stolen property, drunk and disorderly, assault—he'd made the route.

A couple of years before I'd managed to convict him of burglary, and put him away for a year in the state pen. He might still have been there except that his son, Billy, who didn't take after his father, had been killed in action in Viet Nam about a year ago. The state parole board had released Beasley from prison, mostly on the strength of that. Which was funny, in a macabre sort of way, since Beasley had never given his son anything but misery.

Carson said, "That's the place up there on the left."

It was a ramshackle wooden building, its walls held together by faded signs advertising cigarettes and soft drinks plastered here and

there. Two gas pumps stood under an overhang in front. There was a small, unpainted house in a weed-grown lot out back. I noticed the pickup truck I'd seen Beasley in that morning, parked between the house and the store. "Cheerful looking place," I said.

Carson grunted. He pulled off the highway, stopped under the overhang. We left the car and went inside.

The interior was like a cave. The only light came from a couple of small dusty windows set high in a side wall, and a single kerosene lamp on a counter at the back.



We picked our way along an aisle between dingy display cases. Beasley was sitting on a stool behind the counter, reading a magazine. Hearing us, he looked up.

"Well, if it ain't the county's finest," he said in a voice like pebbles rattling in a tin can. "What can I do you for?"

I waited for Carson to take the lead. He looked around the shadowy store, taking his time about it. Then his glance settled on Beasley.

"A young feller in his mid-twenties," Carson said abruptly. "Medium-sized, with blond hair that he may've dyed a darker color, gray eyes and kind of pale complexion, stranger around here. You seen anyone like that, Jack?"

"Nope," Beasley said. He shrugged burly shoulders, and watched us through narrowed eyes. "That all?"

"James, his name is," the sheriff said. "Thomas James."

I started to speak, but the sheriff cut me off, and went on, "He's a bad one, Jack. Wanted for several things. Includin' murder."

"Do tell," Beasley yawned. "Well, if I see him, I'll be sure not to turn my back on him." He picked up his magazine.

"This feller shot a man this mornin'," Carson persisted. "Man died. Come to think of it, you saw him—there on the courthouse lawn, in town."

"No kiddin'," Beasley said carelessly. "Me, I thought that guy was drunk, the way he almost run into me."

"He was an FBI agent," Carson said.

The magazine fell from Beasley's hand. His eyes flicked from side to side. "FBI? You mean it was a G-man that this James Thomas shot?"

I could hear Beasley breathing rapidly in the silence that followed.

Then Carson said softly, "I told you his name was Thomas James. How come you turned it around?"

Beasley started, licked his thin lips, finally rasped, "Hell, a natural mistake, with a—a name like that."

Now I put in, "Have you been hiding out. James Thomas here in this rathole the last few days? If you have, it'll be a lot better—for you—if you tell us about it right now. Maybe the government will let you off with a harboring a fugitive rap. That beats hanging, Beasley."

He scrubbed a palm over his face. For a moment I thought we had him. "I don't know a thing," he said. "Not a thing."

"Yeah, then how come you followed the agent into town this mornin' in your truck?" Carson growled.

"I—I didn't—"

Then I tried to push him on over the edge. Instead I made a blunder. "We just talked to the people that live down the high-

way, west of here," I snapped. "They said they saw a gray sedan go past, with your pickup right behind."

Beasley stared at me. A long moment went by. He suddenly relaxed. We'd lost him.

"That's kind of funny," he said, "seein' as how those people are gone on a vacation to Florida."

Carson tried to pick up the pieces, but it did no good. By now, Beasley had regained his poise. He was sweating, all right, but he wasn't talking—except in an attempt to pump us for information on why the FBI had been interested enough in James Thomas to send an agent looking for him.

"What they wanted him for don't matter," Carson snapped. "Now he's wanted for murder. That's what matters."

"Well, you ain't goin' to find him here," Beasley said. "Go look somewhere else. Cops! If I never see you two again it'll be too soon."

He laid his magazine on the counter, opened it to a page of photographs of nude women. His lank, graying hair fell over his forehead as he bent for a closer look.

The sheriff gave me a questioning glance. I shook my head. We were going to need a big wedge to pry anything out of Beasley, and right now we were all out of

wedges. Beasley hadn't budged.

Maybe when the FBI arrived, they could do something.

I tried a last gambit. "If you're so clean, Beasley, you won't mind if the sheriff and I search the place."

He didn't even look up. "Search away. The house is open, out back. You get through with the store and the house, you might try the woods on beyond the house. There ain't more'n three or four hundred acres of 'em. Maybe you'll find this feller out there among the briar patches."

That was that. If he didn't mind us searching, it was sure we wouldn't find anything.

"Let's get out of here," Carson muttered.

As I started to turn from the counter, my eye fell on a small, framed photograph on a dusty shelf behind Beasley. It was a picture of a young man in Army uniform, Beasley's son who had died in Viet Nam.

"I guess it's just as well your boy isn't around anymore," I said. "You'd sure make him sick at his stomach."

"Keep your big mouth shut about my boy," Beasley snarled, lunging to his feet. It was a lot more reaction than I had expected. Maybe we had a wedge, after all.

"Think about it," I said. "Billy

there, going off to fight the communists and getting himself killed—and now here's his own father protecting a communist even lousier than the ones who killed him."

For a moment I thought Beasley was going to come over the counter and take a swing at me. Then he rasped, "What the hell are you talkin' about, Gates?"

"Are you kidding? Don't you know James Thomas is a communist? That's why the FBI were on his tail. He stole some government documents from his father's house, shot a man who got in his way, and now he's trying to get to his buddies down in Cuba, and from there to Russia—"

I broke off, because he wasn't listening anymore. He was staring past me into the shadows, and whatever he was seeing there evidently wasn't pleasant.

Finally he said, "Is that the truth? Thomas is a commie spy—a damn traitor?"

"It's the truth, Jack," the sheriff put in softly.

"Sleep good tonight, Jack," I said. Then, to Carson, "Let's get out of this joint."

"Yeah. It stinks in here."

We got perhaps four steps toward the front door. Then Beasley said, "Wait a minute."

Carson gave me a wink as we turned back to the counter. He

said, "You suddenly remember somethin'?"

"Maybe." Beasley chewed at his lower lip. "Listen, at one time or another, maybe I've kind of give a helpin' hand to fellers on the run. You know? Put 'em up here for a couple of days, if they got money, then pass 'em on to a contact down in Florida. From there, they can get out of the country, or whatever they want."

Sweat was dripping down his face. He fumbled out a cigarette and lit it. Carson and I waited.

"Strictly business with me," Beasley said, dribbling smoke from his mouth as he talked. He took another drag from his cigarette. "I never asked any questions of these guys. None of my business what they've done. But I'd never hide out any damn turncoat or—"

"Oh, brother," I said. "Murderers and thieves, fine, but you draw the line at the pinko set, huh? Come off it, Beasley."

He made a sharp, angry gesture. "I don't give a damn what you cops think of me. But I'm tellin' you, I wouldn't help any commie. That's altogether different than the other, some poor slob with the cops chasin' him for robbin' some grocery store or the like."

Carson said sarcastically, "Kind of a matter of ethics?"

Beasley didn't seem to hear. "I

ain't sayin' I ever saw James Thomas, and you'd never be able to prove I had. But if he had been here the last couple of days, he'd be long gone now. He'd have took off right after pluggin' that guy this mornin'. Headed east for the state border, in a beat-up old black coupe—"

Carson wheeled, headed for the front door. "I'll put that on the radio in the car," he said over his shoulder.

"Remember, I'm just supposin', Sheriff," Beasley called.

The screen door slammed behind Carson. I turned to Beasley. He was lighting a fresh cigarette. His hands were trembling. I said, "What happened this morning?"

"Nothing."

"Come on. There's no witness. Besides, like I told you, the quicker you get out from under, the better off you'll be. Harboring a fugitive is one thing, murdering a Federal agent is something else."

Beasley thought about it. "I told you, Gates. I wouldn't have a comie within a mile of here—if I knew it." His eyes flicked around the store, came back. "Short and sweet, it was like this. Feller came in here about eleven this morning. Looked like a bum—no shave, lousy clothes—and asked me for a job. I told him to hit the road. Then Thomas came in from the

back. He thought I was alone. Soon as this guy saw him, he went for him. There was a scuffle." Beasley stopped. Again he looked around the store.

"Well, go on," I said impatiently.

"That was it. Thomas pulled a gun and fired. Right at the same time, this guy hit him—knocked him cold. Me, I got the hell out of the way. The guy staggered by me, bent over and holdin' his belly. He got in a gray car and took off west. By then Thomas was comin' around. I asked him what the hell? He told me the guy had been in with him on a robbery. Asked me to get after him, find out where he went. By the time I got the truck on the highway the gray car was out of sight. I drove on to the intersection, and spotted the car headed for town. He must've stopped somewhere."

I told him, "He did. So you followed him into town, and when he hit the tree, you came over to see if—"

"Yeah. To see if he was still kickin'. Hell, I thought he was on the lam himself. You know? So he wasn't goin' to do any talkin' to cops, even if he was still alive."

That explained that point.

"Man," Beasley added, "if I'd had any idea he was a Fed, I'd have been long gone myself, along with Thomas."

I walked toward the door. "I'm going to talk to the sheriff. Stay put. Or make a break for it, if you want."

He laughed harshly. "I ain't goin' anywhere."

At the door, I glanced back. He was staring at the picture of his dead son. I went on out. Carson was just finishing the radio call to his office.

"The deputy'll relay the information on ahead. Maybe we still got a chance to nail Thomas, if he don't ditch his car and pick up another one," Carson said.

I nodded. "Beasley finished the story for me." I gave it to him briefly.

When I finished, he said, "Well, either Jack's awful scared, or you really got to him with the crack about his son, and Thomas."

Patriotism fitted Beasley about like a size forty suit on a midget, but the main thing was that now we knew where we were going, or thought we did.

Suddenly, a roar of gunfire ripped the early afternoon air. Carson leaped from the car, and to-

gether we plunged back into the store. Then we stopped in our tracks.

Beasley stood swaying on his feet, over near the east wall. A display case had been pulled away from the wall, revealing a small door in the wall itself, a door that was open now. A man lay sprawled half in, half out of a tiny closet there. There was a .45 automatic beside him.

Beasley turned to us. A smoking shotgun fell from his hands, clattered on the floor. He nodded. "Meet James Thomas," he said. "He's a fast boy with a gun."

I went over to look down at Thomas, or what was left of him. I shook my head at Carson. "This one's had it."

"You—bet he—has," Beasley gasped. He pressed a hand over the crimson blotch on his shirt. "So we're even."

"Why did you do it?" Carson asked.

"What the hell," Beasley said. He fell to his knees, then uttered his last words: "What the hell—it's the Fourth of July, ain't it?"



Anticipation of a "whole new life" has been known to influence wary plans for extirpating the old.



WHEN Jenny came back from the corner newsstand with the *Sunday Times-Picayune* under her arm she found Rocky standing at the window gazing down into the grimy alley where a stray mongrel was doing his best to remove the lid from a trash can. Rocky waited until the dog finally gave up in despair and slunk off with its ears drawn back and face almost touching the ground, then he shook his head and turned away.

Jenny removed her sunglasses and dropped into a chair. Her rich chestnut hair was pulled back and she had not put on makeup. The strain of sleeplessness showed on her face, for she had tossed and turned most of the night in the airless little apartment. She felt irritable, and the four block walk to the newsstand and back in the

for JENNY

steaming New Orleans heat had done nothing to improve her disposition.

"What kept you so long?" Rocky asked.

"It's hot out, in case you don't know it," she replied. "I took my time. Do you have any objections?"

"Kind of grumpy this morning, aren't you?"

"I'm beat. You'd be, too, if you'd slept as little as I did." She looked at him imploringly. "Rocky, when are we going to get out of this dump?"

Rocky ran fingers across his chin and along the side of his face. He hadn't been out of the apartment for a single minute in the past five days, nor had he shaved during all that time. The coarse black stubble that covered his face gave him a dirty and repulsive appearance.

"Maybe in about five days," he said. "Maybe a week. We'll see how it goes."



Jenny sighed. "If we don't get out of here soon I'll be climbing the walls."

"You think I'm having a vacation?" He gave her a pat on the cheek and added with a smile, "Chin up, baby." Against the black whiskers his teeth looked very white. For a moment he seemed about to kiss her. Jenny hoped he wouldn't. The thought of those stiff black bristles touching her skin gave her a chill. Rocky had always been clean-shaven but now he looked like a bum, a stranger whom she could not quite recognize.

"We'll have a ball when we get to Miami," she heard him say. "We'll really go out on the town."

"Sometimes I wonder if we ever will get there," she said. "Right now Miami seems as remote as the moon."

"We'll get there, all right. Don't you worry that pretty little head of yours about that." He felt his chin again. "How do you think I'll look with a beard?"

"I haven't any idea. Right now you look like—"

"I know. Like a bum. Wait'll I trim it, though. I'll have one of those goatees and a moustache that curls on the ends. With a pair of glasses and that dark blue suit of mine, they'll think I'm a college professor strictly from squares-

ville, not worth a second glance."

Looking at him, she could not see how anybody would possibly mistake him for a college professor. She said nothing.

"I'll walk out of here carrying that briefcase, with the money and gun, right past every cop in town, and not one of them will suspect who I am. Won't that be a laugh?"

"It will be a scream."

"Chin up," he said, patting her again. Then, picking up the paper, he walked to the divan and stretched himself out. He looked over the front page first and then went to the comics while Jenny sat, staring ahead in stony silence.

She had known all along that Rocky wasn't too strong in the brain department but, until five days ago, she had never fully realized what a bumbling idiot he really was. There had been no need to fire the gun. She had been parked at the curb, seated behind the wheel of a stolen car with the engine running, in a position to observe almost everything that had happened. Just as he was leaving the loan company one of the clerks had panicked and let out a scream. Instead of making a dash for the car, Rocky had swung around and fired one shot. The tragic part of it was, not only had the shot been fatal, but the victim had happened to be the niece of an

important politician. Now every policeman and plainclothesman in the city was doing his utmost to find the killer.

It was little consolation to Jenny to know that she was free to come and go as she pleased, for on the day of the robbery she had been dressed like a man, wearing one of Rocky's sport shirts and one of his snap-brim hats pulled down over his face with her hair drawn up underneath it. They were looking for two men, not a man and a woman.

She was still pondering these things when Rocky's voice broke in upon her thoughts. He had been turning the pages of the society section when something caught his eye.

"Listen to this," he said. "Mr. and Mrs. George Devereux were hosts at a cocktail party Saturday given at their Lake Shore home. Among those present were . . . And it goes on to tell how she's taking a trip out to the Coast to visit her old man who's a big stockbroker out there."

"Isn't that nice," Jenny said dryly. "I had no idea you were so concerned with social events."

"I'm not. I thought you might be." He folded the paper and tossed it over to her. "Have a look at the picture."

Jenny unfolded the paper and

glanced down in a detached way. She found the picture near the bottom, and a look of surprise came to her face. It was the picture of a young man and a young woman, both of them poised and self-satisfied with the assurance that comes of wealth. It was not the man who held her attention, but the woman. So closely did she resemble Jenny that she might have been looking at a picture of herself.

Rocky was watching her slyly, with a smile plastered on his mouth. "I didn't know you had a twin sister in New Orleans," he said.

Jenny paid no attention to him. With a shrug of her shoulders she threw the paper aside.

Closing her eyes, her thoughts drifted to a home on the Lake Shore and the couple named Devcreux. The name had a magical ring to it and she wondered about this woman, so much like herself in some ways and yet so remote, existing in an incomprehensible world of luxury, doted upon and pampered. She tried hard to visualize this world as she thought it might be, and then with a wistful sigh she opened her eyes, exchanging the vision for her own sordid surroundings. Was there nothing more to life than moving from city to city, she wondered, pulling

small heists, living high-on-the-hog one day and in flea-bags the next?

When they got to Miami it would be the horse races. Rocky was a confirmed racetrack tout with a line of hot tips and a phenomenal record of failure. The money would soon be blown, and the cycle would begin all over again—the endless treadmill that led to nowhere.

Suddenly it seemed incredible to her that she had ever loved Rocky, or even thought she had loved him.

"How about getting us a beer?" Rocky said.

Jenny got up and walked into the kitchen, took one can of beer from the refrigerator and brought it back to the parlor-bedroom.

Rocky asked, "How come you're not having one?"

"You know I don't care for beer."

She watched him snap off the tab and gulp down a swallow. Then she said, "Rocky, twelve thousand dollars is a lot of money, isn't it?"

"It's not what you'd call small change."

"Divided in half it's six thousand dollars each."

He eyed her suspiciously. "Who said anything about dividing it in half?"

"Rocky, I've had it. I want out. I want my half."

"Try and get it," he challenged.

"I want it, Rocky," she said in a calm voice. "I've earned it. I'm entitled to it. If it weren't for me you'd be in jail right this minute with a murder charge facing you."

"How do you figure that?"

"You wouldn't have any food or beer or cigarettes. You wouldn't have anything. You'd have to leave this apartment to get them, or else starve, and when you did you'd be picked up in five minutes and hauled into jail. In case your memory is short," she went on, "I'm the one who rented this apartment. As far as you're concerned that slattern of a landlady doesn't even know you exist."

"You're getting all hepped up about nothing. I told you before, we'll be out of here in about five days. Just as soon—"

"I don't intend to wait that long. I'm leaving now. Today."

"Walking out on me. Just like that," he said, and snapped his fingers.

"Just like that. I told you I've had it." She paused. "Listen to me, Rocky. The rent is paid up for a whole week in advance. Before I leave I'll see to it that the place is stocked with food, cigarettes and beer, and anything else you need, enough to last you a whole week. By that time your beard should be grown in and you can walk out of

here then without having to worry."

"No dice! Try touching that briefcase and you'll find yourself with a handful of broken fingers." Suddenly his face softened and a smile came to his lips. He caught hold of her hand and pulled her down beside him.

She sat limply, offering no resistance, and Rocky put his arm around her shoulders.

"You're all on edge," he said. "You're a bundle of nerves. You didn't get any sleep. This place is a dump, not even fit for human beings. You think I don't understand? I've got to sit here all day, looking at four walls. At least you can go outside, get some air. I can't even stick my head out the window in case someone will see me and report it." His arm tightened around her and he leaned forward and looked into her face. "Look at it this way; a week from now we'll be in Miami, loafing on the beach and living in some swanky hotel, with twelve thousand dollars in our jeans. We might even get married and make everything legal. How would you like that?"

She didn't answer. She could see the futility of trying to reason with him any further, and Rocky did have a temper, a nasty one. Well, at least she had tried, and now that she had failed she would have to

devise another way to elude him.

"Now, how about getting me another beer," he said. "I'm empty. Get one for yourself, too. It will do you good."

She took just one and gave it to Rocky. There were only two left and by noon he had them finished. He could drink beer all day with practically no ill effects. By the same token, whiskey hit him hard and he usually avoided it.

Early that afternoon Jenny went out for more beer. She came back with six cold cans in a paper bag and a bottle of whiskey. When Rocky saw the whiskey a scowl came to his face.

"Who's that for?"

"It's for me."

"You plan on killing a whole fifth of whiskey?"

"I might, Rocky. I just might."

They whiled away most of the afternoon the way they usually did, playing gin rummy. Rocky drank his beer and Jenny her whiskey. Each time she went into the kitchen to refill her glass she measured out what looked like a full shot and then poured most of it down the sink, mixing what was left with water. The drink she brought back with her was colored enough to make it look authentic although it contained no more than a tablespoonful of whiskey.

When Rocky ran out of beer and told her to get him some more she gave him a dazed look and said in a slurry voice, "Rocky, darling, I couldn't make it down the stairs, let alone up the street."

"You've been hitting that bottle pretty hard, haven't you?"

"I'm going to get plastered. I'm going to sleep for two whole days and forget about everything."

"You're plastered already."

She threw out her hand and smiled foolishly. "I am not. There's a whole half bottle left. And if you're a good boy," she added, "I might let you have one teeny little drink out of it."

After ten cans of beer Rocky's appetite for drink was sharpened rather than dulled and, since he couldn't go out himself and Jenny was in no condition to, he had no choice. He would have one drink, he decided. Two at the most.

It was dark when he finished. The bottle was empty, and he lay cold on the divan. Jenny went over and shook him hard. His face twitched and he grunted, but he didn't open his eyes.

She went to the dresser, creamed her face, put on makeup and combed her hair, then slipped into a fresh summer dress and stood there briefly, admiring her reflection in the mirror. With twelve thousand dollars she could put on

‘a front and, given a little luck, perhaps snare the right man. Someday her picture might even appear on the society page too. A whole new life lay ahead of her and she intended to make it a good one.

She emptied the dresser drawers and placed most of the contents in a small weekend bag along with her cosmetics. Then, after she had packed the rest of her clothes in a much larger suitcase, she hurried to the closet, took down the briefcase containing the money and the silencer-equipped gun and emptied it on the bed. Working quickly, she put four hundred dollars into her wallet and the rest of the money into the weekend bag. She left the empty briefcase and the gun lying on top of the bed, took her keys from her purse and locked both suitcases.

She had just put the keys back into her purse and snapped it shut when she heard a sound and looked up. Rocky was raising himself on his elbow. His eyes were bloodshot and dangerous, his face contorting with rage.

“You lousy little tramp!” he said.

She stood paralyzed as he got to his feet and took an unsteady step forward.

“You stinking little bum!” he snarled, closing his fists. “Gonna walk out with everything, were

you, and leave me stranded?”

Breaking the spell, she sprang forward and picked up the gun, raised it and pulled the trigger. The bullet caught Rocky in the chest. A dark red splotch appeared on his shirt as if by magic. But he still came forward, staggering, lurching, his arms extended. She fired again. He sagged backwards. In a few seconds he was dead.

Even the two dull pings had seemed to fill the room and overflow outside. She hurried to the window and peered down as if expecting to find a throng of people looking up. The alley was empty. A piano thumped in a nearby barroom and on the floor below a television blared.

With a breath of relief she picked up her suitcases and purse, turned out the light and left the apartment. Locking the door behind her, she hurried down two flights of stairs and stepped out into the street.

It was four blocks to Bourbon Street and the milling crowds of tourists that filled it, like an endless, undulating serpent, always active, always moving. Picking her way through this mass of humanity, she continued for another two blocks to the nearest drugstore. She went to the phone booth and called the airport, requesting a reservation on the first flight to Los

Angeles, any airline, any class.

She was told that everything was booked up until next day. "I can get you a seat on the 9:10 flight tomorrow morning," the

clerk said and, since she had no choice in the matter, she accepted.

When he asked for her name she blurted out the first one that came to her. It seemed she must use any



name but her own, and once it was spoken it could not be retracted.

She spent the night at a hotel on St. Charles Avenue and the next morning she took a cab to the airport, arriving there almost an hour early. She wore a smart, tailored suit and white high-heeled shoes and, with the little pillbox straw pushed back on her head, she looked very chic.

She paid for her ticket and checked in the large suitcase, explaining to the clerk that she intended to carry the small one. "May I leave it here until departure time?"

"Certainly."

He took the bag and handed her a baggage check. She dropped the plane ticket into her purse and put the baggage check in her wallet, wondering what the clerk would think if he knew the value of the suitcase he had just stored under the counter.

As she walked away she noticed two men who seemed to be observing her with interest. She continued past them, her high-heeled shoes tap-tapping on the terazzo floor, toward the main entrance. Suddenly she had the feeling they were following her.

She paused on the concrete walk outside the door, looking all around, with the bored indiffer-

ence of the seasoned traveler about to embark upon another routine trip, but a slight paleness and a certain tenseness in her face disputed her otherwise casual appearance.

Then it happened. The two men moved up to her and the stout one said, "Police officers," and pulled out his wallet. He flipped it open to expose something that she could not quite see, then closed it and put it back in his pocket. "You'll have to come with us."

She looked into his plump red face incredulously, her mind in turmoil. How? How could they possibly have discovered Rocky's body so soon? And how could they have traced her with such apparent ease?

"But why?" she stammered.

"You'll find that out later," he said in a grave tone. "Please come along."

"But my plane—" she protested.

"You needn't worry about that. We'll take care of everything."

They got into a car. Jenny sat in back with the stout, red-faced man, while the other one drove. They turned right on the Airline Highway, heading away from the city instead of toward it.

Jenny looked at him in alarm. "Where are we going?"

The man didn't answer. He had lighted a cigarette and now he sat

back, studiously puffing on it, holding it in a peculiar way between his thumb and forefinger as if it were a dangerous thing.

"This isn't the way to New Orleans," Jenny exclaimed.

"Calm yourself. Easy does it."

The driver turned and gave her



a quick look but he said nothing.

Then it suddenly dawned on her that these men were not what they claimed to be. "Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

"Mrs. Devereux," the stout man said in a patient voice, "you're a nice girl and a pretty girl. But you talk too much. Why don't you just sit back and enjoy the scenery. We know what we're doing."

Then she understood. These two strange men, whoever they were,

had mistaken her for the real Mrs. Devereux. It all came back to her, Rocky's voice reading out loud, *It goes on to say she's taking a trip to the Coast to visit her old man who's a stockbroker out there.*

She almost laughed. The whole thing was unbelievable, fantastic, an outlandish coincidence. The real Mrs. Devereux was leaving too, that same morning, perhaps on another plane. In some way the men had known about it and they had been there waiting.

The same two questions echoed in her brain again. Why? Who were they? There was something sinister about them; she knew it now. The answers came to her like a shock. They were kidnapers. They were going to hold her for ransom.

In a way it was hilarious; in another way terrifying.

She looked at the stout man and said, "You're making a mistake. I'm not Mrs. Devereux. My name is Jenny Wilson. I don't even know Mrs. Devereux. I saw her picture in the paper," she went on desperately, "and I'll admit that I look like her. But I'm not. Really I'm not. I'm Jenny Wilson. Don't you understand?"

The man yawned and flipped his cigarette out through the open window. He was totally unimpressed.

They had been moving at a high

rate of speed. Suddenly the car slowed down and turned into a narrow road. The road crept around the border of a low marshland thick with mosquitoes. They followed it a short distance and stopped. The driver spoke for the first time.

"End of the line," he said. "Everybody out."

Jenny was still trying to reason with the man, to explain things as they really were, when he caught hold of her arm and shoved her out. He got out, too. The driver remained behind the wheel.

It occurred to her then that something more insidious was about to happen. She fought like a wildcat, and the man dealt her a blow with the back of his hand that sent her staggering backward. Through a blur of tears she saw his hand slip under his coat and come out with a gun.

They were professional men, thoroughly skilled in their business. It took one bullet. She died instantly.

They dumped her body in the swamp and waited there until the

muck closed over it before they drove away. The stout man sat beside the driver. He had opened Jenny's purse and taken the wallet from inside. Out of the four hundred dollars there was still almost two hundred left, along with the baggage check.

He put the money into his pocket and said to the driver, "She was a hellcat, wasn't she, Albert? Bit my hand, she did."

"You wouldn't think it," Albert answered. "A rich dame like that."

"They're all alike, rich or poor. They're all hellcats underneath."

"Maybe that's why he wanted to get rid of her," Albert said in a thoughtful voice. "Maybe she was getting to be too much for him."

"That could be, Albert. It could very well be."

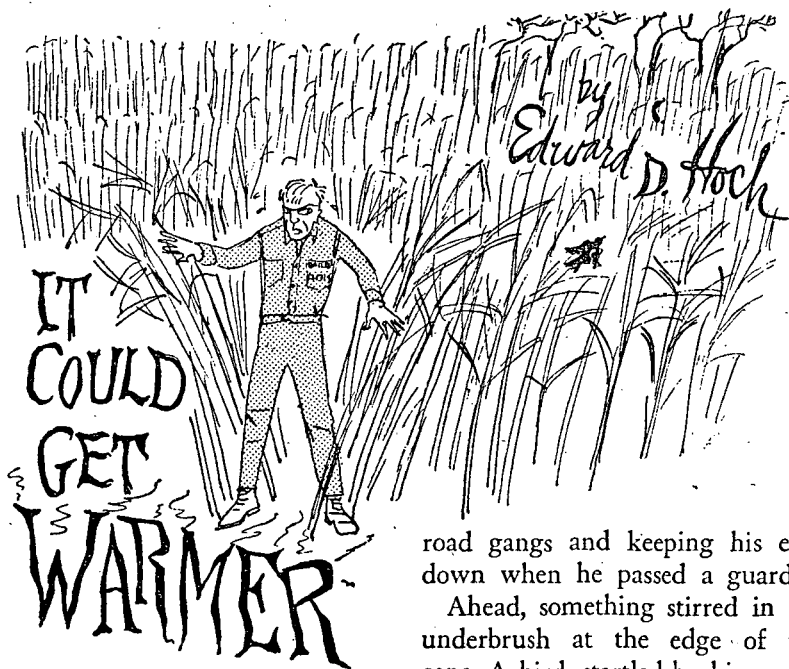
He took the baggage check out of the wallet and tore it, slowly and methodically, into little pieces, then held them in his fist and stuck his arm out the window. He opened his hand and the wind caught the pieces and whipped them away, scattering them like a trail of confetti behind the fast-moving car.



When one walks away from a trying situation, his interpretation of such distress decides his route.

IT WAS only an hour after dawn, but already the air above the cane fields was thick with turgid black flies that dropped onto Bailey's bare arms and dug painfully into the skin before he could brush them away. The morning was hot, and he knew it was the humid warmth that made them bite.

Behind him, somewhere off in the woods, he could hear the barking of a dog. Could they be onto his trail already, after only twenty minutes? No matter; the cross-roads could not be far now, and he would be safe there until the Boss came for him. Safe and free, after two years of working on



road gangs and keeping his eyes down when he passed a guard.

Ahead, something stirred in the underbrush at the edge of the cane. A bird, startled by his morn-

ing approach, took wing into the too blue sky, heading north because there was no place farther south to go; birds and bugs, flying free, not confined to the earth like Bailey.

He broke free of the cane at last, onto a ribbon of asphalt pavement that stretched to eternity in either direction. Off to the left, almost out of sight, he could see his destination—the little general store at the country crossroads. The place had once been called Reliance, when a tiny settlement had clustered itself about the crossroads in a futile effort to survive. The other buildings had crumbled and ceased, leaving only the general store for those who lacked the time or energy for the long drive north to the crowded chrome supermarkets.

Bailey stayed off the road as much as possible until he reached the store, ducking down into the pebbled drainage ditch with each hum of an approaching car. Traffic was still light, though, because when farmers arose early in the day it was to work the fields, not to venture abroad in their cars. He knew the alarm would be out for him soon, but he had not heard the barking dog again, and this encouraged him.

"Morning," someone said, and he looked up, startled, seeing for

the first time the slim young man in work shirt and pants who stood on the slanting wooden porch of the general store. "You're out early."

"Yeah," Bailey said, squinting his eyes against the early sun. "It's a hot one today."

"Could get warmer," the man decided, looking at the sky. "Come in and cool off. Our place stays nice in the mornings."

"I was going to." Bailey mounted the three wooden steps and stepped through the rusty screen door, letting it slam shut behind him.

Almost immediately, a girl appeared from the back room. "Steve, who . . ."

She was young and not unattractive, the kind of girl Bailey had known back in the city. Perhaps in an urban surrounding she would have blossomed, but here, the obvious wife of a rural storekeeper, she faded into a background of boxes and shelves. Already, in her middle twenties, there were touches of gray in her unkempt hair.

The young man entered behind Bailey. "It's all right, Linda. I just invited him in to cool off."

The place was neatly cluttered with an assortment of canned goods and packaged foodstuffs, with here and there a bale of wire

or a shovel or ax handle to testify to the farmers' patronage. Bailey felt the coolness of the air and was grateful for it, breathing in the mingled odors of musty furnishings and morning coffee.

"Oh," the girl said. "Would you like a cup of coffee while you rest?"

"Sure," Bailey told her, but now he saw that the man called Steve, was eyeing him suspiciously.

"That's a prison uniform, isn't it?" the man asked.

Bailey was silent for a moment, sizing them up, measuring the distance to the rusty screen door. The standard prison uniform for the road gangs was a shirt and work pants a bit like those that this man wore himself, but Bailey's shirt had his name stenciled over the breast pocket, and a number. On the back of the shirt was another stenciled design, not unlike a target.

"Yes," he admitted. "That's right." He stooped quickly and grasped one of the ax handles, raising it to his shoulder in a half-way menacing gesture.

"Steve!" A gasp came from the girl, a hand went to her mouth in a classic gesture of rising terror.

"Don't worry," he told them. "I'm not going to hurt you if you play ball. Someone's picking me up here at noon."

"You've escaped," the man called Steve said. "They'll be coming for you."

"Maybe, maybe not." Bailey grasped the ax handle a little more surely. "That's not your concern. I'm goin' to stay here till noon when the Boss picks me up. Then



I'll be gone and you won't have any trouble."

The young man motioned to his wife. "Go in the back room, Linda."

"No," Bailey cautioned. "There'll be a telephone back there. I don't want no trouble.

Stay where I can see you both."

"You can't stay here all morning! We'll have customers coming in."

Bailey regarded him with something like scorn. "That's your problem, buddy, not mine. I stay here till noon, and then I leave. You play along, and I'll ask the Boss to slip you a fifty. You cross me up and he'll kill you—if I don't do it first." He relaxed on a worn wooden counter. "I'll take that coffee now, miss."

She stood rooted to the spot for a moment, then started for the back room. Suddenly Bailey followed, dashing through the flowered curtain and beating her to the telephone by two paces. "Rip it out if you want," the man told him, "but somebody's sure to report it and the phone company'll send a man to find the trouble."

"Wise guy, aren't you?"

"Not really. I'm just no hero. I don't want trouble."

"That makes two of us." He sat down and accepted the cup of coffee she brought him.

They were silent for a time. Bailey tried to listen once more for the barking dogs, but there was no sound from outside except the chirping of birds. "Not many people around here," he said.

"Enough. They come from a long ways."

"To this little store?" Bailey snorted. "What's the name of it anyway? Land's End?"

"Perkins. It was my father's and now it's mine. We make do."

Bailey downed his coffee in silence, aware that their eyes were on him.

Finally the girl asked, "What did you do? What were you in for? What crime?"

He snorted again. "I should tell you murder, huh? To scare you a little? Then after I'm gone you could tell all your friends you had a real murderer holding you prisoner."

"Are you a murderer?"

"No. Not yet, anyway. I robbed a bank. Me and three other guys. Two years I've served, but now the Boss is coming to get me."

"Why would he do that?"

"We live by our own code. It took him a while, but he didn't forget me. He's been living high on that money from the robbery. I guess maybe now he needs me for another job."

"I have some things to unpack," Steve Perkins said.

"Go do them. Just don't wander too far."

It was cool here in the back, even cooler than up front, and he felt he could relax for the first time that morning. He walked over to glance out the back win-

dow, seeing only the undisturbed cane field through which he'd come. Yes, it would be safe here until noon. Like some primeval cave in which to crawl, it would be safe here.

The sun was high overhead, blowing a hot wind that penetrated even into the coolness of the store. There had been only one customer all morning, a wrinkled farmer who chatted about the heat, bought a soft drink from the coin machine, and finally departed with a small selection of canned goods and a pouch of tobacco. He'd barely noticed Bailey, and hadn't commented on his presence.

When they were alone once more, Steve Perkins came over to where Bailey was watching the road through the window. "Still think he's coming for you?"

"It's not quite noon yet," Bailey said, more to himself than to Perkins. "He'll be here."

"You're a witness against him. Maybe when you run out to the car he'll just shoot you dead and drive away."

"Nuts!" Bailey spat. "Any more talk like that, mister, and I'll flatten you myself with this ax handle!" He went back to watching the road, buoyed momentarily by the distant sight of a small cloud of dust along the highway. Some-

thing was coming, traveling fast; but then, as it drew near, he saw that it was only a long-haired girl in a red sports car, bound for some half-realized destination. For a moment he imagined himself in the seat next to her, a young man without cares, the way it used to be.

"Should I get lunch?" Linda Perkins asked. The fear had worn off her face now. His presence within their store was becoming only a nuisance.

"Get us a sandwich, Linda," the slim man told her.

Bailey thought he heard a dog barking, and he went around to the other side, where the window commanded a view of the cane fields. There was nothing, nothing but the sun high overhead. "Do you have a radio in this place?" he asked.

"There's one in back," the girl answered.

"Bring it out here. I want to get some local news."

The radio was a small table model, with a cracked plastic case held together by tape. She plugged it into a wall socket and he heard the familiar beat of recorded country music. Sometimes, up at the prison or out on a work crew, the sound of it was in his ears all day. He tried for another station, but there was no news at the moment

—no news and no cars—no luck.

He wondered if there was a roadblock, something that would keep the Boss from getting through. Now it was after noon, and he was beginning to worry. He tried again for some news on the little radio, finally settling for a network broadcast in hopes that a local newscast would follow it.

"You're going to have to leave," the man told him. "If you stay here, they'll catch you sooner or later."

"This is where I'm supposed to meet him," Bailey said doggedly. "This is where I stay." He was beginning to sweat, and he wiped some of the moisture from his forehead.

"It gets warmer as the afternoon goes on," Steve Perkins said.

"Yeah, yeah! You told me!"

The voice on the radio was giving the weather, and followed it with a brief rundown of area news: an auto accident, a barn fire in the next county, then a few routine notes on a weekend church social. Nothing about him. Nothing.

"They're playing it cool," he decided. "Not letting anyone know I'm gone."

Steve Perkins came over with two halves of a sandwich and offered one to Bailey. "You must be hungry."

"Don't try to do me any favors."

The slim man sat down beside him by the window. "You don't talk like this part of the country. Where you from?"

"Up north," Bailey answered vaguely. "A crowded city with crowded streets, where nobody ever cared what happened to you. I came south a long time ago, but things didn't work out."

"You wanted somebody to care about you."

"People care. They care back at the prison. The Boss cares."

"Sure."

Bailey wiped away the sweat once more. "How do you live in this country, in this damn heat?"

"It's nice in the autumn. In another month it starts to cool off. You came during the hot season."

"Don't you think I know it, slaving on that road gang all day?"

"How long do they work you?"

"Dawn to dusk. Long hours this time of the year. I should get the prison board after them."

"And you just walked away?"

Bailey munched the last of the sandwich. "I been walking away from things all my life, mister."

A car appeared and slowed to a stop, but it was only a woman from a nearby farm, come after some flour for the day's baking. Bailey lingered casually near the door until she was gone. Then he went back to the

window and lit a cigarette. There were no other cars in sight.

The afternoon drifted and finally died, hot and torpid, without even the movement of a breeze in the cane fields. It seemed to Bailey that only the flies were in motion out there, and even they circled and buzzed in a half-hearted, logy manner.

"He's not coming for you," the slim man told him. "Don't you realize that by now?"

Bailey moistened his lips. "Somebody'll come. They'll come with the dogs, at least."

"Nobody's coming for you, ever."

"Shut up!" He slammed the ax handle down hard on the wooden counter, bringing the girl running.

"It'll be dark soon now."

Bailey glanced back at the road. "He'll come. Somebody'll come. God, somebody's got to come for me."

"Nobody's coming."

"Maybe I got the wrong store, the wrong crossroads. Is there another place near here?"

"No."

The girl, Linda, came up and stood beside him. "You're very lonely, aren't you?"

"It's the heat, this damned heat! I can't think."

"The nights are cool, you'll see. That is, if you want to keep on waiting."

He looked out at the road once more, at the ribbon of asphalt that stretched everywhere, and nowhere. No car was coming for him, no car would ever come for him. "The hell with it," he said at last, dropping the ax handle.

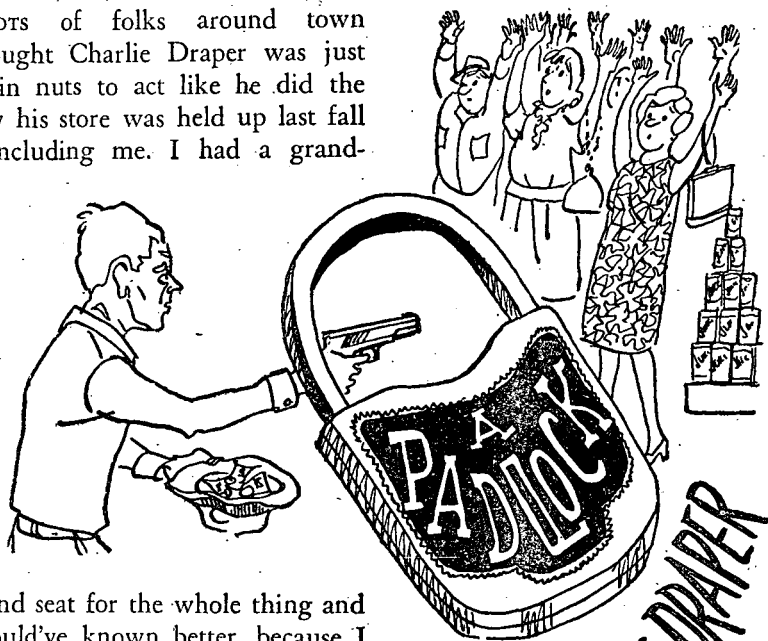
He left them, Steve and Linda Perkins, standing by the screen door of their little general store, watching him shuffle down the steps and into the road. He paused to light a final cigarette, hesitated a moment, and then began walking through the thickening twilight.

He went back the way he had come, through the cane fields, hurrying as he had before. The day was ending, and perhaps they hadn't even missed him yet. Perhaps he could get back before they even noticed he'd been gone.



One who professes to choose the course of least resistance might, on provocation, elicit an abeyant, if unseemly, spirit of enterprise.

Lots of folks around town thought Charlie Draper was just plain nuts to act like he did the day his store was held up last fall—including me. I had a grand-



stand seat for the whole thing and should've known better, because I know Charlie Draper pretty well. We play poker every week, and me and Charlie have been business neighbors for going on twelve years. My hardware store is right next to Charlie's grocery in the old Stackpoole Building, which is backed up tighter'n a fat lady's girdle to the face of the north bluff in Cedar Gulch.

Cedar Gulch is not such a big

town—we haven't got any supermarkets yet—but it's not a poor town, either. A lot of money goes through Charlie's store on Fridays, because the fellows who work in the smelting plant get

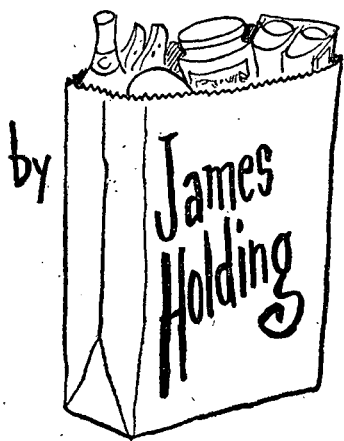
paid on Thursdays. I don't do as good as Charlie—there's not as much call for hardware items as there is for victuals—but I don't do bad, at that. Anyways, this holdup at Charlie's happened on a Friday, right around four o'clock in the afternoon.

The thing was, Charlie was always talking about this theory he had, and everybody who heard about how Charlie acted at the holdup thought they had the laugh on him good because he didn't stick to his theory. He did just the opposite to what he always said was right. I don't know how many times I've heard Charlie talk about his theory—at lunch time at Grogan's, after church on Sundays sometimes, but mostly at our poker sessions after he's had a couple of beers and folded his first two stud cards of a bad hand, and don't

have anything else to do until the next deal except talk.

Charlie claims there's two ways of doing everything, the hard way and the easy way. And a man's a fool that does anything the hard way if he can do it the easy way. That's about all there is to Charlie's theory in a nutshell.

We kid Charlie about it a lot. Least, we used to. Mort Johnson asked Charlie one night, "How about getting married? Was there a hard way to do that and an easy way?" Charlie didn't bat an eye, just said, "Sure, the hard way was to marry a poor girl you loved, and the easy way was to marry a rich girl who loved you." Mort pointed out that Charlie's own wife, Lizabeth, was as poor as a packrat with fleas when he married her, and Charlie said he'd married Lizabeth before he thought up his theory, that was all. Then Deke Sawyer says, "How about playing a busted flush in draw poker, Charlie, what's the easy way to play that?" And Charlie says, "If you pick up a four flush hand on the deal, the hard way to play it is to draw one card to try and fill, but the easy way is to just sit back and play it as a pat hand." Then Charlie grinned and said, "Specially if you're playing with a bunch of guys who are dead easy to bluff,



like all you funny fellows here."

See what I mean? That kind of talk went on whenever Charlie was around, and we never had a chance to shut Charlie up about his theory until his grocery store got stuck up.

The funny thing was, Charlie wasn't even in the store when the holdup man walked in and pulled out a .38 from inside his coat and told everybody in the store it was a stickup and to keep quiet and drop all their cash money into his hat when he told them to. The store was full of smelters' wives, like I say, spending the dough that their husbands got paid the day before. It turned out later Charlie was walking back from the post office about then, where he'd been mailing off a money order to his widowed sister in Clutchers Falls.

Anyway, the first I knew anything out of the ordinary was going on was when Charlie comes walking into my store and says to me, "Hi, Herbie, how's a boy?"

"I can't complain," I told him. "But how come you're not over taking care of your customers, Charlie? This is your busy day, Friday. I must've seen at least a dozen women go in your place the last ten minutes."

"Casper'll take care of 'em," Charlie says. "He's an all-right kid for only seventeen, you know

it? Best clerk I ever had. I been down to the post office before it closes, that's why I ain't over there helpin' him."

"Oh," I said. "Well, what can I do for you, Charlie? Sell you a power lawn mower so's you can cut your grass the easy way?" We often lean on him a little like that. Him and his theory.

He shook his head. "You know darn well I got no grass to cut, Herbie, and even if I did, that would be the *hard* way to cut it." He looked at me slantwise, and I knew he wanted me to ask him what would be the easy way, so I did.

"If you got grass," Charlie says, "let 'er grow a while till she's rich and ripe, and then buy yourself a couple goats. They'd eat it down neater'n you could cut it. Cheaper'n a lawn mower, too. That's the easy way, Herbie."

"All right. I'm sorry I asked. What do you need?"

"I thought I might buy a padlock," Charlie said.

"Okay. I got a good selection. Big or little?"

"Oh, about medium, I'd say, Herbie. Maybe two bucks and a quarter, two and a half, in there somewhere. It ought to be pretty strong, though."

"What you going to use it for, Charlie? Tell me that, and I can

tell you better what kind to buy." I got four padlocks of different sizes out of my padlock drawer behind the counter. The cheapest one was made of laminated steel plates.

Charlie says, "I figured to use it on my store curtain."

"This laminated job is the one, then," I pointed to it. "It's plenty strong for that, and only a buck ninety-five. It's what I use on my own curtain." Charlie's grocery and my hardware store both got one of those roll-up steel curtains that you pull down out of the storefront ceiling and padlock to a staple in the sidewalk when you close up the store, you know?

"Okay," Charlie says. "I'll take it." He threw two singles on the counter and I gave him his nickle change.

"Want me to wrap it up?"

"Don't bother, Herbie." He took the padlock and the keys for it, and started out.

"Hey!" I said. "I just thought, you already got a lock for your curtain, Charlie. How come you need another? D'you lose it?"

"Nope," Charlie said, stopping in my doorway. "It's inside my store, laying beside the cash register."

"Well, then . . ."

"I don't want to go in my store right this minute."

"Why not?" I wanted to know.

"It's bein' held up by a gunman," Charlie says.

I thought he was out of his mind. "You sure it wasn't Danny's Bar you was at, instead of the post office?" I asked him.

He laughed. "No, it's a fact, Herbie. I come back from the post office just now and start to go in my store. When I look in through the window, there's a tall skinny guy in there with a gun, lining up my customers to shower down their money in his hat, one at a time. How about that?"

I gulped a little and stared at him. "Is he still there?" I yelped.

"Hope so," says Charlie. "Bound to be, I should think. There's at least fifteen, twenty women in there to rob, not countin' my cash register and my clerk, Casper. And you know how long it takes women to find anything in their handbags."

"I'll call the cops!" I turned around and made a move for my telephone.

"Hold it!" Charlie says. He comes back into my store and grabs my arm. "No police, Herbie, you hear? It's my store bein' robbed, so I'll handle this my own way. Okay?" He grinned at me. "The easy way, that is."

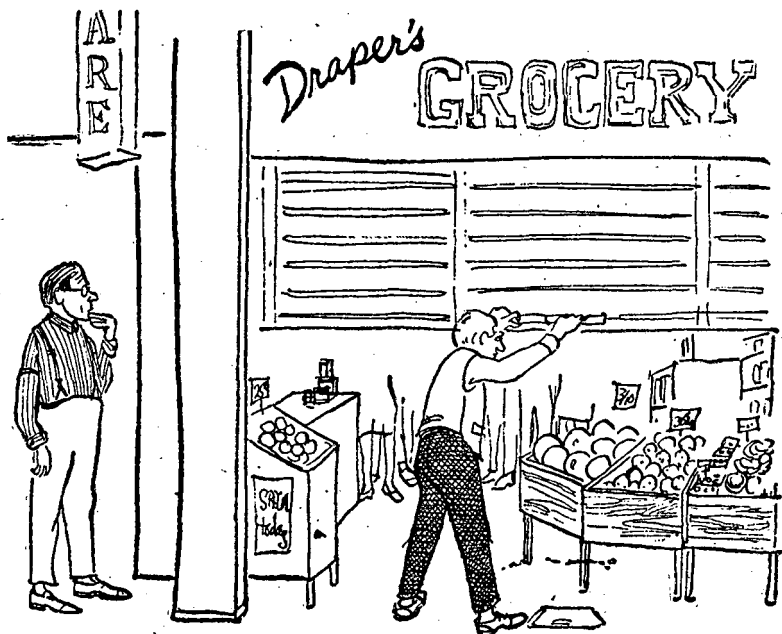
I said okay to the dope, wondering what he was up to. I followed

him as far as the front door of my store and stood in the doorway and watched him stroll the few steps to his own grocery store next door, batting his eyes just once at his store window when he came to it. He turned his head and winked at me and gave a nod, so I knew the gunman was still in there, all right. Charlie had the new padlock I sold him in one hand, open, and he was putting on a big innocent customer act as he got to the door of his store.

He didn't go in. He just reached up over his head, gave a little jump, and grabbed the ring of his

steel store curtain and yanked it down across the storefront, all in one motion. Then he slapped the curtain fastener over the staple in the sidewalk, threaded his new padlock through it and snapped it shut as casual as if he was only shutting up shop for the night, as usual.

Inside three seconds, you could hear a real gabble of voices coming from behind Charlie's steel curtain. His women customers was kinda surprised to have all the daylight from outdoors suddenly shut off, I guess, in the middle of a first class holdup.



Anyway, Charlie comes back to my store, calm as you please, and says, "Okay if I use your phone, Herbie?"

"Go ahead," I said. "Help yourself. You handled that pretty smart, Charlie, I got to admit it. Now you got the fellow sealed up in there, it's a lead pipe cinch the cops can take him easy. Go ahead and phone them."

"Thanks. Lucky thing our stores don't have no back doors, 'count of bein' built so tight against the bluff, ain't it?" Charlie says, grinning at me. "That boy in my place can't come out now except we let him out the front, through the curtain." He picked the receiver off my telephone hook and asked for a number from Maisie Jordan, our day operator.

"That's not the police number," I said to him.

"I know it. I'm not callin' the police. I'm callin' Casper."

"Your store clerk?"

"Sure," Charlie says. "Casper's right in there behind the curtain where the action is. I want to find out what's happenin'."

The phone rang for quite a while before somebody answered it. Charlie says, "Hello, is that you, Casper?"

I guess it was Casper, all right, because I could hear a big rush of talk coming over the wire. Casper

started to tell Charlie there was a holdup going on over there, but Charlie cut him off.

"I know there's a gunman in there," he says. "That's why I pulled down the steel curtain, Casper, to seal him in. What's he doin' now?"

I got up close so's I could hear Casper's part of the talk coming over the wire. "He's wavin' his gun around," Casper says. "He's gonna shoot everybody in the joint, he says."

"Listen, Casper," Charlie says, "you tell him he's locked in the store by that curtain and come hell or highwater, nothin' will get him out except me raisin' the curtain from the outside. You tell him I'm callin' from Herbie Purdom's hardware store right next door, and nobody knows yet he's in there except me and Herbie. Not even the cops." Charlie winked at me. "Go on, now. Tell that holdup man what I said, Casper." Charlie drummed his fingers on my counter till Casper come back on.

"I told him," Casper says.

"What'd he say?" Charlie asks.

"He says he's still gonna kill every dame in the place, and me too, unless you open the curtain mighty quick, Mr. Draper." I thought Casper was on the gunman's side. He wanted the curtain

opened too, and no more waiting.

"Ask him what good he thinks that'll do," Charlie says to Casper, "killin' everybody? Then I *will* call the cops. And no matter how many dames he kills, the cops'll get him easy because he's sealed in, tell him. Instead of just an itty-bitty holdup, the cops'll nail him for a flock of murders. He ought to know you don't get well from a murder charge, Casper. So whatever he does, he's hooked, 'less I raise that curtain. Tell him that now, will you?"

We could hear Casper's seventeen-year-old voice, with a tremble in it like he was seventy, telling the gunman what Charlie said. Pretty soon he comes back on the phone and his voice sounds a little stronger. "He wants to know what's your deal?"

"Deal?" Charlie says, kind of hurt, "I didn't offer no deal to the son-of-a-gun! But you tell him if he leaves my customers alone, and gives 'em back their money, and hands over his gun to you, Casper, I might let him out."

"His gun?" Casper's voice went into a kinda squeaky tenor. "I don't want his gun, Mr. Draper! Listen, can't you . . ."

"You listen," Charlie tells him. "If I open up the curtain and leave him out, I got to be sure he won't start shootin' the minute he

sees daylight, don't I? And the only way I can be sure of that is if you got his gun. Don't that stand to reason? Sink his gun in the sugar barrel if you're scared of it, Casper."

"Okay, Mr. Draper, I'll tell him." Casper did so. After a minute, he says, "The feller wants to know if you'll let him go free after you unlock the curtain?"

"Nope," Charlie says. "He's a holdup man, ain't he? He's got to take what's comin' to him." He paused. Then, "Oh-oh! Wait a minute, Casper!" He holds his hand over the phone for a couple of minutes, then takes it away and says into it, acting real excited, "Listen, Casper, I just looked out the door. And you know what? There's a crowd of miners from the smelter comin' down the street with fire in their eyes! I thought I heard somethin'! Looks a little bit like a lynch party. Probably figurin' to teach that holdup man a lesson about scarin' respectable wives when they're doin' the family shoppin'."

Casper was kicking this piece of news around in his mind for a while. You could tell by his heavy breathing and no talking. Then he put his finger smack on the weak spot in Charlie's lie. "Gee, Mr. Draper," Casper says, "if nobody but you and Mr. Purdom knows

about this holdup, not even the cops, then how come all them miners . . ."

Charlie looks me straight in the eye and says; "Herbie Purdom musta spread the news at the smelter, Casper. He run out of here like a fox with sore feet the minute I started talkin' to you. He's kind of an old lady for gossip anyway, Casper. You know that."

I made a fist and was half of a mind to slug Charlie for that crack. I'm a bigger man than he is by a good sight, but I wanted to find out what would happen, so I didn't.

Charlie went right on. "So you tell that gunman, Casper, that I *will* do one thing for him, if he does like I say with the gun and all. I'll personally guarantee to keep the miners from jumpin' him when he comes out. I'll get him to the jail safe and sound. That's a promise, Casper. It might be kinda touchy, but I'll do it. Tell him that, Casper."

In a minute, Casper's voice comes back, "He says okay, Mr. Draper. Unlock the curtain."

"Are our customers all right?" Charlie asks. "You sure nobody's hurt?"

"They're fine," Casper says.

"Did he give 'em their money back, the ones he robbed so far?"

"Yep. He sure give it all back."

"You got his gun?"

"It's buried in the sugar barrel about a foot down, Mr. Draper."

"Swell," says Charlie. "Then I'll come right over and unlock the curtain. Tell him to come out slow and easy." Charlie hung up.

"*Now* call the cops," I said.

Charlie shakes his head. "Lend me a gun for a few minutes, will you, Herbie?" He points to a double-barreled 12-gauge in my gun case. "That'll do," he says. "That's just the ticket. I won't even get a speck of dust on it, Herbie. Won't even need any shells. How about it? If I bring it back good as new in ten minutes?"

I just gave him a dirty look without saying anything. He had no call to tell Casper I was a big-mouth.

Then he says, "I was only kidding about you bein' a gossip, Herbie. Honest."

Well, it was a pretty good apology for Charlie, so finally I handed him the shotgun. He took it and went on over to his own store and put the gun on the pavement while he unlocked the padlock on his store curtain. Then he pushed up the curtain, and pointed my empty shotgun at the tall skinny guy who came walking out, and waltzed him off to the police sta-

tion all by himself with the gunman looking all around him like crazy for the lynch mob Casper told him about. Of course, there wasn't any.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that if this was Charlie's idea of the easy way to handle a holdup in his store, the guy was just plain nuts, right? Reason I know is, a lot of people around Cedar Gulch was thinking exactly the same thing when they heard about it, including me. Most of us figured this was a prime chance to shove Charlie's theory down his throat and make him choke on it, and shut him up for good, you know what I mean?

Wednesday night after the hold-up, we had our regular poker session, and Charlie was there. After a few hands and a couple of beers, Mort Johnson begins the treatment.

"Well, Charlie," he says, "from now on we won't have to listen to you nattering about that bloody theory of yours any more." Mort's half English, and he talks funny sometimes.

"Why not?" says Charlie, folding his first two stud cards to wait for a better start.

"After the way you handled that holdup of yours last Friday? If ever I heard of doing something the *hard* way, that was it. And you

telling us for years anybody does anything the hard way is a bloody fool!"

"He is," says Charlie, sticking out his jaw a little. "I ain't backin' off from that."

"Then why didn't you handle your holdup the easy way?" Mort jerks his thumb at me and says, "Herbie told us all about you buying the padlock and borrowing a gun, and taking a chance on getting yourself and a lot of women killed, and sweet-talkin' the hold-up man into surrendering on the phone. You call *that* the easy way to handle a simple holdup when all you had to do was call the cops on Herbie's phone, sit back and relax, and let them take over?"

"Wait, Mort, you got it wrong," says Charlie, not taking any back seat that you could notice. He waits till Deke Sawyer rakes in a four dollar pot on a couple of wired kings, and then goes on, "Depends on what you're tryin' to do, which is the easy way and which is the hard way. Right?"

I said, "Right. And you was trying to stop that holdup man from robbing your store, wasn't you?"

"That was part of it," Charlie admits, nodding his head. "But that wasn't all of it."

"Whatever it was, Charlie," Mort says, "come on and admit it, you did it the hard way. And you

can't make us believe different."

Charlie folds his hands and sits back. "You think I kicked my theory in the face, huh?"

"You sure did!" we told him.

Charlie looked serious. His eyes went around to all of us. "Well," he says, "I told Herbie when I went to buy the padlock from him that I was down to the post office. Didn't I, Herbie?"

I said yes.

"Okay. So while I was at the post office, I killed a couple of minutes reading the WANTED notices on the bulletin board down there. I saw where a tall skinny fellow with a white scar on the back of his neck named Slim Cotter is wanted for train robbery over the line. There's a picture of him on the notice. You with me so far, boys?"

We looked at him like you look at a sidewinder that's loose in the kids' sandbox.

"So I go back to my store," Charlie says, tapping his fingers on the poker table, "and through my front window I see a guy inside holding up my customers with a gun. He's a tall skinny bird, and with his back toward me I can see he's got a white scar

on the back of his neck. Get the connection?"

Mort got it first. "You mean you recognized the guy from the WANTED notice in the post office?"

"Sure. It was a cinch to be Slim Cotter, wouldn't you say? I figured it was."

"Even so," says Deke, "what's the difference? You still took the hard way to catch him, didn't you?"

"Not me. I took the easy way to do what I wanted to do. And that was to wrap up this fellow all by myself and hand him over personally to the law."

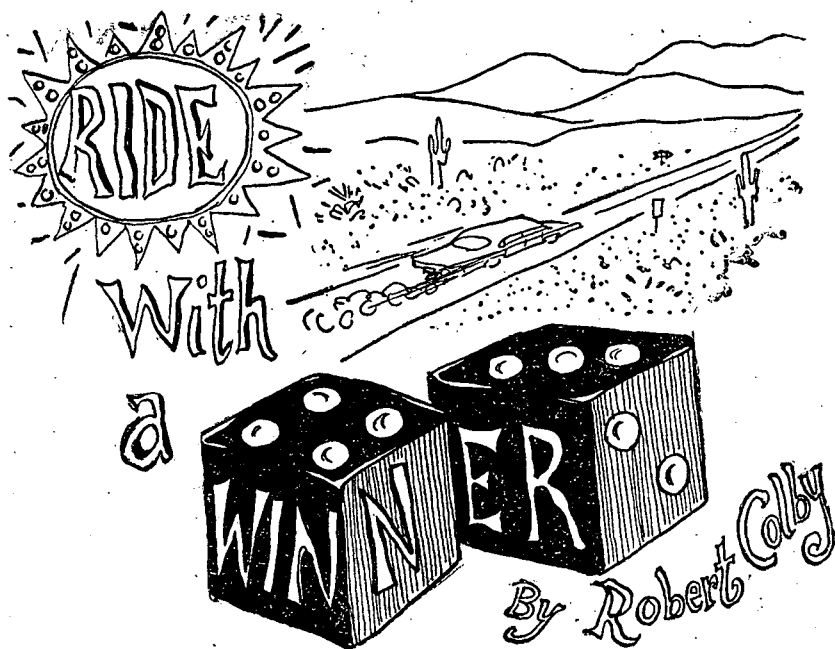
"What'd you want to do that for?" I asked Charlie.

"Didn't I mention it?" says Charlie, grinning at us. "The post office notice said there was a five thousand dollar reward for anybody who caught this Slim Cotter."

There was a dead silence around our poker table.

Then Charlie says, "I *did* take the easy way, see what I mean? The easy way to keep from havin' to split the reward with maybe five or six of Cedar Gulch's money-hungry cops!"

Our protagonist to the contrary, the odds favor only "death, and taxes" as les faits accomplis.



AT ONE of the three crap tables in the gaming room of the Desert Jewel, a sprawling bauble of glass supported by stone and wood and crowned by furiously winking neon, Roy Wilcox was losing the last of his forty-eight hundred dollar fortune. Accompanied by his wife Gail, he had come to the tables just after dinner. By midnight he

was nearly broke—and near panic.

In about the same period of time, at the next table a distinguished looking man, wearing a tan sport jacket and an out-sized diamond ring, had casually won close to twenty thousand dollars.

Roy and Gail Wilcox had been flying from Chicago to San Francisco and Roy had thought it

would be a kick to stop enroute for a night in Las Vegas. Approaching his mid-thirties, Roy was still a man of wild impulses, some of which had brought him a considerable amount of trouble from time to time, and this impulsive detour to Las Vegas had swiftly become a disaster.

Roy, restless in his job as an insurance salesman for a national company, sick of the blustering, bitter winters of Chicago, bored with the same routines, the same tired people, had applied for a transfer to the San Francisco office. When his request was denied he told Gail it didn't matter, they had about five thousand in the bank and the hell with it—they would move to San Francisco anyway.

Gail knew better than to argue with Roy, so they had placed the bulk of their belongings in storage and had bought the plane tickets.

The kick had begun innocently enough with a fine dinner and a spectacular floor show. Including their modest room at the Desert Jewel, the whole package would not have cost fifty dollars if Roy had been willing to let it go at that. But no, he was an old army shooter from away back who had cleaned out many a GI game and he was going to, "Invest a couple of bucks to make a thousand," at the dice tables.

In the first hour he had steadily lost over three hundred dollars. Gail watched in dismay, begging him to accept his losses and leave the table before he got in over his head but, as usual, Roy was stubborn. He said a good shooter was like a good horse which started badly, then came on strong to finish in front.

At ten minutes before midnight Roy, having exchanged his entire forty-eight hundred dollars in traveler's checks for chips, had lost all but six of those chips, worth five dollars apiece.

Although the room was frigidly air-conditioned, he felt as if his clothes wrapped him in a clammy steam bath of sweat; his tongue seemed enormous in its parched cave of cotton, his smarting eyeballs floated in a solution of burning acid; and in the bottomless pit of his despair, writhing tentacles of fear slowly strangled him.

His concentration had long ago departed. He played blindly, frantically, hoping that some miracle would save him, while knowing absolutely that he was doomed.

Supporting himself against the table, he saw the granite-faced stick man push the red cubes toward him. He placed five of the six chips on the line and reached for the dice with a quivering hand. Beside him, Gail gave his arm a squeeze of en-

couragement, but he hardly noticed.

"New shooter coming out," chanted the croupier. "Get your bets down, folks."

Think seven, Roy told himself. Seven or eleven. No, forget the eleven, just think seven! Seven, seven, seven! But the image in his mind wavered, was carried away in a rushing current of fear.

Around the table the sullen, disapproving faces of the players had lost identity; they seemed to hang suspended behind the blue-gray gauze of tobacco smoke.

Roy shook the dice and tossed them mightily across the green felt. They danced back toward him, spun, came to a dead halt.

"Boxcars," accused the man next to him.

"Twelve-crap and a loser," droned the stick man, raking in the chips with one hand, covering a giant yawn with the other.

The game continued as if the floor had opened up and swallowed him, as if he had never existed. Forty-eight hundred dollars gone, and not a player sent him so much as a glance of sympathy. The stick man and his assistants were only bored, their sharp, disdainful eyes erasing him, consigning him to the rightful oblivion of the loser.

He hated them! Hated their

smug, wooden features and their relentless, mocking eyes. He wanted to shout something obscene that would shake them loose, something violently abusive to shock the whole table of closed, jaded faces.

Instead, he turned and staggered away from the table, squeezing the last lonely chip so tightly in his fist, with such mounting rage, that it threatened to break in two.

Almost in his ear he heard Gail's voice purring, "I'm sorry, darling, I'm so sorry . . ."

He turned to look at her—a stunning redhead of twenty-nine with pert features, a provocative mouth and a wolf-whistle figure.

"Sorry!" he sneered. "Forty-eight hundred, and you're sorry. What good is 'sorry' now?" For a moment, as if she were part of the whole conspiracy, he wanted to smash her pretty face with a backward swipe of his hand.

Absently he glanced toward the table where the man in the tan sport jacket, the big winner, was surrounded by a knot of excited players and observers. With no particular motive but to chase his unbearable wretchedness with any distraction, he stepped closer for a look at the action.

He found himself blocked, unable to reach the edge of the table through the huddle of watchers. A

few feet away, Gail was having better luck. Spying her, a couple of hungry-eyed men had made room for her to pass, and Roy took advantage of the opening to follow close at her heels. Like magic, Gail was ushered to a spot just removed from the lucky winner and Roy was behind her with a clear view.

The man with the sea of chips stacked carelessly in front of him appeared to be in his first forties. Ruggedly assembled, with wide thick shoulders and a massive chest, he had jet dark hair closely cropped above a broad forehead which descended to bushy eyebrows, a prominent nose, an aggressive chin. It was a face of jagged thrusting lines, savagely intense.

In his manner and dress there was a suggestion of flamboyance, underscored by the gleaming brilliance of the large diamond ring which he wore on the little finger of his left hand.

Apparently he had little faith in the other players, for he consistently bet against them while awaiting his turn with the dice. It was obvious that he did not connect Gail to the man standing behind her, did not notice Roy at all. From the moment of her arrival beside him, the winner had not removed his probing eyes from Gail any longer than it took to make his

bets and quickly scoop the profits.

Now, as the stick man poked the dice toward him, as he selected a pair and rolled them thoughtfully between his palms, there was a hush of expectancy around the table.

The fat man who had just lost the dice spoke around a limp cigar to his companion. "Watch this and take a lesson," he said. "It's got nothin' ta do with luck. It's all in the way this guy throws the dice, like they was puppets and he holds the strings."

In the silence the fat man's voice had a challenging edge, as if he doubted that anyone could win so steadily without some sly, invisible gimmick.

The big winner in the tan jacket carefully placed the dice on the table and eyed the fat man with amusement. "Friend," he said, "I'm gonna prove just how wrong you are. The whole business is pure luck. When your luck is racing with the tide, nothing can stop it until the tide changes." His head swiveled, his eyes swallowed Gail in a single fiery gulp. "Now I'm gonna ask this delicious morsel of femininity on my right to toss the dice for me. And I'll just bet you a thousand on the side that she rolls me a winner."

The fat man shrugged, lowered his eyes, chewed his cigar.

"All right, folks," the stick man needled, "time is money. Place your bets, the dice are coming out."

Tan jacket ignored the stick man. "C'mon, put your money where your mouth is," he goaded the fat man.

"No bet," the fat man muttered.

Tan jacket placed the dice in front of Gail. "Roll 'em, honey; will ya? I got to prove my point anyway."

"I don't play," said Gail self-consciously. "I don't know the first thing about—"

"Just flick your wrist and open your hand, sweetheart. The dice will do the rest."

"Roll or don't roll," growled the fat man. "Let's get this game on the road!"

"They're comin' out, folks. New shooter comin' out for a point," the stick man urged.

Behind her, Gail felt the nudge of Roy's elbow, insisting. She picked up the dice.

Tan jacket was rapidly counting his chips, setting a long row of tall stacks on the line.

"Five thousand says the lady can do it," he announced. "Is it okay, Tony?" he asked the stick man. "This is my last ride for the night."

Tony glanced over his shoulder, signaled the pit boss. They conferred in whispers.

"It's perfectly all right, Mr. Par-

nell," said the stick man politely. "But just this one time."

"Roll them, honey," said Mr. Parnell.

Gail fingered the dice nervously, tried to make them rattle in her fist, tossed them daintily, ineptly upon the table. They bounced high and wide, did an awkward, separate jig across the felt, flopped over and died.

Around the table there was a unified, sighing release of breath.

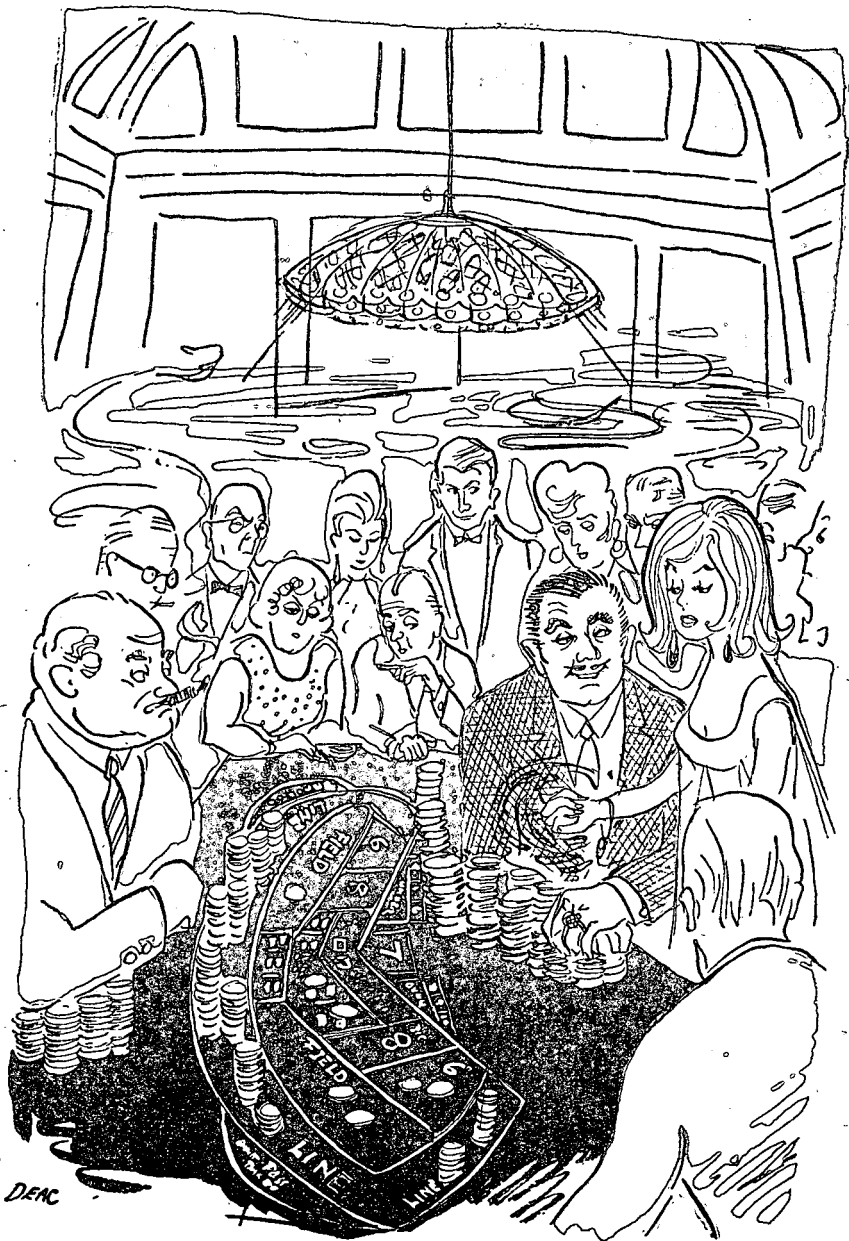
"Eee-lev-on! A winner!" cried Tony, the stick man. "Pay the line, pay the line."

Mr. Parnell sent the fat man a teasing smirk. His diamond winked slyly as he gathered his chips. His eyes swarmed over Gail, hugging her.

"I told you, sweetheart. Didn't I tell you? The hand is just a gadget. You throw the dice up here—in your mind. *Your* little mind was a blank, but mine was locked on eleven. Simple, but you got to know when to quit. That's the secret.

"Now you wait right here while I turn this stuff into a bundle of cash. Then I'll buy you a drink."

"Well—" said Gail, "I really don't think so. I mean, I'm so glad you won *all* that money with my hand and your mind, but I'll have that drink some other time. You see, I've got a date with a big loser."



"Too bad," replied Mr. Parnell, his smile fading swiftly. "You should always ride with a winner. Bad luck is a disease—you might catch it. Shake him off, honey, then look for me. I'll be around." Every pocket bulging with chips, he turned and strode toward the cashier's window.

His narrowed eyes heavy with malice, Roy glared at Mr. Parnell's retreating back. "Last of the big spenders, he sneered. "Well, you still have the dice," he told Gail. "You made him rich, now do it for me!"

Roy placed the remaining five dollar chip on the line, and with bolstered confidence, Gail tossed the dice neatly across the table. They flipped back, spun and settled.

"Snake eyes!" Roy groaned.

"Two-crap, a loser," Tony declared happily.

A floor above, in their room, Roy had removed his coat and tie. He slouched mournfully in a chair, elbows on knees, his drooping head resting in the palms of his hands. Gail sat on the edge of the bed, staring morosely at the pink, manicured petals of her curled fingers.

"What will we do now?" Roy moaned. His voice had a sobbing inflection, as if he might weep at any moment. "I've got thirty-eight cents left, can't even pay the hotel

bill. A couple of plane tickets to San Francisco, then what? No job, no money. Do we sleep in the park?"

"Well," said Gail, "I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't—"

"Don't give me that, please don't give me that tired line again. You're right, but I just don't wanna hear it! Can you think of anyone back home who might wire us a couple of hundred bucks?"

"I can't even think of anyone who's got two hundred bucks," she said wryly.

"Almost five thousand dollars," he whimpered. "Five thousand down the drain of this desert money trap. And just for laughs, a guy like Parnell cons you into making him five grand in one roll of the dice. Then what does he do? Does he say, 'Here, sweetheart, you won the goodies, take a thousand for yourself?' Hell, no! Not a thousand, not five hundred, not ten bucks. He offers you a drink.

"Well, maybe you should've had the drink with him. Maybe he'd have paid off in the end."

Gail snorted. "Don't kid yourself, darling. I know the type. They *never* pay off. Not the way you expect. They buy you a couple of drinks and then they want to celebrate with champagne—delivered by room service."

"Yeah," he agreed, "that figures.

This guy Parnell, he's a creep you don't have to get to know. You hate him on sight. I could strangle that man and sleep like a baby."

"I'll bet he's a millionaire, a big wheel," said Gail. "He kicked and clawed and knifed his way up to the top over the heads of meek little people like us. He'll have a big fall some day, and how I wish I could be there to see it!"

Roy looked up sharply. "You mean that?"

"Sure I mean it. Why?"

Roy's tidy features became darkly concentrated. "I'm gonna get our money back," he announced. "I'm gonna relieve Parnell of at least five thousand, maybe a lot more. And you're gonna help me."

"Now wait a minute, I was only—"

"I realize—but let's say we could find a way to empty his pockets and save our hides—would your conscience bother you?"

"No. I couldn't care less what happens to a man like that. But I do care about myself, I care about you. And if we got caught—"

"If we got caught, if it could be proved that *we* stole his money, ordinary people like us with no criminal records, then we might go to prison for a couple of years, though chances are good we'd get probation.

"Anyway, what difference does it

make? This is the end of the line for us. Unless we bail out of this, I'd just as soon blow my head off."

Quickly Roy crossed the room and reached inside an open suitcase. A blue-steel automatic appeared in his hand. As Gail stared in wide-eyed, slack-jawed horror, he pressed the gun to his temple.

"Bang!" he cried, "and you got no more troubles. That's my way out. And I'll take it if I have to, don't think I won't."

There was an electric silence. "What do you want me to do?" Gail asked in a small, awed voice.

Roy put the gun in his pocket and sat down tensely on the edge of his chair. "I don't have an exact plan," he said excitedly. "So far, I'm playing it by ear. I need more information. If he's carrying the money with him, it's a tough problem. But if it's in his room, then maybe you could keep him busy while I get in there and find it.

"Now we know he's got a big thing for you. That whole deal at the table was just to set you up for a fast whirl. Passing you the dice was only the hook, the bait was his money. He wanted you to swallow the hook without taking the bait.

"So I want you to go back down there and get cozy with him, pretend to snap at the bait. Drink it up, laugh it up—and listen! Pump him dry, find out where he keeps

the money. Then beg off to the powder room and call me. I'll take over while you keep him occupied."

"What if he asks questions?" she said anxiously. "Suppose he wants to know my name, room number? Who am I? Why am I here?"

"Now you're ticking," Roy said approvingly. "Well, your name is—Sheila. Very sexy, romantic. Sheila—McCabe. Mix the exotic with the common, sounds believable. Now let's see—you live in Los Angeles, Santa Monica. You came to Vegas with your brother—Vic. That's me. Just in case he saw us together. We're not staying here, we're not staying anywhere. We just flew in for a few hours of fun and games, we're going back to L.A. on a four a.m. flight. The rest you can fake as you go along. Okay? Got it?"

She nodded. "About the gun. You wouldn't use it on him, would you?"

"Of course not! Am I a killer?"

Gail was surprised to find Mr. Parnell seated at the bar beside the cynical fat man with the cigar. They now appeared to be the best of friends. Gail mounted a stool well removed from the pair, but in thirty seconds flat Mr. Parnell had excused himself to join her. In another thirty seconds they were touching knees in a dark corner booth.

Gail confided that her date "with a loser" was a little joke. The date was her brother, who had lost so heavily at the Desert Jewel he had crossed the Strip to the Flamingo, hoping to have better luck there. She had chosen to remain here because she wanted to see the floor show. Her brother was to meet her at midnight, but she supposed he would become too involved at the tables and eventually she would have to hunt him down.

Mr. Parnell said his first name was Jason, and Gail introduced herself as Sheila McCabe. Jason Parnell *did* ask questions and she casually fed him the story she and Roy had composed.

In her turn, Gail wanted to know what kind of business engaged Mr. Parnell's attention. Jason said he was a builder of small, fast boats made of fiberglass, which were manufactured in a plant near Santa Barbara. He produced a card from an overstuffed wallet of fine leather. "Parnell Speedcraft Company," read the card. "Jason Parnell, President."

"You should've been a professional gambler," Gail commented with a chuckle. "My, what talent!"

"Not talent, just luck," he insisted. "And the power of a strong, fearless mind over the dice."

"I expect," said Gail, "you'll go back and clean the house for an-

other few thousand before the night's over."

"No, sweetheart, I don't think so." Jason toyed with his splendid ring. "I've decided against it. I don't need the money, I gamble for the fun, the challenge. But I'm no sucker and I don't intend to give that twenty-five thousand back to the house. I just now put the money in the hotel safe where it won't tempt me—or anyone else."

"Oh," said Gail, "I see. "Well, I think that's very wise, I really do."

There goes the plan, she decided, and was just a bit relieved. Jason Parnell did not seem a man to tangle with. Roy might be clever, but he was outclassed.

"It's been nice chatting with you," she said, squinting at her watch. "And thanks for the drink. But it's getting late and I must search for Vic, poor dear. He lost five thousand and I do hope he won it back."

"Not likely," Jason Parnell replied scornfully. "Probably he chased another bundle after it and lost that too."

"How reassuring," said Gail, aching to swat him across that smug face. Preparing to rise, she began to ease her way out of the booth.

"Wait," said Parnell. "Please don't go for awhile." The first note of pleading had crept into his

voice. "Stay, keep me company."

"Sorry," Gail said coolly.

"So am I. Listen, Sheila, why don't you skip that four o'clock plane and drive with me to Los Angeles? I have a sales office in L.A. and I was planning to stop there on my way to Santa Barbara."

Gail hesitated. The vague shape of a different sort of plan loomed in her mind. "What about Vic—my brother?"

"He's over twenty-one, isn't he?" Parnell's lips twisted mockingly. "He can take care of himself."

"Just leave him here? Wouldn't that be just a wee bit heartless? Really, Jason, your tactics are not exactly conventional."

"I didn't make my fortune with conventional tactics," he answered arrogantly.

"Oh, I believe you. But, Jason, I'm not a business, I'm a woman—and you have a lot to learn about women. No, I wouldn't think of leaving my brother, much as I'd like to go along with you. However, once we deposit him at home—"

Their eyes locked. "All right," he agreed, "it's a deal. But remember, once we get him to L.A. . . ."

"I'll remember, Jason."

He smiled a lusty smile of anticipation. "We'll leave at once. There's nothing to keep me here

now. While I'm packing we'll have a little drink to celebrate."

"That does sound jolly," she replied with a poker face, "but I'd better go hunt Vic and prepare him."

"I'll go with you," he declared.

"No," she protested. "Vic is protective where I'm concerned, and this is going to take persuasion. But don't worry, I'll handle him. We could meet you in the lobby of the Flamingo in an hour. Would that give you enough time?"

Parnell studied his watch in the gloom. "That would be ten minutes before two. Make it two o'clock sharp."

"Two o'clock sharp," she repeated, and sent him a conspiratorial smile.

They met promptly at two, and after Gail had introduced Roy as her "brother," Jason Parnell led them to a maroon sedan which was parked just outside the Flamingo. Though a bit gaudy, it was a graceful beauty of such sparkling newness it might have been delivered only the day before.

In obedience to Roy's instructions, Gail climbed in front. Roy, the automatic in his pocket, took the back seat. The couple had left the luggage they had brought to the Desert Jewel in their room. Later, they would wire the amount of the bill to the hotel and order

the baggage held for shipment. Since many people who came to Las Vegas were moved by the shifting winds of fortune and caprice, this would not be very surprising to the management.

As Parnell drove, he gave Gail's knee a playful pat and said, "One of the things I like best about Las Vegas is leaving it, especially when you're leaving with a barrel of *their* money." He glanced over his shoulder. "How about you, Mr. McCabe? Did they sucker you out of the whole bundle?"

"Please just call me Vic," Roy said. "No, I recovered nicely, thank you. One way or another, I always manage to wind up ahead."

"Then you're one of the few, and that makes you my kind of man, Vic—a winner."

On the outskirts of town, as they came to an intersection which borrowed light from a brightly illuminated all-night gas station, Parnell seemed about to wreck their scheme when he slowed for a better look at a young hitchhiker with an extended thumb.

In a rush of words, Roy told Parnell he had read of a string of hitchhike murders in the area, and Gail told him she was scared silly of hitchhikers, wouldn't dream of riding with one, so Parnell went on without stopping. Roy released a long breath soundlessly.

The lights of the city faded behind and soon the arid waste of the desert spread itself around them. In the distance stark buttes, somber and ghostly, crouched in the moonlight. Stern mountains lifted shadowy fingers of rock toward the sky.

A couple of miles beyond, Roy spied what he was seeking—a narrow road twisting into the desert. Taking the gun from his pocket, he held it firmly against the back of Parnell's head.

"Don't bother to turn around," he said in a cool, commanding voice. "This is a .32 caliber automatic, for your information. Just ease up and take that little road to your right, then keep going until I tell you to stop."

Parnell did not flinch. Looking straight ahead, he removed his foot from the gas. "Whatever your game," he said bitingly, "don't try it with me. You won't get away with it, buddy-boy."

"Shut up, big mouth!" Roy said in a manner that made him proud of himself. "Do precisely as you're told and you might come out of this alive."

Parnell made the turn and they began to jounce across the desert floor on the narrow road, little more than a trail.

"I'll tell you a funny one, big-shot," said Roy. "You wouldn't be

in this jam if you weren't such a tightwad. When, uh—Sheila made that five-grand roll you should've been generous. A thousand, even five hundred would've satisfied us. Right, Sheila?"

"Perfectly right," said Gail. "Jason, you should learn a lesson—never be too greedy."

"Where did you put the money?" Roy demanded.

Parnell said nothing.

"If we don't find it," Roy threatened, "you'll talk, the hard way."

"Suitcase," Parnell muttered. "In the trunk."

"That figures. A few hundred in the old wallet too, and I'm crazy about that diamond ring, aren't you—Sheila?"

"It was love at first sight," Gail answered.

They were silent for a time. After another mile the road became wilder, less defined under the headlights. It seemed about to be swallowed by the night, vanishing in a wilderness of sand and cactus.

Suddenly Roy became uneasy. Something was out of balance. It was as if the power of control had left him, though he couldn't fathom what gave him the feeling.

Gail, too quiet, too rigidly fixed in place, explained it. "He's got a gun pressed against my side!" she cried shrilly.

"I always carry a gun under the

seat," Parnell declared mockingly. "Now pass me that automatic or I'll blast the life out of this dame, whoever she is."

"That doesn't make you much of a brain," said Roy. "Now I'll have to kill you."

"You should," Parnell agreed, "but you won't. You haven't got the guts—and that's the difference between us. I'm betting my life on it, so either shoot me or give me that gun. You've got ten seconds to decide before I pull this trigger."

Parnell was right, Roy told himself. He didn't have the guts to kill a man in cold blood. His thoughts scattered madly in search of an answer, found it. Swiftly he reversed the gun and brought it down sharply on Parnell's head.

Parnell slumped, the car veered off dangerously, returned in time when quick-witted Gail caught the wheel.

"The brake!" Roy cried. "Get your foot on the brake!"

The sedan came to a jolting stop, and Roy reached across the seat and cut the motor. Together they hoisted Parnell from the car and stretched him out in the beam of the headlights.

"He'll come around in a minute," Roy said. "I was careful not to hit him very hard." He handed Gail the .38 revolver which had fallen from Parnell's grasp. "Watch him

closely while I check the trunk."

Roy returned quickly with a handsome leather suitcase. It contained an assortment of clothing under which were concealed fat bundles of hundred dollar bills.

Roy whistled. "Looks like a lot more than twenty-five thousand here. Some haul!" he exclaimed. He then knelt beside Parnell and produced a thick wallet from his hip pocket. The diamond ring tightly encased Parnell's finger, but Roy twisted and yanked until he was able to wrench it off.

"Anything worth doing is worth doing right," he told Gail with a grin. "A buzzard couldn't pick him any cleaner."

Roy put both guns in the suitcase with the money and stowed the case in the trunk. Then he wheeled the car around and they began the jogging return to the highway.

They had gone only a few yards when Parnell climbed to his feet and stumbled after them, waving his arms and shouting terrible vengeance. Roy laughed wickedly and sent the big car leaping ahead.

"Parnell's got a long hike in front of him," Roy said as they gained the highway and gunned toward California. "It'll be about three or four hours before he can make it to a phone. By that time we'll be on a plane for San Francisco."

"What'll we do with his car?" asked Gail. "It's such a flashy car, the police would spot it in a minute if they were watching for it."

"No problem," Roy answered. "We'll drive to the first decent city in California, ditch this wagon on a side street, and take a cab to the airport."

Flying across the empty ribbon of highway they made it to the border in marvelous time. They had barely passed into California when not one, but two patrol cars came wailing full-siren after them. Eyed by the gaping barrel of a shotgun, Roy pulled off the road.

Leaning with his hands flat against the roof of Parnell's car, Roy meekly submitted to a search. Gail was already confined in the back seat of a police cruiser.

"This is the guy we've been hunting," said one of the cops as another pulled Roy's hands behind him and locked cuffs to his wrists. "He's got Parnell's car, his wallet and his ring."

"Yeah," said a third cop who had set the leather suitcase on the ground and was inspecting the contents with a flashlight, "and here we have the cash and a couple of guns. Bet you a ten spot one of these killed Parnell."

"Do I look stupid, Woody? That's a sucker's bet. This guy is the Gas Can Bandit, the hitchhike killer.

No doubt about it. He's our man."

"Wait just a minute here," Roy pleaded. "Sure, I took Parnell's car and his money, but I didn't kill him, I left him alive out on the desert not much over two hours ago. I read about the hitchhiker who killed those people—but you've got the wrong guy. I tell you, Parnell is still alive. You'll hear from him any time now."

"Jason Parnell left L.A. two days ago for Salt Lake City," the cop said, "but never got there. Some teen-age lovers found his body on the desert, so we got an APB to be on the lookout for his car. Any questions? Well, then, what's your name, punk? And where's the gas can? Did you trade it for a better trap, one with a nice pair of legs?"

Dawn had just begun to paint the sky a soft lemon color when the man who called himself Jason Parnell trudged up to the all-night gas station at the edge of Las Vegas. The attendant, dozing in the little office, did not notice him as he went quickly to the men's room and entered, locking the door behind him.

Once inside, he brushed the dust from his natty clothes with infinite care, shined his shoes with a paper towel, washed his hands and face, removed a switchblade knife from his pocket, flicked it open and

cleaned his nails with the gleaming point of the long, cunning blade. Returning the knife to his pocket, he studied himself in the mirror, gave his tie a straightening wrench, and inspected the small bump on his head. It wasn't much, he decided, and neatly combed his hair in a manner to conceal it. Finally, he removed a ten dollar bill from the trick pocket of a novelty belt he wore, squared his white handkerchief, and stepped outside.

A monument to sartorial achievement, standing tall and erect, he moved with the brisk determination of an angry tycoon toward the cubbyhole office which enclosed the attendant.

Twenty minutes later, as he stood with one burnished shoe poised atop the full red gas can he had "borrowed" with a ten dollar deposit, a glistening black sedan swerved into the station and came to a whispering halt beside the pumps. The car, and the man who drove it, spoke softly of money by the yard. This was a sure winner—and it was bad luck to ride with any but the sure winners in the

crazy, complicated game of Life.

Carrying the can, he stepped forward. He wore an expression of polite superiority, the look of a man at home with the rich and powerful.

"How do you do," he said, bending so that he was looking directly into the man's eyes. "I hope you'll excuse me, but I'm afraid I'm in a little jam. I ran out of gas and had to leave my Jag a couple of miles up the road. Apparently some joker emptied the tank while I was in one of the clubs last night."

"Rotten luck," said the man, his accent slightly British. "You have my sympathy."

The hitchhiker smiled indulgently and said, "I was just about to call a cab." He lifted the gas can into view. "But I'm in rather a hurry and when I saw that you were going my way—"

"No trouble at all," the man said. "Glad to take you. Hop right in and I'll be with you in a moment."

"Fill'er up?" the attendant asked. "By all means," said the sure winner.



Extreme remedies have long been hailed as appropriate for extreme diseases, but so have certain remedies been seen as worse than the given disease.



THE LECTURE agency called on Tuesday and said they were sending this girl down that weekend. They didn't even ask me; just said they were sending her down. I always take them in, though. When you're married to a man

who had the fortune or misfortune to discover a new active agent for the medics to mess around with, you get used to people—all kinds of people—all wanting something. There are always a lot of girls.

I hadn't heard about this one before, but that didn't mean anything. The agency always has a few on hand doing busy work. This one probably needed a Florida vacation as much as the next one. We don't have any children and there's a good guest room, and I like to cook and make special drinks, so they don't bother me too much. I do get a little tired of Kramer's constant talk-talk-talk when they're here. The stories and theories may be all new to them, but I've had to hear them all a million times. I just sat on the terrace and cut my mind off and let it drift when he talked. That's what I used to do . . . cut and let drift, like the ocean out there.

This one was a publicity girl. Kramer went out to the airport and got her and I spent the time thinking up a special drink. It's something to do. I never drink anything but the best rum and soda myself, but I like to mess around with drinks. I tried something with bourbon and a liqueur, but it didn't come out to suit me; it wasn't at all pretty. So I threw it down the sink and started over and came up with a nice pink thing out of gin, grenadine and white crème de menthe.

Then I heard them in the driveway and put the hors d'oeuvres

in the oven. She was a good-looking girl, like they all are: brunette, tall, with good legs and one of those thinned-down bodies from starving herself to death like everybody in New York seems to do. I've never had to starve myself. I'm just naturally skinny. Not slim or slender, just skinny, and little too. It used to worry me, but I've gotten used to it. I wear my hair long and keep the clothes simple and everybody thinks I'm a lot younger than I am, which is definitely closer to forty than thirty. This girl was about twenty. She looked bright and efficient, and she shook hands like a man. I almost liked her.

We went out on the terrace and she took one of the drinks without saying anything cute about it. I was almost sorry for her having to listen to Kramer for the whole weekend, but she was polite enough to him. They always are, at first. He's still a good-looking man, though he's started to go pretty bald and all the bounce and energy that used to seem exciting has degenerated into a bunch of annoying habits, like tapping his foot on the floor and snapping his fingers.

"Your ocean is wonderful," this girl said.

"Yes," I said. "I like it. I didn't when we first moved here. It used

to drive me crazy. I'd wake up every time the tide changed. But now I can't stand getting away from the sound of the surf. You get attached to it."

"I can see you would," she said. "It must be like listening to rain when you're going off to sleep at night."

Well, when she said that, Kramer leered at her, but she acted as though she didn't notice it. I used to wish he'd get enough of girls, just once, so I could have one around to talk to without him playing cavalier at them, but it isn't going to happen, of course. Not now.

I fixed them another drink and had one myself, and then I went to see about the supper. When I came back out Kramer was telling her about the first year after he discovered the mold or whatever, and she was hanging on it. It is a pretty interesting tale the first time you hear it, I guess, but he always brings in that awful place we were living in then, and makes me sound like Marie Curie stirring the pitchblende in the backyard.

"You ought to get more of that into your lectures," she said, earning her vacation.

"Oh, it really isn't very interesting," Kramer said.

"But it is," she said. "It's just

like the—well, like the Curies."

She actually said it. Well, I guess it's all right; there was a time when I thought it was sort of like the Curies myself.

That was before all the publicity and the girls and the publicity girls—and the money. The money has been fun. It bought me that ocean out there, but it did things to Kramer. Maybe it did things to me too, only you can't see what's happening to yourself so well. I know what happened to Kramer. He got the idea he was the most important guy in the universe. He'd always had a tendency that way, but if all the publicity and the money hadn't come along he couldn't have convinced himself so thoroughly. He wouldn't have gotten so pontifical about it.

I brought the supper out and they ate. The girl, she was named Linda, ate everything. Kramer ate too. Sometimes he doesn't anymore, but I am a good cook. It's about the only thing I am good at.

"Aren't you eating?" Linda said to me about halfway through her shrimp romelade.

"I never want much supper," I said.

I went up to bed early because I figured they wanted to talk business and I wasn't interested in that. I could still hear them on the terrace when I went to sleep. She

had gotten out her briefcase and they were going over the new tour route for the lectures. I hoped Kramer didn't bore her to death.

The next day I took her away with me for lunch and let Kramer work on his lecture notes. We drove up to the next key and had lunch at a nice restaurant there. She bragged on the food, but said it wasn't as good as mine. I asked her all about her job and she told me. She made it interesting, and she was bright and clever. She reminded me of the way I used to be a long time ago in college.

That night I suggested we go to a place where there was an orchestra. That surprised old Kramer, I could see. I don't ever go out anymore. I've gotten to where I like to go to bed early and listen to my ocean. He jumped on it and said, "Oh, great." I knew he wanted to dance with Linda. That was all right with me. Kramer can't dance. He thinks he's real good at it, but he never has learned how to lead.

We went out to the Beach Club where they have a good combo. Kramer danced with me once and with Linda once and then we just sat and drank and talked. They ordered martinis. I didn't blame them. The bartender wasn't really good at exotic drinks like I am.

I drank my rum and soda and

watched all the people in the bar. All of them seemed to have something wrong with them. There was a woman in a sari and she was too fat; there was a tall beautiful girl in a white dress but she had her hair dyed so much it was ruined; there was a good-looking man in a beautiful blue sport coat but he squinted. I don't know why I've gotten that way lately. I look at people and they seem perfectly plausible. Then I see the really awful little thing that ruins them. I looked at Linda and I decided her wrong thing wasn't apparent. That pleased me. I get tired of all the wrong things. I'm not looking for them. They just seem to be there, like me being too skinny.

We went home about two o'clock and I guess that was the latest I'd been up in over a year. It felt strange to look up and see the moon going down over the water and feel that late-night, early-morning chill.

They didn't want to go to bed so I made them some scrambled eggs with the little green peppers and they ate that. Then I made them a nightcap out of cream and crème de menthe and a secret ingredient and they drank that. Kramer can get real nasty about some of my drinks sometimes, but Linda seemed to like all of them so he went along with it. He'll do any-

thing to impress other people with his reasonableness. He only yells at me when there's nobody else around.

When we went up to bed I said, "Well, I like that girl."

Kramer said, "Finally, the millennium. I didn't know you liked anybody anymore."

"I think I'll ask her to stay over another couple of days."

"I guess she'd like that," Kramer said. "New York isn't very pleasant this time of year."

So she stayed. I wonder if she'd gone on back . . . but then that's a pretty useless thing now, to wonder.

She and Kramer got everything set up about the lecture tour and she and I talked. I hadn't talked to anybody in a long time—just listened to Kramer—so it was fun. We went dancing again, and this time I just left them with the scrambled eggs and drinks. That's how I found out.

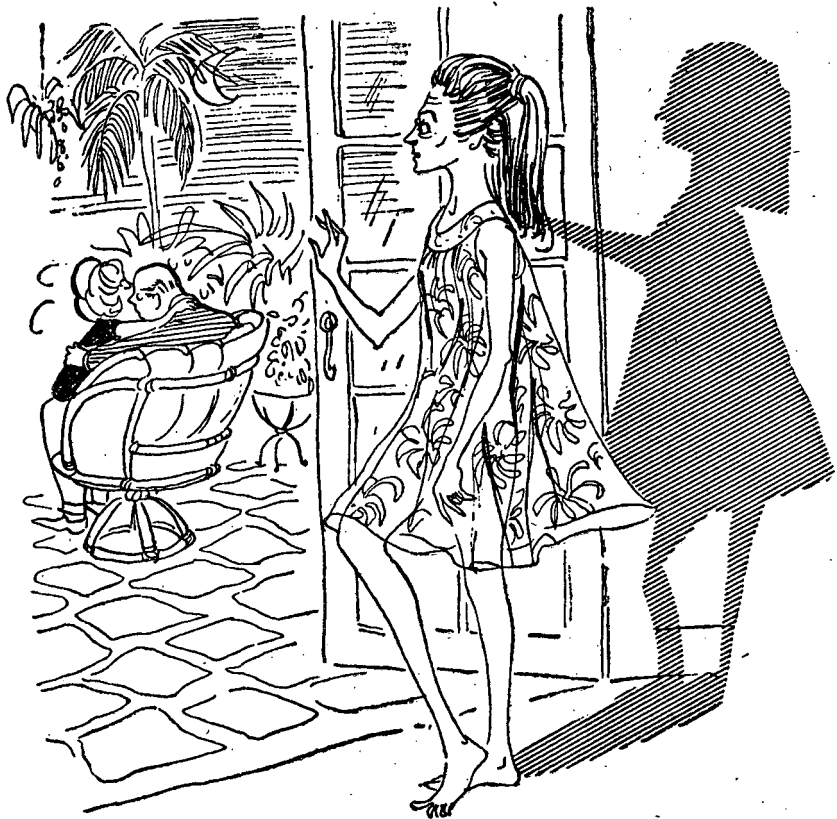
Usually when I go up to bed I go right to sleep, but I guess all the talking I'd been doing lately had stimulated me. I couldn't get to sleep. I lay there in my twin bed and listened to my surf, but it didn't have its usual effect. I kept thinking of things I'd like to say I hadn't got around to yet, so finally I got up and put my robe on. I'd been hearing Kramer talk-

ing all the time, but as I started downstairs he shut up and there was just the surf sound . . . and moonlight. I was barefooted—I never wear bedroom shoes—and I walked out the door without making any noise, I guess. She was actually sitting in his lap, just like the cartoons about secretaries, and he was kissing her neck, and she was making little moaning sounds as though he were some great lover instead of Kramer Lytle, the poor woman's lecture idol. I just stood there and stared at them, because right at first I didn't care whether they knew I was there or not.

They were getting pretty sloppy about the whole thing by then so I turned around and went back in the house and upstairs. I knew then what her flaw was. She's got this little picture of herself as some sort of abandoned maiden.

I figured there was no point planning right then what I had to do, so I just turned over and went to sleep. I'd known for a long time it was going to come to this with Kramer anyway. There had been moments when I knew I would have to do it if he snapped his fingers or said, "Now, in my humble opinion," one more time, but I hadn't counted on having to include one of the girls.

I got up next morning and fixed



them a really good breakfast. I figured they needed it. The funny thing was that knowing now exactly what I was going to do made me hungry. I hadn't had any appetite in a long time—not since the money. First I'd gotten to where I just didn't like certain things: eggs and meat. Then it got to be fish too, and lately there just wasn't much of anything I really wanted; a little bread, may-

be, with my rum and soda. This morning, though, I ate as much as they did, maybe even a little more.

I saw Kramer watching me and I said, "What's the matter?"

"I just wondered why you were eating like that," he said. "I thought you didn't like eggs and bacon anymore."

"Oh," I said, "I guess it's because I've got somebody to talk to these days. Conversation just plain

makes me as hungry as a shark."

They both laughed. Ha—ha. Funny. I looked at her, all dewy and virginal. I wondered whether it was really Kramer or the money, but the dewy look probably meant it was LOVE. She was just a natural-born idiot. If I'd thought it was the money I might have spared her, but there wasn't much point in it if she was really in love with Kramer. That didn't give her much of a future anyway. She had only *seemed* bright and clever after all. It was a veneer like the New York look. Underneath she was just a dumb broad. I'd been wasting my time talking to her all along, just like the years I'd wasted trying to talk to Kramer when all he wanted was a listening post.

It was so simple I didn't have to do much actual planning. The poison was in the house. We kept various kinds for the various insects. It didn't really matter which one I picked. By the time I got through with one of my extra special stingaroos of a drink they weren't going to taste anything in it anyway, and they'd drink it. Linda thought she was being horribly clever liking anything I whipped up in the kitchen, and Kramer was going along with it to impress her and lull me. That's another thing about him. He never has known that I'm not stupid.

He never had the faintest idea he could ever bore *me*.

They sat around all day looking at the ocean with Simple Simon expressions, and once they actually went into the kitchen and started whispering. I guess they figured I was so crazy about her I wasn't going to notice anything. I let them think it. It didn't make any difference. They'd know by tonight.

About five o'clock I said, "Let's go out to dinner."

That took them both aback.

"Why?" Kramer asked. "You know you love to cook and we love to eat it."

"I don't know," I said. "I just want to. I'll whomp us up a good drink first. I've got a real weirdo of an idea for tonight. Then we'll go out."

They looked at each other and both said, "Fine, fine."

I got dressed early so I'd have time in the kitchen while they were getting dressed. I wanted to do it all up really special, so I wore a new dress Kramer had brought me when he came back from one of his lecture trips—a conscience present. Not because he'd actually been up to anything; he'd never really had the nerve for that. It took this girl with the dewy look really to fool him into thinking he was man enough to

try anything in the first place.

I went outside and put my best straw placemats on the terrace table. I fixed some zingy hors d'oeuvres, and even put a big bouquet of flowers in the middle of the table. Appropriate.

Then in the kitchen I went to work on the specialty. There were some coconuts I'd been saving and I figured they'd do real well. I cut the tops off and left the milk in and added the gin, the mixers and the poison. Then I got a really good idea. I never used rum in my specialty drinks. I drank only the best, and it was mine. Kramer didn't have enough palate to taste one drink from another anyway. That was one reason I got such a kick out of mixing up all the mess I could and watching him drink it. I started making the drinks really because I couldn't stand watching him drink cola and vodka or cola and bourbon. He never had known that, but he knew I had a thing about my rum. He didn't really like it anyway, so he thought it was funny, me wanting my six-ninety fifth all to myself. I'd heard him telling Linda about it one day and laughing. "Don't touch Miss Iris' rum," he told her. "That is verboten."

So while I was mixing in everything else I thought, *Give them a charge, put in some of Miss Iris'*

six-ninety rum. Why not? It's the last time. I laced it good. Besides, it would cover up anything the least bit odd. I could just hear Kramer saying, 'My God, Iris, I taste rum. You really must love us.' And I'd say, 'Yes, darling. You don't know how much.' Even Kramer could taste rum when he hadn't had any in so long.

I stirred it all up and punched holes in the coconut tops and put them back on with a straw through them. Then I hollered, "The sun just went over the yardarm," up the stairs, and took the drinks outside. I set the two coconuts square in the middle of two side by side placemats. Then I went back and made myself a good stiff rum and soda and brought it out and sat down across the table from where they were going to sit.

They came ambling out, looking like pie, and oohed and aahed over the coconuts.

"You've really outdone yourself tonight, kid," Kramer said. "Sure you won't have one with us?" Then he actually winked at Linda.

"You know I can't quit my good old rum and soda," I said in a good imitation of a submissive voice. "Cheers, dears." I lifted my glass and took a good slug.

They smiled and leaned over and drew through the straws.

Then they smiled again, said, "Ummm, good," and took another swig.

I knew they were trying to drink it down fast without having to taste it. I just watched them, drinking my drink, waiting.

Then all of a sudden a simply terrible look came over Linda's face. She went white as a sheet, and she stopped drinking and choked and pushed the coconut back and stared at me. She put a hand out and pushed Kramer's coconut away from him and said, "Oh, my God."

I guessed that mess didn't cover up the taste after all.

Then she said, "Don't, Kramer. Don't drink it. It's got rum in it. It's got rum."

Well, I told you Kramer never thought I had a lot on the ball, but it didn't take me long to figure that one. I knew there wasn't any point in worrying about it either. I'd already drunk half my drink and even Kramer would have had enough sense really to load the bottle, even if dewey eyes over there didn't. There wasn't a

damned thing I could do about it, so I just laughed. I laughed for what seemed like a long time while both of them looked desperate and scared and started to stand up.

"An emetic," Kramer said. "The doctor, the hospital . . ."

"Sit down, darling," I said. "You've not only got poisoned rum in your drink, but a good measure of Mother Iris' remedy for you in your coconut milk. I don't really think you'll be able to make it."

I looked at the sun. It was almost ready to touch the horizon. When it does, people here make bets on how long it'll take to go under completely. Two minutes is a pretty good estimate. It goes a lot faster than anyone would think.

"I'll give you odds," I said, smiling at them. "I'll last long enough to watch the sun go under and neither of you will make it."

And that's what I'm doing. Sitting here all by myself looking for the last time at that thin little edge of green that comes up just as the sun goes down.



It is not an exceedingly reckless gamble to back up one's hunch when it comes from a proven performer.

AN OLD

MAN'S



INTUITION

ALEXANDER Kendall circled the airfield again, waiting impatiently for the small red plane below to relinquish the solitary runaway. The hot, morning sun sparkled off

the metallic wings of his droning plane as he loosened his tie and glanced at his wristwatch. Although this occasional inefficiency of rural airfields irritated him slightly, he had to concede their convenience. The proximity of such an airfield to Samuel Carson's country house had just saved him four hours' driving time, and for that he was duly grateful.

The red plane below finally raced down the black ribbon of macadam and was gone, and Kendall methodically began his approach. Seconds later, his plane touched the runway with a gentle thump, and he taxied over to No. 1 hangar where the gleaming black limousine was parked.

A middle-aged and well-tailored man stood by the big car and squinted at the plane. Kendall killed the engine, then opened the door and stepped down off the wing. The man noted his brown Vandyke beard and short-cropped hair, and stepped forward.

"Mr. Kendall?" he inquired in a cool, polite voice. He was a dignified individual with a firm, an-

gular face and a thin gray mustache.

"Yes," replied Kendall, removing his sunglasses.

The man extended his hand. "I'm Randolph Hicks, Sam Carson's attorney," he said. "Shall we be on our way?"

"All right," replied Kendall, wondering again at the urgency that had brought him here.

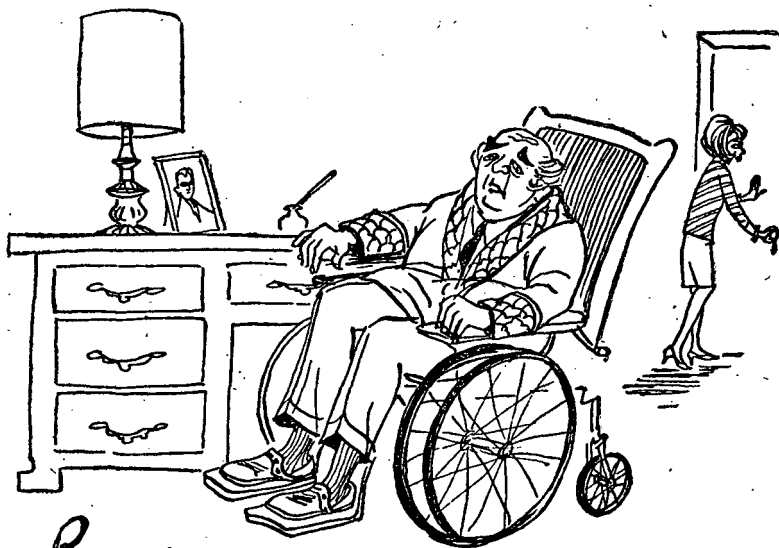
The two men climbed into the limousine, and Randolph Hicks drove quickly out the dusty dirt road that connected the airfield to the highway. Kendall noted with pleasure that the big car was air-

conditioned. He relaxed and turned to his driver.

"What's this all about, Mr. Hicks?" he asked quizzically. Samuel J. Carson was an old friend and client; the elderly tycoon frequently retained Kendall's agency to ferret information on competitors and business associates, but today Kendall sensed that something unusual had come up.

Hicks glanced at him. "James Carson is dead," he said grimly.

Kendall sat up, his tanned, bearded face contorting with surprise. "The old boy's son? What happened?"



By Henry W. Montgomery

"The police are convinced it was an accident," the attorney replied slowly, "but for reasons of his own, Sam thinks otherwise."

Hicks turned the car off the highway onto a hard-packed, tree-lined road, and continued. "We were all in the livingroom last evening. James arose and informed us that he was going to bathe and retire. He took a bottle of whiskey from the liquor cabinet and went to his room. This morning Sam's valet found him face down in the bathtub. There was a bruise on his forehead, and the police theorize that he became intoxicated, slipped getting into the tub, knocked himself unconscious and drowned."

"Why does Sam disagree?"

"He won't say; he wants to see you first."

They drove on in silence. Kendall mentally reviewed what little he knew about James Carson. He had met James only once—a big, conceited, sandy-haired fellow who liked women and liquor but couldn't handle either one.

James had inherited his father's ruddy looks and expensive tastes, but none of his initiative, ability or prudence. He had lived a spoiled and hedonistic life, causing Sam considerable grief, publicity and expense. Sam, with paternal condonation, had bailed his son out of everything from scandals and gam-

bling debts to an ill-fated marriage.

The limousine rolled by two large wrought-iron gates that marked the entrance to the Carson estate. A few minutes later they pulled up at the majestic white-bricked mansion that was Samuel Carson's refuge from the world of industry.

The two men climbed out of the car. Kendall winced momentarily at the renewed wave of heat, then stoically straightened his tie and trotted up the steps after Hicks.

The interior of the big house was bright and pleasantly cool. Hicks opened a door off the hallway and they entered a plush, wood-paneled livingroom. Vases of freshly cut flowers dotted the room. A variety of trophies from past safaris glared down from the walls.

A young woman, blonde and very attractive, arose from a couch across the room and approached them. Chicly dressed in a light yellow suit that admirably complemented her trim figure, she glanced at Hicks and then at Kendall.

"You must be Alexander Kendall," she said, smiling and cordially extending a slender, manicured hand. "I'm Charlene Meredith, Mr. Carson's secretary. He's waiting for you in the library."

Kendall gently squeezed the

proffered hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Meredith. It is 'Miss'?"

"It is," she smiled, walking toward a large mahogany door. Randolph Hicks politely excused himself, and Kendall entered the library behind the comely secretary.

"Good morning, Kendall," immediately boomed a familiar bass voice. "Thank you for coming so promptly."

Samuel J. Carson, industrial magnate, was slouched in a wheelchair behind a polished wooden desk. He had been confined to the chair since his heart attack last year, and he detested it, being an active man who was not accustomed to restrictions. His heavy frame amply filled the chair as he pushed away from the desk and removed his glasses.

"Come in, come in," he said. "Have a seat. That will be all, Miss Meredith, thank you."

Kendall watched appreciatively as the slender blonde left the room. "I see you haven't lost your penchant for beautiful surroundings," he said to the stout, silver-haired man opposite him.

"No, nor you your appreciation of such embellishments," chuckled the old man. Then, in a serious tone, "I suppose Randy has told you what has happened?"

"Yes," Kendall replied grimly.

"My sincere condolences, Sam."

"Thank you." The old man's eyes misted. "James had his faults, Kendall, but he wasn't entirely to blame. If his mother had lived, or if I'd had more time for him, he might have been a different boy. But no matter what his faults, he didn't deserve to die like this."

"I understand the police think it was an accident."

Sam Carson snorted. "Kendall, up in this neck of the woods the 'police' are a hick sheriff and a part-time deputy who have never done more than arrest a drunk or stop a speeding motorist. The county coroner's not much better. This was no accident!"

"Do you have proof?"

"No—just an uneasy intuition. That's why I called you."

Kendall nodded. He respected Sam Carson's intuition; it had been instrumental in helping the old man mold his industrial empire.

"All right, Sam. I doubt if it was suicide, so let's assume it might be murder. Who would have a motive?"

Sam Carson frowned. "Many people, I'm afraid; James had an uncanny propensity for making enemies. But the point is, Kendall, if it *was* murder it had to be someone in this house! No one has entered or left in the last twenty-four

hours except the gardener, the police, and the men from the coroner's office."

"You're sure?" Kendall asked, taking out his pipe.

"Yes. The gates are locked at night and the dogs would have announced any unexpected arrivals."

"What about the gardener?"

"He lives in town; he went home around seven and didn't return until this morning. The county coroner estimates James died between midnight and two a.m."

"And who was here during that time?" asked Kendall as he lit his pipe.

"Randy Hicks, whom you've met; his wife Thelma; my ex-daughter-in-law, Paula—"

Kendall raised his eyebrows at the mention of Paula's name. He had assumed that all relations between her and the Carsons had been severed. He said so.

"Not at all," replied Sam Carson. "I'm quite fond of Paula and she frequently visits me here. We rather enjoy each other's company."

"How did James feel about you —camaraderie?"

"I doubt if he could have cared less. He was finished with her and had new interests."

Kendall removed a small notebook and pencil from his coat pocket.

He made a notation, then asked, "Why are the Hickses here?"

"I invited them up for the weekend. Randy's an old friend and hunting companion. He's also the administrator of my personal estate. He's been a tremendous help to me today, handling the reporters and funeral arrangements and all."

Kendall nodded. "Who else was in the house?"

"My nurse, Miss Simmers; Miss Meredith, whom you were admiring a moment ago; Mrs. Marshall, the cook; and her husband Jonathan, my valet. We'll be lunching shortly and you'll meet them all then. Meanwhile, I imagine you'd like to examine James' room."

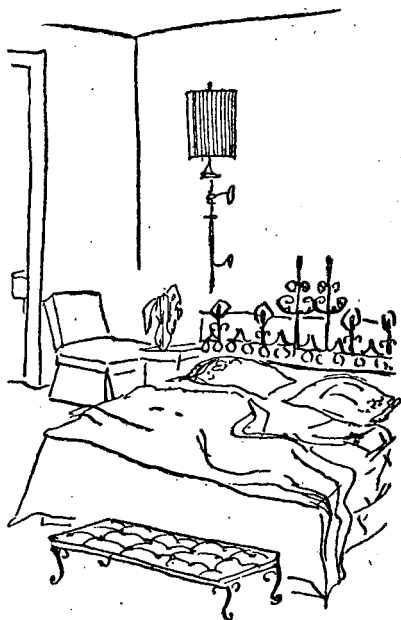
A few minutes later, Carson's valet, a spindly, elderly man with a bald head and a large protruding Adam's apple, unlocked the bedroom door and nervously stood aside as Kendall entered.

The room was spacious and sunny; one wall was solid glass that looked out over the wooded slopes behind the house. Thick maroon carpeting covered the floor. A small bathroom was at one end of the room and a double bed at the other end. Walnut nightstands nestled on both sides of the bed. One stand was crowded with an empty Scotch bottle, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, a butt-filled ashtray, and

a glass containing an inch of light amber liquid. The other stand supported a vase of drooping roses and a small white telephone.

The bathroom door was ajar; Kendall walked in and scanned the contents. The bathtub was still filled with water, and there were several small puddles on the terrazzo floor where the body had been.

Kendall returned to the bedroom



and unconsciously stroked his short brown beard as his eyes methodically dissected the room. Something seemed out of place, but he couldn't determine what it was. He turned to the valet.

"You found Mr. Carson's body, is that right, Jonathon?"

The valet's Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he replied in a high, nervous voice, "Yes, sir. When Mr. Carson didn't answer my call to breakfast, I unlocked the door. Mr. Carson was a very sound sleeper and I frequently had to awaken him. When I saw that he wasn't in bed and the bathroom door was open, I called to him again. There was no answer, so I went in and—well, there he was."

"Did James usually lock his door at night?"

"Yes, sir, every night; that's why I happened to have the key with me this morning. The police asked me about that, also."

"Did they ask you if there was another key to this room?"

"Why, yes, sir, as a matter of fact they did!"

"And is there?"

"No, sir, I have the only one."

Kendall surveyed the room again. "Has anything in here been disturbed, Jonathon?"

"Oh, no, sir! The gentlemen from the coroner's office removed the body, and the police examined the whiskey bottle and nothing more. They're all quite convinced Mr. Carson had himself a drunken fall."

Kendall walked over to the crowded nightstand, dipped his

finger into the glass and delicately tasted it. It was Scotch, and unadulterated. He looked down at the bed. The sheet and spread on one side were thrown back and the pillow was deeply crumpled. Then he noticed the other pillow.

The second pillow was askew and lightly crumpled in contrast to its crushed mate. It had been used, but definitely not slept on, and definitely not by anyone as heavy as James Carson.

Kendall walked around the bed and carefully examined the pillow. He could find no strands of hair, but on the lace border was a faint but definite smear of lipstick. James, it would appear, had had company in bed last night, and it must have been quite a party from the looks of the empty Scotch bottle.

Luncheon was served at noon on the back patio. They sat under a cool, green canvas awning, and the surrounding garden exuded a subtle incense as they ate. Jonathon served, aided at times by his wife, a gray, timorous woman who wore her hair in a bun. When Kendall complimented her on the splendid meal, she merely smiled.

Kendall sat now, savoring a superb sauterne which had been served to all but Charlene Meredith, who had declined.

He was musing. A quick trip into town had served only to confirm the sheriff's conviction that James' death had been entirely accidental. The sheriff had shown Kendall the coroner's sketchy report stating that James Carson had been found face down in a bathtub of water, that he had been drinking, that there was a slight contusion on his forehead, and that water and mucus were blocking his



trachea. The coroner had listed the cause of death as accidental drowning, and as far as the local police were concerned, the case was closed.

Kendall looked up as Thelma Hicks suddenly crowed, "Tell me, Mr. Kendall, why do you wear a beard? You're not one of those 'beatniks' are you?"

"No, I'm not," he replied with a polite smile. "I imagine I wear a beard for somewhat the same reasons that you wear mascara and rouge and dye your hair, Mrs.

Hicks." He gazed at her squarely.

Thelma Hicks returned sourly to her salad. She resented Kendall's observations on her visage. She resented his retort. In fact, Thelma Hicks resented the whole world. She was fleshy and wrinkled, with an aquiline nose and dark, baggy eyes. Although she was only five years older than her husband, she could have passed easily as his mother. The incursions of time had been most unkind to Thelma Hicks.

Kendall studied her and temporarily checked her off his list of James Carson's possible bed partners last night. He looked down the table at three far more likely candidates.

Charlene Meredith, the chic, attractive blonde secretary, caught his glance and smiled. Her blue eyes twinkled. Kendall smiled back. There was no denying Sam Carson's taste in women.

Sitting next to Charlene was Nancy Simmers, Sam's nurse during his protracted convalescence. She was a short, vivacious redhead whose pug nose and freckles gave her a "kid sister" look. It was an ephemeral illusion, however; inside that tight white uniform was a lot of woman. Nancy chattered constantly and kept the conversation flowing.

"Well, Mr. Kendall," she said to

him, "do you have any 'suspects' yet?"

"No, not exactly," he replied, replacing his napkin and reaching for his pipe.

"And what does 'not exactly' mean, Mr. Kendall?" interjected Randolph Hicks. He was an urbane individual, and Kendall imagined women found him rather attractive. He wondered what the graying attorney had ever seen in Thelma. Love? Money? Social position?

Kendall arose, packing and lighting his pipe as he spoke. "Well, Mr. Hicks, you have all stated to the police that you were all in the livingroom last evening playing bridge or reading, and that at approximately eleven o'clock James arose and remarked that he was retiring. He then removed a bottle of liquor from the cabinet and went to his room. A short time later the rest of you retired, and none of you saw James again until Jonathon discovered his body this morning."

Heads nodded in agreement.

"However, I have reason to believe that one of you visited James in his room last night."

"Do you know who?" asked Paula Carson softly. She was a handsome woman of twenty-five, with misty green eyes, small delicate features, and long brunette

hair softly piled high on her head.

"I know it was a woman," he said slowly.

During the afternoon an air of uneasiness settled over the estate. No one talked much. Kendall was politely tolerated whenever he asked questions, but none of them could offer any additional information; they hadn't seen or heard anything.

Sam Carson stared out the library window. "You're sure, Kendall? About the woman?"

"Reasonably sure, yes. What do you know about them, Sam—Charlene, Nancy and Paula? I'm passing on Thelma Hicks and Mrs. Marshall for the moment."

Sam Carson turned away from the window. "I know they're all fine young ladies, and I find it difficult to believe that any of them are involved. Charlene and Nancy have been with me since my attack last year. Charlene was recommended to me by Randy Hicks, and Nancy was my nurse in the hospital—I personally persuaded her to come here. And Paula? I assure you the business between her and my son was over and done with."

"Did James ever mention any of them to you?"

"No, but he had been acting rather strangely the past several

days. He had been helping me with some personal business matters, and he seemed rather smug. Yesterday he said he might have a surprise for me."

"Do you have any idea what it was?"

"No; he never mentioned it again."

"One other thing, Sam: is Randolph Hicks wealthy?"

Sam Carson smiled. "He's comfortable. The big money belongs to Thelma; she inherited a small fortune some years ago."

"Before or after they were married?"

"Before."

Kendall nodded and smiled. He wondered if the graying attorney still thought it was worth it.

He stood up and mentally reviewed the case as he left the library. A lab analysis on the lipstick smear would aid in finding out which of the understandably reticent girls had put it on the pillow, but it didn't mean she was responsible for James' death. There was still no real reason to suspect anything but an accident.

Paula Carson stood up and smoothed her skirt as he entered the livingroom. She seemed nervous and very serious.

"Mr. Kendall," she said, "you asked me earlier if I knew anything that might help you. Well, I

just thought of something; I'm not sure if it's important or not."

Kendall glanced around the room. It was empty. "Yes, Paula?"

"The police say Jim drowned in the bathtub last night."

"Yes, that's what they say."

"Well, that seems peculiar to me because Jim never tub-bathed; as long as I knew him he always showered, always in the morning and before dinner, but never before going to bed."

Kendall thanked her and hurried out of the room.

About seven p.m. Sam Carson's guests were gathered in the living-room having before-dinner drinks. The air of uneasiness persisted among the group, and conversation was at a minimum.

Paula's recollection of her ex-husband's ablutionary habits had prompted Kendall to make a long-distance phone call to his secretary. He was now soberly considering the information she had phoned back a few minutes ago. Thelma Hicks turned to him.

"Well, has the bearded Sam Spade solved the caper yet?" she asked sardonically.

"Mrs. Hicks," he shot back in mock interrogation, "can you account for your whereabouts from eleven last night to two this morning?"

"Wha—I—" she sputtered.

"See here, Kendall—" snapped Randolph Hicks.

Their exchange was interrupted by the entrance of Jonathon Marshall. The valet approached his employer.

"Mr. Carson, the gardener is leaving and would like to know if the flowers should be changed in James' room."

Kendall glanced at his watch and then at the vases of fresh flowers in the room. Then he realized what was out of place upstairs.

"Jonathon," he said quickly, "do you still have the key to James' room?"

"Why—yes, sir."

"Come with me," ordered Kendall, striding out of the room.

Jonathon unlocked the bedroom door and Kendall hurried over to the vase of drooping, wilted roses. He held the vase to his nose, then set it down and trotted back down the stairs.

Everybody looked up curiously as he reentered the room.

"Now then," he said, "I'd like everyone to tell me what he or she is drinking right now. Sam, let's start with you."

"Me? Just a small glass of beer."

"Mrs. Hicks?"

"I don't see what—brandy!"

"Mr. Hicks?"

"Bourbon. With ice."

"Nancy?"

"Brandy. If you'd like some—"

"Paula?"

"Scotch."

"Charlene?"

"Sorry, nothing," she smiled at him.

Kendall stared at her. "You never drink, do you Charlene?"

She smiled. "No. Unfortunately, alcohol always makes me sick."

"What's this all about, Kendall?" interrupted Sam Carson.

"Sam, I think I know what happened to James last night."

Everyone's attention focused on him.

"As I suspected earlier, there *was* a woman in James' room last night. My guess is she was expected and had suggested that he have some liquor present. She waited until everyone was in bed and James had had sufficient time to start on the bottle before she slipped into his room. He was probably pretty high by that time—you know James never could hold his liquor.

"Well, she got into bed, but probably parried any advances and urged more Scotch on him. Naturally, he fixed drinks for her, too, but apparently she didn't like the stuff, because she poured her drinks into the vase of roses beside the bed. The alcohol didn't do the flowers any good."

Charlene Meredith's eyes flashed. "Are you insinuating that I—"

"Yes, I'm afraid I am, Charlene."

"I certainly hope you have more proof than a vase of sick flowers, Mr. Kendall," observed Randolph Hicks.

"An excellent point, Mr. Hicks. Let me continue with my delineation for a moment. I imagine by the time the bottle was finished, James was out cold. Miss Meredith then proceeded to fill the bathtub and unlock the door for her accomplice.

"Her accomplice entered, dragged James over to the bathtub and smashed his head against the tub. Then he drowned him."

"He, Mr. Kendall?" asked Randolph Hicks, setting down his drink.

"You, Mr. Hicks!"

"Those are very serious accusations, Kendall," remarked Sam Carson.

"Sam, if I'm wrong, I'll probably have a lawsuit on my hands. But you see, James never bathed; he always showered, and then only in the morning and before dinner. Yet driving in today, Hicks stated that James had said he was going to *bathe and retire*. No one else reported James saying that."

"Merely an inaccuracy on my part," replied Randolph Hicks disdainfully. "What possible motive would I have?"

Kendall turned to him. "Merely

conjecture on my part, Mr. Hicks, but I suspect that James had stumbled onto your somewhat dubious administrative procedures."

"What do you mean?" demanded Sam Carson.

"Sam, do you know that Hicks periodically has been withdrawing large sums from your estate for 'maintenance and upkeep' and depositing them in his personal account?"

"But that's impossible," replied the old tycoon. "All statements go through my secretary. Miss Meredith—"

"Go on, Sam. Miss Meredith would have discovered the withdrawals and brought them to your attention—but Miss Meredith and Hicks have had a liaison going for some time. When the opportunity came, he set her up as your secretary. The rest was easy. An audit will prove me right or wrong."

There was silence in the room. Suddenly Randolph Hicks lunged for the door, but Kendall caught him and delivered a quick jab across the back of his neck. The attorney collapsed.

"You'd better phone the police, Jonathon," Kendall said as Thelma Hicks fainted.

Paula Carson parked the limousine at No. 1 hangar and turned to Kendall.

"So you see," he continued, "they needed one more big withdrawal before leaving the country together. James had to be silenced. Unfortunately, he suspected Hicks but not Charlene. When she made overtures, he fell right into their trap." He smiled at her and added, "Like his father, he never could resist a beautiful face."

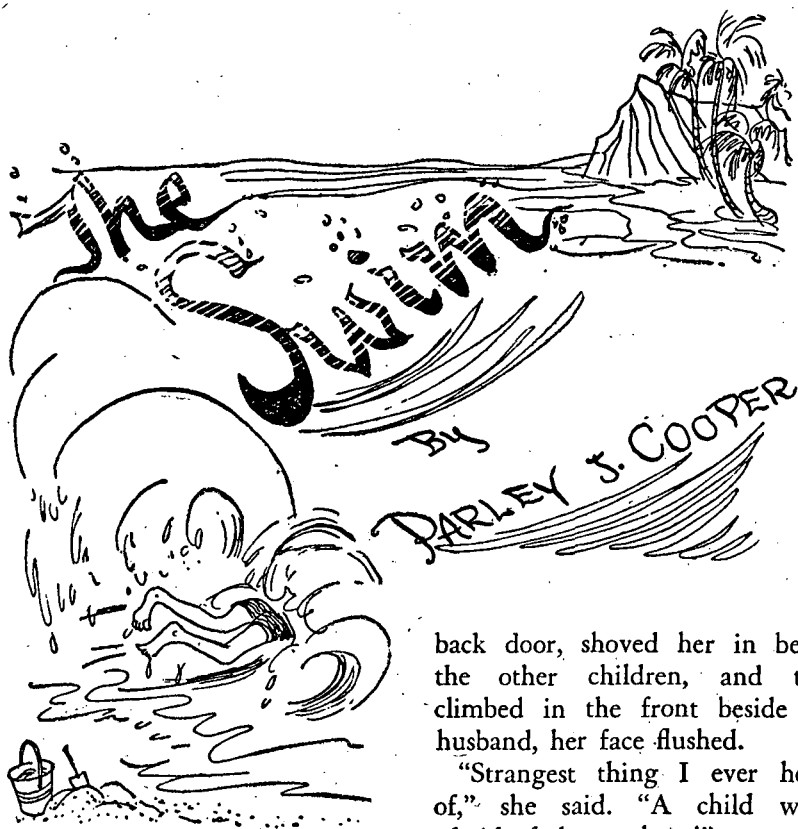
Paula looked down and blushed. "Thank you," she said softly. "But how did they lock the bedroom door afterward without a key?"

"Quite simply. The door has a convenience lock; you merely engage it on the inside and then close the door. Really, their whole scheme was quite simple. The only thing they didn't count on was an old man's intuition."

"And a man named Kendall," Paula added as he climbed out of the car:



*Is there anyone extant who hasn't drowned himself in fantasy
to escape baffling fact?*



back door, shoved her in beside the other children, and then climbed in the front beside her husband, her face flushed.

"Strangest thing I ever heard of," she said. "A child who's afraid of the seashore!"

"Just meanness," Will told her, and glared over the back of the seat at Evie.

"I ain't afraid," Evie said, trying to steady her voice. She turned to-

RHODA COLTON gave her daughter Evie a slap across the cheek, and dragged her to where the old sedan stood in the driveway belching black smoke. She opened the

ward the window, hoping her brothers had not noticed her tears.

"You said you was afraid," her mother blurted. "Just like you was afraid last time." Her voice had reached that shrill pitch which accompanied all their family outings. She was sitting rigidly, her eyes fixed on the oak tree in front of the windshield as if the trip were already in progress.

"Just meanness," Will repeated, and backed the old car into the road.

Evie wiped her eyes with her finger. She slipped her arm around her youngest brother Ron-

nie, her favorite, and whispered into his waxy ear, "I love the seashore."

When their father had turned back to the task of slipping the noisy gear-stick into place, Ronnie gave her a confused look. Anyone who loved the seashore wouldn't hide so she'd be left behind.

"I really do love the seashore," Evie repeated firmly. Then she slid back into the corner of the seat, imagining him puzzling the mystery of her actions.

The car lunged forward, sputtered, and began moving slowly down the dirt road away from the farmhouse.

The trip to the ocean was only forty miles, but it had taken two days of planning. Since the crop had been bad the previous year they had not been able to afford the renewal of the license or insurance on the car. They were traveling offenders, going against any number of laws, with a policeman possibly waiting around each corner to confront them; a fancy that filled the boys with excitement.

They invented a game of betting which tree hid an officer, but Evie did not join them. It was a silly game.

She nudged Ronnie's arm, attempting to draw him away from the game. "Don't you wanna



know why I hid?" Evie asked.

"'Cause you're afraid of the seashore," he laughed, at which she turned her head and looked down at her bony knees.

"You'll miss me when I'm gone," she said. "You'll miss me an awful lot."

He turned and examined her thoughtfully. Was she teasing him again? Finally, he smiled. "You ain't going anywhere," he ventured.

"I ain't coming home from the seashore," she told him. "I only hid because I didn't want to go off and leave you. And all you do is play *their* silly game. You don't even care that I'm not coming back!"

"Why ain't you coming back?"

"You don't really care," she sighed. "Nobody cares." She turned her back to him and looked sullenly at the countryside.

He watched her for a moment; then he turned back to where his brothers were pointing to the next grove of trees in anticipation of arrest, but his heart was no longer in the game. He fell back in the seat and leaned against Evie's side.

"I can breathe under water," she said suddenly.

He beamed at her. Her bad humor seemed to be gone. "So can I."

"No, you can't."

"How do you know, anyway?"

"'Cause you weren't in my dream," she told him. "I was the only one who could stay under as long as I wanted. I can swim all the way to Hawaii without ever coming up for air."

He pushed himself to the edge of the seat so he could look around at her face. "If you can, then why can't I?"

"I don't know. I suppose 'cause I'm a girl. Girls can do a lot of things boys can't. Maybe someday I'll be able to explain it to you—if I ever come back from Hawaii."

Ronnie jumped up and hung over the back of the front seat. "Evie's going to Hawaii," he blurted. "She's not ever coming back!"

Their mother turned, still impatient. "You stop them lies," she warned. "Always trying to frighten the litt'uns."

Evie brought her feet up beneath her and buried her face in the dusty covers of the seat. They just didn't like her, that was it. They liked the boys because boys could do a lot of things on the farm, but it just didn't matter that she could swim all the way to Hawaii without coming up for air. They wouldn't think that was important.

Ronnie sank sheepishly back against Evie's side. With a broken

voice, he asked "Will you promise to come back, Evie?"

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe."

"You stop that!" Evie screamed.

After smashing her sand castle with a signboard they had torn from the beach, her older brothers ran off laughing down the narrow strip of sand. Ronnie, who had been collecting shells, hurried back to look at the shapeless mounds and scatterings of damp sand.

"That was mean," he sided. "I'll help you build it back, Evie."

But Evie kicked down the remaining tiers of sand. "It doesn't matter!" She flung herself on the beach, raising her arms as a prop for her forehead.

Ronnie dragged the sign away and stuck it crookedly back in the sand. "They don't believe you can swim all the way to Hawaii," he said, looking over his shoulder at her. "That's why they did it."

She shifted her head so that her cheek rested on her knobby wrist. "Nobody believes me anymore,"

she proclaimed. "Not anybody!" "I do!"

Evie rolled over and stared up at him with a smile playing about the corners of her mouth. "You're just pretending you believe," she said.

"No! I believe you, Evie. Honest," he told her, and then turned his attention back to the sign. "What's undercurrent?" he asked.

But Evie had leaped to her feet and was running into the water.

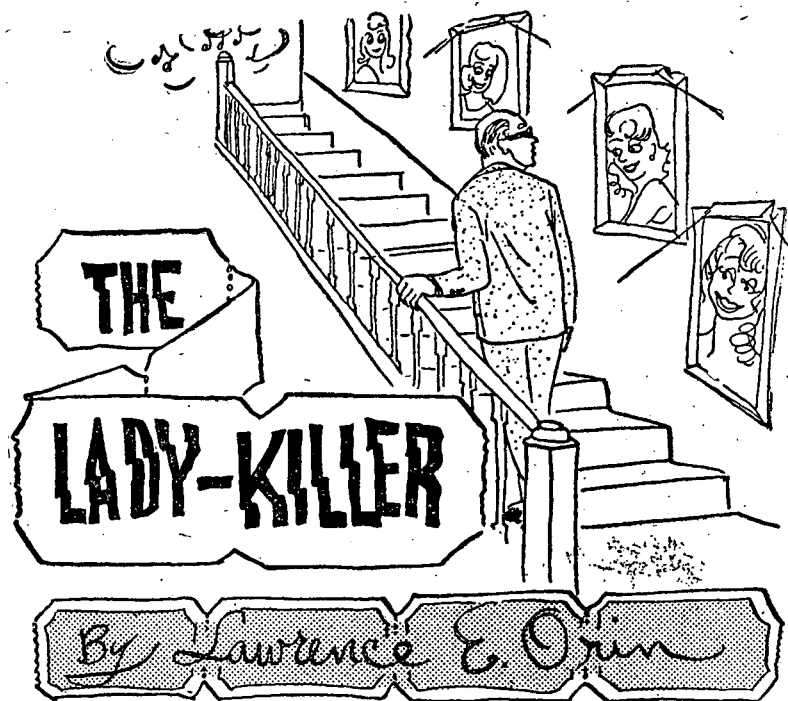
Danger, he read. *Strong undercurrent*.

Ronnie kicked the sand up about the bottom of the sign, and started walking toward the surf, toward Evie. As he stood with the waves lapping his legs, Evie suddenly disappeared. He stood for a moment waiting for her head to bob back above the waves, but when it did not, he gave a shrug of his shoulders and walked back up the beach to where their parents lay sunning themselves.

If he didn't tell them about Evie, maybe she would get back from Hawaii before they even missed her.



Some ailments are treated without a physician and, stranger still, some treatments are effected without touching the patient.



ALLEN DRUMM's big hand trembled slightly as he reached for the plain white envelope his secretary had just placed on his desk. There was no return address, but boldly lettered on the lower left-hand corner was the word, PERSONAL. Even before he'd slit the flap, Allen

knew the letter was from the detective agency.

The investigator's report was terse, and confirmed Allen's worst suspicions. On two occasions during the past month, it said, Mrs. Drumm and a young man identified as Scott Bower had driven, in

Bower's car, to a beach resort some sixty-five miles up the coast. There, in an out-of-the-way motel, they'd registered as Mr. and Mrs. S. Brown, of Los Angeles, and had spent the weekend together.

Allen removed his glasses, carefully tore the letter and envelope into shreds, deposited the pieces in a huge ashtray, then set them afire with a click of his cigarette lighter. *Mr. and Mrs. Brown!* How corny could Scott get? He'd always given his dead sister's only son credit for more imagination than that.

If Allen were half his current age, he would have been envious of his nephew's easy, carefree bachelor existence. It was an experience he'd never had the opportunity to enjoy. But then, he'd never had Scott's advantages: sleek, racy sports cars, an expensive, modern apartment in a fashionable part of town and, most important of all, a doting, well-to-do Uncle Allen whose money furnished these more pleasant aspects of life.

Nature, too, had been very kind to Scott, with a tall, stalwart frame, a shock of dark, curly hair over a handsome, tanned face, and a quick, flashing smile. Allen could understand how many women found his nephew irresistible.

As for Allen Drumm, he'd been nearly bald since age twenty-five,

and his rugged features would be called anything but handsome. A squat, stocky man with legs a little too short for his barrel-chested torso, he would hardly have been considered a lady-killer even in his best days. With little formal education and less material wealth, he'd spent his youth clawing his way to the top of the organization which now bore his name, Drumm Construction Company.

When he'd reached his middle forties, he found a number of women were beginning to be interested in him, but he realized it was the figures in his bankbook which really attracted them. After he'd fallen in love with, and married, Margaret, he never for a moment deluded himself that it was his physical attributes which had charmed a woman half his age into sharing his bed and board.

Someday, he supposed, he'd lose Margaret to a younger and perhaps richer man. But not just yet, he resolved as he sat in his plush, quiet office—and certainly not to that ungrateful scamp, Scott.

The buzzer startled Allen from his reverie. Before acknowledging his secretary's signal, he checked the calendar and the time. It was Friday, November 19, and the hands on the big gold watch around his wrist were stretched to ten minutes to four. Margaret was

right on schedule. Reluctantly, he reached for the switch.

"Yes, Miss Drake?"

"Mrs. Drumm would like to speak to you, Mr. Drumm. She's on line three."

"Thank you." Allen clicked off the intercom and picked up his telephone. "Hello, Margaret," he said.

"Oh, Allen!" Margaret's voice was strained with emotion. "I'm afraid I have some bad news. It's mother again. Father just phoned and—"

"Is he here in L. A.?" Allen broke in.

"No, he called from San Francisco, and he's quite worried about mother. She's had another of her attacks. He thinks I should come up right away."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm about wound up for the week, so I'll leave in a few minutes and pick you up. We can be at your folks' place by midnight."

For a few seconds the line was silent. Allen could picture the frown on his wife's pretty face as she frantically struggled to think of a logical excuse for refusing his offer. At last it came.

"But, dear, I've already booked my air reservation, and I've made arrangements for father to meet me."

"Well, at least I can drive you

to the airport and see you off."

"I'm sorry, Allen, but I was so sure you'd be tied up I called for a taxi. It'll be here any minute now."

"But you could easily—"

"I'll let you know right away if mother is as ill as father seems to think," Margaret interrupted. "I must rush, dear. Take care, and I'll be back no later than Sunday, I promise."

A terminating click, and the phone went dead in Allen's hand. For a long time he sat motionless, then gently replaced the instrument in its cradle. Pushing himself from his chair, he went to the window and gazed with unseeing eyes at the traffic crawling along Hill Street, eight floors below.

At six o'clock Allen took the elevator to the ground floor. Sam, the building guard, approached him as he stepped into the lobby.

"Shall I send for your car, sir?" he asked.

"Not tonight, Sam. I'm going to stay downtown for a while. I'll be back for it later."

Sam touched his cap, and watched the broad-shouldered figure of Mr. Drumm disappear into the thinning crowds on the sidewalk. He was a little disappointed, for Drumm was usually good for a four-bit tip.

At eleven o'clock, Allen still had

not returned for his automobile. He'd had a leisurely dinner at his club, lingered a long time over his cigar and brandy, and killed two more hours at a motion picture theater. Now he was hurrying east on Sixth Street, heading toward the Skid Row section of the city. A light, misty rain had started to fall, and the streets were nearly empty.

At Main Street, Allen turned north. Soon he was in an area of all-night movie houses, murky bars, and brightly lighted pawn shops. Finally, he reached a gaudy, flashing sign: DANCING EVERY NIGHT . . . FIFTY (50) LOVELY HOSTESSES. Under the lights he ducked into an entranceway out of the rain. Beyond, dimly-lit stairs led to an even duskier corridor above. Muffled, shuffling music trickled down the steps.

Allen stood for a minute scrutinizing the pictures on the walls: thin girls, plump girls, blonde and brunette, but all with the same toothy smiles and bold eyes. The pictures staggered up both sides of the staircase, and Allen followed.

A sallow-faced man, intently squinting at a nudist magazine, sat behind a counter. Behind him a sign on the wall read: Tickets 15¢ each—8 for \$1.00.

"How many, buddy?" the man asked, reluctantly tearing his eyes from the photographs in his magazine.

"I'll have five dollars' worth, please."

Through a curtained doorway the dancing area was a little brighter, but not much. The air reeked of tobacco smoke, stale beer and the pungent smell of antiseptic from the restrooms. Commanding the dance floor a three-piece orchestra—piano, horn and drums—occupied a raised platform. At one-minute intervals the drummer, with a ratatat roll, interrupted the music; the end of that dance.

To Allen's right, behind a sturdy railing, was a short bar and several red-cloth-covered tables, now unoccupied. The only entrance to the bar was from the dance floor.

Along the opposite wall stood a covey of girls in assorted shapes and sizes. They all wore tight-bodied, low-necked evening gowns, and they eyed Allen boldly. He crossed toward them. One, tall with dark hair, stepped out to meet him, hips swaying, smelling of jasmine.

"Hi, honey," she drawled.

Allen surrendered his strip of tickets and she draped them, like a Hawaiian lei, around her neck. Taking him by the hand, she led him out onto the floor where she

snuggled close, making him aware of the full length of her lush-ripe body.

Three drum barrages had sounded, and three of Allen's tickets had disappeared into the mysterious depths of the cleavage in the girl's evening gown before she spoke again.

"What's your name, honey?" she asked.

"Melvin," Allen replied, with the first name that occurred to him. "Melvin Myers. What's yours?"

"Virginia Devine. My friends call me Virgin for short, but not for long." She laughed. "Say, Melvin, would you like to buy me a drink?"

"Sure, why not?"

Again she led him by the hand, this time to one of the tables beyond the railing. A waiter with a dirty towel pinned around his middle and a bored expression on his pale face materialized from the gloom behind the bar. "What'll it be?" he asked.

"A champagne cocktail for me. How about you, honey?"

"A bourbon and water, please."

In a minute the waiter was back, a tall glass filled with a fizzy liquid in one hand and a smaller glass of pale whisky in the other.

"That's two-seventy-five," he said, holding out the check.

Allen produced his billfold and handed the man a twenty. He didn't miss the startled look that crossed his companion's face when she saw the thick bundle of currency he'd displayed. Slowly and deliberately, he slipped the wallet into an inside pocket, buttoning his coat over it.

The waiter counted out his customer's change. Allen scraped the money from the table, not bothering to count it, while Virginia took the check and tucked it in with the dance tickets she'd collected.

Allen raised his glass. "Here's how," he said, sipping the watery drink.

"To us, honey," the girl replied. She slid her chair a little closer to his. Beneath the table he could feel her leg rubbing gently up and down against his knee.

"What time do you get off work?" he asked.

"We close at one o'clock. Why? What do you have in mind?" The pressure under the table grew more insistent.

"Oh, I just thought we might go to my place and have a real drink. This stuff's pretty lousy." Allen shoved his glass away.

"You're a real fast worker, ain't you, Melvin? But I don't know, we ain't supposed to make dates with the customers."

I'll bet you're not! Allen thought, but aloud he said, "Well, we wouldn't have to be seen leaving together. I'll go and sort of get everything ready, then you come when you're through work. I'll leave you money for a taxi."

"I don't know," Virginia repeated. "You sure we'd be alone? You ain't got a wife or anyone who'd walk in on us?"

"Don't worry. There'll be nobody there but you and me. What do you say?"

"Well—I guess it'll be okay."

"Good!" Allen took out his wal-

let again, letting the girl's greedy eyes feast once more on its contents. He printed the address on a blank card, then pressed it, together with another twenty-dollar bill, into her eager hand.

"Remember, there's lots more where that came from," he said, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet.

The ticket seller, still engrossed in his magazine, didn't look up as Allen made his way through the anteroom and down the stairs. The dreary rain was still falling. He strode rapidly around a corner and hailed a cruising cab. Within the quarter-hour he'd claimed his own car and was driving out Wilshire Boulevard heading for the Westlake district.

With a cheery fire melting the chill in the darkened livingroom, Allen checked his watch. It was a quarter to one. In another three-quarters of an hour Virginia would be here. For a minute Allen hoped the girl wouldn't come, but then he thought of Margaret and Scott together, and he knew he must go through with this. He sat gazing into the flickering fire, and before he realized how fast the time had flown, he heard her soft rap on the door. He opened it, and the smell of jasmine permeated the air.

The following day, Saturday,



was rain-filled and gloomy, but Sunday dawned clear and bright, the kind of day chamber of commerce advertisements brag about. Allen spent the afternoon on the golf course, and when he arrived home Margaret was already there.

In great detail, she told him about her mother's illness, and how much the old lady had appreciated her daughter's visit. Allen marveled at the glib ease with which she told him her lies. It bothered him that he should feel so guilty for his transgression. Finally, the long, embarrassing evening drew to a close.

At eight o'clock on Monday Allen took his place at the breakfast table across from his wife. As usual, the morning paper was at his elbow. Between sips of coffee, he leafed through the pages. Suddenly, Margaret heard him gasp.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed.

"What is it, dear?"

"This item here; it's about Scott. Listen to this!" He smoothed the paper out on the ta-

ble. "Murdered woman found in man's apartment," he read. "Following an anonymous telephone tip Saturday, police entered the Westlake apartment of Scott Bowman, 24, well known member of the local jet set, and found the strangled body of a young woman identified as Virginia Devine. According to medical examiners, Miss Devine had been dead for approximately five hours when her body was discovered about eight a.m. Because Bowman could not be located, news of the murder was not released until last night, when Bowman was picked up returning to his home. Since he has not been able to account for his whereabouts during the early hours on Saturday, he has been booked on suspicion of first degree murder."

Allen put down the paper and looked up into Margaret's chalk-white face. She made no comment, but arose and hurried from the room.

Evidently she'd been quite upset by the news.



Physical fitness, that excellent government program, may become even more noble when coupled with the war on crime.



THIS story will make little sense unless the reader knows a few pertinent facts about my background. My name is Sinclair Carlins. When this story began, I was a thirty-three year old assistant manager of a West Los Angeles branch of a California bank. In spite of my thatch of bright red hair, I was considered to be a very dull and extremely conservative person. After my unhappy experiences in the United States Army, I made a career out of being just as dull and dignified as I could possibly

SINCLAIR CARLINS'

by Earle Lord

**PRIVATE
WAR**

be. I wore quiet, conservative clothes, drove a small black car, led a routine life, concentrated very hard on my work with commercial loans, only smiled when customers told jokes, and dutifully went to banking school twice a week. My recreation was reading mystery stories, watching television, and playing tennis on weekends.

The bank liked me. The manager especially liked me when I told him I did not plan to become involved seriously with any women until I felt I could afford one and then backed this up by not making any passes at the bookkeepers or women tellers. I was on the list as a "comer." It was rumored that I would be a manager of one of the smaller branches by the time I was thirty-five.

The motivation for this very dull and boring behavior was what had happened to me in the army. The first thing was that a girl I had planned to marry since I was thirteen had sent me a Dear John letter when I was touring Korea. She had been the proverbial childhood sweetheart and I felt pretty sour about her marrying a used car salesman, particularly one who had once sold me a lemon.

The second thing was worse. I joined the army voluntarily to get my military service over. I meant

to be a soldier, a combat soldier, but the army converted me into a clown. I was in a combat unit which was soon going into action when some idiot lieutenant decided to improve our morale and fighting spirit by having company boxing matches. Another idiot, who knew me in high school, thought it would be very funny to get me into a ring and told the lieutenant about me and my nose. It was very funny, all right. It put the whole company into stitches and had them rolling in the aisles, including our company commander and a visiting colonel. The colonel thought it was so funny that he had me transferred into Special Services where I could spend my full time entertaining the troops as a boxing clown.

This situation, of course, was caused by my nose. I grew up in a rough neighborhood in Los Angeles and had my nose badly broken in a fight when I was eleven years old. The doctors put it back together, but there was some strange kind of residual nerve damage that made it excruciatingly painful for me even to bump it, so I had to avoid all contact sports. That's how I got into tennis, which in my part of town was a challenge to battle in itself.

When the word got around my neighborhood about the extreme

sensitivity of my nose, I was really in for it. Teen-age boys are pure sadists at heart, and I was frequently forced into fights. Being very fast on my feet, I learned to move and to duck, so a full swing at my nose would hit nothing but air. After a while, I learned not only to duck, but to hit back sharply, my favorite target being the nose of my opponent. When I acquired this new skill, the kids began to leave me alone. I thought I had left this nightmare behind me, but it was all brought back in an army boxing ring.

Wearing boxing gloves, I could not do enough damage to my opponent's nose to make him stop swinging at mine, so all I could do was duck the head punches and earn a few points by tapping my opponent on the cheek a few times. Off duty, without heavy gloves, it was a different matter. When some half-drunk marine or soldier decided he wanted to see me perform in a bar, I would slip under his punch, then hit him on the chin with a lift-up push with the heel of my hand, a blow taught me in hand to hand combat training. It usually just took one of these to end the attack.

When I got out of my two-year service as a clown for the U. S. Army, I took my injured dignity and wounded pride home and

buried myself in my work. Over-night I became a dignified, conservative young banker who never hit anyone, and would probably have remained thus for the rest of my life if I hadn't taken my 35-mm camera to work with me on one fateful Tuesday.

There were a few pictures left on a roll of twenty exposures and, with my two-week vacation coming up, I decided to finish the roll during my lunch hour by shooting some exterior pictures of the black and gold mausoleum in which I worked. There was one picture left on the roll when I started down Wilshire Boulevard toward my apartment on Ardmore.

I was slowing down for a traffic light when a girl sitting at a bus stop stood up suddenly and waved. She was the most beautiful girl I have ever seen, having that rare combination of jet black hair, light olive skin, and violet-blue eyes that comes up about once in ten million tries. I was admiring this lovely bit of scenery when my car plowed into the large blue sedan ahead of me.

I didn't hit him very hard, but hard enough to lock bumpers and break some of the car's elaborate display of rear-end lights. While mentally cursing fate for having picked out a brand new car for me

to damage, the light changed and we began to move forward rapidly. I was halfway out my door, expecting to trade driver's licenses, when we began moving. Thrown back in my seat by the unexpected motion, the car door almost slammed on my left hand, and I hit the horn with the other hand.

About a hundred yards past the intersection, this lunatic pulled over to the curb and got out. He was a mean looking specimen, medium-height, stocky, expensively dressed, with intense dark brown eyes and a large moustache. Carrying a pair of broken sunglasses, he came back at me fast, and I got ready to duck. I offered him my driver's license tentatively, but he ignored it. He threw the glasses out in the middle of the street and swore softly.

"Come on, bud. Let's get these cars apart," he said, and began tugging at a fender.

I stood on my car and he pulled up on his until they separated with a drawn out grinding noise, and glass tinkled expensively on the street. He pushed back violently against my car and rolled it back about five feet. I looked mournfully at the damage to his car. Aside from a broken headlight and a dent in the bumper, mine was hardly damaged.

Turning to the man, who now

had his wallet out, I started to apologize, but he ignored my words and handed me a crisp green bill, instead. He looked worried and nervous.

"Will that cover it, buddy? I've got to roll," he said in a rasping voice that set my nerves on edge.

I stared at the bill and Benjamin Franklin stared serenely back at me.

"Don't try to hold me up, friend. I'm being very generous with you," he said, handing me another hundred dollar bill, then turned abruptly and began to walk rapidly back to his car.

I cleared my throat, gulped, and said, "Wait a minute. Don't you want my license number and address? We're supposed to trade them," I added weakly.

"I do, not want your license number, buster," he said, glaring at me and speaking slowly with the kind of emphasis you use when talking to a three-year-old. "We are now square. Forget the whole thing. That is why you have two C-notes in your hot little hand."

I could not believe the whole business, but decided I had better at least get his license number. While reaching for a ball-point pen in my coat pocket, I suddenly remembered the camera. I quickly opened the case, and began raising

the camera and cocking the shutter at the same time.

He must have heard the whirling noise as I cocked the shutter, and turned just as I aimed at the rear of his car.

"Don't do that!" he shouted and started toward me. As the camera clicked, he winced and stopped. The noise of a distant siren came over my shoulder. Shaking his head sadly, he took out a pencil and wrote my license number on a small white card.

"What is your name, photographer?" he asked wearily.

"Sinclair Carlins. I live at 3247 Ardmore, Apartment B," I said stiffly, then asked, "What is your name and address?"

"I'll send you a card, Mr. Sinclair Carlins," he said in a rather menacing manner, then got into his car, muttering to himself and shaking his head, and drove away with a roar. I waited for the police, but the siren turned out to be that of a fire engine, so I walked back to the bus stop and picked up some broken glass. There were still people waiting at the stop but no beautiful brunette.

Several of the people literally turned around to avoid getting involved with me, but one clean-cut boy of about seventeen smiled at me and spoke up: "You don't want my testimony, Mister. You

kept going and plowed into him."

I took his name and address anyway, then asked him where the pretty brunette went. He thought about it and looked puzzled.

"That's real funny. I saw that girl. You couldn't miss her. I was standing right next to where she was sitting. She must have left right after the accident. I saw her stand up and wave at you before it happened. Then I watched the big car drag you across the street, with you honking at him. I turned to say something about this but she was gone."

I thanked him, then walked back to my car and drove it to a nearby garage. They estimated thirty dollars worth of damage. I left it with them and drove home in a loaner. When I got home, I removed the film from the camera, then walked to a neighborhood camera shop and bought three more rolls for my vacation trip to Northern California and Oregon. I bought a mailer for the exposed film, filled out my name and address on the return slip, got some stamps from a coin machine in a grocery store, and mailed the roll to the developers in Hollywood.

That evening when I was watching a television thriller about World War II infantry combat, the

fun began. I was seated in an easy chair with my back to a ground floor window. The good guys were engaging a German patrol in a fire fight when I dropped a pretzel. As I leaned over to retrieve it, the television set blew up with a shattering roar. A piece of flying glass cut my ear. The lights went out. I slumped back in the chair, my ears ringing and my heart madly pumping, and tried to catch my breath. This was the most realistic TV show I'd ever witnessed.

After a few minutes in the dark, I got a flashlight, disconnected the set, went outside and pushed the circuit breaker switch back in. The lights came on. I was back inside, trying to sweep up the mess with a broom, when two policemen arrived. One of them inspected the shambles of the set while the other questioned me.

"What happened, Mr. Carlins? Your next door neighbor said a bomb went off in here."

"My TV set exploded," I said, holding a broom in one hand and a handkerchief to my ear with the other. "I was sitting in that chair, and pow! Away she blew. It sounded like a grenade. My ears are still ringing."

The other officer examined the set, then the wall behind the set, then crossed the room to look at

the open window behind my chair. He examined a small hole in the screen, then asked to look at my ear.

"Some flying glass from the picture tube cut it," I explained.

He disagreed. "No, Mr. Carlins, a bullet made this hole in the screen, nicked you in the ear, went through the set, and made a hole in the wall behind it. Someone tried to shoot you."

The two men then went outside and found some footprints in the dirt by the window.

A few minutes later, a plain-clothes officer arrived, Lieutenant William Steele of Homicide. He questioned me closely about any enemies and didn't look at all happy when I couldn't think of any. He seemed delighted, however, when I told him that I worked in a bank.

"About how much money do you have physical access to, Mr. Carlins?" he asked, with the air of a man who has just struck pay-dirt.

"About \$100,000 at the most," I told him, somewhat annoyed.

"Do you ever gamble?" was the next question. He would not believe my negative answer, and warned me that they would check whether I was playing the horses in Hollywood Park and spending my weekends in Las Vegas.

I wished him luck and expressed the hope that he would exert a little energy on trying to find the guy who tried to kill me. We parted on very unfriendly terms.

The next day, I picked up my car on my coffee break, noticed it was running a little rough, parked it in the bank's parking lot, and called a neighborhood mechanic who had an account with us. He said he'd come over to pick it up after lunch.

He walked into the bank at one o'clock to pick up the keys. At 1:30 he walked back into the bank with two uniformed police officers. Very pale, and his hands trembling, he leaned on the counter above my desk.

"Can you come outside for a moment, Mr. Carlins? We want to show you something."

Everyone in the bank, from the manager to the batch machine operator, was staring at us when I followed them out to my car, which had the hood up.

"Lucky for me, I decided to look at the engine before I started the damn thing," the mechanic said, motioning inside. "I noticed this blue wire where it shouldn't be, attached to the starter, and traced it under the car to these four sticks of dynamite taped under the driver's seat. That's when I called the cops."

The policemen looked at me expectantly. I shrugged my shoulders, smiled nervously, and told them they'd better call Lieutenant Steele who was working on a similar incident. When Steele arrived at the bank, we had a conference with the manager in his private office. I again denied that I had any enemies, large gambling debts, or that I was being blackmailed, a new idea of the lieutenant. At the end of the conference, the manager suggested that I take the rest of the afternoon off, and sent for a special auditing team to count the bank's money. I offered to let him search me on the spot, but he didn't think this was very funny. Lieutenant Steele didn't think it was funny either. He took the offer seriously and searched me.

I walked listlessly out of the bank, all of the help and customers staring at me, and began walking the three blocks to the garage where my car's engine was being tuned. I thought I would ask for another loaner. Halfway there, a street cleaning truck came splashing down Wilshire Boulevard, spraying water into the gutters. When a jet splashed close to me, I heard a sort of dull splat behind me, then the explosion of the truck's right front tire. The truck, its jets still spraying water, then

hopped the curb in front of me and crashed into a liquor store. It sounded like a Niagara Falls of broken glass.

I was standing there with my mouth open when a man in a business suit tackled me. We went down in a heap. Another man took out a revolver and fired it twice over us. I started to get up to get out of his line of fire, but the football player, breathing heavily, pushed me down.

"Perhaps you could fill me in," I said. "Which way is the goal line?"

"Stay down, you fool," he said angrily, and drew a gun as the other man started to run down the alley. As people began running out of the liquor store, it ignited with a tremendous whooshing noise and several women began to scream. I could hear the sound of many sirens in the distance. A police car roared up and skidded into the curb beside us. The football player motioned to the uniformed officers, who burst out of the car and ran over to us.

"Get him in the car quick and hold on to him," the football player said, then ran down the alley with his gun drawn.

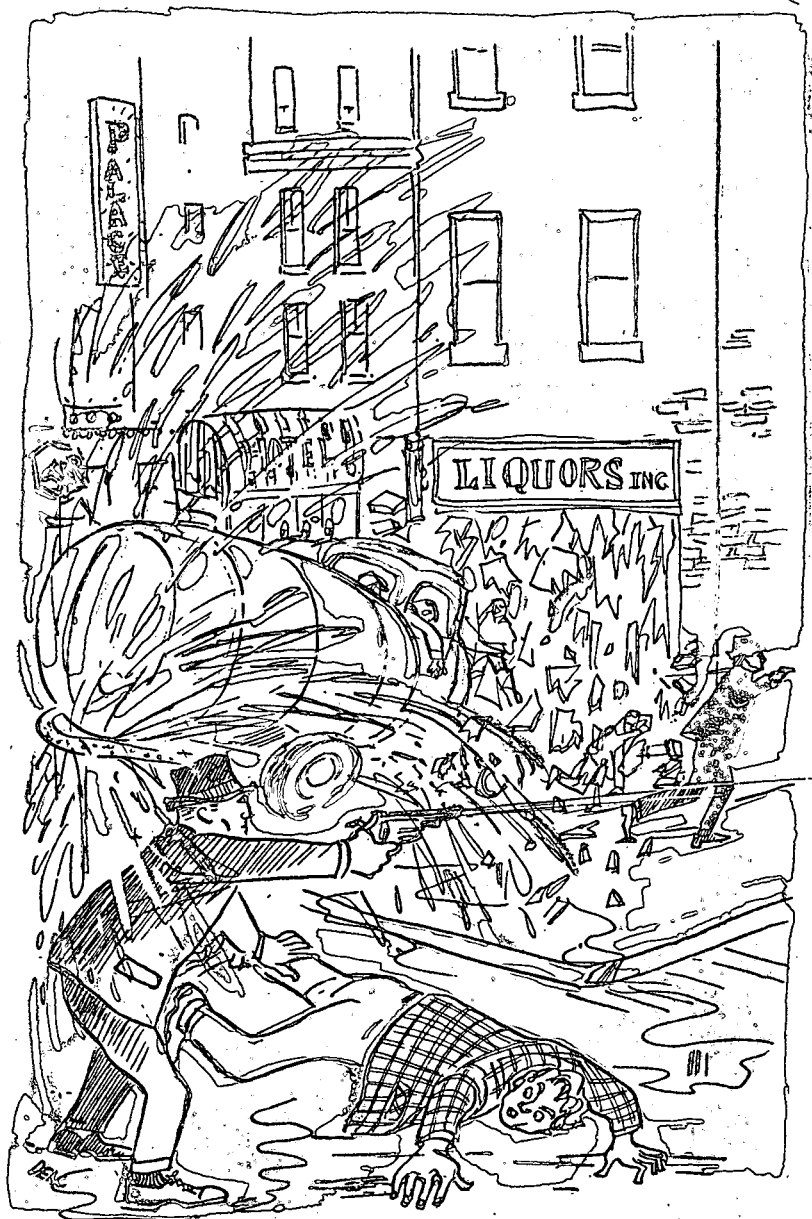
Each officer grabbed me by an arm, hurried me to the police car and pushed me in. One of them got in with me, the other ran after

the disappearing football player.

The officer with me flashed a smile, took off his cap, and said with a tone of respect and admiration, "Did you do all of that, Jack, all by yourself?" He motioned toward the liquor store which was sending a great plume of white smoke about two thousand feet in the air and to Wilshire Boulevard which was now completely blocked off by fire engines on one side and a series of multiple collisions on the other. Traffic appeared to be backed up in both directions as far as one could see, and most of the cars seemed to be honking.

I denied responsibility. An hour later, when the fire was out, the water truck towed away, and the survivors of the multiple collisions had been removed, Lieutenant Steele arrived and informed me that I was responsible. He told me that I had been shot at by a man in the alley, that the shot had missed me and exploded the water sprayer's tire. Two plainclothes detectives had been following me, one of whom turned out to be the football player. They hadn't caught the man who shot at me. Steele asked me in pleading tones to give the LAPD a clue as to why people were trying to shoot me or blow me into small pieces.

I again denied having stolen



large sums of money from the bank, owing large gambling debts, being a blackmail victim or secret agent, or having refused to cooperate with gangsters planning to rob the bank, and Steele told me he was going to send me home in a police car because he didn't have a tank handy and that the department would deliver my car to me when it was ready. He asked me, in an extremely hostile manner, to stay off the streets, and to pull my shades when the sun went down. He reminded me very much of that colonel who had transferred me into Special Services.

I was then hauled downtown to the police building where I was asked to stand up in front of about one hundred police officers and officials, but none could finger me as a major gangster or criminal. I was pleased to find out that I didn't look like anyone. They asked me to volunteer to have my photograph and fingerprints taken. They said I didn't need a lawyer, yet. When the police car returning me home was about a block from my apartment, I asked to get out. I didn't want my neighbors to get any wrong ideas.

As I walked down the street, I noticed there had been a fire in this neighborhood too. The camera shop was a charred ruin. I

crossed the street when I spotted the owner, whom I'd known for several years. His head bandaged, he was standing outside the store and staring mournfully at it.

"What happened, Bob?"

"Something real weird, Mr. Car-lins. Two big hefty guys came in and robbed me, not of money, but of all my developed film and prints. They had me stuff them in a small suitcase they were carrying, then pushed me outside, poured gasoline around the place and set fire to it. One of them hit me on the head with a sap. I came to in an ambulance."

One of the police officers had joined us. "Did this character have any film in your shop?" he asked, motioning to me, and seemed disappointed when the owner said no.

I expressed my sympathy, then walked home, feeling a little conspicuous with the police car following about twenty feet behind me all the way.

When I got inside the apartment, I looked with amazement at the shambles. Someone had torn it apart, completely and thoroughly. Every drawer was out, its contents spilled on the floor. Pots and pans were strewn on the kitchen floor. Sugar and coffee had been poured into the sink from their containers. My camera equipment was spread all over my desk. The back of my

camera was off. I then remembered the weird incident with the man who paid me for damaging his car, and everything started to fall into place.

I started toward the door on the off-chance that the police car would still be outside. I stopped though. I had company. A small, deadly looking man was standing by the door, smiling, and pointing a very large automatic pistol right at me. Hearing the noise of crunching glass behind me, I looked back. A very large, ugly man was standing in my kitchenette with a revolver in his hand, and it too was pointed in my direction. This man wasn't smiling.

My heart began to beat rapidly and my throat became very dry, all of a sudden. I cleared my throat and asked nervously, "Are you gentlemen police officers?"

"No, clown," the little one said in a nasal voice. "We are not police officers."

The big one laughed like a five-year-old girl. "We aren't gentlemen either, little man."

They walked toward me from both directions.

"Where did you hide the film?" the little one asked slowly, with emphasis on each word. The big one stuck his revolver in my back.

In the army, before they converted me into a clown, I had

been trained how to handle this particular situation. I had been very good in practice, but never once had a chance to use my knowledge in a real life situation. My heart stopped pounding and I felt absolutely elated as the little guy set it up perfectly. He swung his gun at my head. I slid under this blow, hit him in the throat with a finger jab, whirled and knocked the revolver out of the larger man's grip with my other hand. When the big man threw a punch at me, I ducked under it and hit him in the chin with a forehand palm lift. I felt something snap and he went down with a crash. I think the smaller man might have shot me, but he was hit by the larger man. Besides, he was choking at the time. When he tried to level his pistol at me, I caught his wrist and twisted it up. When I lifted my knee into his vital regions, the gun went off, blowing a hole in the ceiling, and making a very loud noise in the small room. I gave him a palm lift to the chin and he went down with a moan. I jumped quickly to one side as a large quantity of plaster fell from the ceiling, raising a dust cloud in the room, and partly covering the two bodies on the floor.

The police, who had been waiting outside, charged into the room

without knocking, their guns drawn. By then, I had a broom and dust pan out. I explained to them just how these two men had been incapacitated, but I don't think they ever believed that I did it. They kept searching the apartment for accomplices.

Steele arrived twenty minutes later. "Would you mind putting the broom down while we talk?" he said wearily. He looked tired, tired of me. "I'm not used to interrogating a man under these circumstances."

I leaned the broom against a wall, cleared some plaster off the sofa, and sat down.

"You did all of this?" he said, motioning to the mess in the room.

"No, those two men made the mess. They were looking for something."

He stared at me for about twenty seconds. "One of those men, the big one, has a broken jaw. The smaller one has a broken wrist, an injury to his throat, and some internal injuries. Who else was in here, and what the hell were they looking for? What kind of an operator are you? What in God's name are you up to?"

Lieutenant Steele had lost his temper, and this ill-mannered outburst made me lose mine. I'd intended to tell him about the picture I had taken of the man with

the large moustache, but I now balked. I was angry at Steele for judging me to be a criminal without evidence. I was angry at the sedan owner for apparently ordering my death for simply taking his picture. I was angry at the bank for suspecting me of being a thief. And I was still angry at the U. S. Army for training me to be a combat infantryman and then transforming me into a clown. I had been denied an opportunity to participate legitimately in a large public war. I now decided to engage in my own private little conflict. I now declared war on the man who owned that car. I asked Steele to get out of my apartment and take those two hoodlums with him.

When Steele left, after again ordering me to remain in my apartment, I phoned the bank and asked the manager if they had discovered any shortages. They hadn't, of course, and he was very apologetic about it. He seemed very happy, however, when I suggested that I begin my vacation early. He even suggested to me that I take the additional two days and use them to extend my trip from Northern California up to British Columbia. I asked him how Alaska sounded to him. The man had absolutely no sense of humor as far as I was concerned

and replied that Alaska sounded fine to him.

I cleaned up the apartment. At eight that evening, Steele called me and said the two men had been identified as Eastern hoodlums who had been flown in late on Tuesday night and had obviously been given me as a working assignment. Steele said that it cost several thousand dollars to hire such a team, and I told him I was flattered. He then informed me that he considered this clear evidence that organized crime was directly interested in me and in something that I possessed. I told him that I would let him know if I thought of anything. Steele again ordered me to stay in my apartment until I left for Alaska and to keep in touch with him when I arrived in Alaska. I hadn't mentioned Alaska to him.

I did not sleep very well that night, but dreamed that I was being chased all over the city of Los Angeles by hordes of police cars, ambulances, and fire engines. I had to get up in the early morning hours and pour myself a double brandy in order to get back to sleep.

In the morning I had a quick breakfast, then slipped out the back door and went over a fence into an alley. I walked several blocks to the nearest branch of my

bank and withdrew one thousand dollars in cash. The people in the bank had to call over to my branch to verify the transaction. They tried to stall me a little but I managed to catch a bus about three minutes before the police car arrived. I got off the bus when I spotted a cab stand and took a cab to Santa Monica. I then took an airport bus to Westchester, got off at the airport, then caught an airport jitney bus to the Marina Hotel. In the adjoining business district, I got a butch hair cut, bought some heavy black-framed glasses from an optometrist, purchased a bow tie, a sport jacket, and a suitcase in a clothing store. I checked into the hotel as Ralph Nelson from Oakland, California and rented a car. After lunch, I relaxed in my room for a while, then at two in the afternoon I drove the car back to the scene of the accident and parked it alongside the large office building behind the bus stop.

I began a systematic search of that building, starting with the eighth floor and working down, going into every office on one pretext or another. I found her in a lawyer's office on the third floor. The door was open but her desk was over to one side. I didn't see her until I had walked all the way into the room.

She was typing from some notes on a pad and looked up at me with those incredibly colored eyes, and smiled, a beautiful smile. I just stood there and admired it like a sunset.

"Yes?" she said. I guess she was used to being stared at.

"I am Mr. Nelson," I said briskly. "I am here to see Mr. Johnson about those termites in his desk." I don't know just why this came out. The girl must have stimulated my imagination.

She laughed, a beautiful, melodious laugh. "You must have the wrong office, Mr. Nelson," she said, choking a little. She even managed to do this in a charming way. "There is a Johnson on the floor above us, but I don't think he has any termites."

I sighed sadly at this and looked worried. She had a lovely voice. "You can't always tell by looking at the surface," I said as professionally as I could. "You aren't Mrs. Johnson, then?"

She laughed again and arched her eyebrows a little. They were exquisitely done. "I am Miss Carmelo," she said. I thought this had a lovely sound.

"I'll try upstairs, Miss Carmelo," I said and left abruptly, rather annoyed with myself. I had hoped to observe the girl without her noticing me. She would probably re-



member me now. I left the building and had a bite to eat in a drug-store. I purchased a paperback mystery novel and read in my rented car until four.

Then I took up a position behind a large pillar in front of the building and waited for Miss Carmelo to emerge. My plan was to follow her home and discover where she lived, then try to talk to her about the identity and motivation of the sedan owner. It had finally dawned on me that the accident had been his fault after all, that he had stopped his car when he had seen the girl. Her first reaction to seeing him had been to stand up and wave. Her second reaction had been to run back into the office building.

She walked out of the building a little after 4:30 and surprised me

by not turning toward the bus stop. She turned instead into the large parking lot alongside the building. I followed her and so did two large beefy-looking characters ahead of me. They walked faster as she walked into the lot and began narrowing the gap between them rapidly. I started to run quietly, and when they grabbed her, one on each arm, I was directly behind them.

"Don't make a sound, lady, and you won't get hurt. A man wants to see you," one of them said in a low voice.

I tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned his head toward me with a surprised expression on his face. I kicked him hard in the back of one knee and shoved my forearm lift into and under his jaw. He went down silently. The other man let go of the girl, reached into his coat jacket with one hand, and took a vicious side-armed swipe at me with an arm the size of a Virginia ham.

He almost hit me. I went around this blow and gave him a one-two-three series consisting of a kick in the right shin bone, a knee lift into the lower stomach, and a hand lift into the throat and jaw. He crashed against a car when he fell. I think he dented a fender. I grabbed the girl and hurried her around the back of the

office building to my car parked on the street.

When she began to protest, I told her I knew from vivid, personal experience that these men meant to kill and that I had to talk to her. I told her it wasn't safe to go home and that she should spend that night elsewhere. She agreed to go to a friend's apartment, but insisted on stopping first at hers for some clothes. She said we could sneak in a back entrance.

While driving her to her apartment, I told her my story, all of it. She thanked me for trying to help her but said she had no idea who the man in the sedan was, that she had been waving at someone across the street. She was a beautiful girl but a very poor and unconvincing liar. I didn't try to argue with her but drove her to her apartment. We slipped in the back way and got her clothes. I drove her to her friend's apartment in Westwood, then drove back to the area in which I lived. I parked the car a block away from my apartment, walked down the alley, climbed the fence, and slipped into the place cautiously from the rear.

I was relieved to find my place unoccupied. I took off the phony glasses and bow tie, wrapped a towel around my head, turban-fashion, to conceal my new hair-

cut, then walked out the front door into the entrance foyer of the apartment. I opened my mail box, grabbed the film packet from the developers, then darted back into the apartment. As I slammed the door, I saw the detectives leave a car across the street and start running toward the apartment. I stripped off the towel, grabbed my coat, tie, and glasses, and managed to get over the fence and into the alley before one of the detectives was able to cut me off. I later discovered that Lieutenant Steele wanted to talk to me about an assault and battery committed that afternoon in a Wilshire parking lot.

I was in my car and away before an all-points bulletin was sent out requesting my arrest. Several police cars passed me as I went north on Vermont. I drove to the Hollywood apartment of a friend I knew from high school, a newspaper reporter named Tony Wilson.

He didn't recognize me at first, but he exploded when he did.

"Great balls of fire! Come on in, Sinclair. You are manna from heaven to a poor, hungry newspaperman. Every cop in Southern California is looking for you. You are the greatest story in L.A. since the Watts Riots."

He offered me a drink and I

took it. He was genuinely delighted to see me. When I told him my story and asked him to help me identify the man with the moustache, he promised his full cooperation, said he would discreetly show the picture around until he found out who the mystery man was. When I unwrapped the package of slides and showed him the picture, he held it up to a light, whistled excitedly, then got out a projector. When he projected the slide onto one of the apartment walls, he began to jump up and down.

"You mean to say you took this picture on Wilshire Boulevard this Tuesday?" he said in tones of wonder and amazement. When I nodded, he went on. "This angry man with the moustache was given what amounted to a state funeral by the Mafia over three years ago in Genoa. This man is supposed to be dead. This angry man with a big moustache is Frank Rapallo, deported from the United States seven years ago. He was supposed to be supreme commander of the American Mafia. When we kicked him out, he took over things in Europe."

"So on Tuesday morning," Wilson continued as he paced back and forth in the room, "wearing a big moustache and dark glasses, Frank Rapallo is driving down

Wilshire Boulevard in broad daylight, thumbing his Roman nose at the United States of America, when this Carmelo girl recognizes him and stands up and waves at him. He panics and hits the brakes and you plow into him and knock off the sunglasses. He tries to drive off but your car sticks like a bulldog. Then, when he gets out to buy you off and unlock bumpers, you take his picture. Sinclair, to him, you are a walking disaster. Since then, he's been sending his troops at you and you've been sending them back in tatters."

"The Carmelo girl is in danger," I said, trying to figure out her motivation. "She must have known who he was, but she is only about twenty-two or three. She would have been only fifteen or sixteen when he was kicked out. I think I'd better go out and talk to her again. She should have police protection."

I left the slide with Wilson, told him to write his story and inform the police, deciding that a private war with the Mafia was more than I could handle. I then left his apartment, walked to the nearest phone booth, called Mary Carmelo at the apartment of her friend, and told her I was driving out. She had a lovely voice on a telephone.

This was foolish, I admit, but I wanted to be sure that Mary had

no criminal connection with Rappallo before I asked the police to protect her. I drove back to Westwood, parked my car, and started up the steps to her friend's apartment.

I never made it. There were three of them this time and they were obviously waiting for me. One of them threw a net over me while the others pinioned my arms from the side. They kept clear of my feet, forcing me down, and sitting on them. While two of them held me, the third one picked up a large coil of clothesline and tied me up like a mummy. When he got finished, all I could wiggle were my ears.

They carried me down the stairs like a quarter of beef and put me inside a large, blue sedan with a dented rear end. I was feeling very sad because it was obvious that Mary Carmelo had told the Rappallo forces that I was coming. They blindfolded me and pushed me down on the seat. We were soon traveling up a winding canyon road in the Santa Monica mountains. After about ten minutes the car turned off the paved road, its wheels crunching on gravel. The car stopped and, when the doors were opened, I could hear crickets creaking and frogs croaking. I think I could even hear a stream rushing through a rocky

bed. We were a long ways out in the mountains.

They carried me into the house, placed me in a large overstuffed chair and took off the blindfold. I looked around the dimly lighted, expensively furnished room, large enough to have a grand piano tucked away in a corner. Seated in a chair directly across from me, having a drink, was Frank Rapallo. He gave me a wintry, weary smile, then motioned with his head to the goon squad which had convoyed me into the room.

"Congratulations!" he said to them as they left the room, and raised his glass to me in a mock salute. "I'd offer you a drink, friend, but that would involve untying you. I understand you are a riot with your hands free."

I didn't say anything because I couldn't think of anything to say. I was still mourning the treachery of Mary Carmelo.

"Do you want to tell me what you did with that picture you took of me?" he said gently. "My boys can't seem to find it, and I'm running out of help."

I told him I couldn't be sure, but it was probably in the hands of Lieutenant William Steele by now, and would probably be on forty million front pages in the morning.

He gazed at me thoughtfully

for a long, long time. "You know, son," he said, putting his drink down on the table beside him, "you have caused me more trouble in two days than the entire Federal Bureau of Investigation managed to do in ten years."

I got real brave and replied that he should be grateful that I had brought him back to life. He laughed at this, then stood up and took a vicious looking little gun out of one of his trouser pockets. I wished I had stuck to banking.

He frowned at me. "What do you suppose I should do with you? You're driving me out of my own country. You're probably driving me into forced retirement. You've made a sap out of me and my whole organization."

I was feeling very uneasy now, but tried to put up a good front. "Why don't you try another country?" I said, my voice cracking a little. "Like, say, China or Soviet Russia?" He didn't seem to think this very funny. It didn't sound very funny to me, either.

He motioned at me with the little gun. "You remember this, little man. I keep my word. Even with a square like you wisecracking at me, I don't lay a finger on you. Tell her that."

With that he left the room. I could hear him making a phone call in the next room but couldn't

understand what he was saying. I heard several cars drive away on the gravel path a few minutes later, then silence. Nothing stirred in the house. I could hear the crickets and frogs again. A half hour later, after I had totally exhausted myself trying to get free from my bonds, I heard a car coming up the canyon. I had mixed feelings as it swung into the graveled drive and stopped. I was lonely, but not for the sight of some of Rapallo's little helpers.

The tapping of feminine heels was a pleasing sound to my ears. The sight of Mary Carmelo was a lovely one to my eyes, treacherous or not. I liked to look at her even when she laughed merrily at my plight, and referred to me as the termite man. I had fallen sideways in my struggles to free myself. She straightened me up and kissed me. At my suggestion that I could respond better with my hands free, she kissed me several times more as she uncoiled about fifty feet of rope from me.

By then, I had guessed the truth. Mary was Frank Rapallo's daughter. She, like everyone else,

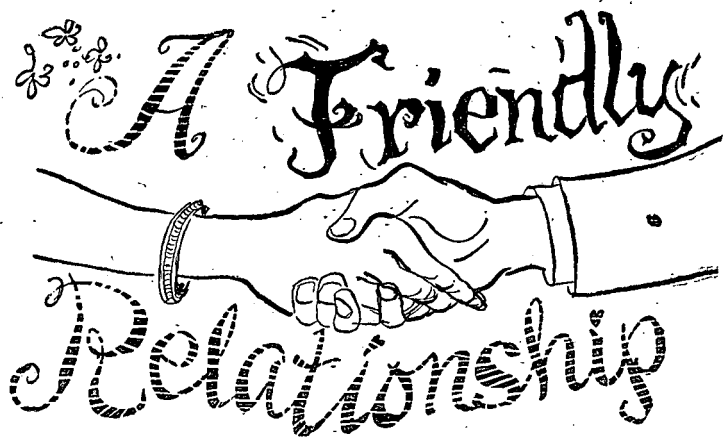
had thought him dead and buried. To her, he was not a gangster and Mafia overlord, but a very kind, warm, and considerate father. When she saw him driving down Wilshire Boulevard, she'd stood up and waved, and the sight of her had startled him into stopping the car, which brought me into the scene with a crash. When I'd left her in Westwood, she had contacted her father by calling a lawyer who was looking after her, and asked him to stop trying to kill me. Rapallo had agreed to his daughter's request but insisted on seeing the man who had given him all the trouble, the man in whom his daughter appeared to be interested.

"I'll have to change my name again, and move to some other part of the country," Mary said with a little frown. She had a beautiful frown.

"I can help you with that," I said, picking up my cue neatly. "Suppose we change it to Carlins. We could move to Alaska." With that, the private war of Sinclair Carlins ended on a positive, matrimonial note.



It seems a reasonable presupposition that A FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIP is the normal culminant of psychological consanguinity.



HAROLD CRANE was not the do-it-yourself type. When he wanted some gardening done, he employed a gardener; when repairs were needed around the house, he employed a handyman; and when he wanted a murder committed, he naturally decided to employ a killer.

There Harold encountered problems. Despite the ever-widening variety of services offered for pay, there is a remarkable shortage of professional assistance and advice for persons who have in

mind the dispatch of a spouse.

If television is to be believed, there are professional killers. However, they are not to be found in the yellow pages or in the classifieds or, Harold discovered, any-

by
**Larry
Powell**

where else that the average, law-abiding citizen might be likely to run into them.

This realization led Harold to turn finally to Allen Stoddard. The alternatives were to commit the murder himself or to allow his wife Marcia to continue to haunt his days, and neither prospect appealed to him.

Once Stoddard had been well-to-do. His parents had left him a fair-sized legacy, but when his guardian died, Allen had run through his bank account at break-neck speed. Harold had hired him a year ago as his personal secretary and it hadn't taken Harold long to perceive that Stoddard would do almost anything to get money again.

Once they had agreed that Stoddard would dispose of Marcia, the secretary began to change. He became more ingratiating, less respectful. Soon most of the people the Cranes knew were accepting Stoddard as a friend of the family rather than an employee; Stoddard's attitude and behavior helped the impression along. Harold did not care for this at all, but he could hardly protest.

After three months, however, Harold's patience was beginning to run as thin as Marcia's tasteless coffee. He was beginning to wonder whether Stoddard really in-

tended to discharge their contract.

"Allen," he said, "I want this thing over and done with before the week is out. I've waited long enough.

Stoddard looked up and smiled. The two of them were alone; Marcia was at another of those bridge parties. The thought of his wife prattling over a card table irritated Harold almost as much as Stoddard's smile.

"We must be careful," Stoddard said soothingly. "I know you're getting impatient, Harold, but you, of all people, can understand that this must look just right. There mustn't be any suspicions aroused."

"That's the reason I employed you," Harold said irritably, "so that no one would suspect me."

Stoddard nodded. "This week it is. Think no more about it, Harold. Remember your ulcer."

Harold scowled. He didn't like Stoddard bringing up his ulcer. That was entirely too personal. You'd think they were friends or something.

Burrowing deeper in the embrace of his favorite chair, the giant leather hulk Marcia always loudly complained about, Harold watched Stoddard fiddle with his tape recorder. Stoddard was always playing around with that machine, recording bird calls,

train whistles, the ocean's thunder, other such claptrap.

"Would you like to hear the bird calls again?" Stoddard said on cue. He pressed a lever and the machine clicked and whirred as the tape began to rewind.

"I didn't like to hear them the first time, much less again," Harold said grouchy. "Have you ever considered that some people make music for those things?"

"Half the enjoyment is recording your own material." Stoddard smiled. "But I forgot. You don't like to do things yourself."

Stoddard's smile was too easy, too quick. He was a handsome man, although loosening up about the chin and neck, collecting tell-tale fat.

"How do you propose to dispose of Marcia?" Harold returned the conversation to essential matters.

"I plan to drown her," Stoddard said matter-of-factly, then went behind the bar and mixed himself a drink. He used the best Scotch, Harold noticed.

"I suppose," Stoddard continued, "that you know I'm teaching your wife to swim. We've been spending a great deal of time on the beach."

"I've taken note of that."

Harold had often wondered why Marcia insisted on a home so

near the ocean when she couldn't swim and he detested all outdoor activity. A touch of sun turned him the color of a sick tomato. Until the coming of Stoddard, their proximity to the beach had been a waste.

Stoddard was saying: "I'll take her for a moonlight swim. She'll go out too far and I'll be unable to rescue her. It's that simple."

Harold swallowed. He was sorry he had demanded the details but he needed some reassurance that Stoddard intended to keep his bargain.

"When will this occur?"

"Sometime this week. At the best opportunity."

Stoddard poured himself another drink. Harold seldom drank, a concession to his ulcer, but his liquor bill kept growing, thanks to Stoddard.

Harold reflected that getting rid of Stoddard would be almost as satisfying as erasing Marcia from his life. He could hardly wait to pay Stoddard off and close the door behind him, shutting off that smile and that excessive friendliness—not to mention the noises on that tape recorder.

Harold lifted himself from his chair. "Make this soon, please. This morning when I looked at Marcia over the breakfast table, when she started another recital of

her complaints against me, I could hardly resist the urge to tell her everything would soon be taken care of. Each new day with her is like an extension of a prison sentence."

"Oh, Marcia isn't such a bad sort," Stoddard said. "She is still somewhat attractive, too. In fact, I rather hate to think of the fate in store for her."

"That's easy for you to say," Harold snapped. "You haven't been bound to her for ten years."

Then he frowned and leaned on the bar and regarded Stoddard thoughtfully. He recalled that Marcia did have a certain brassy attraction and a good figure, and that even he had once been drawn to her.

"You have been spending a great deal of time with Marcia, as you pointed out," he said. "You haven't fallen in love with her, have you? The two of you aren't having an affair?"

Stoddard managed to appear shocked. "You're my friend. I wouldn't betray you like that. In truth, the two of you have come to mean a great deal to me. You don't realize how much I value our friendship. These past several months with you will always be prized by me."

Blast it. He was pouring still another drink.

"I sincerely regret that they are about to end. I wish that you could find some other solution to your difficulties."

You parasite, Harold thought balefully. *What you regret is the prospect of having to shift for yourself.*

"Seriously, Harold, wouldn't it be better just to get a divorce?"

"Community property laws," Harold reminded him. "Why should I give Marcia half of all I own for having made my life a constant irritation? Besides, Marcia is so obstinate that she would fight me all the way."

"And then there's the insurance," Stoddard said shrewdly.

"Yes. Marcia and I have a policy on each other. If she dies an accidental death, I collect a hundred thousand dollars. Half of that will be yours."

Stoddard turned away but not fast enough to hide the sudden gleam in his eyes. "Well, we made an agreement and I'll keep my part of it. But I'll miss both of you, Harold. And this house. I've come to think of it as my own."

You certainly have, Harold replied silently. Aloud, he said, his voice unexpectedly hard, "My advice is to arrange that accident tonight."

Harold was in his den when Marcia returned. He heard her

voice and Stoddard's; and Marcia's tone seemed angry. Then she banged into the den.

"It isn't necessary to knock the door down," Harold said.

Marcia sniffed. She always complained that the den stank of aging leather and pipe tobacco and books. "Don't you ever raise a window in here?" she often asked.

Today she appeared to have other matters on her mind. She must have lost at bridge, Harold decided. She refused to concentrate

on any game enough to become skilled at it, but she was a very poor loser.

"That secretary of yours," she barked, "why don't you keep him out of the liquor? He smells as if he sprang full-blown from a decanter of Scotch."

"I thought you liked Stoddard. You've been spending so much time with him."

"I have to spend it with someone."

Ah, Harold reflected, my fears about an affair were misplaced. She abhors the man as much as I do. But I must be careful.

"I suppose I could discharge him."

Expressions mixed on her face.



"No, not because of me. After all, he's your secretary. I suppose I'm just in a bad mood. Forget it, Harold."

Puzzled, Harold stared after her. It wasn't like Marcia to give up so quickly, or to yield to his wishes. He felt a nagging uneasiness. Oh, well, perhaps tonight would end it all.

Harold usually went to bed early. He couldn't that night. Eagerness thudded inside him. He pretended to be busy in the den, waiting for the sound of voices as Stoddard and Marcia departed for the beach.

Time crawled. Marcia came down from her room and made noises at the bar. Stoddard wasn't with her. Harold fidgeted impatiently, wondering why the delay in Stoddard's appearance.

Finally he could sit there no longer, straining to hear the sound of Stoddard's footsteps, his voice. He marched to the door and threw it open.

"I thought you two were going for a swim."

Marcia turned. She wasn't dressed for swimming. "We changed our minds."

"Where is Stoddard?" Harold demanded indignantly. The man simply couldn't be depended upon.

"You appear nervous, Harold." Marcia smiled. "Could it be that

you finally suspect something?"

Harold swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"Come now, darling. You are dull, you are obnoxious, you are self-centered, but you are not dumb. You can't think that I've been spending time with Stoddard because he interests me."

Marcia laughed. "What I am saying, my dear husband, is that I have persuaded Stoddard to do me the favor of removing you."

"Stoddard—" Harold turned, bewildered, as the secretary came down the stairs.

"Yes," Stoddard said as he lifted a revolver from his pocket. "This is the gun Marcia bought for me to use. But don't worry, old friend. I don't intend to honor her request."

Marcia dropped her glass and it shattered on the floor. No one seemed to care. Harold gasped with relief.

Stoddard laid the revolver on the bar. "Marcia and I had words today when she returned from her bridge date. Do you know why, Harold? I was supposed to kill you while she was gone."

"I have tried to delay this confrontation, knowing how distasteful it would be to all concerned, but now I realize that it cannot be postponed. Both of you are much too impatient. I can't continue to

stall on my contract indefinitely.

"This afternoon Marcia came to me again and insisted that I go through with her plan tonight, that I shoot you and help her fabricate a story about a burglar killing you when you caught him breaking in. And, of course, you were insistent that I make sure Marcia didn't return from her swim."

Marcia uttered a tiny sound of surprise. Stoddard laughed. "Yes, Marcia, your husband offered me virtually the same deal you did. The two of you certainly have one mutual interest, the violent conclusion of your marriage. Unfortunately, I must disappoint you both."

Harold sputtered, tried to protest.

"You'd better sit down," Stoddard told him solicitously. "You're scarlet. You mustn't get excited. Remember your ulcer."

"Now that it is established that I will murder neither of you, the question is: What will I do?" Stoddard beamed. He seemed quite proud of himself. "To begin with, I will help keep the two of you together in what, despite your belief to the contrary, is almost a perfect marriage. While you are different in a thousand small ways, you think and act alike in many things. I am proof of that. Because I value our friendship so

highly, I intend to make certain that this marriage lasts."

"I'll listen to no more of this," Marcia said and started for the door. Harold was too stunned to move.

"Don't be hasty," Stoddard warned. "I'm not through. I have put to valuable use that tape recorder the two of you detest so much. I have managed to record partial conversations with each of you—conversations that are very damaging. I am not acquainted with the legalities surrounding a case like this but in any event, I don't imagine that you would want these conversations publicized. Therefore you will do just as I say."

Harold was beginning to think clearly again. "That isn't all you want, Stoddard. You don't value any friendship, if that's what you choose to call our relationship, that much."

Stoddard shrugged. "Very well. I will admit that your offer of fifty thousand dollars for Marcia's murder did interest me. She thought yours was worth only forty, by the way. But I know my faults. I would have run through the money in no time. As it is, I may remain here, content and comfortable, for as long as I like. Of course, I'll expect you to give me a substantial increase in salary. In

the long run, I imagine that I'll profit more than fifty thousand dollars worth."

Stoddard went behind the bar and took down a bottle. "I'm going up to my room now and leave you two lovebirds together. I'm bored with your constant bickering. From now on, I'll expect less of that. We're going to be one big happy family." He paused at the doorway. "You'd better order some more of this good Scotch, Harold. The supply is running low."

Marcia said vehemently, when they were alone, "And I couldn't bear the thought of the years ahead with you. Now I must face Stoddard, too."

"He'll milk us dry in a few years," Harold said, "but he'll demand a fancy price for those tapes

when he does decide to leave."

Marcia knelt and started to pick up the glass she had broken on the floor. "We should have hired someone to murder him."

"No, I've learned my lesson on that." Harold lifted the weapon Stoddard had deposited on the bar. "Pretty confident, wasn't he, leaving this around?"

Marcia, gazing up at him, smiled slowly. "Perhaps he underestimated you, dear."

"Us, darling, he underestimated us." Harold gave her his hand. "But he was right, I suppose, when he said that we thought alike in some things. Shall we go upstairs?"

"Let's do. I have a dandy story all worked out about a burglar breaking in. I'll explain it to you on the way."



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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

Lingual perspicuity unfortunately does not, unequivocally, give origin to perspicacity.



WHEN the boss, a Swede called Spanish Henry, told his gang they'd need a truck for their next job, Georgie and Byron went right out and stole one.

"Double bueno!" he said when they drove up in a two-and-a-half ton van. "This is just the kind we need," he beamed as he tossed his tool bag inside. "I knew you guys'd shape up some day." But

he soon found out that this wasn't that day.

Georgie handled the van expertly and some twenty miles later they pulled up in front of a decrepit warehouse. It was early Sunday morning and the street was deserted. Spanish Henry got out and guided the truck through the narrow alley to the rear loading platform. Georgie cut the engine

and the three of them climbed onto the platform.

"How're we gonna get in?" Georgie asked.

"Through the window," Spanish Henry said.

"You must be kidding," Byron chimed in. "Every window is wired like a Christmas tree."

"Just get my tool bag out of the truck." Spanish Henry said, "and I'll show you how a pro does it."

Byron got the bag and Spanish Henry took out a big crowbar. Then he went over to a window that had an air conditioner sticking out of the bottom half. "That's how we get in without ringing bells," he said.

Byron and Georgie looked at each other blankly until Spanish Henry jammed the crowbar between the cooling unit and the window frame. He motioned Georgie over and the big guy pried out the air conditioner in two crunching prods.

His gang looked at him with unashamed admiration. He pretended not to notice as he waved them through the opening and followed close behind.

They found themselves in the warehouse office and had to cross through two more rooms before they found what they were looking for: two hundred cases of brand name Scotch.

"Let's start moving this stuff. Andale. Andale!"

They hugged; tugged, pushed and pulled until they finally got the whole load outside on the platform. Spanish Henry sat down on one of the cases and mopped his gaunt face with his shirtsleeve. "This is the easiest job we ever pulled off," he said, lines furrowing his brow. "It's got me worried." He looked up suddenly at Byron who was breathing heavily, which made his sniffing louder than usual.

"Blow your nose!" Spanish Henry said testily. Byron fished some tissues out of his pocket and blew vigorously.

Spanish Henry turned to Georgie. "Okay, amigo. Open the bus and we'll start loading." He got up and forced a smile on his face. "What am I worried about?" he asked himself. "What can go wrong now?"

Just then Georgie opened the back doors and Spanish Henry's question was answered. The truck was filled with young, wide-eyed kimono-clad Chinese girls! Georgie took one startled look and slammed the doors shut fast. Byron blew his nose again, and Spanish Henry's eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets.

"Whatinell are *they* doing in there!" he exploded.

Georgie looked down at his size twelve double E's. "I don't know, Boss. They must've been in there when we copped the truck."

Spanish Henry doubled a fist and standing on his tiptoes he shook it under Georgie's nose. "I'll give you ten seconds to get those China dolls out of there!"

Georgie turned slowly and took about forever to reopen the doors. When he did he was immediately greeted by snickering and shy girlish giggles. Hanging his head and blushing furiously, he blurted out, "Come on, girls, you gotta come outa there. The boss," he jerked a thumb toward Spanish Henry, "says so."

This only prompted more giggles and musical whispering. Georgie looked at Spanish Henry and shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

Spanish Henry pushed him aside roughly and stuck his head in the truck. "Okay, señoritas, let's go! Pronto! Pronto!" The girls quieted fast and some of them began to cry softly.

Suddenly a handsome middle-aged Chinese woman rustled her way through the gaggle and glared at Spanish Henry. "Stop it!" she commanded in clipped British English. "You're making my girls cry, and that will make their eyes red and ugly."

Spanish Henry stood there with his mouth open and not really believing all this was happening.

"Well?" she said. "Don't stand there like a clod. Help me down."

She was as light as a feather pillow and he set her down gently on the ground. She then proceeded to smooth out the wrinkles in her form-fitting black sheath with long slits up both sides. "My name is Ahsing Lee," she said sticking out her hand. "You may call me Ahsing."

He took her delicate hand gingerly. "My name is Helvar," he said a little self-consciously. "But you can call me Henry—Spanish Henry—if you like."

"Very well, Mister Spanish Henry. Now let us try to clear up this mystery. First, what are we doing here?"

Spanish Henry's mouth moved but it was a few seconds before any sounds came out. "You're asking *me*! That's just what I was going to ask *you*!"

She sighed a typically oriental sigh, long, drawn out and philosophically resigned. "Maybe it would be better if I told you all I know and that might help you fill in the rest of the puzzle."

"Good idea, senora," he said impatiently. "But speed up the tape. We can't stay here all day."

She glanced at the cases of



Scotch and the opened window and nodded. "I understand," she said. "To be brief as possible—these young maidens, fifty to be exact, were brought in by freighter from Hong Kong. I met them on the west coast of Canada, and a special transport with forged manifest flew us to a deserted RCAF air base outside Montreal." She turned and pointed to the truck. "A driver was waiting in that lorry and he smuggled us across the border. A few hours ago we stopped. A short while later we started again—and here we are."

Spanish Henry suddenly realized what must have happened. "Hey, Georgie," he called out, "where did you pick up the lorry—uh—truck?"

"In the parking lot behind Rose's diner. Why?"

"That's it!" Spanish Henry said. "The driver probably stopped for a bite to eat, and you guys—"

"Stole the lorry," Ahsing finished.

He swallowed a few well chosen obscene phrases and took a resolute stance. "Well, senora—as they say on TV—sorry about that. But you're gonna have to get the girls out of the truck so I can load the booze."

Ahsing shook her head firmly. "I'm afraid you don't understand,

Mister Spanish Henry. These girls were brought a long way at great risk and expense to become the wives of wealthy Chinese businessmen and a great deal of money will be lost if they're not delivered safely. Do you understand now?"

"All I understand is that I want them girls off the truck!" he roared. "And quick too. I don't wanna be mixed up in a federal rap."

For a second or two it looked as though Ahsing was going to argue, then she turned meekly and spoke quietly in Chinese to the girls. When she finished they burst into a clamor of wails, sobs, and moans of intense emotion.

Byron, in a rare display of quick thinking, ran over and slammed the doors shut on the racket. "We better get out of here before they have the whole town down on us," he said. "We can dump them out of town and come back for the load later."

"Good thinking, muchacho! You ought to blow your nose more often. It clears your brain. Now open the doors and help Oh-song back in the truck."

"Ahsing, Boss. Her name is *Ahsing*."

Spanish Henry fixed a baleful eye on him. "I know! I know! *Ahsing*. That's what I *said*." By-

ron wisely dropped the subject and opened the doors. The girls had simmered down a bit but there were a few who were still carrying on pretty good.

"Get her in fast and close those doors!" Spanish Henry ordered.

A few minutes later they were wheeling along on the highway. "We'll drop them off in front of the drive-in," Spanish Henry said. "There's a pay phone there and Dragon Lady can call a taxi or a rickshaw or something." When they pulled up in front of the booth, Spanish Henry got out and opened the back doors.

"I want to talk to you," Ahsing said as he helped her down and closed the doors on one hundred curious eyes.

"Okay, senora. Start talking."

"I must insist," she singsonged, "that you forget about the cases of spirits and take us to our destination."

Spanish Henry laughed in disbelief. "And what if I don't?" he teased.

Her answer was the unfunniest punch line he'd ever heard. "If we're apprehended I'll tell the police it was you who transported us across the border—"

"You wouldn't!"

"—for immoral purposes!"

"I guess you would," he moaned.

Ahsing plucked a slip of paper from her bodice and handed it to him. "The girls must be delivered to this address in Chinatown."

"Chinatown!" he exploded. "You expect me to take fifty illegal immigrants three hundred miles?" She nodded coldly. He lit a cigarette to help him think. The more he thought, the more agitated he became. Puffing furiously, he stomped around and kicked up dust like an angry bull. "You're asking me to give up a load worth five thousand bucks to get involved in a federal rap?" He threw his cigarette butt down and ground it into the dirt. "Well I'm not going to do it! You can tell the police, Ching Chow or Chiang Kai-shek!"

Ahsing quickly realized that threats wouldn't work with this strange man. She wisely changed her tack. "I'll give you five thousand dollars."

"The booze is worth that," he sneered. "Double it and you got a deal."

She hesitated for the briefest second, then smiled. "Ten thousand it is—you *thief*."

When he got back his men were so anxious to find out what happened they both spoke at once.

"What happened?" Georgie said.

"What're we gonna do?" Byron said.

"*Por favor*. One at a time. We're gonna take the girls to Chinatown."

"Chinatown! That's over four hundred miles away," Georgie said.

"Closer to three hundred," Byron corrected.

"Makes no difference, compadres. I'd take them clear to China—for *ten thousand bucks!*"

At the mention of all that money their faces brightened considerably. Then Byron's suspicious nature asserted itself. "How do we know they'll pay off?"

"Simple, muchacho. We just keep the girls until we get the dough." The expressions on their faces indicated they were satisfied with the deal and he felt good about that. Instead of winding up with nothing for their labors, as usually happened, it looked like this job was going to turn out better than they had expected. As a matter of fact, twice as good.

He cautioned Georgie to stay at least five miles under the speed limit at all times, then leaned against the window and dozed off. A few minutes later the sound of bells clanged into his subconscious. Then a howling siren made him jump with a start. "What—what's that?" He looked in the rear-view mirror and saw a black sedan with a blue flashing

light on top bearing down on them.

Byron dabbed at his running nose nervously. "Is it the cops?"

Just then the car, with two men, drew alongside. The fat man in the right seat shouted for them to pull over. When they did, he got out, approached the truck, and said simply, "Your truck's on fire."

Spanish Henry jumped out and gaped incredulously at the smoke pouring out of the ventilation holes in the roof. He had to stall for time until he could think of a way to keep this fat guy from finding out what his cargo was.

"Thanks a lot, amigo. Say, you guys ain't the police, are you?"

"Oh no, sir!" the fat man said. "We're the Volunteer Fire Patrol of Plaintown."

"Plaintown?" Spanish Henry said, just to keep him talking.

"That's right. It's not a very big town and it wouldn't take much to burn it down. That's why we're so careful here. Now, if you'll open the doors we'll help you put out the fire."

"Fire?" Spanish Henry said. The light in his head was starting to glow. "There's no fire."

The fat man looked at the smoke, then back at him skeptically.

"Those are vents to let the steam

out," Spanish Henry said, mentally crossing his fingers.

"Steam?"

"Yes, steam," Spanish Henry said quickly. "From the hot water heater."

"Hot water heater?"

"Yes! For the—for the—er, bananas. That's it," Spanish Henry said brightly. "Bananas! You know. Tropical fruit—" Spanish Henry started edging toward the front of the truck. "Need heat to keep from spoiling—" The fat man stood there scratching his head, as Spanish Henry grasped the door handle. "You guys are doing a great job. Plainview must be proud of you." He slid in beside Byron. "Get this thing moving," he hissed.

Georgie geared in and stepped on the gas, and Spanish Henry held his breath until he saw they weren't being followed.

"That's *Plaintown*, boss. *Not* Plainview," Byron said.

"I *said* *Plaintown*, you juice-head! And another thing, shut up until I say different, sabe?"

In a matter of minutes they'd left the town far behind, and Henry told Georgie to pull off on the first side road they came to. As soon as Georgie braked to a stop, Spanish Henry jumped out quickly and jerked open the back doors. "Now what the—"

Ahsing was standing right there. "Ah, Mister Spanish Henry. Would you care to join us?" She was ladling steaming rice from a pot atop a small charcoal brazier. Some of the girls stood around with their tiny wooden bowls outstretched, and the others were using their flimsy fans to direct the smoke upwards toward the holes in the roof.

"Ai, chihuahua! He slapped his head so sharply his eyes started to tear. Then with one mad leap he mounted the truck and ran behind the miniature barbecue. Ahsing, anticipating his actions, tried to snatch the pot of rice but she was too late. His first kick sent the pot flying out of the truck. The girls huddled in the far corners, petrified with fear. He then booted out the brazier, filled with hot coals.

"Would you believe it?" he sputtered when he rejoined his men up front. "They were having a cookout back there!" In his agitated state it took nearly half an hour before the monotonous humming of the tires on the concrete lulled him back to sleep, but he couldn't have gotten more than five solid minutes of sack time before he was nudged awake by Byron's bony elbow. "Wake up, boss. The girls are banging on the sides of the truck."

He groggily pushed Byron's elbow out of his ribs. "Those dames are really making sure I earn those ten gees!" He groaned like a man who is no stranger to aggravation.

Georgie stopped the truck again and Spanish Henry went to investigate the racket. He jerked open the back door and shouted, "Stop it!" as loud as he could. The girls didn't understand the words but they couldn't help understanding the tone of his voice. They put their wooden bowls down fast.

"I must apologize for the disturbance," Ahsing said softly. "The girls just wanted to attract your attention."

"Bueno! They attracted my attention. Now what?"

"They're hungry," she said. "You kicked out their rice."

Suddenly he became the soul of contrition. "Now I apologize to you, senora. I lost my temper. The next town we hit I'll get them something to eat." He started to lock up.

"Wait," she said quickly. "I'll tell you what you should get for them."

"Hey, what do you think I am? A waiter at a drive-in?" The slamming doors reverberated throughout the truck.

At the next town he sent Byron to a Chinese restaurant to buy ten quarts of chow mein. When he

brought it to them, the girls smelled it, opened the containers and looked at it, then tasted it cautiously. They didn't like it, but Spanish Henry put his foot down. "Eat it and like it!" They were hungry enough to eat it but they weren't hungry enough to like it.

Then, just when he thought he was finished being nursemaid for a while, Ahsing made another request. "Tea," she said. "That spicy American food has made my girls thirsty."

Spanish Henry looked heavenward and made a silent appeal for strength. Then he resignedly dispatched Byron to the local supermarket to pick up two jars of instant tea. When Byron returned they realized they'd need water, so they drove around until they found a stream, then parked behind some trees that hid them from the road.

"Okay, senioritas," he said impatiently. "Everybody out of the truck." He grimaced. "It's tea time."

Ahsing dutifully translated, and the girls gleefully gathered up their wooden bowls and piled out of the truck. Crowding around Spanish Henry, they watched with fascination as he showed them how to make tea, American style. Borrowing one of the wooden bowls, he shook some tea powder

into it and filled it with spring water, swished it around a couple of times, then handed it to one of the girls. She took one dainty sip and rudely spat it out. Stunned at such a display of bad manners, Ahsing rebuked the girl angrily. The girl hung her head and handed her the bowl pointedly. Ahsing bowed ceremoniously to their host, tasted the tea, then quickly knelt beside the stream and rinsed out her mouth. The other girls got the message and quenched their thirst with water.

The slight edge in Spanish Henry's voice revealed his hurt feelings. "Okay, *Senoritas*, back in the truck!" he shouted. "Senora, tell them this is absolutely the last stop until we hit Chinatown. Sabe?"

She nodded solemnly, and a few minutes later the truck was rolling again. By nightfall they were just a few miles from New York City.

"Pull off the highway anyplace along here, Georgie," Spanish Henry said. "I'll take the Dragon Lady with me to see the man with the money. And just to make sure there's no double-cross, nobody's going to know where the truck will be—not even her." He looked anxiously from one face to another. "*Bueno or no bueno?*"

"*Bueno!*" they chorused.

Satisfied, he opened the door. "I'm gonna take her out now. I don't wanna open the truck in the city. No sense taking chances now when we're so close to a big payday." He jumped out of the truck lightheartedly. "Well, *compadres*," he said, "I think we're over the hump. We shouldn't have any more trouble." But he was wrong again.

When he lifted Ahsing down and started to lock the doors, the girls became hysterical. He gritted his teeth tightly. "What's the matter now?"

Ahsing shook her head sadly. "They say they're afraid to stay alone. They're so young and have led such sheltered lives."

"What do you want me to do about it?" he snapped. "Buy a watchdog for them?"

"No, that won't be necessary. They will be satisfied if the big man would stay with them."

Georgie was dead set against it but was eventually won over by a steady barrage of threats, compliments and, finally, an appeal to one of his baser instincts—greed. "No stay, no payday," Spanish Henry reminded him.

Up front Spanish Henry sat between Ahsing and Byron, who was now doing the driving. A few minutes later they crossed the city line and Byron pulled off the

road. Spanish Henry put down the road map he'd been studying and whispered in his ear. "Got it?" he asked. Byron nodded, but Spanish Henry whispered it once more just to make sure. Then he and Ahsing got out and hailed a taxi that took them right to Mott Street in the heart of Chinatown.

Ahsing led him down the dingy street and up the darkened staircase of an old tenement. She stopped in front of a door lettered, Chinese-American Benevolent Association, knocked lightly and opened it. A lean, middle-aged Chinese seated behind a small desk greeted her warmly. They chatted for a few minutes in Chinese and then she introduced Spanish Henry in English.

The man got up and shook Henry's hand. "Hi, Hank," he said in pure Americanese. "I'm Jimmy Tong. Ahsing tells me you'll turn over the girls for ten gees. Well, that still leaves me fifteen thou—and that's a lot better than nothing." He picked up a pad and pencil from his desk. "Now, just tell me where the truck is so I can check the merchandise." He winked slyly. "My clients are very conservative and old-fashioned."

Spanish Henry shook his head firmly. "Not so fast, amigo. I wanna make sure you don't tip off

your boys and heist the truck before we get there."

Jimmy Tong laughed. "Fair enough, Hank. We'll play the game any way you want. What's the deal?"

"I'll take you to see the girls and when you're satisfied, you go get the money and bring it back alone. Sabe? Alone."

Jimmy Tong agreed. Ahsing stayed behind, and the two men



went downstairs and got into Jimmy Tong's late model black sedan. Jimmy gunned it and headed north at Spanish Henry's direction.

An hour later Tong, getting a little impatient, finally asked, "Are we getting close?"

"We're here. Just turn into that dirt road off to the right."

Jimmy Tong turned and followed it slowly as Spanish Henry tried to pick out the truck in the darkness. But the truck wasn't

there. They followed the road all the way up to a deserted farmhouse, where it ended.

"Well?" Jimmy Tong asked, "where is it?" He sounded worried.

Spanish Henry *was* worried. "I wish I knew. I just can't figure it. I told that juicehead twice—the *third* dirt road turn-off after the *second* light on route *four*."

Jimmy Tong looked at him incredulously. "Are you putting me on, Hank? A guy would have to be a genius to remember directions like that!"

Spanish Henry groaned. "And Byron is certainly no genius. Aichiuhual! I think I goofed again."

"Well, let's not get panicky. There's too much at stake here. Maybe we can figure this thing out mathematically." He took a pad and pencil from the glove compartment and began scribbling. "Now, if he just remembered the numbers—three, two and four—but got them mixed up, there are only six possible combinations. Since we've already tried one, we only have five left."

They quickly checked out combination number two, the *second* dirt road, after the *third* red light on route *four*. The truck wasn't there either.

It wasn't until six o'clock the

next morning, when they tried the last combination—*four, two, three*,—the exact opposite of what he'd told Byron—that they found the truck. Byron was stretched out on the front seat fast asleep. Spanish Henry roused him none too gently. He rubbed his eyes and sat up. "Hi, boss, where you been? I waited up all night."

Spanish Henry was about to explode, then thought better of it. "What's the use," he said wearily. He took the keys and unlocked the back door. Georgie jumped out eagerly. "Gee, boss, I never was so glad to see anybody in all my life!"

Jimmy Tong stood there aghast. "What was he doing in there!" When Spanish Henry explained, he said, "You mean he was in there all night?" When Spanish Henry admitted he was, "Oh, no!" Jimmy Tong moaned.

"What's the matter?" Spanish Henry asked. "The girls are okay."

Jimmy Tong sighed. "I can see you don't understand the old-fashioned Chinese ways, Hank. These rich old gents I represent want only the purest, most innocent girls for their wives. That's why they go to such trouble to have them smuggled into this country from special schools in China. If they knew the girls spent the

night with a man—" he looked critically at Georgie, "—they wouldn't even take them on as servants!"

Spanish Henry was logical if nothing else. "You don't have to tell them."

Jimmy Tong smiled patiently. "You don't understand. They have to ask, and the girls would have to tell them. That's the way they're brought up—never to lie." He hung his head in utter dejection and started for his car.

Spanish Henry was thinking desperately. "Hey, wait a minute, amigo. Try reasoning with them. Tell them how great America is. Tell them if they don't lie, they'll be sent back to China."

Jimmy Tong brightened slightly. "Okay, Hank. I'm willing to try anything to keep from losing fifteen gees."

"And I feel the same way about ten gees," Spanish Henry said.

Jimmy Tong approached the truck and started talking to the girls. When he'd finished, the girls' answers were emphatic. He turned and the result of his talk

was plainly written on his face.

"They won't lie." He smiled wanly. "I guess they're not too choked up about staying in the States." He walked slowly back to his car, looking as if he might cry any minute. "Can I drop you guys off anyplace?" he asked.

"Thanks," Spanish Henry said glumly. "There's a bus stop half a mile down the highway."

"Hop in, fellas," Jimmy Tong said. Then he called out something to the girls. "I told them to stay put and I'll send somebody out for them," he explained. "I'll tip off the immigration authorities later."

"What'll happen to them?" Spanish Henry asked.

"They'll be shipped back to China. I guess that's what they really want anyway."

The northbound bus was about to pull out and the three hoods made it just in time. Jimmy Tong waited until the bus was out of sight. Then he headed back to the truck with a money smile on his face—a smile worth *twenty-five* thousand dollars.



The man who would "cast beyond the moon" might well be the undoing of the prognosticators.

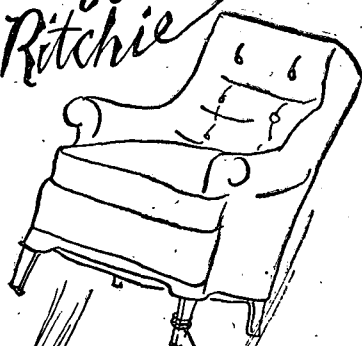
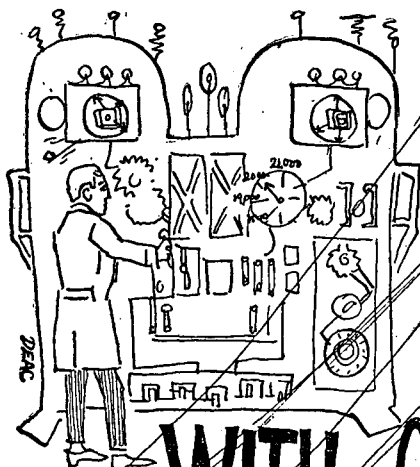
AND so you saved the entire human race from extinction?" Professor Layton asked.

"Yes," I said. "Indirectly."

Professor Layton was a skeptic. "This is quite an impressive aggregation of machinery you have here. I suppose you call it your Time Machine and it leaps into the future?"

"No," I said, "the machine stays here. It is an *object* which I send into the future, and I am able to transport it to any portion of this

by Jack
Ritchie



WITH ONE STONE

earth at the press of a button."

To tell the truth, I have never really liked Professor Layton, though I have admired his incisive mind, his erudition. For an academic man, he is a person with a remarkably commanding personality.

"So the future is immutable?" he asked. "It cannot be changed?"

"I don't quite understand all aspects of that myself," I said, "but basically that appears to be true."

My first experiments had been with the common objects about me. Initially I had put a volume, *The Mill on the Floss*, in the center of my transference circle—I felt that in case something went wrong, I could easily spare it—and proceeded to project it two hundred years into the future.

When I brought it back to the present five minutes later, it was a bit wet. Evidently it had been raining.

I next tried lamps, tables, chairs, and other objects with complete success.

Ultimately I progressed to animate subjects—a bowl of goldfish, my parakeet, and eventually I borrowed a friend's dog.

I remember tethering the animal to one of the legs of my heavy green armchair. I did not want him to wander off into another century and become irretrievably

lost. It could prove embarrassing.

I sent him boldly off to the year 20,000 and when I brought him back ten minutes later, he seemed none the worse for wear and even yawned a bit.

According to my calculations I had transferred him 20,000 years into the future, but how did I really *know* that he had been there?

So, inevitably I found myself sitting in the chair and staring at the small portable control mechanism in the palm of my hand. How far ahead should I set the dial? A thousand years? Or should I approach this with caution and try for ten years? Twenty?

I remember finally smiling. It probably made no difference. Might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb and 20,000 years seemed a good journey.

I pressed the button.

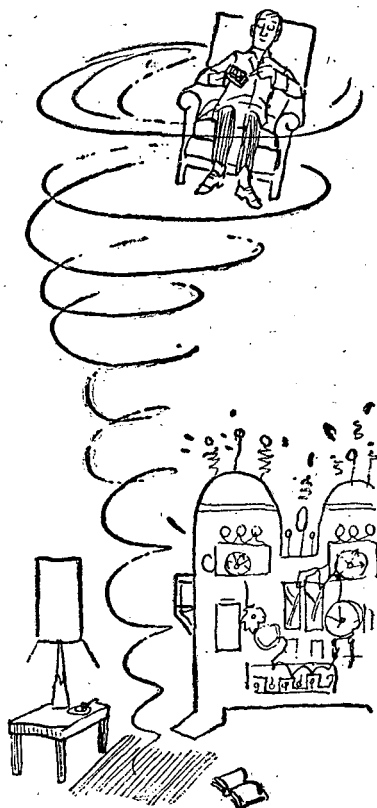
Now Professor Layton lit a cigar. "And what kind of a world did you find?"

"Rather green," I said. "Quite overgrown. You see—as I learned later—it had been some 14,000 years since it happened and there had been an almost complete recovery. Of the vegetation, at least."

"Since *what* happened?"

"The atomic wars, and hydrogen, and cobalt, and all those things."

Professor Layton snorted. "I



might have expected to hear that. So there had been a complete recovery as far as the vegetation went? What about the people? There *were* people? Or weren't there?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "There were people."

"Mutations? Or something of that nature?"

"No. The people looked very much like we look today, except

that they were rapidly dying out."

"Radiation? Contaminated atmosphere?"

"No. As I mentioned before, that had all passed. The air was quite pure and healthy. No, the change was within them. Their minds?"

"What was wrong with their minds?"

I smiled rather apologetically. "Well, it was almost as though the human race had become tired of it all and decided that it would cease to exist. I transported myself to a dozen different places on the face of the earth and the situation seemed to be identical wherever I went. I would estimate that the population of the entire earth had declined to less than one hundred thousand."

Layton ran fingers through his hair. "And you communicated with them? I suppose they all spoke English?"

"No. As a matter of fact, their languages seemed to have regressed to hardly more than gutturals. But I could *see* that the intelligence was still there. It was only that their *will* to live—to learn, to survive—seemed to have left them."

Layton waved an angry finger. "And you claim that you . . . *you* managed to. . ." He pulled himself together. "How much time

did you spend there altogether?"

"One week. It was all rather interesting and I did feel a bit like a tourist."

"One week?" He showed teeth. "And I suppose you encountered some sort of space-time warp? One week of time in the future is but a moment of the present?"

"No," I said. "Actually the time exchange rate was one for one, so to speak. One hour of our present is equal to one hour of the future—one year, one year—one lifetime, one lifetime." I sighed. "You have no idea what just my appearance among them meant. I seemed to be a catalyst. I became their leader immediately—by default, I imagine—but as long as I gave them direction they would do anything I wanted, including just living. Frankly, it all rather embarrassed me."

Layton seemed to bite on his cigar. "How far into the future did you say this machine could take you?"

"Twenty-one thousand years," I said. "That seems to be the limit."

"And so you traveled 20,000 years

into the future and found that the human race was on the verge of extinction?"

"Yes."

"And naturally this worried you?"

"Well, yes."

He showed teeth again. "In that case, instead of worrying, why didn't you immediately take your time machine *another* thousand years into the future and see for yourself whether the human race was or was not saved?"

"I did."

There was a silence while he studied me suspiciously. "And? It was saved?"

I nodded. "Yes. Things turned out quite nicely."

He took a deep breath. "In that *one* week you managed to—"

"Good Heavens, no," I said. "Saving the human race took a lifetime."

"And *you* did it?"


"No."

He frowned and sat up a bit in the green chair. "Then who did?"

"You," I said, and pressed the button.



A house is said to be ornamented by the friends who frequent it; in like manner, one's troubles are often alleviated.



A PLETHORA of ALLIES

I TURNED from the avenue into the side street and drove straight into the orange ball of Hollywood setting sun. A couple of blocks farther I parked the five-year-old convertible and marched into the hole-in-the-wall lounge. The guy I wanted was a grizzled fat man who sat alone and overlapped a



chair stool at the well-worn bar.

He looked terrible. He was a haggard forty years. His head was massive, his skin cast an unhealthy sheen, his clothing was wrinkled, and the glass cupped in the fleshy folds of his interlocked fingers seemed permanently affixed.



Once the somebodies in town clamored for attention from Bo Collins. Once, Bo Collins humored them. Once, he had been a big personality, a familiar figure in all of the right places, but no more. Now Bo Collins was a nobody, an insignificant movie critic with a bevy of eagle-eyed editors watching over him on the newspaper where in yesteryear he had been the paper's bright young Man-Around-Town. A libel suit had opened trap doors under Bo Collins and he had dropped straight into an esoteric hell.

I sat immediately to his left, ordered a beer and stabbed a finger at the glass in his stubby fingers. The bartender poured rye into the glass.

"My name is Curt Brent," I said.

He turned his massive head slowly, and I was looking into deep-set, red-veined eyes, enigmatic in the flaccid face. If he saw my simmering anger, he didn't show it. Neither the eyes nor the face changed. On the other hand, I was satisfied that the wheels of what was reputed to be a phenomenal memory were clicking.

"Quit trying," I said. "You're only spinning in sand. You don't know me."

"Then we have a mutual acquaintance?" His voice was flat, lacked sincere curiosity.

"Jack Franzenburg, the film cutter. He told me where to look for you."

"And why would Jack do that?"

"You saw a new picture over at Diarts the other day, Mr. Collins. *The Gun*. It's to be released in September."

"So?" Bo Collins drank the rye.

"Word has it *The Gun* is big. It may drag a fortune. I went to Jack because I thought he might have worked on the film. He hadn't. He pointed me to you."

"You're angry, son."

So he had noticed. "For a good reason," I said grimly. "From what I hear, *The Gun* is my story. It was stolen from me. I still have the original script in a dresser drawer."

I'd finally reached him. I saw a jaw muscle flatten. The red-veined eyes seemed to go deeper into his skull. He said, "That's a nasty accusation, boy. Do you know who is credited with writing the—"

"Norris Harper."

"And the producer?"

"Farley Gold, Mr. Diarts."

"The lead?"

"Paula Diamond, Farley Gold's wife. She doesn't do anything without him."

Collins bobbed his head. "Harper, Gold, and Diamond. That's the hottest combination in town."

You want to be careful when you say they stole your story."

"I didn't say *they*, Mr. Collins. My money is on Harper and his agent, Alexander Lake. Lake is also supposed to be my agent."

That surprised him. Interest and questions popped into his eyes.

"I'm trying to be a screenwriter," I said impatiently. "I'm not yet, but several months ago I took a script to Lake. He seemed to like it. He seemed to like me. He didn't do anything with the script for me, but he said he wanted me in his stable."

"And now this script turns out to be *The Gun*?"

"From what I've heard about the picture it is, but I can't be sure without knowing the twists in the story line. That's why I'm here. You saw the picture."

"I and twenty-three other reviewers. Alex Lake is big league, boy."

"Quit throwing up storm signals and tell me about the picture, will you? Lake doesn't scare me."

He talked in jerks and with nervous gestures. He took ten minutes, and he drank his rye. Then he summed: "It's a bomb. It's not a good picture."

"That's what you're going to write because of Harper," I said shortly. "Now tell me what you

really think about the picture."

He motioned to the bartender to fill his glass before he admitted begrudgingly, "It could make two, maybe three million. It has the ingredients—action, suspense, Paula Diamond, and a helluva kick at the close . . ."

"It's my story," I said, burning.

"Embellished with Norris Harper flair and experience? Is that what you're saying? Son, they had to be hurting something terrible to steal, and they're not . . . Hey, where are you going?"

I'd left the bar, and I snapped, "Out to get a pair of scalps."

"You'd better cool."

"I'm not going to kill anyone, Mr. Collins; just maim."

"Alex could be innocent, you know. Harper is the insidious one. He could have spotted the script in Alex's office, stolen it, read it, replaced it, then turned out his own version."

"Without Lake recognizing the story line? Come off it, Collins."

He shrugged, said nothing.

"Did Norris Harper really have you that cold?" I asked, unable to stop myself. "A half million dollars worth?"

Bo Collins turned back to his rye. "The paper settled for two hundred grand, remember?"

I'd never been inside the Tennis

Club where Alexander Lake lived. When you barely eke out subsistence in a two-and-a-half room apartment—and look it—you are not welcomed with open arms on the rich oasis of bungalows and courts and swimming pools set geometrically amid lush greenery. I was not welcomed at all that warm July evening. The dapper man at the front desk in the main building pinched the tip of his nose delicately, told me Mr. Alexander Lake was out for the evening, and did not invite me to return.

I went back anyway, about eleven o'clock. I had scoured the town by then, tried all of the clubs a bachelor of means might frequent. This time I skipped the main building, spotted a Lake-type blonde enjoying the breeze beside one of the swimming pools, took satisfaction in my intuition when she told me Lake's bungalow number, and knew greater satisfaction when I saw light behind closed venetian blinds in the bungalow.

Lake took time answering my knock, stared at me quizzically for a moment before recognition set in, then expressed dismay when I put my finger against his chest and backed him into the living-room of the bungalow.

He was a large, trim, tanned,

middle-aged, smugly confident man who held himself in high esteem and looked every dollar of what he was reputed to be salting away. He also charmed the ladies, especially those with the wherewithal to back his plays. Although we seemed alone in the bungalow now, I knew we were not. The faint apple scent of her lingered, and across the room a forgotten cigarette burned in an ashtray. The filtered tip was tinted a dull orange, with flecks of iridescence in the coloring.

He could have had a herd of women hiding in the back bedroom of the bungalow, but I didn't care. I snarled, "You louse!"

He pretended fear, recoiled, backed off a couple of steps, then feigned surprise. "My dear Mr. Brent," he winced, "what is it?"

My answer shook him briefly and this time the effect was genuine, but he regained his poise and said, "You're off base, Brent."

"Bo Collins saw the picture, louse. I've talked to him."

"So?"

"So this!" Blazing anger blinded me. I wasn't even aware of having struck him until I suddenly missed him. He was curled up on his side on the thick carpeting, hands covering his face. Blood leaked out between long fingers.

The sound in the back of the

bungalow triggered me again. I raced back there to darkness, switched on a ceiling light and found myself in an empty kitchen. I crossed to the door, yanked it open. A yard gaslamp provided poor illumination as the squat, topdown sports car backed onto the asphalt road. Headlights suddenly blinded me, then the car shot past and I managed only a brief glimpse of the driver. She wore dark glasses, a headscarf had been pulled forward to hide most of her face, and she huddled over the steering wheel.

I watched the car disappear around the main building, then left the bungalow. Walking to my heap, I allowed that Alexander Lake might have police on my doorstep the next morning, but he was going to have a reluctant witness—if any witness at all—to substantiate his assault charge.

I drove across town to a tall apartment building where Norris Harper and the second Mrs. Norris Harper lived on the seventh floor. I rode a self-service elevator up, put a thumb against a buzzer outside the Harper door and left it there for a long time. The thumb did not produce, so I hammered on the door with a fist. It did produce—from the elevator—a dark-haired woman of thirty, with all of the standard female equip-

ment assembled by afflatus under a pale yellow shift. She hesitated, frowned at my stilled, lifted fist, then went past me and on down the long corridor. I watched her until she fitted a key into another door, cast a nervous glance at me, then disappeared.

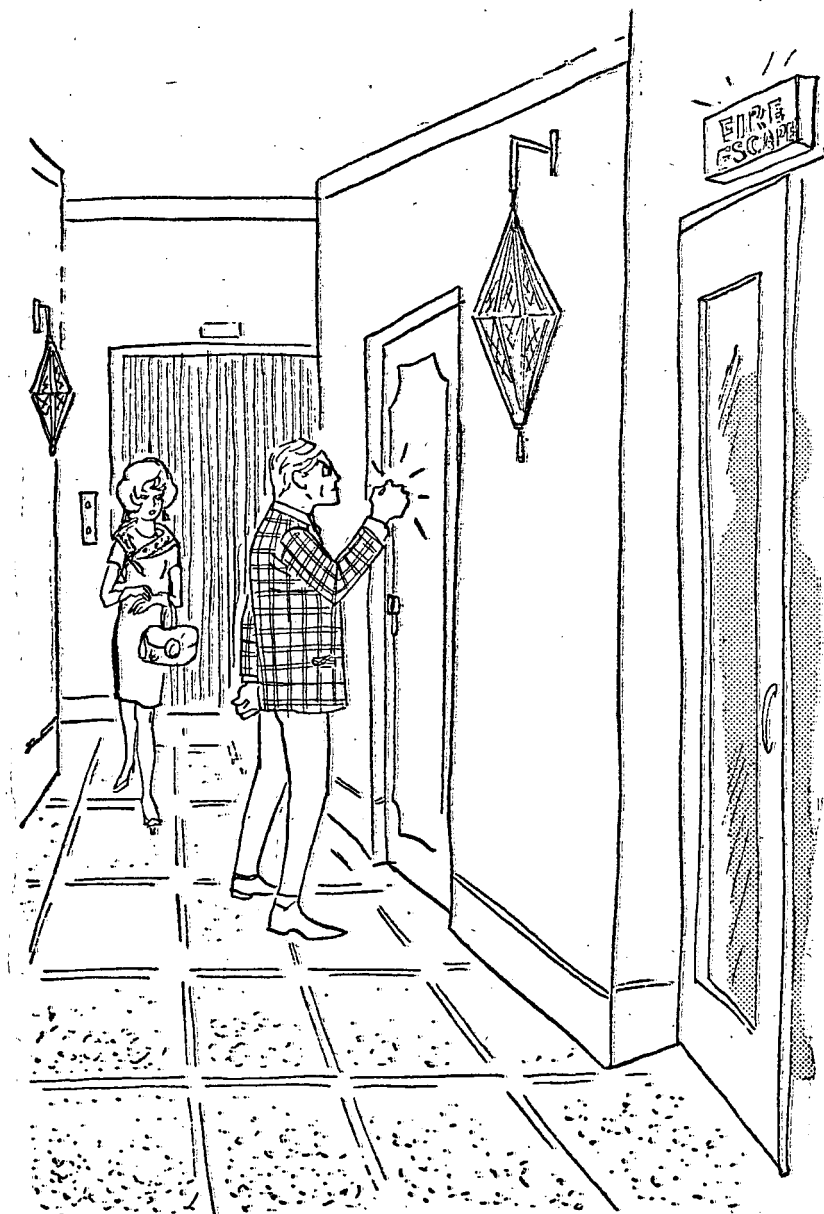
I started to turn back to my hammering, then froze. Was it my imagination, or had the fire escape door at the far end of the corridor moved? And if someone was down there behind that door, was that person there to watch me, or catch the woman in the yellow dress?

I suddenly dropped my fist. I'd find Norris Harper tomorrow. The interim might produce qualms for him anyway, since Lake was sure to phone him. The call could fill Harper's mind with dire imaginings of painful sufferings. Let him sweat.

I left the building, drove home, drank a beer, finally felt relaxed enough for bed and hit it.

The next morning the cop was polite. He allowed me to sleep until ten minutes after nine o'clock before banging on my door. He had a mild manner and voice, and said his name was Lieutenant Franks. He also said he had come to me from Mr. Alexander Lake.

I sighed. "Do I have time to put on my pants, Lieutenant?"



"There'll be fewer interruptions if we talk here, Mr. Brent," he replied easily. "Put on some coffee instead."

He allowed me to walk into the kitchenette before he unloaded the bomb. "Do you know Norris Harper, the screenwriter?" he asked from my livingroom.

My heart gave an extra little kick. "Yes," I answered carefully.

"He was shot to death last night, sometime around midnight."

There was nothing complicated about how Norris Harper had died. Someone had put the muzzle of a .38 under his jaw and fired the slug up through his mouth into his brain. The mystery was in who had fired the shot and why.

"His wife called us," said Lieutenant Franks, "but she was hysterical when we got to her. She's under sedation now. We won't be able to talk to her again until tonight at the earliest."

"He got it at home?" I asked.

"At his front door. We managed to piece a few things together before Mrs. Harper collapsed. They retired early last night, according to her. Then, around midnight, someone came to their door, awakening them. Norris Harper went to the door. Mrs. Harper said she heard her husband speak angrily. She did not

hear another voice. Only the shot."

"So what's the complaint with me?"

"After we had established exactly who Harper was, we went around to see his agent. He was not in a jovial frame of mind, to say the least, and he made a lot of wild accusations. Brent, I'll say one thing. When you pick a guy to chop down, you pick a mean one. If you're all the things Alexander Lake says you are, how have you lived so long?"

"I only slugged him, Lieutenant."

"Uh-huh. Okay, how about letting me hear your version of why."

While I talked I had the strange sensation that I was dropping a noose around my neck, and when I finished I thought I could feel the noose tightening.

Franks said, "So you had a beef with both of them? Lake and Harper?"

"Don't you think I did—and do?"

His shrug was slight. "I don't know about those things. You tell me."

"*The Gun* is going to make someone a bushel of money, Lieutenant. I figured I'm being cheated, but good!"

"Is a stolen idea incentive enough for a writer to kill?"

He asked it fast, and I shot it back at him equally fast: "Some writers."

"You?"

"No, I didn't kill Harper."

"But you admit you had this beef?"

"Hell, yes!"

"And you were on the warpath last night."

"You've talked to Lake."

"I also drove from the Tennis Club to Harper's building *after* I talked to him. It's about a thirty-five minute pull. It would be quicker at night."

I saw through that one okay. "Which means Lake told you I was at his bungalow around eleven, and if I went up to see Harper after I left Lake, it would have put me at his door around midnight."

"Right."

"And Harper got it around midnight."

"According to his wife. So far it checks with our lab people."

"I didn't go after Harper, Lieutenant. I started after him, true, but then I discovered the business with Lake had taken most of the steam out of me. I decided to let Harper breathe easy until today. I drove here, drank a couple of beers, piddled around with a new script I'm working on, and then went to bed."

The lie was easy. It was born in a strong sense of self-preservation and I didn't see the danger in it until I remembered a woman in a yellow dress. If this cop had already talked to her, if he had a description of me from her, the cop was now going to tell me to get my pants.

He didn't. He surprised me. He stood, rubbed the bridge of his nose with a forefinger, went to the door, then said, "You understand; Brent, I may want to talk to you again."

"Any time."

"Incidentally, do you own a gun?"

"Do you want to look, Lieutenant? Help yourself."

"Later perhaps."

He was gone, and I was sweating. I shouldn't have lied. Sooner or later, the lie was going to hang me like a slab of beef on a butcher's hook. Franks, eventually, was going to talk to the woman in the yellow shift. She was going to step forward. It was odd that she hadn't already made that step. Surely the sound of the gunshot and the commotion of the cops pouring into the apartment building had attracted her. Could it be that, for some unknown reason, she didn't want to talk to cops under any circumstance? Could it be that I had an unexplained ally?

I was dressing and working on my third cup of coffee when Bo Collins phoned. He sounded excited: "Hey, boy, I just heard a radio newscast!"

I grimaced. "Not me, friend. I didn't get to Harper."

"Somebody else beat you?"

"I got to Lake. That was it. I decided to leave Harper until today."

"You sound as if the cops have already been around to see you."

"A Lieutenant Franks," I said wearily.

"Franks, huh? He's got a rep. He's supposed to be a right guy. Tenacious, but right."

"That's encouraging."

"Hey, boy, you sound down in the mouth. Perk up. The world can't be that dark on this bright, lovely day."

"Why did you call, Mr. Collins? What do you want?"

"To help. I'm your alibi if you need one. You were with me all night. We were at my place—er, murdering a jug instead of out on the street murdering a so-and-so." He chuckled.

"Humor I don't need, Mr. Collins."

"But an alibi you do, huh?"

"Not that kind."

"Hmm. Then that means you're already stuck with a story with Franks. So okay, boy, unload. I can

manufacture to substantiate anything."

"I didn't kill him, Mr. Collins."

"It's still a beautiful day. He's dead, isn't he?"

"I've got to bug. I've got an appointment."

"Sure, chum, but remember me, huh? You decide later today you need an alibi, after all, you throw my hat in the ring, hear? I can handle cops even when they hit me cold."

So I had two allies.

I didn't have an appointment but it suddenly seemed to me the apartment walls were closing in, so I left. I needed fresh air. I breathed it deep. Bo Collins had been correct about the day. It was beautiful, tepid and breezy.

I got into my convertible and drove. I had no particular destination, but after awhile I found myself cruising slowly past the building where a murder had been committed at midnight. The hubbub was finished. Everything looked normal and calm in the morning light. I drove on.

Who had killed Harper? Had he been dead when I had banged on his door? Was that why my fist had not gotten an answer? No, that was absurd thinking. Franks had said Harper had been shot by someone who stood in the doorway, so the murder had taken place

after I had been there. But it must have been very shortly after, if the midnight time was correct.

Suddenly I remembered what I thought had been the movement of a fire escape door. Had that door actually moved? Had someone been lurking behind it while I attempted to raise Harper? Had that someone, following my departure, slid down the hall, also knocked, then shot Harper when he opened the door?

It was eerie thinking. I shuddered, suddenly snapped back to reality and found I had stopped opposite the office building that belonged to Alexander Lake. Why had I braked here? Lake was about the last guy in the world I wanted to see this morning.

But he wasn't the last guy someone else wanted to see. The dark blue sports car turned into the parking lot and stopped with its nose against Lake's building, and I was remembering another squat sports heap. Or was this the same car?

A woman vacated the passenger side, leaned down and apparently spoke to the young man who remained behind the steering wheel, then went around a corner of the building and inside.

I drew a deep breath upon the recognition of Belle Black, first wife of Norris Harper.

She was in her early fifties now,

long retired from the studio grind, but still remained one of the town's all-time sex symbols. In her heyday, Belle Black had no peer. For my dough, she didn't have to worry about today's fleshpots either. On the other hand, she wasn't an Alexander Lake kind of woman. Her men all had one common ingredient: youth. Alexander Lake no longer resided in that category. The jasper across the street, still sitting behind the wheel of the sports car, did. He looked as if he might be twenty-three, if he stretched. So why was Belle Black visiting Alexander Lake on the morning after her first—and only—husband's murder? To find out what she could about that murder? Had interest in him been retained, in spite of a lurid divorce and Norris Harper moving into the fourth decade of his life?

I was curious, so I sat in my heap and waited. It was a long wait, almost an hour, but when Belle Black came out of the building I was rewarded. Anger showed in her stride and in the careless manner in which she returned to the seat of the sports car. The car remained motionless for a few minutes, then suddenly zoomed out of the parking lot.

Curiosity continued to govern me. I trailed the sports car, to a showplace home in Beverly Hills.

I felt oafish then. I had no business being where I was—except that it was interesting to speculate that Belle Black might wear apple-scented perfume and orange lipstick with an iridescence in the coloring.

The sports car deposited her at the front entrance of the home, then drove around a U-shaped drive to the street, and rolled past where I sat. The driver had a high stand of bushy black hair and a strong profile. He didn't look at me as he whisked past.

I drove up to the house. I didn't expect to be admitted, but I hoped Belle Black, instead of a maid, would answer my door summons. All I had to do was look at her up

close, smell her, to satisfy my curiosity.

I got a Japanese maid and a surprise at the door. I asked to see Miss Black and I was admitted. I surmised it was my age. Anyone in his twenties was automatically ushered inside.

I was escorted through the house and outside again, to a blue swimming pool where the first pinch of queasiness tweaked my stomach muscles. Belle Black sat in the shade of an umbrellaed table and she seemed to be waiting for me. She was striking, she was wooden-faced, and her lipstick was a bright red. When I stood before her, a pine fragrance sifted into my nostrils.



She arched a penciled eyebrow. "You are?"

Somehow I felt trapped. The maid had disappeared, and I seemed to be alone with Belle Black, but I was not at all sure I could cope with her.

"A policeman?" she continued to probe. "Is that why you followed us from Alexander Lake's place of business? Do you think I might know something about Norris Harper's violent death? I once was married to him, I'm sure you know. Are you here to—"

I interrupted. I told her who I was, and I wished I were in China. I had been trapped, all right. No wonder my admittance had been so easy. I wondered where her friend was. Although I couldn't see him, I had the strong suspicion he was near—and I had an even stronger suspicion that he was strong.

Belle Black was regarding me curiously. "So you are the young man who is so involved in Norris' death," she said, as if contemplating the consumption of a strange and not-too-appetizing food.

"That's just one man's opinion, Miss Black," I said defensively.

"You didn't kill Norris?"

Actually I was getting a little weary of answering that question, but I repeated, "I didn't kill any one, Miss Black."

"Alex says you did. Alex says you are mad. He thinks the police should jail you. He considers you a menace." She paused, then seemed to dismiss something with a flick of her hand. "But I always take what Alex says with a grain of salt. He is not one of my favorite persons. Now tell me, why did you follow Rodney and me?"

There was no reason I shouldn't tell her, and it amused her. She laughed heartily. "Alex and me?" She laughed again, shook her head as if amazed—and as if Alexander Lake were right. *I was mad.*

So I shot one at her. "Turn about, Miss Black?"

It stopped the laughter, brought the arched brow again.

"Why did you go to see Alexander Lake on the morning after your ex-husband was killed?"

For a moment I thought she was going to summon Rodney from his hiding place. Then she relaxed and said, "Do you really think it is any of your business, Mr. Brent?"

"Probably not," I admitted, "but I'm curious."

She debated it before she said, "Money, Mr. Brent. I went to Alex to see if there is any way I can get a cut from the Harper profits of this new film, *The Gun*. Norris and his sleep-around-town wife are far in arrears in alimony payments owed to me. I intend to collect, not

because of need but because of—"

"Yeah, it was a dirty divorce, I remember."

"Tina Harper is a dirty woman."

"And how did you make out with Lake?"

"Zero."

"Is there any chance, Miss Black, that with Norris Harper dead, Alexander Lake's take from the film will be greater?"

It surprised her. She bit her lower lip. Then after a few seconds her look became direct. "Mr. Brent," she asked, "just how much of a box are you really in?"

"I've had a chat with a cop," I admitted. Lake sicced him on me."

"You displayed violence last night."

"Only with Lake."

"You didn't kill him."

"No more than I would have your ex-husband if I'd gone up to see him."

"Then you didn't call on Norris?"

I shook my head. The lie was there again, but at least this time it wasn't in words.

"Then if you are that clear, I don't see why you are so troubled now."

"I've got a weak alibi for the time of death. Maybe no alibi at all. From Lake's bungalow I went home—alone."

"I see." She pondered it briefly before she added, "So in suggesting that Alex might profit from Norris' death, you really are hoping to protect yourself. You are attempting to build counter offensives for the future, paper-thin as they may be."

"I don't *know* anything about the financial arrangements between Harper and Lake, Miss Black. The give and take of such dealings can be quite misleading and mysterious. I merely thought that Lake might have told you—"

"He didn't." She shook her head vigorously. "Not even a hint. But I like your thinking. Your suggestion can stand some probing. I think my attorneys will be interested."

"Well, Miss Black, luck."

"The same, Mr. Brent. And if you suddenly find yourself in a real box, my attorneys are also available to you."

Another offer of assistance. Even if nerve-jangling, it had to be my day for acquiring allies.

I drove home slowly. Wheels turned inside my head. Did Belle Black have motive to kill her former husband? Was there something left over from their divorce and his instant remarriage to "the other woman"? Was Belle Black a woman who sought vengeance? Would she send Rodney out to kill

for her? Was Rodney that kind? Or had Belle Black tired of badgering for alimony due her? Had she threatened, and then carried out the threat?

The thoughts began to cloud and become confused as I rolled up in front of my building. There were too many unknowns. I parked, got out, then saw the door of another car swinging open. Lieutenant Franks came along the sidewalk.

"Mr. Brent," he said, "will you voluntarily come with me to the station?"

Unless you are a flick hero, do you fight an onrushing army when you're the last soldier on your side?

At headquarters I asked Franks, "Am I under arrest?"

"No." He pointed to an open door. "Have a chair in the other room. I'll be with you in a moment."

I expected the room to be empty. It wasn't. It contained a desk, a telephone, five chairs, and a frazzled Bo Collins who obviously had taken a running start at his daily deliriums. He looked unhappy when he saw me. "I'd hoped you'd hightailed it out of town, son."

"No reason," I said with much more bravado than I felt.

He stared at the floor, wagged his head. "They got me with a beautiful bag started. They got me

when my thinking was just starting to get fuzzy."

"Is that supposed to mean something?" I asked sharply.

He looked up. His red-veined eyes were wet and hollow. "No, son, don't mean a thing. I just couldn't alibi for you is all. I couldn't think fast enough. I tried, but I botched it."

"I told you I didn't want an alibi."

He ignored that. "It was Lake," he muttered. "He put the cops onto me. He told 'em you said you had talked to me about the picture."

"Which was no reason to come after you."

"Except I think they want to talk to us together. I think they wanna know about the conversation we had last night. I think they wanna know from me if you were angry enough to kill when—"

"Mr. Collins," I said stonily, "what you mean is, they've already pumped you and you—"

"Son, it was a slip!"

"What was a slip, Mr. Collins?"

"Well, I . . . Look, I really didn't intend to tell 'em what you said. I mean, they got me when my thinking was fuzzy."

"What, Mr. Collins?"

"Well that part about you going out to get a couple of scalps." He looked up suddenly and now his eyes were pleading. "You remem-

ber that, don'tcha? I mean, it isn't going to look good to these people if you deny saying it. It's gonna look like I'm trying to hang you or something. And I'm not, boy!"

"I remember, Mr. Collins. Why couldn't you have fallen off your stool this morning and split your skull wide open?"

"Boy, don't be that way! I wanna help!"

"Then drop dead."

Lieutenant Franks had what he wanted. He appeared in the doorway and motioned Bo Collins out of the room. Another cop waited for Collins and took him in tow, then Franks said, "You're in a jam, Brent."

I didn't like his tone of voice or the dropping of the Mr., but his face didn't tell me anything until his eyes lifted from me, and I twisted in the chair to see where they were going.

She was there, in the doorway. Today she wore a brilliant blue suit. I could have been wearing astronaut gear and she would have recognized me. She didn't say a word, merely nodded. Then Franks said, "Thank you, Miss Hale," and she disappeared.

Franks took enough time to light a cigarette. "All right, Brent," he said, leaning against the desk, "are you going to level with me now? Why did you lie?"

"I was very scared, Lieutenant."

"Maybe, but not dumb. You know we always talk to people. It's the only way we can solve a crime."

"It was too late when I realized you would eventually find her . . . Miss Hale."

"She came to us," Franks said, as if to make a point. "She missed last night's action because she took three tranquilizers and went to bed. She didn't know anything about Harper's death until she awoke this noon and heard a news broadcast."

"That was convenient. She could have walked up to Harper's door after I left and shot him, too," I said bitterly.

"Come off it, Brent. Steve McQueen could have been living on the same floor, and she wouldn't have known. She just took the apartment yesterday afternoon."

"Okay, so I lied, but that doesn't mean I killed Harper!"

"You were up there at the right hour. You had a big beef with him."

"Not that big!"

"I understand this picture thing could run into a couple of million or better."

"Someone could have come along right after I left!"

I told him about the fire escape door, how I thought someone had been lurking behind it, but if it

registered with him, it didn't show. He snapped, "You're running too thin and too much to happenstance for me with that kind of thinking."

"But it could have happened!"

"It could have, but I'm not buying it."

I was desperate then. I threw Belle Black to the wolf. He listened, but when I'd finished he said, "Okay, so the guy owed her a bundle, but she can't collect with him dead."

"Vengeance, Lieutenant!"

"Perhaps."

"The divorce! Something could have been left hanging."

"We'll look into it."

I gave him Alexander Lake and my theory about a contract between Lake and Harper. "Lake could have gone to Harper's place. He could have followed me from the bungalow. He could have seen a golden opportunity after I left Harper's door. Check into that contract, Lieutenant! After all, Lake has been pitching me to you all day."

"We'll do some checking, all right, Brent."

"Look, Lieutenant, I realize I'm grasping at straws. I know I'm—"

The phone on the desk jangled. Franks swept up the receiver, identified himself, then listened. "Right," he said, and hung up.

"You sit here and cool for a spell, Brent." He left the room.

I sat, but I didn't cool. I chain-smoked six cigarettes, was debating about attempting to bolt, then Bo Collins was with me again.

He was excited. "Hey, boy, maybe we've got a break!"

"The only break I could have where you're involved, Mr. Collins, is—"

"Listen to this! You've heard of Belle Black, Harper's first wife? You know how she is about male companions? The younger the better! Well, they just hauled in one of her youngsters, guy named Rodney. But get this, son, get this! Rodney was courting a .38 when they got him! Get it? Harper was plugged with a .38!"

Bo Collins' excitement was catching. I grabbed his biceps and told him about visiting Belle Black and what I'd learned.

"Boy," he exclaimed, "this is like getting a reprieve!" He danced an Irish jig around the room.

"Where did you hear about this?" I asked, still not quite capable of believing the change of fate.

"Across the hall. They had me sitting over there in a squad room while the dame took a look at you. Two detectives brought Rodney in, and to say he is unhappy is to say he is unhappy!"

"Where did they get him?"

"You're never gonna believe this, son, but they caught him tailing Alex Lake out to Paula Diamond's home! Her old man is in New York, you know, dickering on the screen rights to some Broadway production. Maybe Alex and Paula have a little something going. Who knows? Who cares? The point is, the cops had a stakeout on Lake. They were tailing along when they spotted Rodney."

"Bo, what if ballistics doesn't turn up a match in gun slugs?"

It sobered him. "Don't even think that, son!"

"Franks would be back to me, wouldn't he?"

"If he comes back to you, I'm gonna give him Tina Harper to think about. I'm thinking now, boy. Don't you sweat it. I don't know how Franks could overlook her in the first place."

I frowned. "Tina Harper?"

"I know plenty, son! For one thing, the Harper marriage isn't all peaches and cream. Tina has aspirations of her own, aspirations Harper vetoed. She had a shot at a big TV role. She was in, then Harper put his foot down. No limelight for his wife. It was a quirk with Harper, one of the reasons he and Belle Black split. Harper shriveled at the thought of his wife becoming a big personality while he remained a hack."

"But I still don't see why she—"

"Boy, look! Maybe Tina Harper wants that TV role more than she wanted her husband. The cops only have her *story* about being awakened, hearing Norris angry with someone at their door, then hearing a gunshot and finding Norris dead. She could have killed him. There's this TV thing—and, as Harper's widow, she isn't exactly a pauper."

I wagged my head. I felt very confused.

"Hell, son, I don't know who killed Norris Harper. Maybe his wife. Maybe this Rodney with his .38. All I'm sure of is, it wasn't you!"

"I wish Franks was equally as sure."

"You lied to him, boy. You shouldn't have. You should have realized that squaw in the yellow dress was going to open her trap sooner or later. But now that you've admitted you lied, Franks is gonna come around. It may take him a while but—"

"I'd like to get out of here," I interrupted. "I need some fresh air."

"Okay, Brent," said a voice from the doorway, "cut. Just don't try to cross the country. You too, Collins, scram."

Lieutenant Franks went with us into the corridor. I figured he'd have some parting shot. He didn't.

He disappeared into a squad room, and Bo Collins and I crossed the street and went into a bar where we ordered, and I drew my first decent breath of the last two hours.

"Well," said Bo gleefully, "it looks like they're gonna hang Rodney."

They didn't. About forty-five minutes later, we saw Rodney come out of police headquarters and drive away in Belle Black's sports car.

"What the devil . . ." I breathed.

Bo Collins had left me. He was in a phone booth. He stayed there a few minutes and then he was back.

"Talked to one of my cohorts from the newspaper," he said flatly. "He says Rodney gave the cops a pitch about Belle Black and the back alimony and that he, Rodney, went around to see about collecting from Lake but saw Lake cutting out and trailed him. My friend says the cops, with some assistance from Belle Black's squad of lawyers, are buying Rodney's story for the moment."

"Which means the gun slugs must not have matched."

"Probably," grunted Bo Collins.

"So who are they going to pick on next? Me again?"

"I told you, boy, I'm gonna give them Tina Harper."

We ordered fresh drinks and drank in silence. I conceded Tina

Harper could have killed her husband, but the concession did not exactly stuff me with a sensation of freedom. I was worried and frightened. I wished I had controlled my temper. I wished I had gone to a lawyer rather than to the sources of my agitation. I wished Alexander Lake had not returned to his Tennis Club bungalow with his . . .

"Boy, you're thinking hard."

I told Bo Collins about the woman I had chased out of Alexander Lake's bungalow.

"So?" he said. "What's to think about that? You know Alex's rep. He's a hot man with the ladies, from unknowns to stars."

"Uh-huh, and Paula Diamond is a star."

"Hey, boy, you trying to build a plot or something?"

"Suppose there is something between Alexander Lake and Paula Diamond. Suppose Norris Harper discovered promiscuity and held a club over them. Suppose Norris was having a bad time turning out a script. Every writer has his slumps, you know. All right, suppose Norris was in a slump, but heard about my story from Alex. Suppose he forced Alex to show him my script. Suppose he rewrote it, then forced Alex and Paula Diamond to sell Farley Gold on the flick idea. Suppose Norris had a

contract set up so he could drag most of the profit."

"Wild, boy."

"How long do you think Alexander Lake would allow anybody to fleece him?"

"I've never known Alex to get pinned to a wall."

"But it could've happened with Paula Diamond. I'd like to know if she wears orange lipstick and apple-scented perfume."

"There's one way to find out, son. We can drive out to her place and attempt to get inside."

We went in my car. We rode in silence until we were stopped by a traffic light. Then Bo Collins said, "Brent, if you're right, you're gonna put a match to a helluva explosion in this town."

"Lake could have followed me from his place last night. He could have taken a gun and been after me, then saw an opportunity to kill Harper and fix the blame on me."

"Possible," grunted Bo.

I got the green light, started forward, then in the corner of my eye saw a sedan bearing down on us. I hit the brakes. The sedan skidded to a stop in front of us. It was a new model car, a brilliant yellow. A woman behind the steering wheel stared open-mouthed at us. I stood up in the convertible and yelled at her, "Hey, didn't you miss a red light, doll?"

She gunned the motor of the sedan and was gone. I went on across the intersection, then suddenly hit the brake again and veered into the curb.

"Boy, what's the matter with you?" Bo breathed.

I stared at him hard, my heart hammering. "Yellow!" I blurted. "How the devil did you know the Hale woman was wearing a yellow dress last night?"

He looked like I'd hit him with a building.

"At the station this afternoon," I went on, "you told me lying had been a mistake. You said I should have known the woman in the yellow dress would show eventually. Man, the only way you could know she was wearing yellow last night is if you were there!"

"All right, Brent," he said helplessly. "I was there. I trailed you all over this damn town while you looked for Alex Lake, then I followed you over to Harper's. I wanted to watch, that's all. I swear. I wanted to see you hit Harper. I owed that guy something but I never had the guts to take care of him myself."

"It was you behind the fire escape door!"

"Yeah, it was me. After you gave up at Harper's door I waited a few seconds and then walked down the corridor instead of going back

down the steps. I intended to give you plenty of time to get out of the building and then I was going to use the elevator, but as I was going past Harper's place he opened up. I'm not sure what happened then. All I remember is, we stood there for a couple of seconds staring at each other, he said something, and then suddenly we were on the carpeting in his front room and I was holding him down with my fingers against his throat. He wasn't moving. I was afraid he was dead. I fell away from him. Then I heard a sound in another room. I suppose it was his wife leaving her bed. I ran. But I swear, Brent, I swear Norris Harper wasn't dead! I didn't kill him. He was breathing hard and writhing there on the carpeting when I ran. I heard him!"

"You better come up with a better story than that, Mr. Collins. I don't think Franks is going to believe that one."

The lieutenant and another cop he didn't bother to introduce listened patiently. They waited until Bo was finished before Franks lit a cigarette and said, "You've cleared up something for us, Collins."

Amen, I thought.

"There were bruises on Harper's throat. We've been puzzled about how they got there."

Bruises had been their only puz-

zle? My expression amused him.

"Tina Harper killed her husband!"

I shook my head, stunned.

"We talked to her in the hospital this evening," Franks went on. "She confessed. It had something to do with a television contract. I don't have all of that straight yet, but she is going to give us a statement later."

"Lieutenant," I asked, gulping hard, "*why* did she confess?"

"Oh, we had her cold, Brent. She claimed, you remember, that someone was at their door. She said she heard her husband speak angrily, then she heard the gunshot. Well, if Norris Harper was talking to someone, he must have opened the door, and if the gunshot followed immediately, it also follows that others in the building must have heard the shot. We know that Miss Hale, who saw you at Harper's door, was still awake even though she had just taken tranquilizers. A gunshot makes noise, Brent, plenty of noise. Someone should have heard it, yet we could not find a person in the entire apartment building—including Miss Hale and the couple who live directly across the corridor from the Harpers—who had heard it."

The lieutenant lifted his palms in a shrugging gesture. "Harper was shot. We had plenty of evi-

dence of that, so we had to assume the sound of the shot was muffled. A bed pillow can muffle."

I said nothing, but Bo Collins was excited again. "I get it, Lieutenant! Brent woke up the Harpers with his pounding on their door. Then he became impatient and scooted. In the meantime, Harper came to the door and opened it as I was passing. I attacked him, then ran. Tina Harper came into the livingroom, found her husband on the floor and maybe only half conscious. She saw her opportunity, raced back into the bedroom, came out with a pillow and the gun, put the pillow around the gun and shot her husband, then claimed he had been slain by an unknown person at the door."

"We searched the Harper place this afternoon," said Franks. "We

found both the pillow and the gun."

Later, after crossing the street outside police headquarters, Bo Collins grabbed my arm and steered me into the bar. "Son," he said, "this has been a wild day."

"Have you," I asked, "ever considered writing for a living?"

He gave me a huge grin after he had ordered our drinks. "That was good over there in the cop shop, huh?"

"You turned it on," I admitted.

"Boy, you know something?" he said as if possessed by a sudden and pleasant idea. "Maybe I will try my fingers on a typewriter. There's this good-looking gal, see? And she's the wife of a screenwriter and . . ."

"No," I muttered, shaking my head. "Not—"

"Yep. *The Gun*."

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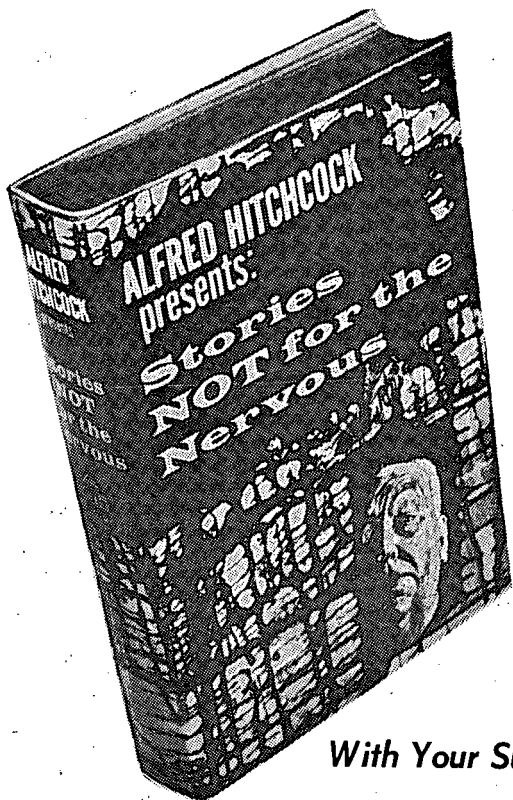
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