

ALFRED

AUGUST 50¢ K

# HITCHCOCK'S

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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



August 1967

Dear Reader:

Great sums are expended daily in combating heat or cold, depending on the season. The day is long past when one was content to wave a paper fan or blow through one's hands. I believe there is but one place extant, where people are involved, in which a steady temperature is maintained the year around, and not for the particular comfort of the occupants.

Clearly, then, most of your contemporaries are currently members of the Beat-the-Heat Association. You may identify one by the way he runs the gauntlet between air-conditioned edifices, or submerges himself—for a reasonable time only—in a body of water.

However, there is a better way to pinpoint one. He will be holding a copy of this magazine, with its tales of malice from California to the Caribbean, and beyond.

So take heart. Regulate your thermostat in accordance with the chills which await you herein.

*Alfred Hitchcock*

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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

### CONTENTS

#### NOVELETTE

THE TENTH PART OF A MILLION <i>by Robert Colby</i> .....	140
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#### SHORT STORIES

THE LOSER <i>by Max Van Derveer</i> .....	2
THE EXTRA WATCH <i>by Frank Sisk</i> .....	20
SELECT BAIT <i>by Richard O. Lewis</i> .....	28
YOU CAN'T WIN 'EM (AT) ALL <i>by Ed Lacy</i> .....	40
THE LAST BOTTLE OF WINE <i>by Richard L. Sargent</i> .....	48
TO THEM THAT WAIT <i>by J. Michael Kelly</i> .....	60
TURN ON THE HEAT <i>by Edward Y. Breese</i> .....	67
WARRIOR'S FAREWELL <i>by Edward D. Hoch</i> .....	72
THE \$15,000 SHACK <i>by Jack Ritchie</i> .....	79
THE AVERAGE MURDERER <i>by Fletcher Flora</i> .....	88
A RARE BIRD <i>by John Lutz</i> .....	96
NEMESIS <i>by Jay Bailey</i> .....	105
THE COILS OF MURDER <i>by Carroll Mayers</i> .....	112
ELEMENTAL CYBERNETICS <i>by Cal Moore</i> .....	129
COP IN A ROCKER <i>by Henry Slesar</i> .....	136

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*Paradoxically, one often attains posthumously that which he was denied during his lifetime.*



# THE LOSER

*by*  
**Max Van Derover**

ANGEL didn't like Texas. She figured California was her dish. In California there was excitement, and artists, and movie people, and beachniks, and writers, and Hell's Angels, and all kinds of interesting people . . .

"When are we gonna go, Bob Roy?" she pouted two days after we were married. "You said—"

She stopped when I looked up from the '38 I'd owned since I was a kid in Abilene. "Maybe our cupboard ain't so bare, after all, doll? Maybe you-all got a stake laid out I



don't know about? Let's see it."

Three weeks earlier, I'd found her along a highway. She'd been thumbing west, and she'd been broke. I'd talked her into hanging up her walking shoes for a spell, taking a job at the Tempest A-Go-Go, and then I'd married her. But now her toes were itching again.

"You promised, Bob Roy. You said we'd get married, and make a hit, and then we'd head—"

"When we find the right guy, doll."

"There's hundreds of guys in the club every night!"

"But the right one ain't come in yet." I got up and put the gun away. Angel looked downcast. I softened, went to her, took her in my arms. "He'll be along, baby. You-all gotta have patience, that's all. One of these nights a real big one will come boppin' in and—"

"And then we'll go?" Her eyes were alive again.

I gave her a crooked grin. "We'll go, cat—if you-all are sure you won't settle for Texas."

"California! And maybe even my mink bikini!"

That was another thing with Angel, the mink bikini, but then I'd found Angel was not always rational, seldom practical, and abhorred conventionality. Add these things to her twenty-one years, legs, smooth muscles, china-blue

eyes, platinum blonde hair fashioned in the boyish cut, and you know why I had married her.

"Yeah, doll, but you-all gotta understand somethin', too," I cautioned. "Somethin' could go wrong. The law could come pouncin' down on us like—"

She stopped my words with a shake of her blonde head. "No, Bob Roy. Nobody is ever gonna arrest us. I'd kill first."

I had to buy that even though it triggered strange little chills along my spine.

Then Angel laughed softly and turned out of my arms. "Find me one tonight, Bob Roy. I'm in the mood and I feel like traveling! Find me one of these rich oilmen!"

He wasn't an oilman. He was a cowpoke, but in the dimness and the smoke-haze of the club that night, I knew he was the one we wanted. He looked fresh in from two weeks on a ranch, a rangy, ruddy hand cruising alone in his forty-dollar hat, sixty-dollar boots and three-dollar jeans, bent on making the Saturday night last just as long as the new bottle of expensive Scotch in his fist.

He took the table immediately in front of Angel's pedestal, ordered ice in a large glass, and poured Scotch over the ice. He gulped, poured again, then sat back and

admired Angel—who, doing the banana, was something to admire. The cowpoke was gaga with the a-go-go.

I caught Angel during a break. She was sweaty but she was beautiful. She also was ahead of me. "A guy in jeans?" she complained. "Bob Roy, you gotta be out of your cotton-pickin' mind!"

"Tone it down, sugar. You-all are forgettin' somethin'. Texas is my country. I know these ranch types. They ain't gonna win no Ten-Best-Dressed contest, but there's green in the jeans!"

She shook her head.

"And I can take him," I said.

She quit shaking, stared at me. "He's awful big."

"And I'm awful sober, doll," I grinned, chucking her chin. "Now you-all go on back out there and bring him."

She brought him finally. He carried the Scotch bottle in his right fist. It was almost empty when they entered the motel unit but, surprisingly, the cowpoke was steady on his feet. He put the bottle on the carpeting, grabbed Angel and kissed her hard. A couple of seconds later I stepped out of the bath and said, "I'm the husband."

The cowpoke released Angel, but he didn't look frightened. "Yeah?" He saw the .38. He stiffened slightly, then drew a deep breath,

seemed to relax, and almost grinned. "You-all want me to empty my pockets, pardner?" he asked.

He dropped a fold of bills on the bed. It was too thin. I said, "The wallet."

He opened it, showed me the empty gap. "Now what?" he asked.

"Turn around," I snapped.

"You-all gotta slug me hard, fella," he said. "I've got a thick skull."

I hit him so hard I thought I'd killed him, but he stirred and groaned after we had loaded him and our single suitcase into his car and drove away from the motel.

Angel held up the fold of bills. "Forty-seven lousy dollars!"

"So it ain't the moon." I wasn't happy, either.

We left the cowpoke in his heap in Texas and crossed into New Mexico on foot. No Dyer rap for me. We walked for miles and dawn was pinking the sky before we finally staggered off the road and collapsed in a gully.

Sunshine baked my eyes and my body was wet with perspiration when I awoke. I poked Angel. She moaned and sat up, blinked hard against the brilliance of the day. "I'm hungry," she said.

"We can stay off the road and leg, or we can take a chance and thumb," I said. "Either way, a lousy disposition ain't gonna help, doll."



"I'll bet every cop in the state of New Mexico is lookin' for us."

They may have been, but we made it on two rides deep into the mountains by mid-afternoon. Then we were out in the boondocks again and walking west after an old geezer had dumped us out of the back of his dented pickup truck.

"California, here we come," snorted Angel. She walked with long strides; levis and sweat stuck to her.

"It could be worse," I reminded her. "We could be coolin' our heels in a Texas pokey."

"I'm livin' for the moment, Bob Roy, that I can spend every one of them great big forty-seven dollars. I wonder if I can manage it all in one day."

"So we hafta hit another guy."

"Yeah, and you can damn well bet I'm gonna pick him this time!"

"Here comes a heap."

I turned toward the high whine of the motor behind us. Sun gleamed off chrome. I put up a thumb. The heap was a new model station wagon. The lone occupant was a woman. The wagon flashed past us, rolled on down the black-top highway and out of sight around a curve.

"Thanks," muttered Angel.

"There'll be another."

Twenty minutes later we round-

ed the curve in the road and saw the station wagon again. It was on the shoulder of the highway now, with the woman squatted behind it. She stood and waited when she heard us approach.

"Your kind, lover," mumbled Angel without breaking stride. "Plump and forty. Turn on the charm."

"I think it might do more good, doll, if I changed a tire."

The woman hadn't been over the physical hill too long. There was fleshiness now inside a white blouse and brown skirt, but under the perspiration and grime of attempting to remove a flat tire there also was a scrubbed look.

She said sheepishly, "It won't surprise me if you two keep right on walking. I didn't stop for you."

The accent was Midwest, and the manner was that of a youngster learning a lesson in living. There was an Iowa license plate on the wagon.

"Or could it be," said the woman, "you know compassion?"

"I know how to change a tire," I said, putting down the suitcase and grinning.

"Thank you," the woman said. "My name is Pamela Feld. You two look quite strong, very healthy. Obviously, you are conditioned to the outdoors. I am not. Will you change my tire? I can pay you in



"dollars or I can pay you in dollars and a ride west."

"The ride will do fine, ma'am."

"How far are you going?"

"To California."

"My, you do need a lift."

I jacked up the rear of the wagon and changed the wheel while Angel, remaining silent, squatted beside the road. Pamela Feld, chattering aimlessly, finally dipped into the front seat and said, "Interested in a cool drink? I just happen to have a thermos of iced—"

Angel grunted and shot like an arrow straight into Pamela Feld's midsection as she came out of the front seat. The woman cried out and became wedged into the crevice between the door and the wagon body, and then I saw the gun that had been in her hand spinning through the air.

Angel and Pamela Feld struggled viciously, but it was as Pamela Feld had said: she was not conditioned. Angel made short work of her. She chopped savagely into Pamela Feld's middle, then twirled the woman away from the wagon and followed her down into the shallow ditch. They went down hard, Pamela Feld under Angel, and suddenly both were still.

"Angel?" I said, with the tire iron lifted and ready to strike.

Angel rolled from Pamela Feld. The woman did not stir. Angel

was breathing heavily. Blood seeped from a slash in her right forearm. I grabbed Angel's wrist, looked at the slash.

"It's nothing," she said, snapping her arm out of my grip.

I got down on a knee beside the woman. She was very still, too still. Her eyes were closed, her mouth hung open, but she did not breathe. I caught her shoulders, lifted her. Her head lolled back, and then I stared at the large rock.

"She went after a gun!" Angel wheezed. "Why would she . . . Damn, Bob Roy, is she dead?"

"She's dead!"

"But I didn't do anything to her! I just—"

"She smacked the rock when you went down! We gotta track, Angel!"

She scrambled. She went to the station wagon, pawed around inside. "There's gotta be a reason she went for the gun! There's gotta be something in here!"

She came out of the wagon with a large purse, opened it, dumped the stuff on the ground. She found two \$100 bills, a \$20, a \$10 and seven \$1 bills.

"Maybe it was her life savin's," I said.

"It's gotta be more than this," said Angel, stuffing the bills into a pocket of her levis. She scooped the other items back inside the

purse. "Let's find it, Bob Roy!"

"Look, cat, we gotta vamoose. Somebody comes along the road now they're gonna stop. They're gonna see—"

"Put her inside, Bob Roy! We can drive for a while! I gotta think!"

It was better than squatting near a dead woman beside the highway so I stretched out Pamela Feld among the suitcases in the back of the wagon, and then I was behind the wheel and we were rolling along the blacktop into a new range of mountains.

Angel used a handkerchief to dab the blood from the slash in her forearm. "Damn, she had a reason to go for the gun," she said, and suddenly she leaned back over the seat.

I risked a glance in the rear-view mirror. Pamela Feld lay on her back and slightly spread-legged. A strip of adhesive tape on the inside of her thigh just above the knee was visible. Angel ripped the strip from Pamela Feld's leg. "Just what I need," she said, and then she dangled the tape in front of me. "Look!"

There was a tiny, flat key stuck to the tape.

"Find a side road and stop!" Angel commanded.

The key opened one of the suitcases in the back of the wagon.

We gaped. There was only the hiss of our breathing. Finally I managed to look at Angel. "Didja ever see so much green in your cotton-pickin' life?"

"Never!"

The bills were neatly packed in the suitcase. Each was a \$100 bill and there were fifty to a rubber band. We counted—\$215,000!

"Lordy," breathed Angel, "wha'd she do, rob a bank?"

"Maybe Fort Knox," I said carefully, and Angel snapped a look at me.

"You're thinking, Bob Roy," she said, making it sound like an accusation.

"You reckon we can walk along the highway with this here suitcase and nobody'll be the wiser?"

"Walk when we have her car?"

"Accordin' to the map, there's a town on the other side of this here mountain."

"So?"

"So we buy our own heap there. We drive on up the mountain, then we ditch this job and walk down to the town."

"Bob Roy, you're talking crazy for sure!"

"Sugar, this could be a stolen rod."

It made her think, and while she was thinking I laid it out for her: "We can leave the wagon and the dame right here, sure 'nuff. This

is back country. It might be days before anybody comes along. On the other hand, there may be a search. Maybe the dame was gonna meet somebody. Maybe the green is legit. Maybe . . .

"Sugar, the smart thing is to make the dame have an accident. We drive up the mountain, put her behind the wheel and then run her off a cliff. Who's gonna look for fingerprints then, and ours are all over the place now. Even if somebody does look eventually, we'll be long gone. Put the dough you took from the purse back in it."

Angel frowned and I sighed. "You want a traveler who ran off the road and got herself killed found with no dough at all?"

Angel kept one of the \$100 bills she had taken from the purse and returned the others in a fold. An hour later we were walking along the blacktop highway again, this time with two suitcases. Angel carried the one with the money. It was heavy, but she carried it as if it were empty.

"You're all of a sudden walkin' tall, baby," I said.

She grunted, then suddenly laughed merrily and skipped a few steps along the highway. I saw her take the \$100 bill from her pocket and hold it aloft in her fingertips, where it fluttered in the breeze.

"Hey!" I protested.

She laughed again and allowed the wind to carry the bill over the edge of the cliff. "I've always wanted to do that," she said gaily. "Throw away a hundred bucks!"

We walked into the sleepy valley town at sundown and most of Angel's enthusiasm had vanished by then. The suitcase of money had finally become heavy and she had been content to pass it to me. "I'm bushed," she said. "Let's find someplace to sleep."

"We should go on. We're only a few miles from a dead dame," I reminded her.

"Lookit here, Bob Roy, I'm tired! I'm filthy! I feel like—"

"Okay," I said, yielding more to my own weariness than to her explosion.

We checked into a rundown motel where the dumpy woman behind the desk was interested only in our money, not in why we had walked into her place from the highway. The next morning I purchased a sedan from an Indian in a used car lot who was suspicious, hesitant, and attempted to rob a stranger by asking \$2,500 for the heap until he saw the \$2,000 cash in \$100 bills. He grabbed, we signed papers, and I returned to the motel for Angel, who was still asleep.

"How come you're in such a big rush?" she asked quarrelsomely.

when I roughly poked her awake:  
"California next stop."

She hustled—but she wasn't fast enough. While we were putting the two suitcases inside the sedan, a car with two high antennas and a large decal on the door turned into the motel and braked beside us. The man who got out of the car was large, bulky, swarthy, wore suntans, a wide-brimmed hat, boots, and a badge.

"Mornin'," he said congenially.

"Mornin'," I said, wondering if the pounding of my heart showed through my shirt.

"Sheriff Lozep," said the man.

I said nothing, and he nodded to Angel. Then his eyes swept the sedan. "Understand you just bought this car from one of our town's best citizens."

"I sure 'nuff just bought it, Sheriff," I said.

"Paid cash, too, I hear."

"Yep."

"You bought it from Injun Ben."

"That right?"

"Good man, Ben. Came in off the reservation 'bout eight years ago. Good man, so I don't want you to hold nuthin' against him, but it ain't often a stranger around these parts walks in off the street and buys a car and pays cash. That's unusual here."

"So Ben phoned you."

"Uh-huh. All of them hundred

dollar bills made him suspicious, I guess."

"There's somethin' wrong with cash, Sheriff?"

"Not at all, son, and that ain't why I stopped when I seen this car. I stopped 'cause I'm hopin' you might be able to help me. You see, I figure if a stranger buys a car and he doesn't have a trade-in, then the stranger had to have another way, besides car, of gettin' here in the first place. What I really mean, son, is the transportation in and out of this town ain't much. No passenger trains anymore. Never any planes. Only the bus. Two a day, one goin' east and one goin' west. It happens my office is right across the street from the bus depot. It also happens I saw both buses come and go yesterday and nobody got off here. So, you see, I gotta ask myself, how did this stranger get to town? Walk?"

"You hit it, Sheriff."

"You walked? You and the, er —" his eyes darted to Angel, back to me, "the missus?"

"You wanna see our marriage license?"

"Now, son, there ain't no cause to get riled. I ain't questionin' the status of you and the little lady here. I'm just interested in you two hikin' in here. You come in from the east?"

"Right along that highway be-

hind you there, Sheriff, yep."

"When?"

"Bout seven o'clock last evening. I think the motel manager can verify that."

"No verification needed, son. Nothin' like that. But if you walked in from the east yesterday, you came down from Bear Peak."

"We were walkin', Sheriff, because we couldn't catch a ride. We've been hitchhikin' across the country. It began as a lark, but the last few days have been rough. That's why we decided last night to take most of the money we had and buy this car. We're on our way to Phoenix."

"Then you did walk over the mountain."

"As the song goes, yep."

"See anything unusual along the road? Like one car pushin' another off the highway maybe?"

"Nope."

"There was an accident up on the peak. We figure it happened sometime yesterday afternoon. Woman ran off the highway, rolled about a thousand feet down into one of the high valleys. Killed her, of course. Old Fez Turban hunts that country every day and he found her. You two walkin' in from the east, there was just a chance you might've seen something."

"We'd have reported it to you if

we had, Sheriff, we surely would."

"We found two packages of one hundred dollar bills wedged under the front seat of the wrecked wagon, son."

It was a bomb going off in our faces. Angel hit Sheriff Lozep low and I hit him high. Angel rammed his heavy middle with the top of her skull, and I swept his hand away from his gun holster with my left while I brought my right fist up under his jaw. He went down hard, moaned. I slashed the toe of my boots against his ear. It silenced him. We piled into the sedan and rolled away from the motel as the dumpy woman waddled out of her office, rattling shrilly.

We rolled through the town and out into the valley. Angel was on her knees beside me, keeping an eye behind us. "Get my gun!" I rasped. "There may be a roadblock ahead!"

She arched over the back of the front seat and dug the .38 out of my suitcase. I put it on the seat between us. I felt better. At least we had a chance now.

Angel continued to watch behind us as we rolled along the blacktop. Her eyes were popped. "Lordy," she hissed, "I'm scared!"

"I've got a hunch we're gonna make it, baby. We shoulda hit a block by now if there is one. Get the map out of my back pocket."

She dug out the map, opened it.  
"How far to the first decent road headin' south?"

She sat in the seat, spread the map on her lap. "I can't . . . can't tell, Bob Roy."

"We're beyond Albuquerque."

"I know where we are, but I can't—"

"Here, steer."

She grabbed the steering wheel, guided the sedan while I inventoried the map. I found where we were. Up ahead there was a dark line going south. It could be a decent road. In New Mexico you never know until you're on it. I decided to take a chance because the line looked as if it went all the way to the Mexican border.

"Are we gonna cross the border?" Angel asked.

"I dunno, cat, but we gotta get rid of this heap."

"Why? You just bought it!"

"The cops have a description and license number."

"Jeez, we're never gonna get to California."

"I'll be happy if we make it to Tucson," I said grimly. "I've been thinkin', doll. We ditch the heap there and hop a plane. In a city it might be a couple of days before the cops find the car. They may even figure we ditched it and lifted another'n to drive south across the border."

"Look ahead there, Bob Roy!"

I saw the car. We were crawling up on it fast. "What?" I rasped.

"Maybe we can switch!"

Now *she* was thinking. We were in lonely country and when we eased up behind the sedan, I saw that the driver was alone. "When I pull up beside him, point to his front wheel," I told Angel. "Try to make him think there's something wrong with his tire."

Angel was good in flagging down the kid driver. He braked immediately and began to ease from the blacktop. I rolled to a stop ahead of him, got out of the car and was with him by the time he had left the sedan. He was young, maybe eighteen, in denim work clothes, and he was frowning when I hit him. He also was tough. I had to work on him for a few seconds before he was down on the blacktop and out of it.

Angel stood behind me. "Gimme your blouse!" I snapped.

She peeled out of it and I stripped it. I caught the kid's wrists and tied them behind his back. "Get our suitcases!"

Angel made the transfer while I took the kid off the road and rolled him down into a gully. I tied his ankles with another strip of Angel's blouse. She was inside the kid's sedan and buttoning a fresh blouse when I jumped in un-

der the steering wheel. The motor was purring and a radio was blaring. The gas indicator showed about a half tank of gas. We rolled.

That afternoon we were in Arizona when we heard the radio newscast. A New Mexico sheriff named Lozep was asking assistance in finding a Mr. and Mrs. Bob Roy Roberts, believed traveling to Phoenix. The couple was wanted for questioning in the road death in New Mexico of a woman identified as a Miss Pamela Feld of Des Moines, Iowa. Pamela Feld had been the object of a nationwide police search for weeks. She had been wanted for the kidnaping of the small son of an Iowa banker. The banker had paid through the nose—\$225,000 cash—for the return of his son. He had not gone to police until the boy had been returned unharmed. Now the Feld woman was dead, and police were searching for a Texas couple.

*Bob Roy Roberts was described as . . .*

*Mrs. Roberts was described as being . . .*

*Texas authorities also wanted to question the couple. A cowboy had been lured, slugged and robbed. He also had died—but not before he had been able to tell police . . .*

"Dead!" exploded Angel.

"Easy, cat," I said grimly.

"How do they know us?"

"I had to register at the motel, and there were papers to sign when I bought the heap."

"You should've used another name!"

"I don't have identification in another name!"

"Bob Roy, you're wanted for murder now!"

"You-all ain't 'xactly got yourself a front row seat in a Baptist choir, doll."

We rolled into Tucson without another hitch, ditched the stolen car, then bought new clothing and air tickets to Los Angeles, but Angel wasn't really her old self again until we were lodged in a L.A. motel and she was stretched out flat on her back on one of the twin beds. Only then did she finally draw a long, savoring breath and suddenly turn on a grin. "Smell the air, Bob Roy! Doesn't it smell rich and exciting?"

"I'd rather be smellin' dry Pan-handle air."

"Oh, come on. Snap out of the dumps, honey. We're free now, ain't we? We made it. Nobody knows where we are."

"Maybe we better go on to Hawaii, doll."

She popped up on her elbows. "Hawaii? No! I wanna stay here. I wanna be in California. I wanna go to find Hollywood and see—"

"Angel-babe, you-all gotta settle

your britches. We've gotta think."

"Wha'dyuh mean? Now you listen here, Bob Roy. We got a new name, Mr. and Mrs. Thad Baxter. I like our new name. It sounds sorta distinguished, and if you think I'm gonna stay holed up in some motel with only a distinguished soundin' name to think about, then you got another—"

"Angel-babe," I said patiently, "we gotta do some thinkin', that's all. Nobody wants to stay holed up, but we gotta play this cool. We gotta figure how we're gonna live and—"

"What's to figure with all that money we got? We can live high, that's what we can do! And that doesn't take much figurin'!"

"You wanna bust out and spread money like water all over the city, huh?"

"I swear, Bob Roy," Angel said, flouncing from the bed, "you all of a sudden sound like a damned penny-squeezer! I wanna live rich!"

"All right. But on a beach, huh? Maybe even an island of our own, out where there ain't many people; out where nobody pays too much attention to us and ain't nosey about how two people who don't work can live good. You see what I mean? Hawaii may be what we really want."

"It's suddenly very warm in here, Bob Roy," she said sullenly. "I

don't believe the air conditionin' is workin' right. I'm goin' out to the pool and cool down."

"Do some thinking while you're out there, will you, doll?"

"Bout how I'm gonna be allowed to spend a dime a day?" she asked sweetly.

She burned exteriorly that afternoon but she cooled interiorly while at the pool. When she returned to our unit around five o'clock she discovered that the California sun had burned through her Texas tan but now she seemed willing to talk sense.

"A beach place, huh?" she said as she stripped and walked out of sight into the bath. "You've been thinking about livin' on a beach, huh? In Hawaii yet."

"Since I've known you, cat, you've always talked about livin' in a beach place."

"It's what I want, okay. An elegant place."

"Not too elegant, doll. Then we might have to explain the moola to someone."

"Well, it's gotta be nice—but it ain't gonna be in Hawaii. I've decided that much."

"Look, baby, the more distance we put between us and—"

"California has beaches. We can drive up and down the coast. We can find us a beach in California."

"Doll—"



"Now you lissen to me, Bob Roy," she interrupted. She stood in the bathroom doorway, looking at me over a bare shoulder. She was a contrast in color, pink-brown and white—and beautiful. "You lissen good. You don't want me spendin' money like we was turnin' it out in a print shop, right?"

"Right."

"So I give a little. I don't."

"Now you-all are thinkin' smart."

"But you give a little, too, hear? You forget about Hawaii. You think about California."

She disappeared into the bathroom. The door closed. I heard the hiss of shower water. I lay back on a bed, closed my eyes. The memory of her standing in the doorway was sharp against the back of my eyelids. If we remained in California we should change our appearances. Dark glasses would help, and Angel should buy a wig. What would she look like as a redhead? And how would I look with my long hair clipped down into a flat top? There should be new clothing, too; native clothing. And we'd have to buy another car.

When she returned from the shower, I went over it with her. She nodded, dressed carefully. She put on a brilliant red blouse and short, white skirt, both purchased in Tucson. "I'll shop for a wig to-

morrow," she said, sitting and stripping hose onto her shapely legs.

"And tonight, doll?" I said, sitting up on the bed and grinning suddenly. "You-all are gettin' all prettied up like you're goin' someplace."

"Well, I ain't gonna sit around here and look at the idiot box all night, lover. Not on my first night in California."

"Good. There's work to be done."

"Work?" Her penciled eyebrows shot up.

"Some things you can't buy, baby, like a Social Security card."

I laid it out for her. We needed the heap if we were going to stay in California, but I couldn't buy a car with Bob Roy Roberts' identification—too many people were looking for Bob Roy Roberts now—and I didn't have Thad Baxter identification, no matter how distinguished the name sounded. So we needed a wallet. Specifically, we needed the papers in a wallet. We needed them just long enough for me to walk onto a used car lot with some kind of identification.

"A *used* car lot?" Angel bleated.

"Later, doll, we trade for a new heap. Someplace else. Maybe in San Francisco."

The guy we hit had looks and manners and did the monkey like

he was one. Later, Angel said he was a gentleman all the way, even out in the darkness of the parking lot beside the club where I slugged him on the back of the neck with a fist and lifted the long, flat wallet from an inside coat pocket.

The papers in his wallet were exactly what I needed. There were seventy-three bucks, too, that I gave Angel. The next morning I purchased another used sedan, paying cash.

Angel was waiting for me when I returned to the motel. "Now do I get to buy my wig?" She held out her hand for the car keys.

I dropped the keys into my pocket. "Easy, cat. We don't spend a fortune in one day. There are eyes in a motel. Curious eyes. They already see a car we didn't own yesterday. We loaf the rest of today. We play it casual."

She wasn't happy. She put on her white, one-piece swim suit.

"It ain't a mink bikini," I admitted, attempting to jostle her out of her sour mood, "But on you, doll, it looks good."

She left the unit without waiting for me to change, but I picked up the wallet and cigarettes, and joined her at poolside.

"I've been thinkin'," I said casually. "I think I'll become a writer."

Angel stopped spreading suntan lotion on her thighs and blinked

at me hard. "What do you mean?"

"We find our beach place and I'll be a writer," I said. "You-all tell me another profession where income is so mysterious. Someone will be curious about the strangers no matter where we settle, and I can't be goin' to an office every day."

"Why worry about income if there ain't gonna be no spendin'?" she asked sourly.

"So tonight we spend."

"We do?" She sat straighter, the scowl left her face.

"You haven't seen a movie star yet, have you?"

"We're going to Hollywood! Tonight we're going to—"

"Tonight I'll take you to a drive-in movie, doll!"

My humor did not please her. She remained in a foul mood the remainder of the day, and that evening she refused to go to the motel club with me. The following morning, my mood soured. Angel was gone from the unit when I awoke. I found a note: "Gone shopping for a wig. Get your hair cut." It was going to be a damned expensive wig. One of the packages of money was missing from the suitcase—five thousand dollars.

Angel returned about noon, laden with packages, and a cab driver brought more into the unit. There were three new dresses, four boxes

of shoes, hose, underclothes, two slack suits, a black wig—and a diamond ring.

"And the change?" I managed to ask without striking her.

She counted out one thousand dollars into my palm. "I'm keeping the rest for pocket money," she said defiantly. "I've decided I'm in this thing just as deep as you are, Bob Roy Roberts, and—"

"Honey, don't make me smack you quiet."

She shut up. She stripped. It wouldn't have surprised me if she had been wearing a mink bikini under her dress, but she had to put on the white swim suit. She left the unit. I sat staring at the new things. The sight of them didn't cool me. I walked down to the main lobby, bought a newspaper, went into the club, ordered a double shot of bourbon, no chaser. The bartender was overly cordial. We had to move again, I decided. We had to find another motel. *We were attracting too much attention in this one.*

A small item on an inside page of the paper caught my eye. The story had a Tucson dateline. It was about Bob Roy Roberts of Texas and his wife Angel. Tucson police were cooperating with New Mexico police in a search for the Roberts' after a young New Mexico boy had been found trussed up

along a highway and his stolen car abandoned in the Arizona city. Authorities had been concentrating their search in Tucson and along the Mexican border, but now a ticket seller at an airlines office had come forward . . .

Angel didn't act too disturbed when she read the article. "So?" she said, putting the paper aside. "L.A. is a big city."

"Baby, it's gotta be Hawaii now!"

"Not for me, Bob Roy." She shook her head and stood. "You can go to Hawaii. I'm stickin' in California. You wanna split the cash now? I'll go to the unit and count out my half."

She marched off. I let her go. She wasn't thinking straight. She didn't understand. We had to cut. Maybe the smart thing to do was double back into Texas. Corpus had nice beaches, and the cops wouldn't expect us to double back.

I left her in the motel, but I didn't make reservations for anywhere. I found a city park, walked and turned things over in my mind. *There was only one way for me to travel now. Alone.*

I returned to the motel, told Angel, "Get into your swim suit, doll. We're gonna drive out of the city and find us a beach."

She didn't understand until I said, "You-all wanna stay cooped

up in this joint all night? I feel like the walls are pressin' in. Put on a dress over your suit and we'll head down the pike."

It was dark when I found the deserted area I needed. Angel hadn't said a word, and she remained silent when she left the sedan and walked down to the narrow strip of sand. I peeled out of my shirt and pants and stood in my trunks. "Come on," I said. "Maybe the water will help."

The ocean water was cold. Angel decided she didn't want to swim, but I took her arm and coaxed her out to where she no longer could touch bottom. She had to swim then, and I let her stroke slightly ahead of me before I lunged and caught her throat in my hands. She didn't even have time to scream before she went under. I held her down. She clawed at my wrists for a long time and I began to tire, then she finally was limp. I left her. She didn't bob up. I stroked back to the beach, got into my clothing, took her dress and returned to the motel. I knew I should drive that night, but I suddenly was very tired too. Morning would be soon enough.

As I loaded the car the next morning with the new clothing Angel had purchased, I was confronted by the motel manager.

"Have a good night's sleep, Mr.

Jarvis?" he asked rather cheerily.

But I knew that wasn't what he really was interested in. It was written in his eyes: Where was Mrs. Jarvis?

"Not very," I grumbled, sliding into the sedan, "but it wasn't your fault. I had to take Mrs. Jarvis to catch a plane last night. Her mother, in Texas, is quite ill. She decided in the night she wanted to return home. I'm driving back."

It seemed to satisfy him. "Well, good trip," he said.

I had been driving about three hours when the muffler on the sedan was jarred loose. I braked on the side of the highway and was under the car attempting to tighten the muffler when the highway cop pulled up behind me. He squatted and peered at me.

"What's the trouble?"

I told him.

"There's an oil station and garage about six miles down the road."

"Okay," I said, sliding out from under the sedan. "Guess I can make it that far."

The cop was a large guy and he was looking inside my heap when I got to my feet. I saw the curiosity on his face as he inventoried the women's clothing I'd piled on the back seat.

"Where are you heading, mister?"

"Texas." I explained about my wife's sick mother.

He grunted. "I see. You got a driver's license?"

"Sure." I started to reach for my wallet and then I froze. I had a Texas driver's license in the name of Bob Roy Roberts.

The cop noticed the hesitation. "Well, let's see it," he said, suddenly clipping his words.

"It's a Texas license," I said, stalling.

"A Texas license, huh?" he said. "And you're driving a car with California plates. Loaded down with female stuff, too, but I don't see a woman. Are you sure you didn't hit some store in L. A. last night? Are you sure you—"

It was all he got out before I banged my palms against his chest and sent him falling back into the ditch. I leaped inside the sedan and rolled. The bullet came through the back window, zinged past my ear and smashed the windshield. I fought the wheel but it was too late. The nose of the sedan was already off the highway. I felt the back end come up, and then I ducked down on the seat and braced as the sedan flipped.

The cop was on the side of the sedan and pointing his gun at me down through the open window when I managed to uncurl and stand. I was standing in pack-

ages of one hundred dollar bills. A suitcase had popped open.

"Ain't there an expression?" I asked the cop. "Some guys can't win for losin'."

"Yeah," he grunted. "Come on out of there. We gotta do some checking on you, fella."

They did plenty of checking, okay, and they found that Bob Roy Roberts was wanted in Texas and New Mexico and L.A. Angel had washed up on the lonely beach. Then the federales came around. They were interested in some ransom money that had been stolen from a kidnaper.

It wasn't all their show, however.

California couldn't prove I'd drowned Angel. She could've drowned accidentally. New Mexico had trouble too. They couldn't prove we had killed Pamela Feld. She could have suffered the head injury in the crash of her station wagon. Angel and I could have witnessed the wagon plunging off the mountain road, investigated, found a dead woman and the money.

But Texas . . .

Well, Texas had a cowpoke's story before he had died. And Texas could—and did—prove I had killed the cowboy.

So there's only one consolation for me, see? At least I'm gonna die in Texas.

*To some there may be an extra item in a particular group, but oftentimes this philosophy provides an additional member of the labor pool.*

**T**HAT morning young Bolton checked into the Bureau a half hour late and blamed it on his watch. "It keeps losing time unless you wind it just right," he told Rinehart.

"Don't tell me," Rinehart said. "Tell the captain. He likes to hear things like that."

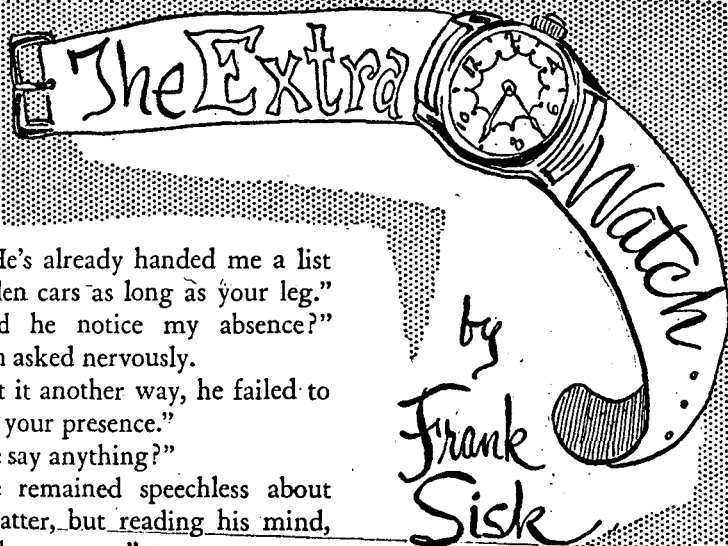
"Is he in yet, Rino?"

"Bet your dollar watch he's in,

"You'll be wearing a blue suit again, kid, with those big shiny buttons, and doing the third shift on Flatfoot Avenue."

"Hell, it's only the second time I've been late in six weeks," Bolton said.

"Listen, a regular detective is allowed to be late only once in his career. A probationer like you—never."



kid. He's already handed me a list of stolen cars as long as your leg."

"Did he notice my absence?" Bolton asked nervously.

"Put it another way, he failed to notice your presence."

"He say anything?"

"He remained speechless about the matter, but reading his mind, I got the message."

"Yeah?"

"Then I guess I better buy a new watch."

"I guess you better." Rinehart took the yellow teleflex summary of the night's crimes from the action basket on his scarred desk and scanned it quickly. "Speaking of

watches," he said after a moment, "don't ever buy one from a little guy named Dominic L. Piano."

"What's that supposed to mean, Sarge?"

"It means Mister Piano at this very moment may be sidling around town with nine fine watches for sale, all of them half price and all of them red hot."

"Dominic L. Piano," Bolton grinned. "A name like that, you must be kidding."

"Read paragraph fourteen," Rinehart said.

Bolton took the teleflex sheet and read #14 *Theft Nitetime, from premises Guthrie & Poole, 378 Lincoln av. Entrance thru rear basement window. Alarm system bypassed with glass cutter, wire clipper, ground clamp. Complainant A. E. Poole, prop., alleges evidence of theft discovered upon midnite return to store to get reading glasses left there at closing 9 p.m. Nine Swiss watches, retail value \$2733, missing. Items of less value in same display case intact as were diamonds of much greater value. Makes and serials in morning report filed by Pilm F. Josephson, Pct. 3.*

Handing the yellow sheet back to Rinehart, Bolton said, "Yeah, but where does the Piano come in?"

"I keep forgetting how green you are, kid," Rinehart said.



"I only wish you would, Rino."  
"Piano's signature is all over this little job, for anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with Piano."  
"Clue me in like a good guy."

"As we cover ground, I may just do that," Rinehart said, settling an old felt hat on his balding head.

A few minutes later, in the unmarked police car with Bolton at the wheel, Rinehart began to expatiate on Dominic L. Piano. "The first tipoff that the job is probably Dom's is the time of day. Before midnight, usually between ten and eleven—that's Dom's time. He seems to reason that the streets are too quiet after that. The cop on the beat can hear a wrench drop or spot a flashlight beam a block away. And before ten there's always the danger of some conscientious creep working overtime under a desk lamp in a back room.

"The next clue is the mode of entrance—a rear basement window, especially if the window is very small. Dom is a very small man, and generally these little windows aren't hooked into the alarm system because nobody expects anything bigger than a cat could get through them—a cat and Dominic L. But in case there is a hook-in, our little lad has quite a professional touch with the proper tools.

"So now he's inside the shop with total contents at his disposal.

What does he do now that he's in?"

"What does he do?" Bolton asked rhetorically.

"Well, for one thing, he's never dominated by greed, kid. He's selective, very selective. All he wants is Swiss watches and only the finest of those. He's probably the country's most unsung authority on expensive Swiss movement—the inaudible movement of absolute precision', he calls it."

"He really calls it that?"

"Wait till you meet him. Once he told me that the only watch worth owning is one whose movement can barely be detected by a stethoscope. So all he steals is fine Swiss watches. He never touches stones. The market is too limited. A fence for diamonds pays a top of twenty-five per cent of list and the corner customer shies away from a diamond deal because he can't tell a carat from a turnip. Besides, a flashy stone draws attention to the one who wears it, stirs up comment, invites investigation. Dominic L. Piano knows all this and that's why he specializes. A watch is a necessity, a part of a man or woman's wrist, and if it's a fine watch with a snob-appeal name and can be bought for half the list price, the market is *broad*, kid, and don't you forget it. Even guys in pool halls and bowling alleys know what a Movado is worth, or an



Eterna. They know a bargain when they see it. So Dominic has no trouble disposing of his stock fast and pretty much on the open market."

"He sounds like a smart operator," Bolton said.

"That's about like saying a plumber is a smart operator because he knows how to wipe a joint," Rinehart said severely.

"You know what I mean, Rino."

"I know what you think you mean, kid, but look at the record. Dominic L. Piano is so smart he's spent eight of the last twelve years in concrete custody. If our little connoisseur would listen just once to his own inner workings as carefully as he listens to Swiss movement, he'd know right off that he's losing time—and losing a lot faster than your own drugstore time-piece, baby. Take my word for it."

Bolton looked thoughtfully sidelong at Rinehart but said nothing.

"Pull over here," Rinehart said a minute later.

Bolton drove the cruiser to the curb outside a small apartment building of yellow brick. An old man and a young boy sat on the cement steps that led to the lobby. The plate glass in the entrance door displayed a plethora of smudged fingerprints to the morning sunlight.

"This where Piano lives?" Bol-

ton asked as they left the car.

"Since he quit living with the warden a few months back, yeah." Rinehart was examining the names on the mailboxes. "Here's our boy. Apartment thirteen."

"Lucky number."

"Maybe not."

The inner door wasn't locked. The detectives strolled down the central corridor, noisome with the battling odors of floor wax, cooking cabbage and disinfectant, and found Piano's door at the extreme end of it, conveniently near the rear entrance. Rinehart knocked with maternal gentleness. No answer. Once again his massive fist beat a gentle tattoo but with the same results.

"Heavy sleeper," Bolton said, taking an impressive ring of keys from his pocket.

"Put those away, kid," Rinehart said. "We haven't got a warrant."

"But this guy's a known criminal, isn't he?"

"With constitutional rights like every other known criminal."

"You're the boss."

"Go find the janitor and tell him to bring his pass key. Tell him we're making a hazard survey for the fire marshal's office."

"That makes it legal?"

"More or less."

Twenty minutes later, after a methodical search of the two-room

apartment under the bleary stare of a gin-drinker named Pearsons, the detectives declared the place to be wholly in conformance with the fire safety ordinances and departed.

Back in the cruiser, Rinehart said, "Drive to Cooley's Bar over on Seventh Street. It's one of Piano's favorite hangouts."

"He's a morning drinker?"

"He's a non-drinker. Gets high on black coffee. But most of Cooley's customers are wearing watches they bought at terrific discounts."

"Can we prove that?"

"Only when we pull 'em in for some other misdemeanor. Then, if we're lucky, we sometimes trace the watch to its source through the serial number—if the jeweler has kept a record of the numbers."

"Great. Then what?"

"Well, then the guy with the hot watch says he found it in a garbage can."

"They don't rat on Piano?"

"They never heard of Piano." Rinehart's pose of old resignation suddenly changed. "Hey, kid, that green car coming our way—the convertible."

"Yeah?"

"Read the marker."

"Cue ex two six five three," Bolton read automatically.

"Get on its tail," Rinehart ordered, taking a tattered notebook from his coat pocket.

Bolton deftly executed a tire-squealing U turn. "Off Piano and back on buggies. You switch quick, Sarge."

Rinehart was consulting personal hieroglyphics in the notebook. "Cue ex two six five three. Check?"

"Check," Bolton said.

"That's Piano's car all right."

"How do you know?"

"I got it from Motor Vehicles this morning as soon as I saw that watch heist on the morning report. Dom always had a weakness for late-model convertibles."

Bolton said with genuine admiration, "You're on the ball, Rino. I got to admit it."

"I got an alarm clock at home and I get to work on time," Rinehart said flatly.

"Ouch."

"But step on it, kid. I want to find out who's driving that car."

"It isn't Piano?"

"It isn't Piano."

Bolton fed the cruiser more gas. The driver of the convertible must have been a rear-view mirror man because he responded with a spurt of acceleration and soon the two cars were speeding along Charles Street at sixty mph.

"The guy's a pro," Rinehart said. "He knows now we're not just private citizens out to break the speed limit."

"He's got a red light in the next

block," Bolton said, looking ahead.

"He'll run it," Rinehart said, and he was right.

In running the red light, however, the car had to swerve sharply to avoid hitting a pickup truck innocently crossing the intersection, and it veered and rocked out of control, then swung its right rear into a utility pole, coming to a trembling stop. The driver sprang from the car and sprinted up an alley. He was gone beyond recall by the time Rinehart, gun in hand, trotted heavily along the street for a look.

Rinehart drove the convertible back to headquarters, protecting any potential fingerprints on the wheel with a handkerchief. Bolton followed him into the police garage.

"Search the trunk, kid," Rinehart said. "There's nothing in the glove compartment."

In the tire well under the spare, Bolton discovered a chamois bag containing a number of Swiss watches. "I'll be darned, Sarge," he said. "You sure called this one right."

Rinehart came out from under the raised hood where he had been examining the engine number with a magnifying glass. "It seems to be our lucky day," he said, wiping grease from his fingers with a handkerchief. "Unless my hunches are

slipping, this is a stolen car." He took a list from his pocket and checked it smilingly. "It used to be black, a month ago when the owner reported it missing."

"And the engine numbers are the same?" Bolton asked.



"Our acid boys can tell us that later. The numbers have been filed away but whoever did the filing failed to completely obliterate the last two digits. I could just about make 'em out as a nine and a zero, which coincides with the last two digits on the engine number of the black convertible stolen a month ago. The year and model are the same too."

Upstairs in the Bureau Rinehart and Bolton found a small man, nattily dressed in tailored shark-skin, registering a complaint with the divisional clerk. It seems he had parked his car, a new green convertible, in the parking lot adjacent to Cooley's Bar on Seventh Street for no more than five min-

utes, but when he returned—  
“Well, if it isn’t D. L. Piano, esquire,” Rinehart said, patting the small man affectionately on the back.

Piano faced Rinehart with a nervous smile. “Good morning, Sergeant. It’s been quite some time, hasn’t it?”

“About two years,” Rinehart said. “With four months off for good behavior.”

Piano forced a tiny laugh. “You enjoy the gift of humor, Sergeant, as I’ve noted before.”

“Thank you, Dom. And now it delights me to say that I’ve got good news for you. Three guesses.”

“I’m afraid I’m not in the guessing mood at the moment,” the small man said mournfully. “I’ve just undergone a most distressing experience.”

“Then let *me* guess,” Rinehart said. “Some crook has stolen your new car.”

Piano’s soft brown eyes widened. “You’re a man of many surprises, as I’ve noted before.”

“And here’s another surprise for you, Dom. We have already recovered your lost property.”

“Incredible, sir. Why, I haven’t even finished filling out the complaint.”

“And one more thing, Dominic— But wait a second. I don’t believe you’ve met Detective Bol-

ton, have you?” Rinehart asked. “I don’t think I’ve had that pleasure.”

“Well, Dom, you may not regard it as entirely a pleasure if you notice what Detective Bolton is carrying in his hand.”

Piano now saw the chamois bag and his neat little face sagged. “Alas,” was all he said, while a film of moisture crept across the brown iris of each eye.

Rinehart permitted Bolton to wrap up the case, much as a teacher might give his pupil a final exam, and the young probationer acquitted himself rather well.

Settling in the interrogation room with Piano, Bolton did not immediately mention the Swiss watches. He simply placed the chamois bag on the table between them. This was good technique.

“Now about this car of yours,” he began. “Did you know it was stolen?”

“Why, certainly I knew it was stolen,” Piano said. “That is why I presented myself here of my own free will to—”

“Perhaps I’m going too fast for you, Mister Piano. Did you know it was stolen from its original owner a month ago?”

You could have knocked the small man over with a feather.

“I suppose you purchased the car from a reputable dealer?”

Well, it had been more of a transaction with a private citizen.

"Of course, you have a bill of sale."

Naturally. Otherwise the car could not be registered.

"And how much did you pay for the vehicle, Mister Piano?"

Suffice it to say it was an advantageous deal.

"Suffice be damned. How much?"

Fifteen hundred. Cash. Cold cash.

Bolton shook his head wearily in imitation of Rinehart and said, "Didn't it strike you as suspicious that you could buy a nearly new car, worth perhaps four grand, for less than half price?"

Well, now that you mention it.

Within an hour Dominic L. Piano had given Bolton, in return for vague promises to go light on the watch heist, enough information to start a solid crackdown on the hot-car syndicate.

"I'll book him now, kid," Rinehart finally said. "You sit here and write the report while it's still fresh in your head."

A few minutes later Rinehart

was standing outside the interrogation room and looking through the one-way glass at his assistant. Bolton had taken the watches from the chamois bag and lined them up in a single glittering row on the black tabletop. He counted them. Then he counted them again.

*Ten, Rinehart was thinking to himself. That's right, kid. Ten. Not nine like it says in the report. That's how the captain really tests a probationer.*

Bolton selected one of the watches and held it to his wrist, next to the one that kept losing time unless you wound it just right.

*Don't let me down, kid, Rinehart prayed. Because I think you've got the makings.*

Bolton returned the watch to the chamois bag and then, with a silent shake of his head, gathered up the others. Rinehart opened the door and walked in.

"You know, Rino," Bolton said, "there's an extra watch here. Ten altogether. Not nine as it states on the morning report. Somebody goofed."

"Well, I'll be damned," Rinehart said. "Let's go tell the captain."



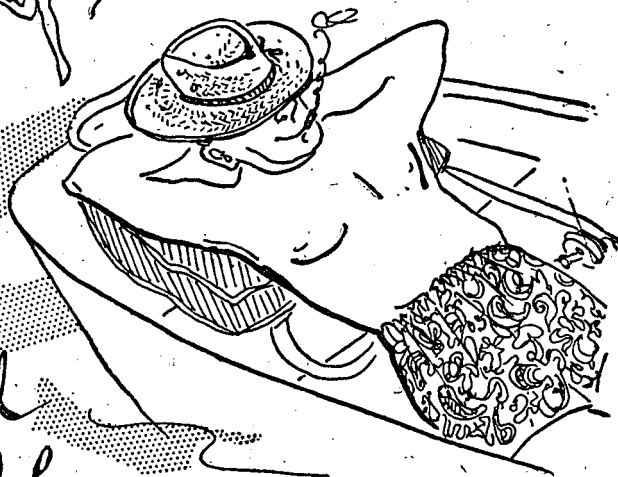
*Politics, Will Rogers once said, has got so expensive that it takes lots of money to even get beat with.*

**M**ONTE HARMON leaned back deeper against the cushions he had piled against the stern seat of his anchored craft, enjoyed the play of sun and wind upon his bare chest, and wondered how Mayor William (Big Bill) Stanton was getting along back in Stanleyville. Having a rough time of it, he hoped. Sweating! Sweating out the investigation!

Monte pulled the brim of his felt hat lower over his eyes, grinned,

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK BAT

by  
Richard  
O. Lewis



DEAC.

and congratulated himself. For the past several years he had been trying to nail Big Bill to the cross of public opinion, to topple the monarch from his throne, and he now felt he was well along the road to success.

His opportunity had come through the media of Big Bill's red-haired secretary, a party, and a goodly number of cocktails. The redhead had made a slip of the tongue concerning a certain current shortage in the educational funds, and that was all Monte had needed; that, and a couple of friendly newspaper reporters to goad the city council into making a surprise investigation of the books.

Monte didn't want to be around when the explosion came, didn't want the good people of Stanleyville to connect his name in any way with whatever might happen, so he had left town immediately for a vacation.

So far, it had been a wonderful three days of sunshine, fishing, relaxing, and just plain loafing about the little cabin that lay hidden in the woods just beyond the point of land that jutted out into the lake. There was little doubt in his mind who the next mayor of Stanleyville might be: a certain rising politician by the name of Monte Harmon.

It wouldn't be all peaches and cream, though. Far from it! Big

Bill would suspect from the very beginning who his real enemy was and would fight back with all the venom of a cobra. He would use every trick in the books, and a certain Monte Harmon had better watch his step . . .

"Hello there," came a lilting voice out of nowhere.

Monte could not believe his ears.

"Hello!" the voice said again.

Monte straightened quickly, brushed the brim of his hat back, and found himself looking directly into the deep blue eyes of a blonde girl in a red canoe not more than two feet away from his own craft. She was wearing a small straw hat, a wispy bikini, a gorgeous tan, and a wondrous smile.

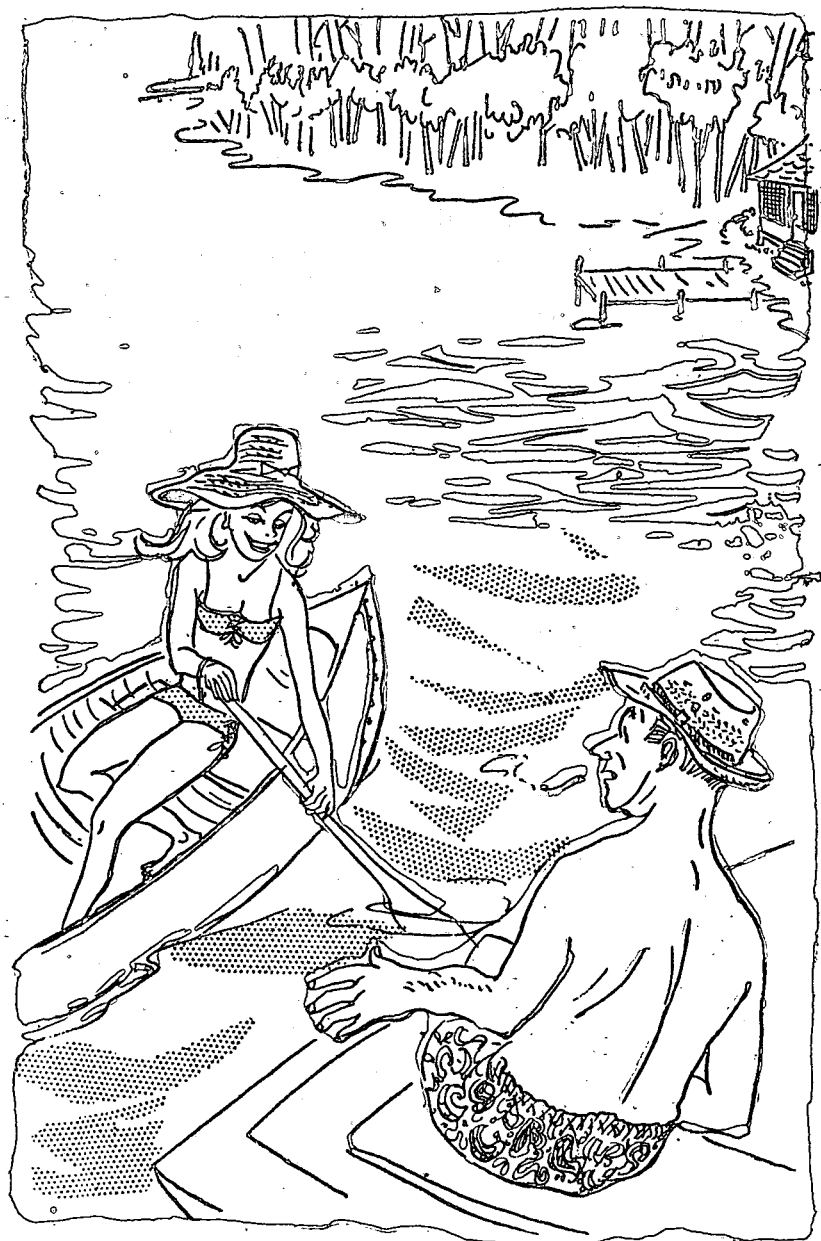
"Hello," he said, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

"Do you have any water?" she wanted to know. "I forgot to bring some along, and I've been out on this lake for—for ages!"

Monte picked up his thermos bottle and shook it. "I had some coffee, but I guess it's gone now. Sorry."

"Just my luck," she said, twisting her full red lips into a pout, "but maybe I'll survive—somehow."

Certain ideas began racing around in Monte's head. Foremost was the thought that this vacation might turn out much better than he had planned.





"I'm Jil Manley," she said. "Three of us are staying in a cottage on the other side of the lake. The other two are taking pictures and writing an article of some kind. I just came along for fun and exercise." She dipped the blade of her paddle to steady the canoe against the nudging breeze. "So far," she added, the smile returning to her lips, "about all I've been getting is the exercise."

"I'm Jack Keeley," he said, giving her the first name that popped into his head. No point in spreading his name around—not just yet, anyway. "I'm in a cabin just beyond the point there. Good water. I'll tow you over."

She shook her head. "You must not know much about canoes. If you try to pull them, they skitter all over creation."

"There are various ways of doing things." He went quickly to the bow of the boat, untied the rope that was holding him to the anchor below, and handed the end to her. "Tie up the critter," he told her, "and hop in. It'll be here when we get back."

She made the rope fast to the seat, stood up quickly, took his hand, and stepped into the boat. Her fingers were firm and alive in his as he seated her in the mid-section. Monte started the motor and sent the boat planing over the

little waves toward the green point of land just ahead.

Her hat was off, and her blonde hair was whipping about her neck. She looked back over her shoulder at him once and smiled. She seemed to be enjoying the little adventure immensely.

He handed her up at the little pier, and their bare shoulders touched briefly.

"What a delightful beach," she said, her eyes following the crescent of clean sand that curved away from the pier. "We don't have anything like this on our side of the lake."

"We could go for a swim," he suggested.

She shook her head. "Not right now. I'm dying of thirst. Remember?"

They walked up the path to the shaded porch of the cabin, and she dropped comfortably into one of the chairs.

"I have cold beer," he said, gazing down at the contours of her relaxed body. "Or I could fix some coffee or tea."

She dropped her purse and hat to the floor beside her and whipped the hair back from her face and neck. "No, thanks. Just plain water."

A moment later, she was holding the tall glass of water he had brought from the kitchen.

"Mmmm," she said after a long drink. "Beats city water sixty ways!"

He seated himself in a chair opposite her, feasting his eyes. "It comes up sweet and cold from a sand-point twenty feet down," he said.

She finished the water and put the glass down. "Married?"

He shrugged. "Reasonably so," he admitted, his thoughts flashing briefly back to Alice and the two kids in Stanleyville. "And you?"

She flashed him another smile. "I'm not ready for that just yet. I want to see and do a lot of things before I take the final plunge."

"Speaking of plunges," he said, getting suddenly to his feet, "how about that swim?"

He took her hand and pulled her up. She got her purse and hat and went along with him toward the pier. "We'd better save the swim for some other time," she said. "I've been gone all morning, and the others are probably beginning to wonder about me. If they search the lake with binoculars and see my empty canoe floating around out there, they'll be coming in a hurry."

"Yes," he agreed reluctantly, "I suppose so."

When they reached the pier, he was somewhat surprised to find that he was still holding her hand.

She seemed to become conscious of it at the same moment, and turned slowly to look up at him. The next instant his arms were about her, his lips were upon hers, and he was pressing her body tightly against his own, his hand feeling the play of young muscles in her back.

An old car rattled by along the lane just beyond the trees, making little impression upon them.

She pushed him away, finally. "Tomorrow," she whispered. "We'll have all day tomorrow. I'll tell them not to expect me."

"Yes," he said, his voice cracking like that of an adolescent. "Tomorrow."

"My purse," she said, as they seated themselves in the boat.

He got back onto the pier and picked it up from where she had dropped it. "I'm forever forgetting things," she confessed as he got back into the boat and handed it to her. "I don't know how I manage to own anything at all."

From the canoe, she leaned toward him, and he took her into his arms again, briefly. "I'll come after you tomorrow," he said.

"No," she said, adjusting her straw hat. "I'll paddle over. I came for the exercise, remember?" She smiled at him. "And fun!" she added, dipping the paddle and sending the canoe gliding away.

He sat motionless in the boat for a while, watching the rhythmic sway of her body as she sent the canoe along with long, even sweeps. She turned once to throw him a kiss. He waved.

Back at the cabin, Monte opened a bottle of beer, seated himself on the porch, and smiled. Yes, this was really going to turn out to be a wonderful vacation! But even as he began basking in the thought, a little alarm began to buzz somewhere in the back of his brain.

She might be precisely as she seemed—a young girl on vacation, determined to have whatever fun she could. On the other hand, Big Bill might well have a hand in this.

Yes, the blonde could very well be bait. Big Bill had just had time enough—three days—to set it up. The girl could have paddled over today to meet him, get things in readiness, and tomorrow there could be a concealed camera or two along the tree-studded shoreline, telephoto lenses zeroed in on the pier, and another camera in the woods, focused in readiness on the cabin door.

Monte took another drink of beer and whistled softly to himself. What a nice layout it would make on the front page of the *Stanleyville Sentinel*. He could see it now. Monte Harmon—married, two chil-

dren, rising and respected politician—going through the door of a cabin in a remote woods with his arm around a blonde young thing who was wearing nothing more than a couple strips of thin cloth.

There was something else. The bronze initials on the purse she had almost forgotten on the pier were P.G. He had paid little attention to it at the time, but now it seemed to hold significance. P. G. was certainly a far cry from J. M., the initials of a girl called Jil Manley.

Monte finished the beer and laid the bottle aside. "Take it real easy tomorrow, my boy," he told himself. "Play it real cool and keep your distance. If she's on the level, she'll go along with the pace you set, and there will always be another day. If she makes a sudden move toward a compromising scene—boy, *you'd better jump!*"

Monte was seated on the pier next morning, his back resting against a piling, his hat pulled low over his eyes, when the red canoe suddenly glided into view around the point. She spotted him almost instantly and raised a paddle in salute. Monte waved back and got slowly to his feet.

When the canoe came to a stop against the pier and she stood up, he saw that she was wearing a different bikini. It was made of swatches of soft leather held in

place by a lacing of thongs. Its fawn color blended with her suntan, giving her an almost nude look. She took hold of his extended hand and stepped lightly to the pier. He felt certain she would have melted into his arms at that very moment if he hadn't stepped away suddenly to make the canoe secure.

When he turned toward her again, she was standing with feet apart and head thrown back, shaking damp hair away from face and neck. On the pier lay her straw hat, a transistor radio, and the purse with the initials P. G.

Monte fought down a desire to pick up the radio and try for a news report concerning Stanleyville. His car radio had conked out a week ago. He hadn't bothered to get it fixed; he had felt certain there would be a radio or TV in the cabin—which there wasn't.

With a half smile on her red lips, the girl said, "I brought along the radio just in case we wanted to dance on the beach by moonlight or—or something."

"Good idea," Monte said, still keeping his distance. He could almost feel the cameras focused on him, fingers on shutter releases, waiting.

"Well," she said, lips inviting him, "here I am. What's for fun?"

Monte let his eyes travel over her. He had to hand it to Billy

Boy; the guy certainly knew how to select bait.

Then an idea struck him. It would be a pleasing twist if he could steal the bait, steal it without getting caught on the barb of the hook. If he could get her away from this immediate area, away from the eyes of the cameras and into some secluded cove . . . Only then would he be certain.

"Let's take a spin around the lake," he suggested.

The smile suddenly left her lips. "I've had enough cruising for one morning," she said petulantly. "I just finished paddling all the way across the lake. Remember?"

Well, that hadn't worked out. Smart gal! She had all the answers.

"Let's go for that swim you wanted to take yesterday," she said.

Without waiting for an answer, she ran lightly to the edge of the pier and entered the water in a graceful, shallow dive that carried her a few yards away. She came up in water that scarcely reached her shoulders, and turned to face him, wet body glistening in the sun. "Come on in," she invited "The water's fine."

Monte felt that he was now definitely on a spot. He could dive in after her and carefully keep his distance, or he could remain standing on the pier like a stuffed toad.

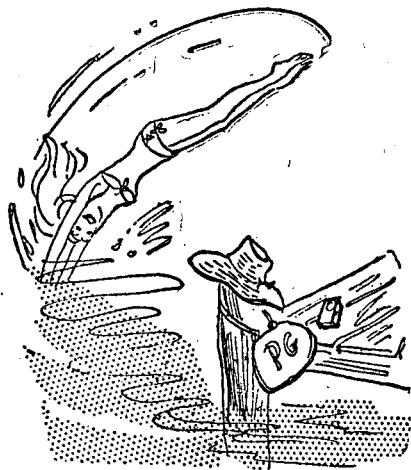
She began clutching at something

in the water beside her. "Heavens!" she shouted, laughing and holding up a narrow strip of leather. "I've lost my bra! It must have come untied when I dived!"

*So this is it! Scene one! Take one! Action! Cameras!*

"You'll have to come in and help me," she called, struggling with the strip of material. "It ties from behind."

*Sure! Dive to the rescue of the fair maiden, and just as you reach her, she'll step out into shallower water to expose herself. The cameras will pick up only what they*



*see above water. Two gay people out for a chummy swim—in the nude!*

"I don't know much about those things," he said, trying to make a joke of it.

"You can't learn any younger," she laughed, striking out through the water toward the pier. In a moment, she had climbed out of the water and was standing facing him.

Monte backed off quickly. He hadn't quite expected her to carry things so far so suddenly.

"What's the matter?" she asked, a frown beginning to ridge her forehead. "Haven't you ever seen a woman before?"

Monte stepped back another pace. He was certain now. He knew he would have to act quickly and with finality. "Not exactly one of your type," he said flatly. "And what I've seen so far I don't like."

She paused in the act of taking another step toward him. "You—what?"

"Look, little girl," he said. "I get the *picture*, but *you* don't get the *pictures*, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean," she said, her face and neck beginning to turn red beneath the tan.

"I don't need to spell it out for you," he said. "Just go back and tell your boss the bait was wonderful, but I just don't happen to be a sucker."

"But I don't understand . . ."

"The game is over!" he said. "Finished! Kaput! I don't want any

part of you! Can you understand *that?*"

Her body tensed as if he had struck her. The red faded beneath the tan, became white. Her mouth came open as if she were trying to say something but couldn't get the words out.

"Now get into your little canoe and paddle yourself back across the lake," he commanded. "And stay away! I don't want you around."

"Why, you—" Hot tears suddenly brimmed from her eyes. She spun away, clambered into the canoe, cast off, and dipped her paddle. The canoe shot out toward the open lake, erratically, as if she were having trouble keeping it under control. She didn't look back.

Monte watched her go, chuckling. He might have felt sorry for her except that she had brought the whole thing tumbling down upon her own pretty little head. He wondered what the boys with the cameras were doing about now.

As he started back toward the cabin, he stumbled over the straw hat and radio she had left behind. He picked them up and turned to call, but she had already disappeared beyond the point. He guessed she wouldn't have returned for them, anyway.

Later, with a bottle of beer on the tray beside him, Monte fiddled with the transistor until he finally

got a Stanleyville station. There was music, interspersed by the quips of a disc jockey and someone advertising air conditioners. It went on that way for an hour or so and then shifted into weather reports.

Monte had become lost in his own thoughts when he suddenly sat up in his chair.

"Funeral services for Mayor William (Big Bill) Stanton will be held this afternoon at two o'clock in Broadlawns Chapel," the commentator was saying. "Mayor Stanton collapsed three days ago of a heart attack immediately following an investigation by local authorities . . ."

Monte turned the radio off and sank back in his chair. Big Bill *dead!*

He sat for a long time, feeling neither remorse nor guilt. Big Bill must really have been in deep water to have collapsed like that. Now someone else would take the man's place to run against him, Monte Harmon, in the next election; someone with an untarnished record. The undermining of Big Bill Stanton had not brought about any political advantage whatsoever. He would still have to fight his way up . . .

He leaped suddenly to his feet. Jil! If Big Bill had died three days ago, he certainly would not have had time to set up Jil as bait. That

meant that she was precisely what she had at first seemed to be—a healthy young girl trying to cram as much fun as possible into an otherwise drab vacation.

Well, there wasn't anything he could do back in Stanleyville at the moment, and he still had two days of vacation left . . .

It was not difficult to find the cabin in which Jil was staying; her red canoe lay on the shore half out of water before one of them. Monte cut the motor, drifted to the pier, and quickly made fast. A moment later he was banging his fist on the screen door of the cabin.

A tall brunette appeared and pushed the door slightly open. She was wearing a halter and tan shorts, appeared to be in her thirties. "Yes?" she said.

"I'm Monte Harm—I mean Jack Keeley—from across the lake. Is Jil Manley here?"

"She's here."

"Tell her—tell her I want to talk with her. Tell her it's important."

"If you're who I think you are," the brunette said, her dark eyes narrowing, "I don't think she'll want any part of you. I don't know what you did to her, but I do know that you ruined her vacation for her—and for us. She's packing and wants to leave immediately."

"Please," Monte said, feeling like

a schoolboy confronting the mother of an intended girlfriend. "Please explain to her that it was all a big mistake." Then he poured out the whole story from start to finish. "But the initials on her purse, P. G.—"

"Patricia Gayland," said the brunette. "My purse. She forgot and left hers back at the apartment."

"Well—" Monte was struggling, "well, certain pictures could have ruined me both politically and otherwise."

"In other words," Patricia Gayland said evenly, "you thought Jil was mixed up in some kind of blackmail."

"Well, not just that—" He knew he was doing a terrible job of it. "Here," he said, suddenly thrusting the hat and radio toward her. "Give her these and try to explain things to her. Tell her I want to—to see her."

"I'll tell her," said Patricia Gayland, taking the things from him, "but I'm not promising any results. You can't shatter a girl's pride, trample her into the mire one minute and have her forgive you the next." The door slammed behind her.

Monte stood alone on the porch for a moment, then walked idly down the short path to the pier. He looked out across the shimmering lake, cursing himself for being sev-

en kinds of a fool. He could have had a wonderful vacation—the kind that happens in dreams—if he hadn't botched the whole damn thing.

He gave up finally and started toward the boat when he heard the screen door open and bang shut again. He whirled to see Jil walking slowly down the path toward him. She was dressed in the same leather bikini and was carrying the white purse.

He ran quickly forward and clutched her hand. It was stiff and cold in his own. He saw that she had applied fresh makeup, but it in no way covered the telltale redness about her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Jil," he said, walking with her toward the pier. "It was all a hideous misunderstanding. I thought . . ."

"Yes, I—I know what you thought," she said. "Patricia told me the whole story."

"I hope you're not too angry."

She didn't answer.

They reached the edge of the pier and stopped. He turned her toward him. "Please," he said, and put a hand beneath her chin, slowly forcing her head back until her eyes looked into his. "Please. There are still two days left. We could have fun . . ."

Her eyes slid away from his, but the hand he held felt suddenly

more alive. He pulled her to him, his lips seeking hers. In a moment, she was responding almost as warmly as she had responded on his pier the morning before.

Something gave way between them, and she stepped back. "That pesky bra!" she said, laughing, and crossed her arms over her chest. "It came untied again."

Monte stooped and picked up the flimsy piece of leather from the pier. "I'll—I'll tie it on this time," he promised, and pulled her closely to him, pressing her body tightly against his own. "We could go back to my cabin in the boat," he whispered hoarsely. "Take that swim we almost took this morning. We could even dance on the beach in the moonlight or—or something."

She pushed herself away from him, her eyes downcast again. "Well . . ." she hesitated, "I—I don't know."

Monte felt certain that he now had the battle all but won. All he had to do now was to humble himself a bit more, beg forgiveness, plead with her—then she would be his for two whole days . . .

"I—I'm really awfully sorry about what happened," he said. "Please believe me."

Her eyes evaded his, and in the silence, a car sprang to life somewhere among the cabins and wheeled away over the country



road, raising a cloud of dust. "Let's be friends," he begged, taking both her hands in his. "We can start all over—"

Suddenly she jerked her hands from his, turned to face him, her blue eyes icy, and said evenly, "You have insulted me in almost every way a girl can be insulted. And now you are insulting me again with your false humility and mock apologies. You are thinking only of *yourself*, not of *me*."

"But—" Monte felt his jaw sag open at the sudden change in events.

"You have ruined my vacation, have just about ruined things for the others." Her eyes bore steadily into his own. "But now I'm going on another vacation. A real vacation. I'm going to have fun. And you, Mr. Monte-Jack-Keeley-Harmon, are going to pay for that vacation!"

"But I don't see—"

"It's really quite simple. The girls are rather good with cameras. It's part of their business. The cameras are equipped with telephoto lenses. The view of this pier from the

back door of the cabin is quite clear, and Patricia is now on her way to town to put the film in a safe place."

"But—but that's . . ."

"Blackmail," she finished for him. "Exactly. The girls thought that since you had accused me of the deed, we might as well go along with the ideal"

She clutched up her purse, opened it, and took out a slip of paper. "If ten thousand dollars does not reach this address by the end of the month, your wife and the newspapers of Stanleyville are going to receive some choice photographs!"

She shoved the paper into his limp hand. "And now, Mr. Harmon," she commanded, "get into your little putt-putt and putt-putt yourself back across the lake and stay there!" She clicked the purse shut with finality. "And, Mr. Harmon, if you ever meet another girl who is trying to have a little fun on her vacation, try not to insult her!"

She turned and walked away, breasts and chin held high.



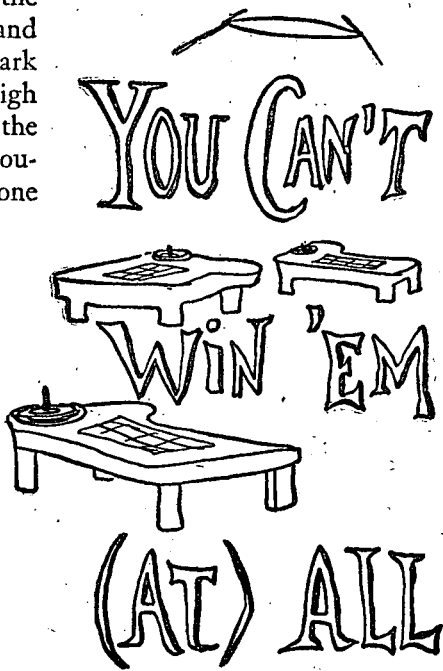
*Luck, it would seem, has more the properties of a good mulch-  
lage than of a poor whitewash.*



THE municipal casino in Nice, France, is one of those clumsy old buildings like something out of a creepy movie. What I mean is, maybe a hundred years ago it held a couple of concert halls and was probably called "grand." Today, the upstairs part is jazzy with the real casino, a fancy nightclub and an expensive restaurant, but the big hallway downstairs is dim and drab, divided by thick old dark curtains hanging from the high ceiling. The *boule* room is in the rear. *Boule* is the poor man's roulette. The numbers run from one

to nine, an ordinary rubber ball is used and the payoff odds are seven to one. You can walk in without a tie, even in shorts.

To give you a hint of how badly my luck was going, I'd started for the *boule* room, made a turn into a darker and smaller hallway and was lost. True, I was juiced on



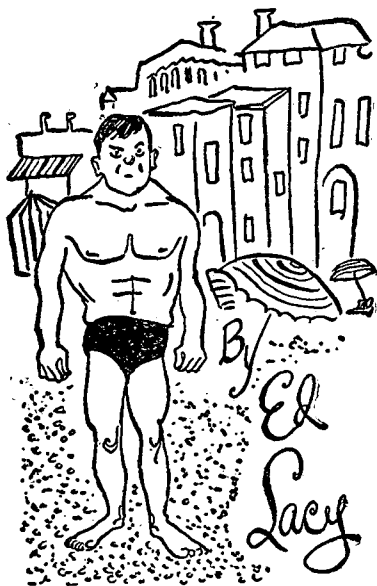
French booze, but not that drunk. Lighting a match, I saw I was in this dusty, curtained passageway. I heard sounds ahead of me and, parting a curtain, burning my fingers before I got another match working, I saw a small door. Opening this, I was on top of the *boule* room chatter, with only another old curtain between me and the room. Peeking through a slit in this, I saw the *boule* room okay, but it wasn't an entrance. Somehow I'd ended up behind the change desk, the cashier.

Cussing silently, I turned around, stumbled out to the main hallway, and finally made the entrance to the *boule* tables. I paid

my franc to get in and didn't see Frankie, nor did I expect to. I played a handful of francs and lost, as usual. The crazy drinks I'd had were making me a trifle sick, so I went to our hotel room. Frankie wasn't there, either, which didn't help my mood.

On Nice's rocky beach that afternoon we'd been making a play for a large Dutch blonde in a skimpy bikini. I knew I was going to win because Frankie's a bag of bones in trunks, while my 230 pounds of solid muscle cuts that well known figure. Of course, neither Frankie nor I spoke Dutch, but when the big babe started walking gingerly across the pebbles toward the blue Mediterranean, obviously needing help, we both jumped up. Skinny Frankie ran across the damn rocks like a native and reached her first. Those big pebbles were killing my feet, and as I neared her I took a pratfall. She turned, along with all the others on the *plage*, and laughed at me, while Frankie put his arm around her waist, helped her down the rocky slope and into the water.

I don't like being laughed at; in fact, I wanted to belt blondie. Instead, I eased to my feet like a punchy fighter and finally reached our dressing room. I left the *plage* to tie one on, leaving the lush



bikini'd blonde to lucky Frankie.

It must have been about two a.m. when Frankie came into our hotel room and turned on the john light to undress, whistling softly. When I sat up in bed, Frankie asked, "Where've you been, Mike? We looked all over for you. She had a friend, another fine blonde and so lonely. Man, a couple of sex boats. Shame, they're leaving in the morning, part of a tour."

See the way my luck has been? All lousy.

My being in France seemed like a break at first, and maybe I've no right to beef. I'm living good over here. It started a month ago, back in the States. I was at the track and by the fourth race I'd taken a bath, was broke. I was hanging around the \$10 WIN window, hoping to see anybody I knew, to make a touch. This skinny guy, who looked like I'd seen him before, came along followed by a big slob giving him a fast sales pitch. When skinny shook his head, the goon tried to grab a ticket from skinny's mitt. Glancing at me, the thin guy called, "Mike, help me!"

I flattened the slob with a gut belt and as the guards started toward us, this thin guy said, "Mike, let's cut!"

The races were over and we lost ourselves in the crowd. Once we

were outside, this guy said, "Thanks, Mike. Don't you remember me, Frankie Dill?"

"Sure," I said, although the name didn't ring any bells.

"When you were bossing the Turbans, I used to hang around with the gang."

He came into focus then. All that was eleven years ago, when I was sixteen and the Turbans were the roughest bopping gang in town. Frankie Dill had been a runty kid I used to send to the store for sodas or butts, an errand boy nobody paid any attention to.

"What are you doing these days, Mike?" he asked.

"Nothing much. Working the docks, a bouncer in a bar over the weekends. You holding a winning ticket on the last race, Frankie?"

He grinned. "I got the Twin Double, worth \$2,194! That punk back there was trying to fast-talk me into letting him cash it, said he had a phony Social Security card, so I'd save the tax bite. I told him no dice and he—"

"Frankie, you're holding a \$2,194 ticket?"

"Yeah, I've been lucky the last year or two, winning five or six hundred bucks a week—cards, to the track office in the morning Double last month for a grand," Frankie said calmly. "Let's take a

cab back to the city. I'll go down to the track office in the morning to cash my ticket."

"Then you'll have to pay the income tax bite?"

Frankie shrugged narrow shoulders. "I don't mind giving Uncle Sam his cut. I got a fifty-dollar gambler's stamp, play it legit, including my taxes. Keep out of trouble that way."

In the taxi Frankie suddenly asked, "How much time did you get for that stolen car, years ago?"

"Six months. Why?"

"Ever been in stir again, Mike?"

I shook my head. "What you bringing up all this old stuff for, Frankie?"

"I been thinking I ought to take a vacation. That guy you slugged might be looking for me. I'm pretty well loaded and I've always wanted to see Europe, but I don't like traveling alone. I've no record and if you only did six months, you can get a passport. I speak high school French, let's see what's cooking in Paris, Mike. I'll pay your way."

Six days later we were on an Air France jet. Frankie isn't tight with his loot; he bought me a couple of suits and in Paris we put up at a swank hotel. Frankie slipped me two hundred bucks. "Spending money, Mike. When you need more, shout."

Let me tell you, Paris was a drag. We got there in a cold rain on a Thursday and it was still raining on Sunday when Frankie said, "We seen the nightclubs and striptease joints, the hell with this rain. Let's head south to the Cote d'~~A~~zure. They say it's a sunny ball."

Five hours later we were taking the sun on a *plage* in Nice, watching the bikini babes. Nice is great, and you'd think with a setup like this going for me I'd be content. But I wasn't. Frankie took care of the bills, but it annoyed me to be dependent upon him. When I was bossing the Turbans, Frankie would have been delighted to shine my sneakers. Now I felt like his flunky. I mean, I've always stood on my own two big feet. I wanted to show Frankie I could make out without him.

Nothing broke for me, though. Like we played *boule* a couple of times, neither of us winning, but Frankie liked the game and said he was working on a system to beat it. Monday night we went to the trotters in a city outside Nice named after Jimmy Cagney, although they spell it Cagnes. Horses are horses in any language, but I dropped sixty bucks worth of francs while lucky Frankie, who kept telling me to follow his picks, won himself eight hundred

francs for the night, which is about \$160.

In Paris I'd bought a couple of lottery tickets at three francs each. Each Wednesday they pick the national lottery winners in France. On Thursday morning I stumbled through a French newspaper while we were eating the rolls and coffee the hotel called a breakfast. I didn't see my numbers and was about to tear up my slips when Frankie said, "Let me see them. Here, you big dope, you won a hundred francs. They also pay off on the last number and you got a 'five' in the 'O' series."

A hundred francs is only twenty bucks but it gave me a lift, as if my luck was finally changing. I asked, "How do I collect? Do we have to go back to Paris?"

Frankie tried reading the news item, then he said, "No. I'll show you where to collect here in Nice."

After breakfast we left the hotel and I stopped for my usual ham and eggs at a sidewalk cafe. Then Frankie took me to a tobacco shop where they sold lottery tickets. I gave them my ticket and got a hundred-franc bill. The good feeling left me when Frankie handed in a lottery ticket of his own. He had the last three numbers and had won a thousand francs!

Holding up the bills as we left, he asked, "Need more spending

money, Mike? I'd be glad to—"

"No!" I only had about fifty bucks left but I was damned if I'd ask him for any more money. We bought a couple of lottery tickets for the next week and then went down to the *plage*, where lucky Frankie also won the big blonde.

Lying in my bed, staring at the darkness, listening to Frankie breathing evenly in the next bed, I started thinking about how I'd got lost in the casino, ending up behind the change desk. At that desk you get chips for your money and money for your chips, if you win. I figured at least a couple of grand was lost in the casino every night and it was all at that little change desk.

It would be a cinch to come up behind the desk again, clout the one guy there, grab all the paper money and scam the way I'd come. They had three floor men working the *boule* room but they were always watching the tables. Nobody kept an eye on the change desk.

I kept twisting the idea in my mind, sweating a lot, a little hung-over. I hadn't pulled a job in a lot of years and I sure didn't want to do time in a French can. But with two grand of *my own*, I'd feel like a man again, instead of Frankie's pet ape. Although he never said anything, I knew he enjoyed giv-

ing me a handout, making up for being a bag of bones and for the brush-off I'd given him back in the teen gang days. Yeah! I'd flash the two grand and say I'd gone to Monaco, won at the Monte Carlo Casino. Still, I knew it was risky. In a strange city it would be 'iffy,' but in a strange country it's stupid. In fact, the only reason Frankie and I didn't gamble upstairs at the real casino was, we didn't understand this *chemin de fer* and the rest of the card games.

I slept on the holdup idea and awoke in the morning with a headache. It was another sunny day and Frankie suggested we take the bus to Cannes, which has a sandy beach.

I enjoyed the sand, showed off my swimming and was feeling great. I told myself the holdup bit was a wrong move. When we were dressing in our *cabine*, I said something about why didn't they clean up the place, and kicked some old newspapers under the bench. Frankie, who was sitting on the one chair putting on his shoes, asked, "What was that-yellow thing, Mike?"

"Just some dirty cardboard."

Frankie reached under the bench and damn if he doesn't pick up a dirty pigskin wallet. It belonged to some cat from Lincoln, Nebraska, and held \$1,000 in trav-

eler's checks, about seven hundred francs and fifteen very green U.S. ten-buck bills!

Handing me a couple of tens and some francs, Frankie said smugly, "I told you to look at it. The traveler's checks are no good to us, so we'll toss them and the wallet into a mailbox."

That tore it! I was fed up with being a jerk—I knew I was going to rob the casino, purely for my own self-respect!

We returned to Nice and had a good steak and a *salad nicoise* in one of those little, non-tourist restaurants Frankie was always finding. He suggested we take in a movie, that he'd translate for me. I told him to go it alone; French movies left me all mixed up and feeling dumb. Like in Paris we saw a U.S. western, but with the talking dubbed in French.

Going to the casino, I found the curtained passageway. It was less than two hundred feet long. Gently opening the door, I stared through a slit in the curtain at the back of the change guy's head. He was a plump little guy in a blue-tux. On a shelf under the desk he had piles of 10, 20, 100 and 500 franc notes, with trays of chips stacked at one side. I studied the *boule* room, everybody standing two or three deep around the tables, including the floor men.

There was a small bar across from the change booth, but the bartender was busy washing glasses. Two hundred feet. I'd cover that in a few seconds, another second to sap the change guy, catch him by the collar so he'd fall without any noise. With my reach, it'd be no trouble reaching through the curtain and scooping up the paper francs. I'd wear a coat, stuff the dough inside my shirt. The only real risk was somebody coming to the desk for chips, or my being seen after leaving the main hallway, meeting somebody on his way in to play *boule*. He'd remember a clown my size.

That was the chance, but I'd stroll in casually and stop to light a cigar if anybody was around. Then, less than three minutes later, I'd casually stroll out, stuffed with francs.

It sure would be a bang to dump the dough on my bed, bull Frankie how lucky I'd been at the Monte Carlo Casino, which is only about a half hour bus ride from Nice. I was tempted to pull the job there and then, but I decided on the next night. I like to figure all the angles, never pull a job too fast.

The next afternoon we met a couple of U.S. college girls on the *plage*. I knew nothing would come of it, but Frankie said it was

a pleasure to talk to them, suggested we buy 'em supper.

I told him, "You take 'em to supper, since you all speak this amateur French. I think I'll see what this Monte Carlo's all about."

"You'll lose your shirt there, Mike, stick to *boule*. Hey, tomorrow night we'll go to the trotters again."

"I at least want to say I been in the Monte Carlo Casino. I'll take it easy. Maybe I'll see Princess Grace."

Frankie gave me a sad look. "Citizens of Monaco aren't allowed in the casino, they're too smart to gamble. Okay, enjoy yourself. Need money?"

"No."

I ate alone in some tourist trap, got nicked twenty-five francs for a meal not half as good as the eight franc ones Frankie found in his restaurants. I bought a heavy cake of soap and put it in a sock, and a small flashlight. Then I sat on the Promenade, watching the waves, and figured by midnight the change desk would have its top money.

At five after twelve I had a fast drink and walked into the Nice casino. It seemed too quiet downstairs, although the good jazz band was playing upstairs in the nightclub. I walked into the curtain passageway without being



seen. When I opened the door back of the last curtain, it was so quiet that at first I thought the *boule* room was shut. But looking through the slit in the curtain I saw the usual crowd around the tables. The bartender opposite the change desk was reading a paper. Nobody seemed to be talking much. I took a deep breath and put my left hand through the slit in the curtain, grabbed the change guy's collar and pulled him back. His head and my soap sap, in my right hand, hit the curtain at exactly the same time. With my left hand, I lowered him gently to the floor. Not a soul had noticed anything.

When I put my left hand through the curtain for the money, I got a bad shock. There were only a few paper bills on the shelf! Not knowing what to do, I grabbed them and ran back along the passageway. Shoving the bills in my pocket, along with the flash and sock, I cased the main hallway. It was empty. Walking out, I crossed the street to the neat park, tossed the crumpled cake of soap in a trash can. Then I walked to the Promenade, wiped any possible prints off the flash, put it into the sock and hurled that into the sea. Sweating like a bull, I stopped at a sidewalk cafe for a beer.

I counted the bills in my pocket

—eleven 10 franc notes, three 20 franc bills and one 50 franc note: 220 francs.

I started sweating more. I'd risked a foreign jail for a lousy forty-four bucks! Maybe the prints of my left hand were on the change guy's collar? No, he'd start sweating when he came to, mess up any possible prints, and nobody had seen me reaching through the curtain or leaving.

It took another few beers to brace my nerves and at one a.m. I went to our hotel room. Frankie was reading a magazine in bed. He asked, "How was the Monte Carlo Casino?"

"Aw, I never went in, just walked around the town and took a bus back to Nice. You get anyplace with the college broads?"

Frankie waved a slim hand in the air. "Stop it; I didn't expect to. A couple of nice kids." He pulled back the cover at the foot of his bed, revealing stacks and stacks of French bills. "But my system scored in *boule*! It was a gasser, Mike. I went to the casino at eleven p.m. and I could do no wrong. By midnight I'd broken the bank there and left. I won \$1,763 in francs! I never was so lucky. Help yourself to all the francs you . . . Hey, what's the matter, Mike, you look like you're going to bawl or something!"

*According to the fabled eagle, stricken with a dart, "With our own feathers, not by others' hands, are we now smitten."*

**I**T WAS a successful cocktail party, Helen Lawrence decided, surveying her guests. While the senator had disappointed her, there was an ambassador and two members of the House of Representatives, plus

a scattering of actors and actresses. They all seemed to have settled into animated little groups, and there was not even the usual solitary man who just sat in a corner, smirked, and drank himself into an embarrassing condition. The door chimes sounded. Helen smiled at the thought someone wanted to make a late and impressive entrance. The maid opened the door.

Madeline Tremaine came into the room as though on parade. Heads turned and there were glances of envy from the women.

Madeline was a rather delicate girl with black, shoulder length hair and a slim, shapely figure. Her face was broad and somewhat long, and featured startling grey eyes and a tiny, turned-up nose. Twenty-two years old, she could pass for a well developed fourteen.



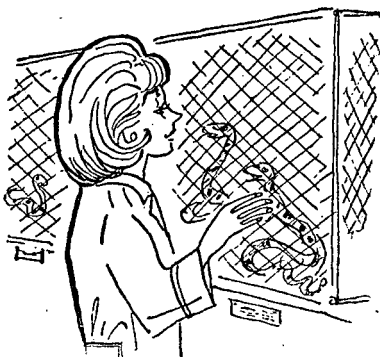
By Richard L. Sargent

Although her gold lamé dress was gorgeous, the envious glances were not inspired by it, but by the young man at Madeline's side.

Before she could analyze the reaction, even Helen felt a tingling sensation inspired by the splendid young beast. Tall and broad shouldered, his handsome face was deeply tanned. His dark, curly hair had a bit too much oil on it, but one could overlook that in favor of the superbly white, even teeth revealed by his engaging smile.

As Madeline made her way across the room, pausing to introduce her new conquest, Helen began a more analytical appraisal. The man had charm, perhaps even glamor, but his reaction to the notables present indicated he was just a bit too impressed. Helen allowed herself a small sigh. Madeline had been secretive and happy for the last two weeks, and that could mean she had become involved with another fortune hunter.

Helen Lawrence had come to regard a monthly cocktail party as the most efficient way of staying alive socially, enjoyed them for what they were—a few hours of pleasant but meaningless diversion. She preferred the sense of accomplishment that went with her work. Although her big-girl figure would have qualified her for a bathing suit advertisement, a white lab coat



seemed even more perfect for her. Usually, she wore her honey-blond hair curled under at shoulder length, but on this occasion it was upswept and she wore diamond earrings. She laughed away requests for the phone number of her hairdresser, refusing to admit that she did it herself. Neither would she invite "Won't-you-whip-something-up-for-me?" requests from her girlfriends by admitting she designed her own clothes, including the gold-trimmed Grecian style dress she wore this evening. Her face frequently misled people to believe she was married and the mother of several young children. Not that it appeared older than her twenty-five years, but it had the softness and serenity sought by photographers who were assigned to get advertising illustrations featuring young mothers.

Madeline was beaming as she said, "Helen Lawrence, I'd like to introduce my fiancé, Johnny Ste-

fano." She seemed very proud.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Johnny."

"And I'm very happy to meet you." The interest in his eyes was casual.

"Helen's my dearest friend," Madeline said. Her arm was linked through Johnny's and she smiled up at him as though he were a god.

"Lawrence—would that be Lawrence Oil?" he asked, his interest becoming less casual.

"My father is, I'm not," Helen replied, putting a deliberate chill in her voice. She was well aware that Johnny was admiring her figure as though she were a burlesque queen on a runway.

"You wouldn't get along with Helen," Madeline said. "She spends all day in a laboratory playing with snakes and other icky monsters."

"Ah, a herpetologist?" Johnny asked. "I've never met a lady snake charmer, but I must say such a beautiful girl is wasted on reptiles. It's a fascinating field though. What do you specialize in?"

Helen would have preferred some cutting remark, but found herself answering, "The effects of poisons upon the nervous system, with special application to the potential beneficial uses of venom in medicine."

"I am sorry," Johnny said. "I shouldn't have called you a herpe-

tologist. Quite obviously you're a medical doctor. You must forgive me for going off half-cocked."

"There's nothing to forgive," she said, beginning to like him in spite of the fact she knew he was experienced in ingratiating conversation. "I'm not a doctor yet. I may not even go for a degree. I just enjoy research."

Madeline tugged at Johnny's arm. "Darling, let's go get a drink and meet another girl friend of mine who seems to be on the verge of leaving. You will forgive us, won't you, Helen?"

"Of course, dear, run along."

As they started away, Johnny glanced back over his shoulder. Helen recognized it as a look of speculative interest—as though he were willing to drop his option on Madeline if there should be a chance of getting his hands into the till of the much larger Lawrence Oil. Helen gave him a small but discreetly sexy smile. She knew, before the evening was over, Johnny would find a way to talk to her again.

Throughout the party, when she had the opportunity, Helen watched Madeline and Johnny. She examined looks and gestures, adding them up as though they were an equation. She did not like the result. While she still cherished some small hope that this time

Madeline had found an honest suitor, it did not seem likely. She was, to the contrary, fairly certain that Madeline had been hooked by another gigolo. Judging Mr. Stefano's considerable talent, it was difficult to judge how far the relationship had progressed, but Helen feared it was further than any of Madeline's other romances had gone. In the past, either Madeline's father or Helen had come to her rescue, but this time it might be too late.

It was several hours later that Madeline asked her to bring up a bottle of their special wine to toast her engagement to Johnny. Helen went into the cellar for it. Standing in the dim light and frowning at the bottle in her hand, she didn't want to take it back to the party, yet did not quite know how to avoid it.

"May I help?"

Helen turned to see that Johnny Stefano had followed her. "Not really. I have the wine."

"What's with this Romano Conte '49 and you two?" His voice was slurred but he was far from drunk.

"Oh, it's a silly thing. When we graduated from college, we wanted to celebrate and strolled into a liquor store and found the stuff. We took a bottle out to our hideaway in Foster's Glen and spent the afternoon telling each other our

dreams and ambitions, and just sort of having a private drinking party. I don't remember which of us suggested it, but we decided to make it our special wine and drink it only when one of us scored some triumph. Romantic kid stuff. Anyway, we went back and bought twelve bottles. Now there are only two left."

"You know, I can't imagine you two as best friends all these years. Madeline plays at painting, and you work with snakes which is the one thing that horrifies her most. I mean, how come?"

"Put it down to opposites attract, if you like. Madeline had a talent for getting lost on the campus and it seemed I was always the one to direct her. At first, it annoyed me, and then I got to like her. She's a darling girl, really."

"So you're her mother hen with a soft shoulder wrapped in a crying towel?"

"Let's say I feel more like her older sister. Let's leave it at that, Johnny."

"Fine. I didn't come down here to talk about her anyhow."

Helen put the bottle of wine back in the rack and crossed her arms. "Why did you come down here?"

He grinned. "I like you, Helen. You're direct and you don't mince words."

"I think you're cute too—too cute,

perhaps." It was intended to have the effect of a slap, and it had.

"I know better than to try to seduce you," he said. "You're the kind who can't be seduced. When you want to make love, you're apt to come right out and tell the guy."

She smiled. He was shrewd and perceptive. She had intended to rattle him and put him in his place. Instead, he was outfencing her. She searched for a way to shatter his ego.

"You know why I came down here?" He didn't pause for an answer. "Because I made a bet with myself about you."

"Oh? What was it?" Helen asked, sure that he was going to provide the opportunity she wanted.

"I bet myself that if I tried to kiss you, you'd haul off and slap me so hard I couldn't see straight for a week."

"You're probably right." She thought the tone of her voice was cutting enough to intimate there was no *probably* about it.

"There's only one way to find out." He stepped closer, his arms reaching out to touch her waist, one of them moving upward along her back.

"You've been warned," she told him, confident, ready to slap him harder than she'd ever slapped any

man. He was so sure of himself—so sure she wouldn't.

He pulled her close and his lips touched hers.

The sensation she had when she first saw him flared within her again. Then, coming to her senses, she broke the kiss. Looking into his eyes, she realized this man was not only an animal himself, but that he had the power to bring her down to his level. She had a fair amount of experience with men, but had never encountered one who had this effect upon her. The realization of what he could do was frightening. She understood now why Madeline had fallen for him.

Johnny gave her an expression of mock amazement. "Hey, hey, hey—the little lady turns on!"

It was frustrating to realize that he had known it all along. She smiled sheepishly, feeling too weak to deliver the slap she'd intended. "You . . . you lost yourself a bet."

A girl's voice slid through the room like a hard jabbed dagger. "You rotten witch!"

They both turned toward the doorway. Unbalanced by drinks, Madeline swayed down the stairs. It was not difficult to conclude she'd either missed Johnny and come looking for him, or had actually followed him here.

She held out her hand, display-



ing her engagement ring. "You're too late, sister. Johnny's mine. You've taken other men away from me, but you're not getting this one." She put her arm through Johnny's. "We're getting married next weekend and there's not one damn thing you can do about it. I kept him away so you couldn't get your claws into him, but I should have known you'd try, even this late. You're not going to succeed. As daddy would say, no-sir-eee-bob. I love Johnny and he loves me. S'right isn't it, honey?"

He stroked her hair and smiled. "Sure it's right, sweetheart. Nothing's going to come between you and me. Now take it easy, eh?"

"I'll take it any way I can get it," Madeline said. She giggled drunkenly and stuck her tongue out at Helen.

Helen laughed. "Okay, darling, I surrender. Take him with my compliments. Now let's all go back to the party."

Madeline nodded. "This time I win, huh, Helen? Damn right. You can't win 'em all. You can't have my Johnnykins." Backing Johnny against a wall, she gave him a long kiss. "Adore that man! An' I love 'im, love 'im, love 'im."

The next afternoon Helen worked in the lab, preoccupied by memories of the party. The more

she thought about it, the angrier she became with herself. If Madeline hadn't walked into the cellar, there was more than a possibility she would have let Johnny get much farther than a kiss . . . and he knew it.

That made him one of the most dangerous men she'd ever tangled with. Madeline couldn't be blamed for falling for an aphrodisiac with legs. That he was a fortune hunter who would bleed Madeline's father dry, Helen had little doubt. With more time, she might succeed in stealing him from Madeline and then extricating herself as she had done in the past, but it would not be easy. If she tried it, Helen knew she would run the risk of becoming addicted to Johnny herself. Even now, in the familiar atmosphere of the lab which was antagonistic to any thoughts of romance, she could visualize Johnny and feel tremors of desire throughout her body.

It horrified her to know that this animal—this worthless gigolo—could have this effect upon her. She had always considered herself a nice girl and fully capable of keeping any man at a distance, particularly men like Johnny. The feeling she had about him was similar to that of someone who has always denied there were such things as ghosts, and has come face



to face with one, with no way out.

Her mind on Johnny, she carelessly reached into one of the glass-fronted snake boxes. The large rattlesnake coiled and began shaking its tail.

Shocked at what she'd done, Helen quickly and carefully withdrew her hand. The snake relaxed. She stared at it, thinking that Johnny Stefano, in his own way, was quite as deadly as a rattler, and if someone didn't intercede, Madeline would be devoured by him just as the snake was devouring the small rabbit she'd placed before him.

Helen went to the phone and dialed the private number of Madeline's father.

"You've got J. P. on the line," the growling voice said. "Speak yore piece."

"Don't pull your gruff old bear act on me," Helen said. "I know you better."

The old man laughed. "Helen, honey, it's damned good to hear your voice."

They bantered for a few minutes, then she said, "Dear, we have a problem. Do you know who—or rather what—your daughter's running around with?"

"Oh, *him*. I sort of figured you might call me about that."

"Then you know and haven't done anything about it?"

"Don't intend to. Listen, she's

twenty-two and I can't go on protecting her forever. I bought a couple off her and I know you shook loose a couple of others, but it didn't do no good—she just went out and got herself tied up with this one. I figure maybe she should get burned a little, maybe that'll cure her."

"J. P., listen to me. If she marries this man, she'll not only get a big old broken heart, but you're apt to lose your shirt."

"I know. I know, Helen. But I figure as to how he won't take me for any more than them other two did."

She argued with him for several minutes, but he wouldn't change his view.

"Helen, I'd do anything to stop it, but Maddy's put me over a barrel. She says if I do anything to break it up, she'll never speak to me again. She's serious about it—so what else can I do, but what I'm doin', which is to let her go ahead and swallow the hook, and then just be around to put things right when she finally sees what he is. I just don't understand that girl, Helen. I sent her to them fancy psychiatrist fellers like you said, and all that, and it didn't do any good. All I can see to do this time is play the hand out."

Disappointed, Helen dropped the argument and bid him goodbye.

Her one hope of getting Madeline out of the situation the easy way was gone. Now, if anyone were going to save Madeline from Johnny, it would have to be herself.

J. P. was right when he said he didn't understand Madeline. If he had, he would have known that the kid was loaded with suicidal tendencies. If she married Johnny and came to realize what a rotten bum he was, and caught him running around with other women, which was inevitable, she would be very likely to kill herself. Either that, or kill both the other woman and Johnny and wind up on trial for murder. When Madeline had quit seeing the psychiatrist Helen recommended, and he had been unable to impress her father with the importance of further treatment, he had called Helen and discussed the matter with her. Nothing would persuade Madeline to continue treatment, and rather than risk destroying their friendship, Helen had dropped the subject. She wished now that she hadn't given up so easily.

Frustrated by the whole situation, Helen continued working.

Less than an hour later, Johnny called her. She knew the moment she heard his voice that he would ask for a date and that she would accept.

All the time she was talking to

him, she was looking into the eyes of one of her rattlesnakes.

They were picnicking in Foster's Glen. They'd driven out in Helen's red compact and it was parked on the small hill above them. She and Johnny were sitting on the edges of a red and white checkered tablecloth spread out on the thick grass beside a small, clear stream. He had stopped at a delicatessen and bought sandwiches and a barbecued chicken. The only thing she had insisted on bringing was the last bottle of Romano Conte '49, which was now in the large, covered basket at the edge of the cloth farthest from the stream. Only the top of the bottle showed through the hole in the center of the lid of the wicker basket. While at the house, Helen had also changed into pink stretchpants, a white blouse with a low neckline, and thongs.

Johnny wore Levi's and a bright red shirt, open at the collar with his black chest hair curling over the edges. He finished most of a sandwich and tossed the small L-shaped crusts into the stream. "Nice place to make love," he said. "Miles from nowhere."

"You talk as though it were a foregone conclusion."

He eyed her. "It is."

She felt her cheeks flaming. He knew his powers too well; knew

she couldn't resist him any more effectively than had Madeline. "Don't you feel the least guilty about cheating on the girl you're going to marry?"

"Why should I? We're not married yet. And what about you? Don't you feel guilty about cheating on your best friend?"

Again, she felt, he'd twisted an attempted attack to his advantage. She decided to drop it and confirm beyond doubt her suspicions about him. To go through with what she intended, she had to be sure there was no alternative. "Tell me, Johnny, do you really care anything about Madeline?"

He grinned. "If anyone else asked me that, she'd never get a straight answer."

"And me?"

"I'll level with you. I like the kid. I genuinely, honestly like her."

"But?" Helen asked, smiling.

"But," he said, "if you crook your little finger, baby, I'm all yours."

"Simply because my father's Lawrence Oil and hers is only Tremaine Industries?"

He shrugged. "Some guys, you know, they go to college and get a trade—they can do something. Me, I couldn't make the education bit. I found out a long time ago that I have only one talent. I'm not proud of it, but it's all I've got, so I

figure I gotta use it. I wish it was some other way—no, Helen, really, I do—but it's just the way the big monkey swings. I've got what girls like, and I'm resigned to it."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Okay, okay. I'll lay it out for you, cold and simple. If neither you nor Madeline had a dime, I wouldn't look at either one of you, nor at the sexiest most beautiful broad in the world. If your family wealth were equal right down to the last decimal, I'd stick with Madeline because she's easier to handle. But since your old man is worth ten times what hers is, like I say, crook the finger, kid, and you made yourself a deal."

"Well, you're honest!"

"With you, it's the only way to fly. Madeline digs the sweet whispers of love and all of that, so that's what I deliver to her. That routine would never go with you. The customer's always right. Dig?"

She laughed. "I dig."

"Hey, the wine chilled yet?"

She reached over and felt the top of the bottle. "No."

"How come you brought the last of your Romano Conte '49?"

"Isn't stealing Madeline's favorite boyfriend worth toasting?"

"I guess," he said, "but you haven't stolen me yet."

She gave him a teasing smile. She

had promised herself she wouldn't let him make love to her, but his animal magnetism was working on her.

His hand touched her arm, then gripped it. Looking into her eyes, he pulled her off balance and they lay on their sides, her lips inches from his. Then they kissed and she felt the hot magic of him in her blood.

As the kiss became more passionate, she felt impossibly weak and feminine. She began to doubt she would ever have the strength to go through with what she had planned.

Nestling in the basket beside the bottle of wine was not ice, but a large and very deadly rattlesnake. She intended to ask Johnny to open the wine. He would have to wrestle with the clasp, awakening the snake. When he opened the lid of the basket, the snake would strike.

She would then gather up the evidence of their picnic and drive away. Johnny would be found dead and it could only be assumed he'd accidentally been bitten by one of the rattlesnakes common to the region. It would work, she knew it would work, but now, feeling his warm hand caressing her, she wondered if she could go through with it. She could get the bottle out of the basket without disturbing the snake, and Johnny would never

know what she had planned to do.

She wanted Johnny, and this once or a thousand times wouldn't be enough. His hold on her was as strong as it had been on Madeline. She stopped wondering, knowing full well she could not see him killed. She'd gambled she could trap him; instead, he had trapped her. Knowing exactly what a louse he was didn't help. The last thoughts of resistance drifted from her mind, and she abandoned herself to enjoying him. She was lost and glad of it.

Madeline Tremaine peered over the hood of the little red car. While she had suspected that Johnny might be going to see Helen, she had thought they would be someplace where she could walk in and take Johnny away before anything serious developed. Although she had not believed Helen would bring Johnny to Foster's Glen, it was a choice of looking here or going home. She had seen Helen's car from a distance and walked a circular course to it. It had been a mistake; she should have driven right up and honked the horn.

This had been their private place and now Helen had betrayed her by bringing him here.

Madeline's thin lips began to tremble at the sight of them kissing. Her fists knotted up and

stretched invisible rope. Helen had stolen other boyfriends, but Madeline had never been as much in love with them as she was with Johnny. She gave a choking little sob. Helen had stolen him just as she had the others.

Madeline wished passionately that she had brought a gun. If she had, she would walk down the hill firing at them until they were riddled with bullets. She would kill them both. The thoughts threshed in her mind like the legs of a black spider turned on its back.

She bent over, gripping the sides of her head as though to crush the impulse to kill. It would not be crushed.

Her gaze fell to the car's handbrake. She could release the brake, turn the car off the road and send it rolling down the hill. They were only sixty feet away. The car would be on top of them before they could get out of the way. Involved with each other, they might not even hear it.

One second it was only a thought, in the next it was reality. After aiming the car, she jumped

aside and stood watching as it sped down upon Helen and Johnny.

It was less than a dozen feet from them when Johnny saw or heard it, and yelled. He tried to get up and run. Helen's scream was cut in half as the car slammed into them. They were thrown into the stream and the water turned red with their blood.

In a dreamlike state of calm, Madeline walked down the incline. She stood on the picnic cloth with the tire mark across one corner and gazed at the wrecked car and the broken, sprawled bodies.

She said, "I win, Helen. I win because you didn't get Johnny." She turned toward her own car, then saw the neck of the familiar wine bottle protruding from the basket. Her victory deserved a toast. She fumbled with the clasp and tossed aside the lid.

Madeline found herself looking into the tiny bead eyes of a coiled rattlesnake. Paralyzed by horror, she could only watch as the flat brown head streaked through the air and the white fangs sank into her arm.



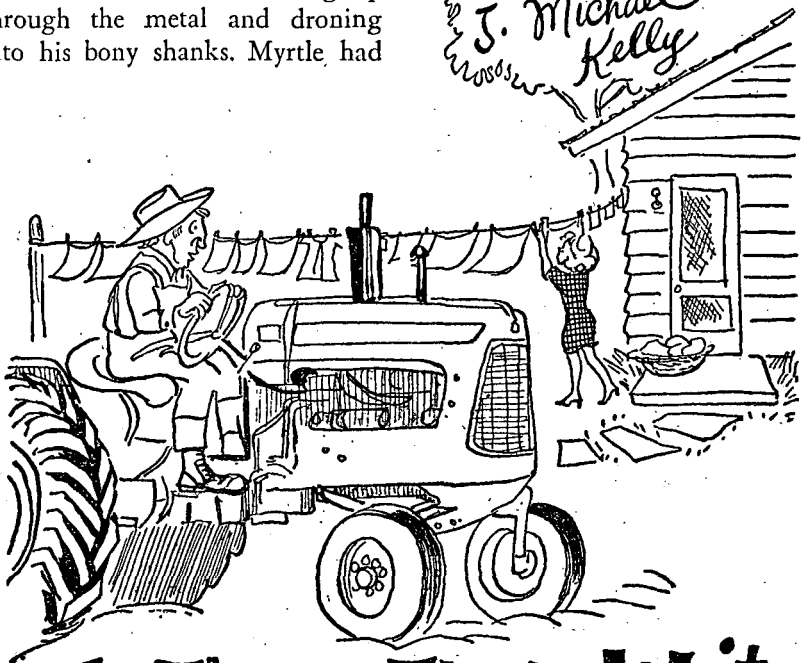
*There may be considerable truth in our protagonist's philosophy, but unfortunately I know of no belief that is exclusive.*

**J**ASON HIGGLEY climbed into the saddle of the big green tractor and cranked her up. It was almost Christmas and there was still a lot of land that hadn't been turned under, but Jason didn't let out on the clutch. He just sat there, feeling the tractor's vibrations coming up through the metal and droning into his bony shanks. Myrtle had

come out the back door and was moving slow and lazy toward the clothesline.

Jason watched the way her hips moved under the denim skirt and

By  
J. Michael  
Kelly



# To Them That Wait

felt the old, twisting ache in his insides. He turned his face into the sleeve of his blue overall jacket and wiped his mouth, making a whisper of chin stubble. Then he let off on the clutch, rolled the steering wheel hard, and headed out of the yard toward the fields.

The waiting was hard. Getting harder all the time. It had stretched out longer than his longest calculation.

The tractor dropped into the shallow drainage ditch, lurched up and out, then settled into the field. Jason lined the big rear tire along the outer edge of the lumpy, naked soil, let down the blades and moved off, turning up four brown swells of moist earth under the pale December sky.

*But I can wait.*

Waiting, in fact, was Jason's secret strength. It was the central, single tenet of his faith in himself and in the way things would eventually turn out.

*All things come to them that wait.*

He wasn't sure whether it was something his Ma had told him or whether he'd learned it in Sunday School, but he believed it. He'd lived by it and tested it and hung on to it when there wasn't anything else to hold onto.

*I ain't the brightest thing that ever lived. I know that. And not*

*too good-looking, either.* He remembered the sound of Hervie's voice: "You 'mind me of a starved turkey gobbler—only uglier." *Not that ugly. Just not too good-looking.*

Jason made his turn at the end of the row, then came back, gouging out a new set of ripples on the face of the field.

After all, Hervie hadn't been any prize—stubby build with short-cropped hair that made him look even shorter, and gaps between his teeth when he grinned, which he did most of the time even when he was mad and cussing. Jason had never figured out how the girls could go for all that snagged-tooth grinning, 'specially on a short little fellow like that. But Hervie had a way with them. Least, he made out he did, slicking up and cutting out every Saturday and every rainy day in between.

Hervie wasn't his real brother; just half-brother. Same Ma but different daddies. Hervie was fifteen years younger and Jason had never liked him. All those years when he'd been doing a man's work, he'd had to watch them spoil Hervie rotten. He'd just kept at it, though, plodding along, figuring that being the oldest, he'd come into the farm someday.

But Ma died first, and when his

stepdaddy died about a year later, Jason found out that Hervie had got control of the farm for the rest of his natural life. So the waiting started all over again. It didn't seem right. After all those years of working the farm for Hervie's daddy, now he had to work it for Hervie, getting out of it just exactly what the grinning little toad decided to give him.

If he hadn't been tough and fully made up to stick it out, he'd have been whipped a long time ago. Hervie had a way of making it hard, 'specially on Saturday nights when he'd been drinking. He'd come in walking stiff-legged and rolling a little from side to side like he was 'straddle a barb wire fence. Then he'd start to gibe.

"Hello there my old half-brother buddy. You have a big night watchin' Gunsmoke and all that? Or do you maybe have a little gal staked out in the hayloft that you ain't telling me about?" Then he'd waggle a stumpy finger and roll his head. "No, no, no. Not old Jason. So I reckon it's up to me to keep the girls happy. Wanta hear about how it was tonight? Well, let me tell you something . . ." And he'd go on about what he'd done and how he'd done it until Jason couldn't stand it and would go to bed.

It wasn't that Hervie wouldn't

work or was stingy or anything. It was just the teasing. That and the thought of him having the farm and getting the girls and strutting around like the cock of the walk and grinning all the time.

Jason hung on though. At first he hoped Hervie'd get himself killed jukin' and skirt chasin'. For nine years he just plugged along, doing nothing. Even after he'd given up on the idea of Hervie's getting shot, even when his forty-fifth birthday had rolled around, even when there didn't seem a prayer of anything ever changing, he just kept on waiting, and believing that his waiting would win.

Even when he figured out how to cure Hervie for good, there was still considerable waiting. It was Hervie himself who showed the way by getting careless. Everybody knows that when you go into a tobacco barn to check on the burner, you'd better leave a stick in the door to keep it from slamming shut and accidentally latching on you. But one day Hervie must've been in a hurry or forgot or something. Anyhow, Jason and the hands heard him holler, and came running so's to keep him from stewing in the 160 degrees it takes to cure tobacco. Before they could get there, though, Hervie had kicked the door down.

So the next year, just before



curin' time, when he was getting the barns in shape—which is what he did every year because the barns were old and went down from one season to the next—Jason just did a real good job of it: new hinges, new latches and double nailing on all the boards. Ended up with seven of the tightest, stoutest barns in Robeson County.

Even when the curin' began, he didn't rush. It had to be when the barns were fired up good and hot, and on a Saturday afternoon when all the hands were in town.

When the right Saturday came, he'd been ready. Squatted behind the barn he'd picked, he'd watched Hervie come along from checking the others. Hervie was already dripping water because even going in to check on the temperature and to make sure that there was no danger of fire would sweat a man down. So old Hervie was stepping along, dripping sweat and swinging his tobacco stick like it was some kind of fancy walkin' cane—that last time having cured him of going in without propping the door open.

Jason knew Hervie wouldn't stay in there more'n a minute if he could help it, but a minute was plenty of time to pull the stick, slam the door and make sure the latch was caught.

That's how it happened. There

was that first quick yelp; then kicking and hollering, but Jason just ambled on back up to the house. He turned the TV up real loud, pulled off his shoes and watched the football game. There was no one on the place, and the barn was nearly a half mile back off the road. Even when Hervie thought to start twisting the shut-off valve on the gas line, it wouldn't do no good. It would just spin round and round, doing nothing, because the set screw was gone.

All it really took was just sitting there watching the game. Jason knew how long it took to cure a barn of tobacco, but he wasn't right sure about curin' a man, and he wasn't one to hurry anything along.

As it turned out, it was a good thing that he wasn't the impatient sort. It took the courts over a year and a half to settle things up; insurance people raised a fuss about having snap latches on tobacco barns and had made him change them all; and the lawyers had piddled around 'til they got their share. But that wasn't what made it rough. The real rough part came with Myrtle.

Myrtle showed up right after the funeral, hollerin' about how Hervie had got her pregnant and how she deserved half of everything

he'd owned. Jason just shook his head. He let her find out for herself that there wasn't any way she could prove a claim on Hervie as the daddy of that baby—if she really was carrying one.

About six weeks later she came back and sure enough you could tell that she was going to have one. This time she didn't demand nothing; just stood there on the porch and said, "I wondered if you'd be willin' to give me a place to stay until . . ." She made a little motion with her hand, ". . . afterward."

"I don't have to," Jason reminded her.

"I know it."

"Will you keep house for me?"

She nodded.

"Well," he said, kind of drawing it out and feeling pleased with himself, "I reckon maybe we can make a trade. Long as you don't go to spending money for stuff we can't eat."

It had been a good feeling. Not that she was all that pretty in the face, which was kind of pale and flat-looking, but her hair was a nice straw color, and when she walked it made Jason plumb hurt to watch it. Best of all, she was Hervie's woman. Not only did he have Hervie's farm—or soon would—but he was fixing to have Hervie's woman, too.

Only Myrtle wouldn't have nothing to do with him. She'd cook and clean but when he tried to ease up to her, she'd put him down in a hurry. "We didn't trade like that," she'd say.

At first Jason figured it was being pregnant and all, so he'd put it off. But after the baby had come and was a couple of months old, he figured it was something else. Maybe she was just holding out to see if he really was going to get the farm.

It took over eighteen months to get shut of all the lawyers and have everything all sealed and legal. But as soon as it was done, he took the papers back into the kitchen and showed them to Myrtle.

"I guess that means you got it all," she said.

"Ever' bit of it. Except what I owe the lawyers."

"Good for you," Myrtle said, spacing it out sort of sarcastically, and then turning back to the dishes in the sink.

"I waited a long time for this," Jason went on. "I ain't rich. But I got plenty." He moved close in behind Myrtle. "Enough for two," he said, slipping his arms around her waist.

"Get your hands off me," Myrtle snarled, twisting around with a fork in her hand.

"Hold on, now." He backed off.

"Hold off, you mean. You come pawin' me again and I'll stick this through your scrawny neck."

It was then that Jason had got suspicious. Only reason for a woman like her holding out must be another man.

Sure enough, he caught her slipping out to leave her baby at a woman's house so she could make off with some man. That's when he had the phone taken out and bought the big shepherd dog that would raise Cain if anything stirred about the house after dark.

Myrtle didn't like it. It was written all over her face. One night she got so mad that she was shaking when she started in on him.

"You really think you can get anything you want by just waitin' for it, don't you?"

"It works out that way."

"Not with me it don't."

Jason smiled. "You're still here, ain't you?"

"That ain't no proof that I'll ever . . ." Myrtle broke off and bit her lip.

"We'll see," Jason said softly. It was getting closer and he knew it and she knew it.

"Damn you." She said it real low and with her lips peeled back over her teeth.

Jason just rocked a little back

and forth on the sofa, smiling at the TV set. It was real close. *All things come to them that wait.*

Jason broke ground until the sun set. Then he headed back to the house. That night when it had seemed so close was nearly a month gone, and Myrtle wasn't dating on the sly. He knew that for sure. So every night, like tonight, he came in hoping that she'd own up to what they both knew: that he'd waited her out.

The first thing he noticed, even, before he got in the door good, was the smell. Myrtle had on *perfume*. And she'd fixed her hair and had on a good dress.

It was all he'd ever expected, and more, too. She smiled at him and her voice had a little sound like humming. "My, you look tired. How 'bout a cup of coffee while I get supper on the table. Go on out in the livin' room and I'll bring it to you. I got my little one already asleep so it ought to be nice and quiet."

She brought the coffee and sat on the arm of the sofa while he drank it. She kept talking about this and that, and let her hand work up the back of his neck, up into his hair. He liked the feeling. He kept on liking it even when her words began to run together in his drowsiness.

Jason woke up all stretched out on the sofa. His mouth was dry and his tongue felt thick. It was when he tried to put his hand to his mouth that he realized he was tied.

"Myrtle. Hey, *Myrtle*."

She came in from the kitchen and grinned down at him. "Have a good nap?"

"What'd you tie me up for?"

"So it'd be easier to dump you into the pond."

"Quit your foolin' and let me loose now."

"I ain't foolin'."

Jason knew all at once, knew from the way she said it, that she meant it. He watched her walk to the door, crack it open and listen.

"I'm waitin' for Buck. He's the one I used to go out with before you got that damn dog. But I put him to sleep just like I did you." Her head cocked. "Buck's comin'. I can hear him." She closed the door and went on explaining. "Buck's goin' to help me. Goin' to hold your head under the water. Once you stop gurglin', we'll cut you loose and stick a flashlight in your pocket to make it look like an accident."

Jason heard the car coming up the dirt road. He felt the sweat popping out cold on his forehead and stinging under his arms. She really meant to do it. It didn't

make any sense; none at all. Wouldn't gain her a thing. But she meant to do it, after all this time—hog-tie and drown him.

Jason strained at the rope behind his back until it cut into his skinny wrists. "Won't do you no good," he blurted. "Won't get you a thing. But you just let me loose and I'll give you money. I'll even marry you and—"

"*Marry me*," she laughed. "Why, Jason sweetie, we already been livin' together two years and more. Cohabitation is what they call it—common law—and it'll stand up in any court in this state. Just think of it: you and me, man and wife."

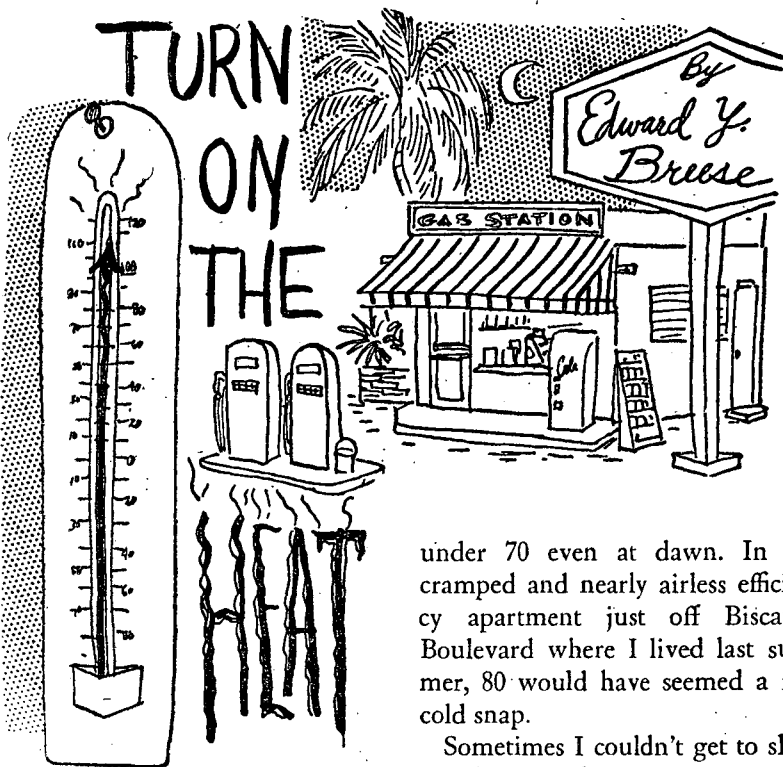
"But I never laid a hand on you."

She laughed again. "That's right, you didn't. But nobody'll ever believe it. I don't even think Buck believes it, and it's been makin' him awful fretful. After all, I mean, how many girls are there with enough patience to wait themselves right into being an untouched wife and widow?"

Jason heard the heavy steps on the porch and sawed his raw wrists against the rope. He watched Myrtle open the door to the shadowy form of the man, and heard her say:

"Come on in, honey, the waitin's over."

*As I have always stoutly maintained, reading broadens one to the highest degree.*



under 70 even at dawn. In the cramped and nearly airless efficiency apartment just off Biscayne Boulevard where I lived last summer, 80 would have seemed a real cold snap.

Sometimes I couldn't get to sleep till three in the morning or even later. When I knew that was going to happen I would get up and go out. Anything was better than just lying there and sweating into the sheet. The company in the neighborhood bars wasn't too good, so

**T**HE August heat in Miami, Florida, can breed violence as a dead cat breeds flies. No matter what the Weather Bureau says, it tops 95 most days and seldom goes

mostly I just walked in the never-realized hope of finding a really cool spot. Sometimes I walked over to the bay and sat on the seawall at a street ending. After the police in the prowler car had questioned me a couple of times they got to know me as a regular and only waved as they passed. Sometimes I just watched the cars run up and down the glittering boulevard.

On the nights when I needed somebody to talk to I would walk over a block to a gas station on the corner and visit a while with the night manager. Old Pop Albury was a great talker. He had kept a small town sundry store for years until he retired and came to Miami. I guess he got in the habit of talking all the time to the customers who came in and out. On the night shift he didn't get many gas buyers to talk to and mostly the ones who did stop were in a hurry.

First time I stopped to buy gas we talked a while. When he found out I lived just down the block, he asked me to come by any night and have coffee from the pot he kept simmering on a hot plate in the office. We would take the coffee out front and tip back a couple of cane bottomed chairs and go to it for hours. Sooner or later we hit every subject you could think of.

That's one of the things I really liked about Pop; he wasn't any ordinary, garden run, flap-jaw talker. He'd been a teacher in a small high school for three or four years when he was young, and it had made a great reader out of him. All by himself he'd acquired more information and a better education than most of the PhD's I've known. He had opinions, and pretty intelligent opinions at that, on everything from Plato to Picasso to a home recipe for mushroom pizza.

Once in a while he'd refer to himself as, "An inexhaustible mine of relatively useless misinformation. You would think," he'd say, "that somewhere along the line I'd have learned enough so I wouldn't have to tend this station for beans money now."

I guess his storehouse of information was pretty near bottomless. When it rained he would say that we were lucky; the south coast of New Guinea had five times as much mean annual rainfall as we did. If a foreign sports car went by, like as not I'd get half an hour of fascinating historical scandal about the town where it was built.

Sometimes our talks were interrupted by the sounds of a fender-bender accident over on the Boulevard. I'd walk over and come back

with a report for him. Sometimes what we heard were the sounds of violence from the other direction. Only one long block to the west of where we sat was the edge of one of the city's really tough sections, and noise can carry a long way in the still hours before dawn. We could hear a woman scream even if we didn't know whether it meant robbery or just a routine wife-beating. When the late bars closed we could hear drunken calls and revved up motors. Once in a while a pack of teen-aged hoodlums would start yelling, baying up their courage for a rumble, I guess. Once there was the 'splat, splat' of shots from a cheap, small caliber revolver, and then the rising howl of a prowler's siren.

The heat lay over everything like a blanket; like an old army blanket boiled in a black iron wash tub and lifted out steaming and thrown over the city. For weeks at a time there was no relief, and it didn't take any psychiatrist to see how the violence bred under the heat. It was always worst around full moon time.

Once in a while Pop would speculate on what he would do, "When this station gets stuck up." He always said 'when' instead of 'if'. I never argued with him about it. The all night gas stations were a favorite target for the tough boys

around town. A couple of them were sure to be hit almost any summer night. Only Pop's relatively busy street location and the fact that the police regularly prowled the area had saved him so far. We both knew it had to happen some night, and of course it did.

The two punks wheeled up to the gas pumps in an old station wagon with the body just about rusted out, and slick tires. One was black haired, but the boy behind the wheel had hair sun-bleached till it was almost white. Both of them were young and weedy-thin and wore printed sport shirts and those special slacks the kids favor which have legs so narrow I've always wondered how they ever get them on or off.

When Pop started putting in gas it also developed that the blond boy had a gun. It was an old, nickel plated, hammerless, lady's model Smith & Wesson .32, but it looked as if it would fire all right.

We didn't argue with the kid at all. His knuckles were white where he gripped that gun, and the muscles along his jaw were wire-tight and hard. He was hopped up with wine or marijuana and with the long, slow, smothering heat until the need for violence oozed out of his pores with the sweat that oiled him all over.

Without the gun I could have

broken him in half, but with it he was very, very dangerous. He was much more dangerous than a grown man would have been.

They both got out of the car and marched us into the station office. The dark-haired boy went for the cash register while the blond one held the gun low so it couldn't be seen from the street, and made up his mind whether he wanted to kill us or not. There was nothing we could do about it one way or the other. The boy looked crazy. I thought of the gas jockey up in Hollywood who'd had a pneumatic grease gun stuck down his throat and forty pounds of thick grease blown into him by a couple of kids out for a laugh. He just barely lived.

Pop had had a real good night, and the cash register gave up nearly sixty dollars. That wasn't enough, of course. Blondy told his pal to go through our pockets.

"And take what he's got hangin' under his shirt," he said, looking at the thin chain Pop always wore around his neck.

I had noticed the chain before but had never cared to ask what it was. Now I saw. On it were an old Army dogtag and a plain gold wedding ring, worn thin by the years.

"The tag was my boy's," Pop said, "and my wife wore that ring

for forty years before she died. They aren't worth anything." He said it simply, just stating a fact. I knew this was as close as he could come to begging the boys.

"I'll give it to my broad," the blond one said. He took the ring from the other boy and stuck it on his own finger. I prayed for a prowler car, but only an old pickup truck rattled by. The night was hot and quiet like something waiting to die.

Then they were ready to go. They took us outside away from the phone instead of knocking us out or tying us up inside. I'll never know why. The dark boy got into the car with a paper sack holding our wallets and the loose cash.

The other one went to the back of the car where the gas hose nozzle was still in the tank, and started to fill it up. He was awkward with his left hand—the gun was in his right—and he was trying to watch us and the hose at the same time. As a result, the nozzle came out of the tank and gas poured all over his legs and feet. He didn't have sense enough just to let go, which would have shut it off automatically.

Instead he lost his head, started to curse, grabbed with both hands, and lost the gun. It skidded into a pool of gas under the car where he couldn't get at it. Gas continued to



pour out of the hose onto the concrete.

As if moving in a nightmare, I started forward after Pop, who had picked up a wrench.

"Freeze!" the kid screeched in a high voice like a girl's. "Freeze, you bums!" He was white and shaking with panic and rage. He had been smoking, and he snatched the cigarette out of his lips and held it over the pool of spilled gas. "If you make a move before we get out of here, I'll drop this in the gas and burn us all. I swear I will."

I could tell he meant it too, and Pop and I were already on the wet concrete. I stopped. I surely stopped.

Pop just kept right on going.

The boy was too excited to care. He kept his word and slammed the glowing coal into the pool of gas.

It fizzed and went out as it would have in water.

Pop hit the boy alongside the head with his wrench, just hard

enough to knock him out. When he let go of the hose, the gas shut off. I got the other kid by the throat and just hauled him out of the car. He didn't put up any fight at all. He just whimpered.

Pop dragged his boy out of the pool of gas and went back for the gun. "Call the cops," he told me. "I'll watch them."

Then the prowler car came, and it was all over. "Pop," one of the cops said, "why did you ever keep going like that? If that gas had ever blown, you wouldn't have had a chance in a million."

"I guess I was mad," Pop explained. "He shouldn't have taken my wife's ring. Besides, anybody knows you can't light gasoline or gas fumes with a cigarette. The coal only burns at about 800 degrees of heat, and it takes almost 1,500 degrees to ignite gasoline. If he'd have lit a match, now—we'd all have been gone."

As I said, Pop was a great reader all his life.



*Experience, as they say, is the best teacher, but one thing troubles me: what will come of it?*



**SOME** early morning fishermen had found the body, washed up on the sandy beach like a great dead whale cast aside by nature, and it was only a few hours until the authorities identified the man as Sam Zodiak, an unmarried used car dealer and petty gambler.

I read the item in the afternoon editions of the paper with great interest because at one time Sam Zodiak had probably been my best friend. He was a large man in every way, and when I first knew him he was an army sergeant, looking very much the part. That was something like fifteen years

ago, in a place called Korea that most of the kids today don't even remember.

I was young and sort of frightened in those days—frightened of a place I didn't know and people I didn't understand. Prowling the streets of Seoul at night, lonely and far from home, I was thankful for the company of a man like Sergeant Zodiak. Unlike the others, he wasn't particularly interested in picking up any of the girls who cluttered the bars of the city, and he managed to stay reasonably sober during the hours we'd spend together.

"You know, Corporal," he'd say over a beer at a crowded back table in one of those smoky places, "I just look forward to doing my job every day. Sometimes I think the two most important words in the language are *war* and *justice*."



And they're not a great deal different from each other, if you're fighting a just war like this one. They're invaders, and they got to be killed. It's as simple as that."

"You talk like a career soldier, Sarge." I liked to kid him about it.

"I'll stay in as long as they need me, that's for sure." He took the cigar out of his mouth. "Justice! That's what we got to deliver."

"What about when you get home?" I sipped my beer. "A lot of the fellows talk about going back to school."

"Hell, I'm too old for that. I'm

over thirty already. No, I'm going to get me a little lot and sell used cars. That's where the money is. Then maybe I'll take off an afternoon a week and go out to the racetrack or something. I like to see them ponies run."

"They say it might be a long war here, Sarge."

He puffed on the cigar for a minute. "Well, then I'll stay a long time. First things first. We got to end this thing."

Two weeks later we went into battle together, one of the last big engagements before the truce was signed, and I saw for myself exactly what he meant. It was a bloody scrap, not far from the 38th Parallel, in an area of hilly farmland that had changed hands at least twice before. The planes had softened up the area, leaving only the old stone farmhouse standing roofless in the sun. We came over the hill with our rifles ready, backed up by a BAR and mortar team, and immediately exchanged fire with a retreating enemy squad. It was the better part of an hour before we'd taken the farmhouse and decided we could hold it till morning.

After an hour or so of scouting the area, we flushed out a Korean farmer who'd been hiding in a ditch. He didn't look quite right; but then none of them ever did to

our eyes. He seemed friendly enough at first, and pretty soon the PFC who was guarding him put down his carbine to light a cigarette. It was his first and last mistake. The farmer made a dive for the rifle and got off two quick shots before I ran up and clubbed him to the ground with my own weapon. The PFC was dead.

"He's a North Korean officer," I said, ripping away the farm clothes to reveal the last vestiges of a uniform beneath. "I guess we came on too fast for him to get away."

"Damn spy!" Sergeant Zodiak muttered. He was the ranking non-com, and he had to decide what to do with the man. "Too bad you didn't kill him." The man was bleeding from the temple but otherwise seemed to be suffering no ill effects from my blows.

"It was faster to slug him, Sarge. I didn't want him spraying bullets around the place. Shall we send somebody back with him?"

"With the kid dead, we can't spare a man."

"We leave him tied up in the farmhouse, then. They'll find him tomorrow."

Sergeant Zodiak shook his head. "And let him kill somebody else, maybe? No, there's only one way to handle his kind." He reached out and took the carbine from me.

"He's a prisoner of war, Sarge!"

"Like hell he is! He's out of uniform. He's nothing but a spy and a murderer, and as such he can be executed."

"Without a trial?"

But Sergeant Zodiak half turned toward the prisoner and fired a quick burst from the carbine, ending the discussion. The man's head jerked back in the shock of death and he went down hard in the tall grass of the field.

We left him there with the other bodies, and nobody ever mentioned it again.

Sergeant Zodiak surprised me and everyone else when he didn't reenlist for another tour of duty. He returned to the States with me, and we were discharged together in San Francisco. I moved east after that, spending a couple of years finishing up my education at a little college in Ohio, but all the time I kept in touch with Zodiak, and an odd sort of friendship seemed to grow between us.

I saw him once after college on a trip out west, and we went on a two-day drunk that was unlike any of our subdued army outings. Sam had his used car lot and was making a pretty good living at it. Drinking together on that visit, I think we both realized for the first time the bond of friendship that existed between us. Six months later, when I married a girl I'd

met in college, Sam Zodiac came east to be my best man.

After that, I didn't hear from him for something like a year, until he phoned me one evening and told me he was getting married. "That's great news, Sam," I told him, meaning it. "I was beginning to think you'd never do it."

"I want you out here for it," he said. "Best man, the whole deal."

"Just let me know the date and I'll be there."

Sam had left San Francisco and was living in a smaller ocean community in a neighboring state. I flew out there on my vacation, although the wedding was still a month away. I was anxious to meet the girl Sam Zodiac had finally chosen.

I never did meet Ann. On the very night I was flying out, an ex-mental patient who lived in the next block from her went wild and shot his wife. Then he went out on his front porch with the gun, saw Ann running across the street toward the house, and shot her dead. He wounded two others before the police managed to subdue him, and I arrived at the airport to find that tragedy had struck Sam Zodiac.

"I don't know what to do," he told me the next day. "I'm just lost and going around in circles. Ann was a nurse, always wanting to

help people. We were just getting out of the car when she heard the shots and went running. Crazy! I should have grabbed her. I should have held her back. I should have done a hundred things."

"It wasn't your fault."

"The hell of it is, this fellow Gordon will get off free. There's not even a death penalty in this state any more."

"They'll put him away for a long time."

"A few years in a mental hospital and he'll be walking the streets a free man. I know."

I stayed for the week, trying to calm him, and I thought I'd succeeded pretty well. His prediction proved to be correct, though, and George Gordon was never brought to trial for killing Ann. The others recovered from their wounds, including his wife, and Gordon was sent to the state hospital for treatment.

I went back east to my own wife and, though the correspondence with Sam Zodiac continued, we saw no more of each other for three years. Then one day I received a brief letter from him, enclosing a newspaper clipping. It told how a man named George Gordon, recently released from a mental hospital, had been shot and killed during an apparent robbery. Sam's only comment on the clip-

ping was a single sentence in his letter: *This is what I call justice, not revenge.*

Shortly after that, I changed jobs and became a purchasing expediter for a large chemical firm. One of my duties was a monthly trip to a supplier in Sam's city. Suddenly we were seeing each other again, on a regular basis.

One night, over beers, I asked him how he was doing.

"Darned good. The used car business is a little off, but I'm making it up at the track. Even own part interest in a racehorse now."

"That's great, Sam." I found myself trying to read the backward lettering on the neon sign in the bar's front window. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you," I said finally.

"Fire away, boy!"

"That clipping you sent me a few months back, about that fellow who killed Ann."

"Yeah?" I could read nothing into his expression.

"Well, Sam . . . How should I say it?"

"I'll say it for you," he told me quietly. "It's no mystery, really. The thing's in the Bible. An eye for an eye, and all that stuff. There's not even a death penalty in this state anymore."

"I know." Suddenly my blood had turned cold.

"I know what you're thinking. You're remembering that time in Korea."

"No."

"I was right then, and I'm right now. He killed Ann, and nobody punished him for it. What was I supposed to do?"

I couldn't answer that. I didn't want to answer it. I just wanted to get away from there as quickly as I could.

After that, I started cutting down on my visits with Sam Zodiak. Sometimes I'd sneak into town for a day and not even tell him about it. I saw the signs for his used car place around town, and I knew he must be doing pretty well, but I didn't want to see him anymore.

About a year after George Gordon's death, the city where Sam lived was the scene of a particularly brutal sex murder involving a fourteen-year-old girl. She'd been found in the trunk of an abandoned car, and it took the police only an hour to trace the ownership of the vehicle and send out a ten-state alarm. The suspect was arrested in San Francisco a few days later and brought back to Sam's city under close police guard. The newspapers reported that the man had confessed to the killing.

There were maybe a hundred

people outside police headquarters when the suspect, a young man named Asker, arrived. As he was led into the building between two detectives, a single shot from somewhere across the street hit him in the back of the head, killing him instantly. In the near panic that followed, the killer made a clean getaway.

I read the newspaper accounts of the killing with a gnawing sense of urgency. It couldn't be Sam Zodiac again, it just couldn't be, yet I had to know, to be certain. I arranged to fly out there the following weekend.

I wired Sam that I was coming, and he met me at the airport, smiling and friendly as ever, despite the fact that I'd seen little of him during the past year. "How you been, boy? How's the wife? Any kids yet?" He was the same old Sam, and I instantly regretted the suspicions which had been breeding in my mind; regretted them until I remembered Gondon and the Korean thing.

Later, over dinner, I ventured into the object of my trip. "I read about the killing of that fellow, Asker, at police headquarters. Awful thing."

"Awful? Asker's crime was awful, his killing wasn't."

"He hadn't even stood trial yet."

Sam Zodiac waved his hand.

"What good would a trial have been? There's no death penalty in this state anymore."

"No." I lit a cigarette and tried to keep my hand from shaking. "Then you think his killing was justified?"

"Of course."

"Just like George Gondon's"

"Just like it. The people of this state never had a chance to vote on capital punishment. The legislature and the governor just got together and abolished it. You think that's right?"

"For some people it's hard to tell the difference between right and wrong. You killed Asker, didn't you?"

He eyed me slyly across the table. "Justice was done."

"Sam, Sam! What's happening to you?"

"It's not me—it's the modern morality—or lack of it." He focused on me with wide, intent eyes. "People look at me and what do they see? A used car dealer, a petty gambler. I suppose I'm the sort of guy who's supposed to have no morals at all. And yet, look at the rest of them! Condoning every sort of violence, every excess. The murderer today is to be pitied—because of his tragic childhood, or low IQ, or mental illness, or economic blight. They don't execute murderers any more, they send

them to the hospital, or to prison for a few years. And then they turn them free to kill again."

I had to get out of there, into the fresh air where maybe it wouldn't seem so much of a bad dream. Sam paid the check and left with me, strolling at my side with one arm around my shoulders like the old army buddy he was. "I'm a warrior in the battle for justice," he said. "A warrior."

"I think you're mad," I told him. "How long are you going to keep this up?"

The sly look was back on his face, not entirely hidden by the night. "You're a buddy, so I'll tell you something. You'd never prove it to the police anyway, so I'm safe in telling you. There've been five of them now, five of them since last year. The others were downstate, and didn't make such splashy headlines."

"Five!"

"All criminals, all *murderers* who'd escaped the death penalty because of our laws."

We were strolling across the bay bridge, with the lights of the har-

bor obscured by the nightly mists. I turned to him, for a moment speechless from the horror of what he was telling me. Then I said, "You really think you have the right?"

Sam Zodiac stared straight ahead at the deserted bridge. "I have three others on my list already."

It was then that I pushed him with all my strength, saw him grasping frantically at the railing before he toppled over, with the beginnings of a scream cut short as he hit the murky waters below.

They found his body the following morning, while I was still in town, and though I read the account in the afternoon paper with a growing sense of relief, there was one thing that nagged at my mind—one tiny, troublesome thing.

When he'd realized what I was doing, in that last second before his face vanished from sight, Sam Zodiac hadn't looked really angry. Instead, there'd been a sort of challenge in his expression.

As if he were saying to me, *See what I mean?*





*Well-timed silence, I have heard, hath more eloquence than speech.*

**I** DIDN'T have the heart to tell him.

Charley was a small man with mild blue eyes and you wondered how he got to be as old as he was without being crushed on the way.

He took an arm-load of books from the cart and put them on the



By  
**JACK Ritchie**



desk. "I got just sixty days more."

Jackson, who was new in the prison library, began checking them back in. "Sixty days more and then what?"

"I'm going to get myself a little place in a warm climate and take it easy for the rest of my life."

Jackson looked up. "So what are you going to use for money?"

Charley smiled. "I saved some."

Working for the library is the best spot behind these walls. All Charley and I do is wheel our carts from cell to cell, deliver the books to those who want them, and come back to the library with the returns. No sweat at all.

"You got yourself a nest egg someplace?" Jackson asked.

"Fifteen thousand," Charley said and smiled again. "The safest place to keep money is in a bank."

Charley, a small-time stickup man and not too good at his trade, has spent about half his life behind bars. Not all at one time, but it adds up to that.

Jackson pushed aside the pile of books when he was through with them. "You got fifteen thousand? Big deal. This is going to get you a nice place and let you live in the lap of luxury?"

Charley shook his head. "I don't need a big place to be happy. Just a little shack and maybe a couple of acres. I'll be raising just about ev-

erything I need." He smoothed down his gray hair. "To tell you the truth, that's the only thing that kept me going this time—thinking about the place I'll get. I'm fifty-eight now and I'm pretty sick of these big four walls."

Jackson put the date stamps back in the desk drawer. "Look, Charley, if you start buying things, like even a shack and an acre of land, the parole people will want to know where, when, why, and how you got the money, and I don't suppose your money's clean. You'll be back here in no time."

"I won't be on parole, so nobody will be watching me," Charley said. "I'm serving my full time."

Jackson seemed a little surprised that something like that should happen to a quiet man like Charley, so I explained. "Charley was out, but he violated his parole and they brought him back."

Charley nodded. "It was a real hot night so I went into this place for a cool beer. When I came out, this cop who knew I was on parole saw me and that was that because you're not supposed to go into taverns. I got sent back to do the other eighteen months and there's only sixty days left now."

The chow whistle sounded and we went out to join the formation.

The reason I'm in here is be-

cause of income tax irregularity.

I almost expected it to happen some day. You can't run the kind of organization I do and live the full life without leaving some things peeking out at the edges. So the federal accountants sniffed around and nailed me for evading a lousy sixty thousand in taxes. Or was it sixty-five? I forget. Anyway, I guess that was all they thought they could prove. I got handed fourteen months to repent but I'll be out in nine for good behavior.

It's almost like old home week here. I mean when Internal Revenue pulled the string, they caught a lot of fish—like Donavan, Morgan, and Janecki from my organization—and Big Kahn and two of his top boys, and Mike Oakley from the northern part of the state.

The green stuff still greases the way—inside or out—so Big Kahn has a job in the powerhouse reading dials and yawning, and Mike Oakley is in the gardener's shed painting hoe and shovel handles. The color is orange this year.

As I said, I'm in the library, and I first bumped into Charley my second day on the job, really bumped.

I was pushing the cart down the aisles, taking books off the shelves and filling out the request list when I turned a corner, rammed

into old Charley. He just managed to keep from falling backwards, but as it was, the book he carried flew out of his hands and slid down the aisle. Charley went after it like a rabbit, scooped it up, and shoved it protectively under his arm.

I grinned at the action. "Did I break anything?"

"Oh, no," he said quick. "It's all right."

"The way you dived for the book, I thought you expected to see it go down a drain."

He smiled apologetically. "It's just that I feel responsible for these books and I wouldn't want anything to happen to one of them."

I was curious about the one he still held so tight. "What's the title?"

Charley hesitated and then let me get a peek—*The Mill on the Floss*.

I remembered the book and high school required reading. I grinned again. "Who the hell is requesting that?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, nobody actually."

"Don't tell me *you're* going to read it?"

He almost nodded and then seemed to change his mind. "No. I found it on the floor. I was just going to put it back in place."

It was about a week later, after

we'd cleaned up the library for the day and were waiting for the chow whistle, that Charley told me about the account number and about Margie.

"About twelve years ago I decided it was time to think of the future," Charley said. "I made fair money on my jobs, but I always spent it. I had nothing to show for all the years except my record, so I decided I'd better start putting aside at least part of what I made. I didn't want to end up some day just a bum on the street, you know. So I started looking for someplace where I could put money where it would be safe—in case I should happen to be put out of circulation for a while again—and I found out about these number accounts in some banks. You ever heard of them?"

I kept myself from smiling. Had I ever heard of them? I had half a dozen and even one in Switzerland, but I said, "No, can't say that I have."

"They're real secret," Charley said. "You just get a number and that's your account. You deposit money to that number and nobody—except for one or two of the bank officials—knows who the account belongs to. Even then, those bank officials will take any name you give them with a straight face. All they care about is the number and

the money you put in their bank." "Some people are like that," I said.

Charley agreed. "So what I started doing was building up a nest egg. Like I'd pull a job and then send part of it, or sometimes all, to the account number in San Francisco and that's how I come to have fifteen thousand."

"And now you're going to buy the little shack and live all by yourself on some forgotten acre?"

Charley hesitated. "Well, not exactly alone. There's Margie."

"Who's Margie?"

Charley seemed a little embarrassed. "She's a girl I met while I was out this last time. She danced in this chorus, but the show folded and she was out of a job. I helped her here and there, and we got to like each other. I was a little older than she was, but we got along fine."

I looked out of the window. "I suppose you told her all about your number account?"

Charley nodded. "Just before I got caught on the parole violation."

"And arranged things so that she could take money out?"

Charley became slightly aggressive. "We were going to get married, Mr. Regan. Suppose something happened to me? I could live to be ninety, but you never know. So what good would all that

money do if it's tied up in the bank and she can't touch it?"

Charley had mentioned before that on visiting day the only person who ever came to see him was his brother.

"How come she doesn't see you now and then?" I asked.

"Well," Charley said, "we decided that if I should happen to get caught for anything there shouldn't be any contact between us because somebody might connect the two of us together and find out about the bank account. It's still stolen money, you know, and it could get confiscated."

"She writes to you?"

"No," Charley said. "That would be a contact too, Mr. Regan."

I studied my nails. "Have you told her about your little dream of retirement?"

"Sure," Charley said. "She said she hates the cities and she's always wanted to garden."

"What's Margie's last name?"

"Margie Del Monico," Charley said. "She sometimes used the professional name of Gloria Fontaine too, but she told me that Del Monico is her real name."

I could just see Margie Del Monico weeding carrots and onions.

The whistle blew and we left the library.

I got to know Charley better

during the next few weeks. Like I said, he'd been in this place off and on for half his life so he knew the ropes. I had him running errands for me, little things here and there. He would have done them for nothing, but I always saw to it that he got a few extra things, like maybe candy or cigars.

Eventually I sent Charley to the warden's secretary with a carton of cigarettes and he came back with a couple of forged passes so that I could arrange a meeting with Big Kahn and Mike Oakley in the library.

I talked to them about our organizations and what I had in mind.

Big Kahn shook his head. "I like things the way they are, Regan. We haven't had any trouble with each other in fifteen years."

Oakley agreed. "The three of us got the state split nice and even and with exact boundaries. Why don't we just leave it that way?"

"Because times change," I said, "and big fish eat little fish."

Big Kahn took the cigar out of his mouth. "I don't get you."

"Look, boys," I said, "we're doing fine now, but we're inside a Chinese wall. It's going to crumble one of these days. There are some pretty big organizations outside. They're expanding, and they're not going to stop at the state border."

Big Kahn nodded reluctantly. "There's something to that. I been watching the national picture some. So what do we do to protect ourselves? Rally round the state flag?"

"That isn't strong enough," I said. "A handshake all around isn't going to hold up if a storm or temptation comes. We'd each still be looking out for Number One."

"So what then?" Oakley asked.

"Consolidation," I said. "Legitimate consolidation. We make ourselves a corporation."

Oakley rubbed his jaw. "With shares and stuff? A board of directors?"

"Why not?" I said.

Big Kahn grinned. "With a president who gets a nice salary and a juicy bonus? And who are we going to elect to this cushy job?"

Oakley thought some more about the whole deal. "Maybe you got something there, Regan, but it's going to be one hell of a complication to make one business out of three. Just with my own little enterprises I had to switch to computers to keep up with the times."

"I didn't expect that we could form the corporation just by snapping our fingers," I said, "but we all got high-priced accountants and lawyers and we'll let them crack their heads together for a while and come up with something that

we can all sign without quibbling."

After they left, Charley helped me fill my book cart.

"I didn't know what to expect when you first came here," he said.

"I was surprised."

"Surprised about what?"

"I mean you always had your picture in the paper and you got this reputation for being tough, but I never even heard you raise your voice so far."

"Look, Charley, there's lots of ways to be tough besides growling. Most of the physical days are over except maybe for some of the young punks who see too many old movies. Besides, most of the stuff I deal in now is legitimate."

After we filled the cart, I said, "Charley, you still got this account in San Francisco?"

"That's right."

I patted a few books into line. "I been figuring a deal like that might come in handy for myself. I don't suppose that every bank handles a thing like that?"

"I guess not."

"Maybe I could open an account in your bank, Charley. What did you say the name of the place is?"

Charley hesitated.

I grinned. "What's the matter, Charley? Don't you trust me?"

He seemed a little embarrassed. "It isn't that, Mr. Regan. You just got to be cautious. Even if you

trust people," he added quietly.

I think I looked hurt. "So what could I do to you even if I knew the name of your bank? You still got the account number and you'll keep that to yourself."

"That's right," Charley said. "No hard feelings?"

"Of course not, Charley. We're still friends."

He relented a little. "I guess I can tell you the name of the bank. It's the West Coast Maritime."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind when I get out." I fiddled with the books again. "It just come to me, Charley. Suppose you forget the number of the account?"

"I don't," Charley said firmly.

"You could accidentally bump your head. Amnesia. Those things happen."

Charley smiled. "I'm not worried about anything like that. And even if it did happen, Margie would remember the number. She's got it written down."

"Pieces of paper have been lost before."

"Well, even if she lost it and I forgot the number, I'd still have it written . . ." He stopped.

I sighed. "You got a slip of paper in your pocket? Or maybe hidden somewhere in your cell? That's not smart, Charley. Suppose it turns up in one of the shake-downs and suppose somebody is

smart enough to figure out what the numbers mean?"

Charley shook his head. "No. They won't find it. Not on me or in my cell."

Not on him or in his cell? Where else did Charley travel?

My eyes went to the library shelves. I smiled.

I hung back when Charley took his cart out, then went back to the shelves. I stopped in the fiction section and pulled out our one copy of *The Mill on the Floss*. The stamped date inside told me that the last time it had been taken out was in 1913.

I thumbed the pages slow and there it was on page 186—the number C-165 in ink.

On Monday, visiting day, Harry Honeck, my lawyer, came to see me. I asked him about my kids—Tommy, who's eleven, and Diana, who's nineteen and a sophomore at State University.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked. "Don't they write?"

"Sure they write," I said. "So does my wife. But you get to see them once in a while and I like direct reports."

"Well," Harry said, "Tommy's got a mosquito bite on his left elbow and Diana's last date was two minutes and sixteen seconds late."

"Okay, wise man," I said. "So change the subject."

"Did you talk to Big Kahn and Oakley?"

I nodded. "We had our first meet. They're mulling things over, but I think we got a sell."

"Good," Harry said. "It'll be to everybody's advantage. I know the American Dream still exists, but only as a dream. The day of the individual is over. Nowadays it's the team, the company, the corporation."

"Harry," I said, "I got a little work for you." I gave him Charley's account number and explained the situation.

He rubbed his jaw. "Just what do you want to find out?"

"How much money is in the account."

"That might be a little trouble."

"But we know how to get around things like that, don't we, Harry?"

He grinned. "Suppose it's still all there? Suppose Margie Del Monico is really still waiting with a copy of *Organic Gardening* in her loyal little hand? You'll eat your hat?"

"No," I said, "*The Mill on the Floss*." But I didn't have to.

On the next visiting day, Harry showed up again. "There's only one hundred and one dollars in Charley's account."

"Hell," I said, "why didn't she take it all?"

"That's the minimum you need to keep the account open. I guess she wanted to leave it active in case somebody got curious and tried to find out whether it still existed. You want me to track down this Del Monico or Fontaine?"

"Forget it. She probably grabbed the money twenty-four hours after Charley got sent back here. She could be anywhere in the Fifty by now."

Harry left five minutes later and when I got back to the library, Charley was sweeping up and it was almost time to close.

He looked up at the wall calendar. "If nothing goes wrong, I ought to be out by Monday. That's three days before Christmas." He smiled. "From now on I'm going to spend all my Christmases on the outside."

"Sure, Charley," I said.

Monday was a cold and dark day. From the library window, I could see Charley walk across the windy yard, holding down his hat, and carrying the small suitcase. The gates opened and he went through them into the outside world.

Big Kahn, Oakley, and I had another meeting—this time in the gardener's shed—and we decided to give our lawyers and accountants the go-ahead to draw up plans for the merger. If we liked



what we saw, and I thought that we all would, we would put the final okay on the consolidation.

"I'm still thinking about who's for president of this organization," Big Kahn said. "What we need is the brainy type." He buffed his nails and grinned.

Oakley felt his pockets for cigarettes and discovered he was out. He turned. "Say, Charley, get me a pack of . . ."

He stopped. "Hell, I forget that Charley isn't with us any more."

"A sweet little guy," Kahn said. "Give you the shirt off his back."

Oakley agreed. "Practically had the run of this place, being as he spent so much of his life here."

Kahn nodded. "He'd show up in the powerhouse off and on and we'd talk. Did you know that Charley had a secret nest egg of fifteen thousand bucks?"

"Everybody did," Oakley said. "But do you know how much that lousy dame left him? One hundred and one dollars. Account number L-372, it was."

"No," Kahn said. "It was account number B-438. I happened to come around this generator once and bumped into Charley and the book he was carrying flew out of his hands. *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, it was."

Oakley shook his head. "Hell, no. I bumped into him coming around

the tool shed and the book was *Timon of Athens*."

"Look," Big Kahn said firmly. "I ought to know what Charley's account number was. I had fifteen thousand bucks slipped into number B-438."

"Damn it," Oakley snapped. "It was L-372 and my lawyer put fifteen thou . . ."

There was a silence.

Big Kahn and Oakley eyed each other and they began to color.

I had the feeling there was no Margie Del Monico and there never had been. How many other accounts with one hundred and one dollars had Charley opened in San Francisco? Or was it his brother who handled that part of the job?

I could understand how Big Kahn and Oakley felt. It wasn't the money, it was the principle of the thing.

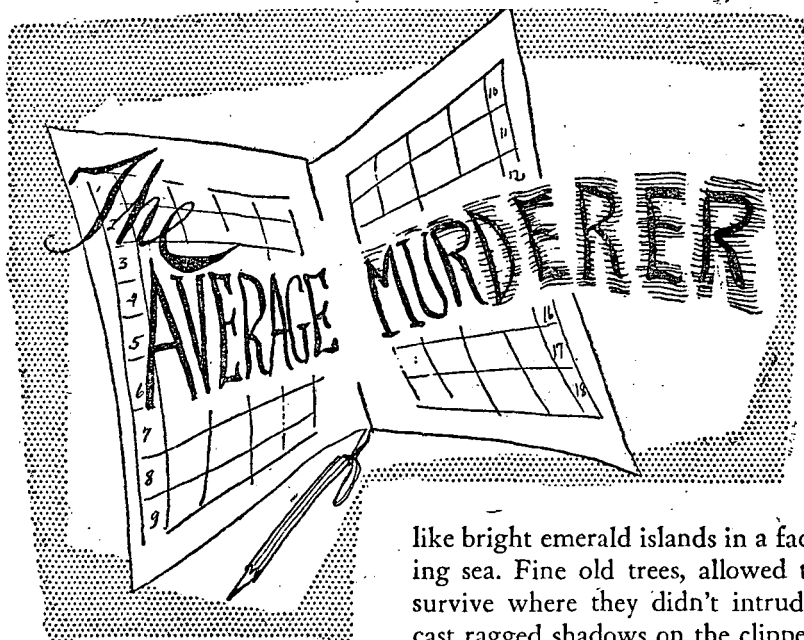
I was one of Charley's suckers too, number C-165, but there was no point in admitting it out loud.

Instead I clicked my tongue sadly. "Don't tell me that two smart big-time operators like you let a little gray-haired doll like Charley make fools of you? For shame. How will this sound if it ever gets out?"

They looked at me.

I suddenly had the feeling that I was going to be elected the president of a large new corporation.

*A learned jurist, in defining Justice as "tolerable accommodation of conflicting interests," also suggested there is no royal road to accommodations.*



**WE** came in after nine holes, Pete Decker and I, and sat across from each other at a table beside one of the windows overlooking the terrace and the golf course beyond. From where we sat, we could see a large part of the rolling course, seared in spots by the summer sun, with spaced and elevated greens

like bright emerald islands in a fading sea. Fine old trees, allowed to survive where they didn't intrude, cast ragged shadows on the clipped grass in a scattered, random pattern.

Inside the bar, it was cool and dark and quiet. Besides Pete and me, there was no one there except a bartender who brought us, without orders, the pair of gin and tonics that he knew we wanted. We sipped the drinks, which were astringently good with their strong taste of gin qualified by the deli-

cate bitterness of quinine water, and looked out across the terrace from the dark coolness into the hot, white afternoon. We didn't speak. In our silence, however, there was no unease, no conscious restraint. That's the way it had been with Pete and me for many years. We always understood each other.

After a while, another man en-

tered the bar from the terrace, set his golf bag against the wall inside the door, and walked over to the bar. His face was lean and brown and gave one, somehow, by a curious effect of antithesis, a feeling that it was either prematurely aged or preternaturally preserved. His body was also lean, the shoulders somewhat stooped, and the hair be-



low his linen cap was bone white. He ordered a bourbon and water and drank it standing alone at the bar. There was about him an aura of withdrawal, a patina of astringent bitterness as apparent to the eyes as my tonic's to the tongue. When he had finished his drink, as

he turned to go, he saw Pete and me at our table and hesitated for a fraction of a second. Then he nodded, a faint movement of the head that was barely discernible, and left the bar by the way he had come, reclaiming his golf bag by the door as he went.

"How long ago has it been?" Pete said.

"Ten years," I answered. "Ten years last fall."

"A lot has happened since then. It's almost forgotten now."

Pete was right. A lot had happened since Francis McRae stood trial for murder. Pete Decker, then the young county attorney who had prosecuted him, had achieved through politics a state-wide attention and acclaim that would have landed him in the governor's chair, the youngest governor in our history, if he hadn't had the bad luck to get the nomination in a year when opposition candidates all over the country rode in on the coattails of the big man upstairs. People we had known had gotten rich or gone broke or died or moved away, and wars that were not called wars had begun and ended. And I, Guy Powers, had moved away myself but had come home again to inherit my father's business, and had gotten married. A lot had happened; a lot of good things, and a lot of bad.

You may remember the Healy-McRae case. That's what it was called at the time, but Francis McRae actually stood trial alone. Rhoda Healy was charged as an accessory before the fact, and would have stood trial later if Francis McRae had been convicted. After he was acquitted, it was obvious that she could not have been his accessory, and so the charge against her was dropped. She could have been charged with the murder directly, of course, but the odds against convicting her, after Francis McRae's acquittal, were far too great. A third possibility, a charge of collaboration as the partner of a second murderer unknown, was, in view of the evidence, or the lack of it, manifestly absurd.

To be exact, Francis McRae wasn't acquitted. His first trial ended in a hung jury, and so did his second. After that, mainly because the county was reluctant to throw good money after bad in an effort that was beginning to look futile, the case was not pressed, and he went free.

The second jury, because it is somehow easy to follow a precedent, was split down the middle. The first was hung by one juror. The case for the people was soundly organized and expertly presented, as the eleven 'guilty' votes testified, but it was entirely

circumstantial. It was based primarily on motive and opportunity, and the motive could be questioned, while opportunity, as any rational man knows, is not always exploited simply because it is present. In brief, there was room for reasonable doubt. That was my position, at any rate, and my position happened to be decisive. I was the twelfth juror.

Perhaps I should recapitulate the circumstances of the case. Rhoda Healy was a beautiful young woman with pale blonde hair, striking brown eyes, and flawless skin that looked always, the year around, as if it had been tanned by the summer sun. She was married to Neil Healy, the only son of extremely wealthy parents. Unfortunately, Neil was a kind of semi-invalid. The report was that he had suffered, as a child, a critical attack of rheumatic fever that had left his heart seriously impaired. However that may have been, he took precious good care of himself. He was, moreover, suspicious and demanding and abusive, a difficult person to get along with generally, and difficult to live with particularly. He did no apparent work, and was constantly under the observation and care of his doctor.

His doctor was Francis McRae.

Neil and Rhoda lived in a white-painted brick house that was ab-

surdly large for a young couple with no children and, if gossip could be credited, no prospects of any. Francis habitually stopped at the house twice a week professionally, although he later admitted that most of these visits were no more than doubtful psychological placebos, and frequently he was at the house in the evenings socially, without his stethoscope, so to speak. He admitted, in fact, with what seemed a perverse determination to see himself hanged, that Neil's heart was in much better condition than Neil liked to admit, and that his patient, with only reasonable care, might have anticipated many years of life. It was the meat of the prosecution's case, you see, that Neil Healy, dying too slowly to give satisfaction, if dying at all, had been nudged along by Dr. Francis McRae with the blessing and perhaps the help of Rhoda Healy. Pete Decker argued brilliantly that Francis and Rhoda were having an affair, and he was able to present testimony and evidence that supported, but did not prove, his argument. In this matter, again his most effective witness was Francis McRae himself. Francis denied that he and Rhoda were having an affair, but he said flatly, with go-to-hell belligerence, that he damn well *wished* they were. That wish, in the minds of eleven jurors, was

unequivocally father to the deed.

Anyhow, to drop back a bit, Neil Healy suddenly died. Considering his medical history and the persistent impression of his precarious condition, this was no great surprise. Francis McRae signed the death certificate, and it appeared briefly that events would proceed normally to the end that is our common denominator. But no such luck. The elder Healys got their wind up and demanded an autopsy. Rhoda Healy, as the widow, refused to authorize one, and Francis McRae, once more with that strange obduracy that threatened to damn him, supported her refusal. The elder Healys, however, were rich and locally powerful, and had connections. They were instrumental in securing a court order, and Neil was opened for inspection. It was discovered that he had been given, by one means of ingestion or another, a lethal dose of white arsenic. It was murder. No doubt about it.

Well, who has better opportunity to poison a man than the doctor who is caring for him? And if the doctor and the man's wife are having an affair, who has a better motive? And if it's all circumstantial, and damn thin at that, what of it? It's neat, it's logical, and in the hands of an expert like Pete Decker, it's deadly. I was astonished

when I was summoned for jury duty, but I was glad of the chance to sit in on the case. In fact, I was so eager to serve that I told a necessary lie. I said, in response to a stock question, that I had no objection to the death penalty. That was all right, however, because if I had been convinced of Francis McRae's guilt, I'd have voted guilty, death penalty or no.

I've already indicated the ingredients of the people's case, and there's no good in detailing it. I'll only repeat that the execution, thanks to Pete Decker, was brilliant. As a minority of one, I thought the defense was stronger, but it was often poorly handled, and it had the critical weakness of sometimes seeming fanciful. It was contended that a doctor, if he wasn't a fool, could easily devise a better way to kill a patient than by feeding him arsenic. It was argued, the defendant's wishes to the contrary notwithstanding, that there was not a shred of real evidence to show that his relationship with the victim's wife had ever been more than platonic. It could hardly be denied, however, that the victim had been fatally dosed with white arsenic, and it was in an attempt to offer an alternative to the defendant's guilt that the defense constructed its most fanciful hypothesis. Neil Healy, it was contended,

had been a vindictive man; on occasion, a vicious man. He had frequently betrayed overt hostility toward his wife. Character witnesses were introduced to support the contention and testify to the evidence of hostility. So far, so good. Tenable, at least. From there on, however, the defensive position was pure conjecture. It was argued that Neil Healy, aware that he was dying, or at least *believing* that he was dying, had devised in a tortured and distorted mind the devilish scheme of poisoning himself in such a way as to excite suspicion and implicate the wife he had wrongly distrusted and hated. She was the one he wanted tried for murder. Dr. Francis McRae, because of his position, was merely the unfortunate victim of circumstances.

We, the jury, listened. Later we voted and split. Eleven went one way, and one the other. I, the splinter, was subjected to every kind of pressure short of violence by the block. They reasoned, they cajoled, they bullied, they sweat and cursed and tried again. But I didn't waver. I took the English position of not proved, and there I stood. At last we gave up and went home, and it was shortly thereafter that I went away at the age of thirty. When I was brought back at the age of thirty-two by my

father's death, the case had been nol-prossed, finished. That was, as I had just said in response to Pete Decker's question, ten years ago.

Pete was looking out the window and across the rolling golf course toward a giant elm that spread its branches between the earth and the sun.

"There's a lot of nonsense repeated about murder and murderers," he said.

"Nonsense?" I said. "How so?"

"Well, it grows out of the consensus that murder is the supreme violation of the individual's rights. Inasmuch as it deprives him of the right to live, it negates all his rights to everything else. The murderer, therefore, is looked upon as an arch criminal, a deadly and constant threat to society. That, I say, is largely nonsense. The average murderer, if such a term is acceptable, is not a threat to society at all; he is, at one time or another, a threat to another individual. Do you follow me?"

"Conceding the distinction between individual and social threats, vaguely."

"I simply mean that the average murderer is not a repeater. Driven by powerful motives to the supreme crime, he kills once and once only. His crime is the crisis of a lifetime. He is unlikely to reach such a crisis again. If he goes undetected

and unpunished, it is probable that he will go on to lead a normal and perhaps useful life."

"Wait a minute. How about your professional killers? How about your homicidal psychopaths who are driven to kill again and again?"

"They are the exceptions that prove the rule. You read most about these kinds of murderers, of course. Why not? They make sensational reading. Murder, Incorporated, for example. A long line of almost legendary murderers like Dr. Cream, for example. But these habitual killers are a tiny minority. They hog far more than their share of attention. Most murderers, even when caught, pass off the scene after creating a nominal disturbance and are soon forgotten. And consider, please, the multitude of murderers who are never caught, and the innumerable murders, indeed, that are never recognized as such. The murderers in these cases are not detected simply because they never kill again, and therefore do not multiply the *chances* of detection. Oh, I know. We repeat the old shibboleth that murder will out. That's another bit of nonsense. The average murderer, having committed his murder, is no greater danger to the rest of us than the rest of us are to him or to each other. It's ironical, isn't it? The only time he is a menace is be-

fore he has committed his crime, which is precisely the time nothing can be done about him. Once his crime, his solo murder, has been committed, it is, even when he is caught, too late. In effect, we are simply closing the barn door after the horse is gone."

"Do you suggest that the murderer, for all the danger he is, had just as well go free?"

"With the exceptions I have just allowed. I'm not talking about *punishment*, you understand. That's another matter."

Our glasses were empty. I signaled the bartender, and he brought us a full pair. Pete was still staring out the window toward the giant elm, as if its enduring strength brought him a measure of comfort.

"Are you thinking," I asked, "of Francis McRae?"

"Not exactly." He smiled slightly, and there was, I thought, something sad in the smile. "I'll tell you something, after all these years, that may surprise you. I was never convinced of Francis' guilt."

"Oh, come off. You worked like a dog on the case. It was, on your part, a masterful job. You certainly gave no sign of entertaining doubts."

"As prosecuting attorney, it was my job to present the best case I could. I have no regrets about that. Nevertheless, I was never con-



vinced that Francis McRae was guilty. Oh, Neil Healy was murdered, all right. I never swallowed that fantastic alternative the defense offered. But he was not, I think, murdered by Francis McRae. Francis had no motive, you see."

"What about the affair between him and Rhoda? God knows, you made a strong circumstantial case for it."

"It was essential. Without that motive, I had no case at all. But I never believed it." He lifted his glass and drank, still staring out the window. "She was having an affair, of course. But not with poor Francis, however much he wished for it. She was having an affair that was conducted with such discretion that nobody knew it, and precious few even suspected it."

"Then you had better be grateful that I was on that first jury. If I hadn't been, you'd certainly have convicted an innocent man."

"I'm grateful. Please accept now my delinquent expression of gratitude." He brought his eyes inside at last, and sat staring into his glass. "Did you ever wonder how

you happened to be summoned for that jury?"

"Jurors are selected by lot. Everyone knows that."

"True. But a lottery, by the right man in the right place, can be fixed."

"Are you trying to tell me that you *planted* me on that jury?"

"I needed you. I needed you to keep me from deliberately committing a worse crime, however legal, than the one on trial."

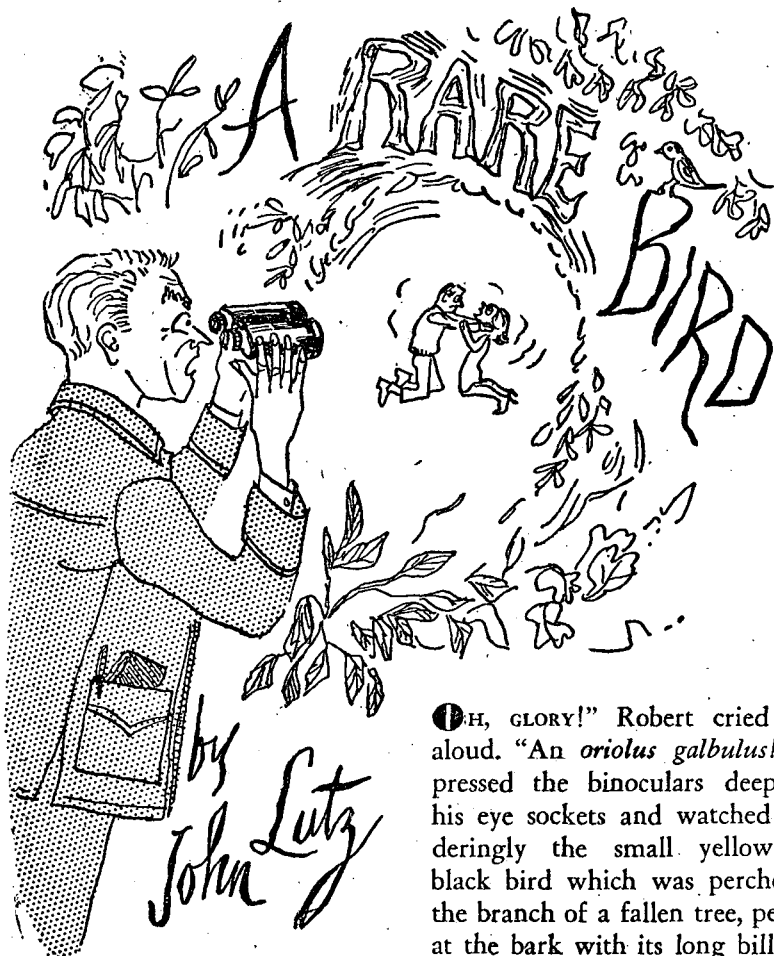
"That's absurd. How in the devil could you have possibly anticipated that I'd hang the jury?"

"I just told you. The average murderer is not a repeater, not even when his second murder could be committed in perfect safety within the law by an ostensibly good citizen doing his duty." He pushed his glass away, still half full, and stood up abruptly. "Well, I have to get on home. Goodbye, Guy. Give my best to Rhoda."

He went out the same way Francis McRae had gone before him. I emptied my glass, then emptied his. As I told you in the beginning, we always understood each other.



Ultimately, there had to be some justification for innocent bystanders being reluctant witnesses.



“OH, GLORY!” Robert cried half-aloud. “An *oriolus galbulus*!” He pressed the binoculars deep into his eye sockets and watched wonderingly the small yellow and black bird which was perched on the branch of a fallen tree, pecking at the bark with its long bill.

Still peering through the binocu-

lars, Robert reached clumsily into his breast pocket and pulled out his notebook and pencil. The branches pressing in on him rustled when he did this and the *oriolus galbulus* looked in his direction, then resumed its pecking. If it knew about Robert it didn't give a hoot.

So rare a bird to find here at this time of year, Robert mused. If only he'd brought his camera. Still, this would cause quite a stir at the weekly Audubon Club meeting.

Keeping a watchful eye on the bird, he began to write its exact description, checking his neat handwriting in quick glances. Robert was a small man, middle-aged, and beginning to spread about the waist. With his pleasant round face and thin beak-like nose he was rather like a bird himself, a comparison he would not at all have minded.

The *oriolus galbulus* suddenly stopped its pecking and fluttered off into the denser woods. "Oh, drat!" Robert said. He came to Memorial State Park every weekend and was aware of how thick the underbrush was in this area of the vast wood. Letting his binoculars swing free against his chest from their leather straps, he decided to follow the bird.

The fall undergrowth snared

Robert's ankles with every step, and though he tried to walk quietly the carpet of dry leaves rustled and crackled beneath his feet. He knew the beautiful *oriolus galbulus* would flee before him if he made too much noise.

He was walking slowly, his myopic blue eyes scanning the foliage, when he heard the odd call. It was a loud and sudden 'Caw!' Like a crow, yet strangely unlike a crow. His curiosity aroused, he stood for a moment, then began to move quietly in the direction of the sound.

He'd moved slowly and cautiously forward for some time when he caught a glimpse of movement through the mottled foliage. Crouching and scooting to the left so he could see better, he raised the binoculars to his eyes.

He heard his own little intake of breath as he watched. In a small clearing was a man and a beautiful blonde girl, both down on their knees, the man's fingers pressing into the girl's slender throat. As Robert watched, the man squeezed harder and shook the girl furiously. Again there was that strange crow-like sound and the struggling girl's arms dropped limply. Robert wanted to cry out, wanted to run and help the girl, but fear immobilized him and made his forehead clammy with

sweat, his throat constricted.

The man released the girl and stood. Through the binoculars Robert could see the horrible expression on her discolored face before her body sagged to a heap among the leaves.

The man flexed his fingers as if to limber them, then wiped his hands on his tan sweater and looked about in a wide circle. Robert's heart thumped as the murderer faced him. He dropped the binoculars to his chest to reassure himself that the man was farther away than he'd appeared in the lenses. When he was certain he hadn't been spotted, he raised them once more to his eyes.

Now the man was dragging the blonde's body into the underbrush. Robert saw an expanse of pale thigh as her dress caught on a branch, and he was ashamed to feel quick interest stir within him. He hastily aimed the binoculars at the man.

"A grave," Robert muttered, as he saw the man give the body a final jerk and the blue of the girl's dress disappear. When he saw the man stoop and lift a shovel from the thick brush he knew that he was right. The murderer had come earlier and dug a grave for the poor girl, a grave that now needed only to be filled in and have dry autumn leaves kicked

over it to prevent discovery.

Robert knew he must do something! Anything! And then he realized the man's car must be parked on the dirt road that led to the abandoned fire tower.

Still crouching, backing slowly and awkwardly away, Robert kept his eyes fixed on the movement of the shovel in the high brush until the foliage blocked his view. Then he turned and ran for the dirt road.

He spotted the car immediately, about three hundred yards away, a black four-door sedan pulled off the road by a picnic bench. Robert crossed the road so that he was directly behind it and, making sure he was well concealed, focused his binoculars on the license plate. Just as he'd finished writing the number in his notebook, the man appeared out of the woods.

The man looked around him again, but this time Robert screwed up his courage and continued to stare back through the powerful binoculars. He had an uneasy moment as the murderer's glance swept past him, but he didn't move a muscle. He watched as the man tossed the shovel into the car trunk, then got in and drove off, leaving a thick haze of dust hanging over the hot road.

When Robert started to drive home from Memorial Park, he'd

fully intended to call the police and report the murderer's license number immediately—but now he wasn't so sure. A fantastic thought had crossed his mind, a thought so unlike any he'd ever had that it held him spellbound. Perhaps this was fate. He surely wasn't born to be a bank teller all his life, a bank teller who hadn't had a promotion in six years. Perhaps this was the one opportunity that came in a lifetime, the opportunity that strong men grabbed and the weak let slip past. And wasn't he strong? Hadn't he shown courage by not flinching when the murderer had looked directly at him that last time?

By the time he reached home determination was beating in Robert like a pulse. He drove into the garage and shut the overhead door. Then he went to his seldom used tool chest and got out a stout, twelve-pound sledgehammer. Steadying himself inwardly, knowing that with this one act he would commit himself to his plan, he stood alongside the car. Then, very deliberately, he swung the sledge at a level with the car's bumper and made a long creased dent along the bottom of the door and onto the rear fender panel. Pleased with himself, he went inside to wait for evening.

At exactly ten o'clock Robert

phoned the police and told them that while he was driving earlier that evening his car had been struck by a hit and run driver.

The police sent a one-man patrol car out and Robert told the officer how he'd been driving on Willow Lane an hour before and a red convertible had sideswiped him with its bumper, then sped off. However, Robert had alertly gotten the license number, which he gave to the officer.

Only an hour after the policeman had left, a sergeant phoned and told Robert that the license number he'd given the officer belonged to a black four-door sedan.

"Are you sure?" Robert asked, careful to put puzzlement into his voice.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said. "There's no mistake about it. The plates were issued just a few days ago, transferred from Ohio plates."

So, the murderer had just moved here from Ohio but, drat it, why didn't the police mention the man's name? Calmly Robert said, "I was so positive about the license number. Perhaps the car has been painted, with a white top, and I mistook it for a convertible with the top up."

"Nope," the sergeant said. "I saw the car and talked to the owner. He and his wife were at the

movies when you were hit. Showed me the ticket stubs and told me what the show was all about."

Robert waited until he was sure the sergeant wasn't going to suggest it, then he said, "Perhaps if I were to look at the car . . ."

There was a long pause on the other end, then a long sigh. "It's way over on Chambers Road," the sergeant said. It was obvious he didn't want to send someone out to drive Robert over there.

Robert wanted to ask for the address but was afraid to push things any further. "Well, perhaps I misread the number."

"Yeah," the sergeant said, brightening, "that happens a lot of times."

"And it *was* dark . . ."

"I'll tell you," the sergeant said, "if I was you I'd just call my insurance company and put it in their hands."

"I guess I'll do that," Robert said. "And thank you." He hung up and smiled. His heart was beating very fast.

Robert looked up Chambers Road on a street map and found that it was only six blocks long, one of those suburban developments of ritzy small apartments. The rent there must be at least two hundred a month, Robert calculated as he drove slowly down

the street. Each building had a neat little concrete parking space for its occupants, but the murderer's black car was nowhere to be seen. Bitterly disappointed, but not discouraged, Robert drove home.

The next day he spotted the car parked in front of a corner building. He was sitting wondering just what to do about it when he saw the murderer emerge from the building. Robert recognized him immediately, the distinguished graying hair, the lean dark face with the piercing eyes. Beside him walked a woman on very high heels. The murderer politely held the car door open for her, then walked around and got in the driver's side and backed the car into the street.

As soon as the black sedan had disappeared Robert got out of his car and crossed the street to the swank apartment building. He was checking the names on the mailboxes when the door on the landing just above him opened and an old woman with dyed red hair looked down at him.

"Can I help you?" she asked suspiciously.

Panicky, Robert picked one of several names on the mailboxes. "I'm, uh, looking for Mr. Denton. I think he's an old school friend of mine."

"Mr. Denton's at work now, but

I'm the building manager. Perhaps I can help you."

Robert, after a pause, said, "The Denton I'm looking for is about six feet, graying hair, dark."

The woman looked puzzled, then her eyes lit up and she said, "Oh, you must mean Mr. Emerick. He and his wife moved in two days ago—but he was transferred here from Cincinnati."

"Yes, Emerick," Robert said. "Didn't I say Emerick?"

"No," the woman said, suspicion again in her voice. "You said Denton."

She stood staring at him, and he could think of nothing to say. Finally he muttered, "I meant Emerick."

"Well, why don't we just go up and talk to him?" the woman said, ringing the bell lettered Emerick.

"Yes, why don't we?" Robert said cheerfully, confident that they were not at home. He rang the bell again himself.

When there was no answer he shrugged and smiled. He could see the woman's suspicions had disappeared. "When he comes home, don't tell him I was here," he said. "I want to surprise the old son of a gun."

Because he'd just arrived in the city Emerick's telephone number was, of course, not in the direc-

tory, so Robert had dialed information. The operator had politely told him that the Emericks had an unlisted number which she could not disclose. Robert had slammed the receiver down and cursed violently. Somehow he had to make contact with Emerick.

Robert started parking near the apartment at night, hoping to catch Emerick alone. Slumped behind his steering wheel, he wished he could simply walk up and ring Emerick's doorbell and confront him in his livingroom, but Mrs. Emerick would be there, and the situation would not only prove fruitless but quite embarrassing.

Suddenly Robert sat bolt upright. They were going somewhere at last! Mrs. Emerick was dressed up, balancing precariously on slender heels even higher than the ones she'd worn before, and Emerick was wearing a dark suit.

Robert watched as they got into the black sedan, Emerick attentively opening the car door for his wife as before. When they drove away Robert followed, tremendously excited.

Emerick drove to the parking lot of a downtown theater. Robert parked almost next to him, and even stood in line behind the Emericks at the theater ticket window.

The previews were just ending

as Robert followed the Emericks down the dimly lighted center aisle and took a seat four rows behind them. He kept a close eye on the silhouette of Emerick's head and Mrs. Emerick's little flat hat as the feature started with a blast of music.

Sitting in the darkened theater, Robert thought of how it must have been with Emerick: the familiar story, a young and beautiful mistress he'd taken up with on his previous trips to the city, the girl's possessiveness, her jealousy, and finally her threat to tell Emerick's wife when she arrived. Robert was surprised to find himself envying Emerick—up to a point.

Robert had to sit through half the feature, a senseless mishmash of a man and his wife exchanging corrosive remarks in language that was truly shocking, before Emerick finally rose and walked up the aisle toward the lobby. After counting slowly to ten and wiping his sweating palms on his trousers, Robert followed.

When he reached the lobby, Emerick was standing by himself smoking a cigarette, leaning on the soda machine and looking with some interest at the young girl making popcorn behind the counter. Robert ignored his pounding heart and approached Emerick as

casually and quietly as possible.

"I haven't seen you since Memorial Park," he said, because it was the opening line he'd rehearsed over and over.

Emerick turned and looked blankly at him. "Memorial Park?"

The man's composure threw Robert for a moment. "Yes, you know!" he almost pleaded. "With the blonde lady."

"Blonde lady?" Emerick asked innocently, but there was electricity in his voice now and his dark complexion paled.

"The blonde lady," Robert said, for the first time looking Emerick in the eye. "It would be a pity if your wife found out."

Emerick's cigarette dropped to the lobby carpet and he trembled so that he had to support himself for a second on the soda machine.

Robert knew he had the upper hand now and he intended to play it. "Someone always sees," he sneered.

Emerick collected himself admirably. He ground out the dropped cigarette with the heel of his shoe and lit another. Peering at Robert over the flame he asked, "How much?"

*How much?* Robert flushed and cursed himself inwardly. All his carefully laid plans and he hadn't even considered the amount he would ask. "Five thousand," he



said, his mind racing furiously.

Emerick didn't change expression. *So five thousand was nothing to him*, Robert thought. *Of course not, living where he did, driving that big car . . .*

"When and where?" Emerick asked.

"Saturday afternoon. At one o'clock, in the parking lot of the Spoon and Kettle restaurant on route 21. And make it ten thousand."

Emerick's mouth dropped open at that, but his surprised expression turned with great effort into a broad smile as he looked over Robert's shoulder. Robert turned to see Mrs. Emerick crossing the lobby toward them. As he looked at the woman close up for the first time, Robert noticed through his sudden embarrassment that she was attractive in a blue-eyed, creamy way. There was a look of friendly curiosity on her face as she wobbled toward them on her high heels.

Robert's palms began to sweat again as he tried to think of a way to take his leave gracefully.

"Darling," Emerick said in a brave, high voice, as if about to introduce them. But Robert had spun on his heel and was walking hurriedly toward the exit.

The Spoon and Kettle restau-

rant was a popular truck stop that shared a large parking lot with a service station. The restaurant was doing its usual brisk Saturday afternoon business, which was exactly why Robert had chosen it for his and Emerick's rendezvous. As he stood with one foot braced against the bumper of his car he was in plain view of at least half a dozen diners on the other side of a large plate glass window about a hundred feet away. Emerick wouldn't dare try anything violent with so many witnesses. The thing that was worrying Robert now, however, was whether Emerick would show up.

It was 1:15 when the shiny black sedan pulled off the highway onto the parking lot. Emerick parked on the other side of the lot, then got out and stood squinting against the sun, holding a large dark briefcase. He spotted Robert and motioned him to come over.

Emerick's car was in view of the diners inside the restaurant, so Robert hesitated only a second. Elated and relieved that the risky business of blackmail was about to end profitably, he walked over to meet Emerick.

"The money's in there?" Robert asked, nodding toward the briefcase and trying to sound brisk and businesslike.

"No," Emerick said softly,

"there are two things in here, but neither of them is money." He didn't seem at all frightened or resigned as he had at the theater. There was something in Emerick's steady dark eyes that preposterously suggested he was in charge.

"I don't understand," Robert said, noticing that Emerick had inserted his hand into the briefcase.

"There are two small pillows in here," Emerick said. "And between those two pillows is a gun—pointed straight at you. Now get in the car."

Robert felt himself grow faint. "You wouldn't do anything . . . in front of all these people. It's broad daylight. . . ."

"Oh, but I would," Emerick said, his dark face breaking into a confident smile. "The pillows will muffle the shot so that it will barely be heard inside the restaurant, and when you drop I'll simply pick you up and put you in the car. It will appear that you fell or took sick—if anyone is watching."

Robert knew that he had his

choice: He could either turn and walk away, chancing that Emerick wouldn't dare fire, or he could get in the car and take his chances. It would take nerve to do either, but more nerve to walk away.

As he opened the car door, Robert was shocked to see Mrs. Emerick sitting behind the wheel. His heart hammering, he got in, followed by Emerick. The gun was out of the briefcase now, pressing painfully into Robert's ribs.

"To Memorial Park, darling," Emerick said.

Fright and bewilderment hit Robert with a wave of nausea. "I-I don't understand," he mumbled as the big car pulled out onto the highway. "The blonde lady . . . the lady in the woods . . ."

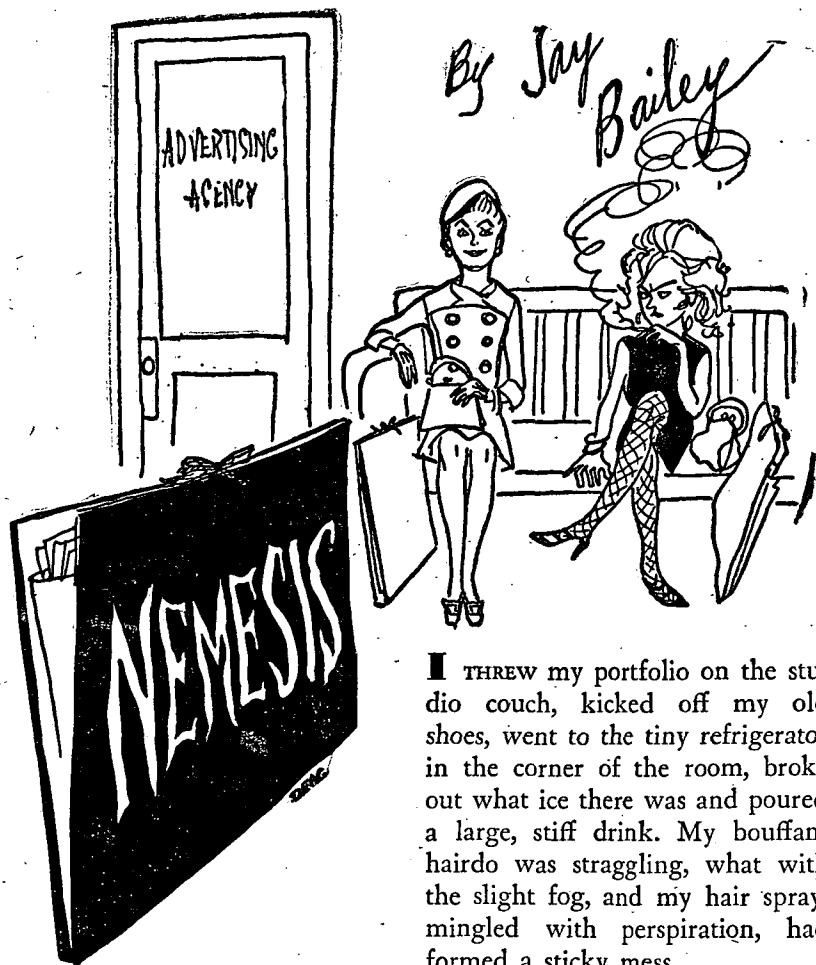
Emerick laughed long and heartily, pushing the gun muzzle harder against Robert's ribs, and out of the corner of his eye Robert could see the woman's ruby lips twist up in a smile.

"Oh, that was no lady," Emerick said, the laughter still ringing in his voice, "that was my wife."



*The successful cutthroat never forsakes the whetstone.*

By Jay Bailey



I THREW my portfolio on the studio couch, kicked off my old shoes, went to the tiny refrigerator in the corner of the room, broke out what ice there was and poured a large, stiff drink. My bouffant hairdo was straggling, what with the slight fog, and my hair spray, mingled with perspiration, had formed a sticky mess.

"To hell with it," I muttered. I

went to the window of my so-called studio apartment (ha! at one hundred and fifty bucks a month it *couldn't* be called one room with bath) and glared furiously at the city. Lights were going on and the view was magnificent, but right now I couldn't care less. *She* had gotten there before me again and that job, that glorious illustrating job, was gone, gone, lost to my competitor, my nemesis, that chic, quick, efficient, perfectly groomed dame who always managed to edge me out. With my rent due, and my new coat not paid for, I had been forced to accept a technical illustration job which I couldn't abide.

I had first seen her on a cable car several weeks before, carrying a portfolio which was much newer and more expensive than mine. Every shiny hair on her head was in place and she was wearing the most beautiful suit I'd ever seen, which I appraised, enviously.

"Pardon me," I asked, "but where did you get that exquisite outfit?"

"I made it," she smiled.

"Oh," I said. Nice?

When I arrived at the advertising agency she was already there, having been just a little ahead of me as we walked the few blocks from the end of the line.

We sat in the waiting room. I

figdgeted and smoked. She was called into the office first, returned twenty minutes later and smiled at me, rather frostily, I thought.

"Goodbye," she said, as though it hurt her.

"So long," I answered. She looked rather triumphant and, well, secretive, as though she knew all about me.

Marco Perkins, his tie askew as usual, said as I went in, "Sorry, honey, but the job you wanted is gone. How about taking on the jewelry bit? Good money."

Now I loathe illustrating jewelry. It's icky-picky work, tense, tight and dull, but it pays well. I'd been hoping desperately to grab the really plummy one—illustrating a small book of far-out poems—and had prepared my samples with tender loving care and a great deal of optimism.

"That gal who just came in, I swear she can read minds. This is the second time she's been in with just exactly what we want. Fantastic! Don't be disappointed, kid. There's lots more. We'll never get caught up with these deadlines."

Marco seemed a bit abashed, but business is business, so I said, "OK, Marco, hand me the stuff. When do you want it?"

That was the beginning of the nightmare and almost the end of me. *She* beat me out on the very

plush fashion supplement that one of the newspapers publishes annually; *she* robbed me of the brochure for the Chinese (and most expensive and elegant) import store which was due to open in a few weeks; and on and on and on.

I was beginning to feel like a victim. I'm a good commercial artist—excellent, perhaps, but I have a certain amount of creativity and I yearned to use it. I painted when I could, but just making a living, trying to keep up my appearance and keep myself in art supplies took almost all my time and money. This frantic profession had been mine for fifteen years and I had loved it, but then the glamour had worn off. It had become just a job made up of deadlines, hung-over art directors, missed street-cars, spilled ink and *her*.

That evening I decided to chuck it all. Old Miss Mind-Reader had finally won, temporarily, but I wasn't through yet. For most of my life I had wanted to write. I had stacks of notes and stories, done in my few idle moments through the years, and had even started a book. As I gulped my Scotch, crying now and glowering at the darkening city, I made a decision. Right then and there I began to pack. All I owned were art supplies, a few portfolios bulging with samples of past jobs, and

clothes, such as they were. The next day I paid my bills and when my life was tidied up, I went to the agency to let Marco know.

When I told him I had this dream of writing and the time had come, he screamed, "Not you, too!"

"What do you mean, please?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Well, your 'competitor,' as you insist on calling her, writes too—publishes, I understand."

I sank into a chair and stared, my mouth foolishly open.

"What is this, a cabal?" he yowled. "So, you're going to write? Well, gal, it's been grand. Lots of luck. Lots and lots of luck—you've got nerve or you're crazy. What, pray tell, do you intend to live on? *She* doesn't leave this poor old art director. *She's* no rat who leaves what may be a sinking ship. *She* stays here, and writes too. *She* can do it, why can't you?"

"Marco, from now on I live on prayers. I've had it. That *witch!* *She's* picking my brains. *She* finishes jobs that I *just think of*. I hate her! *She's* taking over my life and doing a better job of it, and I think I'm going mad!"

"Oh, come on," snapped Marco, biting his nails. "Are you getting paranoid in your old age? Coincidences do happen, you know."

"Marco, you idiot, she reads minds. You told me so yourself. How do you fight thought waves?" I began to cry, noisily.

"Oh, shut up! I'll take you out to lunch if you stop blubbering."

I spent the next few hours weeping into seven or eight pre-lunch martinis. I don't remember any food, but Marco and I managed to get beautifully, tearily drunk, and he told me all about his wife who, apparently, was frigid, the price of straightening one of his kid's teeth, how his lawn wouldn't grow and the neighbor's did, how his sister was an alcoholic and he had to pay for the sanitarium, but don't tell anybody, dear, and he was going to get out of the rat race someday.

We ended up at the Buena Vista at 1:00 a.m. trying to sober up on Irish coffee (fat chance) and finally bade a maudlin farewell. I heard him wandering off into the night as I staggered up the stairs, then collapsed on the studio couch.

Morning city noises woke me and I had a hangover, the likes of which had never been experienced by anyone in San Francisco, but I eventually got the coffee going, lurched to the bathroom and looked at my face in the mirror. Ugh! Eventually, though, I knitted myself together, yanked the cover off of my old portable, and started

a story which began: "Today I saw *her* again . . ."

I typed all day, with the aid of several quarts of black coffee, a box of Mother Cooper's cookies, and several packs of cigarettes. My impotent rage mounted as I wrote and by 5:30 I had finished what turned out to be a nice, tight, mean and bitter little story. I jammed it into a mailing envelope, slapped on too many stamps, stormed down the stairs and stomped to the mailbox.

"There, you creep, see what you can do now," I growled. The cop on the corner looked at me strangely.

My fury abated and, wrung dry, I decided to read and go to bed early. I went to the drugstore, picked up several magazines, returned to my room, and heated a can of soup, which was all my stomach could possibly take at the moment. After putting on my robe, I flopped on the old couch and proceeded to look through the periodicals.

With suspense and fantasy magazines I was always able to escape into a nice, gory little world whose characters were generally much worse off than I, and I was enjoying myself thoroughly when I came upon a story titled simply *Nemesis*. It began, "Today I saw *her* again . . ." It was by an au-

thor whose name was unfamiliar to me. I leaped up and threw the book to the floor.

There was but one thing in my shattered mind—murder. How would I do it? And then, very, very calmly I began to plan. I put on my coat, went down to the neighborhood bar, The Flattened Elbow, and engaged my favorite bartender, Parnell, in conversation. "Hi, Parnell, Scotch on the rocks, please. Double."

"Sure, dear. How ya doin'?"

"Fine, fine. How's the cable car situation? Suppose we'll keep 'em? Sure will be a shame if they go."

"Yep. People getting nervous. Another stupid tourist fell off yesterday."

"Really? I haven't seen the papers. Oh well, too many people in the world. Far too many people." I smiled slightly for the first time in weeks. "Another Scotch, Parnell, my friend. You know, you're one of my few friends, Parnell? You don't hurt people. You're just nice and friendly."

He smiled cheerfully as he polished glasses. We had the place to ourselves.

"No sense in hurting people, dear. They hurt themselves."

"Parnell, you're so wise. Sometimes when I get morbid and lonely I get a peculiar fear that I might trip and fall off a cable car

in front of a truck or something. Stupid, isn't it? Damned high heels, women wear stupid clothes. I hate women. I'm a woman and I hate women." I brooded into my Scotch.

"They look nice, though. I suppose that most people, at one time or another, feel funny on a cable car—only natural. Now, how about another drink on old Parnell, baby? Feeling blue?"

"Not really—just tired. Well, I must off and away. Have big things to do tomorrow."

"Don't let it get you down." He grinned as I went out the door.

I walked home, steadily and thoughtfully. I would have no trouble finding her—same cable car every day, same time. I unfolded the studio couch and went to sleep in preparation for my liberation. I must be rested and very, very cool.

When I awakened the next morning I put on my old flats, a comfortable skirt and sweater, and set out. My nerves were of steel and revenge was in my heart. I waited on the corner. The little cable car finally appeared and clacked to a stop, and there she was, the black-hearted witch, perched delicately on an outside bench, wearing another beautiful suit, spike heels which probably cost forty bucks, her portfolio bal-

anced precisely atop her knees.

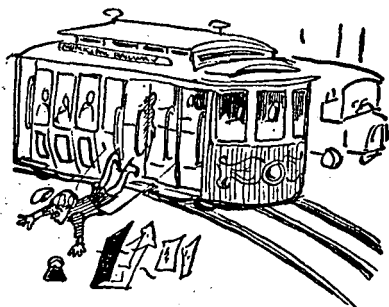
"Well, hello," I said as I sat beside her, clutching my purse.

"Good morning," she smiled in her infuriating way.

That was the end of the conversation.

Now I was ready. As the car went down the hill the curve of the tracks came into view. Not yet. We swung around the curve. Down another hill and *she* was standing up, preparing to debark as the car slowed. Her portfolio was under her left arm and she clung to the bar with her right. I lit a cigarette, shielding it from the wind. A truck approached from the opposite direction. I stood too and then, very cleverly I accidentally jammed the cigarette's glowing tip onto her right hand. When she gave a little yip, I swiftly reached around in front of her with my left foot and kicked my heel back sharply, hitting the forty dollar shoe. She hurtled into the street. Brakes squealed, but the truck caught her beautifully anyhow, and she sailed, rather messily, I gloated, onto the opposite sidewalk. Chaos reigned. I mingled among the horrified citizens for a while, then oozed off into the crowd, nonchalantly tossing my cigarette into the gutter. She was certainly finished, forever and definitely, what was left of her.

The donnybrook died down after a splash in the papers, causing another cable car furor, and I decided I would stay in the city after all. The expatriate life was not for me. I made my way home, whistling. I then unpacked and put away my typewriter. My writing career would begin only after I had done enough of the really exciting jobs (which would now be *mine*) to allow me to leave in



style. I saluted myself in the bathroom mirror and laughed, girlishly. I intended to save enough to last me for a year or so in Mexico, and from that moment on the tide turned, oh, how beautifully!

I got another hairdo and went on a diet. Gradually I became more confident. I even bought a little sewing machine and made some stunning new clothes in order to save for my eventual exodus, which promised to be not far off now. One sunny day I went so far as to spend forty dollars on a gorgeous pair of alligator shoes



and I bought a new *leather* portfolio, one which I had coveted for months. As I improved, so did my work, and Marco was all agog. On top of the world at last! I felt indestructible, beautiful, successful, efficient, talented, and fully in control of my life.

One day, a few weeks ago, this frowzy creature, sweating, of all things, sat beside me on the cable car and stared, rather rudely, I thought.

"What a beautiful suit," she said.

"Thank you," I purred. It made me feel *very good*. It seems she was on her way to the agency too, with her pitiful little portfolio. I heard her just behind me, breathing a bit heavily. She needed to drop a few pounds. Why *do* women let themselves go? She followed me into the waiting room. Of course I strode right on into Marco's office, while she sat like a lump, nibbling on her fingers and smoking, sloppily.

Marco's place of work was, as usual, a ghastly sight—papers and drawings every which way—but it

was my home away from home. I put the new work on his desk.

"Bless you, sweetie, always on time. Bless you again and again and forevermore and I'll take you to lunch."

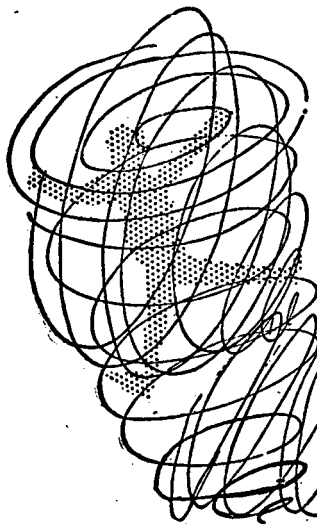
I blew him a kiss as I sailed out the door, saying over my shoulder, "Same time, same place!"

In the waiting room this person with her gummy hair and runover heels and battered equipment looked at me very, very strangely. I had a sudden chill. Poor tacky little thing, I see her constantly on the cable car and she *always* insists upon sitting near me, smoking continually, quite nervous. Probably drinks. Oh well, competition's high in this town and I really can't help it if she's jealous. Sometimes I think she hates me. I just seem to have developed this sixth sense—really can't explain it—but I always seem to get there *first*.

It won't be long now, then, Mexico; here I come! I can't *wait* for my last day in the city, my last drink with Marco, my last job, my last cable car ride . . .



*When enmeshed in the coils of his own problems, a person is inclined to overlook the possible intrusion of a factor which is foreign to the solution.*



handed the M.E. a release form and as he signed it, added, "Fight over the gun, you think?"

"Probably. Those powder burns on his shirt—" He broke off, noting my gaze was on a livid bruise on the corpse's left temple. "If there was a fight, he didn't suffer that tonight," he informed me. "That bruise is five, six days old." He motioned the morgue attendants to wheel in their stretcher.

# The Coils of Murder

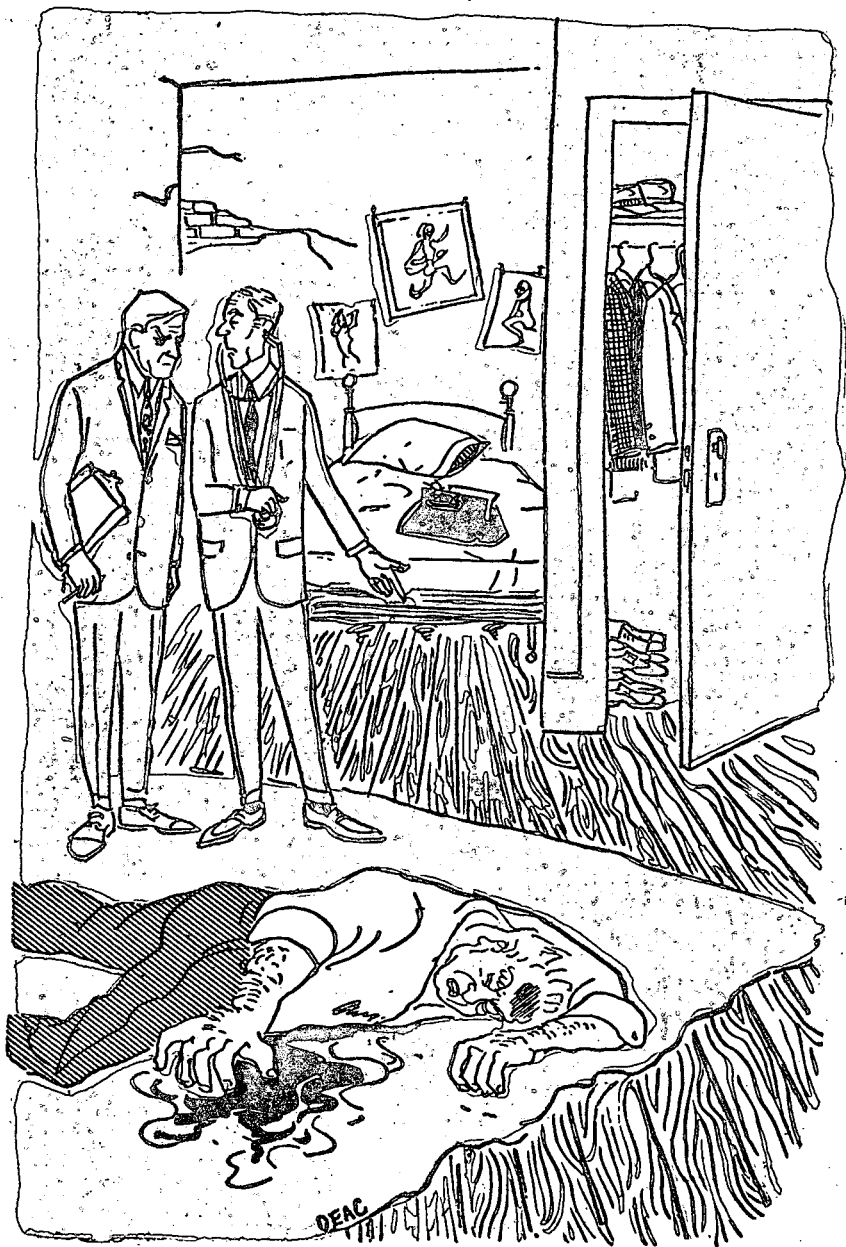
by Carroll Mayers

**T**HE medical examiner gave the corpse a final glance. "Nothing complicated this time," he told me. "A slug in the heart, likely a .38, did the job. I'd estimate two, maybe three hours ago." He closed his bag. "You through with him?"

The body was that of a man I figured for his early fifties, jowly, with thinning gray hair, poorly dressed. "If you are," I said. I

"Nasty knock, though, in a sensitive area; I've known such a blow to be fatal."

"Oh? Well, thanks for coming over, Walt. See you."



He smiled without humor. "I expect you will. Crime marches on."

That it did. This particular crime had been reported at seven-ten, less than an hour ago. Answering the call, my detective partner and I had found the apartment building aroused and curious, yet not as shocked as might have been expected. I had an uneasy premonition we'd picked up a headache.

Jack Grimes, my partner, returned to the apartment a moment after the morgue detail had departed. After a brief inspection of the body Jack had initiated a preliminary canvass of the building; his dour expression now confirmed my hunch.

"This could be a toughie, all right," he said. "The victim's name was Howard Squire. He was employed as a night watchman for Modern Plastics."

"How come he wasn't working tonight?"

"I couldn't learn. Seems he was a real loner, apparently no close friends, no associating with the other tenants."

I considered Jack's remarks. "Who told you what you did get?"

"The super; man named McManus. He's the one who discovered the body, called in. Squire's rent was due and McManus came up here to collect."

I checked my watch: eight-five.

"The M.E. figured the shooting for five, six o'clock," I told Jack. "That should help you pin it down a little. Maybe somebody in the building will remember a visitor here around that time."

"You mean, I re-do the building check?"

"Inquiry in depth now. You're the brains of this duo."

"Naturally." He grinned. "And you'll be doing what?"

"I figure to talk with Roger Pierce," I said. "He's the owner of Modern Plastics; I remember his name in the papers lately in an article on local industrialists. He should be able to supply some background on Squire."

Jack nodded. "Could be. We'll need all we can get."

The squad detail had routinely checked the phone for prints, come up with none but Squire's. I located Pierce's home number in the book and dialed. A pert feminine voice, likely a maid, answered. I identified myself, asked to speak with Pierce if he were home. He was; a moment later his query echoed crisply.

"Roger Pierce, Sergeant. What's this all about?"

"I'd rather not discuss it over the phone, sir. If you could spare me a few minutes . . ."

"Of course. I'll be home all evening."

Jack was prowling the apartment when I hung up. I noted him shuffling through a clutch of girlie magazines, numerous racy-jacketed paperbacks on an end table.

"Real high class literature," he commented dryly. "At least we know Squire was an art lover."

"Down, boy," I told him. "You're supposed to be checking the tenants."

He sighed, dropped the magazines. "Yes, sir," he answered, straight-faced. "Right away, sir."

In sober truth, I hadn't elected to cop out on the apartment building's recheck merely on a whim. Jack was a shrewd interrogator, with a clever, analytical mind. If any significant fact concerning Howard Squire's murder was to be unearthed at the scene, Grimes would come up with it.

Roger Pierce was a lean individual in his late sixties with a sharp, penetrating look, a bearing exuding brisk efficiency. He appraised me closely as the maid ushered me into the library.

"Sit down, Sergeant. Leeds, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"How can I help you?"

"It's about one of your employees. Howard Squire, your night watchman, I understand. I'd like some information on him."

Pierce frowned, asked, "Why?"

"He was murdered tonight. Shot and killed in his own apartment."

The industrialist's frown held. "I'm sorry to hear that," he told me, "but the fact is Squire is no longer in my employ. I discharged him last week."

I asked, "Mind telling me why?"

He made a casual gesture. "The man had an odd makeup, didn't mix with the other workers. Of course, in his particular job he had little occasion to, but he still could be a source of friction."

Pierce paused, then finished quickly. "He'd been with us five months and I'd spoken to him several times about his attitude. Last week he became profanely surly when I rebuked him concerning a serious act of omission, and I discharged him on the spot."

"Would you elaborate a bit on that omission, sir?"

He nodded. "Most of our business dealings are done on a credit or check basis," he informed me, "but occasionally a transaction will arise, say a purchase of raw materials at a special discount, where a cash payment is advantageous. For that reason we maintain a small cash fund in a private safe in my office. We also use the safe as a repository for plans and specifications of new products still in the development stage."

"On the night prior to my discharging Squire, my superintendent worked late in my office before leaving to visit our West Coast plant to initiate some special production there. Inadvertently, he left the safe open. In making his rounds, Squire should have noted the safe was open and closed it, but he didn't. I myself found the door open the following morning."

I could appreciate Pierce's reaction to Howard Squire's negligence. By the same token, that 'small cash fund' intrigued me; money is always a prime catalyst for murder. Pierce, though, had made no intimation of robbery.

"The contents of the safe were intact?" I queried.

"Yes," Pierce confirmed. "Forty-two hundred dollars. I'd checked the amount two weeks ago and we'd had no occasion to disburse any of it since."

So robbery was out. Not too certain as to what tack I was following, I asked Pierce, "Who is your superintendent?"

"Bennett Madison."

"And you're sure he's the one who left the safe open?"

The manufacturer smiled briefly. "I'm not *sure*, no; Madison's still on the coast. But I assumed so, inasmuch as he stayed on, working in my office after I left that night." He sobered. "The point is, Squire

should have spotted that safe open and locked it."

I said, "I appreciate that, sir. Did anyone else at the plant know the combination to that safe besides you and Madison?"

He nodded again. "Yes, three others. Arthur Kirby, my head accountant; Dolores Vitella, my personal secretary; and Paul Zenko, head of production planning." Pierce regarded me quizzically. "Aside from who did know the combination," he added, "Howard Squire certainly didn't—and I've already mentioned no money was taken. I'm not sure I fully follow you, Sergeant."

In essence, that made two of us. "I'm just fishing for all the background I can get on Squire and his associates," I said.

"Then I might suggest you look up Lou Barrister," Pierce told me. "I didn't mention it originally, but there was another reason I determined to dismiss Squire. I'd learned he was one of Barrister's regular patrons, which I didn't consider compatible with stability and trustworthiness."

My scalp prickled. Until now, no tangible motive for Squire's killing had suggested itself, but with Barrister's name added to the cast I had my first possibility. Lou Barrister was a professional gambler, a shrewd character with a rough

reputation. If Howard Squire had been stiffing Barrister, defaulting on a heavy gaming debt . . .

I thanked Roger Pierce for his time, then headed for the Regent Arms, where Barrister maintained a posh suite. I had no assurance the gambler would be home, but if he were I wanted to catch his reaction to a direct confrontation without benefit of a prior phone call.

I could have skipped the strategy; Barrister was in, answered my ring personally, but his dark features remained merely sardonically inquisitive. He was a rangy man with hard black eyes, wearing a wine-colored lounging robe.

"Hello, Leeds." Recognizing me, Barrister permitted his upper lip to twitch. "I thought the Grand Jury had given up—"

"You'll overstep, one of these days." I moved into the apartment, continued to watch the man. "For now, let's just say this is a personal inquiry."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I'd like to have you account for your time between four and seven this evening."

The gambler returned my gaze placidly, settled on a divan. "I don't have to answer that, you know," he told me.

"That's right, you don't."

"What's the particular reason I should?"

He was fencing with me, I knew, and enjoying it. I said bluntly, "There's been a murder tonight, Barrister."

"And you think I'm involved?"

"I didn't say that. I asked you to account for your activity during the pertinent time."

"Who was the victim?"

"Howard Squire. One of your patrons."

The gambler's lip twitched again. "Aren't you assuming a bit too much, Sergeant?"

I drew a breath. "Come off it, man," I said tightly. "We both know Squire gambled with you. He was shot and killed in his apartment between five and six o'clock this evening."

His dark eyes narrowed, a bit of the sardonic mien slipping. "And I shot him because he was hanging me up on a big loss, maybe as an example to other welshers?"

"You said that."

"I said it, but you implied it." Abruptly, muscle ridged Barrister's jawline. "All right, Squire played with me, but strictly small time. I'd've brushed him off from the beginning if it hadn't been for one of my better customers working for the same company he did. As it was, I discouraged Squire; he was a real oddball."

Some of Barrister's fire died as he finished tautly, "And I didn't kill

him, Leeds. From two o'clock this afternoon until seven-thirty tonight I was at the Onyx Club: the bar, the gym, the lounge, the dining room. A dozen people will confirm that."

I wasn't too impressed; stronger alibis than the gambler cited have been rigged. What did interest me, though, was Barrister's oblique reference to the gaming activity of another employee of Modern Plastics.

"It'll be confirmed," I assured Barrister. "Meanwhile, for the record, who is Squire's associate you've favored?"

His smile was thin. "You're the detective."

I swore softly. "Who, Barrister?"

He started to dissemble again, but finally shrugged and said, "Man named Kirby."

Arthur Kirby, Roger Pierce's head accountant who knew the combination to the safe in Pierce's office, and who must have known Howard Squire! For whatever might develop, I recognized accountant Kirby was next on my list. I asked Barrister for his phone directory, looked up Arthur Kirby's address. "Don't plan on any sudden trips," I told the gambler as I left.

The Kirby home was a neat frame dwelling on the south side of town. A slight woman, almost

frail, answered my knock. In her mid-forties, she wore her chestnut hair in a severe coiffure, favored little makeup, and her hazel eyes were questioning behind thick lenses.

"Mrs. Arthur Kirby?"

"Yes."

I showed her my ID card. "I'm Sergeant Leeds, Mrs. Kirby. Is Mr. Kirby at home?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. My husband's gone to the library." She continued to regard me with what I first considered mere curiosity, but what suddenly suggested an aura of apprehension. "Is it . . . anything serious?" she ventured.

I smiled to reassure her. "Not actually, for your husband," I said. "There's been a murder, Mrs. Kirby. A Howard Squire, the night watchman at your husband's place of employment, was shot to death in his apartment earlier tonight."

I paused, assaying the effect of my statement. "I wondered if Mr. Kirby could possibly tell me something about Squire's background. Who his friends were, any likely enemies, that sort of thing."

Mrs. Kirby nodded vaguely. "I suppose he could. I don't recall Arthur ever mentioning the name, myself."

I indicated my understanding. "I'm sorry to have missed him," I said, handing her one of my cards.



"When your husband returns, would you have him call me at that number?"

She tucked the card into the sleeve of her dress. "Of course," she replied. "I know Arthur will be glad to help in any way he can."

"I'm sure he will," I agreed. I turned to leave, then swung back as if on afterthought. "By the way, Mrs. Kirby," I said, "I learned tonight Howard Squire had some dealings with a gambler named Lou Barrister, and that your husband did too. Would you be able to tell me anything about that?"

I might well have slapped her. The woman's breath sucked in and her thin face became even more pale. "N-no," she finally managed, "Arthur's not a gambling man."

"You're sure, Mrs. Kirby?"

"Of course. He never—" Suddenly, her gaze dropped and her fingers interlaced tightly. "Arthur *did* gamble with that man a few months ago," she confessed. "I'd had an operation; I needed extensive care and we didn't have the money—" Then she looked up and concluded, "But everything's straightened out now."

Whatever 'everything' might have been, I wasn't too sure it had been resolved. More to the point, I had no certainty that what I was learning had any direct bearing on Howard Squire's murder. I could

have awaited Arthur Kirby's return for some direct questioning, could have sought him out at the library, if in truth that was where he had gone. Instead, thanking Mrs. Kirby for talking to me, I decided to return to the precinct and review my gleanings with my partner.

I found Jack at his desk in the squad room, hat shoved back on his head and cigarette dangling from his lips in approved TV version of a plainclothes cop, hunt-and-pecking an initial report on his battered typewriter.

"Anything new in your recheck?" I asked him.

"Not especially. That time of evening, must be a hundred people milling in and out of the building. None of the tenants recalls anything significant, anybody in particular going in or coming out of Squire's apartment. Nobody heard the shot."

Jack butted his cigarette. "I came up with only one oddity and maybe it's not an oddity, at that. This could be a toughie."

"I recall your expressing that detail. What's the queer item?"

"Squire's wardrobe. You saw the corpse; most bargain basements would disown those threads. But Squire's closet was jammed with new clothes. Two complete outfits: suits, shoes, hats, the works—and

all the finest high-quality stuff."

I said, "So the man decided to splurge on some fancy duds."

Jack nodded. "Obviously. But it would take more than a little cash, unless he tried extensive credit, which sort of rings a false note. A man in his circumstances just doesn't go in hock for expensive clothes."

"So what are you getting at?"

He sighed. "Damned—if I'm sure." He ripped the sheet from the typewriter, fired another cigarette. "What'd you get from Pierce?"

I filled him in, not only on my interview with Roger Pierce, but also my subsequent visitations with Lou Barrister and Mrs. Arthur Kirby.

"We definitely can't rule out Barrister, alibi or no alibi," I said. "Arthur Kirby's an unknown quantity until we talk to him, but his wife's got the wind up over something."

Jack agreed absently, patiently only half listening. Suddenly, he grunted, cocked one eye at me. "Those people who knew the combination of Pierce's private safe, one of them's named Zenko?"

"That's right. Paul Zenko, head of production planning. Why?"

He had pulled out his center drawer, was riffling through a sheaf of flimsies. "Thought that name registered," he muttered.

"Yeah, here it is. Complaint of indecent phone calls, filed by a Paul Zenko two weeks ago—" and here Jack's voice took on added interest as he scanned the flimsy, "on behalf of a Dolores Vitella."

"Pierce's private secretary?"

He smiled at me. "You're supplying the names, friend."

"So what's it all mean to you?"

Jack sobered. "Right off, two things. First, Zenko and the Vitella girl probably have a relationship outside of Modern Plastics, likely sweethearts, or at the least very close friends.

"Second, Howard Squire could have been the indecent caller. Remember those girlie magazines and sexy paperbacks? A man with that sort of taste could be so hipped on the subject he'd get special kicks in mouthing indecencies to a girl. He knew Dolores Vitella, of course, could find her phone number in the book."

It figured. More, it suggested Paul Zenko as a possible suspect. Apprised by his girl of the obscene calls, Zenko might have had reason to suspect Squire, might have visited the watchman tonight and shot him to death in outraged anger.

I said, "Zenko and Dolores Vitella. Who's for whom?"

Jack's smile came back. "You mean you're not choosing the

girl? Giving me a break today?"  
"I'll flip you."

He shrugged, fished in his pocket. "Okay. Heads, the girl. Call it."

"Heads." I smiled as heads came up. "We'll meet back here," I told Jack. "If he hasn't called by then, I want to try Arthur Kirby again. He—"

I broke off as a middle-aged man, conservatively dressed, with a wispy mustache and watery eyes



came into the squad room, advanced uncertainly.

"Speak of the devil, I'll bet," Jack murmured.

He was right; the man ventured, "The desk sergeant said to come back here. I'm looking for Detective Leeds. I'm Arthur Kirby."

"I'm Leeds," I told him, pulling

a chair next to Jack's desk. Trying to ease his obvious disquietude, I added easily, "You needn't have come all the way down here, Mr. Kirby. A phone call would have sufficed tonight."

Kirby sat down, kneading his hands on his knees. "I—I just didn't know," he said. "My wife said Howard Squire had been killed and you wanted to ask me some questions. I thought perhaps if I came here personally . . ." His words trailed off doubtfully.

"We appreciate it," I said. "It's nothing involved, sir. We want to know what you can tell us about Squire. Who he associated with after work, his habits, how he got along with the other night workers he came in contact with, that sort of thing."

Kirby batted his weak eyes. "I'm afraid I can't tell you anything at all," he answered. "I hardly knew the man. He was . . . well, odd. He seemed to prefer keeping to himself, as far as I could judge."

Jack said, "Nobody at the plant held a grudge against him?"

"Not that I know of."

"What about women?" Jack asked him. "Did he ever make suggestive remarks about girls?"

Kirby spread his hands, appealed to me. "I just don't know," he said. "I never exchanged so much as a dozen words with him."

I shot Jack a look; at the moment I felt we'd glean nothing significant from the man and I was anxious to get on with our talks with Dolores Vitella and Paul Zenko. Before Kirby left, though, I did want to try and pin down the one vague uncertainty which still lingered.

"When I talked with your wife, Mr. Kirby," I said, "she seemed somewhat upset about your being involved in any way with us. Would you say she had cause to be?"

He managed a small smile. "You must forgive Martha, Sergeant. She's undergone a serious operation and we've had money problems. Anything that suggests trouble upsets her. She still isn't well."

Reasonable? I decided so—to a degree. If that degree subsequently needed expansion, we could come back to it.

I again thanked Kirby for his appearance and the accountant quietly departed. Watching him leave, I quoted wryly, "And the meek shall inherit the earth."

Jack sighed, got to his feet. "Wish them luck. They'll need it."

Dolores Vitella maintained modest quarters in a new apartment complex alongside the river. A pert brunette with a dark complexion and bold brown eyes, her figure

was equally bold in white blouse, snug Capris.

Introducing myself, I came right to the point. "Two weeks ago you received some indecent telephone calls and a Paul Zenko filed a complaint on your behalf." I made it a statement rather than a question.

She colored slightly. "Yes. They were . . . filthy. I told Paul and he immediately went to police headquarters."

"Mr. Zenko is a personal friend of yours?"

Those brown eyes mirrored warm emotion. "We're engaged. We both work for Modern Plastics but Paul's switching over to Consolidated Chemical next month."

Paul Zenko, production planning head, going with a rival concern—and Howard Squire with an expensive new wardrobe. A coincidence?

I said, "You'll marry then?"

"Yes, just as soon as Paul is settled in his new position." Dolores Vitella vouchsafed the information with a small frown at the irrelevancy of my question. "Are you here about those phone calls, Sergeant?"

"Indirectly, yes," I told her. "We think the man who made them may have been Howard Squire, the night watchman at your plant. Squire was shot and killed to-night." I paused, then went on sim-

ply, "Is Paul Zenko an impulsive man?"

She got my inference instantly, and her eyes flashed. "If you're suggesting Paul shot that man for indecencies to me, you're wrong!" she declared. "Paul was outraged, but he would never kill anyone."

"You were with him earlier this evening?"

"No. But—"

I oiled the turbulent waters. "It's my job to ask questions, Miss Vitella. I'm sure Mr. Zenko will make a statement in his own behalf. For now, what can you tell me about Howard Squire? Did anyone openly dislike him at the factory? What about his personal life?"

Dolores Vitella, only partially mollified, contributed very little. No, she didn't know if anybody at Modern Plastics bore Squire a grudge. No, she knew nothing of his personal life. She'd seen the man only once or twice in the main office. If, indeed, he had been the man who'd phoned her, she wasn't too sorry about his death.

After some twenty minutes, satisfied with the one nugget I had unearthed, I thanked the girl for her time, received a none too gracious acceptance, and returned to headquarters.

My partner had again preceded me. Munching a peanut cracker sandwich and drinking coffee from

a paper cup, he gestured with the container as I approached. "Age before beauty. What'd you get?"

"Not much, but maybe one bit," I told Jack. "The girl told me no more than anyone else about Squire, but she did drop an item about Zenko."

"Oh?"

"The guy's changing jobs, going with Consolidated Chemical. He tell you that?"

"Matter of fact, he did. And that's about all he told me. As far as Squire was concerned, he professed the man to be practically a complete zero." Jack drained his cup, eyed me sharply. "Squire's new wardrobe, eh?"

I nodded. "Exactly. Squire could have acquired a small bundle by blackmailing Zenko. Zenko's changing jobs. What if he took some of Modern's new developments, some top-secret projects, over to Consolidated in return for a better position? He had access to Pierce's private safe where such data would be kept, if he wasn't already privy to the pertinent details in his planning position. Suppose he slipped out some of those papers one night to make photostats and Squire happened to spot him, put the bite on?"

Some crumbs had sprinkled Jack's lap; he brushed them off methodically. "Could be," he said.

"But while you're thinking along those lines, consider Bennett Madison, Pierce's superintendent."

"Eh?"

"Suppose it was Madison who played hanky-panky with some top-secret specs and Squire had somehow learned of it, was blackmailing him? Madison's got a great alibi: he's out on the coast. But a morning jet would get him here secretly in a few hours, return him just as secretly tonight—after the killing."

I gave Jack a close look. "You can't be serious."

He returned my look equably. "I said, 'suppose'. Everyone we've talked to or heard about tonight can be considered a possibility, because they all knew Squire: Madison; Roger Pierce; Lou Barrister; Arthur Kirby; Paul Zenko; even Dolores Vitella, on behalf of her lover. She's likely a hot-blooded Latin."

Jack stopped, musingly. "And there's the possibility the killer's someone else entirely," he appended. "Somebody else in Squire's life we haven't learned about, with a motive we don't suspect."

I continued to regard Jack, his mien abruptly intriguing me. "But all supposition aside, you've got something," I suggested.

He nodded soberly. "Maybe. It's still supposition—and reaching a

bit. But it's basically simple and it fits what facts we know." He paused again. "I had a hunch, made a phone call a few minutes ago and satisfied my own mind. I've been waiting for you to try for the wrap-up."

Working with him for two years, I'd come to respect Jack's hunches, backed as they were by that sharp, analytical mind. I asked, "Who'd you phone?"

"Bennett Madison. Due to the time difference, he was still at the coast plant."

"What could Madison tell you?"

"I reviewed briefly what Pierce told you. Madison said Pierce was wrong in thinking he had inadvertently neglected to lock the safe. Working late that night, Madison was certain to check the safe before departing. He swore to me he'd closed it."

I shook my head. "I'm still lost," I said.

Jack shoved to his feet. "If I'm right, you won't be for long," he said. "Come on."

"Where to?"

"You've been there," Jack answered.

The small livingroom was neat and trim, the furnishings on the sparse side but all meticulously polished. Arthur Kirby and his wife sat together on the sofa, facing us,

Kirby's watery eyes shifting, his mouth quirking, Martha Kirby's gaze staring at trembling hands in her lap.

"You didn't tell your wife you'd shot Howard Squire tonight, did you, Mr. Kirby?" Jack queried quietly. "She knew about your trying to get money by gambling with Lou Barrister; about your stealing the forty-two hundred dollars from your company's private safe to make payment to Barrister, money which might not have been missed for weeks, as matters held. She even knew about Howard Squire blackmailing you—but you didn't tell her you'd killed him."

A convulsion shook Martha Kirby; she sobbed, clutched her husband's arm. Kirby tried to comfort her, his features haggard, desolate. He made no reply to Jack.

After a moment, Jack resumed. "You don't have to make a statement now. We've no real proof as yet, but we'll get the proof, you know we will." He stopped, waited. "Do you want to tell us how it was?"

Kirby still did not answer; it was as though he was not even listening. His whole attention was devoted to his wife, who was now weeping softly.

"Then suppose we tell you," Jack suggested solemnly. "The night you secretly returned to the

office to steal the money was the night Bennett Madison worked late, before he left for the coast. Madison made certain to lock the safe, but you knew the combination.

"Later, here at home, when you told your wife what you'd done, she was anguished and horrified. Probably you'd begun to have misgivings of your own. Whatever, your wife persuaded you to return the money that same night, and that was what you were doing when Howard Squire caught you while making his rounds. *You weren't stealing the money, you'd just returned it.*"

For the first time, Arthur Kirby seemed to comprehend something of what Jack was saying. He raised his head, choked, "Y-yes. I —" and then was unable to continue.

Jack went on. "That accounts for the money being intact the next morning; for the safe being open; and for a bad bruise on Squire's left temple. When Squire walked in and surprised you, you panicked, struck out blindly. Squire stumbled, fell, likely struck his temple on the edge of the safe. It was a vicious blow, could have been fatal. You thought it *had* been fatal, that you'd killed him. Your panic grew; you fled, leaving the safe still open.

"Minutes later, when Squire revived, he was too groggy to note the safe wasn't locked. But groggy or not, convinced he'd caught you in an attempted theft, he likely conceived his blackmail ploy right then. He had a twisted mind; we're satisfied he was also making obscene phone calls. And his discharge the next day caused him to need money even more."

Kirby abruptly threw out his hands. "He wouldn't listen to me!" he cried. "He said even if it were true about my returning the money, I was still a thief. I told him I couldn't pay more than the three hundred dollars I'd already given him, that I still owed Barrister, that Martha was still ill. But he wouldn't listen!"

Abruptly, Kirby's fervor died; he slumped against his wife, the pair

embracing each other for mutual support. "I—I didn't mean to kill him," he whispered. "I went there tonight—with the gun—to scare him, make him agree to stop bleeding me, not to tell—but he only laughed at me and tried to slap the gun aside. It . . . went off."

An act? For my money, no. I believed Arthur Kirby. He was a killer, yes, but essentially he was an ordinary, decent joe who'd gotten enmeshed in the coils of murder only because he'd sought salvation for himself and an ailing wife.

Jack stepped forward, laid a hand on Kirby's shoulder. "Let's go," he murmured.

The man struggled to his feet. On the sofa, Martha Kirby sobbed wretchedly. I took Kirby's arm, fell in behind my partner.

Sometimes, it's a lousy world.

---

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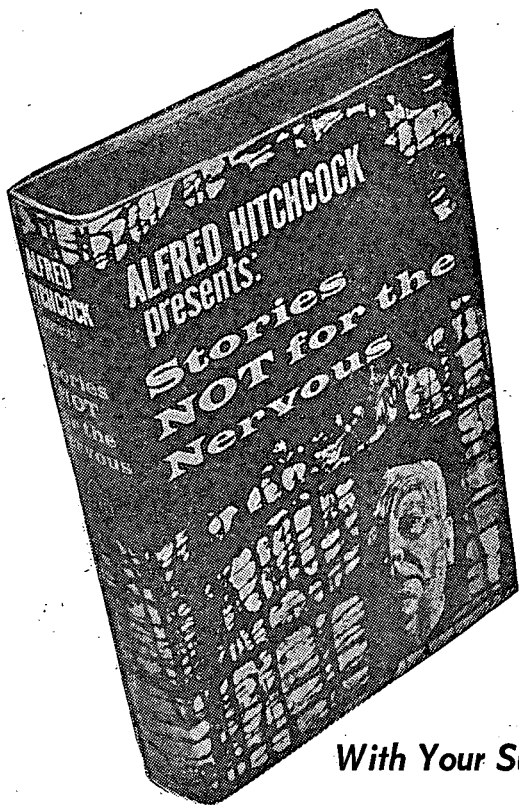
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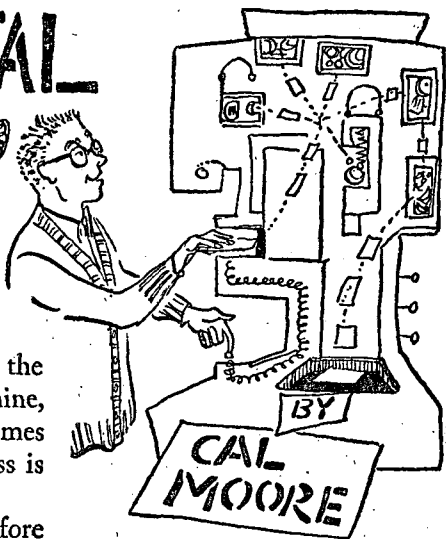
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*It isn't everyone who can play a tune by ear, after all.*

# ELEMENTAL CYBERNETICS



I AIN'T the smartest type in the world but, machine or no machine, as soon as this Darcey comes through the door, I sees the boss is going to have trouble.

"Big Deke," he says even before he closes it, "you fingered the wrong guy. I'm straight these days."

"Now I remember you," the boss says, rolling his cigar to the side of his mouth so he can grin. "You used to be pretty handy for bank jobs. What've you been doing with yourself these days?"

"What's the angle?" Darcey asks. "How come you finger me if you don't remember me from Adam Gringle?"

"Technology fingered you," the

boss says, like a guy just dealt a pat aces-full.

"Tex who? I don't know the fink. I'm straight since I got sprung six years ago. I got a legit insurance racket and I ain't interested no more. Get someone else to do your dirt."

"Now hold on a minute," the boss says. "There's ten big ones in it for you."

"How many times I got to tell you I ain't interested? I'm a respectable type from my commu-

nity. Look for some other patsy."

"If you're so straight," the boss says, "how come you come to my becking and calling?"

"You know why I come."

"Right," the boss says, and he picks up from off his desk one of those information cards the brain sends him. "We got quite a lot on you."

"It's no go, get someone else."

"Like who do you suggest?"

Darcey looks at me. "If it's worth ten thou, it must be a number one. That's Chuckles' line. Send him out."

The boss looks at me and laughs. "This one ain't in his line. His line took the long count years ago. It takes some brains and some finesse for this one." He looks at the card again and then back at Darcey. "I didn't like it at first either, because I didn't remember you. But now I see you, I think maybe the machine is right. Those six years rubbed off good on you. You *look* legit."

"Machine! What gives with you guys anyway?"

"We got a brain in the basement," I says, to put in my two bitsies so he'll think I ain't so dumb as he thinks I am.

"You got a what?"

"A computer," the boss says proudly. "A mechanical brain. We've turned modern since you

was here. No crazy mistakes."

"You're turned nuts," Darcey says.

"Just about the smartest nuts you've ever seen," the boss says.

"With our efficient organization, we got this whole sector of the good old U.S.A. all tied up. Why, since we put in this thing, we got fingers on anybody that was ever in the organization, any cop that ever took a bribe, contacts, schedules, distribution, payoffs; you name it, that machine has it. We've run all the competition out of town. Even New York and Chi have begun coming to me for dope. Pretty soon I'll have enough on their organizations to move them out too. Don't call me a nut, Darcey. I'm going to be number one in the country soon."

"So three big cheeses for you, what's it got to do with me?"

"We got this problem. There's this broad we used to know. She's got to be scrunched because she knows too much. The machine says that if she's just bumped, there's a 72.05% chance that I get had because of some letters she's got. The machine says the best bet is to make her go for someone new, for him to get those letters away, and then bump her in a way that the cops are left looking for the new boyfriend. We ran what we know about her into the ma-

chine to find out who in the organization she'd go for. It's like them college games they play with these machines. You know, matching lovers. It says you're 99.43% sure for this job—not only that you attract her, but that you scratch her. I like them odds."

"Your machine flipped its tubes. I'm legit and I never did no number one anyway."

"It says we got enough on you to twist your elbow."

"You're nuts," Darcey says again, but weaker.

The boss looks at the card. "It says that if we open our traps there's a 62.345% chance of getting you hung up on the old First National job without getting ourselves involved, and 89.62% on the Morgan Trust job. A guard got rubbed on that one, didn't he?"

"It was Blinky White triggered him."

"Blinky's dead, it's 89.62% you can be had. There's some more here, want to hear them?"

"Does it say it's 100% that I go to the cops? And with evidence that machine of yours must be packing, it's 110% that they'll be so happy they'll let me off?"

The boss rolls his cigar back to the middle of his mouth and gives him his mean look. "Listen," he says, "don't get wise or you don't live five more minutes. See this

thing?" He points at a box on his desk with a red, a blue, and a green button. "Without I punch buttons ten times in an exact order, that machine don't work. It starts forgetting instead of answering. If the cops ask it something without I play the tune, they find the machine with amnesia. There ain't nobody knows the combination but me. Now, do you play, or do I blow the whistle?"

Darcey played. At least he took the paper the brain wrote that told him where to meet the dame, what to talk about to get her interested, how fast to go, and all the other stuff. The paper gave him seven days to get her to Mexico, three days to scratch her, and four days to cover his tracks and get back with the letters and get the ten-G payoff.

When he is gone, the boss looks at me and says, "Chuckles, I don't like it."

The boss don't talk to me that I answer. He has me there because I'm big enough to scare people and because he don't like that people think he talks to himself. I don't say nothing, but I agree. Darcey don't act the man for the job.

The boss turns on that other box on his desk, the one that talks to people like a telephone, only louder, and says, "Numbers."

Now this Numbers is twenty-

four gold carrots if I ever seen them. He's a boy that belonged to one of the old mob that was rubbed out back in the black-market days. He's called Numbers because he's so good with them. He could do all those 'divided bys' and 'times this' or 'times that' before he could ask for jellybeans. The boss sent him away to college and when he was sixteen and come back, he started talking numbers until the boss finally bought him the electric brain. Numbers is what they call a genius, but except for that, he's dumber than me. He don't think about nobody, not even the boss, and half the time he don't even know when somebody's talking to him. He's so crazy about that brain that finally the boss had to put him a bed in the basement and send him meals there so he could eat and sleep with it. I think if that brain could walk, he'd marry it.

When finally he comes on the telephone box it's with that voice what sounds like he's talking from out in air like one of them sat-a-lights you hear all about these days. "Yes?" he says.

"Is all that dope on Monday's heroin shipment ready?" the boss asks.

"Most of it, but I became distracted mentally calculating interception frequencies of orbiting

bodies. You'll have to open the channel again."

The boss punches the buttons on his desk, red-blue-green-green-red-blue-red-green-green-blue. "It's open," he says, "and I can hear Numbers feeding the thing."

Pretty soon it stops, and Numbers says, "I'll interpret this and send it up shortly."

"What I wanted," says the boss, "is to find out if you're sure about what the machine said about this Darcey and the Loveleg dame."

"What?" says Numbers from the moon. "About what?"

The boss looks at the card. "It was process 131-47296-4212."

"Oh that," says Numbers. "A rather elemental cybernetic problem. What's the matter?"

"The machine says it's 99.43% sure. Is that right?"

"There can be a certain, computable margin of error due to discrepancies of the available data."

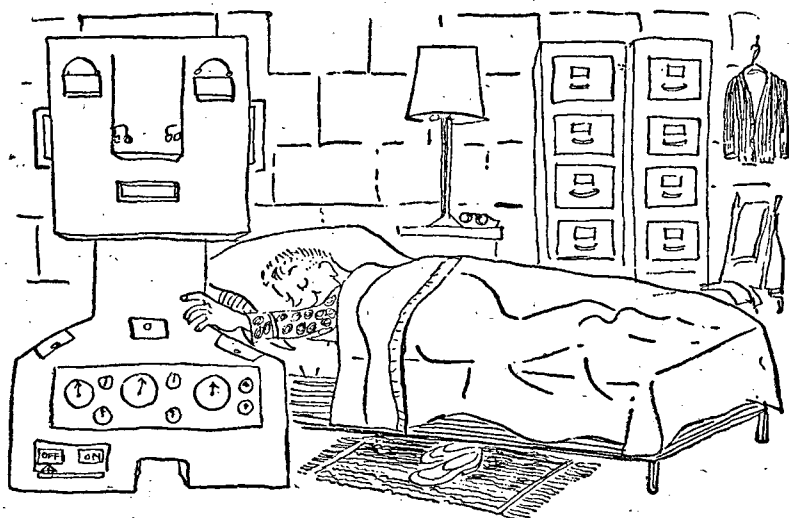
"What's that mean?"

"That if the information processed is accurate, the resulting solution is correct."

The boss hangs up, but I guess he still ain't satisfied because he says to me, "Chuckles, I guess you better earn your beans a little."

"Boss?" I says.

"I think you better keep a eye on this Darcey for a day or two. Do you think you can manage it with-



out you get in trouble?" he asks.

It wasn't hard to do. This Love-leg dame is society that likes to mingle, and that car of hers is as easy to tail as a Mack truck. That night this Darcey has her picked up already and next day they're already making like Bill and Co. So the boss sits a little cooler, takes me off their tail, and eases up worrying a little.

Everything is Uncle Dory over the weekend, but Monday the fat is in the fan. We get this call from the coast that says that the boat with the heroin has rendezvoused with a regular Coast Guard patrol, and that the plane it was supposed to meet run out of gas looking for it and fell in the drink.

Real quick the boss turns on his

telephone and screams for Numbers. "There's something wrong with that machine," he yells.

Numbers keeps his cool, says he don't believe it none but he'll look it over and ring us back. About a half hour later, when the boss has his nails about chewed off to the hammer, Numbers calls back. "A most unexpected and, in my experience, most unprecedented thing," he says.

"I don't care about presidents," the boss screams. "What happened?"

"It's a loose connection on a secondary circuit," Numbers says.

"What's it done?" the boss says, like a father that's just been told his kid's in jail.

"It's a minimal defect that I

should estimate had influenced no more than 10% of the problems we have given it. Even then, that ten percent of problems will still be about 85% accurate."

The boss looks a little relieved. "How long has it been doing this?" he asks.

"I conducted a circuit check a week ago," Numbers says, "so it must be since then."

"How long to run the last week through again?"

"I still have the programming," Numbers says. "It should necessitate no more than two hours."

When the cards finally come up we see that, besides the heroin shipment, there's little changes in two other capers and they can still be fixed. The only other thing is the Darcey one. Now the brain says it's 99.999% that Darcey gets the Loveleg dame to go head over ape for him, but the pari-mutuel window is down to only 42% that he's the one to rub her—even in spite of all we got on him.

The boss don't like them odds, but it's already Monday and on Tuesday Darcey is to take her to Mexico. He's afraid if he calls Darcey off now or sends someone else out it's liable to queer the thing or blow the whistle, so he decides to hold his hand pat and see what gives.

Wednesday we sees in the soci-

ety part of the morning paper that this Loveleg broad has copped out to Mexico with her new boyfriend. It don't give no name, but we put our money on it's Darcey.

Just like on the schedule we give him, seven days after he goes to Mexico Darcey walks into the office. He don't say nothing but just steps up to the desk where the boss is at and plunks down a bundle. Even from where I am by the door, I can see it's a bunch of letters. The boss don't say nothing neither but takes a wad of bills out of the desk and tosses it up next to the letters. He rolls his cigar over to the side of his mouth, and I can see he's grinning because he's feeling pretty good at winning a bet that's only about four to ten in his favor.

"I don't want the dough," Darcey says.

The boss puts the cigar back in the middle of his face and narrows his eyes. "What gives?" he says.

"She ain't dead," Darcey tells him.

"Why not?"

"We tied the knot," Darcey says. "We got hitched. She's waiting for me down in Cuernavaca. I come back to give you them," he points at the letters, "and to tell you to lay off. She ain't going to blow the whistle. She says why can't we just forget it."



"It's no go," the boss says. "She's got to be creamed."

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes," says the boss, and it is, because for a heist man that Darcey is neater with a rod than what is normal. I find it out because he pulls one out from under his coat and plugs the boss twice right between the eyes.

Then he turns around and points the thing at me. "Well, Chuckles," he says, "I guess you got your eyes so full I got to close them too."

"Wait a minute," I says.

"What for?"

"I could have dropped you six times while you was gunning the boss," I says, "but I figure me and you can talk."

"What's your game?" he asks.

"You take them bills and walk out and, like you says, we forget everything."

"What's that leave you?"

"It leaves me the boss."

"Ha!" says Darcey in an unbelieving way. "Chuckles, you ain't got it upstairs to be boss."

"Watch this," I says, and walks to the boss' desk. I punch the telephone box, and when Numbers comes on I says, "Numbers, the boss has gone to other parts and won't be back."

"Oh?" says Numbers from somewhere out near Mars. "I hope he has a pleasant trip."

"Numbers," I says then, "I was thinking that maybe we need another one of them mechanic brains so that you have something to do when you ain't working."

"Are you serious?" he asks, after the quickest trip ever from Mars back to Earth. "By all reports, the new three digital models are vastly more interesting."

"Then that's just what I'll get you," I says. "But there's one little item I want you to take care of first. I want you to wipe out everything the brain knows about this here Darcey and the Loveleg broad."

"Who?"

I find the card and says, "It's the personages the brain calls 131-47296-4212."

"Oh, them again? Most certainly, boss. Clear the channel if you will."

The boss never told me them buttons. I guess he figured I was so dumb I'd never remember them, but I seen him punch them so many times I could do it in my sleep even. I reach over and play them red-blue-green-green-red-blue-red-green-green-blue, just like he always used to do.

"You see," I says to Darcey, who had the rod put up by now, "I figure I got so much down there in the basement that I don't got to have nothing upstairs."

*It is difficult at best to observe certain dictates, but one can take heart in seeing circumvention through improvisation.*



**D**ETECTIVE Lieutenant Herb Finlay sat on the porch of his vacation cabin, defying his rocking chair to rock. It was only a minor disobedience of doctor's orders, but it gave him satisfaction to sit motionless in the chair and glower at the treetops and coastline of Maine, towards the deer he wasn't hunting and the fish he couldn't land.

The department MD had been definite about the restrictions. "For a cop like you, Finny," he'd grunted, "hunting and fishing is no relaxation, it's just like catching crooks. I want you to *rest*, and I mean rocking-chair rest, you old fool."

Finny wasn't old, of course, only fifty-nine; it was his arteries that had aged too rapidly. One fine morning, on his way to make the

# Cop in a Rocker

six hundred and twenty-fourth pinch of his career, he was seized forcibly by the heart and sentenced to bed. He got time off for good behavior and was remanded to the custody of fresh air, sunshine, and total rest. "Don't even move," he was told. "Forget you're a cop and be a vegetable." After thirty-two years, it was his toughest order.

Finny picked up his field glasses and poked around the trees with his condor's eyes. Where the land met the water he saw a cluster of neat little houses with white roofs, baking like cookies in the broiling



noonday sun. He watched the houses for a good ten minutes. Then he tilted back the chair and tried to sleep. Five minutes later he was using the binoculars again, training them on the houses once more. Eventually he got up, went into the cool interior of the cabin, and picked up the telephone. He tested the length of the cord, and found it was possible to bring the instrument right to the rocker. He squared it on his lap, and dialed the hotel operator.

"Would you get me Mr. Bryer?" he said. She did, and Bryer came on like the innkeeper he was. "Yeah, everything's fine, fine," Finny said sourly. "It's paradise on earth. Only I wanted to ask you something. You know anything about that bunch of houses over near the lake? Looks like oh, maybe three, four miles from here, southeast."

Bryer's reply was apologetic. "You must mean the Rose Valley Development. Little stucco houses with white roofs? Ruin the landscape, but that's progress."

"How many homes are there?"

"A dozen. All of 'em been sold except three. But listen, if you're thinking of settling in the area—"

"Just curious," Finny said flatly. "You wouldn't happen to know the families in those houses, would you?"

"Me? No, sir, that's none of my business. Bill Jessup can tell you; he's the real estate king in this part of the world. Why do you want to know?"

"That's none of your business, too."

Finny hung up and got the operator again. He traced Jessup's number through information, and was talking to the real estate king himself two minutes later.

"Sure, I know the families, I sold every one personally. Who wants to know?"

"My name," Finny said carefully, "is Detective Lieutenant Herbert Finlay," stressing the title.

Jessup threw a list of names at him. Finny had no interest in the Buchanans, who were out of town visiting Mrs. Buchanan's mother; or the Sandhursts, who were abroad; or the Parkers, who were on vacation (where do you go when you leave Maine? Finny wondered); or in the other four families who hadn't moved in yet. The remaining five were the Cotters, the Wilsons, the Twynams, the Pilchaks, and the Smileys.

"Any flap about these families?" Finny asked. "Any interesting gossip, stuff like that?"

"Now look," Jessup said with a dry edge to his voice, "I'm a real estate man, not the town tattler. You want gossip, talk to Hal

Crump, not me. I'm too busy."

"Who's Hal Crump?" Finny asked.

Crump turned out to be the star columnist of the local paper, a six-sheeter called *The Yankee Trader*. He was affable enough on the phone, and was only too eager to supply Finny with what he wanted.

"The Cotters now," Crump giggled, "they're newlyweds, so we don't see much of them. The Wilsons are in their mid-fifties; all *they* ever do is watch TV. The Twynams are an old New England family, quiet people. The Pilchaks are moody. The Smileys are the worst of the lot; he drinks and knocks her around, and the police have been there five or six times already . . ."

"Ah," Finny said, comforted by the nice round word, "police."

He placed his next call to the station house, and got a good gruff sergeant's voice on the other end.

"My name's Finlay," he said. "Detective Lieutenant, Homicide, Eighth Precinct." Then he asked his question.

The sergeant answered, "Smiley? Heck, yes, we answered three squeals at his house in the past week, one of them only yesterday. He's a wife-beater. Knocks her around something fierce, and she's

a frail thing, like a little doll."

"Where's he now? In custody?"

"No, we couldn't hold him; he got up the bail. Matter of fact, he went home only a couple of hours ago, and he had that red-eyed look. Wouldn't be surprised if we get another call tonight."

"Just one more question," Finny said. "Do the Smileys live in the third house on the east side of the development? Near the birch trees?"

"Why, yes, that's the house."

"Then I wouldn't wait for that call, Sergeant," Finny said. "I'd get right over there this minute."

"What's that?"

"Go on," the detective said harshly. "Hitch up the wagon and start moving, before you're too late."

"What's happening? He beating up on her again?"

"This time," Finny said grimly, "I think it's murder."

His telephone rang an hour later. Finny had fallen asleep in the hot sun, the instrument still cradled in his lap, and he almost

tipped over the old rocking chair.

"Lieutenant?" The sergeant's voice was shrill. "For Pete's sake, how did you know? I mean that cabin of yours—it's four miles away!"

"What's the story?" Finny asked. "What was going on at the Smileys'?"

"We were too late to do anything, but the old lady didn't give us any trouble. She was just sitting around in the basement, with that bloody axe on the floor, waiting for the furnace to burn up the old guy's body. Who knows? She might even have gotten away with it, if you hadn't called us. But how did you *know*, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, it just came to me," Finny said, a pleasant warm feeling spreading inside him. "When I saw those nice little houses, and that chimney smoking like sixty for half an hour, I got to wondering what the heck anybody would be burning on the hottest day of the year."

After he hung up, he began to rock contentedly back and forth.



*Procrastination, purportedly "the art of keeping up with yesterday," has been known to induce a bright tomorrow.*



## The TENTH PART of a Million

ON the day Walter J. Ferris lost his striking blonde secretary to the marriage mill, he was seen peering through the glass partition of the typing pool. Beside him was Mr. Gates, the office manager.

Paula Reynolds, easily the most attractive typist of the group, watched Mr. Ferris covertly from

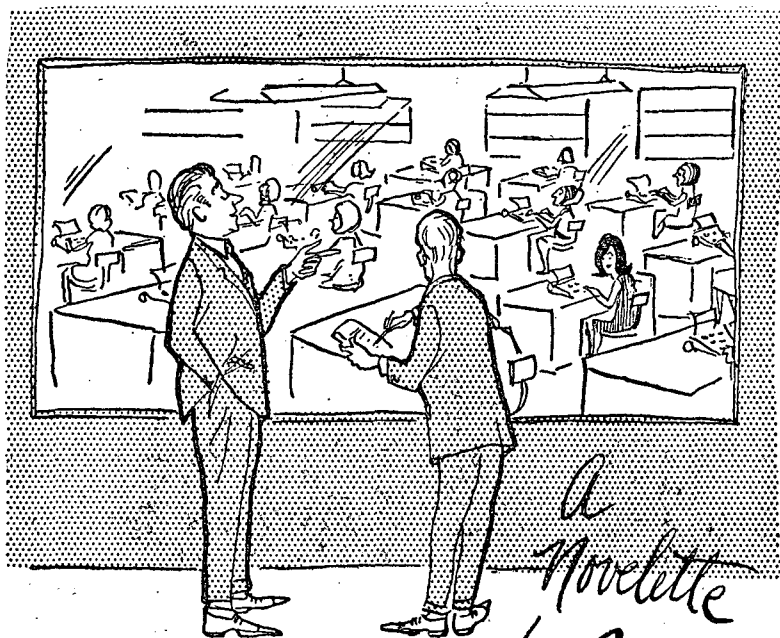
the corner of her eye. Mr. Gates was nervously attentive to the president of this great New York textile company which bore his name, and followed the scanning gaze of Mr. Ferris alertly, writing something in a notebook every time Mr. Ferris spoke with a barely perceptible movement of his lips.

Then, as suddenly as he had come, Mr. Ferris vanished, presumably returning to that mysterious sanctum of the high brass three floors above.

His departure was followed immediately by an undeclared cease-fire in the typing lines, those machine gun bursts being replaced by tittering speculation. Every girl present was aware the job of private secretary to Mr. Ferris was a

you were queen, looking down upon all the other secretaries and even certain minor executives who dared not cross you.

Finally, there was Mr. Walter J. Ferris, who was himself something of a prize. Still in his early forties, Mr. Ferris was tall and lean with an abundant thatch of dark brown hair. He was a dedicated believer in physical fitness and beneath his expensively tailored suits there was



big prize with splendid advantages.

For openers, it offered a thirty-five dollar a week raise. There was no great volume of work; and you had your own little office where

*A  
Novellette  
by Robert  
Colby*

the hint of solid muscle and coiled strength. His features were not pretty or regular, but handsome in the way of certain awesome rock formations which arrest the attention because of their rugged magnificence.

He was married—three times married, in fact—but he had never allowed his marital status to dim the gleam in his eye or distract him from his tireless interest in beautiful women. More, he was a millionaire—and generous to come-ly females who delighted him.

Thus, when three quite lovely girls from the typing pool were called separately to his office for an interview, the moment was somewhat as breathless as the judging of the Miss America finals. In the end, Paula Reynolds was chosen. This came as a surprise because, of the three, only Paula was married, and usually Mr. Ferris wasted no time on married females.

Yet, in the looks department Paula was irresistible. She was twenty-six, had shoulder length hair of burnished ebony, a flawless dainty heart of a face with darkly passionate eyes, and a slender willowy figure which blossomed in all the right places.

Paula was perhaps more surprised than anyone else, not only when she got the job, but by what

Mr. Ferris said as he presented the crown.

Swiveling easily in his massive chair behind his massive desk, and smiling in a way that would have seemed a leer on the face of a man of lesser distinction, he said, "Well, Paula my dear, you have only one strike against you."

"And what's that, Mr. Ferris?"

"You're married!"

"I know," she replied quickly, "and so are you! But I don't hold it against you, Mr. Ferris."

He laughed suddenly, gleefully. "At first I thought you were only beautiful," he said. "Now I find that you are also charming and—likeable, for lack of a better word."

He swung about and for a moment gazed down through a wall of glass at the toy streets and the bustling toy people of Manhattan, forty-two stories below. When he had circled back to her he said, "Do you love your husband, Paula?"

"Of course I love him," she answered breezily, though she smiled in a teasing manner which left the matter in just the right shade of doubt; for if Paula understood anything at all, she understood men.

"Report here in the morning, Paula," Mr. Ferris said briskly, snatching the receiver from one of the phones on his desk. "I'll call



down and notify Mr. Gates of my decision."

That evening Paula took the good news home to Larry, her husband, who was a shipping clerk for a mail-order house. Taxes and the high cost of living swallowed his small salary in one great gulp and, even though Paula brought in her share, they were forced to live on a tight budget, saving for a house on Long Island while they rented a shabby apartment on the Westside.

Being young and in love, Larry's dreams of success and riches were only now becoming slightly tarnished by the corrosion of lasting failure. A medium sized, husky man of thirty-two with sandy hair and boyish features, his sharp blue eyes denied his look of innocence. They were quick, knowing eyes, sometimes merrily mischievous.

Although Larry was usually easy-going, amiable, he was occasionally taken by violent bursts of temper, especially when his jealousy over Paula was aroused. Not that she gave him cause, but she was the sort who turned more heads than a Davis Cup tennis match.

"Thirty-five more a week?" Larry repeated, sprinkling cheese on his heaping plate of spaghetti. "Hey now, that's more like it!" Pursing his lips, he calculated their

total income in the light of Paula's raise. "At that rate," he mused, "we should have the down for the house by the first of next year."

"Mmmm," Paula nodded slowly, "but that would still be about six months off." She glanced around her disgustedly. "I don't know if I can bear this dismal place another six months."

"Ahh, don't be a killjoy, sweetheart. We'll do what we have to do." He studied her, his eyes narrowing. "How did you get the job, anyway? Thought you were only a so-so typist. They just pick your name out of a hat or something?"

Paula smiled her teasing smile.

"Oh," he said, "it was that way, huh? I should've known."

"It wasn't *that* way at all," she defended. "A few girls were sent up to Mr. Ferris for an interview. I got the job."

"It was still *that* way," Larry insisted. "After Ferris got one good look at you he didn't care if he had to write his letters longhand. Just another potbellied old lecher," he sneered.

"Not that it matters, dear," said Paula with a dash of sarcasm, "but if Mr. Ferris has a pot belly he hides it beautifully. He's trim, tall and rugged, not much over forty, and quite good looking, if you like the type."

"And you like the type, I suppose?"

"Darling, please don't be childish. I was only having a little fun with you. You know I love you. And the only thing I see when I look at Mr. Walter J. Ferris is money. Money, money."

"How much is a guy like that worth?" Larry asked, his mood changing abruptly.

"Millions!"

"Millions," Larry repeated in an awed tone of voice. A man who thought of little else but money, his whole existence was dominated by fruitless schemes and hopeless dreams revolving around quick riches.

"How could Ferris have made it so fast, Paula? I mean, if he's only a little better than forty, how did he get control of a big textile company?"

"Simple," answered Paula. "His grandfather built the company and left it to his father. When his father died, it went to him."

Larry shook his head bitterly. "I never could understand this world. No justice. None at all." He took a sip of iced tea, lighted a cigarette. "A guy like that, gets his first look at life from a solid gold cradle in a room where the wallpaper is made of money. He's a born winner, he can't lose. It's already decided that he'll be president of the

old man's company before he knows what the word means. You call that fair?"

"Oh, you haven't heard the half of it," said Paula. "Grace Comstock, the gal I'm replacing, told me that W. J. sheds wives like soiled clothes. He's on his third. They have a big place in Sands Point, a penthouse in town, and a waterfront home in Florida, complete with a yacht. They fly to Europe whenever the mood strikes them, and once a year they go on a luxury cruise to some fascinating part of the world. Imagine!"

"Sorry," said Larry with a sad little smile, "I can't quite imagine all that. It must be on another planet. Maybe it's called heaven. But I've got one thing Ferris hasn't, and that's you! Just let him once get playful with my girl, and I'll kill'm with my bare hands. I'll break him up in sections you could feed a cat!"

Paula chuckled, but only to cover a stab of fear. Larry wasn't kidding! One time when they were down at the corner bar a man had tried to get cute with her. Larry would have strangled that man to death if they hadn't pulled him off in time, and Larry had warned that if she ever deserted him for another man, that man would live no longer than it took Larry to find him. This was a side of Larry



which disturbed Paula, kept her always a little on edge.

Near the close of her third month in the new job, Mr. Ferris told Paula he was wildly in love with her, but Paula pretended not to take him seriously.

"If you *really* loved me," she said, closing her dictation book and offering up a sly wisp of smile, "you'd do something noble for me. Like, you might give Larry a job as vice-president in charge of—the mail room, or something. Then we could live in the style you'd like us to become accustomed to."

Mr. Ferris was not amused. He came from behind the little office bar which vanished when you pushed a button. Solemnly, he offered Paula a martini, then sat on a corner of his desk and stirred his own drink with a toothpick impaled olive.

"I'm afraid," he said unsmilingly, "vast as my love for you is, dear Paula, it does not include Larry. As a matter of fact, there is no room at all for Larry in this very pleasant picture I am trying to visualize."

"Oh?" said Paula, snickering. "Poor Larry. Whatever shall we do with him?"

"We could," said Mr. Ferris, "dispose of him in the same way I am disposing of Nadine."

"That sounds pretty grim," Paula

replied lightly, a smile on her lips.

"Not at all." Mr. Ferris reached across his desk for a gold lighter and flamed his cigarette. "I sent Nadine out to Lake Tahoe for a Nevada divorce. Very friendly. It's all agreed."

Paula could barely conceal her astonishment. "Well," she said numbly, "I certainly hope that this has nothing to do with—"

"No," said Mr. Ferris, "we've been drifting apart for some time. All three of my marriages have been terrible mistakes. It's as if, unconsciously, I married the sort of dull social flowers my father would have chosen for me. He did actually arrange my first marriage, and I thought there was too much at stake to cross him.

"But until I met you, Paula, love was just a word, not a heart-twisting emotion that drives every other thought from my mind."

"I'm flattered," Paula said sincerely. What had begun as an exciting little game with no end result but the expansion of her ego, now seemed madly out of control. How could she retreat gracefully and keep her job? She decided to play it by ear.

"About Larry," said Mr. Ferris, "did you ever think of divorcing him?"

"No, it never occurred to me. Why should it? And even if I did

want to divorce him, I couldn't."

"Why?"

"Because he wouldn't let me."

"Nonsense, Paula. How could he stop you?"

"Well, he would know there had to be another man involved. And he would hunt that man down and kill him."

"You're joking," Mr. Ferris said.

"If you think I'm joking, then that's only because you don't know Larry. He's perfectly normal and sane—except when it comes to me. He has this crazy, violent thing about me. Take my word, if it cost him his life, he'd kill any man who tried to steal me away." This startling truth might keep him at a safe distance, she hoped.

Mr. Ferris frowned. "I believe you," he said. "Though I'm not exactly the violent type, I can understand how he might feel that way about someone like you." He drained his glass in a gulp. "Well," he added mysteriously, "that does pose a problem."

"It does? What sort of problem?"

"Some other time, when you're in a more receptive mood, I'll tell you."

Paula was now intensely curious and wanted to hear more, but his manner closed the subject. He was withdrawn as he crossed the room and stared silently down into the shadows of late afternoon envelop-

ing the city. She quietly left him.

Paula did not mention the incident to Larry. No use stirring up trouble needlessly. She would gaily, laughingly, tell him the whole crazy story later, when Walter Ferris got around to showing all his cards.

Meanwhile, she was overcome with curiosity. If he came up with some sort of sly, nasty proposition, she would probably lose her temper, and her job. On the other hand, if a man like Walter J. Ferris, who could take his pick of almost any woman in the world, was truly serious about her . . .

How exciting that would be! With pride, with a wistful air of nobility and self-sacrifice, she would be able to say to her girl friends, ". . . Only a word, just *one* word, and I could have been Mrs. Walter J. Ferris, the wife of a millionaire, living in luxury for the rest of my life! But of course, I turned him down for the love of Larry. And I've never been sorry . . ."

When more than three weeks passed, and Mr. Ferris was merely kind and attentive without once returning to the subject of his undying love for her, Paula was disappointed. Perhaps he had only been playing a sneaky game to see if she were ripe for seduction. But no, he had never made a single

pass at her. He was almost aloof.

It had to be Larry. He was afraid of Larry. Why, oh why, had she told him the truth about Larry? Now she would never know what he had really intended.

On a Monday morning several days later, Mr. Ferris did not appear at the office. He called in to tell Paula he had some personal matters to attend to and was taking the day off. There were, however, some business letters which had to go out and he was sending his chauffeur to bring Paula to his penthouse on Sutton Place.

Paula smelled something in the wind but she was more excited than alarmed. Riding across town in the long sparkling limousine, she tried to look casual and just a bit haughty, pretending that she was, indeed, Mrs. Walter J. Ferris, a person so accustomed to splendid living that she was just a little bored with it all. People turned to stare enviously at her and she felt very grand.

An elegant English butler bowed her into the study of the penthouse, his manner so obsequious she could have been royalty. Sitting by the window in that quietly regal sanctuary, glancing down at the bland surface of the East River, Paula felt as if she had entered the gates of paradise.

Larry had been right. A man

like Walter Ferris was so removed from pettiness and squalor, from the noisy shoving masses in their grubby surroundings, he might just as well exist on another planet.

Shortly, Mr. Ferris, impeccably attired in a suit of deep rich blue, entered the room. He was followed by a petite French maid carrying a tray. She set an enormous breakfast beside Paula, then quickly retired, closing the door behind her.

Paula was too nervous to eat. She drank coffee and nibbled on a Danish as Mr. Ferris chatted easily but impersonally. If romance was on his mind, or if he had anything momentous to tell her, he was certainly saving it.

Feeling that she should be relieved, Paula was irritated, but when Mr. Ferris graciously asked if she would mind taking some dictation, she smiled sweetly and went to work. An hour of this and Mr. Ferris glanced at his watch, said he had to leave for his home in Sands Point. It was late August and he would not be using the house again until next summer. There were certain instructions concerning the closing and maintenance of the place which he had to give the help.

Would Paula like to come along, continuing her dictation enroute? She would.

When they were about to leave,

Mr. Ferris asked if she would care to look around the penthouse. As if walking on clouds they moved over whisper-soft carpets through a livingroom large enough to swallow two apartments like her own. They drifted down softly illumined hallways, glancing into spacious, silky-lush bedrooms, four of them, all in unique shapes, each with its own lovely decor. Four bedrooms—and five baths! A handsome dining room, the study, a large kitchen, servants' quarters, a garden terrace; with every piece of furniture exquisite, while throughout there was a pleasant, muted atmosphere, an air-conditioned silence which excluded the whole dreary world of toil below.

*Marvelous, marvelous!* thought Paula, but she said little because Mr. Ferris was so indifferent that she did not want to seem stupidly unsophisticated.

The summer day was sticky-hot, but in the air-conditioned limousine it was cool and serene. Like magic, a tiny bar appeared and Mr. Ferris produced chilled, ready-made cocktails. Sipping, he spoke carelessly of his winter home in Florida, showing Paula a snapshot, moving on to other subjects, such as his cruise around the Pacific, stopping at such exotic places as Hawaii, Tahiti, Hong Kong and Tokyo.

Then he began to dictate but, to Paula's relief, he had hardly begun when they arrived at the house in Sands Point. They wound over a long, twisting drive past stables and a tennis court before they halted in front of a charming Cape Cod sort of house which rambled endlessly in all directions. Expecting an austere formal mansion, which she despised, Paula was delighted.

An hour later, as they sat together on a wrought-iron love seat in a cloistered garden near the swimming pool, Mr. Ferris said, "Well, Paula, what do you think of all this?" He made a sweeping gesture, big enough to include his whole empire.

"I'm positively in love with everything I've seen!"

"In that case," said Mr. Ferris, watching her intently, "I'll make you a present of it. This place, the penthouse, my home and yacht in Florida, my whole way of life. All yours, Paula—if you'll marry me. For my part, there would be no problem. My divorce papers came in this morning's mail."

Swiftly, as Paula sat gaping, he reached an arm around her and kissed her. She was much too overwhelmed to resist for more than a moment, after which she joined in the kiss, presenting it as a reward to this man who had just

offered to make her queen of his rich kingdom.

When he told her again how much he loved her, she said, "But Mr. Ferris, I can't—"

"I do wish you'd call me Walter," he pleaded.

"But I can't possibly marry you—Walter. Have you forgotten Larry?"

"On the contrary, I've given Larry a great deal of thought. Could we buy him off?"

"Never! If the price were right, you could buy anything in the world from Larry—but me. Anyway, it's foolish to discuss Larry at this point. I haven't had a minute to consider my own feelings."

"Take all the time you want, Paula, dear."

Paula was confused. It was obvious that Larry was never going to have anything or be anything. And perhaps, chained to a life of semi-poverty, the dull monotonous years would soon crush her feeling for him.

On the other side, Walter was most attractive and you might easily grow to love a man who cultivated you in surroundings which were the stuff of the Hollywood dream makers. Only an idiot would dismiss a man like Walter Ferris with a few trite phrases about the comparative unimportance of money when you were in love.

Paula said, "I can't say how—how pleased and flattered I am that you would—but I'm happily married and I don't really know you, Walter. You seem kind, but you might turn out to be cruel. You seem generous, but you might be—"

"Darling," he interrupted, "didn't I just say that all of this is yours for the asking?"

"Yes, you did say that. But at the risk of sounding selfish, I want things of my own. Personal things, money to spend freely. Because, Walter, in my whole life I never had more than a few dollars that were mine alone."

Nodding, Walter smiled sympathetically. For a moment he sat in silent deliberation. "If you would help me erase Larry from the picture," he said, spacing his words dramatically, "then I would deposit the sum of one hundred thousand dollars to your personal account. Naturally, I would not do this until the day we were married, on the very day."

"A hundred thousand!" Paula exclaimed. "Oh my, oh my," she sighed, mentally rubbing her hands together, spending furiously. "But Larry would never give me up, even if I wanted him to. And he's dangerous. He might kill me, he would surely kill you."

"Then, as I said, we'll have to—"



erase him. It's the only way out."

"You can't mean—"

"Paula, if a man is going to act like an animal, then he should be treated like one. In self-defense, we can only destroy him before he destroys us."

Paula was shocked, revolted, but morbid curiosity and a hundred thousand dollars made her want to know the rest of it.

She said, "You've been thinking about this a long time, haven't you, Walter?"

"Yes."

"And what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about a cruise to the Caribbean. I had booked passage for two. Nadine won't be going now, of course, and we'll get another space for Larry. Since you'll both be my guests, how could he pass up such an offer?"

"There are thirteen nights at sea, and very late on one of those nights, Larry will have an accident. It will appear that he had too much to drink and fell overboard, though we'll assist his demise with what is popularly known as a Mickey Finn. Probably he'll never be found."

"I see," said Paula carefully. For a moment she sat rooted, her head slightly inclined, as if she heard the distant ticking of a bomb. "Well, I—I must say, that certainly gives me a lot to make up my

mind about, doesn't it, Walter?"

It took Paula three dreadful days to come to a decision. Late in the afternoon of the fourth day, when everyone on the executive floor had departed, they sat behind the locked door to Walter's office and discussed the details of the plan.

The cruise ship, Walter told her, would leave New York on a Saturday morning, week after next. It would make stops at Port Everglades, Nassau, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Somewhere along that route, at a time when the best opportunity presented itself, Walter would heave Larry from the stern of the ship. It would have to be in the hours after midnight when most people were in bed or partying, just as long as the decks were clear aft.

Larry would be plied with a good many drinks, enough so that he would be noticeably stoned at table and on the dance floor. Paula was to add a massive dose of chloral hydrate to his final drink, a triple-strength Mickey Finn. She would then guide him to the after deck, supposedly for fresh air.

Larry would be more than drunk when Walter sent him overboard; he would be totally unconscious. In such a state he would drown in the deep waters of the Atlantic.

Walter would return to his cabin, Paula would wait a good half hour before screaming that her husband had toppled over the rail. At eighteen knots, Larry would be more than nine miles behind—and who could say how many fathoms down?

"There will be an inquest," Walter said, "and you'll have to testify. That won't be fun. I may even be called myself. But soon after the inquest we'll be free to marry."

"When we get married," asked Paula, "won't they suspect?"

"Let them suspect," he replied. "By that time it won't matter. Because if they had a witness, they would have produced him. And without a witness, they've got nothing."

"About the hundred thousand," said Paula, who was thinking mostly of money. "Later, you won't change your mind—will you, darling?"

Walter smiled indulgently and kissed her. "Of course not, my dear," he soothed. "A hundred thousand is only the tenth part of a million. And I have many millions. Besides, you'll know too much, and I wouldn't dare cross you."

"That's true," she replied. "Yes, how true. But when it's over," she continued in a wheedling voice,

"I'll have to stay all alone in—that ugly apartment. For appearances' sake I won't be able to see you until after the inquest, at least. And I'll need a few little extras to cheer me—clothes, and spending money . . . You do understand, darling . . ."

Walter gave her a look which said she was an adorable, but spoiled child. He crossed to his desk and drew out his checkbook. He wrote swiftly and gave her the check. "There, start your bank account with that."

The check was for five thousand. "You *are* an angel," she cooed. "But I'll have to hide this from Larry! I'll lock it in my desk and make the deposit tomorrow on my lunch hour."

In order to insure Larry's presence on the voyage, Walter said, Paula was to tell him that *she had* to go. It was to be a command performance because Mr. Ferris would be dictating letters, sending cables in connection with stock transactions, and so on, and Mr. Ferris did not think it proper to take Paula on such a cruise unless her husband came along.

*What a laugh that was!* thought Paula, but she did agree that it was a foolproof idea.

A small problem developed. Larry had no vacation time coming, Paula reported, and it would

be necessary for him to take a leave of absence without pay. He was mighty upset about the loss of income. Walter said that was funny. If Larry but knew it, his money worries would soon be over, but Paula was to tell Larry that she had mentioned the problem to Mr. Ferris and her boss had said he would make it up to Larry out of his own pocket.

It was nearly two weeks before sailing time and Paula waited in a state of wretched anxiety. Clever as the plan was, she knew that any number of unexpected turns could bring disaster. But on a Saturday morning in September there she was, as if caught in the web of a frightful dream, mounting the gangplank beside Larry, Walter striding firmly ahead of them, taking charge of murder just as confidently as he took charge of everything else.

The whole incredible scheme got off to a bad start. Between Nassau and Jamaica, on a night when Walter was prepared to make his first attempt to put the plan into action, Larry became seasick. They were at table on the main deck, drinking it up, dancing, Paula and Walter trying to hoist Larry atop their wave of false gaiety.

But Larry, coasting in the wrong direction, had become increasingly silent. Suddenly he made a face,

clutched himself and hustled off. He remained in the cabin he shared with Paula for the next few days, missing Jamaica entirely, though he did come on deck just long enough to inspect the coastline.

Not until the ship docked at San Juan did he recover, going ashore in good spirits, making his apologies to Walter, promising to be a good sailor now that he had become better adjusted to the rolling of the ship.

Indeed, two hours after the ship had sailed at six on the following evening, he showed no signs of distress. He had eaten a hearty dinner and had declared himself fit, ready to attack the rest of the voyage with gusto.

On the pretext of dictating a long cable to his broker, Walter took Paula to the lounge. "This is it!" he said in a hushed voice. "We'll try again tonight. It's got to work because we haven't many chances left. You have the chloral in your purse?"

"I have it," she said nervously.

"Good. Now the orchestra plays until three a.m. and when they finish a few people will drift out on deck. So we'll stick to the plan and try to get our boy over the rail about two. That will give you plenty of leeway to wait a half hour, rush back into the saloon

and sound your distraught alarm.

"Be sure to steer him past my porthole near half past one so there won't be any guesswork on the timing. Load his last drink heavily with chloral, but don't wait for it to take effect. Remember, you can't carry him. Get him seated on deck, then he can black out for keeps.

"Meanwhile, I'll scramble around the after decks above and below, to make sure they're empty. If not, we'll just have to risk waiting until they are. Got all that?"

"Yes, but I—I'm terribly nervous. I'm frightened!"

"Don't be. No matter what happens, keep calm and bluff your way through brazenly. Now go back to Larry, and we'll all meet on the main deck at nine sharp."

Paula could not remember a more agonizing span of time than those hours between nine and two a.m. She felt as if the desperate smile she had clamped on her face had been set in cement and would never fade, even if she cried, even if she were struck on the lips with a hammer.

They were a ghastly threesome, so hectically gay, so frantically, falsely welded to fun and togetherness, the music throbbing, the drinks gurgling down as Walter ordered and re-ordered, Larry getting obediently drunk and boister-

ous, almost as if Walter had commanded him to do so.

Close to one o'clock, as the orchestra took a break, Walter sent Paula a look, then put his arm around Larry's shoulder and said, "This is a good fellow, Paula, a grand fellow. I like him. Yes, sir, I like this guy of yours! When we get back I'm gonna put him to work for *me*. Got a fine job in mind for your boy here, yes, sir! Would you like that, Larry?"

"Like it," said Larry. "Love it, love it! Betcha sweet life, Mr. Ferris," he cried, drumming the bottom of his glass on the table for emphasis.

"Call me Walter," said Walter J. Ferris.

"Walter then," said Larry. "Hell, make it Walt, even better. Hi ya doin', Walt, ole buddy?" He giggled.

Walter smiled thinly. "Drink up, drink up!" he said, lifting his glass. "To Paula, best secretary any man ever had. And beautiful too!"

They drank.

"And here's to the best ever-lovin' wife *I* ever had," announced Larry, giggling again, though his face went marble when he added, "and let no man, *no man*, cast his shadow between me and my ever-lovin' baby here, or I'll beat him deader than a junk-yard battery—you believe it!"

"Yes, well, I'm gonna turn in," said Walter, rising quickly. "Feeling groggy, you know. But this is my party, so you kids have a ball! I'll see you at breakfast, won't I . . . ?"

The next phase, right on schedule, went smoothly. Larry was docile, he staggered out willingly to get "fresh air." With satisfaction, Paula noticed that people gaped as she half-carried him from the room. That was important. There should be witnesses to his drunken condition. It would strengthen her story.

Paula hiked Larry around the deck, right past Walter's porthole. She did not see Walter, but knew he was there, watching in the darkness of his cabin. When they came to the stern of the ship, Paula eased Larry into a deck chair. Singing loudly, tunelessly, he sprawled across it.

Paula peered anxiously into the shadowy gloom about her, letting her eyes adjust to it. At first she could see no one. But then, with a start, she spied a young couple, locked against each other in a far corner by the rail. They had turned to watch Larry, to stare at her, but apparently they weren't going to play to an audience, and they moved off sheepishly.

When Walter loomed up in the darkness, Larry sagged in the chair,

sleeping like death, his face pale and flaccid.

"It's clear!" said Walter in a harsh whisper. "Did you give him the chloral?"

"Enough to knock out ten giants!"

"We'll see," said Walter, stepping toward Larry. "We'll make a little test."

He caught Larry by the hair and gave him a vicious swat across the face, then another. His head lolling, Larry slept on, oblivious.

"More dead than alive," mumbled Walter. He glanced about, then got a hold on Larry and, lifting him easily, moved toward the rail.

The ship rose and fell in a long, lazy seesaw. In its wake, a bubbling phosphorescent trail churned and glistened atop rolling hills of water. There was a mournful sighing of wind, a liquid hissing.

Trembling, Paula saw the vast, lonely ocean crouching under a cloud-draped sky, saw it as a pulsing evil monster waiting there.

She had changed her mind, wanted to cry out, but made only a feeble sound which was torn away by the wind as Walter completed the high, powerful swing. Letting go, he grinned insanely, muttered something about its being two hundred miles to the nearest land and a mile straight

down—so, here's to good luck.

Looking down, the distance from rail to water seemed immense, frightful. Sobbing now, sick in the deepest part of herself, Paula saw Larry's body entering the water obliquely and with only a small splash, the sound muted by wind and sea and the pounding thrust of the propeller.

She saw Larry come to the surface far behind, then he quickly faded from sight. Gone.

"There, there," Walter murmured as he held her against him. "It's all over, darling. Now buck up and be a good actress, the hysterical wife, the sad little widow . . ."

How superbly simple it all was after that. Everyone believed her story that, drunk, Larry had playfully mounted the rail and toppled overboard. The captain swung the ship about and cruised in circles for nearly three hours. Searchlights blazed, fanning the water, a small power boat was lowered, darting about like a child helping its mother search impossibly for a coin in an ocean of sand. Through-out, the crew and passengers were grave and sad and sympathetic.

The inquest, not as formal and grim as Paula had expected, produced not a hint of foul play. She was questioned politely, almost tenderly. The captain, members of

his crew and three passengers were also examined. All supported Paula's testimony eagerly; it was nearly as if they had seen it happen just as she had described it. Walter wasn't even called.

The verdict was accidental death. Man overboard, a drowning at sea.

Walter was so little-boy excited and pleased with the way it all turned out, he bought Paula a big blue convertible and in preparation for the wedding, a whole new wardrobe of expensive clothes.

He decided that under the circumstances it was needless to wait as long as planned. They would have a secret civil ceremony and, with luck, perhaps the news wouldn't leak out for some time to come.

They were married at nine o'clock on a Friday morning, and at ten, as promised, Walter took Paula to the bank and deposited a cashier's check for one hundred thousand dollars to her account. However, he did spoil his image somewhat by telling her that if by some chance she decided to run off with the money, he would spill the entire can of beans. Paula didn't believe for one minute that he would do any such thing, but she pretended to be properly impressed.

They were catching a one o'clock plane for California, then on to

Hawaii. Walter said it was a delightful romantic place to spend a honeymoon, and Paula agreed that it probably was the best choice. Walter was picking Paula up at her apartment, the shabby one which she had shared with Larry, the one she was seeing for the last time.

Dressed in a lovely new frock, Paula was ready at noon when Walter arrived outside. Her bags were packed and grouped neatly together in the hallway—but Paula only smiled a wicked little smile and made no move to answer the repeated, urgent summons of the bell.

It was *Larry* who finally went to the door and swung it wide.

At that moment, if Walter wasn't having a heart attack, he was certainly in fearful pain, making horrible faces.

"Hello, Walt," said Larry softly. "Are you well, old buddy? I think he's got the seasickness," he told Paula over his shoulder.

"Come in, Walter," Paula said with a cat smile. "Have a drink—darling. You'll need it. Oh, you will very definitely need a drink, Walter dear."

Walter made a graceless, stumbling sort of entrance, then collapsed into a chair like a punctured balloon.

"Larry?" he said in a hoarse

whisper. "Is—is that you, Larry?"

Larry's smile mocked him. "It's Larry—Walt. Still a little damp and bruised, but very much alive. And I do thank you for your concern, buddy boy."

Walter groped for words. "How—how could you—"

"Tell him, Paula," said Larry. "We owe it to him. After all, Walt has been *extremely* generous."

"Oh, *hasn't* he though," agreed Paula. She poured herself a glass of champagne from a bottle which stood in an iced silver bucket beside her. "More champagne, Larry sweet?"

"Why, yes," Larry said expansively. "I believe I will. Walt? No . . . ? In that case, Paula baby, tell him that hundred thousand dollar story."

"Basically," Paula began, "it was a beautifully simple plan. Or would you call it a counter-plan?" She sipped her champagne happily. "Of course I had the advantage of being a spy in the enemy camp, so to speak. You see, Walter, pet, I brought home to Larry every step of your naughty little scheme, and Larry took those steps apart and figured, oh so cleverly, cleverly, how to resist them, make them work for us.

"To get our show on the road, we had to have money for certain expenses. What would we ever ac-

comply without money in this world? Right, Walter? Imagine my surprise when, after only a little prodding, dear Walter himself paid our expenses handsomely with a check for five thousand.

"Gambling on success, Larry quit his ridiculous little job the same day I got the check. His thin, underfed wallet now fat with your money, he went right down and grabbed a plane for Miami. From there he caught another little old plane and went island hopping around the Caribbean.

"Naturally, he stopped at the very same islands where that lovely cruise ship was scheduled to make port. And can you guess what Larry was hunting? Well, I won't keep you in suspense. He was searching for one of those big hundred-dollar-a-day charter fishing boats.

"I see you're beginning to get the, uh—what was it you called it, Walter?—oh, yes, the picture! Anyway, this charter boat had to be just right. It had to be large, and fast. Also, the captain and his mate had to be willing to uh, aid and abet, shall we say, a hoax.

"But such types are not always easy to find, and Larry didn't have any luck until he got to San Juan. There he found the perfect combination. For a thousand dollars he hired the boat and the men. Their

part was absurdly easy. All they had to do was follow that brilliantly lighted cruise ship out of San Juan and keep pace with it until the crucial moment. Meanwhile, they ran without lights, hidden well back in the darkness.

"You might be wondering, Walter, how we could arrange it so that you would dump Larry overboard on the route from San Juan, but we were always in control, could pick our own spot. Remember how Larry played seasick and didn't allow himself to become vulnerable until we left San Juan?

"Don't be restless, Walter. I'm almost finished. The moment you left the deck, after throwing Larry overboard, I signaled the boat with a powerful, shielded flashlight which I had concealed earlier, and Larry had his own waterproof signal light strapped to his body, so that he could be spotted quickly in the dark.

"There were certain risks, it was quite dangerous—and I was truly frightened the whole time. I nearly called it off, but now it all seems worthwhile. Oh, very! Because it's so nice to be rich. Not by your standards, Walter, but by our own.

"A hundred thousand is only the tenth part of a million, perhaps, but with our modest needs, we can live quite decently, thank you, on just the interest.



"Oh, the future is just positively unlimited, and how can we ever tell you of our *undying* gratitude, my dear, dear, Walter?"

"You're just a couple of con artists!" cried Walter. "It was a criminal trick, an obvious swindle! And I'll—I'll have you both arrested!"

"Will you?" said Larry. "How would you like to hear a tape recording of one of those murder-scheme chats you had with Paula in your office?"

"But I'm *married* to Paula," he whined.

"Not at all," said Larry, grinning. "I have returned. Tomorrow you'll be reading the story I told of how I *fell* overboard, had enough sense to remove some of my clothing so that I could better stay afloat until dawn when the captain of a certain fishing boat spied me and

plucked me from the water. My well-paid liars will swear that since I was wearing only my underwear and could remember nothing, they took me to their own home and out of the goodness of their big hearts, cared for me until my memory returned, even lending me money for the flight home.

"Would you want to deny that story, Walt? No. . . ? Then except for the formalities, your marriage is annulled, and mine is beginning all over again. C'mon, baby, let's get moving! Maybe Walt would be willing to help us down to your new convertible with some of the luggage.

"And Walt, old buddy, since I'll be going with Paula on *your* honeymoon, you wouldn't make us a gift of those two tickets to Hawaii—would you. . . ?"

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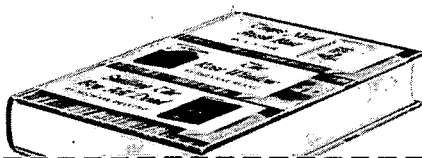
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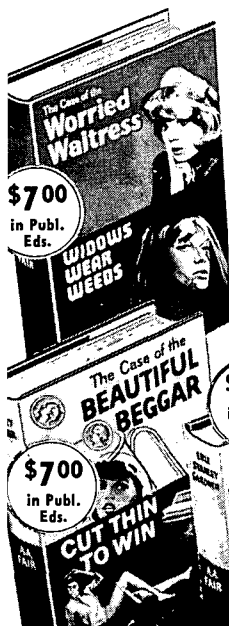
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