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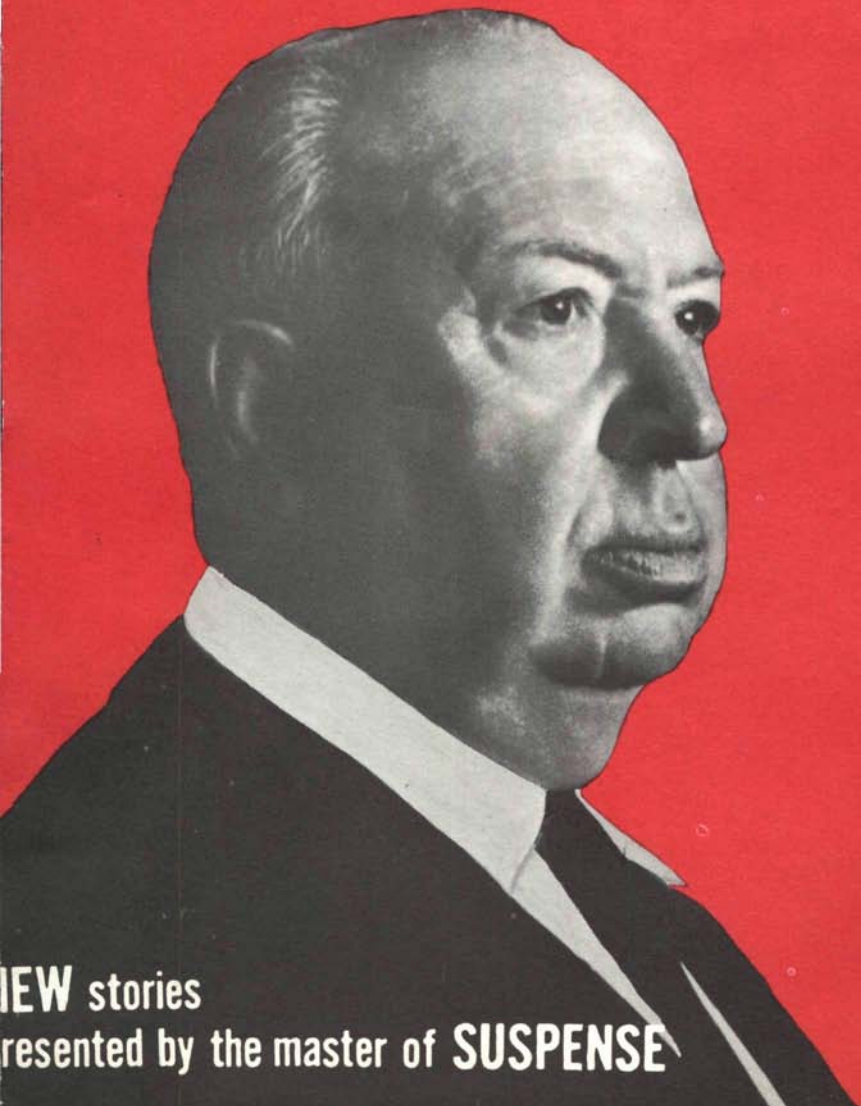
HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



IEW stories
resented by the master of SUSPENSE

December 1967

Dear Reader:

The year is growing old, and in rapid succession we will be gorged on turkey, depleted by gifting, and made liars by resolutions. However, none of this is really objectionable, for they are voluntary acts—like breathing.

Gift-wise, I have already heard of something for the man who has everything. The woman who would like some recompense may consider a necktie made of a new nonslip fabric, Squeezese. Once knotted, the tie will never slip, and is guaranteed to shrink relentlessly with the first drop of gravy.

For the distaffer who has everything, the impoverished man might enjoy giving a box of "Miss Terry" bath salts. It requires only one soaking in this substance to make the little lady's whereabouts unknown.

Both products are manufactured by the Happy Family Chemical Company. If, for some reason, there is no outlet near you, there is a gift idea par excellence on Page 133.

Now, gorge on the pre-holiday gifts that follow, wherein all concerned are resolved to do their best, whatever specialty that might be.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 12, NO. 12 DECEMBER 1967

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

CONTENTS

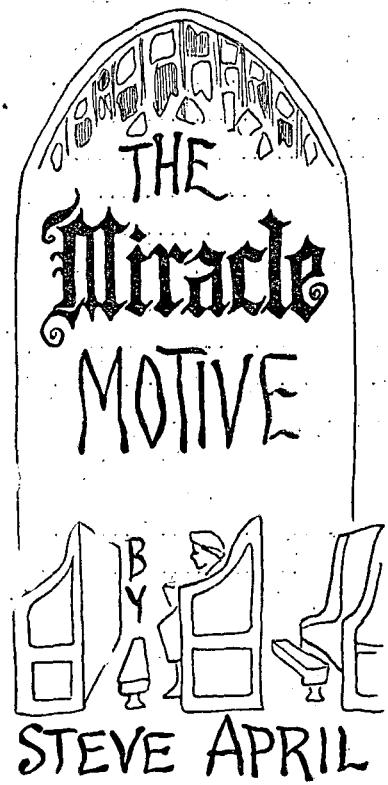
NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

Richard E. Decker, Publisher
Gladys Foster Decker, Editorial Director
Ernest M. Hutter, Editor
Patricia Hitchcock — Associate Editor
Marguerite Blair Deacon — Art Director

The person who succeeds beyond his expectations often realizes, belatedly, there is also merit in knowing when to stop.

AT 6:45 A.M. Sunday, carrying only her small, old purse and a worn, tooled leather Bible, Miss Nancy Evans left for church. She went to church every night; on Saturdays and Sundays she usually spent all day in church, sitting quietly between services. Thirty-three years old, tall and slim, she dressed as plainly as possible, wore no makeup. Her golden hair was dyed a grayish-black and pulled into a severe bun, in an effort to nullify the warm beauty of her pale face and blue eyes. Her long, shapely legs were hidden in the long skirt of her obviously outmoded worn suit, and she wore box-toed oxfords.



As Miss Evans left the entrance of her modest apartment building there was the short bark of a gun from a car parked across the street, the loud sound instantly lost in the early morning quiet. Miss Evans staggered, then fell, a slug through her heart. The car drove off and Miss Evans' corpse wasn't found until 8 a.m.

In the precinct station, before her body was taken to the morgue, Detective Hal Fisher studied the pretty face for almost a half hour, partly because he had nothing else to do but mostly because he was fascinated by her beauty.

Detective Fisher was something of a mild joke around the squad

room, where he was a temporary "paper tearer," a job which both embarrassed and bored him. Several weeks before, Patrolman Fisher had walked into a liquor store holdup. Three goons had emptied their guns at Fisher as he had gunned one to death and wounded the other two. All told, nineteen shots had been fired and somehow Fisher's enormous frame hadn't been hit. He had been promoted to Detective, Third Grade in a short ceremony in the Commissioner's office, before a battery of TV cameras. After shaking the Commissioner's hand, Hal had turned, stumbled over a camera cable and in trying to break his fall, had fractured several bones in his shoulder and arm.

He now wore a plaster cast from his left shoulder to the wrist and had been assigned to light duty in the detective squad room. This embarrassed Hal because the squad room was small and crowded, and his heavyweight figure was always in the way. Also, it was awkward for him to file and do any clerk work since he was a lefty. Actually there was little for him to do and he was often sent out for coffee and sandwiches. Fisher didn't really mind being an errand boy; what alarmed him was the fact he looked forward to these errands as a means of getting out of the crowded office. Nor were matters helped by Lt. Saunders, his boss, telling Fisher every day, "Look boy, I got a busy house. Why don't you go to one of the movie houses on Broadway, spend a few hours looking for missing persons, or something?"

Hal was too much of an eager beaver to goof off, even officially, so now, as he brought in Saunders' lunch of a sandwich and coffee, trying not to spill the container with his awkward right hand, he told his boss, "Sir, I've been reading the reports on the murder of Nancy Evans two days ago."

"Yeah?" Saunders said impatiently, reading a report on a stolen car. "We put that in the Open Files. Homicide agrees it was the work of a nut. This Miss Evans lived alone, was some kind of a religious fanatic, had no relatives or friends, including boyfriends, worked as a typist in the same office for the last thirteen years. Absolutely no motive."

"But there always has to be a motive for murder, even—"

"Not when it's the work of a nut," Saunders cut in.

"Well, sir, there has to be a mixed-up motive there, too, in the guy's crazy mind. If it was the work of a loon, unless he's just starting, there would be a pattern of other senseless killings. We have-

n't had such a pattern in the city for two years and, according to the files, none in this area for the last six years. Sir, I'd like to take a crack at the case."

"Fine, fine, go out and look around, take your time. Any special reason for your interest in this case, Fisher?"

"I saw the corpse and one thing struck me: here was a woman of real beauty, like she could have been on the stage, yet she went out of her way to hide it, dress plainly. Why? I feel that's the only thing going for us, that the motive for her death is mixed up in that, somehow."

"You look into it, full steam, Fisher. Do us all—*you* some good to get out of the office," Lt. Saunders said, eating his sandwich with one hand as he read the report on his desk.

"Yes, sir," Fisher said, sadly.

Detective Fisher walked to the deceased's house and after showing the elderly janitor his shield, had him open the door of Miss Evans' apartment.

The janitor told Hal, "You won't find nothing in there. The other cops been all over her few things. Miss Evans, she was a funny one."

"Funny?" Hal repeated as they stepped into the one room kitchenette.

"See for yourself; almost like a cell, just that cot, plain table and a chair. No books, radio or TV, not even curtains, just shades."

Hal glanced around the nearly bare room, opened a closet door. Except for an old raincoat and a pair of boots, a faded yellow robe, the closet was empty. "This all the clothes she had?"

"That's all. You'd think a young woman . . . I mean, take my daughter, spends every penny she has buying junky clothes. I understand Miss Evans had nearly ten grand in the bank, too. She was so quiet you hardly knew she lived here. She'd come home from work with a little food, around six and maybe a half hour later she'd leave for church, return about nine. Only time I ever talked to her was when she'd come down the first of the month to pay her rent, in cash. Paid regular as a calendar."

"Was she friendly with any of the other tenants?"

"Nope. She lived here for about ten years and she never spoke to anybody, always walked in and out like she was lost in a world of her own. She never had a party, never had any callers, men or women, as I told the other cops." The janitor gave Fisher a smile of mossy teeth. "Sure must have been short of cops to have you working with a busted arm. You shot in that arm?"

"That's right. Thanks for your time. I'll look around, bring the key down." When the old man left, Hal stood in the center of the room, gazing around slowly, aware of something wrong: the room had no personality, reflected nothing. The walls were bare, not even a picture of a saint. Hal noted there wasn't any phone, and the bathroom medicine chest held only soap, toothpaste and a hair brush. There was a plain dresser, the two bottom drawers empty. The top drawer held underwear, a blouse, stockings, a towel, two sheets and a pillowcase. Hal moved the dresser, couldn't find a single book, old letter, magazine or even a newspaper. The refrigerator had some now-stale bread, a stick of butter and a can of milk. In the kitchen closet he found a broom and a small box of soap powder. A kitchen drawer held exactly one knife, one fork and a single spoon. Except for a few cans of beans and sardines, the kitchen shelves were empty. Hal found one plate and one cup.

Hal shook his head. Puzzled, he muttered, "Almost like she was living in a convent. Not even a bottle of perfume and the only mirror's in the bathroom. Why should a pretty young woman live like this all these years?"

With his right hand, Hal moved the cot, looked under the thin mattress, felt of the pillow. He locked the door and went down to the lobby, after ringing the bells of the apartments on either side of hers and getting no answer. A mailman was putting letters in the polished nest boxes. Flashing his badge, Hal asked, "Are you the regular mailman?"

"Right."

"Miss Evans get much mail?"

"That's the babe who was knocked off?"

Hal nodded. "Did you know her?"

"Only time I saw her was in the papers, and that wasn't much of a picture, all sprawled out on the sidewalk. Man, if all the folks on my route got her mail, it would be a pleasure. She never got a letter, not even an ad, and no magazines, nothing. Oh, once every two months she'd get an electric bill and that was all."

"What about packages?"

"Never. She didn't even get any cards during Christmas. You hurt your arm breaking up a riot?"

"Yes." Hal walked down to the basement, returned the key to the janitor. Then he stood on the sidewalk, read the notes he'd made from the other detectives' reports, had a hard time putting them back in his pocket with his clumsy right hand.

In the quiet interior of an imposing church three blocks away, Hal spoke to a young priest, a Father Gordon.

"All violent death is shocking, but Miss Evans . . . hard to believe. Naturally I saw her in church often, but she was a strange young woman. Every night she would sit in one of the pews, sometimes praying, but often seemed lost in her own thoughts. Saturdays she spent all day in church, never leaving to eat. Sundays she attended all services, from morning until night. Between services she merely sat, staring at our altar. She was always plainly but neatly dressed, wore an old beret pulled down over her hair."

"Father, was she active in any of the church socials?"

"No. Several times we attempted to interest her in our bazaars, or teaching Sunday school, but she would merely shake her head. Frankly, I don't recall her ever speaking."

"Was she a religious fanatic?"

"I don't like that term. I'd say Miss Evans found refuge in our church, which is what the church should be for all. Sometimes she prayed, but mostly she would sit in silence, staring straight ahead, seemingly at peace with the world."

"Did she give much money to the church, Father?" Hal asked.

"No, not on any regular basis. Frankly, judging by her clothes, I was amazed to read in the papers that Miss Evans had been regularly employed for years at a comfortable salary."

"Did she ever meet anybody in church?"

"Not that I know of. She always sat alone. Do the police have any idea as to who killed her?"

"Not yet. I'm seeking a motive; there has to be one in every murder. Father, I'm not asking you to break any rules of your ministry, but during confession, did Miss Evans ever—"

"She never attended confession."

Hal stood up. As they shook hands Father Gordon said, "It's an outrage, having you work with a broken arm. Despite your youth, you must be a crack detective."

Hal shrugged modestly, with his right shoulder.

He rode the subway downtown, stopped for a sandwich and pie, nearly dropping his tray in the crowded cafeteria, then went up to see the personnel manager of the insurance company that had employed Nancy Evans. The manager was a sharply dressed redhead who played with a gold cigarette holder and boldly ran her bright eyes over Hal's big frame as she said, "As I told the other detectives, Miss

Evans had already been employed here for eight years when I took over Personnel. She was a very efficient worker, never sick a day, generally worked during her vacation for the extra money. Once or twice I suggested she might dress better. Understand, she was always neat and clean, but she had absolutely no interest in style. I imagine she must have had those outdated suits made. The odd bit was, Miss Evans could have been a most attractive girl if she dressed properly."

"I know. Was she friendly with any of the men here?"

The redhead sighed. "Are you joking? She never knew men existed. She wasn't friendly with anybody, never attended the usual Christmas bash. Nancy never even went out for lunch. She always bought a sandwich from the boy pushing the lunch cart, and a container of milk. She never left her desk during the coffee breaks, either. Honestly, I don't recall ever seeing Nancy in the little gals' room."

"What sort of work did she do?"

"Statistical typist and one of our best, worked like a human robot. Her job rating was always tops. Several times we offered her a supervisory position, but she refused, had no ambition. A real oddball."

Hal managed to get his notebook out. "We can't find any relatives. Her father died when she was a baby and her mother passed on years ago. The house where the mother lived was torn down in 1959. Do you have any relatives listed in your personnel file?"

"No. The other detective checked that. Matter of fact, there's a $2000 insurance policy, part of our fringe benefits, awaiting her beneficiary. Somebody snafued—Nancy never named a beneficiary. I'll get her file."

The file on Nancy Evans was much like her life, bare and scrimpy. This had been her first job. She'd left George Washington High School in her senior year, at the age of seventeen, to start work. The only reference was a Miss Thelma Wallace, a teacher. Hal stood up. "May I speak to whoever worked next to Miss Evans?"

"Be a waste of time, she was one of these neurotic loners. The other detective interviewed all the girls working near Nancy the day she was . . . Wait, Mrs. Escobar was out that day, come to think of it. Her desk is next to Nancy's. You can talk to her. Follow me."

Hal almost walked into the redhead at the door, jumped out of the way. The redhead grinned. "You're fast on your feet, for a big man. I bet you're some dancer."

"I busted my arm dancing," Hal

said, wondering if the redhead was putting him on.

Hal waited in a lounge, lined with soda and candy vending machines, off a tremendous room where nearly fifty women were typing at desks. When Mrs. Escobar, a short, plump, creamy-skinned young woman, came in she said, "I was home sick, you know, when I read about poor Nancy in the papers. I just couldn't believe it. Who would want to kill a simple woman like Nancy?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Were you friendly with Nancy?"

"Look, I sat next to her for going on six years, and all we ever said was good morning or good night. Wasn't only me, that's all she ever said to anybody. During lunch, she'd eat right at her desk and start working the second she was done. Never went out with the other girls, never went shopping."

"Did she ever mention boyfriends?"

"Ah, I wish she had. I always thought a man was what she needed. But she had no interest in anything, including men. Nancy was a very odd woman. She was a natural blonde but she colored her hair that dull gray. Sometimes I would glance at her and think what a truly beautiful woman she could be so easily."

Hal nodded. "Did anything unusual happen lately? I mean, did she seem upset, frightened?"

"No. She never talked. Me, I'm a regular chatterbox. My husband says I . . . Say, I do recall something. Last week, I think it was Friday, Nancy seemed excited. I mean, she acted excited, for her. During the coffee break she actually stopped typing and sat at her desk, sort of smiling at nothing. She looked like an angel. I'd never seen her smile before. I asked if she was feeling okay and she really grinned at me, said softly, 'A miracle has happened.' "

"A miracle? What sort of miracle?"

Mrs. Escobar shrugged plump shoulders. "That was all she said. One does not talk about religious matters. But I could tell Nancy was most happy."

"Did she mention this miracle again?"

"No, sir. That was on Friday and she was killed Sunday."

Thanking her, Hal got to his feet, towering over Mrs. Escobar.

She said, "Ah, you are a giant of a man. How did you break—"

"I was tackled by the New York Giants football team."

Hal bucked a wave of rushing students as he reached George Washington High School at 3:05

p.m. In the office a woman clerk said, "A Miss Thelma Wallace? We haven't any teacher by that name. One second, Officer." She went to a file cabinet. "Yes, Miss Wallace retired in 1959. You want her address? She lives out in Queens."

When Hal called the squad room, Lt. Saunders said, "You off on sick leave, Fisher? What? Oh yeah. Well, keep working on the Evans case. Don't bother checking in tomorrow morning if you're still busy, boy."

It was nearly 5:30 p.m. when Hal reached this street of old private homes, each a copy of the other. A young girl, about thirteen, with golden hair, tight jeans and sweatshirt proving she had a fine figure, opened the door and giggled at Hal. "With that busted arm, you can't be selling insurance."

"Is Miss Thelma Wallace home?"

"Grandma's in bed. You a collector?"

The girl's dark eyes widened with fear, for a second, on seeing Hal's badge. Then she giggled again. "Man, you have the wrong Miss Wallace! Grandma sold her car months ago, so she couldn't have hurt your arm, and a bad back has kept her in bed for weeks now."

"I'd like to talk to her about a former student."

The girl grinned. "Come on, grandma hasn't taught in years. Say, are you really a cop or—"

"Look," Hal said patiently, "I am a police officer and what I have to see your grandmother about is important. I won't disturb her for more than a few minutes."

"Well, I guess it's okay. This way, mister."

Following the swaying hips up a short flight of carpeted stairs, Hal waited in the hallway. Through the open door he saw a woman sitting up in bed, watching TV. Her face was wrinkled and her hair iron-gray, but even from the hall Hal saw bright and lively eyes.

After a moment the woman called, "Do come in, Officer. Tina, shut off the TV and take my robe off the chair. Excuse the state of my room and sit down. What happened to your arm, Officer?"

"I took a fall," Hal said, sitting on the frail chair as the old lady's sharp eyes studied him. "Miss Wallace, do you remember a student you had in George Washington, about 15 years ago, a Nancy Evans?"

"Tina, you can go downstairs and finish your homework." When the girl left the old woman said, "Of course I remember Nancy, a sweet girl. Is she in trouble again?"

"Again?"

"Now young man, you're a police officer: what's happened to

Nancy? Don't spare my feelings."

"She was shot—killed two days ago. It was on the front pages, Miss Wallace."

"Papers depress me. Oh my, who would kill poor Nancy?"

"We don't know. That's why I'm here."

"Goodness, I haven't seen Nancy in . . . oh, so many years. I was her homeroom teacher. Such a sweet girl, so lively and pretty."

"What sort of trouble was she in, Miss Wallace?"

"Nancy became pregnant when she was seventeen. Her mother was one of these prudish, stupid women who, instead of helping the poor child, acted as if it was the end of the world. She put the poor girl out."

"Oh. Do you know the man who got her in trouble?"

"It was probably some silly boy. I never asked. If Mrs. Evans had explained sex to her girl, it never would have happened. All the mother could think of was to place the girl in an institution, get rid of her. Nancy was hysterical, didn't have a soul to turn to. I arranged for Nancy to enter a shelter for unwed mothers. When her baby was born, a girl, she was given for adoption. Some months after that, Nancy was waiting for me outside of school, asked if she could give my name for a job reference. I assured her she could and that was the last I ever saw of her. Now you say she's dead. Our society can be very cruel, Officer, as you must know. We waste people. I tried to tell Mrs. Evans that Nancy had made a mistake out of ignorance, that it was wrong to treat the child like a criminal, but she refused to speak to me. Sheer tragedy. When I saw Nancy that last time, she'd already changed, lost her zest, acted like . . . the living dead. Naturally, giving away your baby is barbaric, must have been a terrible shock to poor Nancy."

"She never mentioned who the father was?"

"No."

"Do you remember the name of the home for unwed mothers?"

"No, that was so many years ago. But I do recall taking Nancy there in a taxi. It was in the Bronx, on Cauldwell Avenue, and it was run by nuns. Poor Nancy didn't even have relatives she could turn to."

"Thank you," Hal said, getting to his feet, nearly knocking over the skinny chair. "You've been most helpful."

"Nancy Evans, dead. Why, she couldn't have been much over thirty. If the poor child's mother had only been more understanding—those mistakes happen—Nancy might have had a good life."

On reporting to the squad room

the next morning, Hal found the place full of busy detectives. A "paper hanger" had worked the squad area the day before; posing as a doctor, he had stuck four drugstores with bad checks. Hal tried to keep out of the way as he waited to speak to Lt. Saunders, told him he wanted to check on something in the Evans case in the Bronx. Saunders dismissed Hal with, "Sure, you do that. Take your time, boy."

The unwanted feeling didn't annoy Hal so much today. He had checked out a list of homes for unwed mothers, found one on Cauldwell Avenue. A white-robed sister with a pale, plump face told him, from behind her desk in the office, "Yes, our records show we did have a Nancy Evans staying with us, nearly sixteen years ago."

"Do you have any record of the father's name?"

"No. Either the girl didn't know or wouldn't tell us."

"I'd like to know who adopted the baby."

The sister gave Hal a tight smile. "Of course, this was before I came here, but in any event I couldn't tell you that. Officer, we purposely destroy all such records. The girl never knows the name of the adopting couple, and they never know the name of the mother. Quite often, after agreeing to offer her baby for adoption, a girl later marries and wants her child back. Naturally, this could result in all sorts of complications for all concerned, so we destroy all adoption records."

"I understand that but, Sister, this is a police matter involving a murder. An adoption has to go through the courts, so there must be some records, someplace."

"I'm sorry, Officer. I would like to help, of course, but the fact remains that all records *are* destroyed."

Hal was back in the squad room at noon. Lt. Saunders was on the phone, checking on a stolen car. When he saw Hal, Saunders placed a hand over the receiver, said, "Hal, get me a roast beef on rye, heavy on the mustard and don't forget the damn pickle. A cup of java, no sugar."

When Hal returned, Saunders cleared some papers from his desk and started eating. Hal stood next to his desk and after a second Saunders said, "Fisher, give me elbow room. I thought you were busy on something?"

"I think I have a lead in the Evans killing, sir," Hal said, explaining about the adoption and ending with, "I don't believe the courts have destroyed all the records. Can you have Police Headquarters put pressure on the court

to give us the name of the family who adopted Nancy Evans' baby girl?"

"What the hell for? That was years ago, so what possible link can it have with her crazy killing?"

"I don't know. Maybe there isn't any connection. But it's the only 'mistake' Nancy Evans made in her life, so I think there can be a link. All these years Nancy Evans lived like a . . . well, almost like a nun, as if punishing herself, but just last week she told a girl in her office that a miracle had happened; she seemed excited and happy."

"So?"

"Considering the routine life Nancy Evans lived, what 'miracle' could Nancy have meant, except maybe that she saw her daughter?" Hal asked.

"Fisher, are you nuts? This Nancy woman was some kind of a religious nut, so anything could have seemed a 'miracle' to her. She gave her baby away practically at birth, so are you telling me she could recognize the girl sixteen years later?"

Hal shrugged. "I don't say this is a sure thing, merely a lead. Perhaps the girl now looks exactly like Nancy did at sixteen?"

"That's a wild theory, but suppose it was so: we don't know that Nancy Evans tried to contact the girl; we do know Miss Evans spent all Saturday sitting in church; and, let's say, Nancy did speak to the girl, why should the daughter shoot her?"

"Lt. Saunders, as you said, this may be wild, a blank wall, but Nancy Evans only stepped out of line twice—once when she had an out-of-wedlock-baby, and once when she was murdered. I think that's worth looking into. I'm going through channels, sir, asking you to help me."

Saunders sipped his coffee and screwed up his face. "You sure they didn't give you this slop out of the sink, Fisher? Now listen, I'm busy-busy here, that damn 'paper hanger,' and now these stolen cars. Calling downtown will mean getting involved in red tape. Look, you go down to Borough Command, tell them your story, see what they think."

Within an hour Detective Fisher was telling a thin, elderly inspector, "I can't say, sir, that there's any connection, until we look into it. Now, suppose the folks who adopted the baby never told her she was adopted? The girl's now sixteen, and let's assume she looks exactly like Nancy Evans did at that age. Maybe Nancy saw the girl on the subway, followed her home, tried to talk to her, or to the girl's adopted parents. Poppa is afraid it will upset the daughter,

and his only out is to kill Nancy."

"That would be crazy thinking."

"Yes, sir, but he might have flipped over the thought of losing his daughter. Sir, I'm aware this is a delicate matter, asking the courts to release confidential information, but we can handle it carefully and if there isn't any connection, no harm done."

"I'll talk to Headquarters, see what they think. Come back in an hour, Fisher."

When Hal returned an hour later, the inspector asked, "You know anything about buildings, Fisher?"

Hal shook his big head.

"I got the name of the couple who adopted the baby, did some fast checking on the phone. They lived up in Syracuse until last week, when they moved into a new co-op apartment project on the Drive, not far from Miss Evans' address. So there can be something to your idea. As you realize, this is confidential information. If we make a mistake there will be a large stink, but we are dealing with murder so I think it's a necessary risk. The whole thing must be handled with great care."

"Yes, sir."

"Happily, with your arm in a cast, you don't look like a detective, so I suggest you be a building inspector. The couple are Robert and Jane Norton. You go up to the co-op late this afternoon, pretend you're checking on walls or something. Do your act in the apartments on either side of the Nortons', to make it look good. It should give you a chance to see the Nortons. All I want you to do is take a look around. As I said, a wrong arrest will make a mess. Understand?"

Hal nodded.

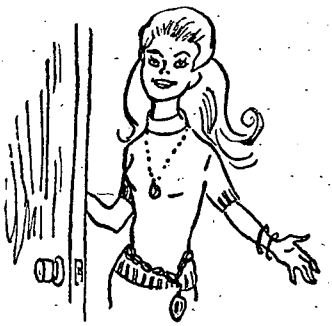
"I'm getting you some identification from the Building Department and having one of their men check you out on some of the lingo. One city department has to wash the hands of the other."

The co-op was one of these swank, terraced buildings overlooking the river, with a good security system. Hal arrived at 4:30 p.m. and had to talk to a lobby man through an intercom before a glass door slid open and Hal entered the colorful lobby. He showed the lobby man his Building Department identification and was told to wait for the manager. Hal walked over to the bank of mail boxes. The Nortons were in apartment 6D. There was some delay in locating the housing manager and Hal quietly walked up to the sixth floor. He rang 6C but didn't get any answer. He pressed the button on 6D, heard a girlish

voice call, "Daddy! You're home!"

The slim girl who opened the door had long blonde hair, pale blue eyes and a warm, red mouth. Hal stared at her, almost gasped—the girl was a living image of Nancy Evans! She said, "Oh, I thought you were . . . Yes?" Her voice was warm, too.

Hal managed to pull his Buildings Department paper from his pocket with his awkward right



hand. "We've been getting complaints about drafts coming through the walls facing the river. I'd like to examine the walls for a moment." He'd been staring at her face so much, it was only now that Hal was aware of the light blue sweater and white mini-skirt the girl wore, her shapely legs in socks and loafers. If she was but sixteen, she already had all the curves of a woman.

"Come right in, Inspector." Stepping aside, she added, "Be careful of your arm. Gosh, I hope a house didn't fall on it."

"Something like that." Hal followed her into a well furnished livingroom which had a glass wall opening on the small terrace. Everything said the Nortons had a comfortable income.

A woman's thin voice called from another room, "Who rang the bell, honey?"

"A man from the Buildings Department, Mama, to look at our apartment." In a whisper she added, "My mother isn't feeling well." Up close, the girl wore a faint but interesting perfume.

Stepping out onto the terrace, Hal went through a routine of touching the bricks, the railing, the glass sliding door. "Have you noticed any wind coming through this glass door, Miss?"

"Gee, I don't think so. We only moved in last week and have been busy getting the place in order. Daddy is still up in Syracuse, winding up his business matters. I thought you were him, when you rang." She giggled. "I hope my grammar is correct."

"Can't prove it one way or another with me." Hal moved back into the livingroom, then through a short but wide hall. He opened the doors of several closets, supposedly testing to see if the doors fitted properly. "So you're new to New York. Like our city?"

"Terrific, a real swinger."

"Were you born up in Syracuse?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you have a lot of relatives and friends in New York City?" Hal asked, opening a closet jammed full of cartons of drugs and patent medicines. "I mean, it seems everybody knows somebody in New York. Your father run a drugstore?"

"Not quite; he works for a drug company and finally got *the* promotion, upped to Eastern Sales Manager, which is why we moved to New York. No, I don't know anybody here, most of our family is upstate. But I make friends fast."

Hal now walked into a modern kitchen. As he reached up to open a closet above the freezer, a small bottle fell out, breaking on the floor and splattering Hal with some kind of white goo. Hal said, "I'm sorry."

"It's all right, we just shoved things everyplace. Wait, I'll get a sponge and clean your suit."

A tall woman with a bony, long face, wearing a blue robe and slippers, her stringy black hair in disorder, appeared in the doorway and asked, "What's happened, Gloria?" Her eyes were deep-set and with rings of darkness around them, the skin almost waxen pale. She could have been forty or sixty.

"My fault. I opened the door and this bottle fell out," Hal said. "Merely checking to see that the doors fit."

"This is my mother," Gloria said.

"Don't worry about it, only some furniture polish," the woman said, her voice shrill. "I don't think it will stain your suit." She took a sponge from the sink and started to wipe Hal's coat, adding, "You can't do this with one arm. I'm sure it won't stain—" She stopped talking abruptly, wet her lips. Gloria was picking up parts of the bottle from the tiled floor and the woman said quickly, "Go wash your hands in the bathroom, Gloria. I'll finish up in here."

"Now, Mama, you're supposed to rest."

"Do as I tell you, Gloria."

"Yes, Mama. But don't overdo it."

When the girl left the room the woman quickly finished sponging off Hal's jacket, then tossed the sponge into the sink, seemed to hold on to the white sink for a moment. Hal said, "If you're not feeling well, why—"

"Merely a headache. I'm glad you're inspecting the apartment. I'd like you to see the drain on the terrace. It doesn't seem to be deep enough and while it hasn't rained yet, I think the terrace will be flooded if we should get a heavy

rain. That could mean trouble."

Hal followed her out to the terrace where she said, "If you'll look over the railing, you'll notice the drain is almost level. Should it be like that?"

As Hal bent over the railing to look at the drain, he heard the rush of slippered feet behind him. The woman tried to push him over, but his 240 pounds was too much for her. Holding to the railing with his right hand, Detective Fisher pushed back with his wide hips, then turned and grabbed the struggling woman's hands with his right. Through the glass wall he saw a baldheaded man come in, drop a suitcase and rush across the livingroom toward them. The man grabbed Mrs. Norton with one hand, swung at Hal with the other. Fisher took the punch on his right shoulder as he said, "I'm a building inspector and your wife tried to—"

"He's a policeman!" Mrs. Norton wailed. "I felt of his gun when I was brushing his suit!"

"Now, Jane, everything's all right. Just relax, dear," the man said, walking his wife into the livingroom, seating her on a couch. She whispered something and the man went white, then turned to Hal, who had stepped into the livingroom. "Look here, if you are a police officer, I'm the one you want. You can leave her alone."

"No, Bob, it's no use covering up for me. I shot her!"

"What?" Bob Norton said, voice trembling. "Jane, you don't know what you're saying. Who did you shoot?" He glanced at Hal and added quickly, "My wife hasn't been well and often thinks she—"

"Bob, stop it and listen to me. Thursday night Gloria and I went for a walk and I thought I'd see what the church looked like. There she was, sitting in the church and staring at Gloria. I knew immediately who the woman was, oh, how I knew! It was my constant nightmare come true! I sent Gloria home for my pills and then I followed the woman to her apartment. I drove there early Sunday and killed her with your gun. I won't lose my child! *I won't! I won't!*"

Norton held his wife against him as she wept hysterically. Gloria Norton came running through the livingroom, hugged her mother fiercely. "Mama, what are you saying about losing me? Mama, I love you! I'll never leave you!"

Bob Norton stroked the girl's blonde hair as she embraced the woman. Gloria kept repeating, "Now Mama, control yourself. There's nothing to worry about."

Mrs. Norton stared at the girl, then looked away and said softly,

"Forgive me, darling, but we never told you the truth. I couldn't bear to tell you and—"

"Tell me that I was adopted?" Gloria cut in, kissing the woman's wet face. "Oh, Mama, I've known that for years, overheard you and Aunt Ruth whisper it many times." She turned her face up to Bob Norton. "Daddy, don't you understand, knowing that only made me love you both all the more! The fact you wanted me, had a choice and still wanted me."

There was a moment of intense silence in the livingroom, broken by Mrs. Norton's hysterical wail as she squeezed the girl to her.

Mr. Norton stepped over to Hal. "My wife has been having a rough time, change of life. You can see her condition. Officer, she had no idea what she was doing."

"That will be for the court to decide. I have to arrest your wife for murder."

"Yes—the courts, of course. Gloria was the greatest event in our life and . . . I suppose I'd better get Jane dressed. Can I phone our doctor? And a lawyer?"

"Certainly. May I use your phone first?"

"Yes. There's a phone on the coffee table in the corner."

Lt. Saunders snapped, "Fisher? Call back later or tomorrow. I'm busy with a forced entry which—"

"I'll only take a second of your time, sir," Hal said, giving him the address and Norton's apartment number. "Please send a squad car over, I have Miss Evans' killer."

"You have— Boy, this another of your crazy ideas?"

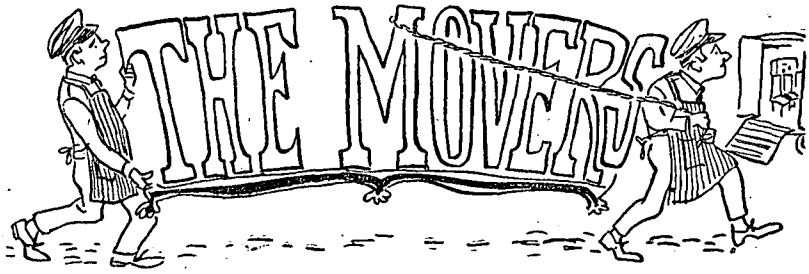
"No, sir. I have the killer and her verbal confession."

"Sit tight, you one-armed son of a gun, I'll be right over!"

Saunders' gasp at the other end of the phone had made Hal feel fine, but as he hung up he saw the troubled faces of the Nortons. The word "killer" seemed to echo in the heavy silence of the room, with every person there aware of the publicity and horror awaiting them, and Hal felt lousy.

For the smallest part of a split second he almost wished he hadn't been such an eager son-of-a . . . gun.

Stubbornness, oddly enough, is not unequivocally alien to patience.



IT WAS morning and Mr. Cartright was expecting the movers to call at his home, but when he answered the doorbell, two men carrying guns burst inside. The door crashed into Mr. Cartright, then the two men slammed it shut and bolted it.

"What is this?" Mr. Cartright demanded.

The larger of the two intruders struck Mr. Cartright's jaw with a gun, knocking him down, and Mr. Cartright suddenly hurt badly in three places—his hip, on which he landed; his jaw; and his shoulder, into which the door had crashed.

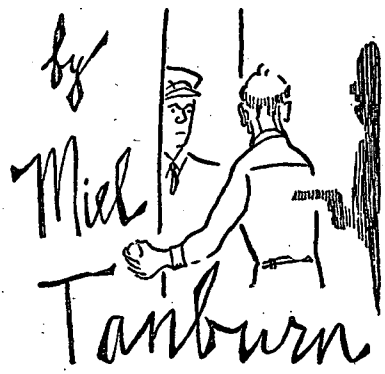
"Who else is home?" the man who had struck Mr. Cartright asked, while his partner, a smaller, uglier person, quickly pulled the draperies closed in the livingroom.

Mr. Cartright felt dizzy. He tried to stand up. The first man raised his gun, as if to strike him again, and Mr. Cartright sat back down on the rug.

"I asked you, who's here?" the gunman said.

Mr. Cartright shook his head, lied, "I'm alone."

"Look around, Clay," the gun-



man said. "You, stand up," he ordered Mr. Cartright. Wrenching Cartright's arm behind him, he said, "Okay, march. Show me the back door," and pushed Mr. Cartright toward the rear of the house.

His arm hurt when the gunman prodded him forward, and Cartright protested, "There's no need for violence. I'm not armed."

The gunman didn't answer. In the kitchen, he asked, "This the only other door?"

Mr. Cartright nodded.

"Some lock. A midget could bust in here."

"We're threatened by very few midgets," Mr. Cartright said coldly.

"Yeah? Don't be a comedian." The gunman pulled the window shades down in the kitchen, darkening the room.

"George, look what I found in the bedroom!" The smaller man pushed Angela, Mr. Cartright's wife, into the kitchen.

"Laughing Boy here said he was alone," George, the larger man, said. "Who else is home, Laughing Boy?" George asked, raising his revolver menacingly and pointing the barrel at the center of Mr. Cartright's forehead.

Angela cried out, "No one! What do you want with us?" She struggled to free herself from the smaller man's grip.

"Is that right, Laughing Boy?" George said. "Just the two of you here? No kids? This time tell me the truth or I'll let you have it. I mean it. We're not playing games."

"My wife and I are alone," Mr. Cartright said.

"We have no—never had—ch-children," Angela said.

"Aw, c'mon, lady, don't start *crying!*" George filled a tumbler with water from the kitchen sink and splashed it in Angela's face. "That's better," he said, when she became silent. "You and Laughing Boy just keep yourselves calm. That way we won't have no trouble."

"What is this about?" Mr. Cartright asked.

"Shut up," George said. "Clay, check all the windows and curtains. I want everything closed tight and pulled shut."

"Roger."

"You two, into the front room," George ordered.

George, a big man, six-two or three and well over two hundred pounds, had a red face with a high forehead, heavy brown eyebrows and bright blue eyes. There was a scar on the right side of his chin which pulled the corner of his mouth down.

"Everything's buttoned up. It looks safe," Clay said, entering the livingroom. He was small and dark, with tightly curled hair that covered the top of his head like a

wig. His eyeballs were big and round and rotated crazily, like marbles. Both men still held their revolvers in their hands.

"Okay," George said. "Sit down and shut up, you two. Now listen, if you don't try anything funny, you won't get hurt. Me and Clay are gonna stay here today and it's gonna be a big secret. Then tonight, when it gets dark, we're gonna go away and you won't see us no more. But if you let anyone know we're here," he looked at his revolver and smiled, "then you got a very serious problem. Savvy?"

"Thomas, are you all right?" Angela asked. "Where he struck you? It's swelling."

"Lady!" George exploded, "This ain't a sewing circle! I asked if you understood what I said."

"You needn't harass my wife," Mr. Cartright said evenly. "We understand thoroughly. But your scheme to hide here won't work. You see, the movers are due here today."

"Laughing Boy, you're really a comedian," George said. "So the movers are coming. So you send the movers away. So that's that. Now you," he said to Angela, "shake yourself and rustle up some coffee and chow for us. Clay, keep an eye on her."

"Sit still, Angela," Mr. Cartright interrupted. "She's not your servant," he told George, "and I told you that your scheme won't work. Your only hope lies in leaving this home immediately."

"Why, you . . . you . . . *slob!*" George sputtered. *"You* don't give orders. *I* give orders." He raised his revolver again to slash Mr. Cartright across the face, but checked himself when the doorbell rang and quickly motioned Clay to take Angela out of the livingroom. Holding his revolver on Mr. Cartright, he whispered, "Whoever it is, get rid of 'em. Nobody comes in and no one goes out."

The bell rang again and Mr. Cartright opened the door a crack. "Yes?" he said.

"It's the movers. We're here for the furniture."

"I'm sorry, but we've had a change in plans," Mr. Cartright said. "You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Are you kiddin', Mister? You got an appointment for today."

Mr. Cartright felt George's gun jammed against his kidney. "We'll just have to cancel the appointment," he said, trying to control his voice. "However, tell your company to bill me for your time if there's a problem in that regard."

"They'll bill you plenty, Mister. You better believe it. And don't hold your breath for tomorrow. *You'll* be lucky to get another ap-

pointment with us in a month."

"As you wish," Mr. Cartright said. "Just leave us alone today, please. I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you."

Mr. Cartright closed the door and bolted it. He felt George's revolver leave his back.

"Well," George smiled, "that was pretty good for a comedian. You ought to be an actor, Laughing Boy. You ought to be in the movies. What are you, anyway—a lawyer?"

"I'm a CPA," Mr. Cartright said. "A certified public accountant."

"You hear that, Clay?" George asked, as his partner brought Angela back into the livingroom. "Laughing Boy is a CPA. That means he's good at figures. Well, make sure you figure this out, Mr. CPA. Me and Clay are gonna hide out here today and you're not gonna give us no trouble. You handle everything like you handled those movers and you won't get killed, not like a couple of prison guards we just happen to know about. Ain't that right, Clay?"

"Sure, George, sure. In the meantime I'm starvin' to death."

"Let's eat then," George said. He turned to Angela, but then he looked back at Mr. Cartright and snickered. "If you could just see the look on your kisser, Laughing Boy. You still don't want her cookin' for us, do ya?"

"No," Mr. Cartright said, setting his jaw.

"You're sure a stubborn man. Ain't that right, Mrs. CPA? Ain't Laughing Boy a stubborn man?"

"My husband is very stubborn," Angela agreed. "Some day it will be the death of him."

"Okay," George said. "Clay, you go rustle up some food. And make a big pot of coffee. After all, I wouldn't want to upset a stubborn character like this."

Angela seated herself on the couch next to Mr. Cartright.

"How long will you be here?" Mr. Cartright asked.

"Until it's dark," George said. "And the less you know about it, the better off you are. So shut up."

"I presume you've broken out of prison," Mr. Cartright continued. "Why did you choose our home in which to hide?"

"Why not? You're on a corner. You're near where the freeway begins. We had to pick someone's house. It was just your tough luck. Kismet, like they say. Now be quiet."

"Very well," Mr. Cartright said. "I just remind you that my wife and I are not very . . . heroic. We only ask that you be fair to us."

"Sure," George said. He waited impatiently for Clay to bring food

from the kitchen, and said little.

The Cartright home was on a quiet street. The men ate in silence, freezing for an uneasy minute when the mailman walked up the front steps. An envelope slithered down the mail chute. Then the mailman's footsteps went away and the gunmen relaxed.

"How come you ain't at work today?" George asked suspiciously, as he drank a second cup of coffee.

"Because of the movers," Mr. Cartright said. "I've taken the day off."

"And you ain't expectin' no visitors, nothin' like that?"

"No. Just the movers, as I said."

"Yeah, the movers. What a very big deal that was."

Clay was sprawled on the couch, half asleep.

After a while George snapped his fingers, as if he'd thought of something. "Say," he said, "if you're moving, how come you get mail here?"

George went to the mail chute and peered inside. "Just one envelope," he said. "Addressed to occupant."

"May I have it?" Mr. Cartright said.

George tore the envelope open. "Ha. It's a joke, Mr. Comedian. This here letter says you can get a high school diploma easy in six months at home."

"May I have it, please?"

"Why? You need a high school diploma?"

"No. If there's a return envelope, I shall mail it back empty. That way they'll have to pay the postage."

George looked blankly at Mr. Cartright. "I don't get it."

"You said I was stubborn," Mr. Cartright said. "It so happens I believe in principles. I didn't ask for that piece of mail and I intend to make them pay, however small the amount, for intruding their unsolicited mail upon me."

"You gotta be kiddin'."

"I abide by principles," Mr. Cartright said.

George gave him the envelope with a look of wonder on his face. "Stubborn ain't the word for you," he told Mr. Cartright. "You're downright anti-social."

"I doubt you'd know," Mr. Cartright said.

"Don't push your luck, Laughing Boy. Me and Clay ain't through with you yet."

Later, there was the noise of a large vehicle parking outside, and footsteps came up the front walk.

The doorbell rang. George held his revolver on Mr. Cartright again.

"Yes?" Mr. Cartright said, opening the door a crack.

"We're the movers," a voice said.

"I guess it's time to get the job going."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Cartright said. "I'm afraid you'll have to come back tomorrow."

"You know that won't do," the voice answered. "We're supposed to move you today."

"And I say tomorrow," Mr. Cartright said.

"I just work under orders," the voice said. "You want me to tell my boss what you said?"

"Tell your supervisor we're not moving today," Mr. Cartright said. "Tell him that's my final word."

Mr. Cartright closed the door firmly and bolted it. George's gun left his back.

"What kind of moving company you doing business with?" George asked. "They so hard up for customers they have to come back twice?"

George cautiously looked through a livingroom window, pushing the draperies aside. Then he whipped around, a look of alarm on his face.

"Clay!" he hissed. "On your feet! There's cops out there!"

More footsteps came up the front steps, followed by a heavy pounding on the front door.

"Open up!" a voice called. "This is the sheriff!"

Clay bounded from the couch in panic and fired three shots through the wooden front door. "How did they find us?" he screamed at his partner.

A gunpowder smell assaulted Mr. Cartright's nostrils. After several seconds, some answering gunshots from police splintered the front windows. Mr. Cartright heard the bullets strike the wall behind him. One of them ricocheted. He grabbed his wife and ran for the kitchen.

In the noise and confusion, the two gunmen were yelling at each other. "We gotta get out of here!" Clay shouted.

"We can't!" George said. "Not unless we shoot our way out!"

Then, without warning, two heavier projectiles crashed through the front windows. In a moment, the livingroom was engulfed in a stinging, burning fog. In the kitchen, Mr. Cartright's eyes felt as if someone had thrown acid in them. "Tear gas," he said to his wife.

In a moment, the front door flew open and Clay and George dashed outside, firing their revolvers blindly. A sheriff's car was parked outside. From behind the car, deputies returned the prisoners' fire, dropping the two men almost immediately. Then two more sheriff's cars arrived, sirens growling to silence as deputies leaped

out, brandishing their weapons.

"Don't shoot!" Mr. Cartright yelled, taking his wife's hand. "We're coming out!"

"Who's in there?" a deputy yelled.

"We're coming out! Hold your fire!" Mr. Cartright shouted.

As he and Angela walked through the front door, he heard a deputy saying excitedly, "Those are the two killers, I tell you! I don't know how they got *here,* but that's *them!"*

Inside one of the patrol cars, a deputy was calling for an ambulance.

A sergeant walked up to the Cartrights, challenging them. "Were you shielding those two guys, or what?"

"We never saw them before," Mr. Cartright said. The fresh air was beginning to soothe his eyes. "They broke into our house this morning and have held us prisoner."

"What d'ya know," the sergeant said. "We got roadblocks all over town for them." Then a sheepish grin covered his face. "You know," he said, "you probably got a right to get mad at us, but the mover said he wouldn't come out here without the law. We brought a warrant for you, just in case."

"I can understand that," Mr. Cartright said.

"Well, you do have a certain reputation for making trouble," the sergeant said. "First you fought the city attorney. Then you fought the condemnation proceedings in court. Then you fought it in the supreme court. Then you refused to leave the property. The house mover figured we were going to have to carry you out bodily."

"Unfortunately, that was almost the case," Mr. Cartright said.

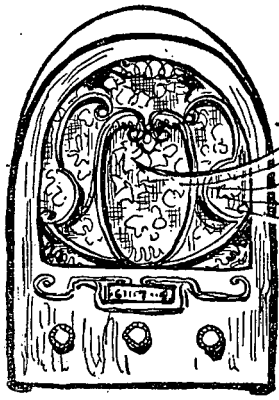
"I'd say you were lucky," the sergeant grinned. "But like the city said, the freeway has got to come through here and they have to move your house, even if you are the stubbornest man in town."

When the ambulance arrived the attendants put George and Clay on stretchers and loaded them inside, beneath a shadow cast by the house movers' big crane.

Although the thoughts of youth are "long, long thoughts," could anyone anticipate them to be poignantly compassionate?

I'll Be Loving You

by Fletcher Flora



We lived in a big white house on five acres of ground a short walk from town. There were oaks and maples and a solitary pine in the deep front yard, and out back was a barn painted red. We didn't keep any livestock, unless you wanted to count a flock of Buff Cochin hens and one rooster, but behind the barn was a big garden plot where we raised truck for the table and some over for the market. I liked the planting and spraying and harvesting, and didn't even mind the hoeing on hot days, for at the bottom of our property was a line of trees and brush along the two banks of a small creek with a deep pool in which I could swim naked after the work was done. My father said early that I had a green thumb. We raised carrots and onions and radishes and peas and beans and tomatoes and potatoes and roasting ears, and it worked out during the growing season that something good was coming from the garden, in turn, from spring till frost. The garden was my father's pride, and he gave

it his loving care, but then he died.

Never mind how. He seemed old to me at the time, but he was young. He died in the winter, and he was gone, and there was the garden to plow and plant in the spring. I didn't know how I could do it alone, going to school besides, but I tried and my mother helped. We worked hard at it, but some of the ground had to lie fallow for two seasons. There was plenty of everything for the table but not much over for the market.

My mother worked bare-headed in the garden, dressed in faded jeans and a man's blue shirt with the throat open and the sleeves rolled up, and she became brown and beautiful in the sun. She had a slim boyish body and brown bobbed hair, both of which were then the fashion. I had always thought of her as old, as I had thought of my father, as all young boys, I suppose, think of all parents, but I became aware, seeing her brown and beautiful in the garden, that she must still feel in her flesh the strange aches and errant longings that I was beginning to feel in mine. When my father died, she was, I guess, not more than a year or two past thirty, but she was tired from work and worry, and I know now that she was lonely. She rarely left the house or grounds during the day, about once a week going shopping into town, and I cannot recall that she left at night in the two years following my father's death more than six or eight times, at most.

Spring and summer nights we sat together on the screened back porch that ran the entire width of the house, and sometimes we talked about trivial things, but never about the secret things that mattered. Mostly we just grew slowly sleepy listening to frogs along the creek and sometimes owls in the trees beyond the barn. Fall and winter nights, when the temperature dropped from chill to cold, we sat inside by the fire, and I did what homework there was to do from school, and she mended socks or clothes, or listened to the tunes of Irving Berlin on the phonograph, or read *This Side of Paradise* or *The Beautiful and Damned* or *The Plastic Age* or some other novel of the time that she had borrowed from the public library on her last trip to town. She wished for a radio, and so did I, but we couldn't afford it.

I won't forget the second winter after my father's death. It was the winter of 1926-27, and I had turned fifteen in the spring. I remember the winter clearly because it seemed that everything happened with a rush, things crowding one right after the other in a hurry to

get done, but probably it was only that I was beginning to take more notice of events outside my own narrow life. Anyhow, there seemed to be a kind of feverish quality in that time, and everyone was desperate to make more of everything than it deserved. My mother shared the fever with millions of others, and she took an avid interest in public sensations like the death of Rudolph Valentino, which happened in August before winter came, and the scandals arising from the suit of Mrs. Browning against her husband. I remember her reading intently the reported escapades of "Peaches" and "Daddy", but what I remember most vividly is her almost obsessive fascination with the Hall-Mills case, and with, soon afterward, the Snyder-Gray case. Both cases involved murders that were dull and sordid enough, to be sure, and the latter especially would have passed as considerably less than a national sideshow if it had not involved a romantic triangle, one corner of which, the murderer, was a Presbyterian corset salesman. As it was, it was reported to the people by a corps of notables, including Billy Sunday, the famous evangelist, who took time off from God to give it his personal attention.

Do I remember all of this from the time? Bear in mind that I was only fifteen. Well, perhaps not. Perhaps my recollections have been reinforced by later review. It doesn't really matter, however it was, for it was not the public fever and the frantic scandalmongering that fixed the time so firmly in my memory. It was fixed by two quiet and intimate events that happened during the winter, and by what came out of the winter afterward.

The first of these two events was simply a conversation that I had with my mother. It was one night shortly after Christmas, in January, I think. As our Christmas present to each other, we had decided at last to buy a radio, a table model in an elaborate little Florentine cabinet, and I had been busy with algebra while my mother listened to a musical program. I don't remember what the program was. It may have been the A & P Gypsies. I'm not sure that Rudy Vallee, in January of 1927, had yet caught the public fancy. No matter, anyhow. Whatever the program was, it ended, and my mother snapped off the set and spoke to me suddenly, as if she had been thinking to the music and had come to a conclusion.

"It's too much," she said.

"What is?" I said.

"The work. The garden and this big house."

"I like it here. I don't mind the

work. Please, let's try to stay."

"Your father's insurance money is dwindling. In a few years, if we aren't careful, we'll be without savings."

"I'll cultivate more of the garden this spring."

"It's not enough. When your father was alive, he held a job in town and worked the garden after hours and weekends."

"I'm older now. I can get a job in town myself."

"What could you do at fifteen? Deliver papers? Maybe it would be better to sell the place and rent a little house or apartment. Then I could go to work. I could clerk in a shop and take typing and shorthand at the business college at night. Later I could get a good job in an office."

"I don't want to move," I said. "I never want to live anywhere else."

There we dropped the matter, but it stuck in my mind like a burr, and it bothered me. I was saddened and troubled by the thought of selling our place, and it's the truth that I loved it and never wanted to leave it. A poet wrote that the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts, and I guess most boys dream of going into the wide world, but all I wanted or asked was to live all my life on my five acres. It suited me just fine.

January passed, then February after January, and it was in early March, on a cold, bright, windy Saturday morning, that the second event I mentioned happened. I had gone down the long brick walk from the house to the mailbox beside the narrow macadam road that ran past. While I was there, with the mail in my hands, I saw a stranger approaching from the west along the hard shoulder of the road. I could tell at once that he was no hobo; at least, not an ordinary one. He was tall and slim, and he was wearing a corduroy cap with flaps over his ears and a bright red flannel shirt and a heavy corduroy jacket and corduroy pants and good, solid shoes with thick soles. He was carrying a heavy stick that he had cut from a tree and trimmed up neatly, and on his back, held in place by two straps under his arms, was a canvas pack. Somewhere along his way on this bright, cold morning he had found a place and time to shave. He was clearly warm and washed, and I could see as he came closer that he had a young and handsome face with brown, bright eyes and a ready smile. He stopped and leaned on his stick and spoke to me.

"Morning, son," he said.

I answered his greeting politely, and his eyes wandered off through

the deciduous oaks and maples past the evergreen pine to the house beyond the deep lawn.

"A charming place," he said. "Your home?"

I said it was.

"My imagination pictures it two months from now," he said, "with the grass green and the trees in leaf and the ground dappled by sun and shade. A pity that I can't linger to see it."

He talked like that. What I mean is, he put into easy words the things I felt but couldn't say.

"It's nice in spring and summer," I said.

"I'm sure it must be." His bright, brown eyes came back across the lawn through the trees and rested on mine. "I've had a long, brisk walk this chilly morning. I wonder if, by some stroke of good luck, you have a cup of coffee left over from breakfast?"

"I don't know," I said. "If there's none left, I can make fresh."

"There you are," he said. "I knew at once that you were a good and generous boy. It will give me pleasure to accept your hospitality."

So we walked up across the lawn and around the house and across the back porch into the warm kitchen. My mother had baked bread, and it smelled close to heaven. She was standing by the stove when we entered. Her face was a little flushed from the heat of the oven, and her short hair was slightly tousled, and I thought suddenly again with a feeling of surprise, as if every time it was a new discovery, that she was beautiful. I started to introduce my guest, and realized foolishly that I hadn't learned his name. He, understanding this, came smoothly to my rescue.

"Permit me to introduce myself," he said. "My name is James Thrush. I am a vagabond but not a bum. There is a vast difference, and I trust that the difference is apparent in me. This good boy, whom I take to be your younger brother, has kindly invited me to stop for a cup of coffee."

He had removed his cap, and his thick brown hair had become somewhat matted under it, but it had been combed before, and it was neatly trimmed. My mother looked at him without much expression, and I could see that she didn't know whether to accept his reference to her as my sister as an honest mistake, which would have made it pleasing, or as brazen flattery, which would have made it offensive. After a moment she smiled, and the smile was pleased.

"You're welcome," she said. "My name is Elizabeth Caldwell. This is my son. His name is Mark."

He didn't make a big thing of

his mistake, honest or not. He merely said gravely that he was delighted to know us. My mother was convinced by this, I think, that he had not taken her for a fool.

"Please take off your pack and coat," she said. "The coffee pot is empty, but I'll make fresh."

We sat at the kitchen table while the coffee perked. Then we drank it, mine with milk and sugar and theirs black, and ate thick slices of hot bread and butter. We ate a whole loaf of the bread among us, and James Thrush apologized for being a glutton, but my mother was plainly pleased by his appetite. She was also pleased by his cleanliness and his table manners and his correct and fluent talk. He was no ignoramus, surely, and he told us after a while that he had, in fact, after serving with the American Expeditionary Force in the last war, taken a degree in liberal arts at the University of Kansas. Since then, he had been, for the most part, roaming about the country.

"With a college education," my mother said, "I should think you'd want to settle down somewhere and get a good job."

"Doing what?" he said. "I'm not much of one for an office. I could teach, I suppose, but I don't fancy a schoolroom, either."

"Don't you do any kind of work at all?"

"Now and again I work at something or other for what I choose to call my travel expenses. And then, for other motives, I work constantly at something else. I write poetry."

"Poetry?"

"Yes. I'm a poet. A good one, if you'll excuse my saying so. My head bursts with images and ideas. My pack grows heavy with filled notebooks. Believe me, writing poetry is work, Mrs. Caldwell. It's *hard* work. Unfortunately, it pays poorly."

"Do you sell your poems?"

"Some I sell, some I donate. That's poetry for you. You can find me in the Little Magazines, if you care to look. I've published one book, an extra copy of which is in my pack. I shall leave it with you when I go, as token payment for your hospitality."

"I'll be proud to have it," my mother said.

He took from a side pocket of his corduroy jacket, which he had hung on the back of his chair, a stubby black pipe and a leather pouch of tobacco.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked.

"Not at all," my mother said. "I'll join you."

After my father's death, she had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taken up the smoking of cigarettes, still considered rather daring among women. I suppose she did it because, in her loneliness, it afforded her company and comfort. From an open pack in her apron she took out a cigarette and leaned across the table to light it from the match the poet had struck on a thumb nail and extended.

"When I have had my pipeful," he said between puffs, as he sucked the match flame onto the tobacco, "I shall be on my way again. I have imposed upon your hospitality long enough."

"It's no imposition. You needn't feel obliged to hurry away."

In that instant, hearing her voice and seeing in her eyes a flicker of something naked and desolate, I had a feeling that she was strangely reluctant to see the last of him. To tell the truth, so was I. I have never met anyone else in all my life who captured my favor so swiftly, or who, in so short a time, created so convincingly an illusion of being an old and tried companion.

"I confess," he said, "that I am tempted to linger. I am indebted to you and your son for a delightful interlude. It would have been an added pleasure to meet your husband."

"My husband is dead."

"Oh. I'm sorry." He drew on his pipe for several seconds in silence. "It's a charming home you have here, Mrs. Caldwell."

"Sometimes it becomes a burden. There is too much work for Mark and me."

"You have much land with the house?"

"Five acres. There is a large truck garden below the barn. Mark and I try together to work it, but it's too much. Since my husband died, we've been able to cultivate only part of it."

"It must be difficult for a woman and a young boy. You need a man's strong back."

"You're a man," I said suddenly.

His bright, brown eyes swung toward me, and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. His burst of laughter was gay and infectious.

"So I am, I hope," he said, "although a poet in some quarters is considered somewhat less than one."

"You could stay," I said. "There's nothing to prevent you if you want to."

"Mark," my mother said, "don't be presumptuous."

"No. The boy is right." James Thrush prodded the air in my direction with the stubby stem of his black briar. "Moreover, the suggestion, I find, is not without its seductions. I shall have to stop somewhere soon, in any event, to

find temporary employment and replenish my funds. Unless one is a hobo, which I am not, one cannot travel indefinitely without funds."

"I couldn't pay you," my mother said. "I could give you good food and a dry place to sleep, but there will be no extra money."

"My work for my keep—a fair exchange. Perhaps I can earn a bit from odd jobs at odd times in town. My expenses are nominal. Mrs. Caldwell, do you wish to hire a hand?"

"You are welcome to stay. I won't deny that it would be a great help to us."

"We will consider it settled, then. Here's my hand on the bargain." He and my mother shook hands gravely across the table, and then he leaned back, sucking briskly on his pipe, which had grown cold, and turned to me. "Well, Mark," he said, "it seems that I shall see your fine oaks and maples in leaf, after all," and so he did.

We agreed for the sake of propriety that it would not be wise to take him into the house at night, but the old harness room in the barn was tight and dry and unused, and we moved in an army cot and supplied him liberally with blankets, so that he slept warm enough through what were left of the chilly nights of March and April. He furnished it with odds and ends, and fastened pictures to the wall that he cut from old magazines. All in all, he made it a snug place. He ate his three good meals a day in the kitchen at table with my mother and me, and after supper he was always welcome to linger until bedtime, which he usually did, and frequently, to my satisfaction, relieved me of the tea towel when the dishes were washed and dried. He never did go into town after the odd jobs, so I suppose that his funds were not so low as he had let us think. He earned, I believe, a little money from the poems he wrote while he was there. Now and again he would leave a long envelope in the box for the mailman to pick up, and several times, when I gathered the mail, there were return letters addressed to him in our care. The letters were self-addressed, and must have been enclosed in the envelopes he sent out, but they were thinner and lighter in weight, which made me believe that the poems had been removed and maybe a check put in.

He was a good worker. He prepared the garden for planting, and later planted the things that had to be in the ground early. My mother and I helped him when we could, of course, she when she could leave the house and I when

I was not in school, but he did the lion's share of the work. He had been lean and gay when he came to us, seasoned by the wind and the sun, but while he was there and working for his bed and board he acquired, besides, for a while, a quality of settled peace. But this was temporary, as we should have known.

It's odd, as I look back, how my memory of specific incidents in our private lives that winter and spring and summer is pinpointed and fixed, so to speak, by public events. I can say exactly, for example, when I first became aware that my mother was desperately in love with James Thrush. It was the evening of the twenty-first of May, 1927. I remember this because it was on that day that Charles A. Lindbergh landed in Paris after his flight from New York, and the whole country seemed to go wild with a kind of hysterical joy. The hysteria penetrated almost instantly even to our small town, and to thousands like it, and the local daily, I recall, was on the streets with a four-page extra. That evening, when I came up from the chicken house with a pailful of eggs, I found James Thrush sitting on the back steps smoking his stubby black briar. I took the eggs into the house and came back and sat down beside him, my daily chores finished.

"Have you heard about Lindbergh?" I asked.

"Before yesterday," he said, "I had never heard of him in my life. Since then, I and millions of other folk have scarcely heard of anyone else."

"I guess he's a hero, all right."

"I guess he is."

"Well, if you ask me, he's an improvement over Judd Gray."

"Right you are." He sat there in the twilight looking down over the roof of the barn in an attitude of intent listening, as if he were trying to hear and separate all the sounds that came up from the fields and the trees. "But still, you know, old Judd was not without his intriguing qualities. He was a pathetic devil, of course, but as a character study he was more interesting, perhaps, than many of those who pass for heroes."

"How so?"

"How? Well, he was a perfect example of the rigid moralist turned sinner. As such, he was incapable of evaluating his sins. Or crimes, if you please. Once you have committed adultery, you might as well go on and commit murder. God has you by the ears in either case."

"That doesn't sound reasonable."

"Old Judd was not a reasonable man."

I couldn't think of any answer to that, and I didn't have to, as it turned out, because at that moment my mother came out onto the back porch.

"Supper's ready," she said. "You two better wash up."

"I'm washed," James Thrush said. "Mark, hop to it. I'm hungry."

I washed, and we ate, and after the dishes were washed and dried we sat in the kitchen while James Thrush smoked his pipe and my mother kept him company with a cigarette.

"I'll have to walk into town tomorrow or the next day," James Thrush said.

"Why?" my mother asked.

"I'm getting shaggy. I hate to spend good money on a haircut, but it looks like I'll have to."

"I'll be happy to trim your hair."

"Well, I don't know." James Thrush sucked at his pipe and looked quizzical. "I'm not an inordinately vain man, I hope, but I have no desire to be butchered."

"I trim Mark's hair. Does he look butchered?"

"I must say he doesn't. Are you sure it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"Nonsense. Pull your chair out under the light while I get the tools."

James Thrush sat in a straight chair under the light, and my mother pinned a clean towel around his neck. I went out onto the back porch and stood looking down toward the barn and the line of trees beyond, along the creek. After a few minutes, I turned around and looked back across the porch through the open door into the kitchen, and it was then, in a flash, that I knew my mother was in love with James Thrush. I saw them in profile, he in the chair and she standing beside him. Her right hand held the clippers suspended, and her left hand was resting on the crown of his head to turn it a bit this way or that as was needed. All this, of course, was ordinary enough. What was extraordinary was the expression on my mother's face. Her eyes were almost closed, and her mouth was slightly open, and the effect of her expression was one of intense ecstasy, as if the feel of his thick brown hair under her hand was nearly more than she could bear.

It was a shock. I turned away again with the shameful feeling that I had inadvertently violated her privacy. I remember that I had, for a moment, a deep stab of sorrow and regret for my father, so lately dead, but that passed quickly. I liked James Thrush, you see. From that night, I began to hope that he would love my mother, as she loved him, and that he would

marry her then and never go away.

He loved her, I think, in his way. I'm sure he did. It was not his fault, after all, that his spirit longed for freedom and his feet itched for the road. We were at fault, my mother and I, for wanting to hold him. We should have known that the time would come when we could not. Meanwhile, as spring passed and summer came on, life was good and somehow exciting. The garden season was almost perfect, with rain enough and the short nights warm and bursting with the silent juices of growth. Everything planted matured in abundance, and there was plenty to eat and plenty to sell.

One night in June we were sitting after supper on the back porch. We could hear the chorus of frogs from the creek, and the myriad softer sounds that stir in a summer night. The back yard was washed with white gold between house and barn.

"It's a beautiful night," James Thrush said. "It's a night for fantasy and errant dreams. Who would like to take a walk?"

"I would," my mother said.

James Thrush turned to me. "Mark?"

"I'm tired," I said. "I'll stay here."

"As you wish," he said. "Your mother and I will see if the elves are out among the trees along the creek, doing their good deeds."

I watched them walk together across the gold-washed yard into the shadow of the barn, then I stretched out on my back on the old settee that we kept on the porch. After a while, to the music of soft sounds, I went to sleep. I slept soundly for a long time, and when I woke up my mother was standing in the light from the kitchen door. I did not stir or speak, watching her through half-closed lids. On her face was almost the same ecstatic expression it had held when she trimmed James Thrush's hair, but there was a subtle difference that I failed at first to understand. Then I saw that the effect of longing had been replaced by one of fulfillment. She no longer merely loved. Somewhere in the shadows of trees along the creek, in the warm and bursting night, she had *been* loved.

I closed my eyes, and after a moment she came and bent over me and shook me gently by the shoulder.

"It's late," she said. "You'd better go to bed." Her voice was dreamy and lilting in the accent and rhythm of her enchanted night.

I got up and went upstairs to my bed, but now, having napped so long, I couldn't go to sleep again. I lay on my back in the darkness and thought deliberately

of my mother and James Thrush. Should I have been angry? I wasn't. On the contrary, I was filled with a quiet, perverse happiness. Now, James Thrush would surely stay forever. Now, we would all stay together in the house I loved, he and my mother and I, and everything would work out well in the end.

So, for a long time, it seemed. The enchanted night endured and became enchanted days and weeks and months, and I cannot believe that any other three people on this earth ever had such pleasure from common work, or sustained such excitement in simple living. My mother grew brown and beautiful in the summer sun, and she seemed to glow softly from some interior and everlasting light, as if her body were transluscent, so that her skin was like satin and her short brown hair had day and night a moonlit sheen. She encountered the days with a kind of childish wonder, as if she saw everything anew and saw it differently, with a kind of restrained delight; as if she felt everything afresh and felt it more intensely. I wondered what James Thrush said to her, and she to him, in the long walks they took at night, and all the other times they were alone. I wondered, too, when matters would be settled between them and he would move from the harness room into the house. Well, no hurry. For the present, I supposed, they liked the shimmering texture of their lives as they were. Fall would be time enough, when the nights grew long and the weather cold.

The hot, dog days of August went, and September came; school began, and our long armistice with reality ended. It ended abruptly, brutally, one night as October neared. James Thrush and my mother, though the night was chill, had gone out for a walk to the creek beyond the barn and the garden, and later my mother came back alone. I was in the kitchen, studying at the table, and I could see at once that something was wrong. She moved as though she were blind and stunned. There was something terribly withdrawn about her, and she seemed to have shrunk into her dark inner self, where the light had gone out. She sat down stiffly at the table, staring blindly ahead, and her bloodless face was as still and hard as a stone.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"He's going," she said.

"James Thrush?"

"Yes. James Thrush."

"Where's he going?"

"Away. Just away. Tomorrow he's going away."

"I thought he never would. I

thought he'd stay here forever."

"He's going. Tomorrow he's going."

"Where is he now?"

"In the barn. In his room."

"I'll go out there and talk with him."

She didn't answer. I got up and went out to the barn, and James Thrush was in the harness room putting his possessions into the canvas pack that he carried on his back. The room was lighted by a kerosine lantern, and my feet were standing on the shadow of his head on the floor. When he saw me enter, he turned away and stood staring at some things he had spread on his cot. Although he spoke softly without anger in his voice, there was, nevertheless, something angry and bitter in his attitude.

"I'm going," he said. 'Im going because it's time to go. I do what I must when I must."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"Did I say I would stay forever?"

"You never did."

"I've kept my bargain, haven't I?"

"I can't say you haven't."

"I've given full measure for what I've received, haven't I? My work for my keep. That was the agreement, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"And if more than keep has been received, then more than work has been given. I told no lies, did I? I made no promises, did I?"

"I can't believe you did."

"You're a good boy, Mark, and it has been a pleasure to know you, but it's time to go, and I'll go tomorrow."

"Where shall we send your mail?"

"There will be no more. I've had answers to all I sent."

"It would be a kindness if you'd tell my mother good-bye before you go."

"That I shall. I'll tell her goodbye."

I went back to the house. My mother was still sitting at the kitchen table.

"He's going," she said, "isn't he?"

"He says so," I said.

She didn't speak again, or move, and there was nothing I could say or do to make her. I gathered up my books and papers and went upstairs, leaving her alone. The next morning she was gone. There was no breakfast ready for me before I left for school, so I left without it. I had my lunch at school, and that afternoon, of all days, I had to stay late to make up a missed examination, and so, considering the long walk home, it was almost six o'clock when I got there. My mother was sitting at

the kitchen table again, in the same chair and position I had last seen her. If I hadn't known better I'd have sworn she hadn't moved an inch all night and day, but her face last night had been a stone. Now it was the drugged face of one who is caught in an enduring dream.

"Has James Thrush gone?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He's decided to stay. He's decided to stay because he loves me. He'll be with us always."

"Where is he?"

"In there. In the little back bedroom. He's lying down, poor darling. We were having coffee together, just as we did when he came to us, and suddenly he felt ill. He's resting."

I went into the back bedroom, and James Thrush was lying on his back on the bed. He did not open his eyes when I entered or move when I touched him. His hands were folded on his stomach. I turned away and went back into the kitchen. The oven was cold, no pots were on the burners. My mother, at the table, was dreamily humming a tune of that time which has survived to this:

I'll be loving you—always,
With a love that's true—always.

She didn't croon the words. She only hummed the tune. I had to get out of there. I couldn't bear seeing her or hearing her. I found the can of cyanide powder and took it down to the barn and put it back with the other insecticides.

That night I buried James Thrush and all his possessions at the foot of the garden.

I tried my best to take care of my mother, but she kept wandering out into the cold nights barefooted in her nightclothes. When I missed her and went after her, I always found her at or near the creek, and at last she caught pneumonia and was dead before Christmas.

Since then, there has been another war, and wars after the war.

It was a long time ago.

Is it possible that "social and cultural betterment" is not the exclusive property of the underprivileged?

by Thomasina Weber

That's the way she is

ALWAYS forming committees to aid the underprivileged, always heading drives to bring about social and cultural betterment of the masses, that is Caroline. Let her see a stray dog in the street or a lost kitten and she whisks it home and feeds it until it is gasping for breath. Let her see another person being cheated and she is right there wielding her umbrella. So, what is a husband to do? That's the way she is.

I used to love her for it. I believed she was unique, a miracle in this immoral, money-mad, power-hungry world. In her own way, I suppose she is a miracle, but it's a good thing for this old world that we don't have hundreds more like her, or even ten more. Can you imagine my distress multiplied by ten, a hundred, *five* hundred? The very idea of it makes me shudder. You see, it is all very well to serve your fellow-

man, but a wife ought to serve her husband also. I have lived on a steady diet of cereal and boiled eggs ever since we have been married.

Not true; I am exaggerating. Sometimes we will have roast beef or turkey or a succulent baked ham—when she comes home with a human derelict in tow.

"Albert," she will say to me, "take him upstairs and give him a nice hot bath."

It breaks me up every time I think of the one she brought home just before Easter. He was six-foot-four and weighed, roughly, a hundred and ten pounds.

"I'm sure he is old enough to bathe himself," I said dryly.

Caroline laughed. "Don't mind Albert," she told our guest. "He has quite a sense of humor—unfortunately.

"And find him something decent to wear," she called as we climbed the stairs.

You probably won't believe that I, five-foot-eight on tiptoe, could open my closet and come up with an outfit for the skyscraper. You would be perfectly right—but you haven't seen the other closet, the guest closet, as Caroline likes to call it. There are clothes in there to fit any size or build in the world—all male, of course. For some reason, Caroline's charity invariably stops short at females.

Where does the wardrobe come from? From the nearly-new sales, of course. Why Caroline cannot be honest and call them rummage sales is something I cannot understand.

Getting back to our Easter guest, however, after an hour upstairs he looked quite presentable in gray slacks, a pale blue sweater and a deep blue cravat which I donated him from my own personal wardrobe. I had even managed to find him a passable pair of loafers in the closet.

Caroline stared at him wordlessly when I brought him downstairs. She had changed into a soft, plushy hostess gown which showed off her superb figure. I could see our guest appreciated it.

"Well, how does he look?" I asked heartily but neither seemed to hear me. We went in to dinner, during the course of which I learned that his name was Curtis Blake, that he had been a partner in a flourishing TV repair business, but one day his partner had absconded with all the money and Curtis' fiancee and left Curtis with all the bills. Curtis went downhill from there.

"How perfectly awful!" said Caroline. "Didn't you tell the police?"

"They never found him. I be-

lieve he went to South America."

"But to ruin a man's life like that!" said Caroline.

"Curtis ruined his own life," I said, pursuing an errant pea on my plate.

"Oh?" said Curtis coolly.

I looked up at him then. I failed to see how such a handsome man —for he would be handsome if he substituted eating for drinking— could think that his life was ruined because of a tough break.

"Really, Albert," said Caroline, "there is no need to be rude. After all, Curtis is a guest in our home."

I let her have the round. She spent the rest of the evening trying to make up for any hurt I might have caused him. I went into the library to throw darts.

When I came out some two hours later, they were sitting in front of the fire with no lights on. She was on the couch and he was on the floor at her feet. It looked very cozy.

"Oh, Albert," said Caroline, waggling her fingers at me, "do come and join us."

"I came to say goodnight. I am going up to bed."

"Of course! Poor Curtis," she said, turning to the guest, "You must be tired, too."

Undoubtedly, I thought. *A man can get exhausted lounging around in the gutter.*

"Take Curtis up and put him in the Green Room, Albert."

Curtis got up obediently. I said I hoped the Green Room would be satisfactory. He gave me an odd look before he kissed Caroline's hand. She sighed and I could just see her reaffirming her conviction that kind deeds are repaid many times over. Oh well, that's the way she is.

The next morning I came downstairs to find Curtis in the library examining the shelves. "Like to read, do you?" I asked him.

"I used to. Before I—"

"Yes, I know. How about some breakfast?"

"Where is Caroline?"

Caroline? "My wife is still asleep," I replied. "She is not an early riser."

Curtis ate a gargantuan breakfast. A week in our house and he would outweigh our horse.

It was at times like this that I began to worry. Caroline was independently wealthy, having been born that way. Before our marriage I had been a prosperous grocer. I enjoyed my profession— and don't let anyone tell you that being a grocer is not a profession —but Caroline thought it was undignified, so I sold my business. At first I did not miss it too much, but I soon learned that to be worthy of Caroline's attention,

you had to be a misfit or an underdog. Since I could not see changing in the prime of my life, I suffered in silence. But let me not mislead you. I sorely missed my business and I missed feminine companionship and affection. There was nothing I could do about the loss of the business. As for the other, I did have a lot of free time. So all in all, things weren't too sticky. I was on my own most of the time and as long as I went along with Caroline's charity cases, we co-existed amiably.

Now, as I watched Curtis eat, I thought how nice it would be to be back in the grocery business. "What are your plans?" I asked him.

"You'll have to speak to Caroline about that."

"Why?"

"We had quite a long discussion last night. I don't feel it would be right to discuss it without her being present."

He had succeeded in making me feel like an intruder in my own home. Before I could answer him, Caroline entered the kitchen. I looked at her in disbelief. She usually comes to breakfast in a short robe with her pajama legs showing beneath it and her hair in rollers. This morning she was resplendent in a sheath of flowered silk, her hair combed and styled, and a full face of artful makeup.

"Good morning," she sang.

"Who are you?" I said in an attempt at humor. Curtis made me feel like a fool by getting to his feet and raising her hand to his lips. He had pretty good manners for a gutter bum.

Caroline ignored me. She let Curtis seat her and pour her coffee.

"What are your plans?" I said loudly.

They disengaged their eyes and looked at me as though I were a four-year-old who had just uttered an obscenity.

"Whose plans?" said Caroline.

"What is Curtis planning to do when he leaves here?" I said evenly.

"Curtis isn't going to leave," said Caroline. "He has always wanted to write, so I am going to give him the chance. It will be my way of rehabilitating him."

I looked across the table at Curtis. He seemed less in need of rehabilitating than anyone I had ever seen. Food he needed, I admit that, but apparently that was going to be no problem.

"You mean he is going to be your—"

"Protege," Caroline finished. She reached for his hand and squeezed it.

"I think I'll go out and talk to

the horse," I said meaningfully.

Caroline had bought the horse for a former protege of hers who said he would never have become a failure if only his parents had let him have a horse when he was a child. As of today, the horse was in the pasture eating his days away while the horse lover was back on the skids, having found another excuse for his condition.

"I wonder if Curtis likes to ride," I said to the horse. Like Caroline, it ignored me. I was beginning to feel like part of the furnishings, something to be dusted off and forgotten.

I went back to the library and my dart board. It was while I was in there that I heard them talking in the next room. I put my ear against the wall.

"Caroline, your husband does not like me. I don't see how I can live here in such an atmosphere."

"He'll get over it, Curtis. It takes him a little while to get used to things."

"A writer cannot create in an atmosphere of disharmony, dear."

Dear! I pressed my ear closer. If I knew Caroline, her reply would be in a soft intimate tone. It was, and I missed it entirely.

Something would have to be done, but what? I didn't know. What can a husband do with a wife who has such a soft heart for the poor unfortunates of the world?

That afternoon I invited Curtis to go for a horseback ride, hoping perhaps that he would fall off and break his neck. He took one look at the horse and declined. "I am not essentially the outdoor type," he told me.

There was a bright side to Curtis' residency, though. Caroline spent some time in the kitchen and we ate well. I could almost see Curtis filling out before my eyes. If I didn't do something soon he would be too big for me to handle.

Caroline gave him the use of the library with his own desk and my typewriter and a ream of paper. I was under orders not to disturb the genius. If the door was closed it meant he was creating. This worked a hardship on me, because with Caroline out crusading the better part of the day and Curtis locked in the library, I was at loose ends. I could not get in to find any books to read, and when he was out of the library I never thought of the books. I could not even throw darts.

After about a week I realized that the library was very quiet during the day. Apparently Curtis did his writing in longhand since there was never the sound of typing. Then I got the idea. Maybe I

could not get into the library, but there was nothing to stop me from looking through the window.

I chose a cloudy afternoon when Caroline was gone. It was no easy job to invade the lilac bush. It was older than I and appeared to resent the intrusion. I was scratched and disheveled by the time I reached the library window. Curtis was in there all right, but he was not writing. He was standing in front of the wall safe. His body was blocking the view, so I could not see whether he had it open.

So Curtis Blake had more on his mind than a literary career. I wondered how long it had taken him to locate the safe. At last count, I believe there were close to a thousand books on the shelves. I hoped he had removed every one of them before he found the safe concealed behind the dart board.

I stayed in the lilac and thought about Mr. Curtis Blake. I knew now that I had never really believed he was a bum. He just did not have that certain air about him. He may have looked the part, but he was far too smooth. It was much easier to believe he was a con man. Everyone knew about the charitable, wealthy Caroline, and Curtis recognized a golden opportunity when he saw one.

Curtis replaced the dart board, opened the door and left the library. I decided it was time to get out of the bush. Getting out was going to be just as hard as getting in, if not more so. I had not yet negotiated the first step when the library door opened again and in walked Curtis with Caroline behind him. I was surprised to see her. I had not heard her car drive up. She must have come in the back way.

"Now here's what we'll do," she was saying to Curtis as he leaned against the desk. "I'll put a sleeping pill in his coffee tonight and at one o'clock you come to his room and we'll get him into the car."

"But suppose he comes to before we get to the cliff?"

"You leave that to me."

I clung to a branch. I could not have moved if the bush had caught fire. I was the one they were talking about. Me! Curtis did not look too happy; I will give him credit for that.

"I don't know how I could have let Albert charm me into marriage," Caroline was saying. "He is an absolute nothing."

I love you, too, I told her silently, you with your saintly behavior in public which conceals what you really are. I had known all along, but a comfortable life can make any road smoother. Marriage to

Caroline had its drawbacks, of course, as any marriage has, but I was willing to put up with it. Even though I longed to be my own boss again in my own business, I was willing to sacrifice that for my life as it was. I had plenty of money, a beautiful, if corrupt, wife and a comfortable home. Now, however, the picture had changed. I was about to be eliminated. The shame of it was devastating enough, but the physical result was unthinkable. This I could not allow.

That night I cleverly avoided drinking the coffee, which was no easy task with both of them watching me. I knew the station wagon was waiting at the rear of the house to plunge down the cliff with its innocent victim. I felt a pang of sorrow. It was a honey of a car.

Sometime during his stay, Curtis had taken time out from his literary endeavors to go into town and buy a few things to wear. He looked exceedingly handsome and sporty in dove gray with a touch of color at the throat. He would make a most attractive writer, I thought with approval. I could see him reproduced on thousands of book jackets.

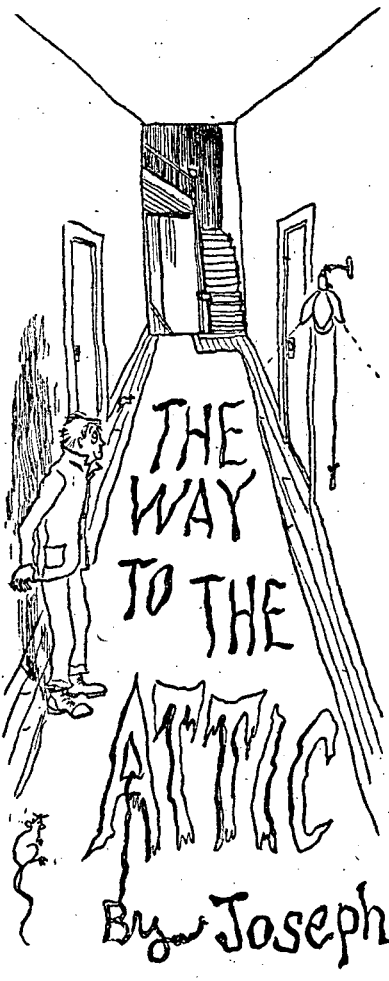
Caroline looked lovely. Instead of a hostess gown, as was her custom at this hour, she was wearing stretch pants—which stretched just right—and a silk blouse with French cuffs and mother-of-pearl links. Few women could look as well as my wife in an outfit like that. We all sat there with our coffee cups, smiling at each other, each one with his own secret.

Poor Curtis: he had not succeeded in opening the safe and making his getaway before Caroline put her plan into action. Poor Caroline: she thought she had managed to get the coffee with its sleeping pill inside me. Poor me: I had no intention of waiting till midnight. Already the two of them were concealing yawns.

I am really going to miss Caroline, despite her faults. How could such a beautiful creature be so completely—wrong?

Oh well, that's the way she is—was.

Perhaps the way to an attic is commonly present, but each must find his own exit.



THE WAY TO THE ATTIC

By Joseph Payne Brennan

IT ALL happened nearly thirty years ago. I was a young writer down on my luck, having quit my job and taken to the typewriter without success. I was finally forced to leave my comfortable furnished room and search for a cheaper one.

After two days' trudging (I slept in a sort of flophouse hotel one night) I came to Mrs. Midgelington's big frame house on Farnaby Street.

The neighborhood had gone on the long slide which led from "genteel poverty" to stark squalor. The hedges were half dead, the grass shaggy, the sidewalks cracked—but I was on my last fifty dollars.

The sign reading "Furnished Rooms" bore a visible greasy thumbprint along one edge. I rang the bell.

Mrs. Midgelington inspected me without enthusiasm. She was wrapped in a limp-looking flowered bathrobe and her puffy red-rimmed gray eyes squinted out from under

a mop of mouse-colored hair which resembled the stuffing burst out of old upholstery.

I followed her up a flight of stairs worn shallow by the feet of that ancient brotherhood—unhonored and anonymous—the "furnished roomers" who come and go by the score, by the hundreds, whose feet tread a thousand dark stairwells, a thousand dim hallways, lost and still searching to the very end.

My room was poorly lighted, small and shabbily furnished, but it was only five dollars a week. I took it.

I settled in with my one suit, my secondhand portable typewriter and a few stationery supplies.

The battle did not go well. I got up early, wrote all morning, took a walk in the afternoon and wrote again in the evening, but the bulky envelopes kept right on coming back.

At length, with thirty-seven cents left in my pockets, I answered a newspaper advertisement and took a job as part-time shipping clerk at a food warehouse. My shift ran from six p.m. to eleven p.m., six evenings a week. I was paid a dollar an hour. I didn't like the work but my net pay of twenty-six dollars a week seemed substantial at the time. I could pay my board and still have three dollars a day for food. That was plenty in those days. If I needed anything extra, I skipped a few meals to make up the difference.

I got back to my room by midnight and to bed by one, so that if I turned out around eight, I still had most of the day for writing.

I was just beginning to pull ahead when the warehouse decided to close at six on Saturday evening and at ten during the rest of the week. This meant my gross pay was cut from thirty dollars a week to twenty. I began to skip more meals.

At about this time my clothes began to come apart. It was impossible for me to replace them; I sewed and patched as well as I could. When my bare foot met the sidewalk, I darned socks and put cardboard fillers in my shoes.

Life went on drearily in my shabby furnished room. I sold one verse for five dollars, but otherwise the manuscripts rushed back with relentless regularity. New tenants came and went; I rarely got on more than nodding terms with them.

For some reason Mrs. Midgelington seemed to favor me. Looking back now, I suppose it was because I didn't sneak women up to my room and didn't get drunk and rowdy like some of the other roomers.

Anyway, I was the recipient of

various small favors. Mrs. Midgelington put up clean new curtains in my room; she fetched my mail; once when I had a cold she brought me some cough syrup.

One day she gave me an old blank ledger which she had found somewhere. She thought I could use it. As a matter of fact, I found it just right for note-keeping. On another occasion she brought me a pocketknife which some roomer had forgotten. One day when the cold was cutting through my cardboard soles, she came in with a pair of shoes which she said that I might have for a dollar. They were just a trifle large, but I whipped out a dollar without quibbling. Ordinarily I would balk at secondhand footwear, but I was desperate; my feet were constantly cold and the shoes were in good condition. I supposed they had been abandoned by a roomer who left in a hurry.

As winter came on, the warehouse got colder and colder, and I nearly froze to death on the windy shipping platform as I waited for trucks to load. Even after hot coffee, I'd go home shivering. By then there would be no heat in my room either.

About this time a story I'd felt was a sure winner hurried back like the rest, and I experienced something bordering on despair. Never before had a rejection hit me so hard. I'd come home late at night and sit on the side of my bed, brooding.

I didn't sleep well and I began to neglect my writing. Suddenly my youthful dreams seemed highflown and foolish. I felt that I was a failure, that my life would never amount to anything.

After working at the warehouse like a robot, I would come back to my cold room, slump in the one half-comfortable chair and just look at the floor. I couldn't get to sleep and when I tried to read, I couldn't concentrate. Everything seemed hopeless, futile, inane, meaningless. When manuscripts came back, I no longer sent them out again; I merely piled them in a corner and forgot about them. Soon there were no more out and so no more came back.

I finally got into the habit of wandering along the corridors late at night—across to the lavatory, down to the vestibule, up and down the stairs. I developed a vague feeling that I was searching for something, though I had no idea what it was.

One night, later than usual, I noticed a flight of stairs leading up to the garret. I had seen them before, I suppose, but somehow they hadn't registered. This night they seemed to hold an odd attraction for me. I

climbed them at once and found myself in an icy dark attic. A faint blur of illumination filtered through a skylight. As I groped around, a string brushed my face; I pulled it and the dimmest bulb imaginable went on. It didn't give much more light than a firefly.

I stumbled around, searching for I knew not what. The entire big, bare-raftered room was littered with broken furniture, moth-eaten rugs and sprung suitcases.

I stayed quite a while, poking around, inspecting the walls and the rafters. At length, I found a heavy iron hook, driven deep into the rafters near the light bulb. I was not surprised when I saw the hook; in fact, the sight of it gave me a queer little thrill. It was as if I had known it was there all the time.

After that, I began going up to the attic almost every night. The darkness and the desolate look of the place seemed to suit my mood. I'd just sit there, as if I were waiting for something. I wasn't sure what it was. It seemed like something was building up inside me.

I no longer wrote at all, and I worked at the warehouse mechanically. New roomers came and departed, but paid no attention to me. Mrs. Midgelington was so tired by early evening, I doubt that she ever heard me walking along the corridors and up the attic stairs. Only one thing annoyed me—some of the floor boards creaked quite audibly. I was always afraid that a roomer, hearing me in the halls so late at night, would think I was prowling around in order to steal something. That might be awkward, and I hated scenes.

One evening a truck driver left a rope on the shipping platform. For some reason I picked it up and took it back to my room, and for an hour or more I sat tying knots. I found it soothing.

Then one rainy night when I opened my pay envelope, I found the proverbial pink slip. It was actually pink, and stated that my services at the warehouse were terminated as of said date. I had been warned previously that I was making too many mistakes, but at the time I merely shrugged.

Strangely enough, instead of being crushed by the news, I experienced a paradoxical sense of secret elation. I felt relieved, as if a decision I had been avoiding had finally been made for me.

As I walked back to my room through the rain, I kept thinking about the attic. After the turmoil, confusion and irritations of the warehouse shipping platform, it seemed like such a peaceful place. It was cold, of course, but I didn't seem to mind that so much any-

more. I was inured to it now.

That evening I sat tying knots in my room till after midnight. Then I stole into the hall and climbed the stairs which led to the attic. I put on the one dim bulb and for a long time just sat there on a battered old steamer trunk. As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, I could see the big iron hook fixed to the rafters overhead. I wondered that it had taken me so long to comprehend its significance. It was the easy and obvious solution to all my problems. It would be senseless, I told myself, to struggle on. My writing had come to nothing. I was out of a job with no prospects of another, but worse than all this—I had lost my zest for life. My energy and enthusiasm had simply ebbed away. To writhe on, ground down by poverty, I assured myself, would be ridiculous.

I got up and started down the stairs for the rope.

I had nearly reached my room when a board creaked loudly. A nearby door opened and an ugly male face scowled out at me. I could see suspicion etched in every acidulous line of that sneering face.

I could feel the two sullen eyes boring into my back even after I entered my own room and closed the door. I felt humiliated—and furious. I knew I could never make another trip to the attic that night. Could there be no peace, no dignity, no privacy, even as one sought oblivion?

Furious with the prying fool who had ruined my plans, I paced my room for hours. At length I sat down and I suppose fell asleep from complete exhaustion.

I passed the next day fretfully, never leaving my room. My only meal consisted of water and a few crackers. I waited impatiently for night to descend. No one disturbed me.

At last darkness came and gradually the house grew quiet. I sat on the edge of my bed, hour after hour, waiting. Finally, near midnight, when darkness and silence had spread their sooty soft wings over every dreary cell in that dreary house, I stood up and started for my door, rope in hand. I knew what I had to do.

Just as I neared the door, a board creaked underfoot, not too loudly, but audibly. Remembering the incident of the previous evening, I felt a surge of exasperation. I certainly didn't want to be interrupted a second time!

As I looked down, I had an inspiration. Bending, I slipped off my shoes. In my stocking feet, I assured myself, there was far less chance of my making noise, and of course I wouldn't need the shoes anymore.

As I reached the door and started to turn the handle, the strangest thing happened. It seemed so weird and inexplicable at the time that I find it hard to describe. The best I can do is to say that I very suddenly appeared to awaken from a trance-like state. I felt that I had all at once shaken off the effect of some drug, of some poisonous narcotic which had seized my mind.

I stared with horror at the rope in my hand. Sweat broke out on my face and I began to tremble. Dropping the rope, I staggered to my bed and slumped down in consternation. What had happened to me? I had everything to live for. I was young and healthy and full of ideas. What matter that I had lost a twenty-dollar-a-week job, that my stories weren't selling yet? I could get another job, and I still had decades of time in which to try my hand at story writing. There were thousands of people, I told myself, worse off than I, and still they struggled on.

Why had I so easily given way to despair? I gazed at the rope lying on the floor as if it were a coiled cobra. Then my eyes slid across to

the shoes that I had just slipped off.

I don't know how long it took before the truth burst upon me. I just kept staring at the shoes that for some reason seemed far more lethal than the rope. Then two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle clicked together in my mind. Reviewing the past several months, I realized that my siege of apathy and slow despair had begun just after I acquired the shoes from Mrs. Midgelington. Those shoes had taken me out into the halls and corridors of the house when I didn't know where I was going or what I was seeking. They had taken me up to the icy attic—up to the hook in the rafters . . .

It was all too fantastic, I told myself, and yet . . . Suddenly I realized I had to know immediately, without delay. I could not wait till morning to find out.

Fumbling under the bed, I found my old shoes with the cardboard soles and put them on. Then I lifted the other pair of shoes, held them gingerly between my left thumb and forefinger and opened the door.

I walked down the hall and knocked at Mrs. Midgelington's door. I knocked for ten minutes before she woke up and asked who was there. Then I heard a bolt slide back and the door cracked open. An accusing eye, an eye like a clouded agate, peered out slyly.

"These shoes." I held them up. "Where did you get them?"

Even in the dim light cast by one dusty hall bulb, Mrs. Midgelington's face took on a look of guilt. She hesitated.

"I demand to know!" I exclaimed fiercely.

"They was Mr. Slumer's shoes," she whispered finally.

"Mr. Slumer roomed here?"

She nodded.

"And what," I asked, "did Mr. Slumer do up in the attic?"

Mrs. Midgelington's face, I fancied, changed color—from a sort of putty gray to paper white.

She didn't reply and I repeated my question in a louder voice.

Mrs. Midgelington looked at the closed doors along the corridor apprehensively and brought her eyes back to my face. She must have known that if I repeated the question a third time, I would shout it.

Her voice was barely audible. "Mr. Slumer hung himself in the attic."

I more or less expected the reply, but it still silenced me for a minute. I stared at her. "How did you get his shoes?" I asked at last.

I could see her struggling to put words together. "They was in the attic. Come off, likely, after he kicked the box away. They said the knot was wrong and 'is face was a

'orrible sight. 'E didn't go quick, they said. Strangled, 'stead of goin' with a broken neck. Likely he kept twistin' there and just sort of kicked off the shoes."

I nodded. "Go on."

"They carried him down to his room without the shoes. Likely they hardly noticed. When the funeral men come, they took another pair of shoes was in his room."

"I see," I said. "So you brought the shoes from the attic and finally sold them to me?"

"They was good shoes, Mr. Brennan; I didn't see no harm in it. If you want the dollar back—"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. Incidentally, I'll be leaving, come daylight. Right now I'm going down to the cellar and throw these shoes in the furnace."

The round agate eyes regarded the shoes sorrowfully.

I started away and then stopped with an afterthought. "By the way, Mrs. Midgelington, which room did Mr. Slumer occupy?"

Again she hesitated; the agate eyes grew more cloudy.

My voice was soft. "You gave me Mr. Slumer's room, didn't you, Mrs. Midgelington?"

She nodded. "It's a nice room, Mr. Brennan."

I sighed and turned away. I didn't care to know anything more about Mr. Slumer. Maybe he had wanted to be a writer . . .

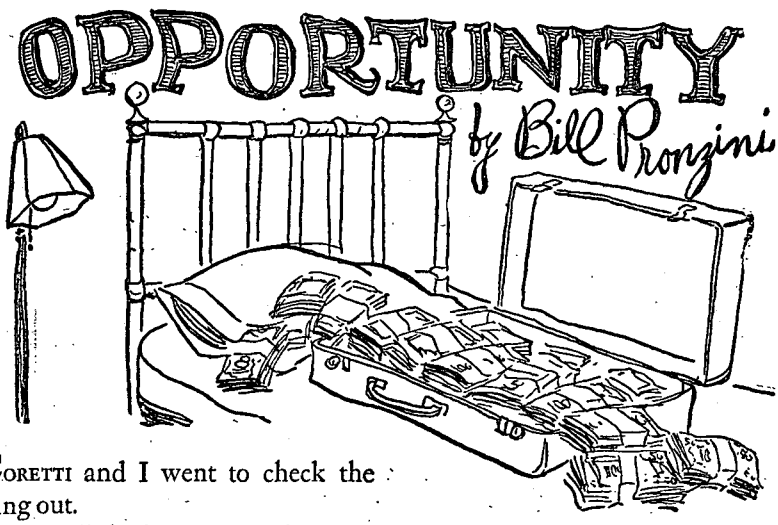
I went down to the cellar, threw the shoes in the coal furnace and watched them burn. Then I packed up my few possessions and waited for daylight.

I found a room in a different part of town. Not long afterward I got a job in a hospital admissions office, and the rejected story which I had felt was a sure winner sold to another magazine. Later, other sales followed.

I didn't set the world ablaze but I earned a living and managed to claw my way a few rungs up the slippery ladder of literary success.

It all happened nearly thirty years ago, but from time to time I still have a certain nightmare. I've got on Mr. Slumer's shoes and I'm climbing Mrs. Midgelington's stairs to the icy attic where there's a big hook fixed in the rafters.

There can be no tie score in a contest between devotion to duty and devotion to one's own.



CORETTI and I went to check the thing out.

The call had come to the captain of detectives at eight thirty-five from an occasionally reliable department informant named Scully. We were logging reports in the squad room when the word came down. It had been a quiet night, like you can get in early winter, the sound of the wind and a thin rain snapping at the high windows, and none of us relished the thought of leaving the relative warmth of the squad room. So we matched coins with the two other teams of detectives on the four-to-midnight swing to see who would take the assignment. Coretti and I lost.

It didn't sound like much, but then you never know. A parlor collector for a string of books in Southern California had vanished with a substantial amount of weekend receipts. Scully didn't know how much, but since the betting had been unusually heavy at Caliente on Saturday his guess was

six figures. Scully's tip, uncorroborated and filtering north on the grapevine, was that this Feldstein had come into San Francisco and gone into hiding in a tenement hotel near the waterfront. The captain thought we ought to run a check.

Coretti and I rode the elevator down to the police garage in the basement of the Hall of Justice, and signed a check-out slip for the unmarked sedan assigned to us. We drove up the ramp and out into the frigid, drizzling San Francisco night. The hotel Scully had named was off Third Sreet. The address was primarily industrial.

We rode in silence the first few blocks. The heater in the sedan made labored whirring sounds and threw nothing but cold air against our feet. Coretti picked up Third at Townsend Street, and followed it out over the Basin.

I lit a cigarette as we passed over the bridge, looking out at the huge, black hulk of the Swedish freighter that had docked there the day before. I exhaled smoke through my nose, and the pain in my stomach almost doubled me over on the seat. I jammed my hand up under my breastbone and held it there, waiting for the sharpness of the pain to subside.

Coretti had slowed the car and was looking at me. "Arne," he said, "you all right?"

"Yeah," I said. I coughed. "Okay, now."

"The ulcer again, Arne?"

I nodded, took the plastic bottle from inside my coat, shook one of the little white tablets out, and put it under my tongue.

"You eat those things like candy," Coretti said. "They don't seem to be helping much."

"They don't. The doc says I've got to have an operation. He's afraid the thing will rupture."

Coretti asked, "When you going in, Arne?"

"I'm not."

He gave me a sharp look. "Why not? Man, that's nothing to fool with."

"I can't afford an operation like that right now. I'm up to my ears in bills. You've got a family, Bob. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I know."

"Maybe this summer," I said. "The bank loan will be paid off by then."

"Does the captain know?"

"No, he doesn't know, and keep it under your hat, will you? I haven't even told my wife yet."

"You can't keep it a secret forever, Arne," Coretti said. "Some of the boys are beginning to notice these spasms you get. The captain's bound to find out. It would be a

lot easier if you told him about it yourself."

"You know as well as I do what it means if I tell the captain—disability. I can barely live on what I make now, Bob. How can I live on what disability pays?"

"Just the same, you can't keep on like this. You look worn out, Arne. If you won't go in for the operation, why don't you at least take some time off? You've got sick leave coming."

"Maybe you're right. I could use a week's rest."

"Sure I'm right," Coretti said, "and if I were you, I'd do some serious thinking about that operation."

"The rest is all I need. A week off and I'll be okay. The operation can wait until summer."

Coretti shook his head. "All right," he said. "It's your health."

We passed the Potrero Precinct Station. It had begun to rain in earnest now, and Coretti switched on the wipers. The bitter cold wind, blowing in across the Bay, whipped sheets of ice water across the windshield, and you could hear it howling at the windows of the sedan.

I sat with my legs straight out in front of me to ease the gnawing in my stomach. I wished I were home in bed, with Gerry's warm little body against my back.

Coretti made a left-hand turn, drove two blocks, and made another turn. The hotel stood between a storage warehouse for one of the interstate truck lines and an iron foundry, midway on the block. It was a three-story wooden affair, well over half a century old—a shambling reminder of another era. A narrow alley separated it from the iron foundry on the right.

We left the sedan's semi-warmth and hurried up to the front door. The rain was ice on the back of my neck.

Inside, there was the strong musty smell of age; the smell of death wrapped in mothballs. Across what passed for a lobby—a leather couch, three cane-bottom chairs and an artificial plant that had been dyed a lemon-yellow—was a flight of stairs that led to the upper floors. A desk paralleled the wall on the right, and an unmarked door was between it and the stairs. There was no one behind the desk.

"Nice place," Coretti said, glancing around. "Homey, you know?"

From behind the unmarked door came the sounds of a television, the volume turned high. I motioned to Coretti and we went to the door. I rapped heavily, and it seemed that a thin dust from crumbling plaster drifted down

from overhead. Coretti had to grin.

After several seconds the door opened and a rheumy-looking old character in a T-shirt and baggy trousers held up by three-inch suspenders peered at us over a pair of glasses that balanced on the end of his nose. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"You the desk clerk?"

"Yep. Desk clerk. Manager. Handyman. You name it." He peered harder. "You fellas want a room?"

I got out my wallet and let him see the shield pinned to it. "Police officers," I said. "Detective Kelstrom and Detective Coretti. We'd like to ask you some questions."

"Police, eh?"

"That's right. Do you mind if we come in, Mr.—"

"Gibbons," he said. "Charley Gibbons. Sure, come on in."

He pulled the door wider. We went inside. A television set in the far corner blared out a soap commercial. It looked like one of the first experimental models.

"I was watching the fights," Gibbons said. He switched the thing off. "Heavyweight match tonight; not much of a fight, though. They don't put on a show like they used to, you know."

"I guess they don't," I said.

He peered at me again. "You a fight fan?"

"No," I said. I wished I had some coffee, and to hell with what the doctor had said. It was very cold in Gibbons' room.

"Oh," the old man said. "Some questions, you said?"

"About one of your tenants."

"Which one?"

"The man's name is Feldstein, but I doubt if he'd be using it."

"Feldstein?" Gibbons shook his head. "Nope, no one here by that name. I only got a couple of tenants now. Business is pretty bad. Must be the weather."

I didn't think it was the weather. I said, "Have you had any new tenants recently? Say in the past two or three days?"

Gibbons thought about that, then nodded. "Fella named Collins rented a room three days ago. Kind of a quiet one. Stays in his room mostly. Only comes out to eat."

"This man Collins say anything to you at all?"

"Nope. Never said nothing, except he wanted a room. Paid me two months in advance, though."

I glanced at Coretti. He asked, "What does this Collins look like?"

"Little guy, kind of skinny; got a mole or something on his left cheek."

It matched Feldstein's description.

Coretti asked, "This Collins in

his room right now, Mr. Gibbons?"

"Far as I know," Gibbons said. "I been watching the fights."

"What's his room number?"

"Three-o-six. Third floor."

"All right, Mr. Gibbons," I said. "Thanks for your help."

He nodded his head, and the glasses teetered precariously on his nose. We went to the door. "Say," Gibbons called after us, "there ain't going to be any trouble, is there?"

"Let's hope not, Mr. Gibbons," I said. We stepped outside and I closed the door. We stood there for a moment, and then I turned to Coretti. "What do you think, Bob?"

"Sounds like Feldstein, all right. He might give us a hard time."

I nodded. "We'll take it slow."

We took the stairs up two flights to the third floor. The hallway was lit only by a single, pale bulb on the wall at the far end. We found room 306, and I reached out and rapped sharply on the door.

There was silence inside, then a faint creaking of bedsprings. The only sound in the hallway was our quiet breathing. I knocked on the door again, but there was nothing more from inside. I felt the tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise. My stomach began to throb. The air seemed charged with tension. I looked at Coretti, and I know that he felt every jolt of it, too.

I moved away from the door to the wall at the side, and rapped on the wood paneling for the third time. Coretti flattened against the opposite wall, his hand on the service revolver inside his coat, and then a soft voice said from inside, "Who is it?"

A chill nudged my neck. I lifted my revolver from its belt holster and flipped off the safety, watching Coretti as he did the same. "Police officers," I said loudly. "Open up, Collins. We want to—"

The slugs came fast, three of them, ripping jagged splinters from the wood as the metal jackets slashed through the door and gouged plaster from the wall across from us. The rapid explosions inside echoed and re-echoed, reverberating off the thin walls, and then died. It was quiet again.

Coretti and I hugged the wall, not moving, waiting. Then, from inside, there was a slight, almost imperceptible scraping sound. "Come on!" I hissed to Coretti. "He's trying to get out the window!"

I stepped back to get leverage and slammed my foot against the thin wood of the door, just above the knob. The lock pulled from the jamb with a rending of rusted metal, and the door kicked inward heavily. The man was at the far

window, one leg over the sill, and he had a tan pasteboard suitcase in his left hand and a short-barrel .38 clenched in his right. He froze momentarily as the door gave, and then his arm lifted and the gun spit flame in our direction.

I was first into the room and threw myself to the floor as he brought the gun up, landing on my right shoulder and spoiling the shot I had at him. Coretti was half in and half out of the open doorway, a clear target, but the man's shot was wild, thudding high into the wall above the open door. Coretti ducked back into the hallway.

I rolled over once, skidding to my knees, bringing the service revolver up and on the window, but by that time the man was just a dim shadow through the rain on the metal fire escape outside. I snapped a quick shot that shattered the window glass, but the bullet whined off into the night and I could hear the man's heavy shoes retreating on the iron rungs of the fire escape.

Coretti had recovered and started inside the room as I scrambled to my feet. "Get downstairs!" I yelled at him. "Cut him off in the alley!"

I ran to the window and got my head out, trying to see where he was. It was almost a fatal move. His first slug tore a hole in the wood frame of the window inches above my head, and the second screamed savagely off the railing in front of me, spraying my face with iron filings.

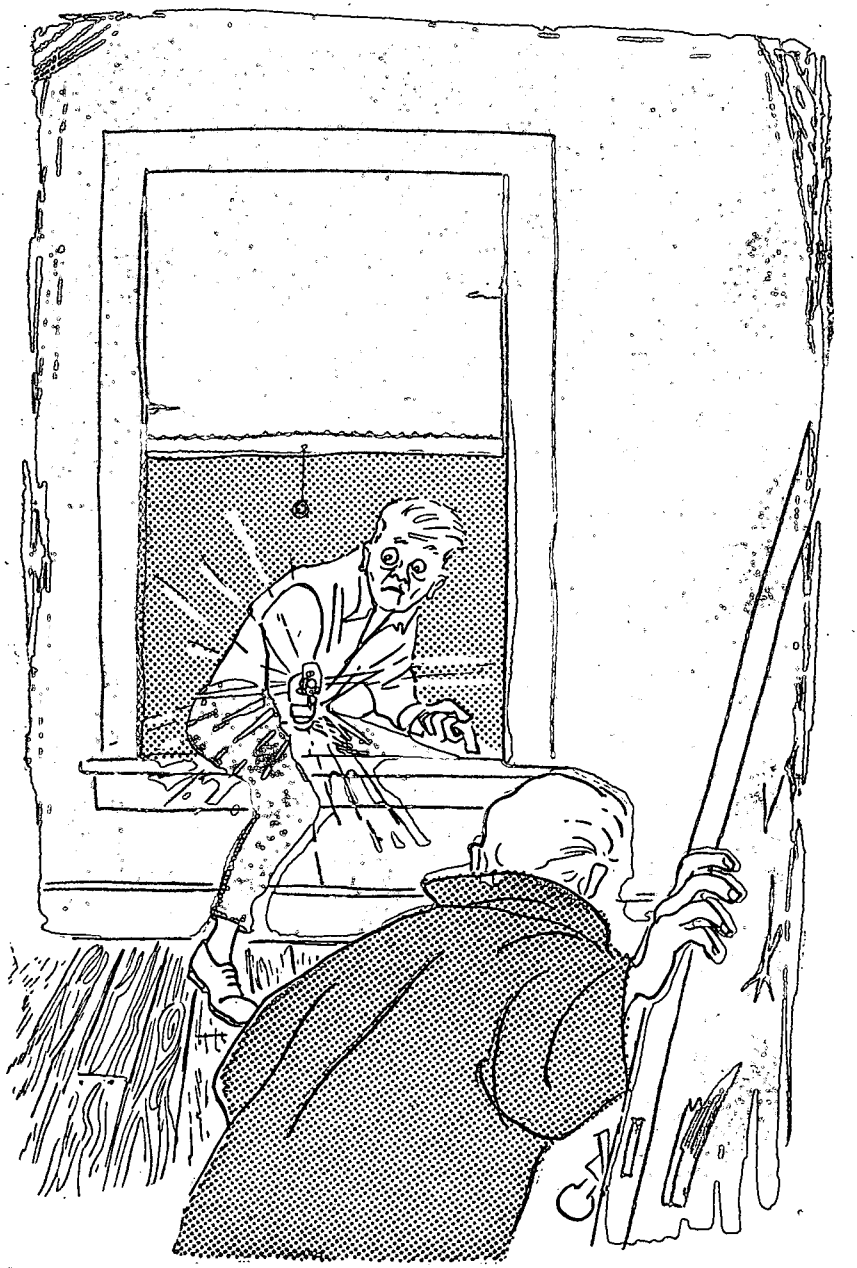
I pushed myself through the window, the pain a hot iron in my stomach now, cursing myself for a fool. I landed on my forearms, tearing a layer of skin from my cheek as my head dipped, and skidded across the iron slats.

The man was almost to the second floor level, his back to me now as he tried to scramble down the rain-slick steps. I got the revolver up, steadying it on my left hand, and fired low, trying for his legs. The first shot missed wide, but I fired again and this one took him high on the right thigh. I saw him buckle, and he dropped the suitcase. His arms flailed as he tried to recover his balance.

I could see he wasn't going to make it.

The force of the impact had pitched him sideways, and he banged hard into the railing. The bar caught him just below the waist and catapulted him over it in a spinning somersault. He screamed once, suspended in air, and then he was gone.

I stood up slowly, wiping sweat from my face, and started down. Coretti was coming up the alley,



running. I looked to see if anyone were behind him, roused by the gunfire, but there was no one.

The fire escape was one of these old-fashioned ones that end flush with the pavement, and I made it down the two levels to the alley floor. Coretti was bent over the man. I walked toward them slowly, and suddenly I couldn't seem to get any air into my lungs. A needle of fire lanced down from my chest to my groin, and I went to one knee, my head hanging down, gasping.

Coretti came running toward me. "Arne," he yelled, "you hit?"

"No," I said between clenched teeth. "Ulcer. Pills in my pocket."

He got the bottle, put one of the pills under my tongue, but it took a long time for the pill to work. The pain was getting worse each time. Finally I was able to breathe normally, and Coretti helped me to my feet. I stood there in the rain.

"You okay now?" Coretti asked.

"Better," I said. "Just give me a minute."

"I'll call a doc."

"No, no, I'm fine now." I looked to where the man lay to the right of the fire escape. "What about him?"

"Dead. Broken neck."

"We'd better call in."

"Let me get you inside first. You don't look so good, Arne."

I nodded, and he helped me up the steps of the fire escape. At the second-floor level, the suitcase the man had dropped lay jammed against the wire mesh of the railing. Coretti picked it up. At the third floor, we climbed back into the room. I was bathed in sweat.

Coretti laid the suitcase on the bed. "We'd better have a look in here," he said. He flipped the catch, pulled it open, and we looked inside.

Money—the suitcase was jammed with it, twenties and fifties in thick bundles with a plain money wrapper around each one. There were numbers scrawled in pencil on each wrapper.

We stood there, looking down into the suitcase. It was very quiet in the small room. The stench of cordite still lingered in the air.

The silence began to build. I could hear the rain, falling in steady cadence on the metal fire escape. I felt the icy touch of the wind through the shattered window.

Coretti said softly, "How much do you think is in there, Arne?"

"I don't know," I said. I wet my lips.

Coretti began to take the bundles out of the suitcase. He placed them on the bed, a fanning sea of green. When the case was empty, he turned to me. "If the numbers on those wrappers are right, there's

one hundred and four thousand dollars here. Arne, one hundred and four thousand dollars!" His voice had a strange quality to it.

The back of my throat was dry. I had not thought about the money at all before. It had been an intangible, and I had attached no reality to it. A routine assignment, stolen money, a thief in hiding—it happens every day. It's my job, and I had thought no more about it than as a part of that job.

Now, looking down at the green bundles on the bed, the money took on weight, substance, and it was uppermost and starkly real in my mind. I kept looking at it, was held motionless by it, more money than I would ever see again in my lifetime, and I was thinking what it would be like to have as much money as that, just half as much, have it for myself, all my debts paid off, the car, the mortgage on the house, the doctor bills, money for my son's education, some of the luxuries we had gone so long without, one hundred and four thousand dollars. *It could be ours, it could be ours so damned easy, and no one would ever know, no one, we could tell them we didn't find any money, it could be ours, all of it, one hundred and four thousand dollars . . .*

The thought jarred my brain with the suddenness of an electric shock, and I was frightened then, frightened by the intensity of it, and a chill crept across my lower back and around into my stomach, amplifying the dull pain there. I could hear my heart pounding like a trip-hammer in my chest.

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat. I turned, and my eyes locked with Coretti's, and I saw there the same thing that was in my own mind. Sweat popped out on my forehead in thick beads, and the silence was very loud in the smallness of the room.

"Arne?" Coretti's voice was a whisper.

I didn't say anything.

"You're thinking it, too, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm thinking it, too."

Coretti took a breath. "We could do it, Arne."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't really know, Bob."

"We could do it," Coretti said again.

I dry-washed my face. "I never took a penny in my life," I said. "Bob, I've never even fixed a parking ticket in fifteen years."

"Neither have I," Coretti said, "but this is no fifty-dollar payoff for looking the other way. This is one hundred and four thousand dollars. A chance like this comes once in a lifetime. Just once, Arne."

"I know that, dammit! Once!"

The rain had quickened now, and the wind blew chill drops through the window. I felt the wetness on the fever-warmth of my face. "It's a big risk," I said. "It's one hell of a big risk."

"Yes, it's a risk," Coretti said. "But a hundred and four thousand dollars? It's worth the risk. It's worth it, Arne."

"There'd be an investigation."

"What could they prove?"

"Gibbons probably saw the suitcase when Feldstein checked in. They'd suspect something."

"What could they *prove,* Arne?"

"We couldn't sit on the money forever," I said. "As soon as we started spending it, they'd know."

"A little at a time," Coretti said. "We could play it out a little at a time. The money's from bookies, it's illegal to begin with. There's no way it could be traced."

"But we *could* get caught," I said. "You've been a cop as long as I have, Bob. It's the little things that trip you up, the unexpected. You know that."

Coretti wet his lips.

"We'd go to prison," I said. "Think about your family if that happens. What becomes of them?"

"I am thinking about my family," Coretti said. "I'm thinking about all the things I want them to have and can't give them. That's all I'm always thinking about, Arne."

Fifteen years, I thought. *Fifteen years, and I never so much as fixed a parking ticket.* I kept looking at the money. I kept looking at the money, and I was thinking, like Coretti, about the bills, and the phone calls and sweetly-printed notes from the creditors, and about the second-hand furniture and second-rate clothes, and about the carefully planned, rigidly-adhered-to weekly budget, and about the throbbing thing that was eating a hole in the pit of my stomach.

I thought about all those things, and I thought about the fifteen years I had been an honest cop. I thought about the convictions a man has, the pattern of life he sets for himself, and what would happen if he were to sacrifice everything he believed in on one big gamble, one grab for the brass ring, and I knew if he did, it would surely, inevitably, destroy him. I closed my eyes, and I saw Gerry's face, smiling, and the face of my son, smiling, and I took a deep breath and opened my eyes, and I said to Coretti, "No, dammit. No, Bob, I can't do it. I won't do it."

"Arne—"

"No, Bob," I said. "No." I went to the bed, and looked down at the money. Then quickly, savagely, with the thoughts still fighting in my brain, I stuffed it back into the

suitcase, and when I had snapped the catch shut I lifted it and turned to face Coretti.

"I'm going downstairs and report in," I said. "I'm going to report in, and I'm going to tell them about the money, all of it, every penny. That's the way it's going to be, Bob. That's the way it *has* to be."

Our eyes held. We stood looking at each other for a very long time, and then I turned and went out into the hall and down the stairs, feeling the suitcase against my leg, and I did not look back. Charley Gibbons was in the lobby, his eyes large and frightened behind his glasses. He began to rattle questions at me, but I pushed past him and went out to the sedan and put the suitcase in the back seat. Then I called the Hall of Justice and told them what had happened.

I sat with the wheezing heater on high and waited for the crew the captain would send out. I had been there five minutes when I saw Coretti come out. He walked to the sedan and moved in behind the wheel. The silence was as deep as it had been in the room upstairs.

Coretti sat looking out through the windshield, and then after a very long time he turned to me. "Did you report in?"

"Yes," I said.

Silence again. Then Coretti said, "God help me, but I almost shot you up there. When you took the suitcase and went into the hall I almost shot you in the back."

I closed my eyes.

"Don't you understand?" Coretti said. "I almost murdered you. You've been my friend for ten years, and I almost murdered you!"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Money like that can do strange things to a man."

"Maybe you were right," Coretti said. "I don't know. We might have gotten away with it. We'll never know. Maybe this way is best. It scared the hell out of me, what I almost turned into up there. I thought I knew myself, Arne, but now I'm not so sure. I'm not so sure of anything at all now."

"It wasn't easy for me either, Bob."

"I know that," Coretti said. "Don't you think I know that?"

"The best thing for both of us is to forget about what happened, Bob."

"I don't know if I can," Coretti said. "I don't know if I can ever forget."

My hand had begun to tremble. I reached into the pocket of my shirt for a cigarette. The pack was crushed and wet from the fall I had taken on the fire escape. Wordlessly, Coretti extended his pack to me, and I took one. Our eyes met again, briefly, and then we both

looked away, at anything else.

I lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply, feeling the smoke curl into my lungs. I waited. No pain. I stared out at the falling rain and took another drag off the cigarette, and my stomach burst into a tearing, seering ball of flame. I cried out with the intensity of it and I began to topple sideways on the seat. I saw Coretti reach out for me, and then my vision blurred and I could not see at all. The last thing I heard was the high, keening wail of sirens, far off, echoing through the wet, black night.

There was a light in my eyes. It was hot and white, and I rolled my head, trying to turn away from the glare. I heard a voice say, "He's coming out of the anesthetic."

I rolled my head again, and opened my eyes. At first I couldn't see. The light was above me, and it was like looking directly into the noon sun, but then the light winked off, and after a moment my eyes began to focus.

The first person I saw was Gerry. She was sitting in a white metal chair beside my bed. She saw my eyes open, and the tears began to roll down over her cheeks. "Arne," she said. "Oh, Arne." She leaned over and buried her face against my neck.

There was a cloying odor in my nostrils, and I recognized it as the smell of antiseptic. I saw the doctor then. He was standing near the foot of my bed, and a round-faced nurse with bovine eyes stood next to him. It was the doctor I had been seeing for treatment of my ulcer.

I looked at him. "What happened?" I asked.

"Exactly what I warned you might happen," the doctor said. His voice was somewhat cold. "Burst ulcer. You're a very lucky man, Mr. Kelstrom."

I raised my hand and touched my stomach. I was heavily bandaged. I could feel Gerry's tears, warm and wet on my neck. I stroked her hair.

The doctor said, "An ulcer is nothing to play games with, Mr. Kelstrom. If you had listened to me when I first told you you needed an operation, this would not have happened."

A momentary chill touched my shoulders. "How long am I going to be in here?"

The doctor said, "Recovery from a burst ulcer such as you suffered is a slow process. It may take anywhere from six months to a year, depending upon—"

"Six months to a year! I can't stay in here that long! I've got a family. How can I support my family from a hospital bed?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kelstrom, but the choice is not yours."

Gerry lifted her head and was looking at me with her eyes shining from the tears. "Arne, you have to do as he says. You have to, Arne. Please. Please."

I covered my face with my hand. I had never felt so helpless in my life.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kelstrom," the doctor said again, and his voice had softened. "I understand. Believe me, I do. But in your condition there is no other way."

I turned my face into the pillow and said nothing.

I heard the doctor say, "Nurse, give Mr. Kelstrom a mild sedative. He needs a great deal of rest now, but Captain Mead and Detective Coretti can see him for a moment."

The doctor and the nurse left the room, and in a moment Coretti and the captain of detectives came in. They stood awkwardly, their hats in their hands.

The captain cleared his throat. "How are you feeling, Arne?"

"Fine," I said. "I'm just fine."

He didn't know what else to say and stood there, holding his hat in his big hands. Coretti looked at a spot near the foot of my bed.

"Did you get the money?" I asked.

"The money? Yes. Yes, we did. We got a positive make on the dead man, too. It was Feldstein, all right."

"What happens to it?"

"The money?"

"Yes, the money. What happens to it?"

"It goes to the state," Coretti said, speaking for the first time. His voice was flat and toneless.

"Yes," the captain said. "I doubt very much if the books will come forward to claim it."

To the state, I thought. *All of it goes to the state.* I glanced at Coretti, but he would not look at me. The door opened again, and the nurse came in, carrying a tray.

She said, "I'm afraid you'll have to leave now. You can come back tomorrow, if you like."

"Yes," the captain said. "Yes, of course." They walked to the door, and he turned. "Take care of yourself, Arne. You're a good officer. I want you back with me when this is over."

"Sure," I said.

Coretti looked at me briefly then, and he said, "Good luck, Arne," and I wondered if he would be back. Somehow I did not think so. The door closed and they were gone.

The nurse gave me some capsules and a glass of water. After I had swallowed the capsules, she took the tray and left Gerry and

me alone with our mutual pains.

Gerry kissed me then, and took my hand. "Why didn't you tell me about the operation, Arne? Why didn't you tell me the ulcer was as bad as this?"

"I didn't want you to worry," I said.

"Arne, I'm your wife," she said. I saw the tears start again. "Oh, honey, I almost lost you tonight. Why didn't you have the operation like the doctor said?"

"We couldn't afford it," I said. "Gerry, we were tied into knots with bills."

"Honey, we could have managed. Somehow, we could have. I don't want you to think anymore about it, darling. Everything will be all right. You'll see. Everything will be all right."

I turned my head away and looked at the far wall, and I was thinking about the money, one hundred and four thousand dollars in a cheap pasteboard suitcase. I was thinking again about the fifteen years I had been a police officer, and all the bribes and payoffs, all the little offers and all the big offers, the quick and easy money that would have made our life less burdened, that I had turned my back on in those fifteen years, all the opportunities I had passed by. Then tonight I had let the biggest opportunity of my life slip away. My reward for that, my reward for fifteen years of honesty and loyalty, was a ruptured ulcer and six months to a year of lying helpless in a hospital bed while I watched my family struggle to keep from being buried under a ceaseless deluge of unpaid bills. I knew then that a man, if he had to choose between himself, his convictions, and his family, really had no choice at all.

As I lay there, with pain I could feel hammering in my stomach, and the touch of Gerry's hand in mine, I knew what I was going to do when I returned to duty again. I knew with a sudden and frightening clarity exactly what I was going to do.

I looked at Gerry. "Sure," I said. "Everything will be just fine."

But even as I said the words, I knew they were a lie.

A crooked furrow rarely yields a rich harvest.

NORMAN ZEEMER was a bank teller who had always considered himself to be an honest man. That's why it came as a minor shock when this ingenious but dishonest scheme popped into his mind.

Norman Zeemer, a trusted employee for over fifteen years, was planning to make a sizable withdrawal without the bank's knowledge or consent. His plan was perfect except for one thing that would have been a serious drawback to a less patient man. He had to wait until the bank was robbed, and that wait turned out to be five

years long. He'd nearly given up.

On this particular morning he started his work day routinely by arranging his cash drawer in a way that was definitely not standard operational banking procedure. He switched the top bills on the fifty and twenty-dollar stacks with the top bills from the two stacks of singles. This was an important part of his plan. Though confusing at the beginning, after five years of practice he was now able to make cash transactions quickly and accurately without disturbing the misleading top bills.

This task completed Zeemer [redacted] his nameplate on the grill and sat on the edge of his high stool. His first two customers were the usual small withdrawers, but then a young, collegiate-looking man entered the bank and approached his cage.

"Good morning," Norman said pleasantly.

The man didn't answer, but reached into his pocket and pulled out a brown paper bag folded compactly into an eight-inch square. He pushed it under the grill with his left hand, keeping his right hand in his pocket.

Norman found it hard to believe his long wait was finally over as he read the note penciled on the bag: FILL BAG WITH BIG BILLS. I'LL BE WATCHING. DON'T GIVE ALARM FOR TEN MINUTES. I'VE GOT A GUN.

Norman had rehearsed this moment so many times he went into action almost mechanically. He unfolded the bag and under the watchful eye of the bank robber scooped up both stacks of singles camouflaged by the fifty and twenty-dollar bills and shoved them into the bag. He handed the bulging bag to the young man and watched him walk unhurriedly out of the bank.

After waiting five minutes to make sure the bank robber had made a clean getaway, he unsnapped the bottom plate from an ancient, spare adding machine and quickly stuffed all the big bills in his drawer inside. Then he snapped the plate back in place.

Norman wasn't sure of the bank's procedure after a robbery. When the police came, he figured they'd search everybody. He didn't know if they'd search the bank or not, but if they did he was betting the whole bundle they'd never think of looking inside the adding machine. He then sounded the alarm.

In less than five minutes the bank was filled with police, bustling bank officials and hastily summoned auditors. Norman put on such a great act that everyone treated him with sympathy and

consideration. Mister Lester, the bank president, told him to take the rest of the day off, but before he could leave a police lieutenant stopped him and asked politely if he'd mind stepping into an empty office in the back. Purely routine, he said. Nothing to worry about, he said.

Norman knew what was coming but played dumb. He allowed himself to be searched thoroughly and waved off the routine apologies when it was over.

The next morning he was back on the job and bit his nails until he got the chance to make sure his money was still safe in its hiding place.

He smiled as he thought of the auditor's report. According to them, the bank robber had gotten away with twenty thousand dollars, but Norman knew that all the bank robber got was about two thousand. He caught himself smiling again as he pictured the sucker's face when he opened the bag and all the singles fell out. He'd probably be able to figure out what had happened, Norman decided, but he'd hardly be in a position to call the police and complain he'd been robbed.

He stopped smiling long enough to consider seriously the next and probably the trickiest part of his plan: getting the money out of the bank. All he needed to do this was a rainy day.

For the next two weeks he cursed the clear skies with uncharacteristic impatience. Then—on the fifteenth day—he woke up to the welcome sound of raindrops bouncing off the windowsill. He jumped out of bed whistling *Pennies From Heaven,* got his umbrella out of the closet, checked it carefully, then hung it on the doorknob so he wouldn't forget it when he left.

When Norman got to the bank he sneaked the money out of the adding machine, stuck it in his umbrella, snapped the locking strip tight shut and reinforced it with a thick rubber band. At five o'clock, with the umbrella hanging innocently from the crook in his arm, he strolled out into the light drizzle.

The next morning, Zeemer went into Mister Lester's office and handed him his notice. He said he was sorry but the robbery had made him so nervous he was getting out of the banking business. Mister Lester said he understood and was sorry to lose him. Norman thanked him sincerely for *everything,* then went back to his cage to begin the two longest weeks of his life.

Closing time of his last day finally ticked around, and after shaking hands with the entire staff, he closed the bank door behind him for the last time. On his way home, he stopped off at a travel agency and picked up literature on Jamaica which he'd always dreamed of visiting. Now he intended to use some of his money for just that purpose.

The next day, after making all the necessary travel arrangements, Zeemer went down to Graley's department store and bought some fancy summer clothes, matched luggage, and a large steamer basket.

After overtipping the cabbie who helped him carry up his purchases, he went in and locked the door. Then, carefully removing the basket's cellophane wrapping, he took his eighteen thousand dollars out of the umbrella and hid it under the jars of jam on the bottom. After regluing the cellophane back into place, he filled out the attached shipping tag with his name and the name of the ship he was sailing on and called a messenger service.

While waiting he packed, and when the elderly messenger had arrived and departed with the basket, Norman hefted his new luggage and took one last look around his room. It looked smaller and shabbier now than it ever did. He chuckled softly. He was beginning to feel like a rich man already, but as perfect as his plan had been, he hadn't realized that mere details are easier to figure out than the human factor.

Norman had never given a second thought to the police lieutenant who handled the investigation, but now it was that very same lieutenant who hailed him from a police car parked at the curb.

Norman, puzzled more than alarmed, walked over and said hello.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd get in the car, Mister Zeemer." It was said politely but there was no mistaking the fact that it was an order. Norman placed his luggage carefully in the back and slid in beside the lieutenant and his driver.

"Taking a trip, Zeemer?"

"That's right, Lieutenant. I'm going to Jamaica." Norman wondered what it was all about, but he figured the cop would tell him when he was ready.

The cop was ready now. "Where's the dough, Norman?"

Norman was still breathing easy but it took some effort now.

"What dough?"

The cop was trying hard to be patient. "Look, there are only ten people in the bank who handle money. Since you're the only one who was hit and the only one who quit and the only one planning an expensive vacation, it looks like you're elected prime suspect number one."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say, Lieutenant. And another thing I don't understand is—why aren't you out trying to catch the bank robber instead of bothering innocent people?"

"Because I know what I'm doing, and because I don't think you're so innocent. Does that answer your question? And I'll tell you another thing, wise guy. I don't know how you did it but I'm betting my badge that you got that eighteen grand from the bank heist stashed away."

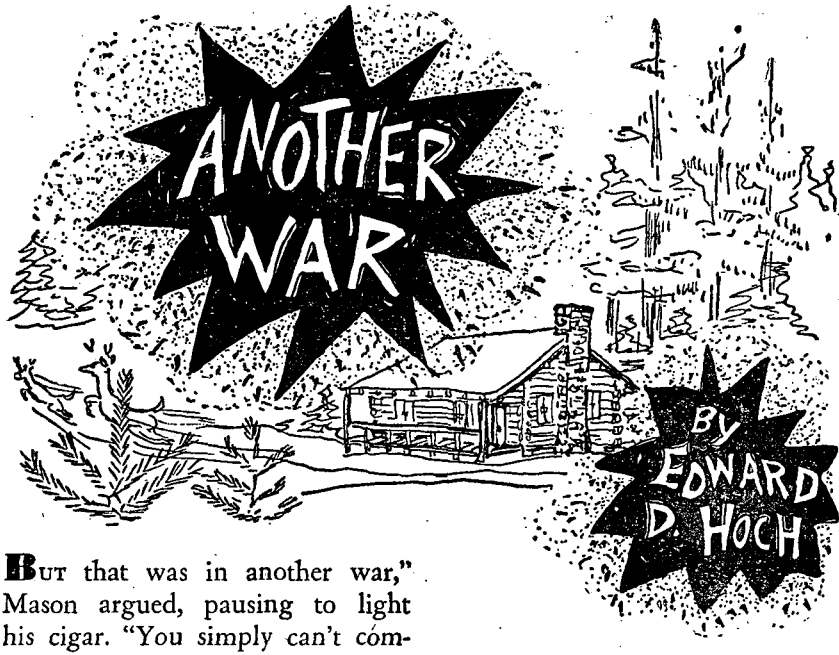
Norman forced a laugh. "Sorry, but your books don't balance. The bank robber got *twenty thousand* dollars."

The cop poked him in the chest with a stiff forefinger. "Now you know and I know that all that patsy got was easily two grand."

Norman was beginning to inhale harder than he was exhaling. "How could you possibly know that? He was never caught. I checked—I checked the newspapers carefully everyday."

"I'll let you check the early editions tonight down at the station, sucker," the cop said. "That clown was nabbed two hours ago."

If one hunts long enough, it would seem, he may find an explanation for everything.



"But that was in another war," Mason argued, pausing to light his cigar. "You simply can't compare the use of tanks in North Africa with that in Korea. The terrain was different, the weather conditions . . ."

Roderick Care shuffled his feet against the carpet and stared at the younger man. "I'm not running down what you fellows did in Korea—don't misunderstand me! I'm only pointing out that given the right circumstances a massed armored attack can be both impressive and effective."

Mason leaned back in his chair, enjoying himself for all the surface disagreement. Care, ten years his senior, was the sort of man with whom he liked to argue. "I don't know," he said with just a hint of a smile. "If they're all like you, I

don't know that I'd be too welcome in the AWB."

Roderick Care, a graying man with a spreading paunch, and no sense of humor, leaped to the defensive. "Come, now! You can't be serious! The AWB is the finest bunch of guys you'd ever want to meet. They accepted me, and I'm British! That must prove something right there. We're not the American Legion or the VFW or the Catholic War Vets, you know. We're strictly social, just a bunch of fellows out for a good time. We like to get away from the wife and children for a few days occasionally and do some hunting or fishing, or just drink beer and talk about our service days."

"The others have plenty of social activities," Mason argued. "In fact I dropped out of a veterans' group once because they were a bit too social. Dinners and dances and all the rest."

"But those things are with the wife! I know you like to get away with the boys once in a while. Everybody does. Hell, how many other veterans' organizations have a hunting lodge like our place in River Forks?"

Mason was ready for that one. "The Khakis have a lodge not too far from there."

"The Khakis! Would you rather belong to the Khakis or the American War Buddies—buddy?"

"Neither group excites me too much, to be perfectly frank about it," Mason told him.

Care spread his hands in a pleading gesture. "At least come to one of our meetings, see what it's all about. What harm can that do?"

More to put an end to the discussion than because he really wanted to go, Mason finally agreed. He'd expected an evening of reminiscing when he agreed to dine with Roderick Care, but he'd hardly foreseen the sort of high-pressure sales talk to which he'd been subjected. As he drove home through the warm autumn night he reflected that he had now committed himself to next week's meeting whether he liked it or not. Well, at least he could tell that to the man from the Khakis who kept phoning him.

"Nice dinner, dear?" Maria asked him as he came in from the garage. "He didn't try to sell you any insurance did he?"

"No, we talked about North Africa and Korea, and tank warfare and stuff."

She'd put the children to bed and was in the process of finishing the dinner dishes. He sat at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette and watching her ever amazed that she could still manage to look as youthful as when he'd married

her twelve years ago. "Well, I'm glad you didn't buy anything," she told him. "Both children are going to need new shoes soon, and we still have the color TV to pay off."

"He wants me to come to the next AWB meeting."

"The *what?*"

"You know. The American War Buddies."

"You're not going, are you?"

"Why?"

"Well, it's just that you've always been sort of cynical about veterans' groups."

"Well, maybe this one's different. Or maybe it's a sign of middle age that I suddenly want to talk about my days as a tank commander in Korea."

"You were never a commander!"

"I was for a day, after Scotty got killed. I told you about that."

She sighed and went back to the dishes. "I should think when fellows come back from the wars they'd just want to forget about all the killing, not go on being reminded of it at monthly meetings."

"Oh, they talk about other things, Maria. In fact, Care said it was mostly a social group. They have a hunting lodge up in River Forks."

"That figures!"

He found himself growing a bit annoyed at her attitude. "Hell, I usually go hunting once or twice every year anyway. If they've got a lodge I might as well use it."

"Do whatever you want," she said.

He grunted and started reading the evening paper, looking for some newsy item with which to change the subject.

The following week's meeting of the American War Buddies was about what he'd expected. It was held in a big private dining room at the Newton Hotel, a room which also served the needs of the Lions' Club and the County Republican Committee. A large American flag hung from the wall behind the speaker's table, and several of the members wore ribbon-bedecked campaign hats.

A man named Crowder, who walked with a stiff-legged limp, conducted the meeting running through routine matters and the preparations for the autumn reopening of the lodge at River Forks. Peering out from beneath bushy black eyebrows, he reminded Mason of a movie-version communist at a cell meeting in the Thirties.

After the surprisingly brief meeting, he walked over to greet Mason personally. "Pleasure to have you here, Mr. Mason. I'm Crowd-

er, this year's president of AWB. Roderick Care tells me you're thinking of joining."

"Only thinking right now."

Crowder offered him a cigarette, shifting weight onto his good leg. "This is the best time of the year to join. There's the lodge, and the Christmas party, and then the big national convention in the spring. Frankly, Mason, we're looking for young blood—Korea and after. Too many of our members are left over from wars that everyone's forgotten. You could go high in the organization right now—maybe even a national office on the executive committee."

"I'm not looking for more work," Mason told him. "Besides, you look young enough to have been in Korea yourself." His eyes dropped unconsciously to the stiff leg.

"I was over there, right at the end of things. But not a tank commander like you."

"I came out without a scratch," Mason said. "I have great respect for those who didn't."

Crowder gave a short, husky laugh. "This leg? Foolish hunting accident two years ago. Shot myself in the kneecap."

"Oh." Mason felt a gentle hand on his shoulder and turned to see Roderick Care beaming at him. He had another man in tow, a white-haired man with a small and gentle face.

"Mason, this is Dr. Fathion, one of our most respected members. He was a major during the South Pacific campaign."

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor," Mason said.

"A pleasure, Mr. Mason. I trust you've been won over by our president?"

"I'm considering it," Mason replied with a smile.

Roderick Care motioned toward the back of the room, where the hotel waitresses were preparing to serve coffee and cake. "Let's discuss it over some coffee. Or would you rather go down to the bar?"

"Coffee's fine."

It was good coffee, and Mason found himself beginning to like these men who clustered around him.

"Tell us about Korea," Crowder said. "I never saw much action over there myself."

"Except with the girls," Care said, muffling an explosion of laughter. "Crowder here is quite the lover."

"You will be joining us at the lodge, won't you?" Crowder asked Mason. "You *do* hunt?"

"A little," He turned to the doctor. "How about you, Dr.

Fathion? You do much hunting?"

The doctor shook his head, slightly horrified. "I never fire a gun. Never even fired one in the army. But I go along with them for the opening of the season. I'm a great poker player, and we usually get a few nice games going."

"It must have been tough going through the South Pacific without firing a shot."

The little doctor shrugged. "Oh, they made us fire at a few training targets, but in battle I was always too busy with the wounded. Field hospital, behind the lines. One day I operated on fifty-five wounded men. I was ready to drop by nightfall."

Mason liked the doctor, and he liked the others too, to varying degrees. After the coffee he joined them at the hotel bar for a quick drink, and found himself signing a membership application with no resistance at all.

Maria was waiting up for him when he got home. "It's pretty late," she said. "I thought you'd be home by ten."

"We had coffee and then I stopped with them for a drink."

"You joined, didn't you?" she asked, making it into something like an accusation.

"Well, hell, yes I did! That's no crime! They only meet once a month and for a few social gatherings. If I get tired of it I just won't go."

"All right," she sighed. "I didn't mean to sound like a shrew."

He mumbled something and went out to the kitchen for a glass of milk.

"So now I'm an AWB wife. Do they have a ladies' auxiliary or something?"

"I'll ask," he replied, not certain that she wasn't continuing to needle him.

"That means you'll be going hunting with them, I suppose."

"Just the first day. I'll only be away one night. Or two at most."

In the morning she was her usual cheerful self, and his membership in the AWB was not mentioned again.

About a week later he received a call at work from a lawyer he knew slightly, a member of the Khakis. "Have you thought any more about joining us, Mason, boy?"

"Sorry, Cliff. I've signed up with the AWB."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"They seemed like a nice bunch of fellows."

"Well . . . yes. But that sort of puts us on opposite sides of the fence."

Mason chuckled into the phone. "Not really, Cliff. I'll still throw some legal business your way.

How about lunch one of these days?"

Cliff seemed to hedge at that. "Um, let's make it after Thanksgiving, huh? I'm getting into my busy season."

"Fine. I'll be talking to you." He hung up, wondering if he had made the right choice. But Cliff had told him very little about the Khakis, really, and had never invited him to one of their monthly meetings.

He went back to the pile of work on his desk and promptly forgot about it.

A few days before the opening of hunting season, Roderick Care phoned him. "Monday's the big day—just thought I'd call to remind you. A group of us are driving up to the lodge Sunday night, just to be there at dawn when the deer start running. You might as well come along."

Mason hesitated only a moment. "All right," he agreed.

"What kind of rifle do you have?" Care asked.

"I've got two—a Remington and an old Italian army gun I don't use much any more."

"Better bring them both. Somebody might be able to use it."

"All right."

"I'll pick up Dr. Fathion and then swing by for you around six. It's a three-hour drive."

Mason was ready on Sunday evening, and he stepped into the brisk night air as soon as Care's auto pulled up in front. He wasn't too anxious for the men to come in and face Maria's cool indifference to the trip.

Dr. Fathion was in the back, and Mason rode in front, feeling good for the first time in days. "Put these with the others," he said, passing over the two gun cases.

The doctor accepted them. "You should get rid of that red hat," he suggested as they got under way.

Mason fingered the fluorescent material. "This? Hell, I don't want to get shot for a deer." He glanced into the back seat at the other cased rifle. "Mind if I look at yours, Care? Not loaded, is it?"

"No, no. Go ahead!"

Mason leaned over the seat and unzipped the case. "A carbine? Semi-automatic? I thought they were illegal in this state."

Roderick Care smiled. "The deer never said they were illegal."

They drove for a long time in silence, with both Care and the doctor reluctant to join in any conversation about their common interests. Mason mentioned North Africa and the South Pacific and finally Korea without getting a rise out of either man.

It had been dark for more than two hours by the time they turned off the main highway, and there was another hour's trip over a rutted mountain road before they finally reached the hunting lodge at River Forks. Three other cars had gotten there ahead of them, and a dozen men were already inside, playing poker and drinking beer.

Crowder limped over to greet them, startling Mason with his costume of green-and-brown camouflage. "That's a heck of a thing to wear when you're hunting," Mason said.

"I probably won't go out with this knee anyway."

The lodge was large enough to sleep a score or more men. There were three big bedrooms with an array of cots, plus a kitchen, indoor toilet, and central livingroom where others could sleep. It was a pleasant place, though it seemed to Mason that none of the men were very relaxed.

Mason chatted with the various men and examined an AWB banner that he hadn't seen before. He ended up in a card game with Care and Crowder and the doctor, and won five dollars. He drank a few beers, talked guns with Care for a time, and finally caught a few hours' sleep on one of the cots. None of the others seemed interested in sleep, and he awakened around three-thirty in the morning to hear Crowder sending one of the men out of the lodge on some mission.

Mason felt around for his fluorescent cap but it was gone. While he slept someone had substituted a dark brown one with ear flaps that was a size too large. He got up and joined the others, yawning, noticing for the first time that none of them wore any brightly colored garment.

"Where are the cars?" he asked, glancing out the window.

Care walked over to stand beside him. "We have a garage around back. They'll be safe there."

"What? Say, who was that just went out?"

"Schlitzer. He's just looking around."

"It's a couple of hours till daylight."

Dr. Fathion was making coffee, and passing the steaming cups around at random. Mason drank,

feeling an odd sort of tension building in his gut. It was almost the way he'd felt in Korea.

Then something about the windows caught his eye, something he hadn't noticed before. He walked over to feel the folded shutters, then turned to Roderick Care. "Since when do you need steel shutters on a hunting—"

The crack of the rifle shot was very close, off in the woods somewhere but very close. Instantly Crowder was on his feet shouting orders. Two men grabbed their rifles and hurried outside, while a third picked up the AWB banner and went out the door behind them, planting it in the soft earth with a firm hand.

"What *is* it?" Mason shouted to Care. "What in hell's happening?"

The answer came through the door. The two hunters were back already, carrying the fallen Schlitzer. He was bleeding from a wound in the stomach.

"On the table," Dr. Fathion shouted, slipping his arms into a white plastic jacket that had a large red cross on front and back. "Get my instruments. Quickly, men!"

Crowder was issuing orders as the others grabbed for their rifles. Someone shoved Mason's into his hands. Then he was facing Crowder as the lame man spoke quickly. "It's a sneak attack by the Khakis," he said, talking in an officer's monotone. "Two hours before the official start. Somebody get those shutters closed."

As soon as he had spoken, one window shattered under the ripple of gunfire. Roderick Care pulled Mason down along the wall. "We're in for it this year," he said. "It's another Pearl Harbor!"

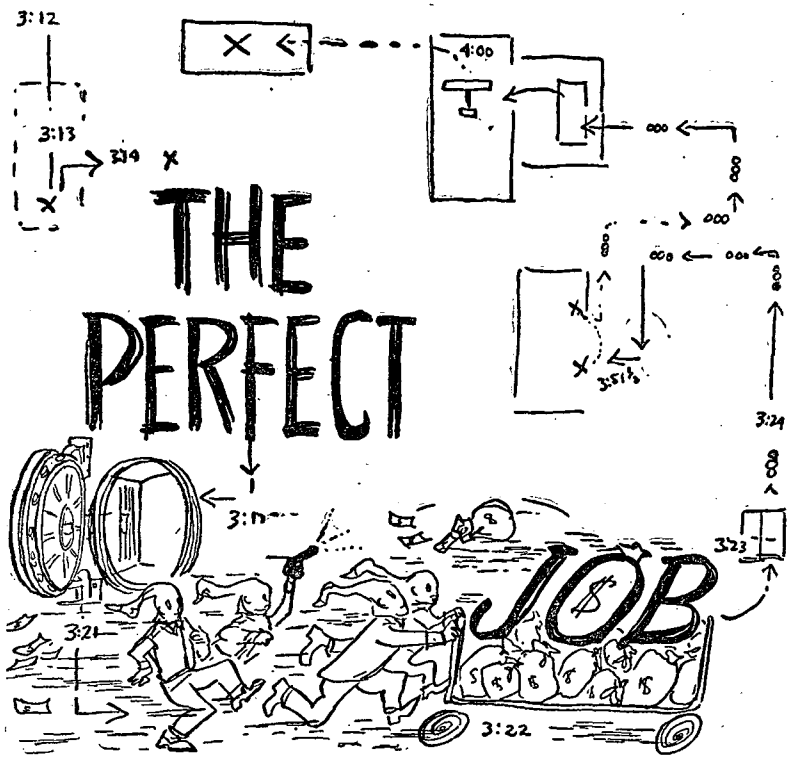
"You mean this happens—"

Care was hugging the wall, edging toward the window with his carbine. "Last year we were lucky—only two wounded. I suppose we were due."

"But this is madness!"

"No more so than any war." Care lifted his head to the window and fired a quick burst with his carbine. "Didn't you ever wonder why so many people get shot on the first day of hunting season?"

It would appear that perfection and myopia could be singularly empathetic.



by Samuel Orlich Jr.

LIKE a Dali creation, the plans, spread on the rough table, lined back to Benny's admiring gaze. The curves, dashes, blurbs, arrows, and dots which were scattered across the sheet dodged hand-

printed notations, and converged on a large red blob on the right side marked *Rio de Janeiro*.

"Perfect," he said, smiling. "Perfect! There it is in front of us, boys, our private social security program."

"Geez," said Eddie, crowding over the table and ogling the plans like a little boy watching a new game.

"I gotta hand it to you, Benny, you're a genius," added Pellucci.

"Not bad," Carl added. "Not bad."

"It won't work, I tell you." Rocking his head in his right hand, Little George dropped the corners of his mouth as his lips pouted outward. "It's too close. It won't work."

Benny's gaze glanced off the ceiling, to the unpainted wall and around the floor as he clawed the hair on the back of his head and forced an exhalation. "What are you talking about, too close? That's what makes it so perfect. It's timed to the second."

"It's so close something has to go wrong. They'll nail us for sure. It just won't work."

"We all know our assignments; we've practiced them every day for a month, and we've traveled over the getaway route a thousand times with a stopwatch to make sure we hit every green light to the airport. What more do you want? Are you chicken or something?"

"No, Benny, I just don't think it'll work," Little George whined. "I like the idea of retiring for the rest of my days, but I just don't want this retirement to be behind bars. It seems so risky."

Benny glared at Little George from under a dark uplifted eyebrow, while the men stared at him, waiting. "Well, for a half-million bucks, there's gotta be some risks! Do you want us to take some more precautions?"

"Yeh—yeh, that's it; maybe a few more precautions," Little George stuttered.

Benny's left eyebrow curved up to match his right one. Nodding, he said, "Well, Little George, maybe you're right. Maybe we should get rid of some big risks. I have some more ideas out in my car that'll probably do the job. Carl, come out and help me get them."

Gliding cat-like across the worn, wood floor, Carl silently held the door of the cabin open for his boss.

"You know, Carl, this Little George is going to foul us up yet. I've had my doubts about him right from the start. He's going to blow the whole deal."

"The job's set up for five men, Benny. There's not much we can do now."

"I've been thinking. Since he's

been griping so much, I've been looking over everything the last few days as we practiced our assignments. I think we can pull this job with only four guys." He waited for the effect to hit Carl. "It'll mean we'll have to double up and take over Little George's assignments."

Slowly bouncing his clenched thumb knuckle on his nose, Carl gave his head a half turn and squinted at him. "That's really cutting it close. Seems like you're adding risks instead of taking them away."

"Baloney! Little George'll panic and get us all sent up. So, we're better off without him. Besides," he scraped his fingernails on the palm of his right hand, "it'll mean we'll all be twenty-five G's apiece richer."

Carl, folding his arms as he leaned against the car fender, said, "We can't just let him go. He'd know the whole plan and we could never pull the job. He'd squeal."

"That's right, Carl; you're thinking like a right-hand man now. You're a mechanic; what do you think would happen if the steering on his car was messed up?"

"He'd end up at the bottom of this mountain without taking the road down."

Benny smiled and nodded toward Little George's car. "And wear gloves—no fingerprints."

Little George flipped a wide-eyed glance at the two men as they returned to the cabin. His fingers started intertwining jerkily, like springy twigs of a tumbleweed.

"I-uh-couldn't find what I was looking for, so why don't we break it off for the day and get together again tomorrow," Benny said, staring at Little George. "I think we have something which will satisfy you, though. You won't have to worry again."

Little George's eyes popped open even wider.

"What's the matter, Georgie Peorgie, don't you feel well?"

"Yeh-yeh—" he said, bouncing up and away from the table.

"You're still with us, aren't you, Georgie?"

"Yeh—I'm with you guys. I'll see you later." He skittered under Benny's squinted stare and trotted to his car. His fingers clawed and fumbled at the door handle as he turned and saw the other four men pile hurriedly into Eddie's big, black sedan.

"Let's see how close you can stay to him, Eddie," Benny said. "He's starting to panic already and we're just starting." He folded his arms and leaned back. "Let's go. This I've got to watch."

Eddie grinned and leaned over the wheel as the thump of his foot on the floor board bounded

through the car and they roared after Little George.

Folding the morning paper away from the plans under it, Benny shook his head slowly and almost remorsefully bemoaned the loss of their very dear friend who had unfortunately lost his life in an automobile accident the day before. They would have to go on without him, hard as it may be, because he was sure that's the way Little George would want it. "Palootch," he said, "being a sensitive man, why don't you take care of sending a big spray of flowers to the mortuary from 'The Boys.' Well, the world must go on," he philosophized, almost believably.

"Geez," said Eddie.

"Yeah, you're right again, Benny," added Pellucci.

"Let's get to work," said Carl.

"O.K.," said Benny. "We have just two days to perfect the job with four men, and to make the final practice runs down the escape route. Here's how we'll do it."

The men pushed in against him as he started X-ing and dashing with a red pencil across the plans. 3:11 was the latest any man from the first shift left the accounting center. So, at 3:13, with Eddie at the wheel, they would drive the panel truck to the rear parking lot. Benny and Carl, dressed in gray uniforms, would be at the back door at 3:14. Since the regular guard was on vacation, the new man would not realize that they were early for the cash pick-up. Eddie and Pellucci would rush up the ramp with the money cart as soon as the door was opened. Benny's red pencil snapped and speckled a red slash as he indicated the speed with which he wanted the two men to move. Eddie would have to act as a lookout and hold the magnetic door open to make sure it didn't lock them in. As he carved a new pencil point, Benny described how he and Carl would help Pellucci direct the rest of the employees in the room into the vault. It should be shut not later than 3:17. Without the fifth man, he added 30 seconds from the leeway time. All three of them would then load the bagged currency, no checks, onto the cart—no coins either. One pair of hands less meant they would have to use up the balance of their leeway time in order to get it all. At 3:21 they *had* to leave. By 3:23 they would be out the front gate and at the first traffic light. This was the only one they could hit red. There was a possible forty-five second delay here, depending on when the light turned green. However, by 3:24 they would be on their way and

the escape-route timing would begin. "The rest will stay pretty much the same. Any questions?"

"I don't want to sound like Little George," said Pellucci, "but this is getting a little close. By using up all of our leeway time, we can't miss even one green light."

"That's right, and we won't. I have every block timed. We'll get to where we dump the truck into the ocean at 3:51½, which gives us exactly five and one-half minutes to dump it and drive the stashed car to the airport. That leaves only three minutes to run to the terminal, check in, and get to the plane by the 4:00 takeoff. I've already made all ticket arrangements. We'll be too late to check our bags, so we'll all carry our own *lootcases*." He giggled. "And as we fly into the wild blue yonder —RIO DE JANEIRO, HERE WE COME—the armored truck will pull up to the accounting office to pick up a half-million bucks which won't be there; and nobody will know who took it!" His giggle turned to a low, raspy gargle.

"Geez," grinned Eddie.

"Benny, you're fantastic," said Pellucci.

"Let's go to work," said Carl.

3:12 p.m. The second-hand seemed to stick as it chipped past the 12. Eddie was chewing on his lips as he slowly turned the panel truck through the front gate. Pellucci's tongue flicked dryly, like a lizard on a hot rock. Carl, crouched in the rear with Benny, watched over his shoulder as he checked his watch with his timetable. Benny's chest hollowed and pounded with each short breath. Only empty cars greeted them in the rear parking lot; the three o'clock shift had changed normally. Eddie eased the panel truck to the side of the windowless building so the guard couldn't see through his peephole that it wasn't the armored truck.

The "bing" of the door buzzer sounded more like the clang of church bells as Benny felt his legs quiver under his grey uniform. 3:14. The guard grunted as he shoved the metal door open, and grunted again as Benny's pistol butt dropped him like a sack of pretzel sticks. Nylon stockings flopping from their heads, Eddie and Pellucci raced up the ramp with the money cart as Carl and Benny held the door and also jammed nylons over their faces.

"Let's go!" muffled Carl through flattened lips, his slanted eyes and pressed-in nose resembling those of a mongoloid.

Leaving Eddie at the door, the three of them raced with the cart down the short hallway and blast-

ed through the swinging metal doors into the fluorescent-tubed accounting room.

"EVERYBODY! Hands in the air and march into the vault—quietly!" Benny shouted. Gasps, shouts, and gurgles of fright mingled into a billowing, balloon-like drone. "NOW!" The clack of Pellucci's cocking machine-gun collapsed the balloon and the "pock-pock-pock" of scurrying heels replaced it.

Carl was quickly stacking currency bags on the cart. Leaving the herding to Pellucci, Benny ran to a far corner and started tossing other bags to Carl.

Almost 3:18. Damn! "Carl, push the cart here to the unsacked bills. Palootch, haul those empty sacks over here and start stuffing." Bouncing like chunks of foam rubber, bundles of bills spilled and rolled off of the arm-swept counter. Benny scooped them all up. "Hurry! Hurry! Move!"

Pellucci slipped and scattered a bagful of bills across the floor. Carl helped him shovel it back into the bag as Benny polished off a counter top. The remaining stacks of currency beckoned enticingly.

"Let's go!" yelled Carl. 3:21 plus 35 seconds. "Damn!" Whacking one last pile into his sack, he tore after the others.

Eddie kicked the ramp down and they panted and heaved the cart into the truck. Slamming the doors shut, he leaped into the driver's seat.

"Slow down, idiot!" screamed Benny, as Eddie roared for the front gate. "Nobody'll find out about this until the four o'clock pickup. The last thing we want to do is attract attention."

Inhaling deeply, he tore at his necktie. The stretching-rack inside his chest pulled another turn. Staring down at them like an evil eye, the first traffic light hovered red, seemingly having an endless life above them. *Kwik-kwik-kwik-kwik! Kwik-kwik-kwik-kwik!* The enveloping cloak of time pounded and echoed around them. "Turn, you devil; turn!"

Plip! Winking and blinking teasingly, the green light beckoned them forward. 3:24 less 8 seconds. The stretching-rack was blown out with a quick, short breath and Benny's chest walls seemed to cave in.

"O.K., we're on our way. Keep it at twenty-eight miles an hour and you'll hit every green light. Now, remember your timing of every block. In case you get slowed down by traffic, you can speed it up a little. Palootch, start packing the dough into the suitcases while we get out of these grey pajamas.

And don't anyone take off their gloves until we leave this crate. No fingerprints!" Smiling at Carl, he whipped off the uniform in the cramped area. "Practice makes perfect." He grinned.

3:31 . . . 3:37 . . . 3:42 . . . The checkpoints clicked past on schedule. Admiring the last suitcase stacked with wrapped bills, Benny closed his eyes and smiled, close-lipped, then sobered. "All set." 3:46. "We should be nearing the Division Street crossing. Only one more to go, guys." The windshield framed the intersection and he started to hum. "Perfect! Perfect! And the light should be turned green . . . right . . ." raising his right hand as he watched the second-hand pick across the numbers, "now!". The snap of his fingers commanded the light and it obeyed by instantly popping green. His giggles shook his body and he hugged his arms, chldlike. "Rio de Janeiro, here we co—"

"COP!" acreamed Eddie.

Flashing two gleaming red lights, the motorcycle pulled into the intersection and the patrolman, standing tall in the saddle, stopped it under the smiling green light, and raised his arm in a halt signal!

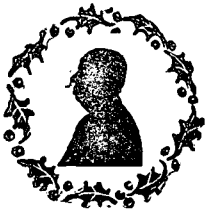
"How'd they find out?" cried Pellucci.

Grunting like a trapped warthog, Benny hugged a suitcase.

"Let's get the hell outta here!" yelled Carl.

Eddie clomped on the gas and the truck jerked and lurched ahead. Swinging to miss the patrolman, he didn't see a long, black vehicle, leading a line of cars, roll across the street. Too late, he cut back! Screeching and plowing into the hearse, spinning with it, snapping open its rear door, they scraped to a stop as the coffin rolled from its mooring, crashed through the windshield of the overturned truck, and with a lid-popping crunch, tossed the cadaver, with flowers, among the jumble of men, suitcases, equipment and scattered and gently floating greenbacks.

"You louse, Little George! I knew you'd foul up this job; I just knew it!"



The determination of "Value for value received," is seldom precipitate or mutual.

It was three months ago they carted Maggie Miller off. Come and got her, they did. Put her in one of those white shirts with the long sleeves and tied her up, kicking and hollering, pure animal sounds coming out of her throat.

I used to come in and do for Maggie Miller once a week, so I was there when it happened, and I can tell you I wish I'd been home instead.

I'd been working for Mrs. Miller for six, seven years. She used to be a right pretty woman, with them china-blue eyes and with blonde hair curling around her face. Her body's sort of rounded and soft looking. By the time they took her away she'd changed a lot.

I had to find me another lady for Tuesdays, but I miss Mrs. Miller. She was always nice to me. I'd come in to work about eight o'clock and Mrs. Miller'd be sitting in the kitchen drinking her coffee.

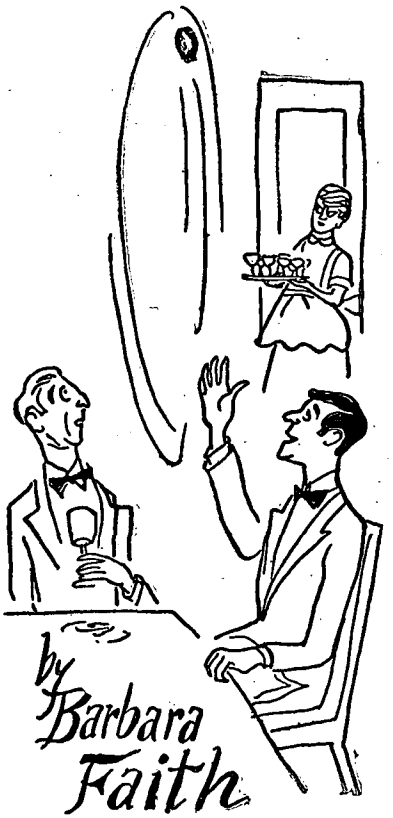
"Good morning, Mrs. Henderson," she'd say. "I've just made a fresh pot of coffee. Sit down before you start and have a cup with me."

And I'd say, "Lordy, Mrs. Miller, I'd better get that wash goin' before

PAID IN FULL

it clouds up as it does washdays."

But she wouldn't have it that way. She'd say, "Oh come on, it will keep," and we'd visit for a while. I swear, she was a nice woman. Mr. Miller's all right, but he's nothing to write home about. I don't know how a pretty little thing like Maggie Miller got mixed up with him. He's a tall man, but he's getting a stomach from sitting around drinking beer and watching television. He used to be better looking, too. He's a contractor or something like that, works with buildings, and I guess he can run home whenever he wants.



He was always watching her. She knew it, too. I'd see her sometimes, leaning on the sink, pressing her hands together till they was white, trying to act like she didn't notice. What bothered her most was him flipping that fifty-cent piece. It almost drove me crazy, and I was only there once a week. He was always flipping that coin. He did it a lot when the children were in the house and that seemed to bother Mrs. Miller something awful, and sometimes when he did it she'd start crying and run upstairs.

One Saturday night they was having special guests for dinner and Mrs. Miller asked me if I'd come over and help her. Well, I liked Mrs. Miller, so I said sure I'd come. Mrs. Miller and me fixed up a real fancy meal. There was six people, and with the three children and them there was eleven, and that's a lot of people to cook for.

Well, you're not going to believe it when I tell you, but right in the middle of dinner don't Mr. Miller take the fifty-cent piece out and start flipping it up in the air. Mrs.

Miller got white and sick looking, and she said to him, "Harry, please," in a low voice, and her blue eyes was looking up at him, but he went right on flipping that coin.

Then he said in a loud voice, "I've got a terrible habit and it drives poor Maggie wild. I'm very attached to this particular fifty-cent piece and I've got this habit of tossing it. I'll probably drive poor Maggie crazy with it some day."

One man said, "I crack my knuckles, Harry, and that drives my wife crazy, too." And everybody laughed.

I was serving them and I looked at Mrs. Miller. She was trying to pick up her glass but her hand had started shaking and she couldn't do it. She bent her head down over her plate until I saw Mr. Miller say something to her in a low voice. Then she straightened her back and picked up her fork, but her hand shook something awful.

It was that night she told me about it. I stayed late, cleaning up the kitchen, and when everybody left I fixed a pot of coffee and was sitting there drinking it when Mrs. Miller come into the kitchen.

"Mr. Miller's gone to bed," she said. "I don't feel like going up yet, Mrs. Henderson. All right if I have a cup of coffee with you? I don't want to keep you from getting home."

"Why, Mrs. Miller," I said, "you sit right down here. I'm in no hurry at all. Got nobody to go home to excepting my cat." Then I kind of sighed, I guess, and I said, "Lordy, I do miss having a man around the house since Jim died."

Mrs. Miller laughed, a nasty kind of laugh, not like her at all, and she said, "Count your blessings, Mrs. Henderson; count your blessings."

Then she shoved her cup and saucer back from the table and she laid her head down and hit the table with her hand. "Oh, Mrs. Henderson," she said. "Oh, I'm so unhappy," and she started in crying.

"Now, now," I said, and I started patting her shoulders. "Don't you cry like that, Mrs. Miller honey. Don't cry. Do you want me to call for Mr. Miller to come down?"

She grabbed my sleeve, looking at me with them tears running down her face, and she said, "No, please don't call him. I'll stop crying."

So I went over to the sink and got a clean towel and wet it, and I wiped her face off. Then, well, I can hardly stand to tell you this, she threw her arms around my waist and she started crying again and hanging onto me. Finally she said, "Mrs. Henderson, can I talk to you, please?"

So I sat down with her and I said, "Yes, you can tell me any-

thing you want to, Mrs. Miller."

She started in telling me and now I wish she hadn't, except maybe it's a good idea for somebody to know, somebody besides Mr. Miller, that is.

It happened a couple of years after I started working for the Millers. My, she was a pretty little thing then, and Mr. Miller didn't look so bad either. He was a good dresser and he had a nice build and he seemed awful proud of the way he looked. I'd see him standing in front of the mirror, admiring how strong and good-looking he was. He was all right with Mrs. Miller except that he was awful bossy.

He was real particular, she told me, about having his meals ready on time. That was hard to do, because she never knew when he was coming home—it was anywheres from four-thirty to seven o'clock—but he wanted his supper ready and served five minutes after he got in the house. Made her nervous, it did, always trying to please him.

He entertained a lot of businessmen and sometimes he'd take Mrs. Miller along with him. She'd have me sit with the children. They were nice kids—six, seven and nine—and very well behaved. Well, they had to be, I guess, or that Mr. Miller would of beat them blue. About all they ever said to him was "Yes, sir," or "No, sir," politelike.

So anyway, I come over this night to baby-sit and it seemed to me that Mr. Miller was picking on his wife, but maybe it wasn't any worse than usual. He kept saying, "For Christ's sake, will you hurry up."

I don't believe in taking the Lord's name in vain so I didn't think too much of him saying that.

Then he said, "Your damn yellow hair looks like hell. I left you three dollars today to get it done. What did you do with the money?"

"I bought Mary Lou a blouse," she said.

Mary Lou is six and looks like Mrs. Miller.

I was sitting in the rocker when they come home that night. Mr. Miller, he goes right on upstairs without even a hello to me. But Mrs. Miller, she paid me, and asked me if the children were OK, and she looked different. I don't know, she looked softer, I guess, and her face didn't look so pinched.

"Did you have a good time?" I asked her just as I was starting out the door?

"Yes," she said. "Oh yes, I had a lovely time. Thank you for asking, Mrs. Henderson. Take care driving home."

That was the night it started, she told me. One of the men that night was new in town and was just

starting with Mr. Miller's company. Mrs. Miller sat next to him when they was having dinner and she said they talked about things she hadn't talked about in years—about books and theatre and art, things like that—and music. Mrs. Miller was very fond of music, but Mr. Miller don't care for the kind she liked, so of course they listened to what he wanted to. Sometimes she put a concert on the radio, real low, but Mr. Miller, he'd yell, "Turn that damn long-hair stuff off."

Anyway, Mrs. Miller and this man—his name was Dan—hit it off right away. He telephoned her a couple of times, she told me, and she told him that he mustn't do that. But then she weakened and agreed to meet him. They drove out in the country, she said, and it was just lovely to drive along, listening to music on the radio and talking.

I know, I know, she shouldn't have done it, her a married woman and all, and I tell you, I was shocked when she told me. She started seeing him and when the mister was away on business trips he started coming to the house. It was summer and the children was away at camp.

She hung her head when she was telling me and she said, "I'm not proud of any of this, Mrs. Henderson, but I just couldn't seem to help myself. Dan was so good and so kind. I couldn't stop it."

Of course, it was bad business, him coming to the house that way; real bad business. And you know what happened, don't you? I liked to have fell off my chair when she was telling me.

She and Dan were standing at the top of the stairs when they heard the front door open and Mr. Miller came in. She said the three of them stood there, the two men staring at each other, and finally she and Dan come down the steps and Dan said, "There's nothing I can say in my own defense, Harry, but believe me, this was my fault." Mr. Miller said, "Shut up, Dan. You've taken what's mine and you're going to pay for it."

Mrs. Miller told me she said, "Harry, please, I know this is terrible. But I love him, Harry. Don't do anything to him, please, Harry. Please don't hurt him."

Mr. Miller said, "He's got to pay for what he's done."

Mr. Miller is a big man, and Mrs. Miller said this Dan was a small fella.

"Don't you touch him," Mrs. Miller said.

But Mr. Miller said, "You don't understand, Maggie. I said he was going to pay, and that's what I meant."

Mrs. Miller said she and this Dan

fellow just stared at him, shocked.

"Now," Mr. Miller went on, "I think we ought to sit down and discuss the value of the merchandise."

"Harry, please," Mrs. Miller said.

Dan said, "I know we've wronged you, Harry, but please, let's be civilized."

"That's what I'm planning to

be," Mr. Miller said. "Civilized. I want value for value received. Now I've been married to Maggie for ten years so I have a pretty good idea of what she's worth. I hope you can afford it, Dan; I hope you can afford the price I put on her favors."

Mrs. Miller said she was crying and telling the mister to stop what he was saying.

But he went right on. "I know her pretty well, so I'm setting the price, boy, and you're going to pay me or I'm going to kill you right here on the spot."

"All right," Dan agreed. "Anything, only leave her alone."

"That's better," said Mr. Miller, "and I'll admit I may be overcharging a little. Dan, the price for my wife's favors is fifty cents. Get it up."

Mrs. Miller told me that she thought she couldn't stand it, that she was going to lose her mind, and she said to the mister, "Harry, don't do this to me."

He didn't even look at her, just said, "This is a business deal between two men, Maggie, so shut your mouth."

Dan dug down in his pocket and brought out a fifty-cent piece. Well, he left, and Mrs. Miller told me he left town and she never seen or heard from him again.

Mrs. Miller said she asked the mister right then for a divorce but he just laughed at her and said he could get a divorce any time he had a mind to, and meantime two could play the same game.

They stayed married, but it was bad. He was always flipping that fifty-cent piece, like he wanted to drive her crazy. He'd do it when the children were in the room, or when they had company, and Mrs. Miller said he kept it on the stand by their bed at night.

He got himself a ladyfriend and he'd brag about it in front of Mrs. Miller and tell her that he'd up and leave her whenever he had a mind to and marry this other woman and take the children with him.

I seen him and this woman one time. She wasn't much to look at and she was a sight older than Mr. Miller, but she was dressed up in furs and jewels and she was hanging onto his arm and looking at him like he was really something.

Day by day I seen Mrs. Miller getting more nervous. The mister went out a lot. He'd say, "I'm going out for the evening, Maggie. Look for me when you see me. I might make it back in time for breakfast." Then he'd flip that fifty-cent piece under her nose.

Finally, I guess the day came when she just couldn't stand it no more.

The paper boy come to the door and Mrs. Miller told him, "Wait a minute," and she said to Mr. Miller, "Do you have some change for the paper boy, Harry?"

He asked, "How much is it?"

"Fifty cents," she said, and they looked at each other.

He took the fifty-cent piece out of his pocket and tossed it up in the air. "I couldn't use this," he said.

I was in the livingroom dusting and I seen them standing there, him tossing that coin and her watching it, her eyes following it up and down, up and down, and all of a sudden she started screaming. Mr. Miller and me tried to stop her, but it didn't do any good. So, finally, I held her while he telephoned the doctor to come.

She was still screaming when they took her away. Her eyes were all wild and she didn't look pretty no more.

Mr. Miller was cool about it and helped the men get her ready. There were a lot of people standing in front of the house watching when they drove her off. The paper boy was still standing there. Mr. Miller, he started up the walk and then he turned and looked at the boy. He reached into his pocket and took out the coin. He looked at it for a long time and rolled it around in his hand. Then he tossed it to the boy. "Here," he said, "that pays me up."

He come back into the house, a studying look on his face, and asked me if I'd stay a few days to look after the kids. I said I would, not on account of him, but because I was sorry for Mrs. Miller and those poor little children.

A couple of days later he took off work so he could see Mrs. Miller's doctor. When he come home

he called me into the kitchen and closed the door.

"Mrs. Henderson," he started off, "it's very sad news. Mrs. Miller will probably spend the rest of her life in an institution. The doctor told me today that she's hopelessly insane."

I started crying and wishing I had the nerve to hit him with a frying pan, because I know he's the one that drove her crazy.

"I have to think ahead, Mrs. Henderson," he said. "I have to raise my children. Mrs. Miller and I hadn't been getting along very well for years and I'd been thinking about getting a divorce when this happened."

"You can't do that," I said.

"I'm a young man," he said. "I have my whole life ahead of me and I have to think of myself."

"But you can't get a divorce," I told him.

"Of course I can," he said, "and I'm thinking about getting married again."

"You can't do it."

"Oh come on," he said, getting mad.

"You can't do it on account of Mrs. Miller being insane."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" he said.

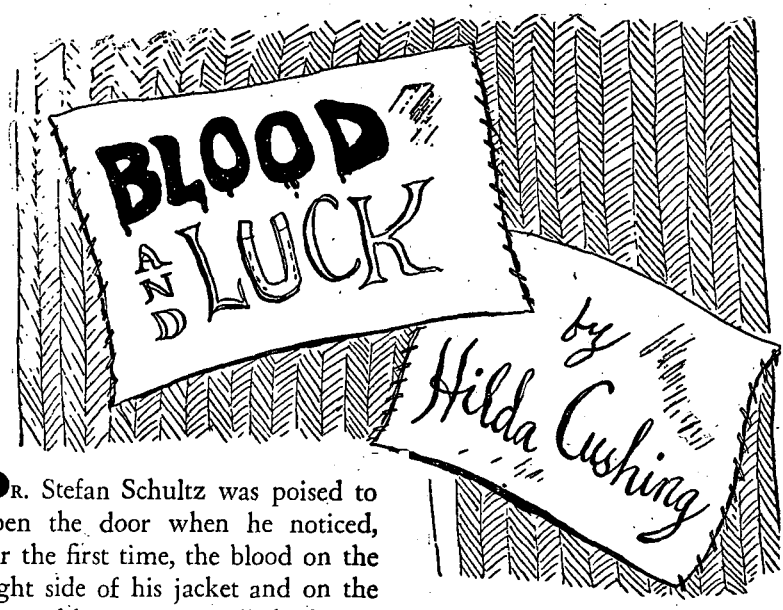
I looked at him for a minute or two and then, as I remember, I smiled at him. "There was another man I used to work for—an old man. His wife was insane, too. She'd been locked up for thirty-four years. He's the one that told me that in this state you can't get a divorce from somebody that's crazy. You just stay married to them until they die." I took my apron off and folded it up and then I looked him right square in the eye. "Or until you die."

That was three months ago. Today I walked past the house on my way to work for a lady in the neighborhood, and there was Mr. Miller sitting on his porch. He looked like he hadn't shaved and like he'd been sleeping in his clothes. Lordy, he was a mess.

"How do, Mr. Miller," I said when I passed the house.

He looked at me, and his eyes was all red-rimmed. "Go to hell," he said.

Seldom is an alibi so tailor-made, but a particular man may still demand alterations before the fit is perfected.



DR. Stefan Schultz was poised to open the door when he noticed, for the first time, the blood on the right side of his jacket and on the knee of his trousers. All the bitterness and anger and subsequent remorse rose to a sudden paralysis of fear. When it subsided he walked back through the kitchen and past the body of his wife lying slumped on the floor of the front hall where the blood, from the wound in her left breast, mingled bleakly with the faded colors of the rug.

Upstairs in the bedroom he sponged the suit with tissues and cold water. Luckily, Ilse's rare AB negative blood had not worked its way into the lining or through the trousers to his skin.

He opened the closet and looked at the several suits that hung there. One was only a slightly darker gray than the one he was wearing. He considered whether he should change. The suits made him think of Julien, his friend and benefactor, who had helped him

and Ilse come to the States from Bonn, Germany, where Dr. Julien Guttman had been the youngest surgeon on the staff and where Stefan sometimes assisted him.

Julien had married an American tourist, wealthy Margaret Waterman, and as he left for the States with his bride, he had said, "I won't forget you."

He had kept his promise and sent travel money as soon as Stefan became qualified to practice internal medicine. Then through the Waterman Savings Bank, a family institution, he had made it possible for Stefan to set up a home with an office close to the center of town and a ten minute walk from Waterman Memorial Hospital. Julien even lent him a suit to wear until he could get his own made. They were so near the same size the fit was good.

"Have you ever felt such fine texture? Nothing like that potato sack you've been wearing!" Julien had said, pulling down the edge of the pocket to show his name and the date of the garment's creation which was sewn to the inside lining. "Besides, it is a sign of success to have a custom-made suit. You look fine! Now you go to Max the Tailor and order one just like it!"

Stefan, properly impressed, did just that; and since then had ordered several suits from the same tailor and as near like the ones Julien wore as was possible. Perhaps the suits were responsible, or maybe it was Julien's active sponsorship—anyway, Stefan's practice started well and grew steadily.

When Margaret was away, Stefan would often bring Julien home for breakfast or whatever meal Ilse had ready. Julien was fond of Ilse's rich, German cooking.

Then Julien would point his fork at Ilse, who was usually dressed in her white uniform, and say, "See now, if you had married a rich American, your wife would not have to work as your office nurse and you could live in a palace and have a separate office building all your own!"

Julien's office was a small building on the grounds of Waterman Memorial, with its own entrance from the street and easily accessible to the hospital and the parking lot. The old Waterman estate in the choicest section of town was his home.

All this banter never bothered Ilse. She would repartee in her throaty German, her eyes sliding slyly from one to the other. She had jibes ready about Stefan's closeness with money, since he was paying off the large loan from the bank, and she would take a poke

at Julien because he rarely accompanied his wife on her many travels. Despite her aspersions, Stefan knew that Julien was both a conscientious husband and a dedicated surgeon. It was because of this dedication, as well as his marriage, that he had become one of the town's most respected citizens.

Now, because of this reputation, Stefan hesitated to go to Julien to confess what had happened this morning or to ask his help. He had no doubt Julien would stand by him and fight, tooth and nail, to protect him, but it would place an ugly burden upon him.

Stefan knew the danger was real. Suspicion falls first on the husband, particularly when the wife is younger, pretty and flirtatious. He didn't dare get rid of the suit. It was too new. Taking it to the cleaners had its hazards, too. Blood could sometimes be detected even after cleaning, and Ilse's rare blood type was unmistakable. Without the blood, he felt he could handle the police.

He looked at his watch. It was getting late. Julien had Mrs. Donahue's appendectomy scheduled for nine o'clock, and Stefan had promised her he would stay by her side throughout part of it at least.

As he thought of Julien operating, the idea struck him. He took his hand off the dark gray suit and closed the closet door. The full length mirror proved that the stains no longer showed. He ran the damp crease of the right knee through his fingers to sharpen it.

With a pair of small, sharp scissors he carefully snipped his name from the inside pocket of the jacket he was wearing. After placing the label in his billfold beneath his driver's license, he slipped the scissors into the outside pocket that already held his stethoscope and the thoroughly scrubbed steak knife. Then with a quick glance about the room to make sure everything was in order, he went downstairs.

In the lower hall again, as he passed Ilse, he looked at her. The blonde curls were tumbled over her staring eyes but they did not quite cover the bruise on her cheek. Her full lips were still in the pout that had formed during her last gasp as she died in his arms. Just showing under her was the early morning edition of the local newspaper.

The door to his office was open and he could see desk drawers pulled out—one dumped on the floor—and the drug closet door hanging on one hinge. Through the entrance to the kitchen opposite, he could see the table at the far end set for two, the missing steak knife replaced by another of

the same design, no discrepancies.

As the percolator clicked itself to "warming," he could smell the pungent flavor of newly prepared coffee. The eggs, the thick slice of ham and the frying pan were in their usual places. Not yet weaned from German ways, he still enjoyed a hearty breakfast in mid-morning after his call at the hospital.

Except for the dishes and cutlery on the kitchen table which Ilse had arranged the night before, Stefan, wearing rubber gloves, had prepared each room to his satisfaction.

This way he hoped the police would believe the murderer to be a man with a desperate need for narcotics, someone who had knifed a helpless Ilse before he stole the capsules that Stefan had flushed down the office toilet. To be on the safe side he would have to dispose of the knife. It suggested an intimacy with the kitchen, and there might be remnants of Ilse's blood in its crevices.

The police officer, Blandin, was still on traffic duty at the nearby corner. To avoid him Stefan would cut again through the Pringles' backyard. It would save him five minutes and there was no one home to see him. Mr. and Mrs. Pringle were on a Caribbean cruise with the Golden Age Club. Because he liked to walk, Stefan preferred the longer route through the town and he only took the shortcut to the hospital when he was in a hurry. He was in a hurry now.

When he arrived at the hospital, he used the emergency entrance. Luckily the waiting room was empty and he could hear the nurse moving about in the adjoining treatment room. Stepping into the cafeteria on the same floor, he found that nearly as empty. Just two interns, deep in conversation, were in the far alcove reserved for doctors.

Pouring himself a cup of coffee, he drank it quickly before going to the elevators. He cut short each of the two remaining house visits, yet he managed to appear unhurried. When he was through, he was well within the time he allowed himself on routine mornings and the knife was buried among others of mixed and dubious heritage in the cutlery bin of the cafeteria.

The operating rooms were on the third floor. Through the small porthole in the door of OR2 he could see that Julien would be a while yet. He would have time for his plan.

As he'd anticipated, the room where the surgeons kept their clothes while operating was empty

and the keys were in the locker doors. He sighed a breath of relief when he opened Julien's locker and discovered the one break he needed. The suit within was almost the same shade of gray as the one he, himself, was wearing.

It wasn't, of course, pure luck. Stefan knew that for everyday wear both he and Julien leaned to the more conservative shades of gray. If his luck held, Julien would not notice the difference.

Stefan was in a green scrub suit and had just finished snipping the name from Julien's jacket when he heard the sound of stretcher wheels and muted voices that heralded the completion of Julien's operation. Hastily he placed Julien's label beside his own in his billfold. If he'd had time he would have tucked it in the pocket of his own suit, but it didn't really matter.

Both Julien and young Broderick, the surgical resident, had removed their sterile equipment and were in just their scrub suits. Several months back, Broderick had been a breakfast guest along with Julien. Stefan had been impressed by the brilliance of the young man, but Broderick came only once more and then begged off. Stefan suspected that Ilse's flirtatious manner embarrassed him.

Now he reddened when he saw Stefan. His greeting was a mumble as he hurried to the table by the window to pick up a magazine. Stefan was watching him thoughtfully when Julien laid a brotherly hand on his shoulder.

"Well, my friend," said Julien. "I understand we're going to have you with us for the appendectomy this morning."

"Yes," Stefan said, still bemused by the color of Broderick's face. "I promised Mrs. Donahue I would stay with her a while. She is quite nervous about the operation."

"Stay until we finish," Julien said. "The ten o'clock cholecystectomy has been postponed until tomorrow, so I'll be through for the morning and we can celebrate the end of my bachelorhood. Margaret comes home this afternoon, remember?"

Stefan did remember, and what a stroke of luck the later operation was postponed! It would be good to have a witness with him when he reached home again.

After the appendectomy there was no delay. Julien had to pull in his abdomen slightly to accommodate the waist of Stefan's pants, but the belt was his own and it slipped into place easily. He shrugged on the coat without stopping to button it. As he fell into step with Stefan on the way to the elevator, there seemed no

doubt his mind was entirely on the hearty breakfast he expected Ilse to cook for them.

After the hideous discovery of Ilse's body, Julien stayed with Stefan until three in the afternoon when he had to leave for the airport to meet Margaret's plane. By then the confusion of picture-taking, fingerprint dusting and the medical examiner's inspection of the body was over.

Julien knew both the medical examiner and the police chief well. In his generous way he lauded the chief's capable police force and the modern methods of crime detection he had introduced into the town. He stressed how lucky Waterman was to have as its chief a former city detective.

Chief Garrison accepted the effusive compliments with a smile, and his questioning of Stefan became a friendly conversation among the three men. However, Stefan noticed that despite his guileless manner, the chief's eyes were sharp and penetrating.

When attention was drawn to the newspaper under Ilse's shoulder, it gave Stefan a chance to pinpoint its delivery; shortly after seven, rain or shine. Garrison wrote the paperboy's name and address in his notebook and the names and times to be checked at the hospital. He murmured, "Routine, you know," almost apologetically.

That night, with small and careful stitches, Stefan sewed his name inside the coat of Julien's suit. When he went to bed, he felt everything had gone off rather well.

The newspaper proved Ilse was alive until after seven, and after Stefan had left the house. Officer Blandin, he hoped, would remember that he waved to him as he rounded the corner before seven. It was doubtful that anyone at the hospital had been observant enough to challenge the statements he had made as to the time of his presence in the wards. Julien was his alibi for the rest of the morning, including driving him home, and was with him right up to and beyond the time he opened the front door to the horrible sight of Ilse lying in a pool of her own blood.

The next morning Stefan had breakfast in the cafeteria at nine with Julien. He wasn't as hungry as usual but when Julien ordered pancakes and syrup, he had the same. Julien was so happy at having Margaret home again they talked about her trip rather than dwelling on Ilse's death.

When Stefan arrived home at ten for office hours, the house had a cold, empty feeling. Before his

first patient arrived, he brought down a rug from the bedroom to replace the one Ilse's body had lain on in the front hall—and that the police had removed the same day. He worked right up to the day of the funeral without interruption from the police.

The next day Chief Garrison invited him to the station for what he called "a little talk." Stefan was relieved to have the silence broken.

After the usual greetings, the chief said, "We don't seem to be getting anywhere, Doctor, and we're beginning to wonder if your wife had any enemies."

Stefan stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Ilse? Enemies? Oh, no! All our patients seemed to like her, and I'm sure we have none on the habit."

The chief sat back comfortably in his chair. "We don't think it was a patient. We've checked and double-checked the list of recent patients you gave us and everyone on it was okay. None are users."

Stefan shrugged his shoulders. "Then I don't understand."

The chief stared at him. "Well, we just can't go along with the murderer being a narcotic thief. The damage in the office seems overdone. A nail file could have opened the cupboard. Also, the stab wound matches the knives on the breakfast table."

"Surely you examined them?"

"We did. No blood and no fingerprints except those of Mrs. Schultz. In fact, there weren't quite enough of hers." He paused long enough for this last to sink in. "We counted the knives in the drawer. Together there were only five. A set is usually four, six or eight. I know, I know!" He raised his hand as though to stop Stefan from interrupting. "Things like that frequently get tossed out with the garbage, yet we have to consider every lead, however far-fetched." He leaned forward. "There is one way you can help us, Doctor. Tell me who your wife's men friends were."

Stefan could feel the quickening of his pulse. This, above all, he had hoped to prevent. Scandal could hurt his practice as much as becoming a murder suspect. It had been his first concern when Ilse had told him she had a lover.

Because she had become cool and indifferent toward him lately, he had the very morning of the murder placed his arm about her and suggested perhaps she was tired and needed a rest.

"We'll go away for a week," he said, offering the first vacation either of them had had since coming to this country. "I'm sure Julien will lend us his house on the Cape. I'll get another doctor to

take my patients. We need a rest."

She shrugged away from him, laughed, and said she didn't want to go away—especially with him—and then she told him she had a lover.

"You're lying!"

She looked at him without flinching.

"I don't believe it! You can't have a lover!"

At the same time he felt her cheek against his fist. It was the only time he had ever struck her, and it was the first time he knew that the way she looked at other men was not just an affectation. At the impact, Ilse had stumbled backward against the wall and looked up at him with jeering blue eyes.

"How will you stop me?" she taunted in her husky German. "You know I never really loved you. You know I only wanted to come to America. Tell me, how will you stop me?" She laughed again.

"Men? Dr. Schultz?" Chief Garrison's voice interrupted the hateful memory.

"We have mutual friends," began Stefan.

The chief shook his head. "More than that, I'm afraid, Doctor. Officer Blandin, the one on traffic duty at your corner mornings, tells me your wife was in the habit of having visitors while you were away from the house—male visitors—between seven and nine in the morning."

"Ilse was a nurse," Stefan cleared his throat. "She could give emergency treatment."

"But one came more than once, Doctor. Would she need to give emergency treatment to that fellow over at Waterman Memorial—Dr. Broderick?"

Stefan drew in his breath sharply. "That doesn't mean anything. We often had breakfast together, the three of us."

Garrison's voice was sympathetic. "Of course," he agreed.

There was a long silence as the two men looked at each other. It was finally broken by the chief.

He said softly, "Blandin could see only the front, Doctor. We don't know who might have used the back door!"

It was obvious the chief was baiting him, hoping he would lose his composure and say something he might regret.

"You are wrong," Stefan said firmly. "Ilse was a good wife. She was friendly and she liked to flirt a little. That was all."

Garrison rose as though to end the conversation. "Well, thanks anyway," he said rather brusquely. "You understand we have to explore every possibility." Then as

Stefan neared the door, and as though it were an afterthought, he said, "By the way, did you know your neighbors, the Pringles, are home from their cruise? They got back last night."

Stefan didn't know and ordinarily he wouldn't care. Now, however, mention of them by Chief Garrison was disturbing. He felt uneasy throughout the day and lay sleepless part of the night wondering what the chief thought the Pringles could add to the investigation of his wife's murder.

He found out two days later. Just as his morning office hours were ending, the chief called to tell him the murder weapon had been found.

"The knife—we're pretty sure it belongs to your kitchen set. We'd like you to come down to headquarters to identify it," he said. "We also have a signed statement by the Pringles you may find interesting."

In spite of his cleverness it had happened! They had searched the hospital and the moment they found the knife, which he didn't for a moment doubt was the right one, he became the prime suspect. One or more of his trips to Waterman Memorial via the seldom used backyard route must have been observed by the Pringles.

Perhaps now was the proper time to draw attention to the suit. Before he left the house he went upstairs to the bedroom and changed into Julien's dark gray.

Yes, as far as he could tell, the knife belonged in his kitchen. Where did they find it?

Chief Garrison, the tips of his fingers on the handle, rolled the knife back and forth on the desk. "In the hospital cafeteria," he said. "There were no fingerprints but we found blood—AB negative—where the blade joins the handle. It was way down in the bin under the other knives. It probably hadn't been used since it was put there." He waited as though he expected some comment from Stefan. Then he added, "This narrows our investigation somewhat."

Stefan remained silent.

"Then, too, we have this statement signed by both Pringles." He indicated the typewritten single sheet of paper on the desk before him. "You see, the back door from the kitchen was important after all."

Stefan passed the tip of his tongue over his lips.

The chief continued, "After we found the knife we knew it had to be someone connected with the hospital. We settled first on Dr. Broderick. Our problem there was lack of blood on his clothes. The day after the murder, we account-

ed for all of them and there was no blood!"

Stefan groaned inwardly. The day after the murder! In spite of his apparent initial acceptance, this man had *never* gone along with the evidence of the missing capsules!

"All that blood, Doctor!" Chief Garrison shook his head thoughtfully. "There just had to be some on the killer. The lab reported someone apparently knelt in it on the rug and that it was smeared over the top of your wife's dress in such a way it suggested someone held her in his arms after he stabbed her."

Before Stefan could force the fear from his throat, the chief was speaking again. "Then we wondered if you were keeping anything back, if you were protecting someone. Were you, Dr. Schultz? Did you suspect who your wife's lover was? Dr. Guttman, perhaps?"

Stefan was shocked. "Of course not! There never was a lover! And Dr. Guttman! It's ridiculous! He is my best friend!"

Garrison smiled sadly. "I'm afraid it happens."

"Besides," returned Stefan stiffly, "he didn't like Ilse very much. He tried to stop me from bringing her over to this country. He felt she would be a handicap."

The chief's sad smile remained on his face. "He told me he knew you both in Germany. Perhaps he had a reason not to want her over here. Perhaps he was afraid he might get involved with her again."

"We were all just—"

"I know, I know," the chief said wearily. "You were all just friends! Dr. Broderick has told us she was a very possessive friend. She threatened to expose him to the hospital administrator if he stopped seeing her. Perhaps with Dr. Guttman it was exposure to his wife. Perhaps he wanted to end his affair with her before his wife got back, and she refused to let him." The chief was no longer smiling. "In spite of her long absences from Waterman, I don't think Margaret Guttman would look very kindly upon a scandal of this sort."

"You're full of 'perhaps'," objected Stefan. "You're just guessing."

"That's where the blood comes in," said Garrison. "From the very first we had the cleaners in this area alerted. They didn't clean a single suit until we first checked the name of the owner and gave them clearance. Yesterday Dr. Guttman brought several suits to the cleaners on Main Street. We almost didn't touch them, but then we decided everyone connected in

any way with either you or your wife was suspect until proven differently. It was a lucky decision. The lab found evidence of Mrs. Schultz's blood on the jacket and on one knee of the pants."

Stefan closed his eyes. Neither Margaret's position in Waterman nor Julien's dedication to the hospital had prevented Julien's involvement. Guilt by association! Now he would have to tell the truth, no matter what it cost him. He must repair the terrible damage he had caused before it was too late. It was no longer Stefan's life that was at stake; it was Julien's and his reputation and his marriage.

"You are wrong," he began carefully. "Lover? Ilse told me she had one but I didn't believe her then and I don't now. Besides, that suit you tested is not Julien's. It is mine!"

The silence that followed hung heavily. Then he continued. "I exchanged it for Julien's at the hospital. We are nearly one size and the suits are both dark gray and both were made by the same tailor. I didn't want you to suspect I killed her. The husband," he sighed. "You know—always the husband! This suit, the one I am wearing, is Julien's. I put it on today because I thought it was I you had suspicions about and I would suggest you have it tested; and if you didn't believe this was the suit I wore that day, to have you test all my suits. That would prove I hadn't killed Ilse because there would be no blood on any of them. Here!"

He tore the coat rapidly from his body. "Take it. Test it and find him innocent."

Garrison looked skeptical. "You were our first suspect. We checked you out after hours of careful investigation. Every minute of your story had been substantiated—from Officer Blandin seeing you leave your house at 6:45 and your wife picking up the newspaper from the porch shortly after seven in the morning—until you arrived back home with Dr. Guttman at ten."

"Never mind all that!" begged Stefan. "Test it!"

The chief regarded him thoughtfully. "How can you prove it's Dr. Guttman's suit?"

Stefan dug his billfold from his pocket. "I have his name here. I cut it from his coat, and I didn't have time to put it in mine. Go look at the suit you have. If you don't find his name where the tailor always sews it, hidden behind his label in the inside pocket of the jacket, then that should be proof." He shook the coat in his hand. "Then examine the stitches around my

name in this one. You will find that Max will swear they are not the original and that an amateur made them—me!"

"Yes," said the chief, his eyes steady on Stefan's face, "that could be proof. In fact we were puzzled by that—the suit with blood on it having the name missing, the stitches obviously cut—the other suits intact. After all, Dr. Guttman didn't seem to be trying to cover up anything. He brought the suits to the cleaners himself."

He took the coat and label, opened the office door and called to one of his men. After murmuring instructions, he returned to Stefan.

He pressed a button on his desk and said briskly, "Everything we say now will be taken down on a tape recorder. You needn't say another word without a lawyer present. But, later, you can go over a typewritten copy with your lawyer and he will advise you whether to sign or not. I will begin the questioning and you may answer or not as you like. Now, when did you first decide to kill Mrs. Schultz?"

Stefan felt as though he had been dragged from a great distance. He ignored the chief's warning. "That morning Ilse told me she had a lover but she didn't say who it was. All the way to the hospital I kept thinking about it. Then, after seeing a couple of my house patients, I was sure she had been teasing me. She was a great tease!" He had to force the words out. "So I had to go back, to hear her tell me herself she was just fooling, and to tell her I was sorry. You see, when she said she had a lover, I struck her. That was why she had a bruise on her cheek. It was the first time, and I was sorry. When I went through the kitchen, after using the short-cut through the Pringles', there she was in the hall." He held his hand over his eyes as though to shut out the memory of the next few moments.

"And then?" prompted Garrison.

"And then," his hand dropped to his lap, "she was struggling to get up and the knife was on the floor beside her. There was so much blood! She tried to say something but all she could do was gasp. I caught her in my arms and in a moment she was dead. The blood got on my knee as I lowered her to the rug." His face contorted. "Then—heaven help me!—I could think only of myself. I did the damage to the desk and the cupboard. I flushed the capsules down the toilet. I took the knife to the cafeteria and then did the most unforgivable. I exchanged suits

while Julien was busy operating!"

He had not cried for Ilse but there were tears in his eyes now.

"I never meant him to be blamed. I swear it! I thought in this town he was like Caesar's wife! He is my best friend. I love him like a brother!"

The chief was intent. "Tell me exactly how you killed her."

He answered, "I know you won't believe me, but that's what I've been trying to tell you. I didn't kill her. She had been stabbed by someone before I returned home from the hospital."

A buzzer on Garrison's desk sounded. His hand touched the intercom. "Send it in," he said.

The uniformed man who had taken away the coat and the label handed the chief a slip of paper. After carefully reading it, he looked up at Stefan.

"Well, Doctor," he said, "you were right about the labels. The sizes vary slightly and the stitch marks show in which coat each belongs. Besides that, I believe you did not kill your wife."

He was baiting him again. Shock treatment to make him do what he had just done—tear his alibi to shreds—and now an about-face to soften him up for the confession. It was too late to pull back now. Stefan straightened his shoulders and braced himself for the worst.

The chief continued, "This preliminary report from the lab shows the coat you say belongs to Dr. Guttman has AB negative blood on the front of it. There has been some attempt to remove it but there was still enough left in the fabric. Now!" His manner became brisk again. "We'll have the tailor look at the suits. After that, with your story plus this," he indicated the Pringles' statement to Stefan, "we should have the evidence we need to charge Dr. Guttman with the murder of your wife!"

Stefan held the sheet of paper before him. It was not Stefan the Pringles identified as using the shortcut through their backyard between seven and nine on many weekday mornings—it was Dr. Julien Guttman!

A skinny pigeon, in retrospect, cannot be expected to characterize a sitting duck for a protracted length of time.

THE SITTING DUCK

By Carroll Mayers

WHEN Howie Link didn't show that Friday afternoon for our regular weekly poker conclave, the rest of us were disappointed. Howie was our favorite pigeon. It wasn't that he'd missed class when the brains were distributed. Howie was smart enough, and even owned his own cab which he'd painted magenta "to catch the eye." Every so often, though, he would come up with a mental lapse that made you wonder, such as a couple of days ago when he unwittingly accepted a phony ten-spot from a sharpie passenger.

That Friday night, while slicking up for my date, my mood wasn't exactly euphoric. When I

was interrupted by a knock on my door, I opened it irritably. "Yes?"

Howie stood in the hall, blinking at me. A skinny little guy with big ears and sad brown eyes, he managed a small smile. "Hi, Gil."

Not too graciously, I motioned him inside. "We missed you this afternoon. Where were you?"

"I couldn't make it. Something came up and I didn't know what to do." Sitting on the edge of the sofa, Howie blinked again. "Gil, I still don't know."

I frowned, checked my watch. I had less than thirty minutes, had yet to shave. "What happened?"

"It was about one o'clock," Howie said. "These two characters came out of a delicatessen on Third, flagged me down. They looked clean-cut; hard-eyed, maybe, but dressed real sharp. That was what bugged me right off—prosperous-looking guys toting a bag of groceries, and giving me the address of a crummy rooming house down by the river."

"Get to the point."

"I am," Howie said soberly. "The meter tab was two-ninety. But I misread it as two-ten. The guy who paid me off gave me a fifty cent tip—which still left me thirty cents short."

It figured; misreading the meter was characteristic of Howie. "And?"

He made a vague gesture. "It wasn't much, but I had it coming and I decided to collect. The two guys had already gone into the building, but I followed them, spotted them climbing the stairs. They went in a room on the second floor front."

Howie paused, eyeing me. "When I knocked on the door," he

went on, "somebody called out, wanted to know who it was. I said I was the cabby they'd just left, that I'd made a mistake and they still owed me thirty cents. The guy swore, called out that I'd been paid what I'd asked, plus a half-dollar, and told me to beat it.

"By now, I wasn't leaving until I'd collected. I knocked harder and told them just that. Then the door was yanked open and one of the men jabbed me in the chest, told me to get lost. I didn't

want trouble but I was fired up. I jabbed back at the guy and half stumbled across the threshold, but I didn't actually get into the room. In the next second the guy knocked me back into the hall and slammed the door."

Howie stopped again, wet his lips. "It all happened so fast, Gil, that I got only a glimpse inside that room. But there was another man besides the pair I'd picked up —and he looked like Ziggy Erdmann."

My scalp prickled. Citizen Erdmann was a pugnacious character wanted by the collective constabulary of a dozen states; a conscienceless heister-killer whose latest exploit had been the slaying of a clerk in a loan company holdup right here in town only a week ago.

Erdmann had escaped and, despite prompt roadblocks and thorough checkouts at all departure terminals, was believed to have fled the city.

Yet if Howie was correct, Erdmann had not attempted to break through the blockade. Rather, along with some associates, he'd shrewdly holed up a few dozen blocks from the crime site, waiting for the heat of the search to abate.

I regarded Howie sharply. "You're sure?"

He shook his head. "That's just it, I'm not. But if it *was* Erdmann . . ."

Howie's words trailed off and I could appreciate his uncertainty. For all the inherent oddity, there could be a legitimate reason for a couple of prosperous-looking characters toting a bag of comestibles to a dingy address, in which case their harassment by a brigade of boys in blue could result in a lawsuit.

Conversely, if gunman Erdmann *was* hiding out with a duo of pals and their attempted apprehension by the police proved unsuccessful to the extent that one or more of them eluded capture, subsequent retaliation against the party or parties initiating said police action could well take the form of a dose of lead poisoning or similar shuddery demise.

"You see, Gil?" Howie resumed, sensing my comprehension. "What should we do?"

So already it was *we*. I might have chided him on my speedy involvement, but I was concentrating on a more intriguing aspect regarding Ziggy Erdmann: the press, radio and TV had publicized a five thousand dollar reward for information leading to the gunman's arrest and conviction. That called for careful consideration, indeed.

"I'm not sure," I told Howie. "I

want to sleep on it. We'll talk some more tomorrow morning. Until then, don't say a word to anyone else."

"But—"

"If it was Erdmann, they're likely planning no immediate skip, what with those fresh groceries. We'll think of something."

Howie's original uncertainty persisted, but he left a couple of minutes later, assuring me he'd be back bright and early the next a.m.

My evening's diversion was pleasant enough and I was drowsy when I finally hit the sack at two, but I fought off sleep. I had some hard thinking to do to resolve the problem of Ziggy Erdmann one way or another. It was three-thirty before I came up with anything. Even then I knew my decision was no stroke of genius, but I figured it should do.

Howie did show up bright and early; at least he was early: eight-fifteen. I was dressed and ready for him, with a good newspaper photo of Erdmann.

"You've got your cab?"

He nodded, animation sparking those sad brown eyes. "Think of something?"

"Yes," I said. "Tipping the cops could be unhealthy for us if anything goes wrong afterward and Erdmann and his pals learn who blew the whistle. But for that five thousand reward, I think it's a chance we should take."

"You mean, we just phone the police?"

"Not right away. First, we should make sure it *is* Erdmann."

Howie wrinkled his brow. "But how, Gil? If it is, he's not coming out of that room for identification. And they sure won't let anybody in."

"Fire will get Erdmann—or whoever—out in a hurry."

He goggled at me. "We set fire to the building?"

"Not really. At first, I thought we might dig up a couple of smudge pots, but they'd be obvious if spotted, and could make our men suspicious if it is Erdmann and trigger their lamming before we could tip the cops.

"The simplest way," I concluded, "is to make a commotion on that second floor and yell, 'Fire!' When the men in that room clear out and hit the street, it'll be easy enough to make a positive identification."

Howie remained dubious. "But if it is Erdmann and company, won't they still be suspicious when they realize there's no blaze?"

"Perhaps," I agreed. "On the other hand, they may figure it for some kids caper. Either way, we'll have to chance it. The main thing is, they'll come out."

Howie considered my ploy; then his eyes shone again as he resolved his doubts. "I could do the yelling while you're watching across the street," he suggested.

"Nuh-uh. It would be a long shot, but one of them just might be out in the hall as you came up, and recognize you from yesterday. I'll do it all. You stay in your cab."

Howie didn't relish a secondary role, but he could appreciate it was best to play the percentages. "All right," he yielded. "Only if it is Erdmann, let me phone the cops, huh?"

"Sure," I said. "Now let's get started."

In retrospect, I still think my gambit was logical. Not brilliant, granted, but sound. I took care not to have Howie park in the street before the rooming house but to stop around the corner, out of sight. I didn't enter the building from the front but from the rear, climbing an alley fence to reach a back door. I even tiptoed up the stairs to the second floor.

As I say, all sound and cautious. Only one thing went amiss. Just as I poised to sneak down the hall, beat a frenzied rat-tat-tat on the portal in question and vocalize convincingly, a hard circlet iced the nape of my neck and a thin voice said softly, "Relax, chum. Straight ahead. And no tricks, see?"

My heart tilted, the chill in my neck streaking down my spine. Obviously, I'd been awaited. I didn't comprehend how or why, but as the gunsel who'd duplicated my soft-shoe act in spades nudged me into the room ahead of us, I ceased further pondering on that score. I had plenty else to consider, mainly the accuracy of Howie's original flash identification. Ziggy Erdmann, indeed, was one of the three men in the room. The other two were a chunky, balding character, my host via artillery, and a thin, big-nosed hood.

Erdmann was a wiry individual, lean-featured, with a brooding gaze. He manufactured a humorless smile as Baldy shoved me into his presence, came to the point without ceremony.

"Where's your cabby friend?"

"Who?"

Erdmann closed his eyes briefly. "Don't stall, buster. We're not sure yet what your game is, but you're not playing it alone. We spotted that bilious hack go by; ten to one there's not another like it in the city."

Great. I'd had Howie park around the corner, but I'd stupidly overlooked the fact that a mere happenstance glimpse of his magenta monstrosity by either Big Nose or Baldy might trigger their

memories—and suspicions. True, Howie could have been in the vicinity on a routine hacking trip, but when they'd recalled yesterday's confrontation . . .

Alerted, then, they had surprised me.

My heart was banging a bass drum solo on my rib cage but I still tried to dissemble. "I don't know what you're talking about," I protested.

Erdmann wasn't listening. "Find him," he instructed the big-nosed gunman. "He'll be in the neighborhood, likely in that cab." The mirthless smile came back. "Invite him up here too."

The hood quirked his lips as he exposed a .38 automatic briefly. "He'll be glad to come," he promised.

My solo crescendoed. Being on the spot myself was bad enough without Howie being dragged in also, but there wasn't a blasted thing I could do.

Big Nose's invitation took less than ten minutes. Howie's skinny shoulders were shaking, his brown eyes more mournful than ever as the gunman prodded him into the room. He shot me one worried glance, then stood silent, mouth working.

I tried to reassure him. "Easy," I murmured. "It'll be all right."

Howie didn't answer. Big Nose turned to Erdmann with an elaborate gesture. "Just like you figured, Ziggy. Right around the corner, waiting in that weirdo hack like a sitting duck."

Erdmann indicated he now understood the situation. "Make sure it was me, somehow, then tip the fuzz, stand by for the action, eh?" he summed up.

I didn't bother replying; my thoughts were churning faster than a go-go gal's hips—and covering just as much ground.

"So maybe you'll get a little action," Erdmann continued. "Tonight, we're getting out of here, taking you two with us. We get clear, with no trouble, maybe we'll let you go. Any foul-up, you get it first."

What do you say to a lovely pronouncement like that?

Erdmann swung back to Big Nose. "That cab standing idle all day could look odd, maybe start the law snooping around. Take the runt's cap and jacket, jockey it across town and ditch it. Then pick up a powerful heap for tonight, stash it out back in the alley. And on the way back, grab some more beer and sandwiches at that delicatessen. It won't hurt to stock up a little."

Howie didn't favor relinquishing his hacking habiliments. He'd been standing mute, hands fum-

bling, dry-washing; now he balled his fists, jammed them into his jacket pockets, clamped elbows tight.

It was a futile protest. Big Nose merely grinned, flipped one palm in a stinging slap and Howie's fire died.

My mind was still chaotic. Howie didn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, wringing wet, and while I topped that by sixty or so, my muscle texture could be described by only one word: flabby. A physical assault on Erdmann and Baldy, backed as they were with lethal hardware, was definitely out.

So what was in? Without some unforeseen break, the future appeared nil.

Once the evening's activities had been charted, Erdmann and Baldy ignored us. Plunking us down in a couple of chairs across the room, Baldy watched in stolid silence while Erdmann idly absorbed the educational facets of a girlie magazine.

Tempus fugited. Howie kept biting his lips, alternately staring at the floor and at me. I did just about the same. Neither of us spoke; under the circumstances, there didn't seem to be much worth broaching.

Finally Big Nose returned, minus Howie's jacket and cap but with a bulging brown paper sack.

"Pick up a car okay?" Erdmann asked as he lifted a bottle of beer from the bag.

"Nice new one," the gunman said.

Erdmann grunted, looked across at Howie and me. "Keep praying," he suggested. "If we make it, maybe you will too." He grinned, repeated, "Maybe."

There was no answer for that, either. Howie and I merely traded looks. Erdmann and his two gunsels went back to the bag, munching and swigging away.

Then, out of the blue, the day's dire dilemma abruptly coalesced into one pulsating moment—a moment when a sharp knock sounded on the door and an authoritative voice boomed, "Open up. Police."

Erdmann swore, whipped out his gun. Baldy and Big Nose did likewise. Even as he moved, features contorting, Erdmann gestured savagely at Howie and me, cautioning silence.

Under the menacing sweep of the roscoe, I was only too happy to comply. Howie wasn't, and elected to speak; only one word, but it was aptly chosen.

"Help!" he yelled.

Ensuing seconds can best be summarized as pure pandemonium. Following his outcry,

Howie dived to the floor, beating me by a pulse beat, while Erdmann and company milled about. Shots reverberated. The door splintered, banged in. Shouts, thudding feet, more shots, the reek of cordite . . .

Then the room was filled, gloriously jammed, with stalwart citizens in blue uniforms and Erdmann and his two associates, although snarling defiance, were manacled and marched away and it was all over.

Realization that the whole mad caper was, indeed, concluded took me a minute or two. It was then that I latched onto a question being put to Howie by a stocky lieutenant-in-charge.

"You planted that phony bill?"

Howie managed a weak smile. "Well—sort of. I just hoped that hood would use it, that maybe the clerk at the delicatessen would spot it."

"He did," the lieutenant nodded, "only it wasn't a clerk, it was the manager. He'd already been wondering about a hard-looking pair buying a stock of groceries every day or so. When one of them came back again today and passed him a bogus bill, he really got his wind up. He hailed a taxi and tailed the guy here, then phoned us."

"Whoa," I cut in, eyeing Howie closely as a bit of sense seeped through. "You mean, you still had that phony ten-spot somebody palmed off on you for cab fare?"

"Yes," Howie told me. "When I realized what that hood was going to do, I fumbled some, managed to crumple up that bill in my jacket pocket. I had to try something."

So that was how it turned out that gunman Ziggy Erdmann was the real sitting duck, tripped up by a skinny little pigeon named Howie Link.

I understand the five-G reward will be coming through next week, and after that sharp-eyed delicatessen manager deservedly takes a cut, I expect I'll have plenty of "friends" to help me spend my share; Howie too. I hope, though, Howie hangs onto some for his own personal use. Maybe I can persuade him to repaint that crazy cab.

Wasn't it Neitzsche who said, "You can scarcely ever fathom their (women's) depths—they haven't any."

POINT-OF-AIM

by Edward G. Breese

"DOWN, BOY," I said when the night man put the big thick steak on the white enameled counter in front of me. "I didn't order that."

He was a young fellow with a nice smile and sweat from the heat of the grill on his face. "Eat it," he said. "It comes from heaven."

"It will have to go back," I told him. "There's only sixty-three cents in my pocket."

He jerked his thumb down the counter. "She sent it. It's all paid for. Eat in good health."

She was the blonde at the end of the counter. As I looked she came over to the seat next to mine. Her hair was too blonde and her v-neck blouse was cut too low. Her Mexican silver earrings dangled Aztec masks and were two inches long. The pancake makeup just about hid the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. The bust and shoulders were still good—very good.

She suited the place, which was Benny's all night restaurant in the tenderloin, and the hour, which was four a.m. She suited fine except for something which didn't fit—and which I couldn't put my finger on.

"Honey," I said, "there just *must* be some mistake."

"No mistake, Johnny." Her voice was low and throaty and a lot more expensive than her clothes, if you follow me. It was somehow familiar. "Go on and eat, and take the question out of your eyes. I'll tell you who I am."

I cut a big piece of steak, but when I tasted it I almost gagged. It was the first real solid food in days. The juice was almost too rich for my body. "I know you," I said. "From somewhere, I know you."

"Not from some*where,* Johnny Howcker, from some*when*. From back when they first called you Johnny Hawk."

I said, "From high school, twenty long years gone?"

"The third seat behind you in algebra, senior year; two dances with you at the Junior Prom. You never carried my books, but I wished you would. I had brown hair then, and freckles. Lots of freckles, and I wore sweaters and skirts. Do you remember at all?"

At first I didn't. It was a long time, and there had been so many girls, then and since. Besides, I'd seen this one somewhere else and not long ago. I put some ketchup on the french fries, and then it was the tone of her voice that cued me at last. *That* hadn't changed.

"Cathy," I said. "That's it. Your first name is Cathy."

"That's it, indeed." Bitterly she said it. "'I'll never forget old Cathy what's-er-name.' I never forgot you either, Johnny Hawk."

I had some second thoughts. "Is this a class reunion?" I asked.

"Go on and eat, and I'll tell you. No, it's not just a reunion though it might have been. Right now I need you, Johnny. I need you bad. Maybe I should say I need something from you. Oh don't worry, I can pay for what I want. Pay better than you could ever imagine, and in cash. Nothing for nothing, Johnny Hawk."

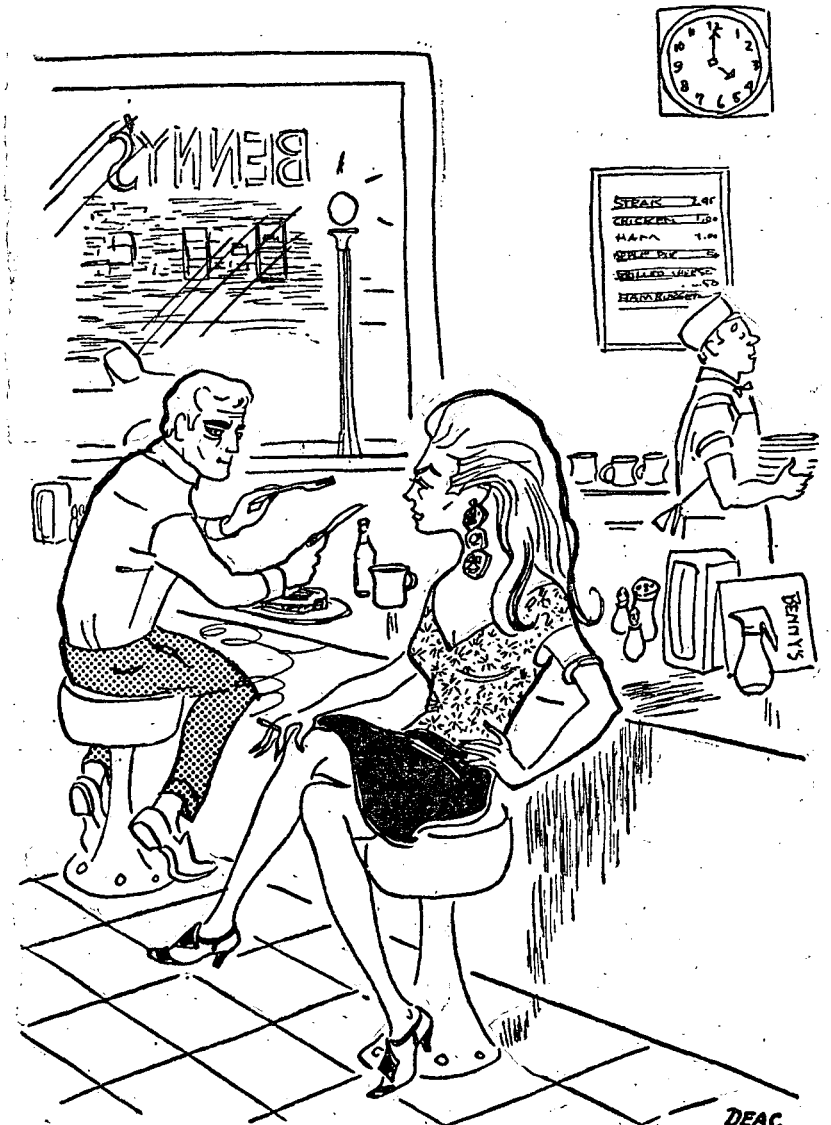
Nothing for nothing. That should have been painted over the door and behind the counter at Benny's, the all night restaurant in the middle of the strip. White tables and tile floor and glaring neon, and the food was good.

I did some more thinking. "Cathy Mills," I said. "Cathy, the cop's daughter. I've got it now."

"Bingo! You finally got it." Her voice was flat for a change.

I thought, *what happened?* This was one of the nice ones, one of the girls your mother could meet. Little Cathy Mills, clean-cut and honest, freckle-faced and *nice*. Of course she knew what I was thinking.

"What happened, Johnny? You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want to know what happened? Well, I'll tell you—all you need to know anyway—but not here. Later, at my place. I've got an apartment, two flights up, over the Happy Hour Bar."

I knew then where I'd seen her lately. Not her, exactly, but her picture on a poster outside the Happy Hour, wearing a fistful of spangles and a fan.

She spotted that too. "Sure, that's me. I entertain. I dance. How do you like that, Johnny? Would you like to see me dance? Would you now, Johnny?"

"No," I said, "I would not."

"I'm glad, Johnny. Honestly I'm glad; though I'd need you anyway right now."

After I finished the steak and a piece of pie we walked through the dark streets to her place and climbed the age-rotten musty steps in the old building. The apartment was clean and cheerful. She'd decorated it with pictures, including a couple of half-good new oils. The kitchenette was spotless. From the front window I could see through a break in the high buildings to the river front.

The big bedroom was mostly bed, a big double job with a neon pink spread and lots of little throw cushions piled up. I knew that sort of bed. She didn't try to bluff me.

"It's big enough for two. You can stay here for a while, Johnny. Plenty of others have."

"Your half will be all yours," I said.

"From one old friend to another? I always did like you."

Cathy fixed me a drink and we sat on the couch in the front room. Outside the windows the black sky was beginning to grey a little. Down in the alley a tomcat squalled frustration at the dawn.

"You never did come back here after college," she said, "so you haven't kept up with things here."

She was right. After I'd drunk myself out of the athletic scholarship at State I'd just kept drifting from one job to another. Later it was from one activity for another. Except for the spell in the army, it had gotten rougher and rougher. Sometimes I came back for a visit, but after the folks died I'd stopped even that. It was pure accident I was in town now. Frankly, I was on the run and just passing through. I hadn't kept up with any of the old gang because I hadn't any news that I wanted them to hear. All my possessions were in the single battered bag standing over against the wall. Cathy wasn't the only one who had changed.

"I'm not even sure I know why I recognized you tonight," she said.

"Maybe I'd rather not know. Anyway I did, and seeing you made up my mind about something I've got to do. If you'll help, it's possible. I'll fill you in. You know my father was a police lieutenant and slated to be captain. After you left town he was brought up on charges of bribery and fired. Pete Mills, the honest cop, was tossed out like a bum. When he couldn't clear himself, it broke his heart. He shot himself with his own gun. He was framed."

"They always are," I said. "Not one man in stir is guilty."

"You're wrong, Johnny. Dead wrong. I know my pop. I know he never took a bribe. I even know who framed him and why, but I couldn't prove it then and I can't now. It broke Mom's heart too. She just faded away within a year after we buried Pop. Then I just fell apart. That's it, Johnny. I just fell apart. You know Pop had me taking college prep courses instead of business. I couldn't do anything useful, had no relatives to go to. I didn't care. I took a waitress job and started to drink and run around. What else was there to do? I was married for a year. His name was Harry and he was killed in Korea in the big retreat. I have a kid—a daughter, Cathy junior—but I don't keep her here. She's with foster parents and I send money. Lately I don't want her to see me."

I reached over and took her hand. She held onto mine like a child.

"I've got to do something for the kid, Johnny. And I've got to do something about the man who framed Pop. If you help me, I can do both at once. Everything's just right for it now. It's the one-in-a-million chance I've waited for. There'll be plenty in it for you too. This can be your big strike. Believe me, it can."

"Tell me more," I said.

"You don't know the local news," she said. "Big Herman Schmidt was killed a couple of months ago. Some out-of-town bum broke in and killed him in his own house; the Big Man himself, knocked over by some two-bit punk. That took the cover off the man I want—Police Captain big Charley—Charley Greco, the man who framed Pop to save his own neck and clear the way for promotion. Maybe to get him out of Herman's way too, I don't know. All I know is, Greco's my man and all these years Herman protected him. Now he hasn't got protection. The honest cops are closing in on him. He's scared and he's wide open, and it's now or never for you and me, Johnny."

"You want to kill him. Okay," I

told her, "that I can see. But where's the money in it? You talked about a big strike."

"Don't be a fool, Johnny. Greco's been grafting and stealing all these years. Where do you think his money is?"

"In property in his wife's name, if he's smart," I guessed.

"Wrong. Wrong, Johnny. Charley's wife hates him. She doesn't trust him and he doesn't trust her, a real love match. She has some of it, sure, but not much. Besides, property can be traced, and Charley knows they're breathing down his neck. He must know. He'll be cashing everything, and he'll have it with him. He must be just about ready to blow the country. Now's the time, Johnny. *Now,* before somebody else thinks of it."

"So," I said, "we kill him and take the loot. I can buy that."

"No," Cathy said bitterly, "we don't kill him. That's too easy for Charley Greco. We rob him, and he can't even squawk. It's all stolen money. He can't admit he ever had it, let alone that we took it. Without it he's dead. He can't run, and he can't buy his way out. The big lawyers want big money. When they blow the whistle on Charley, he's had it. That's what I want. I want him in a corner like Pop was, only worse. I want Charley Greco to cry his guts out. I want him to pick up *his* gun like Pop did. So there'll be no killing."

I didn't like that part. I could think of a couple of things Cathy'd forgotten, but I decided to go along. The thing was too good to let drop.

It was almost dawn when we got into the big bed. I kept my word and let her have her half. After sleeping the clock around I awoke to find steak and eggs on the stove, and coffee strong enough to stand the spoon in. While we ate, she filled me in on the way she had it planned. It was simple enough.

"Charley always did drink a lot," Cathy said. "Since Herman got his, he's really been pouring it down. Trying to keep from being scared, I guess. Anyhow he came in the Happy Hour one night when I was dancing, and liked what he saw. At first, he was content to watch, and then he began to want a lot more. He keeps coming back for the show. That's all he's had so far, a chance to watch me dance."

I looked at Cathy and I hated to think of her doing that dance. With her makeup off she was a handsome woman. It wasn't little Cathy Mills anymore, of course. The freckle-faced kid was as dead as her pop. This was a woman with a woman's body. In spite of

everything, her eyes were clean, and that husky voice made things come alive inside me. I began to hate Captain Greco a little on my own account.

"Next time he comes in," she went on, "I'll let him proposition me again; only this time I go for it. I'll tell him he can't come up here—that I go steady with the boss and he'd beat me for it—but I'll go out to *his* place with him. He's got a house out on the edge of town, and his wife has been in Florida all winter. He'll go for it. As soon as it's set, I'll run up here and tip you. You take my old jalopy and drive out there and wait. When we show up, you and I take him inside. Of course he won't want to show us where the money is."

"I'll persuade him," I said. "That will be a real pleasure."

"Okay, we persuade him. Then we tie him up so he can work loose after a while. I'll have a bag packed and in the car so we can blow town right from there. We don't come back here at all. We split the money three ways. One for you, one for me, and one so that kid of mine does get to college. After all, the idea is mine and I don't want her ever dancing like me." She looked at me questioningly.

I had thought fifty-fifty, but I said, "For the sake of the old-time Cathy, the old-time Johnny will stand still for that split."

She reached over and kissed me. Her eyes were moist.

"You'd better watch that," I said. "That could get to be habit forming."

She didn't look as if she'd mind too much if it did.

It turned out that we had four days to wait before our chance came, but we had plenty to do to fill up the time. For one thing, I had to familiarize myself with routes and driving conditions in the city. Timing might be important, and a lot had changed since I'd lived here.

Too, I had to case the setup at Greco's home. I didn't try to get in, of course, but I did cruise the whole area thoroughly. He had a new house in the $40,000 class sitting almost by itself on a hill outside of the town. From the looks of the fencing he owned three or four acres, most of it covered with second growth elm and scrub oak. The drive, which was about three hundred yards long, made one long curve down a rather steep hill and connected directly with the main four-lane highway leading north and west. The highway was heavily travelled. Almost directly across from the Greco house a two-lane blacktop road twisted

through heavy brush, up a smaller hill, and connected with another road of the same sort which led back to town. There were houses like Greco's scattered on both sides of the highway, but none of them close enough that their owners would notice anything unusual at his place. Not even a scream would be heard, and a shot would only be a pop like a car exhaust. Even late at night there was enough trucking and fast through-traffic on the road to muffle most sounds. From where I sat the whole thing was just about perfect.

I took Cathy's old car to a mechanic and had it given a complete tune-up and a set of new, but medium priced, tires.

Cathy packed a bag with the things she wanted to take and put it with my bag in the trunk of the car. She was leaving most of her stuff. "A new life," she said, "deserves new clothes, and for once I'll be able to afford them."

I would have preferred a new car. I knew the old one was registered in Cathy's name and might be traced, but we just didn't have the cash for a new one. I figured it was all right though. The town of Pleasantfield was only about a six-hour drive on the route we were taking. We could abandon the old car there and pick up a new and better one—using Charley's money, of course. Pleasantfield is a highway junction and nobody would know which of six alternate routes we took out of there. Besides, I had ideas of my own about Greco's following. I didn't talk about them to Cathy.

We did have plenty of time to talk, of course. I didn't want to be recognized, so I stayed in Cathy's apartment most of the time. She worked from nine in the evening till around three a.m. The rest of the time we were together.

"It was sheer luck I recognized you the other night," she said one afternoon. "The idea for this caper has been in my mind ever since Herman was shot, but I knew I couldn't do it alone. I had to have a man to handle Charley. Just any man wouldn't do, either. I didn't know anybody I could trust in town here—just small-time punks or people already scared to death of Greco. Then I saw you sitting there, an answer to prayer."

"What I don't get," I said, "is why you decided all of a sudden that you could trust me. Most people who know me would say you'd lost your marbles."

She laughed. "Oh, I'd heard of you from time to time. The word gets around our sort of people. Besides, I knew you, so I remembered what I heard. It was all

what I wanted—soldier of fortune, smuggler, strong-arm, gambler, but no record of dope. Hard, but not dirty. It fitted with the Johnny Hawk I knew. Then when I saw you order just pie and, I knew you needed money. It wasn't hard to decide to sound you out. Was I wrong?"

For answer I pulled her to me and kissed her. She responded eagerly.

Again, in the evening before she went down to do the early show, she wanted to talk seriously. "I guess you've been wondering about me, Johnny."

"I have," I said, "but we don't need to talk. I like you as you are and no questions."

"That's nice of you." Her face was tender. "That's you, Johnny, but I've asked myself a lot of questions all these years. How did I really get here?"

I put an arm around her. "You told me. I don't blame you. How did I get here myself?"

She ignored that. "No, Johnny, it's not that easy. What happened made a good excuse for me to give myself, but I don't think I believe it any more. Other girls have been in worse spots and not ended up in the Happy Hour. Why did I go to pieces instead of hanging on to what the folks had taught me? Why?"

"You were young then," I said. "No younger than the other waitress on that first job, Johnny. She went to night school and got to be a secretary. Now she has three kids and a good husband and a nice home."

"You have me," I said with a trace of bitterness.

"Stop it. That's not what I meant. I guess I didn't have what it takes, Johnny. Whatever it was, I just didn't have it. I only had enough not to go quite all the way down."

I told her, "It doesn't matter now."

"Oh, yes, it does. Now, maybe I can start back up. I'm Pete Mills' daughter, and there are some things I couldn't do. I can't kill Charley Greco. Pete Mills' daughter couldn't stand murder. You see, Johnny."

"I see."

"When we get this over with, I've got to start back up again. I just hope it isn't too late. This hit can make it possible for us. Can't it, Johnny?"

I'd been doing some thinking on my own. "One thing, honey, there may not be any money. He may not have it there. If that's so, you and I have got to start back up anyway. We'd better make up our minds to that. Win or lose, this is our chance. Maybe our last

chance, so let's make it good."

She sat for a long while before answering, then, "I'm kind of glad you see it that way, Johnny. That's the way it's got to be."

It was the fourth night after she'd spotted me that Cathy ran upstairs with the news. It was only 9:30, just before the first show at the Happy Hour. "He's here, Johnny, and he's drunk already. Honey, this is it! I told him I'd go with him right after this show. That gives you time to get out there and get set. I'll tell the boss I feel sick, and then after the show say I'm too sick to work the rest of the night. I've done it before. When Greco parks at his place, I'll keep his attention."

I looked at her body under the spangles and her heavy makeup. "I'll bet you will." I pulled her to me for a hard kiss. "Don't worry, honey. I'll be there."

When she ran back down the stairs I took my gun out of the dresser drawer. It was a dull black .38 special with a four-inch barrel. When I use a gun, I want to know I can hit point-of-aim.

I placed the gun in a spring holster under my left arm, then went downstairs and got Cathy's car out of the parking lot. I drove out to Greco's place, but I didn't hurry. The last thing I needed that night was a traffic ticket.

When I got out there, I turned into the blacktop across the highway from Charley's and parked the car in a clump of bushes a couple of hundred yards back, on hard ground and hidden from passing traffic. I left the key in the ignition so Cathy could use the car even if I wasn't with her, in case Greco was tougher than I had any reason to believe. Then I walked back across the highway and up his drive. The house was dark, not even an outside light burning.

From now on every single move I made was thought out in advance. I had all my gear in an ordinary canvas flight bag. There was a pry bar, screwdriver, and a piece of flat plastic in case we had to force the lock (if Greco fought and was killed). There was a flashlight and a pair of wire-cutting pliers and a coil of new cotton clothesline. I wanted it new and stiff so it couldn't be tied too tight and he could twist himself loose after we left. There was an extra box of .38s, and a dress and pair of old shoes for Cathy to change into (she'd still be in costume and wrapper, of course). I crouched in the bushes near the door and waited.

Right on schedule I saw Greco's big, white convertible coming on the lighted highway. I heard it too. He was an aggressive driver. The

car was souped up so it roared, and he drove like a fool, or a drunk, cutting in and out of traffic. The car swung up the drive to the graveled circle at the top and slammed to a stop in a spray of pebbles. He must have really tromped his brake. I grinned in the dark.

Cathy was beside him on the front seat. When he stopped, she leaned over and kissed him while I came up behind and put the muzzle of the .38 to the back of his neck. He was so drunk and steamed up he didn't even feel it for a minute. When he did, the shock half sobered him. Cathy took his own gun out of the belt holster and we all went inside.

Greco was white as a sheet. He'd killed plenty of men in gun "battles" when he was The Law and the odds were all on his side. This was different. This called for a brand of guts his kind of killer just doesn't own. He went along like a lamb.

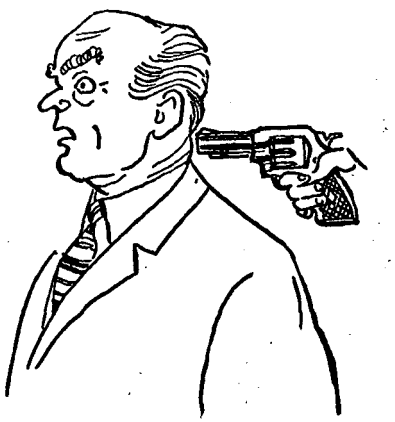
We took the clothesline and tied him bolt upright in one of the heavy dining room chairs. He tried to talk but only stuttered at first. I slapped him, hard.

"You know who I am?" he finally managed.

"Sure, you're Charley Greco. A killer, the big law, all those things. You're a bum tied to a chair."

"Whatta you want? You'll never get away with a trick like this—"

I hit him again, not too hard. "Shut up, Greco. We want the loot you've piled up for a getaway. We want all of it. And when you give it to us, we're going out of here quiet and easy. You won't put the law on us because you can't. Remember how you got the loot, Charley. You can't admit you ever had it. Herman's dead now, you bum. Your cover's gone, and the honest law is after you, not us."



I stopped while he thought it over. "I don't have much," he whined. "My wife has most of it in non-negotiable bonds. You know what those are? I never kept much anyway. The horses—"

"When I want fairy tales," I said, "I'll go see a Disney picture. Is it buried or in a wall safe?"

He said, "Buried," but his eyes

gave him away. He sighed wearily.

I took out the pliers and showed them to him. Then I went around behind him where his hands were tied and applied the pliers to his left thumb. The big bum whimpered like a hurt animal.

"Now, Charley," I said, "you just think of the worst possible thing I could do to you with these pliers. I'm going to do it unless you tell us right now where the safe is, and what the combination is. I mean it."

He knew I meant it. He fell apart and told us.

When I opened the safe there were some paper-wrapped packets of bills, at least $100,000, and some legal papers, the traditional little black notebook, and what looked like an account book. I put everything in the canvas bag.

"Change your clothes now," I told Cathy. "I'm going to check his car for another gun." I slipped the flashlight and pliers in my pocket and went out.

Sure enough, there was a sawed off 12 gauge (just pistol grip and ten inches of barrel) held under the dash by clips where Greco could get at it. I took the shells out and threw them and the gun as far as I could into the brush. Then I got down and slipped under the car for a few seconds. I kept remembering things Cathy had forgotten, things I'd never overlook.

When I went inside Cathy was ready. Greco just sat there and whimpered. I guess he was adding up the price he'd paid for the loot we had in the flight bag. It was all he'd gotten out of cheating and killing and betraying his trust. It was his life. Now it was going to vanish like that other loot at the end of the rainbow. Charley was sick.

We put everything back in the bag. Both of us had worn cotton gloves in the house, so there weren't any prints. We were ready to go.

Charley's eyes were glazed. He knew what *had* to come next, and looked as if he'd almost welcome it.

"No, Captain," I said, "I'm not going to kill you. The lady doesn't want you dead. She knows you can't report this heist. She wants you alive when the D.A. catches up." It satisfied Cathy.

Greco closed his eyes to hide the cold murder rising there, but I knew he'd be after us as soon as his hands were free. That loot was his life.

Cathy said quietly, "Remember Pete Mills, Mr. Greco? This is a present from him." She couldn't keep it back any longer.

Greco jumped like she'd put a hot wire to him. I knew then that

he had definitely framed Pete.

We closed the door behind us, went down the drive and watched our chance to cross the highway. It was only about eleven o'clock and the traffic was still heavy with trucks, and people heading home. We crossed and went to Cathy's car.

Just as we turned into the bushes, light flared back at the Greco house as Charley burst out and left the door standing open. He'd twisted loose quicker than I thought.

The motor of the convertible roared, then Greco came around the circle in a spray of gravel and down to the highway, picking up speed. At the foot of the hill the car never even slowed, but shot right out into traffic. A hot little sports car took him broadside. The convertible swerved and went on its side right under the wheels of a big trailer truck coming up at sixty per. Charley was dead.

Cathy started shaking in my arms. "The fool," she said. "Why, oh why, didn't he brake?"

"Crazy mad, honey," I said. I knew better of course. Greco lived there. He knew the traffic. He'd stomped the brake at the last minute, like he always did, but this time he'd stomped it all the way down to the floor. That's what happens when a brake line has been cut and the fluid has drained out.

As we took the back road which would eventually connect with Route 16 to Pleasantfield, Cathy was very quiet, and back on the highway the convertible crisped in its own flaming gasoline.

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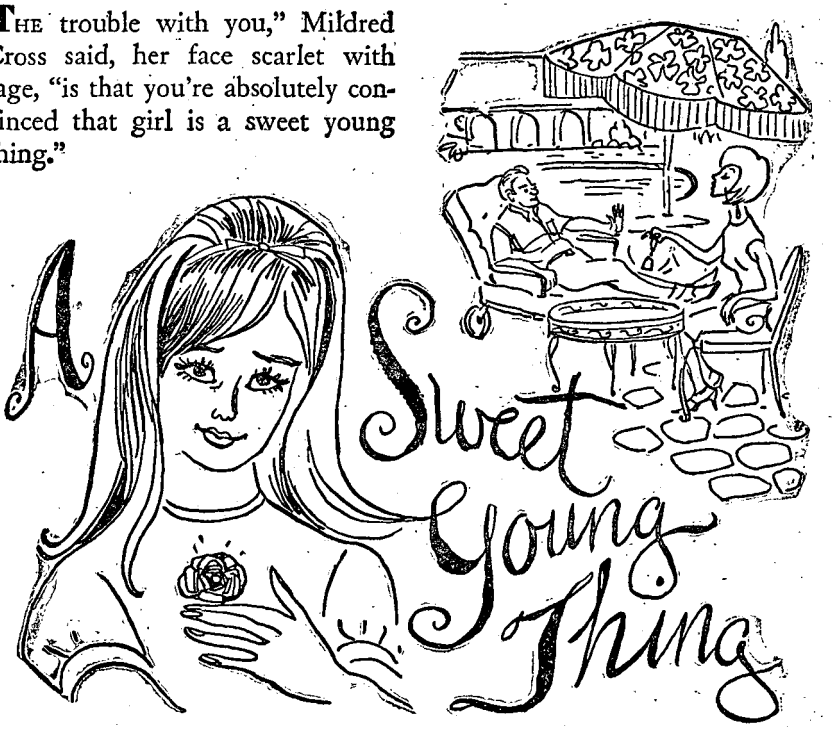
So delicate is the demarcation between intimacy and familiarity, that a transposition is often indistinguishable.

THE trouble with you," Mildred Cross said, her face scarlet with rage, "is that you're absolutely convinced that girl is a sweet young thing."



A Sweet Young Thing

"But she is," Ken retorted. "I can't understand your attitude, Mildred. I thought it was the understanding that when she came here we were to be like a mother and father to her, but that hasn't been the way it's worked out. She might just as well be a servant."

By Mary Linn Roby

Mildred laughed, scornfully. She was a tall, well-built woman with hair that had been bleached to a silvery white. Everything about her was immaculate, from the highly polished leather of her Italian sandals to the crisp white silk of her blouse.

"She wasn't a responsibility that I wanted to take on," she said sharply. "How do you think I felt when she just turned up here? I hadn't even seen her mother for fifteen years, not since June was a baby. We never were close, Frances and I. Not like real sisters."

"June is still your niece," Ken protested.

"What you mean is, she's my responsibility," Mildred snapped.

They were standing beside the oval swimming pool. The mid-afternoon sun was hot. Ken pulled his sweater over his head and sat down on one of the deck chairs.

"I'm thirsty," Mildred said, reaching for the bell on the table. Ken caught her hand.

"Don't ring for that poor kid," he said. "She's at your beck and call all day. If you want a maid, Mildred, why don't you hire someone? There's nothing to stop you."

She looked at him, her green eyes narrowed.

"It's not a question of money, is it, darling?" she said with acid sweetness. "My money. It will buy anything as far as you're concerned, won't it?"

Ken looked away. Why did she always have to bring her money into the discussion? After all, he had a good business and didn't ask her for anything. If she wanted to spend some of her small fortune on extras for the house, it was no concern of his. She had a maid before June came, but he noticed that it had not taken her more than a week to fire the girl. Then, gradually, June had taken over all the duties except those of the cook, and Mildred kept talking about what a good thing it was for young people to earn their way.

"She wants to go back to college in the fall," Ken said now. "What are you going to do about that?"

"She doesn't have a bean," Mildred reminded him, "and colleges cost money."

"You've got plenty of that."

Ken got out of the deck chair and stared down at her.

"Don't talk to me that way," Mildred flared. "That girl comes along with no more claim on me than the fact that she's my niece and just—just settles in. Now, don't interrupt me, Ken. I know that I told her mother that I'd be the girl's godmother, but I hadn't planned on anything like this. How did I know she was going to be an orphan? All right, so she's

here. I don't want her, but she's here. I ask her to help around the house, and she does. At least, I guess you'd call it help. She's a bit slovenly, in case you hadn't noticed, but she rearranges the dust."

Lighting a cigarette with quick, sharp movements, she continued, "And what's she getting in return? All this, that's all."

Mildred turned and pointed up at the house. It was set on a slight rise beyond the pool, with terraced lawns between. It was a showplace, and Ken hated it. He had paid for it himself, because Mildred had insisted this was where she wanted to live, but he knew that everyone in town imagined it must have been bought with her money.

"And now," Mildred said scornfully, "she wants to go back to college. Well, things aren't the same as they were when her parents were alive, and she'd better get that through her head pronto."

She went walking off across the lawn, a slim figure, beautiful—from a distance. In a few minutes Ken heard the car start and knew that, as always when she was angry, she was going to drive along the highway too fast, risking her life and that of everyone else. He closed his eyes and lay back, feeling the sun beating against him. Gradually, through the drowsiness which was engulfing him, he became aware that someone was standing nearby. He opened his eyes and saw June.

She was wearing a red bathing suit, too brief, but what all the young girls wore now. Where Mildred was angular, June was gently rounded. Her skin was tanned to the color of bronze. Her long black hair hung straight about her shoulders. She had a bathing cap in her hand.

"I hope," she said slowly, "that you and Aunt Mildred haven't been fighting over me."

Her voice was sweet, low, gentle, as unlike Mildred's as a voice could be. Sweet, that was the word that always came to his mind. She was very, very sweet.

"I know Aunt Mildred doesn't want me here," she was saying now. Her voice broke just a bit, and she turned to stare out over the pool.

"Don't be absurd," Ken told her. "We want you very much."

He was going to say something about the daughter they had never had, but suddenly the girl was in his arms, sobbing. He touched the soft black hair, gingerly at first, and then contentedly, as though she were a child—and that was what she was, a child. He held her tighter.

That was the beginning. His motives were flawless. He wanted to

make the girl feel at home, make her feel that they loved her. Of course it was perfectly clear that Mildred didn't love her, and that left only him; and June was so sweet, so affectionate.

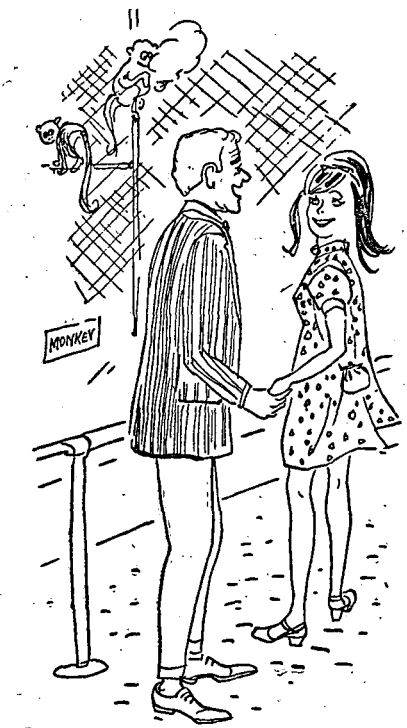
After that day by the swimming pool, Ken never touched June—not for weeks—but he planned little expeditions now and then, in the afternoons, places to go that he thought would amuse her.

Of course, he always asked Mildred to go along, too, and she just as consistently laughed at him. He knew it seemed silly, the places they went; the zoo, for one. He hadn't been there since he was twelve, and he had been afraid after they had started out that it would be dull. Instead, they spent four hours wandering from cage to cage, laughing uproariously at the monkeys, eating cotton candy. It was as though, suddenly, he was a boy again.

That was the way June treated him, sometimes; and sometimes he was the older man of whom she asked advice. Sometimes he was a father, and she would playfully run her long fingers through his hair.

She liked to touch him. When they walked, she wanted him to hold her hand. She was so very innocent; so very sweet.

Ken didn't know when it was, actually, that they abandoned places like the zoo, and began to go out evenings instead. June told him that she was nineteen and had never been inside a nightclub. She sounded so wistful, so he had taken her. He felt this sort of outing would be a little more difficult to explain to Mildred, so he made excuses; not lies. June pretended she had a boyfriend whom she met down in the village. Mildred was glad to have her out of the way and didn't ask awkward questions,



and it was easy for Ken to get out.

June met him at the corner of the road, and got into the car, laughing, her hair glistening in the moonlight. There was nothing wrong in what they were doing. It was so much fun to show her the nightlife of the city, so exciting to hear her low laughter, intriguing to hear her giggle when she was allowed to have a glass of champagne.

It was strange that all of this was not enough for Ken. He was restless. He wanted June to have more. That was why he took the pin.

It was Mildred's, technically. Actually it was his. He had bought it for Mildred ten years before but she had thrown it into her jewelry box and never worn it. It was not her sort of thing, she had said casually; but it was just right for June, a tiny blue diamond in the center of a rose fashioned out of gold.

June was delighted with the pin, and kissed him gravely on the cheek. It was odd how her attitude toward him had changed. She was not often the little girl any longer. Instead, there were flashes of the mature, understanding woman she could be. More and more often Ken found himself telling her about Mildred, how unhappy she made him, and June was a wonderful listener, sitting close beside him in the car on some deserted road. Sometimes it was very difficult to remember that she was a child.

Then the whole thing came to an end. Mildred appeared in his office one day, carrying a manila envelope. She told his secretary that she didn't want to be disturbed. *She* didn't want to be disturbed. It was humiliating, coming into his office, taking over.

"I don't know what's the matter with you," Ken told her, hanging onto the end of the desk to keep himself from grabbing her by the throat. "If this sort of thing ever happens again, I'll leave you. I swear it."

"You'll leave me on top of the biggest scandal this town has ever had," she said, thin-lipped.

She tore open the manila envelope and reports tumbled all over his desk, reports from a detective agency. Obviously Mildred had been having him and June followed right from the beginning, right from the zoo to the afternoon movies to the clubs to the deserted roads.

"And now she has the nerve to flaunt herself in front of me," Mildred shrilled, "wearing that pin; that diamond pin you gave me."

"What are you going to do?" Ken asked her, his face white.

"Divorce you," Mildred said through her teeth. "With lots of

publicity. You're going to lose me and the money as well. And she'll lose, too. She was my heir, I suppose, after you. I don't have any other relatives. She might have had everything I have one day. But not now! And, furthermore, the little witch is going to know about it tonight!"

She was screaming now. Ken took her by the shoulders and shook her until she stopped. As she went running through the outer office, he watched the clerks turn and stare after her. She had promised to make a scandal. As far as he was concerned, it was already made.

Ken stayed in the office until everyone had left. He stayed until well into the evening. There was a bottle of Scotch in his desk drawer, and he drank it and smoked one cigarette after another. Finally he decided he would go to Mildred, plead with her. It was bad enough for her to destroy his business, ruin his life, but she could not be allowed to spoil everything for June.

So he went home. It was nine o'clock when he opened the door. The clock in the hall was just striking the hour. There was a light in the library and Ken went there, forcing himself, one foot in front of the other, like a dazed men.

He found Mildred there—dead—on the floor. Her white-blond hair was spread out around her head almost as though it had been arranged. When he raised her head, he saw that the back of it had been beaten into a bloody pulp. The poker with which it had been done was on the floor beside her.

He called the police. Matt Haskell, in charge of homicide, came. Ken had known him ever since they were boys together, and he saw the odd look in Matt's eyes when he introduced him to June.

She had been in bed, and Ken had gotten her up only when Matt insisted. He had broken it to her gently, and she was crying quietly now, a childlike figure in a long white robe, her black hair streaming around her shoulders, her feet bare. Ken noticed the way Matt patted her arm and made her sit down in a corner, well away from the body.

It was easy to get the story out of her, what story there was. Matt sat opposite her in a chair, leaning forward, speaking gently as a father would to his daughter. She told him how she had heard Mildred come in and go into the library, obviously upset. She had knocked once to see if she could help, but Mildred had told her to go away. Later she had gone back to see if Mildred wanted anything to eat, and her aunt had said no.

"Are you sure it was your aunt's

voice you heard, June?" Matt said.

"Oh, yes." June's eyes were round, like blue spangles. "In fact she told me to come in. She was sitting right here. She . . ." The girl went white and put her hand to her head.

"That's all right, dear," Ken said. "Take your time."

"She'd been crying," June told him. "Her makeup was all smeared. She said she didn't want to be bothered for the rest of the evening, so I ate something, watched television for awhile, and then I went to bed."

"Are you certain that she didn't say anything else?" Matt probed gently.

June's eyes widened. "Of course, I'm sure," she told him. "What else should she have said?"

Ken thought it strange that Mildred had not told June that she was disinheriting her as she had threatened to do that afternoon in his office. Mildred usually did exactly what she said she would do. He supposed he should be grateful that this once she had not. Now June need never know about the hatred her aunt had felt for her.

"Do you know what your aunt might have been unhappy about?" Matt asked.

June stared at him and shook her head back. "Not that unhappy."

"Had you ever seen her cry before?"

"Oh, yes. When she and Uncle Kenneth—well, when they argued."

Ken stared at the girl incredulously. Uncle Kenneth! She had never called him that before. It had been Ken between them, right from the beginning.

"I think you ought to put off answering any more questions until tomorrow, June," he said. "You're obviously very upset."

Matt stared at him, his eyes cold. "You don't mind talking, do you, June?" he said.

"No. Not if I can be of help."

Matt smiled. "That's a good girl. You say that your aunt and uncle quarreled?"

"Yes."

She looked at Kenneth uncertainly, as though he should tell her what to do. He shook his head at her, but Matt saw him.

"I'd prefer it if you'd go out into the hall until I finish questioning Miss Gray," Matt said. "If you'll just go along with that officer."

"She should be informed of her rights!" Ken protested. "She has a right to get a lawyer."

"*She* doesn't need a lawyer," Matt said slowly.

Only later, when Ken was standing in the hall with a policeman on either side of him, did he realize exactly what Matt had said. He couldn't mean that! He couldn't suspect him of murdering Mildred.

He had been at the office. Someone must have seen him. Someone . . .

Ken was told to go back into the library. June was sobbing, and Matt was running his fingers across her hair. Ken knew how that felt. He remembered all too well how that felt.

Matt straightened when he saw Ken. "I'm sorry," he said, "but you're going to have to come down to headquarters with me."

"What's she been telling you?" Ken demanded. "I'm not responsible for this. I was at the office until a few minutes ago. June was the one who was alone here with Mildred. She—

"Don't try to involve this child," Matt said between his teeth. He was obviously an outraged man. "One thing before we go. Do you recognize this?"

He pulled something out of his pocket. It was the diamond pin.

"We found this in your wife's hand," Matt said to Ken. "The pin was open, as though she had just pulled it off. Was it hers?"

"Oh, yes!" June exclaimed before Ken could say a word. "It was one of Aunt Mildred's favorite pieces. She wore it all the time."

Over Matt's head, Ken's eyes met the girl's. An aching coldness settled in his stomach. He could see Mildred telling her that she would lose any chance of inheriting that money as soon as she could get the will changed; and he could see June picking up the poker and bringing it down on Mildred's head again and again, while Mildred, clutching out in panic, pulled the pin from the girl's dress.

"Now, my dear," Matt was saying, "you'd better get some rest. I don't think you should stay here alone, though. Why don't you come home with me? You'll like Alice. She's my wife."

He smiled down at the girl in a fatherly way, as she moved across the room toward him, avoiding the place where Mildred's body lay.

"Alice will be happy to have you," Ken heard Matt say as he and the girl went through the door into the corridor. "You know, it's a darned shame that anything like this had to happen to a sweet young thing like you."

A perceptive man can grasp another's point of view, and even come to adopt it.

A NOVELETTE by Elijah Ellis

THE MAN WHO HATED TURKEY

ALONG about mid-morning you can usually find me at Si Hagen's drugstore on Main Street, having a mug of Si's fair to middling coffee. I was there that Tuesday morning when Maude Braswell came in. Maude was all bundled up against the cold in a shaggy coat that made her look something like an overweight teddy bear. She waddled over to where I was sitting on the first stool at the counter.

"I want to ask you about somethin', Ben," she said.

"Ask away."

"It's this John Scott, the fella you brung to my place yesterday.

Do you know anything about him?"

"Nary a thing except what he told us. Why?"

Maude cut a glance at Si Hagen, who was sort of hovering behind the counter, his big ears cocked our way. "Maybe we could step over to your office," Maude said.

I looked at her and saw she wasn't kidding, so I put down my coffee mug and followed her out of the drugstore.

It was a miserable cold day in late November, with a sharp wind blowing and lead-colored clouds just above the bare top branches of the trees along Main Street. I hunkered my chin down into the collar of my sheepskin jacket and held on to the brim of my hat with both hands. Maude and me didn't waste any time getting across Main and into my office.

She sagged into a chair to catch her breath while I went around behind my desk and sat down. I said, "Now, what's this about John Scott?"

Maude looked past me at the barred door of the one fair-sized cell that serves as the town jail. It was empty, as it usually is. She brought her bright blue gaze back to me.

"There's somethin' wrong with that fella," Maude said. "He ain't what he appears, for all his good manners and high-priced clothes."

I leaned back in my chair and looked up at the dingy ceiling. Maude Braswell is a plump, middle-aged widow who runs a boardinghouse. Oftentimes she makes you think she ain't too bright, but I knew better from long experience.

"What'd Scott do? Leave a ring in the bathtub?" I asked.

Maude didn't smile. "What he did was pace around his room most of last night—after claimin' at suppertime that he was so tired and wore out from his long trip down here."

"Maybe he was too tired to sleep. That happens."

"Fiddlesticks," Maude snorted. "Man don't stalk around in the middle of the night, moanin' and cussin' because he's tired, Ben Carson."

I frowned across the desk at her. "Who was he cussin'?"

"Hisself, far as I could make out. I give him the back bedroom on the second floor, you know, which is just above my room. He prob'ly didn't realize anybody could hear him. That old house looks a lot more solid and soundproof than it really is."

"Uh huh. Buildin' inspector would likely put you out of business—if we had a buildin' inspector here in Roman Nose."

Maude kind of huffed and puffed at that, but I was busy thinking about John Scott.

He'd come in on the bus late the afternoon before. I was hanging around the bus station, for no particular reason, and he walked over to me and asked how to get to a hotel.

He was fairly tall and broad in the beam, wearing a gray suit and overcoat that hadn't come off any rack at a discount store. He appeared to be around my age—fifty or so—though a lot more prosperous than I'd ever been. He wasn't happy when I told him there hadn't been a hotel in Roman Nose since the old LaGrande burned down, ten, fifteen years ago.

He didn't whoop with joy, either, when I introduced myself, and added that I was a deputy sheriff, in charge of the sheriff's sub-station here.

All in all he seemed a pleasant enough fella, though, if a little nervous and preoccupied. Claimed he was a lawyer from Wichita, Kansas, and was down here to clear up a legal matter.

In my usual discreet, roundabout way, I up and asked him, "What legal matter?"

He shook his head. "I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

After that, I drove him and his pigskin suitcase over to Maude's house, the only place in town where you can rent a room and get decent meals to go with it. There, I stalled around in the front hallway long enough to hear him tell Maude he'd be in Roman Nose for two or three days.

Then as Maude started to take him upstairs to show him the room, Scott paused long enough to take a big, appreciative sniff. There was a tangy smell in the air.

Maude explained that she was cooking up a batch of mincemeat for pies. Thanksgiving was just two days off. "Hope you'll be here for Thanksgivin' dinner," Maude went on. "Turkey and all the trimmin's."

"Sounds delicious," Scott said. The two of them went on upstairs and I left.

Now, in the dinky sub-station office on Tuesday morning, Maude was saying, "At supper last night Doc Horner and old man Dawkins"—Maude was referring to her two permanent roomers—"they jockied around, tryin' to find out Mr. Scott's business here and the like. Wouldn't say a word about it, he wouldn't. Most of the time he just sat there, kind of lookin' off into space while he ate. Withdrawn."

I got up to put a new stick of wood into the potbellied stove in a

corner of the office. From there I went on to the front window and looked out. By craning your neck a mite you can see pretty near all of Roman Nose's business district from that window. I turned back to Maude.

"Well, you know what a close-mouth bunch lawyers are. Leastways, when it comes to talkin' about a current case."

"That's another thing," Maude snapped. "Between you and me, the two of us know ever'thing that goes on from here to the county seat and back again. Now, who around here could have business with a high-powered lawyer from Kansas without you or me knowin' about it beforehand?"

I couldn't argue with that. As Maude implied in her delicate way, a sparrow couldn't fall in our part of the county without one or both of us hearing the thud when it hit the ground.

Now Maude said, "Last night after supper this Scott went out for a short walk before turnin' in. Gone maybe fifteen minutes, 'bout long enough to walk downtown and back. You should've seen his face when he come in. Mad as the devil, and at the same time kind of—scared. Just the way he sounded later on, when I heard him pacin' around his room."

I asked, "Could you make out anythin' sensible the fella said?"

"No . . . not really. Just that he was awful upset and cussin' somethin' fierce. And like I told you a'fore, I got the idea it was hisself he was mad at."

"Uh huh. Maude,-I don't know what I could do. I'll study on it."

Maude grunted her way to her feet and headed for the door. "Got to get home and start noon dinner," she said. With her hand on the doorknob she stopped and frowned back at me. "I can tell you right now that it ain't just normal craziness and male orneriness with John Scott. There's somethin' really bad wrong somewheres, with him."

A gust of icy wind came in as Maude went out the door. When I was alone I stood at the window looking out at Main Street. Now, as I said, Maude looks and often acts like a half-wit, but she ain't. Her opinion on people is usually pretty close to the mark, so I had to take what she'd told me seriously.

I saw that the traffic on Main was heavy—probably all of two cars went by while I was standing there—and now a third come along. It was an old rattletrap that I recognized as belonging to Tom Ewing, who runs a filling station and garage down at the end of the street, but it was the driver that

interested me rather than the car.

The stranger, John Scott, was hunched over the wheel. From the mud on the car's tires, he'd been out in the country somewhere. The car went by too fast for me to get a good look at Scott, but I kind of got the notion he was smiling, like he was pleased.

I put on my hat and perambulated out of the office and along the street toward Ewing's garage, the way Scott was headed. Him and Tom Ewing were standing beside the old car, talking, when I got there.

Scott's jowly face was a bit gray and tense, but he said, friendly enough, "Morning, Carson. I was just telling Ewing here, this is certainly a remote corner of the state."

"Expect it does seem that way, to a city fella," I said. "Been out explorin', have you?"

Scott nodded. "The—person—I'm here to see is out of town for a day or two. Until he returns, I don't have much to do but wait."

"Uh huh. Well. What all did you see this mornin'?"

"I just drove around, out north of town. Looked at the countryside. Just keeping myself occupied." He glanced at his fancy gold wristwatch and added, "Getting along towards lunch time. Mrs. Braswell surely does know how to cook." With a nod, he turned and walked off hurriedly.

I'd noticed that Tom Ewing was looking sort of puzzled. I asked him what was up. He give his big, hulking shoulders a shrug and said, "Nothin', I don't guess. Only he didn't drive north. He went south, down to the river. That there red clay stuck on the tires, only place you find it around here is along that old road that meanders alongside the river."

I studied the smeared tires a minute. "Man from the city, prob'ly don't know his north from his south, anyhow. Besides—how long did he have the car?"

Tom did some figuring, wrinkling up his square inch of forehead to help him concentrate. "He come in and asked to rent the car 'bout ten-thirty, I guess. Little more'n an hour ago."

Tom opened the car's near door and leaned in for a squint at the dashboard. "Why, shoot, he only druv the thing six, seven miles. That's funny."

"Maybe he's a slow driver," I said. "Tom, did he say he might want to rent the car again?"

"Yes, he did. Allowed he'd need it this evenin', or tomorrow—he weren't certain which."

"Uh huh." I cautioned Tom not to take any wooden nickles, and headed back for my office. Now, the Red River is just three miles

south of Roman Nose, so it didn't appear Scott had done much more than drive down there, piddle around awhile, and then drive back.

Rain started to scatter down as I turned into the office. Kind of a sorry day for sight-seeing. Not to mention that the Red River ain't much to see at any time, along our stretch of it; a middling stream of muddy water lined here and there with some right dangerous beds of quicksand.

I warmed my hands at the stove. Then I grabbed the phone and called long-distance.

The Wichita police lieutenant I talked to said they had plenty of lawyers and plenty of Scotts up there, but offhand he couldn't think of none that fitted my particular John Scott. He said he'd run a check and call me back.

I thanked the man and hung up. After that I riffled through the batch of wanted posters in my desk, but about the latest I found was for a fella named John Dillinger, so I give up on that job.

Right at noon the Wichita cop called. Turned out that whoever else John Scott might be, he wasn't a lawyer from that city. No, the Wichita police weren't looking for anybody that fitted Scott's description. That was that.

I left the office and drove my old sedan out to Maude Braswell's place. I usually have dinner at Maude's, and sometimes supper, too. I've lived alone since my wife died a few years back and I never was much at fixing my own meals.

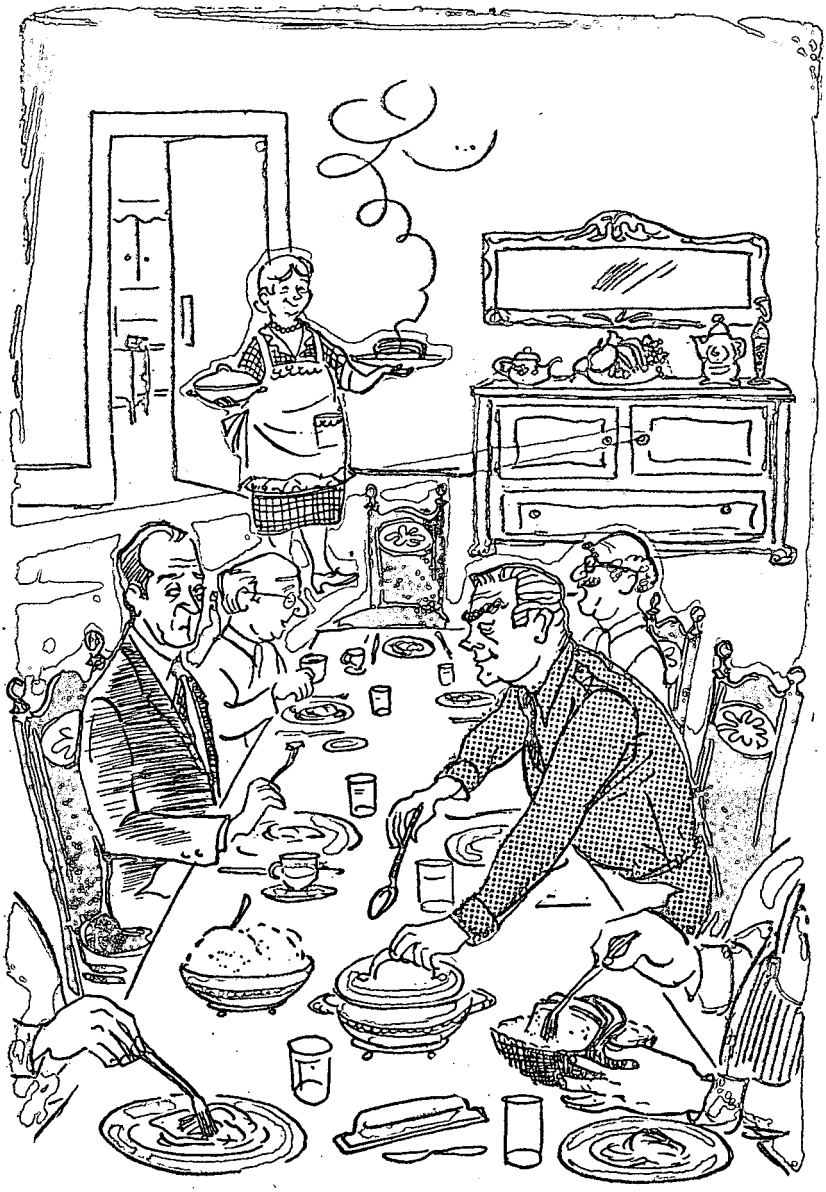
It was raining pretty steady when I turned into the driveway and parked next to Maude's big, weatherbeaten frame house. I got out and made a run for the side door—Maude frowns on people tracking mud through the front parlor—and entered the short hallway there, with the kitchen on my right and the swinging door to the dining room on my left.

Maude's hired girl was just passing through with a big platter loaded with pot roast and vegetables. Maude herself was bustling around the kitchen.

She come to the door long enough to watch me hang my coat and hat on a peg in the hallway, and mutter, "Ben, I'd like to tell you somethin' directly, after dinner. It's about this Scott fella."

I grunted, then went on into the dining room and took a chair at the long, wide table. Maude's roomers were there, hard at it with knife and fork, and a couple other fellas who, like myself, were unattached but liked good food.

I give a general "Hello" and reached for the nearest dish. John Scott was right across from me.



During the meal I noticed he didn't suffer from any lack of appetite. Maude and her hired girl was in and out, making sure nobody at the table went hungry. Maude looked a bit distracted and she didn't joke with the fellas as much as usual.

Finally we worked our way through to apple pie and coffee, and there was some idle chatter back and forth.

Scott was interested, or at least pretending to be, but he didn't say much himself. Me, I'd decided not to ask him anything out of the way for the time being. There's no law against a man claiming to be someone he ain't, not unless there's a crime involved in the deception. Far as I knew, he could have a good and legal reason for what he was doing. Uh huh.

There was one sort of curious thing. I don't recollect how the subject came up, but I mentioned something or other about when I was on the police force in Oklahoma City.

Scott set down his coffee cup right sudden, and looked across at me with a peculiar expression. "You're from Oklahoma City?"

"No, I lived up there a good many years, but—"

Old man Dawkins cackled from the end of the table, "Don't let Ben fool you with his ignorant ways, Mr. Scott. He used to be practic'ly the head of the police department there, a'fore some nasty fella shot him full of holes and he had to retire and all."

Scott's forehead took on a sheen, like he might be a little warm and sweaty all of a sudden. I got the notion he was looking at me like he hadn't quite seen me before, but all he said was, "That's—interesting." A minute later he excused himself and left the dining room.

I took a pause to ponder. If Deputy Sheriff Ben Carson didn't particular bother the man, why should ex-cop Ben Carson give him the chilly fidgets? I made a mental note to call the department in Oklahoma City when I got back downtown.

First, I had to see what Maude had to say.

She and I talked in the little hall beyond the dining room. "I happened to be upstairs straightenin' around, when Scott come in awhile ago," Maude said. "He went in his room, then come out in his shirt sleeves and went along to the bathroom to wash up. And I—well, I—"

"Never mind the hemmin' and hawin'," I told her. "What'd you find in his room?"

Maude give me a sniff. "Suitcase was layin' there open, but there

was nothin' in it but clean shirts and drawers, and the like. His jacket was on the bed, and I accident'ly stuck my hand into the pockets. No letters or anythin' like that, but there was what appeared to be a claim check."

"You didn't—"

"Bring it away? No, I just looked and put it back in the inside breast pocket where I found it. It was a claim check from someplace called Dodson's Parking Garage, in Oklahoma City. There was a printed number on it, and a scribble in pencil across the bottom —'67 Ford Galaxie. That was all. Oh, the number on the ticket was 4223."

"Uh huh. Well. I'll check into it."

Maude didn't look satisfied. I told her severely, "As for you, don't do anymore 'accidental' pokin' around. Don't do nothin' at all."

I left before she could think of a fancy retort.

Back in the office I called the City, and managed to get on to a fella I knew—him and me had pulled scoutcar duty together in the old days. He asked me how I liked being a backwoods deputy chasing chicken thieves, and I asked him when he was going to quit the force and get an honest job, and then we got down to business.

As with the Wichita cops, he didn't have anything on John Scott. While I waited, he called the Dodson Parking Garage, and in a couple minutes was back to me.

"Yeah, the car's there, all right," he said. "Man gave his name as John Scott. Left the car about this time yesterday, and said he'd be in to pick it up toward the end of the week. Car has Kansas plates on it. If you think you're on to something, I'll check the car out from here."

"I'd appreciate it," I said. "I'll hang around the office here till I hear from you."

Then I put down the phone and leaned back in my chair to smoke a cigarette. It was a little after one o'clock.

Scott had come in on the five-thirty bus yesterday afternoon. As I knew, that bus left Oklahoma City around two, and stopped at ever wide place in the road, including Roman Nose, on its eventual way down into Texas. So the times figured all right . . .

Only, why would a man leave his car in the City and ride a bus most of the afternoon, when he could make the same drive in his car in half the time? Course, maybe he was tired of driving, or maybe a lot of reasons.

All I really knew was that a well-dressed, fairly prosperous looking fella had arrived in town,

and that he wasn't exactly who he said he was. Get right down to it, the only complaint we had against him was he was a stranger, and closemouthed about his business here.

I sighed and turned my attention to the small heap of paper work that'd accumulated on my desk in the last two, three months. After that I got a burst of energy and swept out the office and even the jail cell behind it.

Finally, around three, my friend called from the City. He started off, "Ben, how does this grab you? Subject aged forty-eight, six foot tall, over two-hundred pounds. Graying hair, ruddy complexion, successful businessman type. Drives a 1967 Ford Galaxie, Kansas license number—"

"Sounds awful like one John Scott," I broke in.

"Yeah, but it's a man named James Scarbrough. He and his wife have been missing from their home and hearthside for at least one day, maybe two or three. Said home is in Topeka, Kansas, incidentally—not Wichita."

"Uh huh. Go on, I'm all ears."

"I remember. Now it starts getting a bit prickly. The boys in Topeka would love to have a chat with James Scarbrough, but not—so far—to the point of getting out a warrant on him. Seems he's a partner in an investment-brokerage firm there. As it happens, not only are he and his wife missing, but so is some twenty-five grand in cash, and another fifty big ones in negotiable bonds, from the safe in the company vault."

I sat down kind of abrupt on the edge of the desk. "In that case, why the pussyfooting?" I asked.

"Because he's a fairly large man in the community, and there's no proof that he lifted the loot. By the way, the cash was in twenties and fifties, so it and the bonds would make a fair-sized bundle."

"Scott had only the one suitcase with him," I said, "and it seems to be pretty well full of clothes. What about his car there?"

"Nope. No loot—or bodies—stashed in the trunk. Not a thing unusual. Not even a few mysterious bloodstains. Of course, he could've tucked the money away anywhere, if he grabbed it in the first place."

My friend went on to fill me in on the details. This James Scarbrough and his wife had last been seen on Friday. They lived alone, had no relatives or particular close friends, and nobody had missed them till Monday, when Scarbrough didn't show up at his office. Since he was one of the bigshots, and didn't have to punch a time clock, no one had checked

on him or noted his absence.

Then in the early afternoon he was due at a business conference. He wasn't there, and after trying to reach him by phone, with no luck, one of the other partners had driven out to Scarbrough's house. He found the front door on the latch and went inside. That's all he found, except evidence of some hurried clothes-packing in the bedroom.

Around the same time it was discovered that the office safe was a good deal lighter than it should be. So the cops were called in, though all very hush-hush till now. There was no sign of foul play in or around the house.

"And that's how it stands at the moment," my friend finished. "Why, of all places, this man should go to Roman Nose—you figure it out. I can't. According to Topeka, he's strictly a city boy. Came there from Chicago a couple years ago and bought into the brokerage firm. I gather he's so used to city smog, a breath of fresh country air would choke him."

"Well, he's chokin' on somethin' here. What about his wife?" I asked.

"Lenora Tate Scarbrough. Described as small, barely five foot and a scant one hundred pounds. In her mid-forties, uses a touch of dye on her dark brown hair. Kind of a plain jane, I gather, and stays in the background."

"Uh huh. Topeka think there's any chance she might've met with a fatal mishap—run into a pistol slug, or the like?"

"Evidently not. No sign of any rough stuff."

We talked a moment longer and then hung up. There wasn't much of anything to do until Topeka put out a fugitive warrant on James Scarbrough. They were supposed to send a couple of men down to talk to him. They'd have to drive, since the weather was too bad for flying, so it'd be a good many hours before they could get here.

Meanwhile, I was to keep an eye on Scott—or Scarbrough, to give him his right name—and try to discourage any ideas he might have on leaving town.

I give my head a shake. I felt like the fella that tugged at a stray thread, and first thing he knew his whole durn sweater come unraveled on him. Maybe hot coffee would help.

I went over to the drugstore to find out. On the way I noticed it'd stopped raining. Now a few big wet flakes of snow was sifting down. Looked like we might have a white Thanksgiving Day.

I had my coffee and tried to think of one good reason why a

city-type businessman turned embezzler would come to Roman Nose, Oklahoma. To hide out?

That was plumb insane on the face of it unless he was so durn unfamiliar with small towns, he didn't know that in one, ever'body's business is ever'body's business. A stranger sticks out like a sore thumb. Roman Nose was also a mighty bad choice as a hideout because of its location. The only quick way out is the way Scott-Scarbrough had come in. The nearest bridge across Red River into Texas is twenty-five miles away.

Well, then, maybe he was here to meet somebody. His wife and him could've split up, her taking the money, and planned to get back together in Roman Nose, but you come up against the same objections. Why this piddling little burg, of all places? I put down my empty coffee mug. What'd my friend say the wife's name was? Lenora Tate Scarbrough.

Now, it seemed to me like there'd been a Tate family around here in the old days. All died out or moved away long since, but—

I crooked a finger at Si Hagen. He shuffled up, wiping his hands on his apron. He give me a pleasant scowl and said, "There ain't a thing wrong with that there coffee."

"Nothin' more'n usual. Si, do you recollect a Tate family? Seems like they had a farm out east of town."

Si studied on it. "Yeah. But there ain't none of 'em left. In fact, I don't think the old house is even there. It fell in or was tore down years ago. Why?"

"Uh huh. Was there a girl named Lenora?"

I waited, sort of breathing fast, while Si pondered. But then he shook his big bald head. "Nope."

So much for that.

"There was a girl named Nora, though," Si added. "But that ain't the same."

"Yeah. Well. Maybe that's close enough," I said, with a good deal of patience. "What happened to her?"

"No idee. She up and took off, it must be twenty-five years ago. Durin' the time you and your missus was livin' in the City, that'd be. She ain't been back since, far's I know. I kind of remember hearin' she went to New York, or Chicago, someplace like that."

Chicago! That was supposed to be James Scarbrough's old stomping grounds. Things were beginning to shape up a mite.

I got out of Si that Nora Tate had been a little bitty thing in her late teens when she left town, which fitted as to description and approximate age the now missing

Mrs. James Scarbrough. Uh huh.

I paid Si for my coffee and give him a tip—of my hat—and went out to my car. The snow was starting to stick when it hit the wet ground. I drove along Main to the intersection where it crosses Pine—Maude Braswell's place is just out Pine a block. As I slowed for the turn, I saw Tom Ewing step out of his filling station and wave an arm at me, so I pulled in and stopped.

"That there Scott fella?" Tom said, when I got my window rolled down. "He called me on the telly-phone while ago. He told me he for sure wanted to rent my car this evenin'. I allowed it'd be all right, and he—"

"What time's he comin' for the car?"

"'Round six-thirty or seven, he told me."

I cogitated a minute, then thanked Tom and headed on for Maude's place, but at the first corner I circled back around to Main Street and drove west, then south. I rattled across the railroad tracks beside the tumbledown depot—we don't have passenger-train service to Roman Nose anymore—and on south toward the river. I don't know what I expected to find down there, but it was where Scarbrough had gone that morning.

It was about five o'clock and pretty near dark because of the heavy clouds when I reached the river. The old, bumpy asphalt road ended in a turnaround, with the unpaved river road leading off to the east and west. I parked my car and got out.

The red mud stuck to my boots, but it had a tacky feel to it, like it might freeze any minute. I bent over and turned an eagle-eye on the ground. There was fairly fresh appearing tire tracks passing through the turnaround and on along the road to the east.

I got in my car and followed the tracks. It was too durn cold to walk. I guess I went maybe half a mile, and there the tracks stopped, and there was signs of the car that'd made them turning around and heading back along the deep-rutted road. I stopped for a gander at the scenery.

On my left was trees and dead underbrush, on my right the sloping bank of the river. The river itself meandered along out in the middle of its wide bed. It was all kind of pretty, I guess, what with the bare tree branches poking up against the dark gray sky, and the snow falling on the red earth and the river.

Me, I was just cold, and I still had no idea what John Scott—or James Scarbrough—had come down here to see. I drove back to

town. If the fella figured on crossing the river to Texas there, he'd better figure again. There's no bridge and no place shallow enough to drive a car across, not to mention a fella could end up at the bottom of a bed of quicksand if he got a bit careless.

"Damn," I said, and I meant ever word of it.

This time I did go to Maude's boardinghouse. Doc Horner and old man Dawkins was in the parlor listening to the radio when I walked in. I found Maude in the dining room, setting out plates for supper.

At my question, she aimed a stubby thumb at the ceiling, and said, "He's been upstairs in his room all afternoon. Did come down once, to make a phone call, but that's all."

"Uh huh." I hesitated. Then I decided to keep what I knew to myself for the time being. The hired girl come in from the kitchen loaded down with a big bowl of steaming beef stew. I went back to the parlor to wait for supper.

We all—including Scarbrough, who looked a little red-eyed and rumpled but otherwise all right—set down to eat prompt at six. Scarbrough shoveled in stew and hot biscuits like there was no tomorrow, and kept glancing at his wristwatch now and again.

When we was through, Maude poked her head in, and said, "You all want to see somethin' pretty?"

Us four men trooped after her into the big kitchen. She bustled over to the sink and came out with a turkey the size of herself, pretty near. It was wrapped up in a plastic bag. She plopped it down on the drainboard.

"Just took it out of the freezer," Maude told us. "So it'll be good and thawed out, ready to go in the oven first thing Thursday mornin'. Wouldn't be Thanksgivin' without turkey and all the . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She was looking past me, and her plump face shifted from a grin to a startled frown.

I turned. Scarbrough was standing there, his eyes fair bulging, and beads of sweat popping out on his face. He breathed, sick-like, "My God!"

He backed toward the door, his gaze fastened on the turkey. Maude asked, "What ails you, Mr. Scott?"

He blinked, gulped, and shook his head. "I—I can't stand turkey. I—had food poisoning once, caused by—"

He shook his head again and plunged out the door. In the silence that followed I could hear his footsteps rattling up the stairs in the front hallway.

Then old man Dawkins said, "I

thought there was somethin' wrong with that fella—now I know it. Man don't like turkey, he ain't even qualified as a durned fool."

I give Maude a jerk of my head and hurried out of the kitchen. In the dining room she caught up with me. "Is this about the time Scar—Scott—went for a walk last night?"

"Yes, it is, Ben. What in the world—"

"All right. If he starts out again, which he will in a few minutes, stall him long as you can. I'll be in touch with you directly."

I trotted on out of the house, ignoring Maude's questions and unkind comments on my sanity. I jumped in my car and drove away.

It was about a quarter to seven and pitch dark when I reached the train depot on the south edge of town. There was a single dingy bulb burning on the platform that flanks the railroad tracks and another light inside the depot itself. As I said, we don't have passenger-train service anymore. What we do have is a freight that passes through, and stops ever once in a while, at seven in the evening.

I found Floyd Moses, the station-master, behind the dusty counter in the old waiting room. Floyd is a white-haired, grouchy cuss, a lonesome old widower like myself.

"What're you doin', bustin' in here?" he asked.

"Floyd, did a man callin' himself John Scott come here this time last night? Expectin' to pick up a package, maybe?"

Floyd rubbed a palm over the gray bristles on his chin. "Matter of fact, he did. Right put out when it didn't arrive. Wanted to know if there was more than the one daily freight from the north. When I told him there ain't, he purt near had a fit. Funny fella."

"Uh huh. What was he expectin'?"

"A trunk. Supposed to be comin' by railroad express from up in Kansas—Topeka, I think he said."

I took in a deep breath of musty air, and let it out. I heard the dim sound of a train whistle, way off somewhere in the cold night.

Floyd eyed his railroader's watch and said, "Well, sir. Right on schedule for once."

Me, I tried to keep one eye on the street door, the other eye on the door leading to the station platform. For just a second I wished I'd stopped by my house and picked up my pistol. I almost never carry a gun—lost my taste for them after that hood put a couple of bullets through my innards up in Oklahoma City one long ago night—but just that min-

ute the weight of a .38 in my hip pocket would've been downright comforting, particularly if my hunch turned out to be true.

The train whistled again, and now it was much closer. I went over and grabbed the phone on the counter. I called Tom Ewing's place first. Scarbrough hadn't showed up yet to get the car. Maude must be following my orders for once, and delaying him at her house. Bless her.

Now the freight groaned into the station and squawked to a halt alongside the platform. Floyd and me hustled out. There was only one item ticketed for Roman Nose —a smallish green-metal trunk, tied around with lengths of rope. It was right heavy; a hundred and fifty pounds, at least. Floyd and me carried it into the baggage room. Then he went back out to the train for a minute.

I stood there, gnawing at my lower lip, and stared at the trunk. There was no time for formality. I took out my penknife, cut the ropes, and pried open the locked lid. Floyd returned, yelled when he saw what I was doing, but I had the trunk lid pushed back now.

"Oh, lordy," Floyd muttered. "Lordy, lordy."

In the trunk was the body of a tiny woman. Her legs was drawn up and her head tucked down, and she was wrapped in several layers of what looked like the kind of plastic bags used by dry-cleaning shops.

Uh huh. If a man had that sight in his mind's eye, it wasn't hard to understand him reacting kind of violently to a frozen turkey inside a transparent plastic bag . . .

Then I noticed something else in the trunk. Several parcels were crammed down around the body. I tore open a corner of one of them. It contained a stack of money.

James Scarbrough had put all his eggs in one basket, as it were. I said aloud, "But why? Why?"

"Because I panicked," a dull, lifeless voice said from the door of the baggage room. Scarbrough walked slowly over to look down at the contents of the trunk. He sort of gagged, and turned away.

"I didn't mean to kill Nora," he said. "But when I got home last Sunday—was it just day before yesterday?—I had the money and bonds with me, and when I told her I meant to leave for good and all, she wouldn't stand for it. Threatened to call the police. So I—I choked her. It wasn't hard. She's such a little thing."

Scarbrough suddenly sat down on the cold concrete floor. I relaxed. Whatever else, I didn't need a gun to handle him.

Motioning Floyd to keep his mouth shut, I asked quietly, "Why did you ship her down here, Mr. Scarbrough?"

"So you know who I am," he said in that lifeless voice. He shook his head. "I guess I'm not much of a—a criminal. But I don't care. I'm glad it's over—believe it or not."

I repeated my question.

He made a gesture. "Nora had often mentioned this place—how remote it is from everything—and also about the quicksand in the river; how she'd once seen a horse sink down into the quicksand, and it was never found. You see? I took the trunk to the railway express and—"

"Uh huh. So you thought if you could put her into the river, there was no chance of anybody ever findin' the body."

Scarbrough lifted a trembly hand and plucked at his overcoat collar. "Stupid thing to do, but I wasn't thinking straight. I was scared, petrified, when I realized I'd killed her. Stupid. Stupid!" He hunched over and started crying.

"Let's go, Mr. Scarbrough," I said. "There's some fellas from your city due in here sometime tonight. I have an idea you and them will have a lot to talk over between you . . ."

On Thanksgiving Day, I put on a clean shirt and a tie in honor of the occasion, and went to Maude's place for the big dinner.

Now, Maude is a fine cook, and one of these times I may up and ask her to marry me, but that particular day I didn't have much of an appetite for turkey. I kind of wonder if I ever will again.

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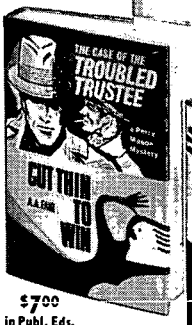

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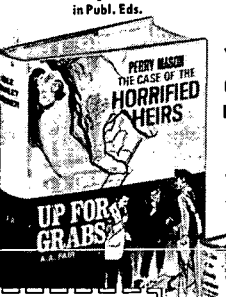

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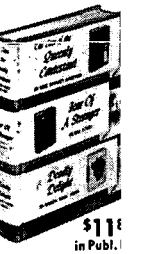

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