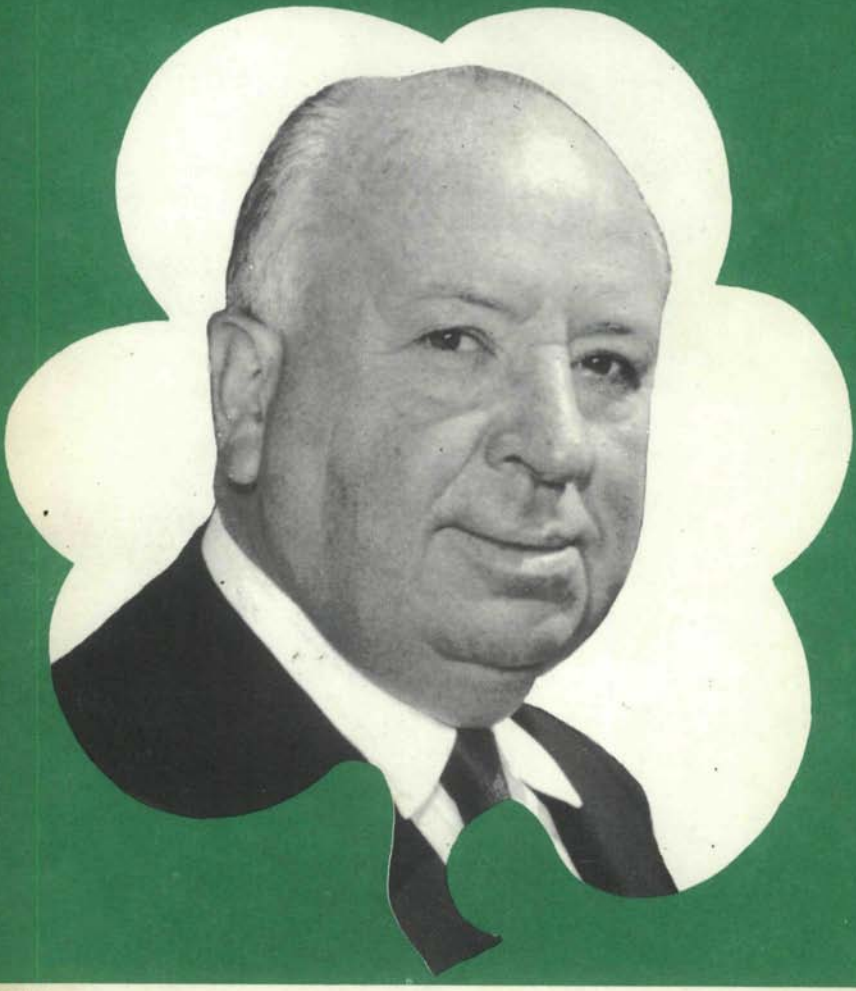
ALFRED

APRIL 50¢

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

April 1968

Dear Reader:

Whether it is prompted by thawing lakes and rivers I am at a loss to say, but the time is nigh for a new spring suit—perhaps for someone on your list. Accordingly, I herewith present the Alfred Hitchcock Fashion Forecast.

Of all materials, the old favorite for rugged durability continues to be cement. It can be sculpted to fit perfectly, and may be inlaid with chips of marble or shards of glass.

Lead is a heavy contender for popularity in 1968, although it is somewhat harder to obtain and more difficult to fabricate.

In the ready-to-wear department, there will be considerable demand for the old-fashioned good looks of anvils, although several lengths of chain are needed for long-lasting stitching, as they are for the ever-popular concrete blocks.

It is no idle claim that any of the above will outlast the wearer, whose satisfaction is not of paramount importance at any rate.

For a sure way of obtaining every issue of your favorite magazine in timely style, a choice of solutions may be found on Pages 105 and 160, amid the new stories tailored to suit your quest for the macabre.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 13, NO. 4 APRIL 1968

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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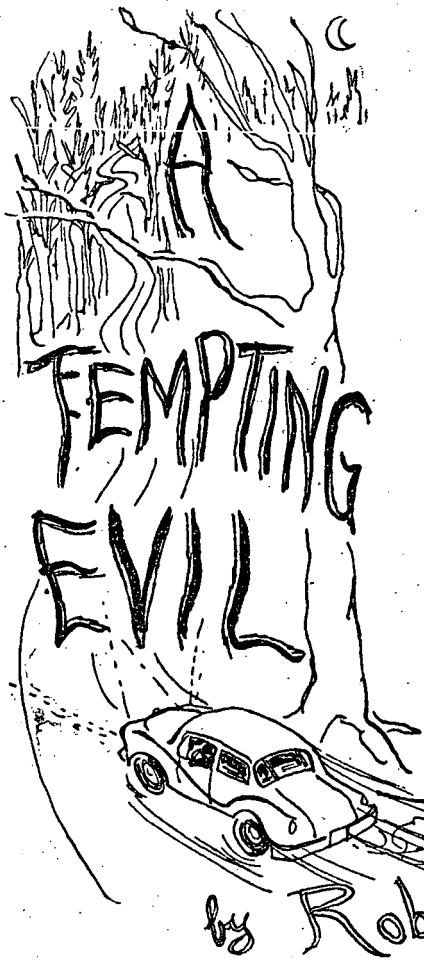
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 13, No. 4, April 1968. Single copies 50 cents; Subscriptions $6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $7.00 (In U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of addresses should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

Belated honesty is a corruption of the best policy, and oftentimes is better never than late.



IT WAS after four o'clock in the morning. They had been driving west from their home city for an hour over a narrow road which ran parallel to the new highway. On a trip of great distance, Paul Burgess liked to put the first couple of hundred miles or so behind him before dawn. His wife, Cora, had to be forcibly ejected from bed at such an hour but, once under way, she was alert and cheerful enough.

It was, however, a far from cheerful occasion. Paul and Cora had owned and operated a small restaurant on the outskirts of town. It had enjoyed a rather brisk business until a few months back when the interstate toll highway had been completed three miles to the south. Since the largest part of their trade was dependent upon

travelers passing along the old road through town, they were soon virtually forgotten.

A few diehard local patrons continued to visit their cafe, but Paul and Cora were unable to attract enough customers to keep the place alive. The building, rented, was no asset. They were forced to sell out at a price which amounted to a little more than payment for stock and used equipment.

All of their savings and a seven year investment of time and labor were gone.

Now they were headed for Denver. They had been hired to take charge of a restaurant in a small hotel. The job offered room and board plus a modest salary. Since they were yet in their mid-thirties, there was still the hope that they could, by frugal living and dedicated saving, gather enough money to open another place of their own by the time they reached forty.

Accustomed to working for themselves and living in good style, it was not a pleasant picture. Further, the accommodations provided by the hotel management were not large enough to include their two children, who had been left behind in the custody of Paul's mother.

As they started out, Paul was in a bitter frame of mind and Cora was at least gloomy. Paul had flatly refused to take the new highway. This was partly because he wanted to avoid paying the toll, but mostly because he wouldn't travel the very route which had destroyed him by taking the paying customers to his competitors. It was a childish and foolish vengeance and, knowing this, he was all the more irritated.

The old road, narrow and sometimes winding, was seldom used by any but those people making short runs to nearby towns. At this time of the morning it was naked of traffic, an empty white ribbon tunneling through a dark forest of tall trees.

Paul applied more foot to the accelerator, exercising his resentment with a feeling of power and speed. The needle climbed steadily to seventy.

"Aren't you going too fast?" Cora said nervously.

"Good road, no traffic," Paul replied crisply.

"The night speed limit is fifty-five and some of these curves are dangerous," Cora argued. She lighted a cigarette with difficulty because her eyes were glued to the darkness beyond the bright cone of their headlights.

"I always liked this road," Paul continued, as if she hadn't spoken. "At least it has some character. Now you take these new toll high-

ways—just pancakes; no hills or curves, no perspective. You could be doing a hundred and you wouldn't feel it. Boring. A dull way to travel."

"I'd rather be a little bored than very dead," Cora complained. "Please slow down, Paul."

He eased off a bit, but not because he had been persuaded. They were approaching a sharp curve and the taillights of another car, the first in many miles, had become visible. As they neared the curve, the car loomed up just ahead.

"Look!" Cora cried. "That car is weaving off the road. He's not going to make the curve!"

Paul saw that this was true, though the car was not actually weaving. It was wandering. It had followed the first part of the curve to the right but then, as if unguided, the car had rambled onto the shoulder. Now, as the road began to straighten, the car did not. It went hurtling through the guard rail above a steep embankment. For a second it appeared to soar lazily in flight before it plunged from sight.

There was the muted thunder of rolling metal, then a crash and the awesome, final sound of glass shattering.

Paul drove around the bend and parked well off the road. He cut the motor but left his lights burning. He scooped a flash from the glove compartment and they climbed out. In silence they scampered back to the break in the rail and went down the embankment behind the beam of the flashlight.

The car, a new sedan, had apparently nosed into the ground, tumbled cleanly and smashed itself upright against a tree. The front end had telescoped, pulverizing as the car climbed the trunk of the tree and hung suspended three feet off the ground.

The top had been squashed and the force of the impact had sprung the driver's door and the trunk lid open. The driver, a youngish man who had once been quite handsome, had fallen halfway from the car. He lay in a grotesque position, head and shoulders on the ground, twisted legs inside the car. He was unmistakably dead.

The passenger, a young woman, lay sprawled like a broken doll across the front seat. It was obvious at once that she was also dead. Nevertheless, Paul checked for a pulse in both bodies to be sure.

"Any hope at all?" Cora asked in a voice heavy with dread.

Paul shook his head gravely. "None. Must've fallen asleep at the wheel."

He found the man's wallet in his hip pocket and opened it under

the flashlight. It was thick with bills but Paul ignored them and inspected the driver's license. The man's name was Nelson Winslow. He lived on Oakwood Drive in an exclusive section of their hometown. Other papers bore the same address. He returned the wallet to the man's pocket.

"First chance, we'll call the police," he said. "C'mon, I'm feeling a little sick."

As they walked away Paul followed the contours of the wrecked auto with a finger of light. He stopped abruptly. Some baggage had spewed from the open trunk and lay in a welter on the ground. A tan satchel rested on its side, yawning open. It was swollen with currency, thick bands of it spilling out.

Paul and Cora exchanged quick glances. Paul crossed and stooped for a wad of bills held together by a wrapper of the sort used in banks. All the bills were hundreds. He guessed there were at least twenty-five in the packet. He plucked more like it from the ground and stowed them with the others inside the satchel.

His mind spun, trying for a conservative estimate. Say there were two thousand dollars to a packet. Multiply that by about twenty . . .

His head lifted sharply. He looked up toward the road and listened. Despite the hour and the rerouting of traffic to the toll highway, inevitably a car would be along soon, perhaps in the next minute. How could you make such a decision in sixty seconds when there was behind you a lifetime of total honesty? Except when he was a brainless kid swiping junk from the dime store, he had never stolen a nickle.

Yet, in his adult years there had been few temptations worthy of the name. Like most people, he had never had the opportunity to steal a grand sum with little fear of discovery. Nor had there ever been a time in his life when sheer misfortune in the name of progress had brought such financial ruin and bitterness.

Carrying the satchel, he turned and walked briskly toward the embankment.

"Paul!" Cora's voice behind him. "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

"Shut up and keep moving!" he snapped over his shoulder. "We'll talk about it in the car."

He was climbing, leaving her behind. She chased after him.

They were speeding away when the lights of a car approached from the other direction. The car went by and Paul watched in the mirror with satisfaction when he saw it brake and stop near the gap in the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railing, eliminating one problem.

For a minute or two, as he poured gas with a leaden foot, he listened to Cora's half-hearted sermon on the evils of theft and especially its legal penalty. As Paul knew, it was mere lip-service which barely concealed the counterpoint of her excitement.

Paul said, "Thanks for the lecture, but now let's get down to facts. In the first place, dead people can't take it with them, so you can't say we stole *their* money. In other words, they have been deprived of absolutely nothing. Right?"

"I suppose that's true," Cora agreed.

"In the second place, I doubt if one person in a thousand could resist such a temptation, and that goes for the cops, too. So the money would've been taken by someone. It was only a question of who got there first."

She chuckled. "Darling, you should've been a criminal defender. You could make murder sound perfectly innocent and really quite charming." She paused. "Okay, I'm only human. I'd like nothing better than to keep the money. But could we get away with it?"

He snorted. "You must be kidding. Did anyone see me take it? Can anyone prove we were there? I don't think there's a chance in a million. But let's say that by some freak the police are able to produce evidence that we were at the scene of the accident. Do we deny it if asked? No! Sure, we were there, but how many other people, including a whole bunch of cops, medics and a wrecking crew, were also there? Get it?"

Cora was thoughtful. "You looked at the man's license—what was his name?"

"Winslow. Nelson Winslow."

"The woman was his wife, I imagine. But where did he get all that money? There must be—how much? Fifteen, twenty thousand?"

He said, "More like *forty* thousand. And don't ask me where he got it. He was driving a big new car and he lived in the best part of town. He was rich and he was probably a legal crook, like all the rest of his kind."

"Yes," she said, "but where would they be going at this hour of the morning with so much cash?"

"They were going on a second honeymoon and that was pocket money," he quipped. "What interests me is, how much? Why don't you get the satchel from the back seat so we can find out."

Under the map light, Cora made the count. Paul's quick estimate had fallen far short. The bag contained sixty thousand dollars.

In a state of hectic excitement, scheming how they would use the money to make themselves still richer, Paul and Cora raced on to Denver where, placing the money in a safety deposit box, spending not a penny, they went to work managing the hotel restaurant. It was part of the plan. They would allow a certain amount of time to pass and if they were not suspected they would then withdraw some of the loot and go into business on their own.

Cora was intensely curious. Arriving in Denver, she had bought the hometown papers to read about the accident and the missing cash. It was too late. Whatever attention had been given to the story, it was now old news. She couldn't find so much as a back-page item.

Paul had been against digging into the facts. He said the money should be considered a gift of the gods, so to speak, with no personal stigma attached to it. In truth, his conscience had begun to needle him somewhat and he was afraid that uncovering more of the mystery might only increase his sense of guilt.

Six months crept by without event. Paul and Cora remained at their jobs while quietly searching for a promising restaurant. At last they found a place up for sale which had a fine location but had been operating at a loss because of inefficient management, mediocre food and indifferent service.

They quit the hotel and bought the restaurant for twenty-five thousand, calculating that if properly and imaginatively operated, it had a potential value of three times that much. It was a shrewd buy. Since they were both hard-working and inventive, they effected many changes which began to pay off with a handsome profit.

Now they purchased a modest but comfortable house with a small down payment, and sent money to Paul's mother so she could fly out with their two children. As their business expanded, they installed a cocktail lounge complete with a three-piece combo and space for dancing.

An expert did wonders with the decor; they hired an excellent French chef and brought comely waitresses in scanty costumes to the cocktail lounge. In less than five years the place became so popular that on weekends people who did not have reservations had to wait in line or be turned away.

At this point Paul and Cora Burgess had a luxurious home in the Cherry Hills section of the city, two expensive cars and a fat bank account. They had more than doubled the original sixty thousand which they had stolen on that

infamous morning of tragedy and temptation.

The theft was seldom discussed but never forgotten. On those occasions when the subject sneaked into their secret conversations they had to admit that their consciences had suffered, especially since they were well-liked and respected members of the community, and the feeling of guilt had grown rather than diminished with success.

However, nothing concrete developed from these mutual confessions—until the night they toasted the fifth anniversary of their thriving business.

Paul was just a bit tight and feeling expansive. Saluting Cora with a bourbon highball, he said, "Here's to crime. Who says it doesn't pay?"

Cora's answering smile was sparing. It vanished quickly and was replaced by a frown. "Paul," she said, "I think we should have a serious talk."

"About what?"

"Crime. I agree that it pays. Oh, beautifully! But there is an aftertaste. It won't go away."

"You have a Puritan conscience."

"No, just an average conscience—like yours. I don't enjoy feeling guilty. It spoils all of this." Her glance embraced the rich, paneled den, her gesture included their whole bright new, dazzling world.

"Well, what do you want to do about it?"

"Give the money back," she said. "We'd still have plenty left. And more will be coming in faster than we can count it."

He nodded. "Okay, I'm in favor of it. But forgetting about the money, I'm not sure I want to pay the price of a free conscience."

"That doesn't make sense, Paul."

"Sure it does. I've made some discreet inquiries. We could get five or ten years in prison. Making restitution doesn't guarantee that we won't be prosecuted. And then there's our reputation. Tell the world you're a couple of crooks and watch the customers fly off."

"Well," she reasoned, "we could return the money anonymously."

"Fine. To whom? Nelson Winslow, care of God?"

"He must have relatives. Maybe he has a son or daughter."

"Maybe. He might have three or four kids. What about his brother? And his mother? How do we decide who gets the dough and how much?"

"Wouldn't he leave a will?"

"Probably. But that won't solve it unless he made specific provisions for the distribution of that sixty grand. Suppose it wasn't part of his estate. Suppose it was a secret fund intended for a secret pur-

pose, and only Winslow and his wife knew about it. That seems logical to me, under the circumstances."

She sighed. "You make it sound terribly complex."

"It is. At least it could be."

"Then we'll have to find out where that money came from and where it should go. We could hire a detective, a private investigator."

"No good. He'd figure the whole thing out in a hurry. Given a few facts, he'd guess the rest. Then he'd have us over a barrel. We might be faced with blackmail —or the cops. Take your choice."

"I give up," she said. "Listening to you, it's plain impossible."

"Not entirely. I could go myself and get the information. A guy like that would've had a lawyer who would know just about everything there is to know, enough for me to make a decision. There are questions I could ask without giving myself away. I could even pose as an investigator acting for a client."

"Yes, and of course you would use an assumed name," she said excitedly.

"Naturally."

"And I would go along to help you."

He shook his head. "Wrong. You would stay here and take care of the business and the kids. Besides, I've always felt that you were just a kind of hitchhiker in this thing. You came along for the ride, but the idea was mine."

"Not at all, darling! I'm just as much to blame—"

"I could leave day after tomorrow, sooner the better."

"You'll fly, of course."

"Yes, I'll fly and rent a car at the airport."

"But now suddenly I'm worried, Paul. If something goes wrong there . . ."

"Don't you worry a minute, baby. Perhaps crime pays now and then, but we're not criminals. Everything will turn out all right in the end. You'll see."

The next day Paul arranged with the bank to have sixty thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills assembled and ready to be delivered before closing. Paul was a man of precise habits and it seemed only fitting that the money should be returned exactly as found.

In the early morning, carrying the money in a briefcase, he boarded a jet and flew east to his hometown. He rented a late model car at the new jet airport nearly twenty miles from the heart of the city. During the rather long ride, tension mounted inside him. His plan to return the money had seemed simple and workable, but now that

he was at the very edge of truth it occurred to him that any number of unexpected developments could trap him and send him to prison.

At one point he almost turned back, but his conscience was more demanding than his fear and he kept on until he came to a drugstore where he paused to check the phone book. He remembered that Nelson Winslow had lived on fashionable Oakwood Drive. Possibly the house had been willed to a relative.

There were several Winslows but none lived on Oakwood Drive. When he could not find a business firm under the name of Winslow, he called the chamber of commerce. The woman checked and told him there was a Barker & Winslow advertising agency. She gave him the number and he placed the call.

When he asked for Mr. Winslow, the girl told him that Mr. Nelson Winslow, a former partner, had been dead for several years. No, Mr. Barker was not in but his secretary would be glad to take a message. Paul spoke to Barker's secretary, introducing himself as George Radcliffe, a private investigator seeking information in the interest of a client.

The secretary confirmed the fact that Nelson Winslow had been killed in an automobile accident some five and half years ago. Mr. Winslow and Mr. Baker had always engaged the same attorney in all matters. The lawyer's name was James Tulley and she had the number handy.

Mr. James Tulley was in court and would not return to the office until late afternoon, when he had a couple of appointments that would carry him until the close of business hours. When Paul said it was a matter of extreme importance, the girl suggested that he call Tulley at home after six.

Paul used the waiting time to visit with his mother, then called Tulley. The lawyer was at home and reluctantly agreed to grant him half an hour at seven sharp.

James Tulley was a chubby man in his fifties, with puffy cheeks and careful brown eyes. He seemed pleasant, even jovial, but not overly responsive in the first minutes of conversation. After a bit of fencing, he made a startling remark.

"Mr. Radcliffe," he said, "if you're investigating Nelson Winslow, why come to me? Why not go to the one person who can tell you more about him than anyone else in the world—his wife."

"His wife!"

"His widow—yes."

After a moment of dumb silence, Paul said, "Frankly, Mr. Tulley, I wasn't aware that his wife was

alive. My client gave me the impression that she was killed in the accident."

"No," said Tulley cautiously, "she wasn't killed in the accident."

"She wasn't?"

"At the time, she was in the hospital having a second baby. Trying to, that is, and nearly losing her life in the attempt. The baby died at birth; so you see, it was a double shock."

"Well, if Mrs. Winslow wasn't in the car, then who was?"

"Why don't you ask Mrs. Winslow that question?" Folding his hands in his lap, Tulley leaned back and smiled. "After all, Mr. Radcliffe, I get paid for legal advice and service, not for dishing up the local dirt."

"That's true," said Paul, "and I feel that this is an imposition. But in a sense I *am* seeking legal advice and service, not for dishing in the settlement of a legal matter. Also, I have a liberal expense account which would include your fee for a few minutes of counsel."

He took a crisp hundred dollar bill from his wallet and passed it across the desk. "Would that be satisfactory, Mr. Tulley?" He winked.

Tulley winked back, folded the bill and tucked it into a pocket. "The complexion of our relationship has just changed," he said with mock dignity. "Since for this period I have been retained to represent you and your client, I believe we can discuss the case to the limit of my knowledge."

Tulley grinned. "Listen, my friend," he said conspiratorially, "it would help the cause a great deal if you would tell me frankly what it is you're trying to accomplish here."

"It would help one hell of a lot," said Paul, relaxing, "but unfortunately I'm pledged to secrecy and I can't tell you a thing. All I can do is ask questions. For instance, who was in the car with Winslow?"

"Well, you could get that information almost anywhere. It was a public scandal. The woman was Mrs. Winslow's sister, Janet. She had been visiting with the Winslows and Nelson ran off with her, bag and baggage. He waited for the opportune moment, when his wife was in the hospital. Nelson was a real chaser, a playboy—to put it mildly."

Paul was thoughtful. "And how did it happen—the accident?"

"Apparently Nelson was going too fast and lost control around a curve. I don't know why he was in such a hurry because whatever their final destination, they were booked for that night at the Lakeside Inn just ten miles down the

road. That did puzzle everyone."

"What about Winslow's business, the ad agency? He just abandoned it?"

"No, he sold out to Barker. They weren't getting along, they fought each other on every issue. Nearly came to blows near the end. Barker & Winslow is a small local agency, but a good one. I have a lot of respect for Dan Barker."

"How much did Winslow get for his share?"

"That's confidential." Tulley smiled. "But not very. He got sixty thousand. Cash."

"Cash?"

"Nelson insisted on cash. In view of the feud, he wouldn't take Barker's check. No doubt he had other reasons, because he got the money in the afternoon and jumped town the same night with Janet."

"Who got the sixty thousand?" Paul asked casually. "Did it go to Mrs. Winslow?"

"Legally, yes, because he hadn't bothered to change his will. Actually, no. The money vanished. It wasn't in the car with him and what he did with it is still a mystery."

Paul felt the urge to smile. "Well, I suppose Nelson Winslow had other assets and left his widow in good shape."

"On the contrary. He was living it up, down, and sideways, was way over his head. He owed money everywhere and his house was mortgaged up to here. Hazel Winslow couldn't meet the payments and she had to sell. Last I heard, she was living with her boy, he must be about seven now, in a small apartment. She works for a living, too."

"Would I find her in the phone book?"

"Probably. Here, let's check and see . . ."

Paul didn't call. He got the address from the phone book and went over. With the money case clutched under his arm, he rang her bell. She opened the door a crack and peeked out.

"What do you want?" she snapped before he could speak.

"I—my name is Radcliffe and I came on a matter regarding Nelson Winslow."

"Nelson? He's dead."

"Well, I know that, but I'm a private investigator and I'm representing a client in connection with his estate."

"I suppose that means he owed someone else money," she said in a sneering tone. "Come back tomorrow. Won't do you any good, though."

She slammed the door.

He rang again repeatedly. She returned.

"Mrs. Winslow," he said quickly, "I came to *give* you money, not to collect it."

There was a startled silence. "That's another story," she said in another voice, and opened the door. She was a willowy brunette, younger than he expected, certainly below thirty. She had sharp, acquisitive green eyes.

He stepped in and she closed the door. A small boy sat before the television in a huge chair which threatened to swallow him. Immediately she crossed and pulled him into her arms. "Time for beddy-bye," she told him. Stroking his head, she guided him from the room.

She came back in a moment. "Ronnie would be all over you," she explained. "Anyhow, it's past his bedtime. Please have a seat, Mr. . . . ?"

"Radcliffe. George Radcliffe." He sank into a chair and held the briefcase in his lap.

"Now," she said, "What's it all about? Did you really bring money from Nelson's estate?" She glanced shrewdly at the briefcase. "Don't tell me they found the missing cash!"

He stared. "What missing cash?"

"Why, that sixty thousand, of course. I'm sure he had nothing else in the world but debts."

For a moment he was paralyzed.

It was too fast. He had prepared himself for a long and circuitous route to the point. He was somehow a bit disappointed.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "we did find the missing sixty thousand—yes."

"You brought it with you!" It was almost a shout.

He smiled. "I brought it with me."

"In there!" She pointed at the briefcase.

"In here." He nodded.

"Cash?"

"Cash," Paul repeated quietly.

"Oh, my!" She squeezed her temples between her palms. "When can I have it?"

"Tonight. Right now, Mrs. Winslow."

"No strings?"

"None."

For several seconds she was intensely still, her head cocked. "What happened to that money?" she accused. "Where has it been all this time?"

"That's something I couldn't tell you even if I had the right. I was simply hired to return the money, no questions asked."

"Return?" She sat forward in her chair. "Does that mean it was stolen?"

"Not at all," he said hastily. "I can only guess that the money was given to my client by Mr. Winslow for—for safekeeping, shall we say."

"Does your, uh, client still live here in town?"

"No, not now."

"Will he be back?"

"Perhaps. I don't know."

"Didn't your client hear that Nelson was dead?"

"I couldn't say."

"In any case, why didn't he make some attempt to get in touch with Nelson?"

"I don't know that either. I'm just a kind of errand boy, Mrs. Winslow."

"Five years," she muttered. "More than five years." Her face became calculating. "Sixty thousand could earn quite a bit of interest in five years, I imagine."

"Well . . ." He was flustered. "Well, that's something I hadn't considered.

"*You* hadn't considered?"

"I mean to say, I doubt that my *client* has considered it."

"Come now, Mr. Radcliffe," she said with a sly expression, "aren't you your *own* client?"

"I resent that, Mrs. Winslow. What're you implying?"

"I'm implying that you stole the money—or kept it all these years."

He stood abruptly. "Apparently," he said, "we're not going to do business. Obviously, the money doesn't interest you." He moved toward the door.

"Wait!" she cried. "You're not a very good liar and you're not fooling me for a minute, but I don't care. I do want the money and you can forget the interest. I was just having a little fun with you."

"I'm not very amused," he said, but he went back and sat down.

"Have a drink and let's be friends," she offered. "Money is so terribly friendly. May I have it now?" She came over and he passed her the case without a word. She opened it and for several seconds stood fingering the bills with

a quiet, awed, hypnotic fascination.

"Where are you from?" she asked him.

"Chicago," he lied.

"How nice. Are you flying back tonight?"

"I'm driving," he answered.

"Have one for the road then. What do you drink?"

"Bourbon?"

"With soda?"

"That would be fine."

She went off with the briefcase. In a minute he heard her in the kitchen, then she brought him the drink.

He stayed for another. The whole time she was amiable, charming. Her spirit bubbled; she could hardly contain her joy over the money.

As he was leaving she said, "Well, drop in if you ever come back for a visit. And you can be sure I'll keep your secret, Mr. Radcliffe. Bye now."

He stormed out.

He hadn't been gone two minutes when she left the apartment with the briefcase and hurried down the hall. Pausing before a door, she unlocked it with a trembling hand and entered. She hid the case in her bedroom closet, then raced back to the Winslow apartment to wash the highball glasses and put everything in order.

She was sitting by the television, innocently watching, when Hazel Winslow returned.

"Hi, Judy," Hazel said. "Ronnie asleep?"

"Long ago." Judy yawned.

"Was he a good boy?"

"A little doll. How was the movie?"

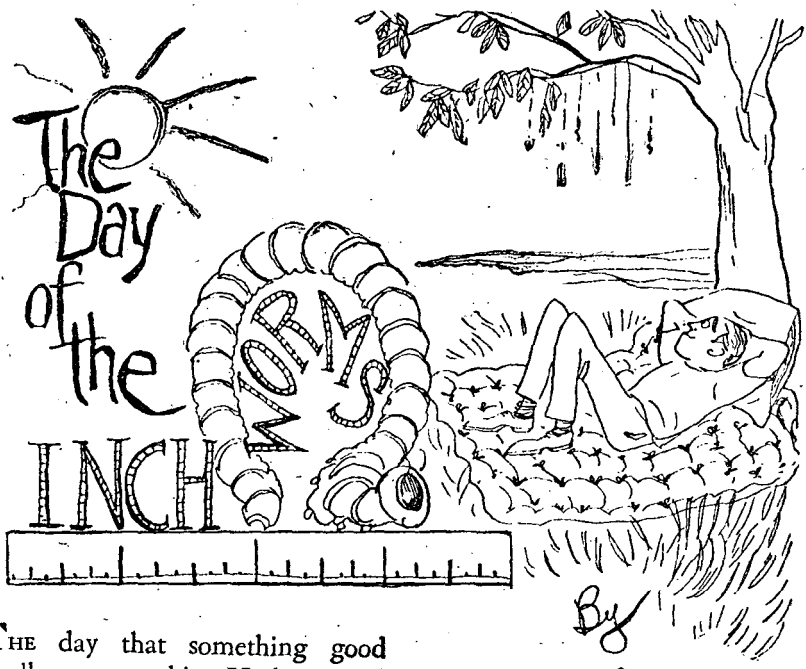
"Dull. A very unfunny comedy. Don liked it but he'd laugh at anything." Hazel opened her purse. "How much do I owe you, honey?"

"Nothing. It's on me tonight, Hazel. I've always hated taking money from an old friend, but I'm being generous because this is the last time. I'm leaving town tomorrow."

"You never said a word!" Hazel exclaimed.

"It was an impulse, a last minute decision."

It is possible, you know, that the lowly inchworm has heavenly aspirations, too.



THE day that something good finally came to him Herbie called the day of the inchworms. Slowly, slowly, had it come, like the inchworm working his way up to heaven.

He'd been lying out in the yard, in the lacy sun and shade of a tall elm, lying there watching the inchworms. There seemed to be dozens of them, all suspended in space at different heights, some going up, some coming down, tiny acrobats presenting a circus.

How can they do that, he wondered. He could see, for his eyesight was excellent; yes, twenty-

twenty, excellent, the eye doctor had said; he could see the gossamer strands they rode up and down but he still didn't understand it.

He reached up his hand and plucked one out of thin air. It crawled, surprised, down his finger.

From the house, his older brother called, "Herbie!"

Herbie lowered his hand, gently moved the inchworm to the grass where it bumped an ant and then curled up in a tiny yellow circle.

He answered his brother and Leonard came out on the porch, hands on his hips, and stared at him.

Herbie had brought out one of his sister-in-law Louise's quilts and a couple of pillows from his bed and he'd laid on them in the grass. It hadn't occurred to him until that moment that it might have been the wrong thing to do.

He pushed himself up to a sitting position, then stood and hurriedly began to gather up quilt and pillows, to get them back in the house before anybody said anything. The quilt took a bit of brushing.

"Put that stuff down," Leonard said, and Herbie blinked at him, held the quilt and pillows tighter. "There's somebody here to see you," Leonard went on. "Remember George Cavello?"

Herbie frowned. He tried not to, he tried his best to get his forehead to go back up where it belonged but it just wouldn't go. George Cavello? According to Leonard, he was supposed to know who George Cavello was, but he didn't know, he didn't know at all. "Yes," he said. "George Cavello."

"He's a big shot for the subway system now." Leonard smiled and Herbie inwardly cringed. It wasn't often that Leonard smiled at him and Herbie didn't class this one as one of Leonard's best smiles. "Come on in, Herbie. He wants to talk to you. He's got a job for you. Maybe."

"A job?" Herbie dropped quilt and pillows, almost fell over them in his haste to reach the steps. "True? A job? Honest, Leonard?"

"I said maybe." His brother's strong arm came out and halted him. "Now don't you get rattled, you hear me? You talk nice and slow, slow as you can. And talk only when you have to." Leonard shook him. "You hear me? Nobody wants you to get a job more than Louise and I do."

"I hear you, Leonard. I understand."

"Smooth down your hair. Straighten your shirt. Stand up, don't slouch like that. And remember, keep your mind on what you're doing."

"Yes, Leonard." Herbie waited

for more. There usually was more. It was part of a speech that he could have learned by heart if only he hadn't ceased to listen a long time ago.

Now he followed Leonard into the house, past Louise who said nothing but watched them walk through the kitchen, into the hall, the pale pink hall with its gleaming wood floor, into the living-room with its mint green furniture and off-white walls and Utrillo prints in antique white frames. Even though he was excited, Herbie took his regular pleasure in the colors.

Sitting on one of the mint green chairs was a big baldheaded man that Herbie was quite sure he'd never seen in his entire life but, wouldn't you know, Leonard, still smiling that kind of smile he'd smiled on the porch, said, "Herbie, you know George Cavello."

Herbie stole a sideways glance at Leonard and then put out his hand. George Cavello took it, squeezed it, pumped it up and down.

"George here might have an opening for you on the subway," Leonard said. "Sit down. He'll tell you all about it. Sit down, Herbie."

Herbie sat hurriedly on another mint green chair.

"This is the deal, Herbie," said George Cavello, leaning forward. He was smoking a long, black cigar and the smoke actually hid his eyes which was too bad because Herbie liked to watch a fellow's eyes. "We've been doing the subway stops over, one by one, trying to upgrade the entire line. We've been re-tiling the walls and painting and putting in new benches, getting it spotless, you know, a place where a lady, say with white gloves, and her little girl would be glad to go."

Herbie nodded. He liked things clean. That's why he shouldn't have put the quilt on the grass, he should have known better. He also liked the part about the lady with the white gloves and the little girl.

"And now that we're getting everything shipshape, we need people to see that it's kept that way. Keep the papers and stuff picked up, wash the fingerprints off the tile walls, give the floor a swab every so often. Keep the place looking right. It doesn't sound like much, maybe, but it's a big job, believe you me. A mighty big job."

Herbie thought, nodded again.

"Now, as you can imagine, we've got a lot of subway stations and we need three men for every one, on shifts, you know; three men on an eight-hour shift. It occurred to your brother and me that you might be just the man for one of these important jobs."

Dare he speak? He would try it,

slowly, cautiously. "I think I would like it very much." That's what he said but he knew it didn't come out exactly like that. A person with a harelip, and nothing done about it, couldn't talk very plain, but he had to speak to George Cavello because maybe George Cavello didn't know, or had forgotten about Herbie's harelip.

It didn't seem to matter. George Cavello was smiling like he meant it. "Well, that's fine, Herbie. We'll supply everything you need, even special cops, just in case anybody should ever give you a bad time. Not that they will, but just in case. I've got a spanking clean new stop for you, Dartmouth Place. It's just been finished, and you can start work tomorrow if you want to. The hours are from midnight to eight a.m. and the pay is a buck seventy-five an hour. Is it a deal?" He put out his hand.

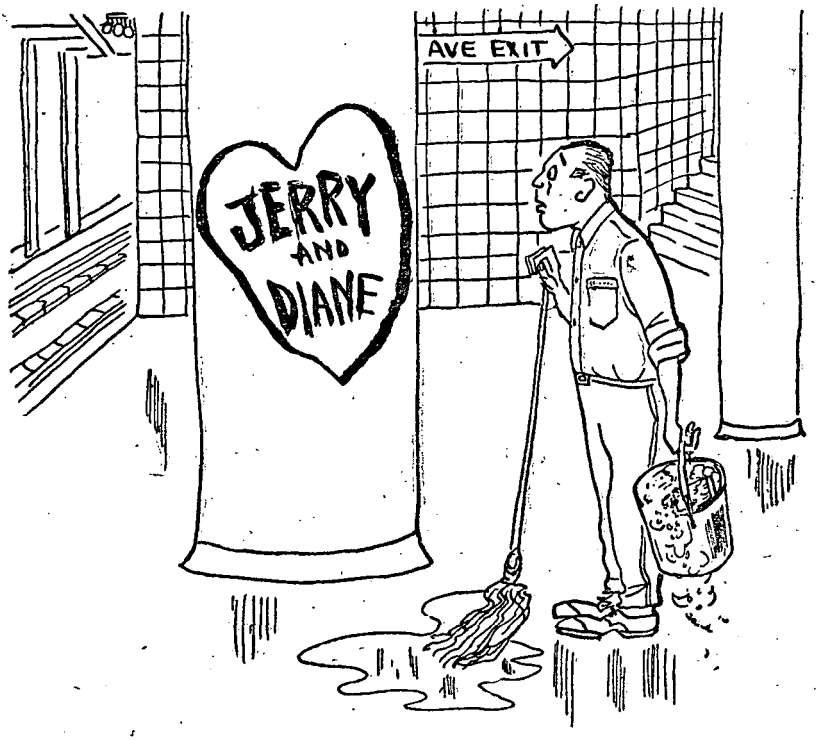
Herbie was almost afraid to look at Leonard. Was it all right? Yes, Leonard was smiling, too. Herbie put his hand into George Cavello's. "It's a deal!"

Herbie would have chosen another color scheme himself. Pastels were his favorites, but the subway stop was in tones of gray, with gray and white tiles on the walls. He supposed it was a matter of practicality. Pastels did get dirty easy and he was sure a lot of people came and went during the day in the Dartmouth Place subway stop. Not that he saw many of them, because people were few and far between during the hours of midnight to eight. Tonight, for instance, he'd seen only a couple and Tom Tinker, the night watchman who wandered around the place in a nice gray uniform, but that didn't bother him. He had plenty of time this way to do his tasks, and hardly anyone ever tracked up his freshly washed cement floor. He looked fondly at it and moved into the rest rooms to do his work there.

When Herbie came out of the comfort station, shining clean now it was, sparkling, he stopped dead still.

Somebody had written words on his clean gray pillar—a badly sketched heart with the names Jerry and Diane inside it. He felt instant rage. How dare they? How dare they desecrate this immaculate place? He looked around and listened, saw and heard no one. Where were they? Who were they? Were there people who didn't care at all?

With a bucket of soapy water in his hand, Herbie hurried to the square pillar that bore the names, began to scrub viciously at them with a sponge. The sponge wasn't



stiff enough, he needed cloth. He reached in his pocket and took out the clean handkerchief Louise had given him just before he came to work. He dipped it and rubbed with all his strength. Some of the marks came off but not all, not by a long shot. He scrubbed some more and stood back.

It wasn't going to work. There was still a trace. It would have to be painted over. If only he had some paint. Wait! The painters had left some of their equipment in the storeroom. He remembered seeing it. He ran to the storeroom, water from the pail slopping. He'd have to clean that up, too. He set the pail down and rummaged through the storeroom. Yes! There it was. Gray paint. But a brush? Where was a brush? In the corner on a shelf he spied a pile of cleaned brushes. He grabbed one and ran out with the paint can. Hurry, hurry before someone came and saw the marks, saw dirt in his clean place.

The lid of the paint can was hard to get off but he managed it

and began to paint. Places on the pillar were still damp from his washing. He ran into the rest room, brought tissue and wiped at it. Dry, dry! It seemed forever but finally he stepped back and saw the words no more—but the wet paint, the place he had painted showed. Maybe that was because it was wet. Maybe it was a different color. It showed. It showed! Then Herbie saw paint drips on the floor. He attacked them with his wet handkerchief. They spread and smeared. What could he do? Paint a piece all around the post? Paint the whole post because it might be the paint was two different colors and, if so, it would always show. He set at it, frantic in his haste. He had to have everything finished before it was time to go.

He made it. He just made it. When his replacement, an old time subway employee named Driscoll arrived, Herbie was sitting for the first time in eight hours, surveying his handiwork with satisfaction. "Doesn't it look beautiful?" he asked Driscoll.

"Give 'em time," yawned Driscoll. "They'll have it looking like an outhouse in a couple of weeks."

"That's not the right attitude," Herbie wanted to say but he daren't. Still he went home happy and slept. The first crisis on his job had passed and he'd handled it well.

When he arrived for work the next night, everything was a mess. There was litter on the platform, gum wrappers and gum, too, cigarette butts, old newspapers. What did those other guys who were there all day do?

A few people came down and waited for a late train and Herbie worked around them. There was so much to do and so little time to do it in. His paintwork was pretty dry. It had been smudged in a place or two, though. He should have thought to put up a sign saying wet paint. The smudges bothered him, but from a distance they didn't show. He went into the comfort station and began to clean.

When he came out his mouth fell open in disbelief. It was there again, Jerry and Diane, not on the same pillar but on another one. He closed his mouth with a snap and looked around. Who was doing this thing? The platform was deserted. He went into both rest rooms. There was nobody there. He ran up the steps and found Tinker on the upper platform. Had he seen anybody?

"Not in some time. Something the matter?" He gave Herbie an odd look.

Herbie shook his head and went back down. Whoever had done it had sneaked in and gone.

Sneaked in. Could it be that someone was doing this on purpose? To discomfort him? But who? Who would try to get him put out of a job? Yet, clearly that was the reason. The supervisor would come around and see it and he'd say, "When did this happen? Why didn't somebody do something about it?" Then he'd find out it happened during Herbie's shift and he'd fire him.

Thoughtfully, Herbie got out the paint and brush and began to paint.

The next night Herbie went into the rest room and peeked out the door. He saw no one suspicious and nothing happened. Breathing a sigh of relief, he had to give the rest rooms only a quick cleaning because he'd spent so much time watching, but he'd make up for it the next night because he'd scared them off.

Accordingly, the next night he planned his work so he could do a good job on the bathrooms. It hadn't been on purpose, the writing; some kid, probably, out late a couple of nights. Herbie whistled while he scoured. He'd learned to dump the cleaning water out in the lavatory before he went out. He'd found that if he didn't, he had to go back and do it—and while he was whistling and cleaning so prettily, the names appeared again, like magic, on another post.

"Aha!" Herbie spoke aloud. "Who's out to get me?" His voice echoed, ran down the now silent track. "I'll fix you," he said loudly. "Don't worry, I know who you are. I'll fix you." He began to paint. Oho, the paint was getting low. What would he do when he ran out of paint?

He'd have to catch his enemy first.

He'd watch and collar him and he'd give him what for, that's what he'd do. He'd teach him not to desecrate Herbie's property. He could almost see himself shaking the culprit, no, more than shaking. This one would need more than a talking-to, that he knew already. Herbie would have to give him the fright of his life.

Who had this big hatred for him, anyway? Who wanted him to fail? And fail he would if the supervisor ever saw Jerry and Diane written on the new gray walls.

His father! Yes, he would be the first on the list, and then his mother. Only they were both dead and in their graves and he certainly knew enough to know there wasn't any such thing as a ghost. There wasn't any such thing.

No, it had to be someone else.

His brother Leonard!

Yes, it could be Leonard or Leonard's wife, Louise. Both

would love to see him lose his job. Oh, they pretended otherwise but he knew. Ever since they were boys, Leonard had hated him, had resented the duty of taking Herbie around with him. Everywhere Leonard had taken him, but that was because Herbie's mother and father couldn't stand having him around. Yes, it had to be Leonard or Louise. There just wasn't anyone else. And they thought he would be too stupid to figure it out!

Very well. He would set a trap for them.

He took Leonard's gun from its holster while his brother was sleeping and tucked it under his sandwiches in the lunch pail that Louise had given him. Peanut butter again! She knew he hated peanut butter.

Almost half-heartedly he cleaned up the day's debris and watched the riders take the night owl train. Then, when all was quiet, he slipped into the rest room with the door ajar. No cleaning tonight. No mopping. Just watching and waiting. And then, "I've got you!" The scare of their lives!

He had been afraid he would get sleepy, but he didn't. His eyes stayed wide and all-seeing, noticing every shadow in every corner, covering the entire length of the platform, seeing even into the blackness of the train tunnel—but no one came.

It was getting late. He couldn't remember what time the names had been painted the other nights. Maybe they knew he was there. Maybe somebody could see through walls and into heads. Maybe there were ghosts.

Then he heard it—somebody talking; a male and a female, low voices; Leonard and Louise! Of course! He took the gun from his cleaning basket and held it ready.

The female, Louise, giggled. They thought it was funny, did they? They'd find out. The man, Leonard, said something and then there was silence. Louise laughed again.

They were coming closer.

"Write it pretty," said Louise.

"Next time I'll bring a red pen," said Leonard.

Herbie burst out of the rest room and caught them in the act of defacing his pillar. He didn't mean to fire the gun, he didn't mean to, but it was in his hand and he was so angry, so very angry, that his finger simply squeezed of its own volition.

The female screamed. The man, Leonard, the boy, the male . . . fell. There were running footsteps and a loud voice cried, "Halt! Halt!" And then something like a boomerang hit Herbie and he fell

into the track section, into utter darkness.

When he awoke, he was hurting and he couldn't move. The bed he lay on was unfamiliar. It was white, everything was white, and he realized he was in a hospital. He heard a sound and tried to look around. His twenty-twenty vision wasn't so good now. Finally, Leonard's face swam into view.

"It wasn't you, Leonard," he said feebly. He could hardly understand himself. They must have given him dope or something.

"Herbie." Leonard made a funny noise. He was crying. He had come from work. He had on his policeman's uniform.

"You don't hate me," said Herbie with great effort.

Leonard came closer, leaned over him. "Of course I don't hate you. I don't understand what happened. You took my gun. They were just a couple of teenagers making love in the deserted subway station; a pair of kids named Jerry Collins and Diane Freemont. Why did you do it?"

Herbie tried to make his mouth work. It was so hard to explain, there was so much to tell about it and he hadn't the time. Finally, he shook his head.

"All right. All right," said Leonard. "Save your strength. Don't try to talk. Louise is on her way down. Believe me, Herbie, we're going to get you well."

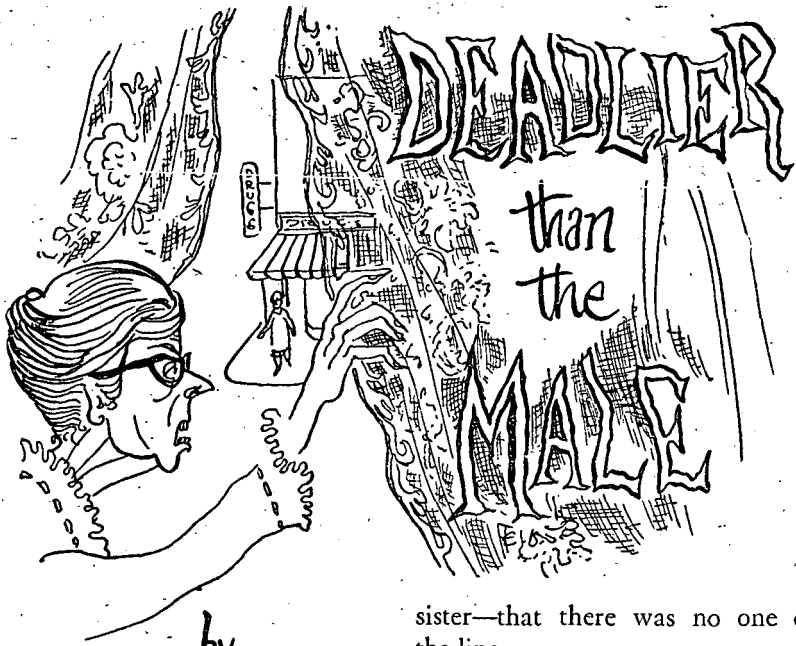
Herbie thought the words over, *get you well.* He'd been shot. Tom Tinker, he remembered. Tom Tinker from the upper platform, that's what the boomerang had been. He'd come down and seen the boy lying there and Herbie holding a gun. So he'd shot Herbie and now Herbie was going to die. He was going to fade away into a soft blue sky where the inchworms went. He gave that some thought, and gave the boy and the girl some thought, and he sighed.

"Leonard," he said weakly, "what happens to inchworms?"

"Inchworms? Inchworms? Why, the birds eat them, I guess."

Herbie nodded. He understood that. The birds were bigger and stronger . . . and much prettier.

Occasionally a person is confronted with perspicacity when he least expects it.



by Elijah Ellis

For several days Agatha Milburn didn't suspect anything about the phone in the apartment ringing at odd intervals, only to find—if she happened to answer, instead of her sister—that there was no one on the line.

Once she did snap at her sister Tessie, "I don't see how people can be so stupid. Always calling wrong numbers."

Tessie nodded her graying head, and perhaps her eyes did not quite meet Agatha's as she replied, "Yes, it happens all the time. You're not used to being home during the day. That's when most—"

"Very well," Agatha said shortly, then limped painfully toward her room. Almost a week had passed since she had badly sprained her ankle when she had tripped on a steep flight of stairs, but the worst part of it was—by doctor's orders—enforced inactivity, and confinement to the small apartment she shared with her sister.

Agatha was beginning to think the place was too small, for both of them. Before the accident, she hadn't given it a thought since she was so seldom there, except to sleep. She had a busy schedule of club meetings, teas, political activity, committees and the like.

Tessie was the homebody. As far as Agatha knew, her younger sister seldom set foot out of the apartment, being content to keep the place in spotless order and watch television. Actually, this wasn't quite true, but in any case the arrangement had worked well enough—until now.

Ten or fifteen minutes after the latest annoying phone call, which Agatha had answered only to find no one on the line, Tessie poked her head into Agatha's bedroom.

"I have to go to the store," Tessie said. "Is there—"

"No, I don't need anything," Agatha grumbled. She went back to the book she was reading, propped up on her bed, but when she heard the apartment door close behind Tessie, she laid her book—a work on slum clearance, one of her pet projects—on the bedside table and frowned at the lacy curtains on the window overlooking the street.

There was something nagging at the back of her mind, something about the series of "wrong number" calls that formed a vague pattern. Agatha squeezed shut her pale blue eyes and concentrated. There had been at least one or two calls each day since she'd been home, not at any particular time although usually in the afternoon, but that wasn't what was bothering her.

No, it was . . . Her eyes snapped open and she gave a startled grunt. It was the rings: one ring, then a pause—just long enough for the caller to break the connection, then dial again—and a second ring. By that time either she or Tessie would reach the phone, only to find the line dead.

"Good heavens," Agatha breathed. But who? And why?

Suddenly she sat up straight and tense, and her rather long, bony face tightened into a scowl. There was no getting around it—every time these last few days that there had been one of these calls, within minutes Tessie had given some excuse and left the apartment.

The more Agatha thought about it, the more she became convinced that the pattern of cause and effect was too clear to be coincidence. Tessie had gone to use a phone—privately.

Agatha got out of bed and limped to the window. She looked out and down at the sunlit street. The nearest phone booth would be the one at the drugstore on the corner there. She drummed blunt fingertips on the windowsill, waiting, and watching. Then her angular body stiffened as she saw Tessie—coming out of the front door of the drugstore.

Agatha slowly returned to the bed and sat down. What could it mean? But could there be any doubt?

Tessie was carrying on a secret affair of some kind, an affair of which she was positive Agatha would not approve, and that could only mean—a man.

Agatha's first impulse was a scornful laugh at the idea of plump, fortyish little Tessie, having a lover. Nonsense, and yet . . . The laugh died away, as Agatha thought back through the years.

There had been few, if any, men in Agatha's life—in a romantic sense—even as a girl, but Tessie had been popular enough. In fact, she might have married on a couple of occasions, without the stern good offices of their late mother. However, that was years ago. This was now.

Agatha rubbed her forehead feverishly. The fellow members of her various clubs and committees might have been startled at the look of apprehension, even fear, that softened her craggy features. It wasn't just the idea of perhaps losing a willing and inexpensive servant. It was the idea that Tessie might, at this late date, marry and move away, while Agatha . . .

No. The thought was intolerable; not to be allowed, at any cost. But how to make Tessie see reason, without driving her away? Certainly, there was the financial aspect. Agatha controlled the small but adequate estate their parents had left them, but would that alone stop Tessie?

The whole matter would take serious thought. The only thing positive and unshakable was Agatha's determination to put a stop to her sister's foolish affair—at any cost.

When Tessie returned to the apartment moments later, breathless and strangely—or perhaps not so strangely—radiant, Agatha said nothing. For now, she would watch and wait.

That evening Tessie went to a movie. Or so she said.

At breakfast next morning, Aga-

tha noticed a certain satisfied, almost voluptuous air about her sister, and a hard fist knotted in Agatha's stomach.

It was a little after two that afternoon when the phone rang. One ring, pause, one ring. This time instead of watching the phone, Agatha watched Tessie. She saw the quick half-smile, and the faint flush that came over Tessie's plump face as she picked up the phone; then, "Wrong number."

Not more than a quarter of an hour later Tessie found she was out of a few things and needed to go to the grocery but, as Agatha saw from her bedroom window, Tessie hurried straight from the apartment building to the corner drugstore.

But who was the man? That was the important thing. There were a few things that could be deduced about him. Agatha limped about the small, well-furnished apartment, her angular head bent in thought.

The man obviously wanted to keep the affair with Tessie a secret, otherwise he wouldn't have agreed to the rather childish phone-signal arrangement; and since the calls did not come at a set time of day, he was a man who had a job where he had constant access to a private phone, or did not work at all.

Agatha knew Tessie—or did she?—but yes, knew her well enough to know she wouldn't get involved to this extent, except with a man somewhere near her own age, and most likely someone she had known for a long time; perhaps a married man. That would

make the most sense. But . . . who?

A picture took shape in Agatha's mind, and with the picture came a name: Leland Harris, a now-successful man in his early forties, with a wife he did not love—or so Agatha had heard—but couldn't divorce without losing a great deal of his financial position.

Twenty years earlier Leland Harris and Tessie had been on the verge of elopement until Tessie's mother—*dear Mother,* Agatha thought, with a catch in her breath, *how I wish you were here now*—until Mother scotched their little plan.

Yes. If the man were Leland Harris, it would explain everything. Agatha gave a decisive nod. Agatha had the innate and cultivated ability to make decisions, even from insufficient data, and more often than not she turned out to be quite right; or so she thought, which amounts to the same thing, for all practical purposes.

That evening at dinner Agatha looked across the table at her sister. Tessie had a Mona Lisa smile on her face, and in the soft glow of the candles—they always had dinner by candlelight, since that was how it had been in their home when they were children—she looked almost young.

Agatha had been stating her views on various subjects, as was also customary. Now, with hardly a break in her flow of conversation, she said, "Whatever happened to Leland Harris?

For a long moment Tessie didn't react. Then her mild eyes widened and she came to attention. "Leland Harris? Why, I-I'm sure I don't know. Why do you ask, Agatha dear?"

Agatha inwardly gave a grim chuckle, but aloud she said only, "Just passing curiosity. His name came up a few weeks ago as a possible member of our slum-improvement committee."

During the rest of the evening, Agatha noted that from time to time Tessie was watching her with a perplexed, uneasy frown on her face.

That was enough, for Agatha. She was sure now that the man was Leland Harris; especially sure when, at nine-thirty, Tessie suddenly said, "I just remembered. I must run down to the drugstore. We're out of aspirin."

"Or is it that you want to make a phone call?" Agatha muttered, after Tessie had gone out. As a matter of fact, she wanted to make a call herself, to one of her clubwomen who was an intimate of the Harris family.

The call was quite revealing. Agatha, shaken, went to her room

before Tessie got back. It seemed that, after all, Leland Harris was in the process of divorcing his wife. No question about "another woman" had been raised, but here Agatha's confidante had paused a significant moment, then added, "But you know how *that* goes."

"Yes," Agatha had whispered. "Yes, I know."

She also knew what had to be done. The chance came two days later, when Tessie went to see the family attorney for a bimonthly accounting. Agatha had always taken care of this matter but this time she pleaded too much pain in her still swollen ankle, so Tessie went.

That gave Agatha most of the morning to act. As usual, her actions were quite direct and positive.

She got her late father's .38 pistol from the cedar chest where it was kept. She loaded it with only slightly unsteady fingers. Then, ignoring twinges in her ankle at every step, she left the apartment, got her car from the garage, and drove downtown.

During the past day she had managed to learn that Harris was taking an extended vacation from his office until the divorce was settled, and also that he had moved out of his home to a hotel. She had learned his room number by a discreet phone call to the desk clerk.

Agatha entered the hotel through a side door and took an elevator to the fourth floor. She knocked at the door of room 406. She looked along the corridor—empty.

The door opened and Leland Harris stood there, his eyes widening in astonishment. "Aren't you—"

"Yes," Agatha gritted, and shot him twice. He fell, dead.

Still unobserved as far as she could tell, Agatha returned home, cleaned and put away her father's gun—and that was that; rather drastic, perhaps.

"But drastic ills require drastic remedies," she told herself with grim satisfaction. Now there would be no more nonsense about Tessie.

Agatha took two aspirins and lay down until Tessie got back from the lawyer's office. Tessie appeared somewhat pale and shaken, as if she might have heard the news of Harris' death on one of the frequent news reports on her car radio, but she said nothing; neither did Agatha.

That same evening, due to the day's strain on her ankle, she lost her balance while getting out of the shower and fell to the tiled bathroom floor. The pain was so great, she fainted. Tessie's face was

the first she saw when she recovered and found herself in her bed, her left leg in the process of being put into a cast by a hastily summoned doctor.

"It's a simple fracture," the doctor reassured her, "but you will need to remain in bed for several days. Your sister has told me she will, of course, take care of you so I see no need for you to enter a hospital."

Agatha nodded weakly. She hadn't thought she'd taken a fall bad enough to fracture her leg, but evidently she had. Well, so be it. She had the strength to bear it. As she drifted off to sleep she added to herself, with a sense of a job well done, there would be no more "wrong number" phone calls, either.

When her sister served her breakfast in bed next morning. Agatha saw that Tessie looked a great deal older than she had this time yesterday.

"Don't worry, dear Tessie. I'll be all right," Agatha said maliciously.

Shortly after noon, Agatha found she had nothing to read and Tessie volunteered to go to the book store. When she was alone in the apartment, Agatha chuckled drily. After all, perhaps the broken leg was her punishment, not for killing Leland Harris, but for not realizing for so long that—

The phone rang. Agatha hunched up on her elbows and peered toward it through the open door of her room: one ring; pause; another ring; silence.

"Oh, no," Agatha gasped. "No—*no!* It can't be!"

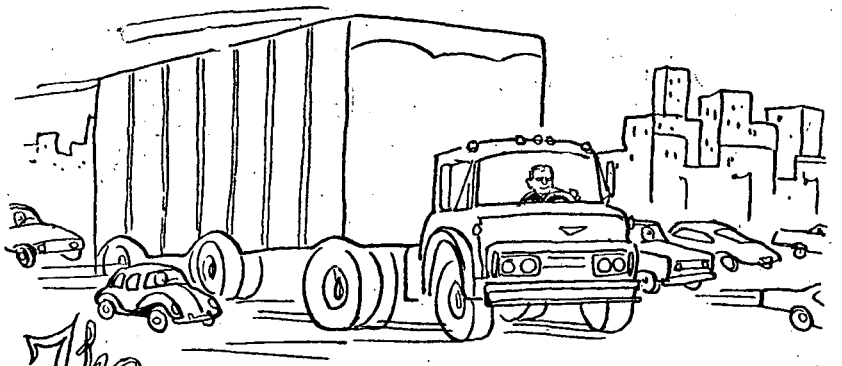
Ring; pause; ring. *She had killed the wrong man. Ring—*

Each ring was louder, more devastating than the last, until Agatha screamed with pain at their racket. *Ring. Pause. Ring.*

Down at the drugstore on the corner, Tessie carefully replaced the phone on its hook and left the phone booth. She was smiling—but not a pretty smile.

"Every day, dear Agatha," she said softly. "I'll call at least once every day, just as I broke your leg last night, while you were unconscious. Every day—as long as it takes . . ."

A favorable juncture of circumstances is rarely neglected by an opportunist, of one breed or the other.



The BIG RIG

By Edward Y. Breese

THE Boss gave me my final instructions and two hundred dollars expense money. "Get going," he said, "and mind you don't forget all the things I've told you."

The crisp green bills felt good in my hand. I like easy living. I stuffed them into my wallet. "What if I don't make connections?" I asked. "It's a big city, and a lot will be going on by the time I get there."

He just laughed and gave me a cigar. "A real pro like you always makes out, Pop. Just be in the right spot at the right time, and you'll make connections. Don't forget—knowing how to do that is what I'm paying you for."

"And all the time I thought it was my high school diploma got me the job." I lit the cigar and

went out to the parking lot to warm up my big trailer truck for the road.

It was years since I'd been behind the wheel of one of those big babies. A whole ocean of water had gone over the dam since then, but I guess a man never forgets any skill he'd once taken the trouble to learn. By the time I got out on the open reaches of the Interstate I was pushing her right along like it had been only yesterday, and enjoying every minute of it.

I always did like driving the big rigs. It's like being the king of the road, sitting high and secure and looking down on the farmers as they jockey their tractors in the fields. The compacts and the foreign bugs and the kids in old convertibles scoot around me like a school of minnows skirting a big bass. The VIPs in their six thousand dollar jobs come up over the horizon with a rush and go whooming on past. I pity them, locked in their antiseptic, air-conditioned cubicles and hurrying too much to notice anything but the road.

The engine of this baby had been tuned to the purr of a cream-fed cat, and the sides painted with the name and address of a firm that had operated in the big city up to a couple of years ago. It was one of those outfits that hired the rig with the driver, so my being free for special contract would be covered. I had plates for the state and county of my destination, and even had ownership and local identification papers made out in my own name and creased and soiled like I'd been carrying them six years instead of six hours. Give the boss credit—what he does he does right.

All the way in I kept the radio going in the cab. I like music. The news bulletins were almost all about the riots, of course. As the day wore on the announcers sounded progressively excited and scared. Mobs were still milling around the South Side, it was reported. The fire department had pretty well finished with the fires lit last night, but more were expected as soon as it got dark. The district was full of liquor looted from the package stores. Sometime after noon it was announced on "reliable authority" that the governor had a call in for National Guard units to back up the exhausted and belabored city police.

Don't get me wrong now. I don't like riots. I had nothing to do with starting this one or any other. They never seem to do any good for the characters that do the rioting, and why they do it I wouldn't even want to guess. Whatever it is they want, to me a riot is sure the

hardest way to go about getting it.

I was heading for this one strictly on orders from the Boss. "When the hen house gets smashed and all that meat is loose," he'd said, "the smart fox comes running. When the bee tree blows down, any passing bear can eat honey." Sometimes I think the Boss must have been born a country boy. Of course, I never dared ask.

The road I was on had been picked to bring me into town from the north. Even so, I was held up once while a column of big, green, Army personnel carriers and jeeps stuffed full of kids in steel pots went by. It took my thoughts back to '42.

I followed them in, keeping to the routes that had been marked out for me on the city map. At the truck lot I found that the Boss had phoned ahead like he'd promised, and they were holding a slot for my rig.

From there I walked the five blocks of run-down discount stores, fly-blown markets, girlie movie houses and cheap bars to Millie's Mother's Home Hotel. The bars were all closed by order of the mayor. At least the fronts were shuttered, though I could hear suspicious noises from inside. There were only a few pedestrians, and they mostly seemed in a hurry. Even here, a mile north of the river, some of the merchants had boarded their windows and locked up.

I've known Millie for at least thirty years, ever since she started in the carny circuit as one of the undraped Living Statues in old Dan Biggs' peephole show. She sure was a looker then. Later on she'd married Jeff Davidson, who owned the Carolina Colossal Shows. When he died, she sold out and bought the Mother's Home.

On the outside it was just another flea-bag, but a big one, half a block long and five stories of little rooms with worn-out carpets, oak dressers and ancient iron beds. Looks can be deceptive. Millie put good mattresses on those beds and kept the heat up in the winter. She loved to talk, but never in front of strangers and never out of turn. An old friend could be real comfortable at the Mother's Home, and no questions asked as long as he didn't set the place on fire or beat up his girlfriend in the lobby.

The guests were carny people, drifters and grifters, a few girls who seemed to like walking in the night air, a couple of living fossils from vaudeville days, local guys who never seemed to work, and old friends like me. There was a rear annex where the blinds were kept drawn, and Millie carried in trays of food and drinks herself.

No annex guest ever showed his face out front.

When I registered, Millie came from behind the counter and gave me a big kiss. "For old times' sake, Al," she said. Millie still had her figure, though it had expanded somewhat here and there, but in a tight dress it was still good. She knew how to kiss, so I felt it right down to my toes. The whole lobby watched appreciatively.

"Old times were the best, Millie," I told her when I could catch my breath. I tried for another kiss, but she slipped out of my reach.

"Boys," she said to the assembled lobby-sitters, "meet Al. Al's an old friend of mine—a lot of friend—and not as old as he looks by the feel of that kiss." She pulled me to one side. "What brings you to town, Al?"

I spoke loud enough so I was sure the nearest ears could pick it up. "Just looking for a chance to score, Millie. I'm in business for myself these days. I've got my own road rig, and I haul anything a man wants moved to anyplace he names. It's a chance to see the country—only sometimes the competition gets rough."

She picked that up. "You in a bind, Al? For what we had once, you can stay here a while on the cuff." Millie had too much heart to get rich.

"Thanks, no," I said. "I'm still solvent, but it's been a while since the last payday. I started up this way to see what I could pick up here."

"You sure picked a bum time. With all the ruckus over on the South Side, nothing will be moving here for a week or so."

"I'll wait if I have to," I said. "It'll be a chance for you and me to get acquainted again."

Her eyes were a lot younger than her face when she looked at me. "So it will, Al. Go on up to your room. I'll see you later."

I took the slow-motion elevator up to the third floor and got myself a hot bath and a change of clothes. Then I headed for the hotel bar. The street door was locked and the neon sign dark, but the lobby entrance was open.

Through the curtained arch at the rear of the bar a small locked door opened into the big back room. At a nod from Millie the barkeep pushed the button to let me through. The back room crowd was about evenly divided between serious drinkers and the "businessmen"—numbers runners figuring their accounts, hot-watch and phony-perfume peddlers, ambulance runners, and touts beefing because the riots had closed the track. Card games were going at two of the tables in spite of the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early hour. The smoke was thick.

I mingled and talked, and talked and mingled, and had a few drinks. I was perfectly open about it. I let them know about my rig and that I was looking for a haul. I also got it across that I was an old pal of Millie's, had ridden the liquor trucks down from Canada as a teen-age punk, and was available for almost any sort of haul—or for a fast buck in any form. I knew the grapevine is hyperactive in times of stress, and the word would get around town fast. All I'd have to do, I hoped, was wait.

Late that night, Millie had me up to her private suite on the top floor for some old brandy and other things. There were good carpets and heavy furniture, and an air-conditioner against the heat. Through the windows we could see the red glow of the fires that now seemed to blanket the South Side. When I opened a window to listen, the voice of the riots came over the distance, ominously laced with wailing sirens and the pop-pop of rifle fire. Millie made me close the window. It was late when I got back to my own room.

In the morning I switched on my pocket transistor radio before even getting out of bed. It was all news of the riots. The soldiers had really gone in there the night before. Seven hundred people had been arrested and eighty-odd put in the hospital. A popular sergeant had his brains shot out by some crazy sniper, and after that his buddies really went to town. There were other dead on both sides. By morning things were pretty well under control. The Army had combat posts at all major intersections, and the streets were clear. Most of the big fires were burning out. South Side stores had been looted clean to the walls and torched.

The mayor and the governor had issued a joint statement. The gist of it was, "The Marines have landed." One more day was expected to finish things up and see peace restored.

"All to the good," I told myself. "Ten to one somebody makes the contact today." I put on an old suit that was a lot better quality than it looked. Since I came in sight of the half-century mark and thickened a bit at the middle I've worn my suits cut loose. This jacket hid the short-barreled .38 revolver in a reverse belt holster back of the right hip. A gun hides best there because it's in the hollow of the back. With the reverse holster the butt points forward, ready for a cavalry quick-draw. I also had a couple of rolls of nickles in my right-hand jacket pocket.

About ten in the morning I went

downstairs and ordered breakfast brought to me at a table in the back room where I could watch who came and went. I had a thick ham steak and four fried eggs, grits and red-eye gravy, a platter of biscuits with honey, and a whole pot of strong coffee. I figured I might need the calories before the day was out.

Early in the afternoon Millie came to get me. "Man in the private office looking for you, Al," she said. "You better see him, but watch out. I think this one's a cop. I *know* he's rodded—small stutter-gun in a left-handed belt holster."

"Thanks, honey," I said. "I can take a hint."

I got up whistling, "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine," and followed her to the small office behind the front desk.

The character waiting for me was young, hard, and mean in that order. He couldn't have been twenty-five, without an ounce of fat on him, and with the soft hands of a punk who uses a weapon when he fights. I figured when he was fourteen his gang started getting their kicks out of beating old drunks to death to hear them yell.

"You Pop Barnes?" he asked.

"I'm Al Barnes," I said. "*Mister* Barnes to you."

He looked at me then. "Don't get feisty, Pop. 'Less you'd like a faceful of knuckles."

I had my gun muzzle nudging his wishbone before he even noticed that I'd moved. The hammer was back, and my hand was steady as a rock. "You're only alive," I said, "because you're young and ignorant. Now get out of here." I lifted his gun with my left hand while I was talking. It was a lousy little Italian automatic, good only for shooting a dying puppy.

To give him credit, he managed to grin at me even while his eyes showed murder. "Sorry," he said. "I meant *Mister* Pop, of course. No offense, now?"

It suited me to put my gun away and toss his on the desk where he could pick it up. "No offense," I told him. "A man gets touchy at my age."

"I guess he does." It was grudging admiration. "Will you show me that draw sometime?"

Millie let out a long sigh of relief, and went away so we could talk in private.

This was the man the Boss had told me to watch for. "I think he'll be there," he'd said. "You just ride to the sound of the guns, so to speak, and let on you're available. He'll contact you, all right."

He had. "I'm a cop," he said, but made no effort to prove it then. He went on to outline his proposition, and it was almost exactly what I'd been told to expect.

"These riots are just about dead," he told me. "By tomorrow everything will be quiet. Starting this afternoon we work 'Operation Property Recovery'. It's gotten to be pretty near SOP at these shindigs. The Army stands by while the police go in and try to retrieve as much as possible of the stuff that was stolen while the riot was going on. Of course there's no house to house search. That would just start trouble all over. We send in cops in pairs, each pair with a bull-horn and riding in a big truck. Every block or so we stop the truck and tell them over the bull-horn to bring the stuff to us. The gimmick is, nobody who turns in his loot right now gets arrested or prosecuted."

"Do they go for that?" I asked.

"Not all of them do, but enough. Of course we don't get back money or whiskey or much small stuff. You'd be surprised, though, at the furniture they lug out of those alleys—sofas, beds, dining sets, big appliances like stoves and refrigerators, and radios and TV sets. In one town farther east the force picked up over four thousand TVs the first day."

"So?"

"So don't play innocent, Pop. Some of the boys on the force just don't like to see all that valuable stuff go to waste. Not after we been risking our necks over this mess, we don't. After all, who gets hurt? The merchants got insurance, ain't they? We got a contact, see. As soon as the truck fills up we go to a certain place and dump the stuff, then back in for more. Only the last couple loads go to the official warehouse. In all the confusion, who notices?"

"I see," I said. "But your trouble is you can't use a regular police truck to haul that kind of load. So you need my trailer."

"On the button, Pop. It's easy enough. The city's hiring all the extra trucks it can get for a quick job. The whole thing's got to be done in a hurry or not at all. You just meet my partner and me where I tell you, and drive where

we say. I'll have an order made out for your truck. The dispatcher gets paid for it. It's a fast five hundred fish and no risk, Pop."

This was exactly what I wanted. "No dice!" I said.

"Whatta you mean, no dice?" He knew all right.

"You can't move without me," I said. "Thirty percent or the wheels don't roll."

If I hadn't showed greedy, he'd never have trusted me. That's the way it is. Ten minutes later we settled on fifteen percent. Not that I really cared. I had my own plans for that truckload. I was sure too that he'd promise whatever he had to and pay off only what he chose. We made the deal.

An hour later I had my rig on the lot he'd indicated. Tough Boy was in uniform by then. He'd told me his name was George Danker. Big, blond, and still mean looking, he introduced his partner as Pete Miller. Pete was shorter, with brown eyes and black hair; a nice looking, soft-spoken young fellow. They made an odd match.

George had the city hire-order like he'd promised. "Money will buy anything," he said. "It would have bought a regular police truck, only some mark would be sure to see us roll it into the wrong warehouse to unload."

"Your place right here in town?" I asked. "Nearby, is it?"

"We'll tell you where it is when it's time, Pop," George told me. "This operation's all planned from soup to nuts. Our contact even advances expense money to bribe the dispatcher, and has a bondsman and a mouthpiece all ready in case we get picked up on the way to his place."

"How do we get paid?"

"Cash on the barrelhead." This was from Pete. "The stuff is inventoried as we unload. We get twenty-five percent of wholesale valuation in cash before you turn a wheel away from the dock. Same for any other loads we bring in."

"A quarter of wholesale ain't much."

George answered this—a bit too fast for my liking. "It's a lot better than overtime pay. Besides, this is a one-shot deal. Whatever we get is pure gravy. The buyer takes all the risk of holding the stuff and getting it out of here to a market. He won't clear much more than we do."

"How come you know all about it, George?" Pete asked as I slowed down at the tail of a line of trucks passing the National Guard check point.

"It don't take no genius to figure," George said. "What makes you ask?"

"As I remember it, this was your

contact," Pete said. "You ever do business with this guy before?"

"I did not. What do you care as long as you get your cash in the hand?"

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

I did. My own hit later on could be an awful lot easier if I knew for sure in advance who was masterminding this whole deal. I'd narrowed it down in my own mind to one of a dozen men. Still, I could be clean wrong, but if I wasn't, a couple of those possibles would be a lot harder to take than the others.

It was easy to see how the whole operation was set up and worked. As soon as Mr. Big figured (or got tipped by his own sources) that a town was ripe for rioting, he'd move in. He had to rent a warehouse and make a couple of contacts on the police force. The local grapevine could spot those for him. Or he could bring in his own men and put them in uniform for the day. In the confusion, with everybody worn out anyway, who'd spot them? After it was all over, he'd move the loot out in his own trucks with forged bills of lading. There's no internal Customs in this country.

As far as I could see there was really only one weak spot in the whole operation. The Boss had spotted that for me, and I had to agree with him.

The lieutenant of infantry at the checkpoint was only a kid. He'd been in the streets for more than thirty-six hours and his face was drawn with fatigue. He stamped our pass without trying to read it. "You know where to go?"

"We sure do, soldier boy," George said. As a veteran, I resented the sneer in his tone.

I guess the lieutenant was too tired even to do that. "Move along, then."

George's expense money had bought us assignment to a rabbit-warren of slum tenements backing up to the main business street of the district. The smoking cellar holes and tottering charred walls on that street had been the best stores on the South Side only a couple of days before.

Back of the fires there was less rubble in the narrow streets. I could sense eyes watching us out of the blank windows. The hair on the back of my neck crawled.

George told me where to stop. Then he got the bull-horn going, and broadcast his message. Looted property was going to be recovered. Everybody could rely on that. The mayor and governor were really their friends. Nobody wanted to hurt anybody else if it could possibly be helped. Anybody who brought stuff out to the truck voluntarily would be considered as

volunteer helpers. No charges would be made, no names taken, no fuss, no muss, no bother.

He kept telling them: "Bring it out now. Right now." He said it was their last chance. The merchants and the insurance companies would be after the mayor later on; it would all be recovered anyway. Here was a chance to stay out of trouble. That was his big message, and he was a real talker. He made it sound good.

At first nothing happened. Ten minutes went by; fifteen. Then a man and a woman came out of an alley carrying a six-hundred-dollar color TV set. Pete helped them load it in the empty truck.

That broke the ice. We had the truck full right up to the roof in only three stops. It was all good, expensive stuff too, with only a couple of pieces showing fire damage.

Of course we didn't get it all. Nobody expected to. The real tough alley rats already knew where to fence their take. Some of the rest were just too greedy to let go. All the guns, watches, and small stuff that could be easily hidden was held back.

What we got was mostly from folks who'd just grabbed because everybody else was doing it. Then the soldiers had come, and by now they'd had time to get scared or honest or both. Anyway, we filled the truck and that's what we'd come for.

George told me where to drive. I noticed he gave all the orders for the pair of them. Apparently Pete was just along for the ride, and because George had to have a partner.

The warehouse he directed me to was in a real run-down part of town. It was still south of the river, though a good mile from the area where the riots had been, and stood all alone between a couple of crumbling, old-style factory buildings that probably hadn't seen a shift at work since World War II. As we drove in the alley to the loading dock, another truck was pulling out. The cops on the front seat kept their faces averted. My pair did the same. I guess nobody was proud of himself right then.

There were three goons on the dock to help unload, and a clerk type with a clipboard and pad to take inventory as the stuff was carried past him. I think he made it a point to miss listing an item here and there—anything to pad the profit margin a bit. We all pitched in and helped the goons. We were in an understandable hurry.

In twenty minutes of real hard work by the six of us, we broke the back of the unloading job. At regular wages it would have taken at

least an hour and a half to do it.

At this point the clerk took charge. "Come on in the office," he said. "As soon as I get this figured you'll get your money."

He led the way into the outer office of the warehouse. There were six or eight desks, but only one was being used. He had an old electric adding machine hooked up, and began banging out figures for the items on his list. We stood around on one foot and watched his fingers fly.

"Okay, gents," he said, looking up finally from his paper strip, "I've got the total. Your end is three thousand, two hundred and nine bucks. Split it anyway you like."

That figured around a twelve-thousand-dollar valuation for a load that I knew perfectly well had run better than fifteen thousand. I was pretty sure George knew it too. He didn't say anything. Neither did Pete.

The numbers man went over and knocked on the frosted glass door to the inner office. After a minute it opened. The first man out was a black-haired, silk-suited hood—the bodyguard. Right behind him came the one man in the world I least wanted to see—the only one of the "possibles" on my list who'd be sure to know me. One look was all either of us needed to establish mutual recognition.

"Hello, Al," Big Dave said. "Long time no see."

I held still.

"You know this bum?" George said into the silence.

"This is no bum," the big buyer said. "This is Al Barnes. You stupid punks have fingered me to what *used* to be the toughest heist man in the business. Now we got to kill him."

"Don't anybody move," I said. Big Dave and his hood and the clerk—who probably didn't even carry a rod—were in front of me. The two cops were six feet at my back. I was pinned down like a bug waiting to be swatted. The only thing—nobody's gun was out yet. I could probably get one or two of them, if I was real fast, But I couldn't possibly get them all. Big Dave knew it. He grinned at me.

"Be good, Al," he said. "You'll never make it."

I tried my hole card. "Boys," I said to the two cops, "you're still on the force. A caper is one thing, murder's another. String with me and we're three to three—really three to two. We take them and split this big slob's whole roll, not just a truck's worth. What do you say?" I was hoping Pete, at least, would remember he was a cop. Kill me and he'd be in over his

head; no turning back after that.

"You know who my friends are," Big Dave said to them. "Cross me, and you're dead anyway."

I heard George's voice at my rear right. "He's right. Sorry, Al. No dice."

Well, I'd tried. There was only one thing left. I flipped my left hand out as if tossing something. The hood's eyes instinctively followed the gesture, and it slowed his draw. I shot him right in the solar plexus. My special hollow pointed .38 load mushroomed on impact and killed him instantly. My second shot broke Big Dave's right arm before he could draw. The clerk went white as chalk and fainted dead away.

The expected slug from behind never came. Instead, there was only a sound like a coconut hit with a hammer. I started to turn and checked myself halfway around.

Pete was down on the floor with his drawn gun near his hand. George had pistol-whipped him back of the ear. His own gun was steady as a rock as he covered me.

"Surprise, Pop," he said. "Babyface was the *real* crooked cop. I'm from Department Security. The chief figured this racket might come to town with the riots."

"You had me fooled," I said.

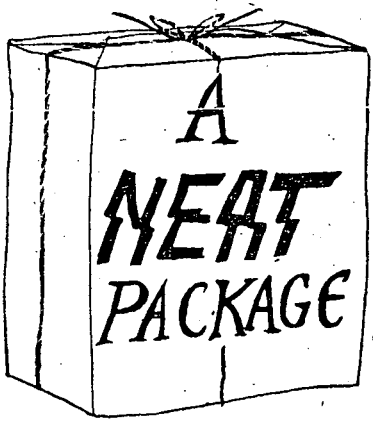
"I take that for a compliment. I've got to take you in, Pop. I hate to do it after what you just did, but you know how it is."

"I know how it is," I said. "But first take a look at my papers. I'm Al Barnes, all right, but for the past two years I've been in the special undercover branch of the Continental Insurance Group. This racket has cost the industry plenty of money. My boss sent me in this time in the hopes I could find Mr. Big."

George looked me over for a minute. Then he paid me one of the biggest compliments I've ever had. "I haven't known you long, Pop, but I think your word is good. Let's get going and clean up this mess."

He didn't even ask to see my papers till we got Big Dave and the boys to headquarters. Before I left I taught him that draw I use.

In deference to the F.D.A., perhaps, the following packet sports a very conservative label.



by Larry Powell

THE COUPLE showed up at the usual time and place. Milton Carter watched as they emerged from a taxi and entered the restaurant.

After several minutes, Milton walked to the window of the restaurant and peered inside. He was sure they hadn't noticed him. They were so engrossed in each other they wouldn't have paid attention to a snowman directing traffic in July.

Milton saw the handsome young man reach across a table and press the woman's hand. She smiled and pressed back. Then a waiter came, and the young man ordered while the woman touched up her lipstick. Apparently they had been kissing in the taxi.

Although nightfall had cooled the air, Milton's collar was damp.

He loosened his tie and nervously checked his watch dial: eight-fifteen. He wondered if the detective would be in his office now.

Moving down the street to a pay telephone, Milton inserted a dime and tried the detective's number. He received no answer. His ribs still hurt a little where the detective had hit him on the day of the traffic accident, but no permanent damage had been done.

Milton was a skinny man with a balding head and soft white hands which often were darkened by ink. He worked for a bookkeeping firm. Never in his life had he been involved in this type of situation and he wasn't quite sure he could carry it to a conclusion.

An hour and a half elapsed before the young man and the woman emerged from the restaurant and entered another taxi. Milton walked quickly to his own car, which was parked nearby, and drove to the apartment house where the young man lived. He arrived in time to see the couple leave their taxi and go up the apartment house steps. Light soon bloomed behind the young man's window blinds.

Milton walked a block to a telephone and tried the detective's number again. He was in luck. The detective's voice grouched a hello.

"I'd like to know if you're available for an assignment tonight," Milton said.

"Couldn't it wait?" the detective, Andrews, said. "I just got in from an out-of-town job and I'm bushed."

"I suppose I could contact someone else."

"Wait, I'll discuss it with you. What sort of assignment?"

"You'd probably call it routine. My wife is seeing another man."

The detective was silent for a moment. Milton heard a sound as though he might be taking a drink of something. Milton could guess what. "We'd better get together to go over the details. Shall I meet you?"

"I'll come to your office. I'm not far away."

"Listen, your voice sounds familiar. Do I know you?"

"You should," said Milton. "My name is Carter. I'm the man who was driving the green sedan."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not," Milton assured him. "I'll be at your office in a few minutes."

The detective's office was on the ground floor of a dingy building. Andrews grinned as he opened the door. "This is a surprise, Carter. I never thought that you'd be bringing me business."

Milton cleaned his glasses. He

was almost as tall as the detective but forty pounds lighter. "You're the only private detective I know."

"I want to apologize for what happened that day." The detective closed a drawer of his desk, probably the drawer that contained the bottle from which he had been drinking when they talked on the telephone. "I had just bought that convertible you banged into. I lost my temper. You did run that stop sign, you know."

"My brakes," Milton reminded him. "I explained about my brakes."

"Sure, but you explained too late. That temper of mine!" The detective shook his closely-clipped head. "It got me thrown off the force. It's ruined my golf game and my wife . . . well, she's always complaining about it." He slapped his palm on the desk to cut off his own remarks. "But you came here to talk about your wife, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Milton. "You fractured two of my ribs when you knocked me down."

"Did I?" The detective looked at the big hand lying flat on the desk. He flexed thick fingers as though their power awed even him. "I'm surprised you didn't sue me for assault and battery."

"I thought about it, but there were no witnesses except your wife. I doubted that she'd testify in my behalf."

"To tell the truth, we were prepared to say that you jumped me first; self-preservation, you know. But I'm glad you decided to forget the fracas. No sense in bearing a grudge, is there?"

Milton put his glasses back on. "About my wife—I was working late a week ago, and when I left the office to get a sandwich I saw her getting out of a taxi with a young man. They entered a restaurant. I waited outside and followed them when they left there and went to an apartment. Tonight I saw them together again."

"You want me to check the man out?"

"I want evidence for a divorce. They're together right now in his apartment. I can give you the address."

"You've done most of the groundwork yourself. Following it up won't be difficult." The detective wrote the address on a memo pad. "You ever suspect your wife before?"

"Never," Milton said. "I guess I was just lucky, seeing them together like that."

The detective scrubbed his mouth. "Yeah, lucky. If I caught my wife doing that sort of thing, I'd wring her neck. But everybody reacts differently. You want photo-

graphs of them together, the whole works?"

Milton nodded. "Can you take care of it tonight?"

"Like you said, it's routine. I can get into the apartment with a camera. I have my methods. I'll hand you the evidence in a neat package tomorrow."

"Will you call me tonight when it's over?"

The detective grinned. "You'll probably hear about it from your wife. But, sure, I'll call."

Milton drove past the apartment on his way home. A light still burned against the window blinds, but a much dimmer light. He went to bed, but he couldn't sleep. He kept looking at the clock and listening for the telephone. Finally, when he had heard nothing by 2 a.m., he smiled, turned over and dozed off.

The telephone rang the next morning while his wife was in the kitchen. Milton answered, and a sergeant from police headquarters wanted to know if Milton had employed a private detective named Andrews.

"I'm acquainted with the man, Sergeant. I was involved with him in a traffic accident not long ago. His new car was banged up and he threatened to get revenge. Why would I employ him? Why would he say that I did?"

"He's a troublemaker, Mr. Carter. Got himself in a jam and decided to blame you just for spite. Forget that I bothered you."

When Milton entered the kitchen, his wife had a newspaper spread out on the table. "Who called, dear?" she asked.

"Wrong number," Milton said. "What's the news?"

"Here's a local story that will interest you. That detective with the violent temper, the one in the accident, entered a man's apartment last night while the man was entertaining a woman friend. The detective had a camera and tried to take a photograph of them."

"Why did he do that?"

"The story speculates that he entered the wrong apartment. Anyway, the man with the woman was a judo instructor and he did a little practicing on the detective before the detective had a chance to explain. And Milton, guess what?"

"I can't imagine," said Milton.

"The judo instructor is the one you went to a couple of times when you were still angry at the detective and doing all that silly talk about getting even with him. I'm certainly glad that you gave up the idea."

"I was a poor student. I'd never have learned to handle Andrews," Milton said. "Besides, there's no sense in bearing a grudge."

The ambivalence of anticipation is frequently more tolerable than realization.

HAVING become a creature of habit, the stale protagonist of a domestic regimen, Ruth awoke that morning, as usual, at almost precisely eight o'clock. The odd thing about her regimen, including the precision schedule of waking, was that it was, and had been from the beginning, entirely unnecessary. So far as her commitments were concerned, her obligation to be here or there at this hour or that, she might as well have awakened anytime and at her discretion have gone anywhere.

Yet, commitments aside, the regimen was, for its own reasons, essential. It gave order and stability to a life that would have, without it, blown apart in an explosion of centrifugal pressure or, even worse, have diminished and died in the dust of abandoned hopes and sustained frustration. She was, indeed, like the compulsive alcoholic who

must adhere to the discipline of abstinence or submit to the anarchy of excess.

This particular morning, however, although it began for her at the time and in the place of other mornings, was in fact the morning of such a day as she had never lived and would never live again. It was, in prospect, the culmination of all the years of days that had gone before it, and it would be, before it was over, the end of them. It would be, by the terms of a kind of destined and dreadful rationale, the end of all that had never been done, the suffix of all that had never been said.

She had planned the day, insofar as she was able, quite carefully. It was characteristic of her, as she had become, that even her aberrations, the willful departure from accustomed ways and normal expectations, must somehow sustain the quality of habit, every strange effect of every disturbing cause somehow anticipated and rehearsed, as if she would otherwise be lost and impotent in a confusion of wanton reactions. The planning had begun, in fact, late in the afternoon of the day before; a few minutes after five o'clock, to be as precise as possible.

Ruth always had two very dry martinis at five o'clock, or rather in the half hour following the hour, and Mrs. Groat, who came in days to clean and cook, had just brought in the little silver tray with the silver shaker and the delicate long-stemmed glass of shining crystal. The telephone in the hall had begun to ring at that instant, and Mrs. Groat had gone to answer it, leaving Ruth to pour the first martini for herself, in itself a deviation from the normal that now seemed, in retrospect, to be darkly prophetic. Ruth had just taken her first sip from the delicate glass, when Mrs. Groat returned with news that was, if not revolutionary, at least unusual enough to excite her curiosity.

"Someone for you," Mrs. Groat said. "A man."

Ruth had experienced no sudden and mysterious intuition about the call. After all, she was still called occasionally by men, almost invariably on matters of business, and there was no reason why she should have expected this particular call to be in any way unusual. Putting her glass on the little table beside her chair, she went past Mrs. Groat into the hall, picked up the phone and said, "Hello."

"Ruth?" the man's voice queried.

Then, of course, she knew. The single syllable of her name was spoken as casually as if it prefaced a response to something she had

said a decade ago, and she stood mute for a moment, her brain scalded with remembrance. After the mute moment, because it was imposed by a fierce pride, she answered with a voice that was miraculously contained.

"Yes. Who's speaking, please?"

"It's Pat. Pat Brady."

"Pat!" She permitted an inflection of surprise to enter her voice. "Where in the world are you?"

"I'm in St. Louis."

She had assumed that the call was local, and she felt an irrational anger at the electronic marvel of direct long-distance dialing. Previously, you would at least have had the intermediate operator to warn you of the unexpected, so that you would have an instant to prepare the reaction of pleasure or excitement or shock, or to disguise, as she was disguising now, the sickening ambivalence incited by what had been and what was.

"That's too bad," she said. "I'd enjoy seeing you again."

"That's why I called. I'm at loose ends tomorrow, and I'd like to see you again, too. Would it be convenient if I came? I'd have only a couple of hours in town at the most."

"Are you sure you want to come all the way from St. Louis for just a couple of hours?"

"Nothing to it. I'll hop a jet in the morning and be there in a flash. I'll take another jet out in the afternoon."

"What time should I expect you?"

"You name the hour, and I'll be on your doorstep."

"Would two o'clock in the afternoon be all right?"

"Fine. Expect me then. Same old place?"

"Same old place. Mother and Father are both dead now. Perhaps you'd heard."

"I hadn't. I'm sorry."

"Well, one adjusts after a while."

"Of course. Nothing else to do. Until tomorrow then, Ruth."

"Until tomorrow. Good-bye, Pat."

It was miraculous, truly miraculous, how calmly she had spoken his name. She was exorbitantly proud of herself, of her miraculous control. To demonstrate to herself that it was secure, not just something she had achieved briefly by a great effort, she repeated the name three times to herself with a kind of deliberate and lilting cadence: *Pat, Pat, Pat.* She cradled the telephone and returned to the livingroom where Mrs. Groat, who had eavesdropped, was clearly torn between an uncertain respect for Ruth's privacy and her own agitated curiosity. Leaning toward the latter, she hovered in hope. Ruth,

aware of this, sat down in her chair and picked up her glass from the silver tray. How steady her hand was! The glass, on its way to her lips, did not shake in the least. Not a drop of the precious pale liquid was lost from it. And how good the strong martini was! It slipped smoothly down her throat and gathered in her stomach in a warm little puddle.

"That was an old friend," she said. "I knew him quite well a long time ago. His name is Pat Brady."

"How nice." Mrs. Groat, whose experience with men had confirmed her mother's warnings, sounded vaguely belligerent. "Will he be coming to call?"

"Yes. Tomorrow afternoon."

"Will you want me to prepare something special? Tea or early cocktails or something?"

"No, thank you. As a matter of fact, you may plan to have the afternoon off. Pat and I will have so many things to catch up on. We'll manage quite well, I'm sure."

Mrs. Groat's open face suddenly closed. Uncertain whether she should rejoice in her unexpected half-holiday or take offense at what might be her peremptory exclusion, she retreated to the kitchen to analyze the development.

Ruth, lifting her glass to her lips again, discovered with a slight shock that it was empty. She had drunk the martini much too fast. Really, she must try to restrain herself. Two martinis between five and five-thirty were her quota, her absolute limit except on those rare occasions that might be called special, and she always paced her consumption of them to last the full half-hour. Having drunk one already, at barely ten minutes after the hour, she would simply have to pace more slowly for the next twenty minutes. Or could this occasion, perhaps, be called special? Well, hardly. Tomorrow, however, was another matter. Tomorrow would be special. Tomorrow she would have her martinis earlier, and it was entirely possible, even probable, that she would have three, or even four.

Already she was making plans. In fact, although she was not consciously aware of it, she had begun planning the moment she cradled the telephone. That was evidenced by her prompt and rather ruthless exclusion of Mrs. Groat, who would only be in the way. *Three's a crowd, Mrs. Groat. Extras are unwelcome on special occasions, Mrs. Groat. So sorry, Mrs. Groat, but you are not wanted.*

She emptied the silver shaker into the delicate crystal glass and took the first sip of her second martini in her disciplined drink-

ing. She was tempted by her growing excitement to drink with reckless haste, but she managed, by a stern exercise of will, to stretch the martini over the remaining twenty minutes, and it was just five-thirty when she got down to what would have been the olive if she ordinarily bothered with olives, which she did only on special occasions. Like tomorrow, for example; tomorrow she would have olives.

Leaving her glass beside the shaker on the tray, Ruth went upstairs to her room. The room was large and light, at the front of the house. It had once been the room of her parents, but now her parents were dead; dead and buried side by side in the cemetery east of town, and the room was hers. She crossed the room to a window overlooking the front yard and stood staring out across the yard and the street to the house directly opposite. In other years there had been no house there, only a beloved and beautiful vacant lot, beaten bare by the neighborhood kids who had gathered to play baseball and shinny on fair days, and Pump, Pump, Pull Away in the soft interminable dusks of summer. Next to the house that now stood where the lot had been, was the house in which Pat had been born and had lived out the years of his boyhood. Shifting the direction of her gaze, looking across the street obliquely, she could see the house.

Oh, he had been a beautiful boy! Swift and strong he had been, and good at games, and later adept in love. It was no wonder she had loved him desperately all those years. The wonder was that he had loved her, for she had been a plain girl, as she was a plain woman, with an odd faded look as if she had been laundered too many times in boiling water. Of course, a girl's looks are not important to a boy when he is very young. What is important is her steadfast loyalty and her readiness to do what a young boy wants to do. And he *had* loved her. He *had*. His love had survived puberty, and the years after, and it had survived in the after-years the trials of abortive expression in this private place or that, at one fearful and ecstatic time or another.

Then, in the end, it had come to nothing. That was the shame of it, the terrible degradation. If only it had ended, if it had to end, in an explosion of fury or a flash of tragedy. If only it had ended in a way that was worthy of the quality of her love—but it hadn't. Instead, it had expired with a whimper. For him, it had died of apathy. It had simply come to *nothing*.

Turning away from the window,

she went into the bathroom. In the mirror above the lavatory, she saw the reflection of her face and paused deliberately to study it dispassionately. Her face was another shameful thing. It was not so much that she minded being plain, or even ugly. She would have preferred, in fact, a distinctive ugliness. What she minded was the faded effect of anemia—the *nothingness*. It was a lie, that's what it was. Her face was a *lie*. It denied the fierce intensity of her heart and brain. It obscured the history of her total commitment to love in her early years, and of her love's cruel mutation in the desolate years afterward.

She evaded the lie by opening the medicine cabinet door. Reaching behind a screen of bottles on the top shelf, she removed a small box. There was no label on the lid of the box. Removing the lid, she stood staring at the white powder the box contained. She could not recall the name of the powder, and made no effort to do so, but she knew well enough its potential. In her hand, in the small box, she was holding sudden death for at least a dozen people. Her father had been a pharmacist and a successful businessman. He had owned three drugstores when he died, two years after her mother's death, and she had gone the day after his funeral to one of the stores, which had since been sold, and had taken this powder from behind the prescription counter. In the bleak newness of being utterly alone she had thought she would like to die. It was not that she had loved her parents so much, or that she even missed them excessively for themselves when they were gone. It was just the loneliness. If she had married Pat, as she had expected and planned, the death of her father would have meant little more to her than a minor adjustment and a large inheritance.

Anyhow, she had decided not to die; not yet. As she had once lived for her only love, she continued to live for the love's mutation. The day would come, would surely come, when she would have the chance to make right what had all these years been wrong. If she could not recover the love, she could at least remove its shame. She could give to her love, the truth in her heart behind the lie in her face, the proud and star-crossed ending it deserved.

Staring at the snowy powder in the little box, she formed with her lips the shape of a word: *Tomorrow*.

Today—today was yesterday's tomorrow—and now that it had begun, it was necessary to get

through it, from minute to minute and hour to hour, until it was spent, ended, at whatever time the ending came. Ruth got out of bed and showered and dressed in sweater and slacks, and then she sat down in front of her dressing table and began to brush her light brown hair a hundred strokes. Her head canted first this way and then that, according to which side of the part she was brushing on, and when she had finished the hundred strokes exactly, fifty on each side of the part, she laid the brush on the table, avoiding her image in

the mirror, and went out into the hall. With the door closed behind her, she could hear Mrs. Groat, who carried a key to the back door, at her work in the kitchen below. Mrs. Groat was a noisy worker, seeming to *attack* every task as if she feared a counterattack, and it was a constant wonder to Ruth that she did not leave behind her a litter of damaged pots and shattered glass and china. Even the vacuum sweeper, operated by Mrs. Groat, assumed a kind of roar, as if it were powered by a miniature jet engine.

Having descended the stairs, Ruth found her place set as usual on the table in the dining room, the electric percolator giving off the good, rich smell of coffee on the server near at hand. She poured a cup of coffee and sat down at her place, and Mrs. Groat, hearing her arrive on her usual schedule on this unusual day, came in from the kitchen with a glass of orange juice.

"Good-morning," Mrs. Groat said.

"Good-morning."

Ruth, leaning slightly forward over her cup, inhaled the rich vapors. Mrs. Groat lingered, sensing the day's difference and anticipating some kind of minor revolution.

"The usual breakfast?" Mrs. Groat asked, her voice brusque.

"Yes," Ruth said. "The usual."

The usual, in addition to coffee and juice, was one slice of buttered toast, two strips of crisp bacon, and one egg over easy. Mrs. Groat, vaguely disappointed in the failure of revolution to develop, returned to the kitchen, and Ruth began to drink her steaming coffee. She had just finished the cupful when Mrs. Groat came back with her plate. Ruth was, surprisingly, quite hungry. The excitement within her, contained and growing, nourished by her expectations, had given an edge to her appetites and senses.

She finished her breakfast, and then, because it was a fair day, and because she was too large for the house with the excitement growing and growing within her, she went out into the yard and cut flowers and brought them in and arranged them in a vase, which she placed in the livingroom. Then she went back out into the yard and pruned and dug and watered and did a dozen things that did not need doing at all, or could have been done later, because it was essential, absolutely essential, that the hours of the morning be filled, the time passed, and somehow the hours were and time was.

At noon, she went back into the house and washed her hands and face and had her lunch and went

upstairs to her room. She lay down on her bed, neatly made by Mrs. Groat, and she wished that she could sleep, could close her eyes and know nothing and open them again just in time to do what must be done before it was too late for doing anything. It was, of course, impossible to sleep with her excitement now monstrous and pulsing and scarcely containable, and it would hardly have been worthwhile anyhow, even if it had been possible, because Mrs. Groat clumped upstairs just before one o'clock and knocked on the door and came in uninvited. She was wearing her hat with an effect of belligerence, and she was clutching her purse like a primitive weapon.

"If you have no further use for me," she said, "I'll be leaving now."

She made it sound as if, after faithful service, she were being discarded. Ruth sat up on the edge of the bed. She wondered if Mrs. Groat could sense her excitement, could feel it in the air or hear it in her voice or see it seeping through her skin like a vapor, and it seemed incredible that Mrs. Groat could not.

"That's fine," Ruth said. "Enjoy your afternoon."

"Thank you." Mrs. Groat did not sound optimistic. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes, as usual. In the morning."

Ruth pronounced the word with no sense of reality. A word is what it was. Morning was a word, a sound, without substance or prospects. What was real, real and here and suddenly demanding, was this afternoon, two o'clock this afternoon, and now she would have to hurry, having waited so long, to do in advance what needed doing. She undressed and took another shower and stood for a minute or two in front of the long mirror on the inside of the bathroom door to look at her lean body, so much more beautiful than her shameful nothing face, and she felt all at once a great pity and regret dor the terrible waste of her beautiful lean body. In the bedroom she dressed carefully, putting on at last a pale green sleeveless sheath. By that time it was one-thirty, a little past, and she went back into the bathroom and took the small box of powder from the medicine cabinet and carried it downstairs. In the kitchen she made a shaker of martinis and put the shaker in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator. When martinis got crackling cold, she had discovered, they became just slightly thick and exceptionally good. Next, she set the silver tray on the cabinet beside the sink and placed on the tray a small bowl of olives and a pair of

crystal glasses. Beside the tray she placed the small box of powder.

It will only require a little, she thought. *A pinch apiece for the two crystal glasses.*

The thought did not depress her. On the contrary, it was exhilarating, a lyric expression of her sustained excitement. The exhilaration cried out for accompaniment. Turning away, she went into the livingroom and looked among the recordings in the cabinet of her stereophonic phonograph. There! That was just right. That was just what she needed, what her mood needed, at once gay and grave and exalted. She put the recording on the phonograph and stood listening to the first movement of Mozart's Jupiter symphony, and the first movement ended, and the second movement began, and then, halfway through the second movement, the front doorbell rang.

How assured she was! How fully in control of the terrible excitement that tried to rise from her breast into her throat and strangle her! She was proud of her assurance, her quiet command of her furious heart. Leaving the Jupiter to play itself out, she walked into the hall and opened the door. At that instant, as the door opened and she saw the man standing outside with his hat in his hands at the far end of a decade gone, her mind was trespassed by a scrap of verse, a strange and perverse lyric culled from a litter of odds and ends for some reason remembered:

I saw my dear, the other day,
Beside a flowering wall;
And this was all I had to say:
"I thought that he was tall!"

How many years ago had she read that? Oh, years and years, in a book of poems by Dorothy Parker. But why had it lain intact and dormant so long in her mind to be remembered at this instant? Was it just that the man outside her door seemed in the instant, whatever he had been and still was, somehow deficient? That was nonsense. The deficiency was not in him, but in her immediate *response* to him, because her anticipation and excitement had tricked her into expecting too much too soon. Closing her eyes, she saw him suddenly, at once reduced and enlarged, growing in a vision from a boy to a man, and her contained excitement was restored with the vision.

"Pat," she said. "How nice to see you again."

"Hello, Ruth. You look the same as ever."

"You know better. I'm ten years older, and I'm sure I show them all. Come in, Pat. We have so much to say to each other."

He left his hat in the hall and followed her into the livingroom.

The Jupiter was still playing. She turned it down and sat beside him on the sofa, the interval between them suggesting to her the separation by scale, as on a map, of what they had been and what they were.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to stay as long as I hoped," he said. "An hour at the longest. My schedule's tighter than I thought, and it will take me the better part of an hour to get back to the airport."

Small matter, she thought. *It will be better to end quickly, now that the time is here, what has taken far too long already.*

"Then you must tell me all about yourself at once," she said.

"There isn't much to tell." His voice struck a note of false humility which she felt uneasily was a kind of inverted pretension. He was too well preserved, too immaculately groomed, even after a long taxi ride, in clothes that were too obviously expensive. "After college, you remember, I went to San Francisco. After a year I dropped down to Los Angeles, and I've been there ever since."

"I didn't know. I've had no word from you all this time."

"I'm sorry. I intended to keep in touch, but you know how these things are. A man gets involved, he doesn't have much time for old friends and places."

"I must say that you seem to have done very well," Ruth said.

"I've been able to get my share, I guess."

"What do you do?"

"I'm in real estate. Real estate and insurance."

"Oh? You used to want to paint. We used to talk about it."

He laughed, and she listened intently with fierce longing for a suggestion of wistfulness in the sound, the merest whisper of sadness for old hope abandoned and limitations enduring—but there was none. His laughter was brief and untroubled, an expression of indifference tainted with disdain.

"I soon had that fantasy knocked out of my head, once I was out on my own. Business is the thing for me. There's where you're up against the real competition. There's where you find the men with drive and vision. Believe me, you have to stay alert if you hope to stay up front."

"Are you up front?"

"Well, I don't like to blow my own horn, you know, but I manage to hold my own. Maybe I've had some luck, too. You have to get a few breaks as you go along. Still, in the long run, you make your own breaks. The secret is in cultivating the right people. Profitable associations, you know. I've been put next to some great opportunities by men in position to

do me a good turn, not by chance."

"I'm delighted. I've often wondered what you were doing. It's comforting to know that you have done well."

"Oh, never worry about old Pat. I have a way of taking care of myself. Right now, as a matter of fact, I've got a show on the road that stands to make me a mint. Would you like to hear about it?"

"Please tell me. You can't imagine how fascinated I am."

"Nothing to it, as I implied, if you know a few people in the right places. I was handed a bit of advance information, very confidential, that a certain area is due for fast promotion and development, a kind of crash program. I was able to get in on the ground floor; to buy up a big tract of land at a very good price, you understand. Next month I start building. Modern, medium priced houses, a classy little residential area with a lot of eye-appeal, you know; variety of construction, nice landscaping and a community club and pool—all that. It represents a big investment, but it'll pay big dividends. You wait and see."

"I hardly can. You must let me know immediately."

"Yes, sir! Business is the thing. Old Silent Cal was dead right years ago. The business of this country is business. He was before our time, of course, but I remember reading that remark. I think I've got it right. Didn't Calvin Coolidge say that?"

"I don't know. I read so little about Calvin Coolidge."

"If you're interested in my opinion, he was a great man, a great president. He was smart enough to put first things first and then leave them alone. There's too much meddling nowadays by the government—all these left-wing fellows. That's the trouble with most of your writers and artists and professors—so-called intellectuals, radicals, people like that. They'll wreck the country if they aren't stopped."

"Perhaps it won't matter in the end. Perhaps all together we will wreck the whole world, and then nothing else will matter."

"What? Oh, you mean The Bomb. In my judgment, there's far too much loose talk about that. What we'd better be worrying about is all this creeping socialism that's taking over everything. But you don't want to get me started on that subject. I might forget the time and miss my jet."

"Yes. You mustn't forget your jet."

"Right." He shot a sleeve and looked at his watch. "Plenty of time however. How did we get started on business and politics, anyhow?

We ought to be talking old times. I passed one of your father's old drugstores downtown. It's changed names."

"After my father died I sold the stores."

"You shouldn't have done it. You should have run them yourself. A clever woman like you could have done wonders with them; branched out in other towns, developed a chain."

"I am not a pharmacist."

"No matter. You can hire pharmacists by the dozen. Your father was realist enough to understand that."

"I was not interested. Perhaps I have no drive or vision."

"Too bad. Do you live alone here?"

"Yes. Alone."

"You haven't changed things much."

"Very little. Are your parents well?"

"Father's dead. Mother's still around. Quite a problem sometimes, Mother is."

"Does she live with you?"

"Hardly. Living with Mother would be impossible. Evelyn and I agreed on that before we were married. Families don't mix."

"You're married? I didn't know."

"Wrong tense. *Was* married. It didn't work, and it didn't last long. Couple of years. Since then, I've carefully preserved my independence."

She thought of something then, a possibility that she had not considered before, and she couldn't for the life of her understand why she had not.

"Do you have children? A child?"

"Fortunately, no. Evelyn saw to that, I'm happy to say. It was, I believe, the only sane position she ever took on anything."

"You sound as if your marriage was unhappy. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was a mistake from the beginning, a sick sort of joke, and I was lucky to get out of it. How about you? Have you made the big mistake?"

"I've made mistakes, but not that one. I haven't married."

"Remember when we were kids? *We* were going to get married someday. Remember?"

"I remember."

"Well, things change; plans and people and things. As I came down the block I saw that the old vacant lot across the street is gone. We had great times on that lot."

"Yes. Great times."

So he came to them at last, after real estate and insurance and creeping socialism and birth control and divorce and Calvin Coolidge. The great times. The early days, the sweet, fierce days of total commit-

ment before the mutated bitter aftermath—his voice went on and on, assaulting the fragile past, evoking and evading the holy places of their adolescent intimacy, and she sat and listened mutely in the cold and arid climate of her private wasteland. She was drained of pride and soiled with shame. She was dying, dying. She was a religious dying in the terrible conviction that there was, after all, no God. Fool that she was, she had wasted her love, and her hate after her love, on an absurd lie.

Why couldn't he have become a magnificent failure or a fanatic or even a splendid rogue? The wild, silent crying of her mind was her elegy and his epitaph. *Why couldn't he have become anything but a bore?*

He looked again at his watch, and she was, she discovered, suddenly standing.

"It must be almost time for you to leave," she said. "I have martinis made. Will you have one before you go?"

"Thanks," he said. "One for the road. I'll just call a taxi while you're getting it."

She went into the kitchen and removed the shaker from the freezer. She poured martinis into the two delicate crystal glasses on the silver tray. She dropped olives into the glasses and took up the small box of powder. For a moment she held it in both hands below her breasts in what was almost a gesture of love, and then she threw it with a gesture of violence across the kitchen. The box struck a cabinet on the opposite side and fell to the floor. The lid flew off, and the powder spread like a skim of snow on the bright tile. Lifting the silver tray, she carried it into the livingroom.

"They are quite dry," she said. "I like my martinis quite dry."

He took a glass, and she, after placing the tray on a table, lifted her own.

"Old times," he said.

"Yes. Old times."

The horn of the taxi sounded as they finished drinking, and she walked with him to the front door, but she did not linger to watch him go down to the street where the taxi was waiting. When he paused once to turn and wave, the door was closed and she was gone.

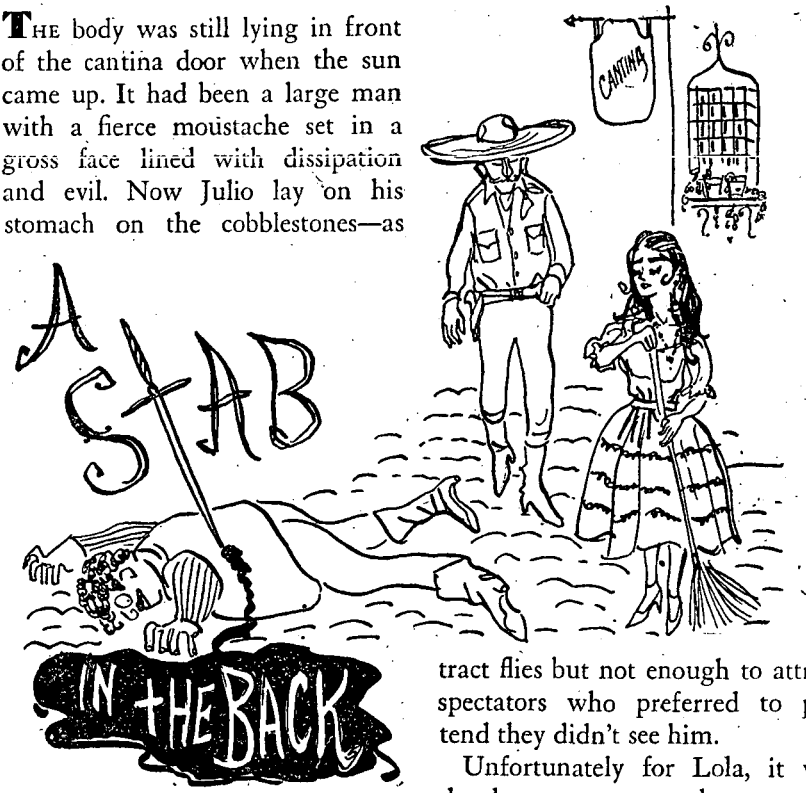
In the livingroom, sitting on the sofa, she drank slowly over a period of half an hour the three martinis that were left in the shaker.

I'm free, she thought. *Now I am free.*

In the terrifying emptiness of her freedom, with nothing left to live for and nothing worth dying for, she sat and drank the martinis.

The ability to win while losing cannot be a trait of the very young.

A STAB IN THE BACK

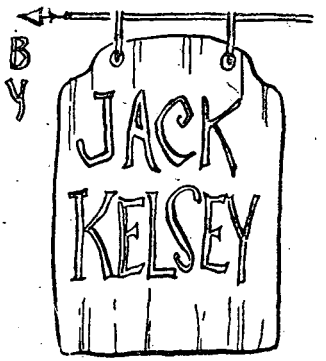


THE body was still lying in front of the cantina door when the sun came up. It had been a large man with a fierce moustache set in a gross face lined with dissipation and evil. Now Julio lay on his stomach on the cobblestones—as he had done many times in life—his head on one side, leering at Lola Corona's ankles with open, sightless eyes. There was blood on the back of his shirt where the knife had gone in, enough to attract flies but not enough to attract spectators who preferred to pretend they didn't see him.

Unfortunately for Lola, it was the hour to sweep the street in front of her father's bar, and she looked with embarrassment at the other women who had no such encumbrance as Julio. Lola was young and darkly pretty and famous for the swish of her skirt

when she brought cerveza and tequila to her father's customers.

Then Don Pablo turned the corner and approached the body. He was a tall, leathery man of seventy, dressed in the khaki of the rurales, the village police, and strangers ad-



dressed him as Sargento. His old-fashioned sombrero with its small crown and wide brim seemed out of place, but the sun would soon be bright and hot, and he would be lounging in the plaza.

Approaching Lola without haste, in the easy, measured gait of a man who has learned to conserve his energy, he tipped his sombrero and smiled at her with his friendly, sleepy eyes. "His brothers will be here for him any minute," he said, removing his toothpick. "I sent word to them when I was notified last night." He used the word madrugada—the wee small hours.

"Nobody," Lola ventured, "has touched the body, Don Pablo."

"Clearly it is not necessary," the sergeant said, sitting down on the stone step in front of the cantina. "Julio is obviously dead. How did it happen, Lola?"

"Pues, I—I had just closed the cantina . . . . Julio was the last to leave . . . it was late."

Four o'clock, Don Pablo reflected. Legally the bar closed at one, about the time he went to bed, but the men worked hard and a few extra drinks on Saturday night did no harm except on occasions like this—and the extra pesos came in handy considering how little he was paid.

"I—I thought I heard a sound—like a man in pain," Lola was saying. "But when I opened the door there was no one there—except Julio, and he was dead."

"How did you know?"

"Well, I called my father and he said Julio was dead. Then he went to tell you, Don Pablo."

As a matter of fact, Lola's father had been very annoyed. Business was always slow for days after a killing. He and Don Pablo agreed that Julio was no loss to the village. He was a bully, arrogant when sober, mean when drunk; he had no respect for women and lent money at unfair rates of interest. It had been decided to leave the details until morning.

"Is there anything I can do to

help?" Lola asked him modestly.

"It is too early for tequila," said Don Pablo, "but a beer might help me to think."

While he was thinking, a station wagon came cautiously down the street, avoiding the potholes. It stopped in front of Julio and a man in a red, white and blue sport shirt got out saying, "My God, that man is dead!"

"Si," said Don Pablo, not wishing to create an international incident.

"But he's been dead some time!" the man exclaimed, wrinkling his nose at his woman, who stared from the car. "Haven't you sent for a doctor or an ambulance?"

Don Pablo looked puzzled. "Why should we do that? As you say, the man is dead. He will be all right until his family comes for him."

The man got back into his car muttering, "These Mexicans."

Don Pablo muttered, "Estos turistas," and nodded good morning at a group of men who had gathered to view the body. The corn patches would grow by themselves on Sunday, and with the policia on the scene there was no longer any need to pretend that nothing had happened.

"It is very sad," Don Pablo said, taking a long pull at his cerveza and sighting down the bottle at them. Some of the men grinned but others allowed no expression to cross their faces, and Don Pablo knew his instinct was right. A murderer does not return to the scene of his crime because of some Indian superstition, but because he has to know what is going on in the mind of Don Pablo.

Without exception, the tired-looking group of men regarding the corpse, with satisfaction or indifference, had been in the bar last night. He'd seen them all during the midnight inspection when courtesy demanded they arise and allow themselves to be frisked. It was true that Don Pablo had not found a knife in eighteen years, but then he never looked under the tables. It was enough that they understood pistols would not be tolerated.

When Julio's two brothers rode into town on their small Mexican horses, the men retired inside to the shade and the smells of the bar. Don Pablo alone witnessed the removal of the body, aware that law and order might prevent another unpleasant incident. However, the boys performed their task so cheerfully he almost added them to his list of suspects, until he remembered they had not been in the bar last night and that their mother, a deeply religious woman, had forbidden the boys to kill their broth-

er anyway. He smiled at them.

He entered the bar, wiping his brow with a large red bandanna. "They say the wake will be tonight; you are all invited. Beer for everyone, Lola!"

Lola's father suddenly appeared behind the bar and started decapitating bottles like a madman while watching Don Pablo with open suspicion. Don Pablo, however, had eyes for Lola alone. Her father was very strict and it was not known if she had a special boyfriend, but she served the first two bottles to the Ramirez brothers, sitting alone at a corner table.

So she was lying for one of them, Pablo thought, although reflecting cautiously that a woman's preference does not a murderer make.

Don Pablo joined them at the small metal table which had been battered by the demanding fists of unserved generations. "Qué tal?" he said.

"I have no complaints," said Lencho, the older.

"A bad business," said Juan, the younger, "to stab a man in the back."

The brothers were in their twenties, two handsome copper faces capped with curly black hair, their expressions accented by large expressive eyes and gleaming white teeth. While Lencho was noisily outgoing and gregarious, Juan was quietly thoughtful and withdrawn.

"Who killed Julio, Don Pablo?" asked a man at the next table, toasting the room with his bottle of beer.

"Someone who didn't like him," the sergeant said, and the men laughed and drank their beer.

"Then we may as well forget it," said Lencho, grinning.

"No," said Don Pablo. "When did you leave here last night, Lencho?"

"When everybody else did. At—well, at closing time."

Don Pablo looked at Lola, who nodded brightly and smiled at Lencho.

"And where did you go?"

"Home, of course. Juan and I went together. Isn't that true, Juan?"

"Si. Don't waste your suspicions on my brother, Don Pablo. He would never stab a man in the back."

The sergeant didn't consider his suspicions wasted, but after a few more general questions he had to admit that last night had been a remarkable one. No one, it seemed, had stopped for one last song on the corner; no one had stopped for a final—and illegal—bottle of ponche, a none-too-subtle blend of alcohol and fruit juice. He decided to try another tactic.

"It seems to me you don't take this with enough seriousness," he said. Then he added, mentally crossing himself, "Julio was a fine man and a prominent citizen."

Suddenly they took it very seriously indeed. Lencho topped the angry chorus by shouting, "The man was a pig! A two-headed snake! A rangy burro! A mountain of filth! He stole the gold from his mother's teeth while she was nursing him! He was lying and cheating before he could talk!" The other men began to quiet down in order to enjoy Lencho's character analysis. "Julio was an open sore on the face of the town, and you know it! You owed him money like everybody else, Don Pablo. He'd have insulted your wife if she was alive. He'd have pushed you around, too, if you weren't the policia. And you call him a fine man! Why don't you ask Lola if she agrees!"

Juan spoke for the first time. He put his hand on his brother's arm and said, "Shut up, Lencho."

Lencho snatched up his beer bottle and took a long angry swig. Don Pablo raised an eyebrow at Lola.

"I agree with Lencho," she said hotly. "The man thought women were his property! He was *worse* than a pig when he was drunk! I have not even told my father that some days I could not sit down for the pinching. I would not be alone with that swine for the world!"

Don Pablo held up his hand as Lola's father came around the bar. "But you said you were alone with Julio at closing time. Where were *you*, Pancho?"

"I was going to bed," said Lola's father.

"Would you have stabbed Julio in the back if you found him molesting your daughter?"

Pancho shrugged. "Why not? A man is equally dead—front or back." The men nodded in agreement.

"Lencho?"

"Certainly! If it was my girl!"

"Oh," said Don Pablo, "Lola's not your girl? Juan?"

"Yes," the boy said, looking sideways at Lola's father, "she is my girl."

"That wasn't the question." Don Pablo smiled at his own cleverness. "Would you have stabbed Julio in the back?"

"Only a coward would stab a man in the back," the boy insisted stubbornly.

"Why do you keep saying that, Juan?" Lola said impatiently.

"He is not very gallant, verdad," said Don Pablo gently. "But then he suffers from a sense of guilt—unlike the rest of you. Are you going to accuse yourself of being a

coward the rest of your life, Juan?"

"You think I killed Julio?" Juan asked quietly.

"Of course. Who else would Lola lie for? If she opened the door when she heard Julio cry out, she would have seen *someone.*"

"Let's leave Lola out of this," Juan said harshly.

"If you had killed him outside," Don Pablo persisted, "there would have been a fight and you would not have stabbed him in the back. Therefore I conclude you returned and found Julio in here struggling with Lola. In a case like that a man loses his head, Juan, and takes the only target available."

"The man was a pig!" Juan exploded. Lola came behind his chair and put her hands on his shoulders.

"There seems to be a lack of imagination in describing Julio," Don Pablo remarked, looking around the room. "But your previous silence did seem to be carrying tolerance too far, Juan. I'm afraid I shall have to take you to Tlapan."

"Why?" asked Juan's brother curiously.

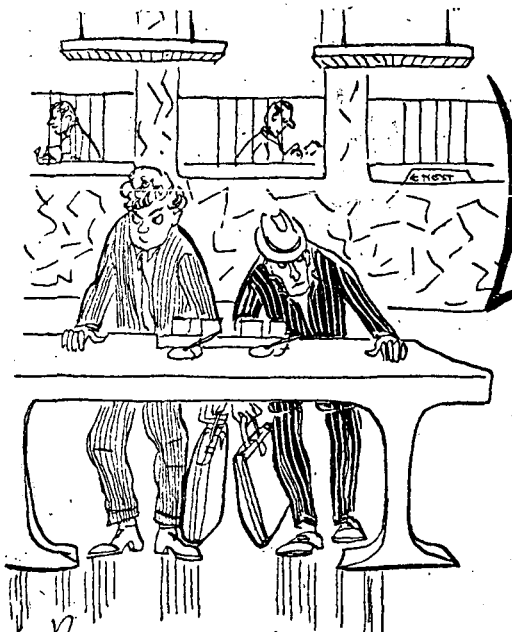
"Murder is out of my jurisdiction, Lencho," the old sergeant said. "And the disadvantage of stabbing a man in the back is that one cannot plead self-defense."

"But Juan has not admitted he killed Julio," Lencho said reasonably. "Of course we should not have lied to you, Don Pablo. It is true we did *not* go straight home. Juan and I were a little borracho, and we bought a bottle of ponche and went to the plaza." He stood up and looked around at the silent men. "I do not remember too well. Who else was with Juan and me when someone killed Julio?"

Every man in the room stood up. "Si," said Lencho, "it was quite a party. But clearly Juan is innocent."

The old man got to his feet slowly and looked at Juan and Lola with his friendly, sleepy eyes. "So my reasoning is wrong again," he sighed. "I will never get promoted at my age." He went out into the sunlight, ignoring the pandemonium behind him.

A slight flaw in an intricate fabrication is inevitably more arresting than perfection.



THE LOOSE END

By Stephen Wasylyk

THE tall, baggy-suited, black-haired kid carrying the lightweight briefcase was making too many trips in the automatic elevators to be up to anything legitimate, especially since he was Nipsy Turko, a small-time thief with a long record of losing.

The only person in a position to notice or pay much attention was me, Mark Stedd, a one-armed ex-detective operating a newsstand in the lobby of the building where the elevators were located, and to tell the truth I don't know why I bothered.

The only reason I was inhabit-

ing that cramped hole behind the newsstand was as a personal favor to Manny, an old friend who at the moment was living it up in Florida. Manny's request had been heartily seconded as good rehabilitation by the doctors who had removed what remained of my left arm after the psycho with the shotgun had ripped it to shreds three months before.

I moved out from the cramped hole behind the newsstand to keep an eye on the jack-in-the-box movements of Nipsy. That hole was tailored to fit Manny, six inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter than I, even without a left arm, and I was happy to get out of it.

At the lobby doors I glanced at my watch. Within five minutes the building would begin to empty for lunch and Nipsy could get lost in the crowd. At the other end of the empty lobby glass doors revealed the writing counters of the bank on the first floor of the adjacent building. Friend Nipsy suddenly barged out of an elevator, walked through to the bank, stopped at one of the writing counters and dropped his briefcase at his feet. Then the lunch crowd hit and the lobby filled rapidly.

I began to push my way forward, almost reaching the doors, when a short, older type with a narrow face hurried through the bank, stopped alongside the kid, busied himself for a moment, then took the kid's briefcase while the kid picked up the one Narrow Face had brought. Narrow Face, another loser in Nipsy's class named Slow Harry Fisher, went out the far bank door in a hurry, and the kid headed back through the glass doors, angling for the nearest elevator. I caught his eye above the crowd and Nipsy, stony-faced, paused for a moment, then stepped into the elevator, pushed a button and the doors slammed in my face.

Now I heard the wailing of police sirens, which sighed to a halt outside the bank. I reached out and caught the nearest arm. An attractive dark-haired woman, on her way to lunch, turned, looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"Take it easy." I grinned at her. "I'd like you to go out there and bring back a policeman, any policeman. Will you do it?"

I'd always gotten along pretty well with women and this one turned out to be no exception. Her face softened, she smiled, nodded and headed out through the bank, surprising me because local citizens weren't noted for their willingness to become involved in police business.

She brought back one of the older patrolmen, a sensible type named Tompkins.

"Mark," he said, "glad to see you up and around."

I nodded at the crowd outside the bank. "What goes?"

"Someone took the jewelry store next door."

"I think I saw your man switch briefcases. Even if you pick him up, I don't think you'll find the jewels on him. They're somewhere upstairs with a kid named Nipsy Turko."

"You sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything. I'm telling you what I saw and think. Who's in charge?"

Tompkins shrugged. "Barnes probably. Your friend here collared me before I had a chance to find out."

"Then let's get Barnes in here and let him worry about it."

Tompkins moved. "I'll get him."

I shook my head. "No, thanks. Nipsy is big enough to handle a one-arm like me if he comes down while you're gone. My battling days are over. I'd rather you took the bank end of the lobby while I stay here. We'll let our beautiful friend get Barnes." I turned to the woman. "What's your name, beautiful friend?"

"Diane Waverly."

"Look, Miss Waverly, will you go to the jewelry store, find the officer in charge, tell him we have some information concerning the robbery, and bring him in here?"

She looked at me coolly. "Shall I lead him by the nose or the hand?"

I watched her walk away and grinned at Tompkins. "If I were Barnes, I'd follow her just to follow her."

Tompkins grinned back. "Why do you think I came?"

We separated and waited. The lobby was still crowded and I hoped Nipsy wouldn't show. It would be no big chore for him to come down and take off before Tompkins or I could get to him through all those people.

The woman brought Barnes more quickly than I anticipated. Cold-eyed and dapper, Barnes looked more like an advertising executive than a detective-lieutenant, but he was smart. Younger than I, he was a loner, cool and hard, and had moved up through the ranks fast, acquiring a reputation I'd always felt was a little inflated. I never did like him very much.

"Mark, you look good."

Smooth, I thought admiringly. I know how I looked after three months in that hospital, but he stands there telling me I look good and sounding as if he meant it.

"Joe," I told him, "I might have something for you here. You have a make on the guy who knocked off the store?"

He shook his head. "Small build, thin face, middle-aged; that's all I have."

"How does Slow Harry Fisher sound?"

"Slow Harry taking a jewelry store? By himself?" Barnes looked at me in amazement.

"Description fits, doesn't it?"

"Sure, but it fits a lot of other guys too."

"How many other guys come running into a bank, switch briefcases with a loser like Nipsy Turko just a minute or two after the robbery, and take off in the noonday crowd like he just welshed on a big bet?"

"You saw this?"

"Joe," I said patiently, "losing your left arm doesn't affect your eyesight. Naturally, I saw it. I also saw Nipsy take off with the briefcase, hit one of the elevators here and disappear upstairs. So far as I know he's still up there, unless he knows a way out that doesn't come through this lobby, and all this after Nipsy spent a half hour riding each elevator in the building before he met Slow Harry."

"Slow Harry and Nipsy, there's a combination for you. They'd be in over their heads taking a corner candy store."

"How much did they get?"

"Maybe about two hundred grand in cut and uncut stones, nothing mounted."

"No sense standing here gabbing about it. You going to look for Nipsy?"

"I guess I'll have to. I'll put an all-points out on Slow Harry, too.

If you saw it, you saw it, although I still don't believe it."

In no time at all there was a uniform at each entrance, one in each elevator, and the superintendent was explaining the building to Barnes.

It was also no time at all before they brought Nipsy down. The trouble was, Nipsy no longer carried the briefcase. Barnes looked at me and I nodded, laughing to myself. Since Nipsy no longer had the briefcase, he'd passed it off or stashed it somewhere. Now Barnes had to go look for it.

Standing alongside the newsstand, my beautiful friend asked, "What's going on? As official messenger, don't you think I'm entitled to know?"

I explained the situation. "Just putting two and two together," I nodded toward Barnes, "it appears we've come up with zero."

Two policemen led Nipsy away as Barnes came up. "Well, he knows his constitutional rights. Not saying a word. I'm booking him on the basis of what you saw but unless we find that briefcase we don't have a thing."

"Then find the briefcase."

His eyebrows went up. "You're a real bundle of joy. Fourteen floors, who knows how many closets, rooms, rest rooms, offices and people. It will take us all afternoon."

I grinned. "I'll make a deal with you. For ten percent of the take, I'll search the building for you. Payable only if I find it, of course. I tell you the kid took the briefcase up. It hasn't come down yet."

Barnes shook his head. "I still don't get it. Two losers like Nipsy Turko and Slow Harry Fisher, who couldn't plan their way out of a subway concourse even by reading the signs, coming up with something like this. Ordinarily, if either got his hands on two hundred grand worth of anything, he'd be moving in a straight line so fast he'd be a blur. But not this time. They take it slow and easy like a couple of pros. One hits the store during the noonday rush, passes the stuff to the other, who ditches it so that if they get picked up they're both clean. Someone set this up for them. The question is who? Someone from this building?"

"I doubt it," I said. "Nothing here except corporation offices, lawyers, advertising agencies, insurance companies, that sort of thing. I'd guess it would be someone from outside. This is a public building. Anyone can walk in. The only thing you can do is find the briefcase before he does."

Barnes scratched his ear and shrugged. "Well, I don't have any better ideas. Might as well follow

yours." He lined up the super and a half-dozen men and gave them their instructions. With a man at each end of the lobby, no briefcase would leave that building without being examined.

I remembered Diane. "If you were on your way to lunch, I'm sorry I held you up. What's your boss going to say? Anything I can do to help?"

She half-smiled. "I won't have any trouble. My boss is away and I'm pretty much on my own. How about you? What were you going to do for lunch?"

"Never gave it a thought."

"Suppose I bring something back for you?"

"Would you mind? Just coffee will do."

"On one condition. You look tired. Get behind that counter and get some rest."

"Lady, you have a deal."

I gratefully sank onto the stool Manny kept behind the counter. Things were quieter now in the lobby, most of the building crowd back from lunch. I could imagine Barnes' men working their way down, office by office, floor by floor, looking for that briefcase.

Twelve years of my life had been spent in situations like this and now they were gone with nothing but a small pension to show for it. I smiled grimly. I could have been dead, but all I lost was an arm. I didn't intend to stop living because of it. There were plenty of ways for a one-armed man with twelve years of police experience to get along. All it would take would be a little thought and some hard work. One thing sure, I wasn't giving up on Mark Stedd.

Glancing up, for the second time that day I saw a man taller than myself. This one, a complete contrast to Nipsy, was expensively dressed, well-built and distinguished looking in a dissipated sort of way, and carrying a briefcase. He motioned imperiously at Barnes, spoke to him for a few minutes, then paced back and forth impatiently until an elevator appeared.

A soft voice said, "Here's your coffee."

I looked up at Diane. "Beautiful friend, you look more beautiful than ever."

"You didn't tell me how you liked it, so I guessed black with one sugar. Was I right?"

"Someone told you," I lied. Actually I liked plenty of cream and sugar.

She smiled. "Nope. You just look the type."

I used my thumb to pry up the lid of the plastic container, rotating the cup slowly as I gradually worked it loose. I noticed she did-

n't offer to help and liked her for it. The lid gave with a sudden pop.

"You two have anything more to contribute?" Barnes asked, leaning against the counter.

"Not a thing, Joe. Who was the big guy with the briefcase?"

"He's the poor victim," Barnes said dryly. "The owner of the jewelry store. Going up to see his insurance company to report the loss. Doesn't waste any time, does he?"

"Looks more the type to get on the phone and yell for his insurance man to come to him, especially for a couple of hundred thousand dollars."

"They won't pay until we tell them the jewels are gone," said Barnes. "No sense rushing."

"Those jewels aren't gone," I said. "They're somewhere in this building." I grinned to myself. Why not give Barnes something to think about? "How's this for a theory? He's your outside man. He hires the two to rob the store, has the kid plant the jewels here in the building right next door, comes in supposedly to see his insurance company, files his claim and picks up the jewels at the same time. That way he doesn't lose a stone, yet collects the insurance. Be pretty safe. You'd never check his briefcase. Even if you did, you wouldn't know if any stones he had in there were the stolen ones or not. Be a nice way to get out of money trouble if he's been living it up too much, and he sure looks like he has."

Barnes looked down into the coffee cup. "You could be right, but what are you drinking? It has to be more than coffee to come up with a wild one like that."

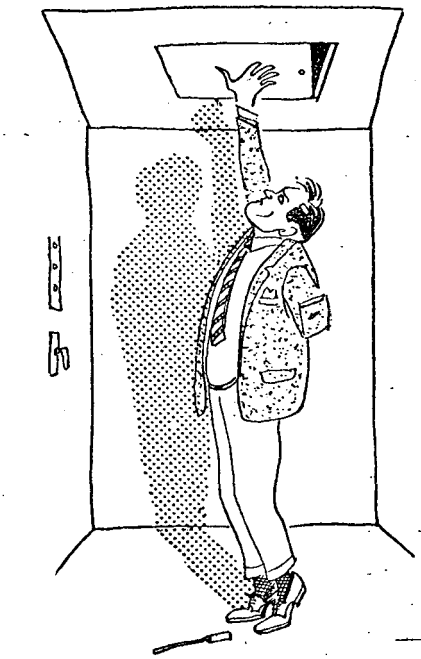
"Okay." I grinned. "Put a man on him or don't. From now on come up with your own theories."

I finished my coffee and flipped the cup at the wastebasket behind the counter. It missed and I muttered under my breath.

As I picked it up, I turned it over in my fingers and the idea came, went, came again and I grinned. Why not? I moved past the woman, motioning Barnes to come with me, headed toward the elevators and punched the call button. One of the elevators hit the lobby floor and opened its doors. I stepped inside, looked up, and found what I was looking for, the usual service door in the ceiling. I reached up and pushed. The door moved. With two good arms, I could have thrown the door open, grasped the edge and taken a look at the elevator roof.

Barnes looked at me strangely and whistled softly. I gave him credit for catching on quickly.

"Now you know what Nipsy was doing in the elevators," I told



him. "Each of these service doors has a catch that needs a half turn with a screwdriver or coin before it can be opened. Not knowing which elevator he would get after the switch, Nipsy took no chances. He opened them all. Probably pushed the briefcase up through the door the minute the elevator was empty. Want to bet that briefcase isn't riding on the roof of one of these elevators?"

"No bet, Mark." Barnes motioned to one of the men in the lobby. "See if there is anything up there."

The detective leaped up, poked his head through the opening, then dropped down. "Nothing but grease and dirt."

The fifth one had the briefcase resting on the roof.

"Get it down," Barnes ordered.

"No, hold it, Joe," I said slowly. "There's no hurry. Nipsy left it here for some reason. As you said, if *he* was supposed to keep the ice, he'd have kept going through the lobby. He left it here for someone. Why not play it cool and see what happens?"

Barnes stroked his chin. "Why not? With someone on the roof of the elevator and a couple of plain-clothesmen at the lobby doors, I can wait to see if someone picks it up."

I grinned. "Good luck. I think I'll go sell some papers. That's what Manny's paying me for."

Diane was still waiting.

"Sold any papers for me?"

"Not even a magazine."

"Manny better not spend too much in Florida. At this rate, he'll be broke when he gets back."

She laughed. "Is the action over now?"

"All except the grand finale. Barnes will take care of it from here on."

"In that case, I'd better get back

to work. I've enjoyed every minute."

"I owe you one coffee. Settle for a dinner tomorrow night?"

"Now that's what I call a fair offer. Accepted."

"Fine. I'll be waiting for you here."

I watched her swinging hips move away—regretfully. I wouldn't be here tomorrow night. By then, I'd be well on my way out of the country.

The lobby was practically empty now. I told Barnes I was going to the men's washroom on the second floor. Once there, I removed the jewels from the paper towel dispenser where Nipsy had left them for me, locked myself in one of the stalls and carefully began to stow them in the pocketed belt I was wearing under my shirt.

Two hundred thousand dollars; little enough payment for my left arm, and quite adequate payment for the three weeks it took me to plan the operation, talk Manny into taking his vacation, and browbeat Nipsy and Slow Harry into pulling the job for a small fee. They couldn't refuse since I had plenty on both that the syndicate boys would like to know. Besides, they were safe enough. The only thing the police had on Nipsy was my testimony and I wouldn't be around; as for Slow Harry, they'd have only a simple eyewitness account and no substantial evidence.

Two hundred thousand dollars. I laughed. I owed the department this little job for passing me up for promotion twice and for sending me into that house with a rookie partner who froze instead of firing when the psycho swung the shotgun my way. If I hadn't moved fast, he would have nailed me dead center instead of catching my arm.

Too bad Barnes hadn't bought that story about the jewelry store owner. It would have been good for a big laugh. The only touchy part of the operation was when he wanted to bring the briefcase down. For a quick moment, until I talked him out of it, I regretted showing him where it was. I had expected him to figure it out himself, especially after telling him about Nipsy riding the elevators before the switch, but he didn't pick it up. As I thought, he wasn't as smart as they said he was, so I had to hurry things along.

I had long relished the thought of walking out with those jewels around my waist while somebody guarded that empty briefcase on the elevator roof and I didn't want to be cheated out of it.

Sure, I could have set it up in a half-dozen other ways a lot safer, but this was the way I wanted it—right under their noses—and

Bright Boy Barnes getting the assignment was the cake's icing.

I carefully checked the belt to make sure it didn't bulge, buttoned my shirt and coat, unlocked the stall and stepped out into the washroom.

Arms folded, Barnes was leaning against a wash basin, looking at me with his cold eyes.

"You going to make trouble, Mark? We don't want to hurt you. We know that arm isn't quite healed yet."

I could have killed him, not because I was caught, but because he had absolutely no business being there. With two good arms . . . But I didn't have two good arms.

"No trouble, Joe."

We walked out of the washroom and took the elevator to the lobby.

"Search him," Barnes told one of his men. He found the belt with no trouble.

"You want to know why, Mark?" he asked gently.

I nodded, although I really didn't care. All I could think of was the two hundred thousand dollars in that belt the detective was holding, the two hundred thousand that really was mine.

"The odds," Barnes said. "I figured the odds of you being here in the lobby, of seeing the kid Nipsy, of seeing the briefcase switch, of knowing where to look for the briefcase. The odds were tremendous, Mark. You always were a hard-luck cop, a good man to have around but no big brain, yet you were always one step ahead of me today and that just didn't figure. The percentages say I should have been one step ahead of you. As far as I was concerned, until the whole thing was wrapped up, you were a loose end and I never liked loose ends. Watching you was just something I had to do."

I'd given him a neatly wrapped package that any sensible man would have bought with no questions asked. All he had to do was watch that briefcase. It was the right thing to do, the logical thing to do, but here he was babbling about odds, percentages, loose ends.

I started to laugh. *Some* detective. And they passed *me* over twice for promotion.

The thought occurs that a certain stigma accompanies permanent phantasmagoria.

The Lonesome Game

By Arthur Porges

LINDA began to awake very slowly, moving up like a drifting balloon from a bottomless well of oblivion, black and terribly silent. She had never been one to open her eyes in the morning and snap to full alertness on the instant. Rather, Linda had always enjoyed the languorous interval that extended from dreamless sleep to sharp awareness—to the caress of silky bedclothes, the sound of mockers trilling in their virtuoso style outside, the scent of perking coffee that chuckled while spreading its aroma. Only after savoring the pleasant transition would she gradually open her eyes to the room itself.

Today the enjoyment went even further in its witchery. For the first time in years she remembered the Lonesome Game, and was moved to play a favorite version. There were a number of these, al-

most forgotten, but now, with this slow awakening, details became clear in her memory.

On chilly autumn evenings, for example, as a girl of ten, she preferred the Voyage. That involved a long walk by the river, rich with poignant night fragrances. She would not return until after dark, pretending it was from some vague, distant journey across the sea. She could not be sure that the old redwood house would be there, or even if Mom and Dad were still alive when she came home. Her heart would be pounding with delicious anticipation—and carefully nurtured fears—as she rounded the last corner. Yes, the house was standing, warmly lit, inviting. But were they really in it, after all these weary years, wondering what had happened to Linda, gone for so long? Was she ever coming home?

It was invariably a letdown then, to have Mom look up from her book, and say mildly, "I do wish you'd get back before dark, dear." Just as if Linda had been for a stroll instead of appearing so dramatically, without any warning, after a long, long visit to foreign lands!

This morning, though, was no time for the Voyage, but rather for the Strange Awakening version of the Lonesome Game, which she had so often played as a child. It called for lying very quietly in bed, refusing to open her eyes even a tiny bit, and pretending to be doubtful of her surroundings. By keeping her arms tightly pressed against her sides and holding herself rigid, Linda could make the soft, familiar bed seem altogether strange, so that when she did peek the room would be quite different, a mysterious change having taken place while she slept. Then even the mockingbirds would sound like those weird singers in African jungle movies, all croaks and bells and hoots, and the smell of coffee would seem more like that of some exotic brew unknown in America, even to gourmets. A silly game, but it was such fun, and so reassuring to open her eyes at last to a well-known and loved place.

Yes, she would play it now, even as a girl of twenty. Girl? No, a woman. Why, how could she have forgotten! Today was her birthday: twenty years old on May 18. What was that bittersweet little scene in "Tales of Hoffman," where the evil doctor, having called for Antonia's age, sings "Only twenty! Why the Springtime of youth . . ." And she doomed by him—made to sing when she was so ill . . .

Linda screwed her lids down more tightly. Well, nobody was go-

ing to ruin her springtime, or her lovely date last night. Brian Macrea, the B. M. O. C., no less; had called for her in his new car, and she'd had her third drink of imported champagne, too; several, in fact. Why not? Brian was loaded; best catch in town, and she had him sewed up. What if he knew his girl of twenty was playing the Strange Awakening this very morning? And he thinks I'm so mature! But then, she defended herself; arms firmly against her sides, eyes still shut, it's the first time in years—because I'm so happy, it must be.

The Lonesome Game was working, too. The bed felt harder than normal; the mockingbirds were oddly still—sometimes they sang all night, a most unbirdlike habit. But she could smell coffee; that must be done perking. It did have a very sharp overscent, however—a strange brew from where? Atlantis, across the sea; not coffee, but a similar drink with other ingredients; that explained the off flavor.

The Lonesome Game was working too well. Linda shivered. She wasn't ten any more. Why this conviction that the room *was* different, that there had been some crazy, impossible transformation while she slept? And so sound a sleep, not to hear the coffee perking, but to awake only after it was done. Briefly it was confusing.

Yet that was natural; she'd been out late; they'd gone everywhere, she and Brian . . . and then parked a long time by the river . . . he was just rough enough to be masculine . . . they could hit it off if only that proposal were in the cards . . . she was quite sure to be Homecoming Queen; that had its points in catching a husband . . . nor was it just vanity to feel that she, Linda Jean Ballinger, was the prettiest girl in town; everybody had always said so since she was sixteen . . . How I ramble! she told herself, sinking deeper in the bed, and actually recapturing the slightness and fragility of childhood . . . I must wake up and get moving: today's my birthday . . . party tonight . . .

Her lids were heavy; they didn't want to lift, and Linda was suddenly a little frightened. It's only that I'm not really awake yet, she assured herself. That's happened before. You think the sleep is over, but are only passing from one dream level to another. I'll force myself out of this half-doze . . .

Then she heard voices nearby. Mom and Dad? No, two women talking; one loud, the other soft and sweet. Company? Not in the morning; not with Mom—house immaculate first. Unless I've slept until noon . . . that possible? . . . I did get home awfully late . . . or

did I? . . . don't even remember . . . too much wine? . . . I hope not—Dad will be furious . . . but I'm twenty today, a grown woman . . . and one has privileges on a birthday . . . I'm very clear-headed for a dream; odd . . .

"In here," the loud voice said. "A tragic case, Sister. Out on a date; night before her birthday, poor thing. Her boyfriend was drunk; he crashed a new car. D. O. A.—dead on arrival, he was."

Linda listened, wondering, letting her lids stay down. Morbid gossip, the kind she hated. Why not stick to the good things? There were so many. Death was unpleasant. What was Mom up to, inviting such people? And who was the "case" in the other bedroom? This was no nursing home; the room was for guests.

Linda opened her eyes at last, but this time the Lonesome Game, in its Strange Awakening form, went on: walls dirty white; smell of some sharp antiseptic mingling with that of strong coffee; and this was *not* her bed, but a hard, narrow cot.

She got her arms free, and with much effort brought them to her face . . .

"Yes," the loud woman just outside the door said. "She's been here the longest. Way before my time. Not a relation left. Brain damage, you know, Sister Ursula. Keeps them in a coma. Just a vegetable. And today's her birthday."

The soft voice said something very low.

"No, she'll not wake up, Sister . . . unless . . . sometimes at the very end, the mind gets quite clear for just a few minutes . . . as if death had special power . . ."

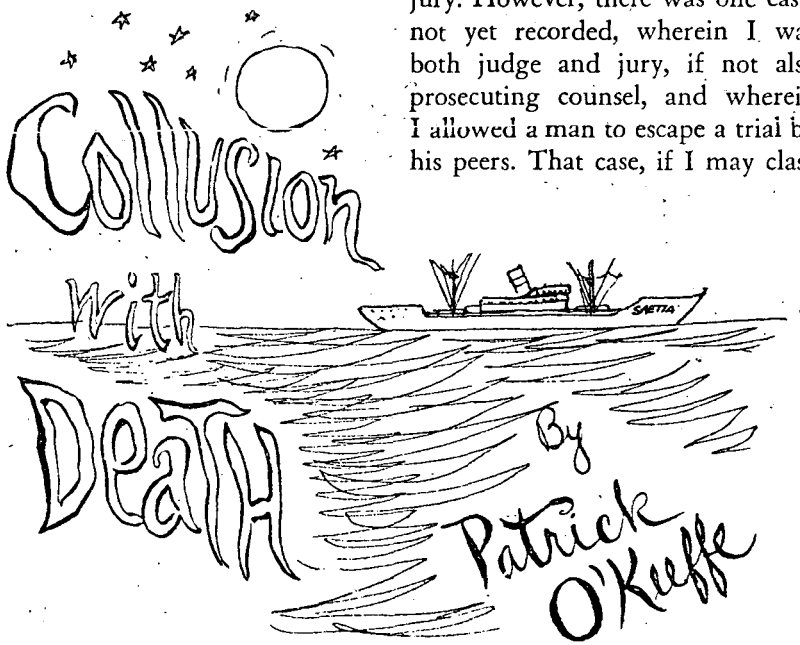
Linda's fingers touched her wrinkled cheeks, old and flaccid; her hands she now saw plainly, and they were gnarled, veiny, hooked . . .

Two women, one a nun, were standing by the bed. Sister Ursula's eyes, soft and brown as melted caramel, met Linda's gaze, so full of terrible urgency.

"Why, she's awake!" the nun cried.

Then Linda's eyes closed and the Lonesome Game was ended.

Perhaps a career is an anticlimax.



IT HAS been said that I have enabled more men to cheat the death sentence than any other living trial lawyer. Implied in the use of the word "cheat" is that I am a specialist in bringing about miscarriages of justice. What seems to be ignored is that in each case on record I did not possess the power to decide; there were also judge and jury. However, there was one case, not yet recorded, wherein I was both judge and jury, if not also prosecuting counsel, and wherein I allowed a man to escape a trial by his peers. That case, if I may class it as such, helped more than anything else to shape my career. Now that all principals except myself are deceased, I can write its history without causing anyone any embarrassment.

The case arose during my final voyage as a merchant-marine radio officer. I had used my teen-age

experience as an amateur to pass for a commercial license in order to get a few glimpses of the rest of the world before settling down to a shore career, and I spent my college and law-school vacations in like manner. In that last summer I had managed to squeeze in a couple of runs aboard oil tankers to Venezuela and Mexico, and there was just time to make the three-week round trip to Puerto Rico in the sugar boat *Saetia* before I was due back in law school for my bar examination.

The captain of the *Saetia* was Philip Maddock, a man who, as a medical-school dropout, was far above the average of freight-ship masters in both education and mien. Making the voyage with him was his wife, Marion. The sugar company allowed the wives of its masters one voyage annually, but this was the first occasion in the past few years that Mrs. Maddock had availed herself of the privilege. She was thin and bony-chested, with gray streaks in her shoulder-length auburn hair, and she wore horn-rimmed glasses that seemed to enhance her fading middle-aged prettiness. She was a buyer of furs for a large department store, but she had been losing weight, presumably from overwork, and her doctor had ordered rest and quiet, we were told. Hence she occupied the pilot cabin in the officers' quarters, instead of sharing the captain's quarters as was customary, to spare her from being wakened whenever the captain was called out during the night.

It became obvious before the voyage was hardly a day or two old that there was a coolness of some kind between her and the captain. She sat at his table in the saloon, together with the chief mate and the chief engineer, but she shared little in the conversation, and would sometimes leave before the others had finished. She rose early and took to having coffee on the bridge with the chief mate at six-thirty. She spent most of the day alone outside her cabin in a steamer chair, reading through sunglasses one of the books or magazines she had brought with her. Part of her evenings she passed playing bridge in the little officers' lounge with the chief mate, chief engineer, and chief steward. They remarked that she was inclined to be sharp-tongued with her partners.

I had very little conversation with her, since I spent most of my spare time with my law books. Once or twice, during the early part of the voyage, she wandered as far as the radio-room door, but finding me busy, she had wandered off again. She did not come

right into the radio room until that very last night of hers on board, four days before we were due in Boston.

It was warm and humid, the radio-room fan giving small relief, and I was waiting for my watch to end at eleven o'clock, when I could go down to the officers' pantry for a sandwich and a glass of cold milk and then cool off on deck for a while before turning in for the night. The ship had quieted down around the officers' quarters, but suddenly someone moved in silently behind me from the open door to the passageway, and even before I glanced up I knew from the waft of gardenia mingling with the ubiquitous raw brown-sugar smell of the cargo that it was the captain's wife. She was in soft slippers and wore a robe over her white nightgown. There was an alarmed expression on her face.

"I must come in," she said. "I'm so frightened."

She sank into the armchair beside the doorway. I quickly turned down the receiver volume control to mute the chorus of ship and shore radiotelegraph signals, and swiveled around to her in my chair.

"What frightened you?" I asked.

Her face was damp from the heat. She had come without her glasses, and her eyes had that odd appearance resulting when glasses are removed.

"The captain." She generally referred to her husband as the captain. "We quarreled this evening," she went on fretfully. "He threatened me."

She cast a look at the loudspeaker as the high-pitched note of a nearby ship calling a coast station rose above the muted background.

"You're not interrupting anything," I assured her.

"I've been upset all evening," she resumed in an anguished voice. "The captain and I quarreled over another woman—a rich young widow he met in a San Juan night club last year. She was a passenger on a cruise ship."

"Mrs. Maddock," I said gently, "I'd prefer not to be drawn into the private affairs of you and the captain."

"You must help me," she cried beseechingly. "I'm terrified. The captain wants a divorce. That's what the quarrel was about. I told him no—never!" Her little gray eyes flashed. "He said I'd refused for the last time. After I went to bed a while ago, I couldn't sleep. Things began to come back to me. This is the first voyage I've made with the captain in several years. Our marriage hadn't been going well of late, even before the wid-

ow. The captain persuaded me to take this trip, for my health. Enid —my sister—said he wanted a chance to put me out of the way, to push me overboard. I didn't take Enid seriously at the time—

just showing her dislike for him, I thought. She never did care for him. It was she who found out all about the rich young widow. I'd been away on one of my buying trips and didn't get back until after the captain had sailed on the next voyage. Enid had seen him out with her. Enid's remark came back to me when I was lying in the dark in my cabin and couldn't sleep. I got to worrying over the captain's meaning when he said I'd refused for the last time. It sounded like a threat. I became terrified he might really push me overboard."

"Mrs. Maddock," I said with a reassuring smile, "it isn't easy to push anyone overboard unless it's

someone who happens to be standing on the rails."

"He could poison me. He keeps all those drugs and poisons in his safe. He knows all about poisons. He could poison me and bury me at sea without anyone knowing I'd been murdered."

"Do you really believe your husband would be capable of committing such a crime?" I asked her.

She gave me a distraught look. "I don't know. But I'm terrified he might. You're studying law. Couldn't you advise me of something I could do? Isn't there some way of having myself placed in protective custody, or whatever can be done like that aboard a ship?"

"My advice, Mrs. Maddock, is to go back to your cabin and try to overcome your fears and go to sleep. You are perhaps overwrought as a result of your quarrel with the captain and brooding over it in the dark. The captain is turned in for the night and unlikely to turn out to offer you something with poison in it. You could refuse it anyway. By morning your fears most likely will have vanished. If not, and you wish to ease your mind, I suggest you speak to the chief mate. Mr. Patcher is next in command and in a better position to act in your behalf than I. Tell him you wish to place yourself under his protection. You may also mention you have confided in me. Tell Mr. Patcher you wish him to take up the matter with the captain. By doing so he'll be serving notice on your husband that if you should unexpectedly die during the remainder of the voyage, he'll come under suspicion."

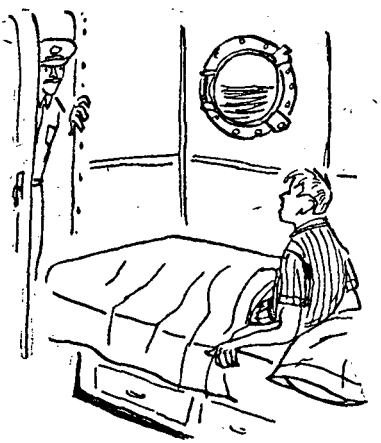
Mrs. Maddock gazed at me with an expression of wretched indecision and then rose as if in heavy resignation. "I know I won't feel any different in the morning," she said miserably, "but I'll speak to Mr. Patcher. Thank you, Mr. Vanner. I do hope you'll forgive me for bothering you with my troubles, but I got so frightened and felt I had to talk to someone."

I watched her as she returned along the passageway, her head bent as if with dread at each step. I felt sorry for her. It was anguish enough to know that her husband wanted to free himself from her without having to suffer the terror of being poisoned, unfounded or not. As a medical student who had given up medicine for the sea, Captain Maddock no doubt possessed a working knowledge of poisons but, although I had known him hardly more than two weeks, he did not strike me as a man who would murder his wife for another woman. He was well liked by both officers and crew. Yet more than

one wife killer has been popular with colleagues and neighbors.

I hoped that Mrs. Maddock's fears would have subsided by morning; I was not eager to have the captain learn that I had been made privy to his marital troubles. That was my last thought as his wife turned the corner of the passageway into the officers' quarters, the smell of raw sugar replacing gardenia, and it was the last time I saw her alive.

I was awakened suddenly next morning by a knock, the hook holding my cabin door ajar was lifted, and someone came in. I started up in my bunk. The cabin had cooled during the night and was now bright with eastern sunshine; the sparkling blue sea was mirrored in the thick glass of the ports suspended on their chains. I



threw an anxious glance at the travel alarm clock on my bunkside tray, fearing that it had failed to go off and I had overslept and should now be on watch in the radio room. But it was only a few minutes before seven. I blinked curiously at the captain, coming toward me with two radiogram forms in his hand.

"Sorry to have to get you up ahead of time, Mr. Vanner," he said gravely. "I want you to get these two messages off at once." He paused. "My wife passed away during the night."

I held out my hand mechanically for the two forms, a single thought racing around in my mind. Captain Maddock was a handsome man nearing fifty, broad and powerfully built, with sea-blue eyes and wavy brown hair, unshaven at the moment and in the rumpled khakis he usually wore during night or early morning spells on the bridge. I could well imagine any young widow, wealthy or not, finding him extremely attractive. But would he murder for one?

"I'm most sorry to hear that, Captain," I said, and I added what appeared to be an innocuous question. "Was she suddenly taken ill?"

"She died in her sleep. As you know, she was making this trip for her health's sake. I thought she was merely run-down. Apparently

it was something more serious." He shook his head sadly. "I far from expected anything like this. It's a big shock to me."

He sounded genuinely grieved; yet I wondered if he did not protest a little too much. He went out in silence, hooking the door behind him. I slid into my slippers and hurried into the adjoining radio room in my pajamas. I read the two messages, counted the words, and added time and date more by reflex action than conscious thought, my mind elsewhere. One radiogram advised the marine superintendent of the sugar line in Boston that the captain's wife had passed away at sea that morning; the other conveyed the same information to a Mrs. Enid Crail. I transmitted the radiograms to a Florida coast station and then went back to my cabin to shave and shower.

While the electric razor hummed about my face, I speculated on the nature of Marion Maddock's death, but decided that all conjecture would be little more than exercise until I had learned something of the circumstances surrounding it.

I waited until eight o'clock before going below for breakfast, so as not to be finished before the chief mate came into the saloon. The captain was absent from his table, and I mused that even a man who had just murdered his wife might be capable of showing that much respect for her memory, if only to keep up appearances. The chief engineer was partly through his usual cereal, toast, and coffee. I sat down to breakfast alone, for of my three table companions the third mate had already left to relieve the chief mate on the bridge, and the second mate and second assistant engineer were still sleeping off their four-to-eight watches.

The chief mate came in just as the chief engineer was leaving. I hurried through my hot cakes and coffee and then went over to the captain's table and eased into the chair vacated by the chief engineer.

"Quite a shock, the old man's wife," I remarked.

Mr. Patcher nodded. He was a mild man of thirty or so, lean and sandy-haired, his black tie a little askew as usual round the neck of his khaki shirt. He was shaking a layer of catsup over his fried eggs, bacon, and sausage, his regular morning meal that belied his slimness.

"I could scarcely believe it when the old man came back to the bridge and told me," he said, putting down the bottle.

"It was he who found her?"

Again the chief mate nodded. "She didn't show up on the bridge

for coffee. The old man went below to see what was keeping her. He called me down right away. She was still in her bunk—died peacefully in her sleep, by the look of her."

"A heart attack, perhaps."

"The old man thinks it might have been whatever's been making her feel out of sorts all along. He's had some medical training, you know."

"He'll have her buried ashore, no doubt, seeing that we'll arrive in port in a few days."

"No. She's to be buried at sea. The service will be this afternoon at four o'clock."

"Isn't that rather unusual—so quick, I mean?"

"I suppose so," agreed Mr. Patcher. "I wanted to fix her up nice and give all hands a chance to view her and pay their respects today and tomorrow, like we generally do with a crew member, but the old man said he wants it simple and nothing special just because it happens to be his wife. He wants it over and done with—no fuss or waiting. He doesn't believe in all the funeral-parlor layout ashore, flowers and all that stuff. I'm with him on that. That's how I'd want it for myself if I kick off at sea—a length of good clean canvas and a firebar or two. No putting me on exhibition. That's the best way of doing it, to my mind."

And also to the mind of a man who is in a hurry to dispose of a body, I mused. I didn't pursue the subject any further with Mr. Patcher. I left him to his morning snack, as he called it, and went up to the radio room to begin my forenoon watch at eight-thirty. I switched on the main receiver and sat with ears attuned to the medley of dots and dashes issuing from the loudspeaker while thoughts criss-crossed my mind like words on a television news ticker run wild. The death of the captain's wife was being accepted a natural one—but was it? Was Captain Maddock really capable of murder after all? Had he given his wife a poison that did not take effect until sometime during the night? Or smothered her with a pillow? Or used some other method unlikely to betray him?

Ashore, I could have gone to the authorities with my suspicions. Here, aboard ship, the authority was the captain, in supreme command, the suspect himself. If guilty, Captain Maddock could be expected to ridicule his wife's fears, charge that she was suffering from delusions, or was out of her mind, and probably hasten the burial. If innocent, he would naturally be outraged, furious, perhaps throw me out of his cabin

and carry out the burial on schedule. Either way, the question whether or not murder had been committed would go unresolved.

How solid were my grounds for suspecting murder? I asked myself. The fears expressed by the captain's wife were perhaps without justification. The captain's remark that she had refused him a divorce for the last time perhaps meant nothing beyond that and was by no means a threat. Her death following so closely afterward could be nothing more than an extraordinary coincidence, the haste to bury her simply a personal preference.

I was tempted to remain silent and do nothing. If Captain Maddock was not guilty, I should be doing him an ill turn by throwing suspicion on him and forcing him to prove his innocence, as well as putting myself in an invidious light as an over-zealous law student. Yet the thought of taking no action, keeping silent in the face of possible murder, left me uneasy. It would be cowardly, I felt. Moreover, if there had been murder, I should virtually be making myself an accessory after the fact. That was intolerable. I had to do something.

I considered radioing my suspicions to the marine superintendent and urging him to order the captain to bring the body to port. Or perhaps it would be more immediately effective to lay the matter before Mr. Patcher and demand that he act on it. Yet I was reluctant to take either course. I felt I should not be dealing fairly with Captain Maddock. It would be like indicting a man without first giving him the opportunity of clearing himself.

I decided to go direct to Captain Maddock. I spent several minutes mentally wording my manner of approach, and then I went out of the radio room to look for him.

I found him in his office, going over some letters on his desk. He was wearing fresh khakis with collar insignia and black tie, seemingly out of respect for the dead. He glanced up as I knocked on the doorway and entered. When I came close enough to his desk, I noticed that the letters bore his wife's name and address on the envelopes. On the bulkhead above the desk was a framed photograph of her.

"Captain," I began respectfully, "I understand from the chief mate that your wife will be buried at sea."

"Yes," he replied sadly. "The service will be at four o'clock on the afterdeck. You'll be on watch in the radio room, of course, but take time out to attend."

"You're not sure what she died from. On shore when cause of death is unknown, an autopsy is generally ordered. Isn't that the rule at sea?"

Captain Maddock studied me for a few moments with his sea-blue eyes, and then smiled, as if suddenly comprehending. "Apparently the law bug is nipping you, Mr. Vanner. Well, for your information, at sea the captain logs the cause of death if he knows it beyond doubt, and to the best of his ability if he doesn't."

"What if he suspected foul play?"

"You mean murder?" The captain shrugged. "If a captain suspected anything of that kind, he'd most certainly hold the body for an autopsy at the next port of call."

"Suppose the captain himself were the murderer?"

The captain smiled. "I'd say he'd do everything within his power to avoid an autopsy."

"So that if such a captain appeared exceptionally desirous of a quick burial at sea, he'd be leaving himself open to suspicion."

Captain Maddock had given no sign of perceiving that my questions were not strictly impersonal, and I was beginning to feel that either he was a good actor or else he had not murdered his wife. Now, however, the smile suddenly vanished.

"Is that an insinuation of some kind?"

"Captain, I'll stop beating about the bush. Late last night your wife came to the radio room. She was frightened. She feared that you intended to murder her, by poison perhaps. She said you had quarreled with her earlier in the evening and threatened her. She died suddenly during the night. You are giving her a quick burial at sea."

The captain sat motionless, his eyes fixed on mine. Through the open portholes came the incessant hiss of the sea against the moving hull; two fans hummed on opposite bulkheads. Footsteps sounded in the passageway and Mr. Patcher went by, glancing casually in. The captain suddenly came to his feet and crossed to the door; he closed it and returned to the swivel chair. He gestured at the chair beside his desk.

"Sit down, Mr. Vanner," he said, as if I had merely come on some routine matter. "Please tell me everything my wife said to you."

I sat stiffly in the straight-backed chair and repeated every word his wife had spoken to me in the radio room on the previous night, as near as I could recall. When I had finished, Captain Maddock appeared a little shaken but otherwise composed.

"So you believe I poisoned my wife," he said, almost reproachfully.

His manner astonished me. This was not the blustering, feigned indignation of guilt, nor the angry scorn of outraged innocence. Indeed, Captain Maddock gazed at me with as little outward emotion as if I had merely drawn his attention to some minor disregard of shipboard radio regulations.

"I think you'll agree there are reasonable grounds for requesting an autopsy," I replied.

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll naturally view that as a sign of guilt."

"And then?"

"I'll go to the chief mate. If he refuses to take any action to prevent the sea burial, then I'll go to each of the union delegates on board. If they, too, are afraid to disobey your orders to proceed with the burial, I'll radio the facts to the marine superintendent and demand that he order the body held for an autopsy. I'll also radio any Coast Guard cutter or United States warship that may be close enough to board us at short notice."

These radio threats, I was well aware, were idle ones, for the captain could have ordered the voltage shut off the radio room, or have me prevented from entering it, but at least I was showing my determination to do all within my power in the interests of justice.

Captain Maddock gazed at me in silence for a few moments. From the deck outside came the voices of sailors washing down the white paintwork for the ship's arrival in the home port, but neither the captain nor I could have said what they were talking about, so intent were we on each other. Finally the captain spoke, with surprising calmness.

"Mr. Vanner, in the circumstances I can quite understand your feelings. However, the facts aren't what you believe them to be. My wife lied to you last night. I did not persuade her to make this voyage. We did not quarrel over a divorce. I did not demand one, nor threaten that it was the last time I'd ask for one. The rich young widow—yes, this is true except that she isn't rich; merely of comfortable means. My sister-in-law, Enid, found out about her and told Marion. Any poisoning that was done was by my sister-in-law of my wife's mind. Marion was furious about the widow. She was an intensely jealous woman. Even though our marriage had become shaky, she couldn't bear the thought of another woman taking her place. She went so far as to say she'd rather see me dead

first. I never took her seriously."

The captain paused, and as his gaze wandered to the photograph on the bulkhead, I remembered how his wife's eyes had flashed last night when she had cried, "Never!" The photograph had obviously been taken several years before; Marion Maddock was fuller in the figure then, and wore a happy smile. I wondered whether it was she or the captain who was the liar.

"My wife," resumed the captain, looking back at me, "suggested this voyage herself. I was surprised, for she had declined to make these annual voyages in recent years, after we had begun to cool toward each other, in fact. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that I was the one who cooled off, for no particular reason other than she had ceased to attract me. Anyway, she had consulted some out-of-town doctor when she was away on one of her buying trips and he had recommended a long rest far from everything. I naturally agreed when she suggested making this trip, with no thought whatever of Enid's silly notion of pushing her overboard."

"Then you won't object to an autopsy?"

Captain Maddock stared somberly at his brown shoes. "That means you do not believe me, or rather that you are still in doubt. I was hoping that I need go no further, but I suppose it was too much to expect. You force me to make a painful disclosure." The captain looked up at me. "An autopsy would reveal that my wife died of a poison taken from the ship's medical supplies kept in my safe."

I stared at him, startled and shocked. Then you did poison her."

"That," he replied, "would be the inevitable conclusion drawn from the result of an autopsy. The truth is that when I found my wife this morning, my first thought was that she had died from whatever had been causing her tiredness. Then, among her lotions on the dresser, I saw the bottle of morphine sulphate tablets. She must have got them from my safe yesterday morning when I stepped out for a few moments while it was unlocked. I put the bottle out of sight before I called down Mr. Patcher. I wished to avoid an inquiry by the Coast Guard. It isn't pleasant for a man to have it known that his wife committed suicide, especially if it was said to be over another woman, which is what my sister-in-law would be sure to say. Also, I didn't want the other woman's name brought into the affair."

I was unable to restrain my incredulity. "You expect me to believe that your wife came to me last night in fear of being poisoned by you and immediately went to her cabin and took a fatal dose?"

"To all appearances that is exactly what happened."

"But why—for what reason?"

"Obviously in hope of having me condemned for murder."

The man amazed me. By now he must have fully realized that he was virtually fighting for his life, yet he seemed as unperturbed as if he were merely stating his side of some trivial complaint lodged with a shipping commissioner by a disgruntled crew member. I could well believe the yarn told of him that when he was the wartime captain of a fast armed freighter being chased and shelled by a U-boat, the submarine commander radioed the freighter to cease firing or he would execute her captain, whereupon Captain Maddock told the gunnery officer to keep up the good work and then took another bite of the apple he was eating.

"Captain," I said, still incredulous, "I find it almost impossible to conceive that a woman would take her own life in order to have her husband condemned for murdering her."

The captain turned to his desk. He picked up one of the letters and handed it to me. "Perhaps that will help to convince you. I came across it a little while ago when going through my wife's correspondence. It is quite clear to me now why she kept it a secret."

I unfolded the sheet of crisp bond paper. It was the letterhead of a Rochester physician, whom the captain's wife had consulted. According to the typed contents, she had asked for a frank appraisal of a series of tests she had recently undergone at a local cancer clinic. The doctor's regretful reply was that death was inevitable within six months at the most.

I looked up at the captain, all doubt finally swept from my mind, but he was slow to grasp the crucial significance of that letter, for he said:

"She knew she would die in six months or so. She couldn't face those six months, slowly wasting away, agonizing pain toward the end. Nor could she endure knowing that I'd be free to marry the widow. So she carefully withheld knowledge of her fatal illness from me, foreseeing undoubtedly that a jury would find it hard to believe that a man would risk murdering his wife if he knew a disease would kill her within a few months. It would seem that her disease had reached into her mind also."

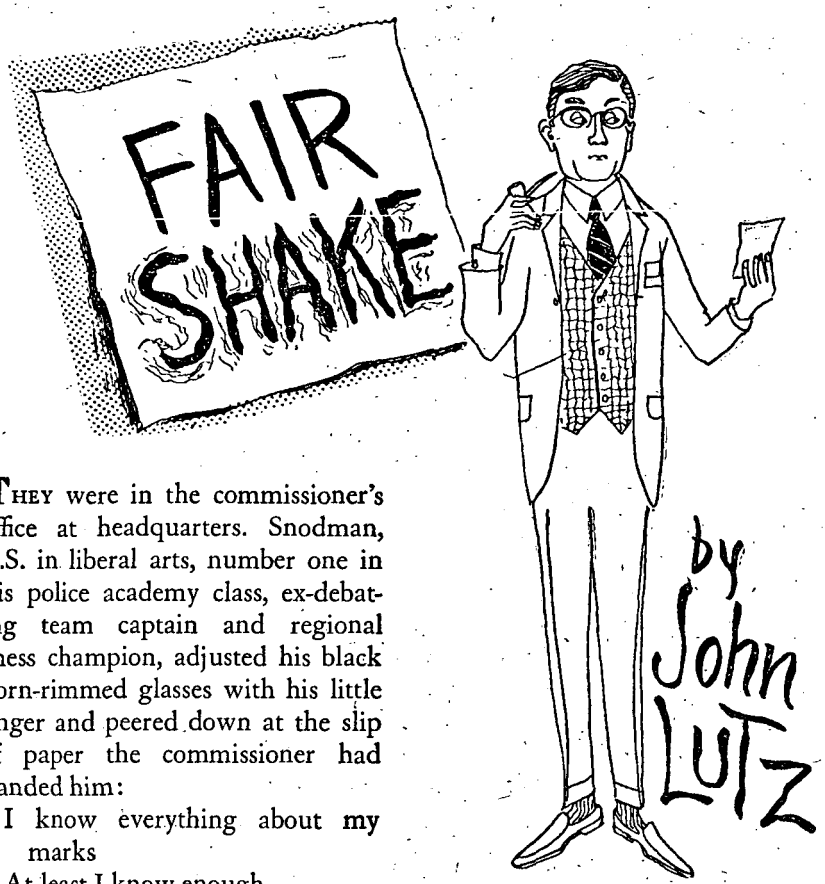
Perhaps. I glanced again at the photograph above the desk. I wondered if that smile was as false as the fears she had expressed to me last night. It was she, not the captain, who had been the good actor. Although Marion Maddock was now dead, I let anger toward her rise within me, resentful that she should have used me as a dupe in her monstrous scheme. But she had been blind to the vital flaw in it: if a man were unlikely to murder his wife while knowing she was soon to die, by the same line of reasoning such a woman in fear of being murdered by her husband would not fail to tell him about her deadly illness.

I stood up, handing the letter back. "Captain," I said, "I'll be on the afterdeck at four o'clock."

I left the *Saetia* in Boston and went to New York to prepare for my bar examination. A year later I attended the wedding of Captain Maddock and the young widow. Whatever her means, Captain Maddock remained at sea. He retired a few years ago, and they moved to Florida. Both were drowned when their sailing yacht was caught in that Bahamas hurricane last fall. As with the first marriage, Captain Maddock left no issue.

Captain Maddock closely followed my career as a trial lawyer. After each case he invariably sent me a telegram of congratulations or regrets, according to the verdict. I shall miss those telegrams, especially the congratulatory ones. These somehow always gave me the comfortable feeling that the verdict had been just for, although I have never accepted a murder case unless there were some grounds, however small, for believing the accused innocent, more than once I have hesitated. Then a glance at the photograph hanging among the diplomas on my office wall helped me to a decision. There have been numerous inquiries about that photograph. Now I shall be able to answer with my true reason for keeping it there, that it serves as both reminder and inspiration. It is an enlarged snapshot of the sugar boat *Saetia.*

A clever man recognizes his own shortcomings—but admits them only to himself.



THEY were in the commissioner's office at headquarters. Snodman, B.S. in liberal arts, number one in his police academy class, ex-debating team captain and regional chess champion, adjusted his black horn-rimmed glasses with his little finger and peered down at the slip of paper the commissioner had handed him:

I know everything about my marks
At least I know enough
To catch them always unawares
They're never up to Snuff

"Crude," Snodman said. "What does it mean, sir?"

"I've seen them before," Commissioner Moriarty said. "They're the work of a man the underworld calls 'The Snuffer'."

"A professional assassin, sir?" Snodman asked, looking at Moriarty through emotionless blue eyes. It had always intrigued Snodman, the fact that a man named Moriarty would be decreed by fate to be a police commissioner and look so like the fictitious Sherlock Holmes would have looked, with lean hawk nose, shrewd gray eyes, even smoking a pipe the stem of which was at least slightly curved.

"Possibly the greatest hired killer the police have ever run up against," the commissioner said. "Rumor has it that he works for the syndicate no more than once a year and receives at least fifty thousand dollars a job. I personally know of six jobs he's definitely completed in various cities."

Snodman, who smoked a pipe himself, placed the stem between his thin lips and reached for his tobacco pouch. "How can you be so sure they were all the work of this . . . Snuffer, sir? *Modus operandi?*"

The commissioner smiled. "It is his M.O. that he is proud of. It varies with every job. In Chicago, concerning the sports fixing racket, it was an exploding basketball; two years ago Hans Greiber, the passport forger, was found drowned in one of those little German cars filled with water; and surely you remember when Joe Besini, who was going to turn state's evidence against the syndicate, was found smothered by a hot pizza."

"Gruesome," Snodman said.

"Anchovies, too." Commissioner Moriarty shook his head reminiscently. "The fact is that in each of these cases the victim knew he was marked for death and had police protection. In each of these cases The Snuffer warned the victim with one of these little poems. A highly developed sense of fair play, if you ask me."

"Yes," Snodman agreed, shifting position in the leather office chair so that his trousers wouldn't become too wrinkled. He was one of the best dressed detectives on the force, and he was proudly aware of it. "I suppose every attempt has been made to trace him through the poems," he said.

The commissioner nodded. "As you can see, they're in hand printed ink on cheap stationery. The paper is too common to mean anything and Handwriting Analysis can't make anything out of the simple printing except that it's the work of a careful, precise individual, which I could have told you."

Snodman wrinkled his still youthful brow. "But why on earth

does he send the poems? Doesn't he realize they merely increase his chances of being caught?"

The commissioner leaned over his desk. "Fair play, Snodman. The psychologists say that he's so clever and supremely confident that his conscience compels him to give his victims warning. They say that The Snuffer wants to preserve his anonymity yet boast about his work, so he writes poems. Some of them are quite good."

Snodman, who fancied himself something of an expert on literature, wanted to disagree with his superior but thought better of it. Besides, he was curious as to why the commissioner was filling him in on this subject, so he sat patiently and waited for his boss to get to the point.

"The point is," Moriarty said, biting on his curved pipe stem, "that a man named Ralph Capastrani has agreed to testify next month before a Senate Subcommittee hearing on organized crime. We thought it was a hush-hush thing, but kept Capastrani under protection anyway. Then, this morning, I received this poem in the mail."

"Does Capastrani know anything about it, sir?"

"No. We don't want him to die of worry before the hearings. We're taking every precaution to keep The Snuffer from earning another fortune from the syndicate. Capastrani is under guard in a room at the Paxton Hotel, just two blocks from here. We moved him in this morning." The commissioner paused for effect and pressed his fingertips down onto the glass desk top. "Starting in ten minutes, your job will be to guard him."

"I'm honored you have the confidence in me, sir," Snodman said, actually rather insulted that the commissioner should think he would have a hard time outwitting the composer of these jingling trivialities.

Commissioner Moriarty smiled his Holmes-like smile. "You are one of the most highly educated men on the force, Snodman, and in the few years you've been with us you've proven yourself to be an efficient and hardworking policeman. Few men of your caliber choose policework as a profession, and your dedication is unquestioned. I can think of no man on the force who would have a better chance of outwitting The Snuffer."

Snodman took this deluge of compliments with aplomb.

The commissioner picked up a silver letter opener and neatly opened one of many letters on his desk. "Capastrani is in room twenty-four on the third floor," he said by way of dismissal. "I'll be

over later myself to check on things."

Snodman rose casually and took his leave.

Suite 24 was small and sparsely but tastefully furnished. Shades had been pulled over the third floor, ledgeless windows; heating and air conditioning ducts had been blocked and the comfort was being inadequately supplied by a rented window air conditioner; food was brought up three times a day by a room service waiter who was duly searched before being admitted. Outside the door to the hall stood an armed patrolman; outside the door to the bedroom sat Snodman; inside the bedroom lay Capastrani, sleeping peacefully. Suite 24 was invulnerable.

Obviously Capastrani, a squat, hairy individual, had faith in his police department, for almost all of his time was occupied by sleeping and eating; but then, besides listening to the monotonous watery hum of the air conditioner, there really wasn't much else to do in suite 24.

Snodman's mind dwelt on how much the syndicate would pay to have Capastrani killed. It dwelt on Commissioner Moriarty and his thorough knowledge of The Snuffer. The commissioner had even consulted a police psychologist. Snodman had seen the gleam in the commissioner's eyes as he'd discussed the cunning assassin, and he was sure that Moriarty had dedicated himself to foiling or even capturing The Snuffer. A policeman's dream, Snodman said to himself, smiling.

The long day went by without event. The patrolman outside the door had changed when the three o'clock shift came on. Capastrani had emerged from his room only to eat a late breakfast and lunch, which he'd wolfed down before returning to stretch full length and fully clothed on the bed. Snodman had read a travel magazine three times. He yawned and looked at his watch: five o'clock.

At five forty-five he was speaking frantically into the telephone to Commissioner Moriarty. "You'd better come over here right away with a lab man, sir. I think somebody tried to poison Capastrani!"

Within five minutes the door to suite 24 flew open. Snodman's police revolver was out of its shoulder holster in a flash, but he relaxed as he saw it was the commissioner and a lab man. They looked in surprise at Snodman's revolver as Wilson, the uniformed patrolman guarding the hall, closed the door behind them.

"It's all right," Commissioner Moriarty said. "We should have knocked."

Snodman slipped the revolver into his suitcoat pocket. "Have a look at this," he said, pointing to the tray of food that room service had brought up for Capastrani's supper. To the lab man he said, "I think there's arsenic on the steak."

"I'm glad you called me personally," Commissioner Moriarty said. "You did the right thing."

Snodman smiled. "I knew you had a special interest in the case," he said. "I thought you'd want to come right over."

The commissioner nodded soberly. "That's why I chose a hotel only two blocks from headquarters."

The three of them leaned over the tray of food. "You can't see it now," Snodman said, "but there were traces of white powder on the underside of the steak when it was brought up. Most of it's dissolved in the juices by now."

The commissioner picked up the plate and sniffed. "What made you suspicious?" he asked, replacing the plate.

Snodman shrugged. "A hunch. And I thought there was a peculiar odor about the steak."

"Check it out," the commissioner told the lab man. Then he drew Snodman over to the sofa to talk with him.

"Capastrani know about this?" Moriarty asked.

Snodman shook his head. "He's still asleep. I was going to wake him when supper came."

"Hmm," the commissioner said. "I don't understand how anybody could have slipped arsenic into that food. I toured the kitchen this morning and checked out the help myself. They're all trustworthy, long-time employees."

"Maybe somebody was bought," Snodman suggested. "The Snuffer would be able to afford it."

"Good point," the commissioner said. "Does Capastrani eat steak every night?"

"It's a standing order with room service. That's just the sort of habit The Snuffer would take advantage of. You said he studied his future victims carefully before each job."

"I didn't say that," the commissioner said. "He did—in his poem."

The lab man, a studious looking young fellow, walked over to them. "There's arsenic on the steak," he said. "I checked the salt, pepper, ketchup, coffee, even the cream for the coffee. Everything on the tray besides the steak is okay." Then he held out the slip of paper in his right hand. "This was stuck to the bottom of the steak plate, sir."

The commissioner took it, unfolding it slowly as Snodman watched closely. They read:

I am quite sure my little trick
Nicely stilled your Pigeon's song
'Cause a little bit of arsenic
Never hurt a soul—for long

The commissioner crumpled the poem and put it in his pocket. Then he turned to the lab man. "You can go now," he said. "On the way out tell the kitchen to send up another steak, and this time you stand right there while it's cooking."

"Right," the lab man said, and walked briskly and efficiently out of the room to implement his orders.

"We won't tell Capastrani about this," the commissioner said to Snodman. "He doesn't even know The Snuffer is after him. There's no point in rattling the state's star witness."

"Yes, sir," Snodman said.

The commissioner stretched his lean body. "You've been cooped up in here all day," he said to Snodman. "Why don't you go out for a while and get a bite to eat and some fresh air. The patrolman's outside the door, and I'll stay here myself and keep an eye on things until you return."

"Thank you, sir," Snodman said with appreciation. "To tell you the truth, I was about to ask that little favor myself. I could sure use some fresh air and a change of scenery." He walked to the door and paused. "Is there anything I can bring you, sir?"

"No, no thank you." The commissioner seemed almost eager for Snodman to leave. "Take an hour if you want, Snodman."

"Why, thank you, sir." He stepped into the hall and softly shut the door behind him.

Just after Snodman had left, room service arrived at the door with Capastrani's new steak. The commissioner let them in, examined the steak, made sure the patrolman in the hall was alert,

then went into the bedroom to awaken Capastrani.

As he first emerged from sleep the squat little man was shocked to see the commissioner. Then he blinked his eyes a few times and recognized him. Without a word, he looked at his watch and rose from the mattress to leave the bedroom and eat supper.

With a smug little smile, the commissioner sat on the sofa and watched as Capastrani settled himself before the tray. Apparently the little man had been sound asleep and was completely unaware of the recent occurrence. Capastrani sprinkled salt and pepper liberally on his steak and buttered a roll. Then he unscrewed the cap on the ketchup bottle and tipped it. As was not unusual, nothing came out. He shook the bottle a few times, gently, then shook it harder. He was holding it upside down, looking at it curiously, when the force of its explosion blew out the entire third floor west wall.

As the ominous sound of the explosion reached police headquarters two blocks away, Snodman leaned back in his desk chair in his tiny office and smiled. He drew the genuine ketchup bottle from his shoulder holster and placed it in his bottom desk drawer. Then he picked up the slip of paper on which was the poem he'd just compulsively jotted down, tore it into tiny pieces and let the pieces flutter down into his wastebasket. For all his cleverness, the one thing he couldn't do was write poetry. Still, bad as they were, even in his lifetime his little jingles might yet achieve a certain degree of fame.

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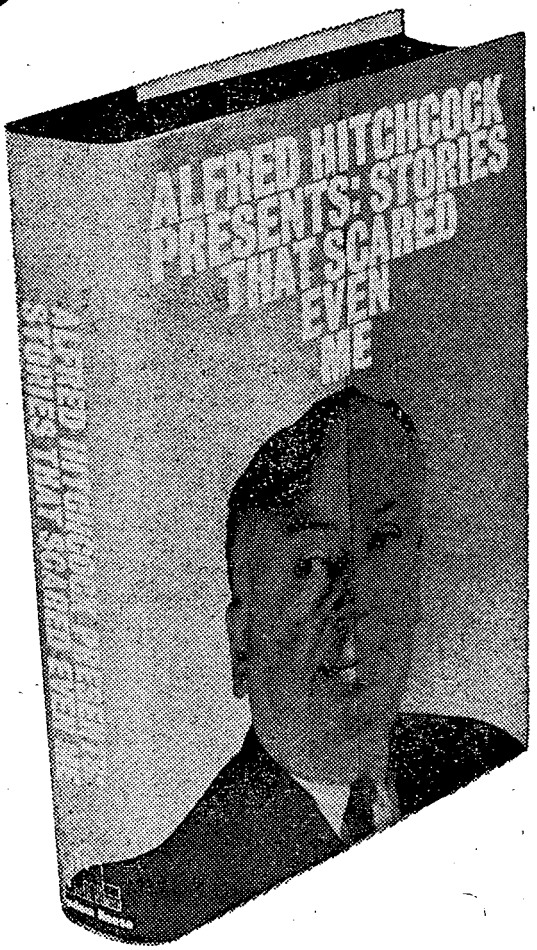
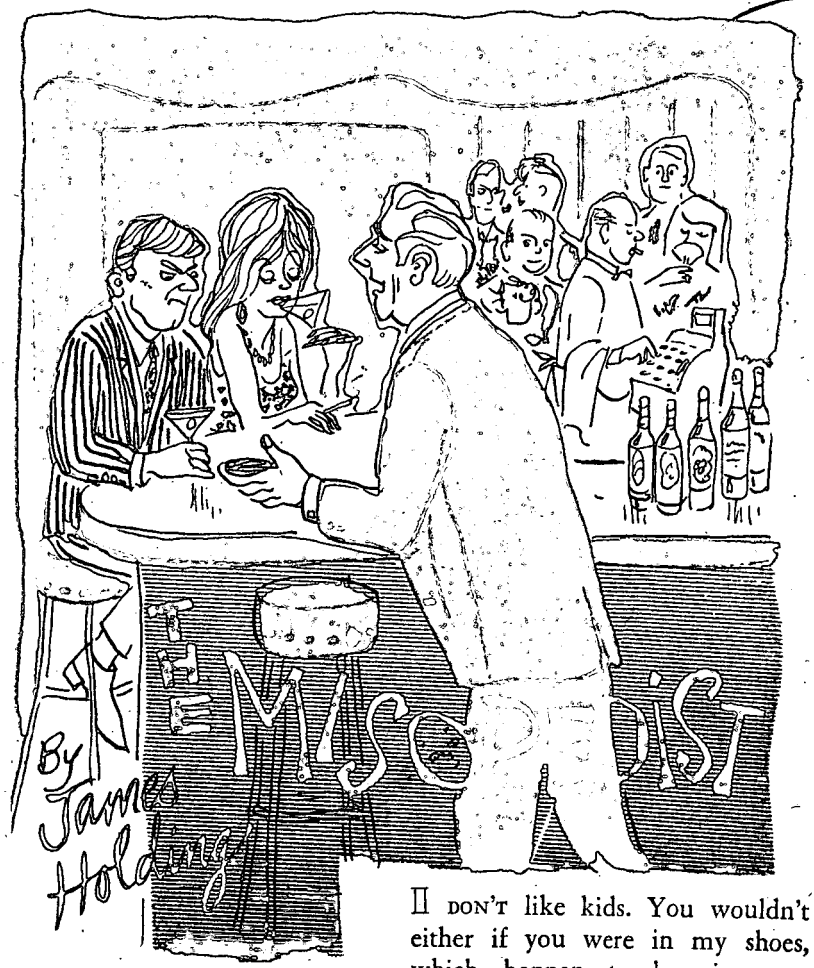
Money Saving Offer



For details please see other side

Or, as a devotee of The Bard might express it, "I do desire we may be better strangers."



I DON'T like kids. You wouldn't either if you were in my shoes, which happen to be size ten, prison issue.

Until the South Side job, I could

take kids or leave them alone. I had nothing particular against them. On the other hand, I wasn't exactly on the point of tears because I had none of my own, especially with me not married.

Anyway, kids were the farthest thing from my mind when Lieutenant Randall came over to me in Tasso's Tavern that night, where I was sitting at the bar beside a girl named Sally Ann.

I didn't know who he was then, of course. He had on a dark blue suit, a striped tie and a white button-down shirt. He also had on a bland friendly manner that promised nothing but kindness and understanding. Nobody would have thought he was a cop.

He was, though. I found that out right away when he flashed a badge on me and told me his name. "And you're Andrew Carmichael, aren't you?" he asked me politely.

Without thinking, I said, "Yeah."

He nodded. His odd yellow eyes looked at me with what could only be gentle affection. "Good," he said. "Then I'd appreciate it if you'd come downtown with me for a little talk, Mr. Carmichael. Would you mind?"

Mind? Who wouldn't mind under the circumstances? I was only halfway through my second martini; my left hand was resting companionably on Sally Ann's thigh beneath the bar. "Now?" I said. Surprisingly, a certain hoarseness roughened my voice. I cleared my throat.

"Now would be fine," said Randall. He leaned forward and looked past me along the bar at Sally Ann. "Will you excuse him for a while, Miss?"

Sally Ann brushed my hand off her thigh, said, "With pleasure. Whatever he's done, I had nothing to do with it. I just met the jerk fifteen minutes ago for the first time."

That's how it goes. Romance dries up fast when a cop appears.

Randall said, "You want to finish your drink?"

I'd lost interest in my martini. "No," I said, and stood up. Randall towered over me. "I'm ready, but it would be nice to know what you want to talk to me about."

Randall grinned. It was a boyish, happy grin despite the unblinking yellow eyes above it. "No reason to keep it secret," he said, and herded me out of Tasso's Tavern ahead of him to a police cruiser parked at the curb. Randall held the back door open for me. When I got in, he climbed in beside me and nodded to the uniformed driver up front. The police car surged away from the curb. "What we want to talk to you about,"

Randall said, "is a little matter of counterfeiting, Mr. Carmichael."

Counterfeiting. I exhaled a long breath, said, "I thought counterfeiting was a federal thing, Lieutenant?"

"It is. Except there's a local angle in this case, and we're handling that. See what I mean?"

I didn't, but it wasn't important now. The skim of ice that had formed over my nerve centers when I first felt Randall's big hand on my arm began to melt. If it was counterfeiting Randall had on his mind, that let me out. I was home free, and I'll tell you why.

I know a little bit about most things. My fund of general knowledge is perhaps bigger than average, if you want the truth, but when it comes to counterfeiting, I'm nowhere. I don't even know how to spell it.

Phony bills and coins never had the slightest attraction for me. In fact, the very idea of fake money has always repelled me. I'm too fond of the real stuff to mess around with cheap substitutes. That's why I was able to breathe easy again the minute Lieutenant Randall mentioned counterfeiting. It just couldn't be me they wanted —not for counterfeiting.

If the lieutenant had said "armed robbery" now, I might have been worried. For armed robbery, especially the bank variety, was something I *did* know about. I'd robbed eighteen branch banks in the last couple of years without a hand being laid on me or even a breath of suspicion drifting in my direction.

I was proud of my success. After all, bank robbery is a demanding line of work. It takes careful planning, courage, intelligence and a fine sense of timing—in addition to a system, of course. For bank work, you need a system, one that takes a million little things into account but stays simple and uncomplicated just the same. That isn't easy; not when you have to think about armed guards, silent alarms, concealed cameras, patrolling police, hysterical tellers, and a whole potful of unpredictable factors like that; not to mention the big decisions, like which teller in the target bank will be easiest to intimidate; which bank to knock over at what time of what day; and even—this may strike you as strange—how big a score you want to make.

Yes, that's important. At least, it is in my system. I confine myself to a relatively modest take on each job. Just the contents of a single teller's cash drawer, that's all, no more, no less. It's quick, it's clean, it's unimportant to the banks and their insurance companies. A few

hundred bucks stolen? A couple of thousand even? Forget it, Charlie. It's peanuts. Just be damn sure you lock up the vault tonight where the big stuff's kept!

See what I mean? You can toss a lot of little pebbles into a pool without stirring up much fuss, but heave in one two-ton boulder with a big splash and all hell breaks loose.

My system, what the cops call an MO, was good, I admit it. Our local newspapers and broadcasters had been calling me The Whispering Bandit for two years now, and nagging the police to do something about catching me, so far without result because I stuck to throwing those little pebbles, the frequent small hauls. They suited me fine. Who needs a fortune? Not me. A few hundred a month besides my honest pay kept me comfortably supplied with all the martinis and Sally Anns my heart desired.

So you can see why Lieutenant Randall's mention of counterfeiting relieved me. You can understand, too, why I was calm and unworried when I faced him across the battered desk in his dingy office at headquarters. Since my conscience was clear, I leaned back in my wooden chair and waited for him to open the ball.

He offered me a cigarette. When I refused, he lit one himself and leaned down beside his desk to drop the paper match into his wastebasket. Then he said, "It's very good of you to cooperate like this, Mr. Carmichael. Believe me, I appreciate it."

I shrugged. "Am I cooperating, or am I under arrest? Are you charging me with anything, Lieutenant?"

He seemed genuinely shocked. "Under arrest? Charged with anything? You've misunderstood me, I'm afraid."

"You said you wanted to talk to me about counterfeiting, didn't you?"

"Sure." He puffed smoke. "And so I do." He coughed. "I don't inhale," he informed me virtuously. "About this counterfeiting thing, I got a call from Tasso's Tavern this evening. They reported that a counterfeit bill had been passed at their bar so I naturally took a run out there to check into it. Sure enough, somebody had laid a phony bill on Tasso's bartender."

"That's tough on Tasso," I said, "but what's it got to do with me?" I was getting fed up with this foolishness.

"You were there," he said reasonably, "weren't you? Sitting at the bar with your young lady?"

"You know I was. Is that any excuse for making me waste my evening like this?"

"I'm not 'making' you waste your evening." The lieutenant's voice was hurt. "I asked you—politely—if you'd mind coming downtown for a talk, and you agreed quite readily. Is that coercion? Or is it voluntary cooperation?"

"All right, it's cooperation—but a damn waste of time all the same."

"I'm glad that's settled," said Randall.

"Nuts." I blustered a little. "Do me a favor, will you? As long as I'm here, pump me dry quick and get it over because this is the last cooperation you'll ever get from me, and you better believe it. Don't you know that you can't push honest citizens around as though we were criminals?"

Randall grinned. "I've got news for you, Mr. Carmichael. We can push honest citizens around as much as we like. It's the criminals we have to treat with the utmost gentleness and respect. If you don't believe me, ask the Supreme Court." He ground out his cigarette in a stained tray on his desk, then he lifted his eyes to me. "The bartender at Tasso's Tavern," he said, "pointed you out to me as the customer who passed the counterfeit bill."

That really surprised me. It disturbed me some, too, and I thought back to my interrupted session at Tasso's bar with Sally Ann. I remembered paying for our drinks with a used fifty—President Grant's picture on the bill had been wrinkled and dirty—and the bill could have come into my possession in only one way. To Randall I said incredulously, "Me?"

He nodded. "The barman said it was the only fifty buck bill he's handled this week."

I know now that I should have owned to the fifty; told Randall I won it in a floating crap game or at the racetrack or some place equally untraceable. Instead, I made a bad mistake. I put on an air of amused relief and said, "A fifty! Then the bartender has to be dead wrong about who gave it to him. I haven't even *seen* a fifty buck bill for ten years, let alone spent one, Lieutenant!" I called on the truth to convince him. "I'm a short-order cook in MacDougal's all-night restaurant, working the midnight-to-eight shift. You know many short-order cooks with fifty buck bills to throw around?"

"No," Randall murmured, "can't say I do. The barkeep was pretty sure he remembered you giving it to him though."

"He couldn't have remembered if his own grandmother gave it to him, not in Tasso's tonight. The

joint was really jumping. You saw it yourself. They were lined up three deep at the bar. The bartender was too busy to remember anything."

Randall gave a reluctant shrug. "Could be," he said. "Anyway, that's why I asked you to come down for a talk."

I said, "Sure, Lieutenant. No hard feelings, now that you've explained. If you want to know for the record, I paid for our four drinks, Sally Ann's and mine, with a five buck bill and gave the barkeep half the change for a tip." I said this boldly; it would be the bartender's word against mine. Leave Sally Ann out of it. When she was drinking, she never noticed anything except her own reflection in the backbar mirror.

Randall dropped his eyelids over his cat eyes and sighed. I think it was the first time I'd seen him blink. His face looked entirely different with those yellow eyes covered. "Well, then," he said, "if you didn't pass the fifty, maybe you can still give me a little help, Mr. Carmichael."

"I'll try."

"Give me the names of anybody else you knew at the bar in Tasso's tonight. *Somebody* passed that fake fifty and I've got to find out who it was. If you can give me a couple of names to start on . . ." He paused hopefully.

I shook my head. "Only one I knew was that girl Sally Ann, and she didn't even tell me her last name. You know how it is. Go into a bar for a drink and ask a babe to have one with you, just for company? Maybe the bartender can help you."

Randall gave another sigh. "I hope so."

I stood up. "All right if I blow now?"

He waved a hand. "Sure. But I'll drive you back. It's the least I can do." He glanced at his watch. "I'll be free to leave in about five minutes, if you want to wait."

I didn't want to wait. I wanted to get away from Randall's yellow eyes and his false politeness just as soon as I could; and I certainly didn't want to go back to Tasso's Tavern. I said, "Never mind, thanks. I'll catch a cab."

"Suit yourself," he said. Then, on a different note, "I'm really counting on that *particular* fifty buck bill, Mr. Carmichael, do you know it?"

"Counting on it?" I said. "For what?"

"To lead me to The Whispering Bandit," Randall said.

I stiffened all over. For a second I was afraid to turn my head for fear it would creak. "The Whispering Bandit? You mean the

bank robber the papers keep talking about?" The words were hard to get out.

"That's the one," Randall said. "A two-bit thief who's got crazy-lucky eighteen times in a row."

I eased myself back into my chair, interest and animation in my face. With not a trace of his insult to me and my system showing, I asked casually, "How could a counterfeit fifty dollar bill lead you to a bank robber, Lieutenant? That doesn't make sense to me."

"Oh, it does in a way, considering the off-beat scheme we're trying right now . . . out of desperation, you might say." He sucked his lips, fixed his eyes on a cobwebbed corner of the ceiling. I waited for him to go on, trying not to look anxious.

Finally he said, "It's a childish scheme. Really childish. It probably won't work at all. How could it? In the first place it was dreamed up by an amateur, not even a cop. A nosey reader sent the idea in a letter to the president of the last bank The Whispering Bandit robbed."

I kept quiet, not doing much breathing.

"A nutty idea," Randall went on, "but I was willing to try anything to get the newspapers off my back." He shot an uncertain look at me. "As long as you've been inconvenienced by it, Mr. Carmichael, I guess maybe you're entitled to hear what the deal is—if you're interested."

"I'm interested," I said. "Everybody in town's interested in The Whispering Bandit."

"Don't I know it! Well, the thing is, that fake fifty dollar bill at Tasso's is a kind of a trap."

I felt cold on the back of my neck. I turned to see if the office door behind me was open. It wasn't.

"A trap?" I repeated.

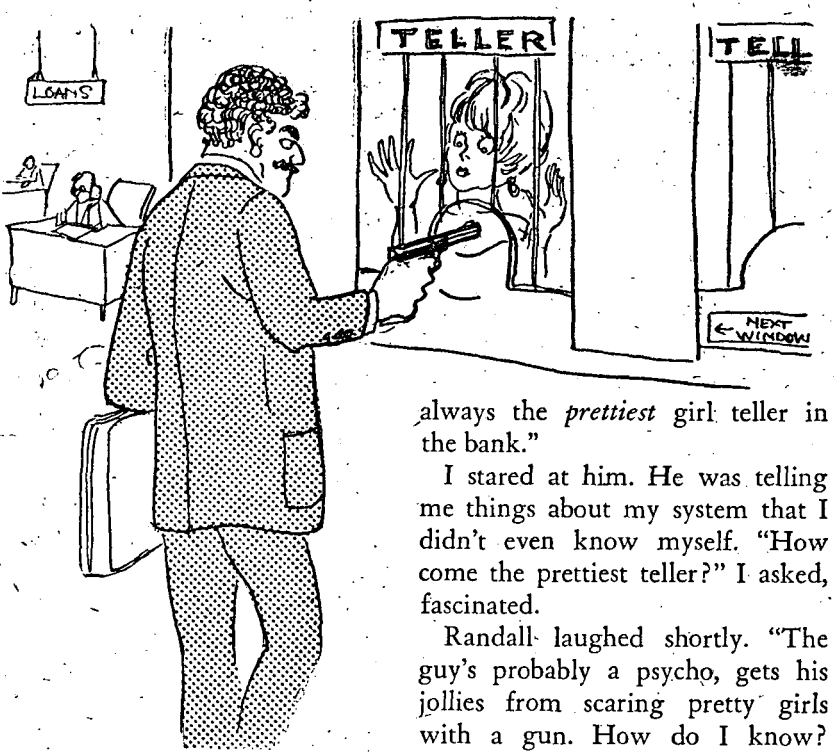
He nodded. "You've got to understand that we know the MO of The Whispering Bandit pretty good by this time."

"What's an MO?" I thought I ought to ask.

"Method of operation. Like The Whispering Bandit always speaks in a whisper to disguise his voice during holdups, for instance. Always works alone. Changes his appearance for every job. Takes only one drawer of cash at each heist. Makes his raids during the noon hour at small isolated branch banks in a geographical suburban pattern that's pretty well defined now, after eighteen robberies. Stuff like that, that's part of his MO. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, but not about the counterfeit fifty."

"I'm coming to that. Once we



know the regular MO of The Whispering Bandit, we can kind of figure ahead of him a little, can't we? Take a rough guess at what banks he'll be hitting next and, even more important, what teller in any bank he's likely to point his Woodsman target pistol at, and ask for the money in her cash drawer."

"You're kidding," I said.

"No, I'm not. It's all part of his pattern. It's always a girl teller that he holds up, never a man; and it's always the *prettiest* girl teller in the bank."

I stared at him. He was telling me things about my system that I didn't even know myself. "How come the prettiest teller?" I asked, fascinated.

Randall laughed shortly. "The guy's probably a psycho, gets his jollies from scaring pretty girls with a gun. How do I know? Anyway, that was the basis of our counterfeit money trap for him."

"The pretty teller bit?"

"That, and the list of branch banks we figured he might hit next. See, we just picked out the prettiest teller in each of those possible branch banks; or the teller, rather, that The Whispering Bandit would think the prettiest, judging from his past selections. Then we fixed up a little bundle of money for her to keep in her cash drawer at all times, separate from her regular cash. It was just a

few genuine tens and twenties, with two counterfeit fifties we borrowed from the Treasury boys mixed in. Used money, understand; not banded, just loose in the drawer, but never to be touched unless The Whispering Bandit showed up. Too, we fixed it with every one of those girl tellers that *if* The Whispering Bandit showed up at her window some noontime, she was to give him all the money in her cash drawer immediately and without arguing—especially the stack that had the two fake fifties in it. You begin to see the plot, Mr. Carmichael?"

"Sure," I said out of a dry throat. "Then I suppose you passed the word that counterfeit fifty dollar bills were showing up around town, and warned stores and bars and places to watch out for them. Right?"

"Right."

"Well." I managed a small grin. "So that's why Tasso's bartender called you so quick tonight."

"Yep. That fifty he took in rang all the bells. I thought we had The Whispering Bandit at last, because there were two fake fifties in the loot he lifted two weeks ago from the South Side branch of the Second National and this was one of them. No doubt about it."

I felt sick. *Two* fake fifties; then the other one was still under the mattress in my room at the flea-bag hotel where I lived. I've got to get out of here, I thought in a panic, I've got to get home quick, I've got to burn that damned bill, I've got to leave town . . .

Randall's telephone rang. He picked it up and listened to a tinny voice on the other end, nodding his head from time to time. When he hung up, he said, "That call concerned you, Mr. Carmichael."

"Me?" I said.

"Couple of my boys have been visiting your room," the lieutenant's tone was almost apologetic, "and I'm afraid Tasso's bartender was right about who passed the fifty, Mr. Carmichael."

Words of doom! Casually said, but doomsters all the same. I flipped. My voice went up three notches. "Visiting my room!" I yelled.

Randall held up a hand placatingly. "All in order," he said. "They had a proper warrant for the search. In fact, we've had the warrant ready for a month—all except for filling in your name." He coughed. "Tasso's bartender came up with that when he called to report the fake fifty. He knew your name, it seems, because somebody called you on the bar telephone at Tasso's once, and when the bartender asked if Andrew

Carmichael was in the house, you took the call. Remember that?"

All too well. The cold feeling on the back of my neck was spreading downward between my shoulder blades. I tried to think.

Randall didn't give me much chance. He went right on. "Once we had your name, it didn't take us five minutes to find out where you lived, fill in the blank warrant, and start my boys over to your hotel. Then I came out to Tasso's."

"You said I wasn't under arrest!" I sounded shrill, even to myself. "You said I wasn't charged with anything."

"You weren't. Not then, but you are now."

I did the best I could. "You got me here under false pretenses, Lieutenant. You've questioned me without my lawyer being present or informing me of my rights. You've deprived me of my constitutional—"

Randall closed his eyes again. "I did nothing of the sort."

"You did. You've questioned me. You've accused me, at least by implication, of being The Whispering Bandit. You've tried to trick me into confessing."

"Oh, no." He reached into a desk drawer and brought out a compact tape recorder. "I think this tape will confirm that most of the questioning was done by you, and most of the confessing, if any, done by me, when I told you about our little trap for The Whispering Bandit."

When had he switched on that tape recorder, the smooth devil? When he reached to discard his first burnt match in the wastebasket?

I gave it another try. "You were deliberately holding me here while your men searched my room."

"That I admit," he said, bland as cream. "And don't you want to know what they found there?" I didn't answer, so he went on, "I'll tell you. Item: one counterfeit fifty dollar bill stashed with genuine currency under the mattress and with a serial number that identifies it as one of the two false fifties stolen two weeks ago from the South Side branch of the Second National Bank. Item: three pairs of contact lenses, various colors. Item: three hair pieces, three sets of false eyebrows, two sets of false mustaches and beards, matching colors. Item: one Colt Woodsman revolver. Item: a complete file of local newspapers detailing exploits of The Whispering Bandit, going back more than two years." He looked at me sadly, and clicked his tongue. "Shall I go on, Mr. Carmichael?"

Miserably I shook my head.

"*Now* you get your lawyer," Randall said. "*Now* we charge you with multiple armed robbery offenses. *Now* the Supreme Court steps in to assure you tender loving care. Because now, Mr. Carmichael, you're sure as hell going to spend a little time in the sneezer as the Whispering Bandit!"

I didn't doubt it. I said, "Very smart, Lieutenant. Very clever. Quite a gag you've pulled on me, I'll admit."

"It's not my gag. I told you that." He opened the middle drawer of his desk, making a show of it. "I've got the original letter here that suggested the idea." He pulled out a single sheet of paper. "Here it is. Would you care to see it?"

He held it out to me. Automatically, I took it and read the few lines scrawled on it in pencil:

Dere Mr. Presidant of the bank: I know a way to fool the Whispring Bandit. When he holds up your bank, you could give him play money instead of reel money. Thank you.

Richard Stevenson, Age 9

I tossed the letter back on Randall's desk. He looked at me and his expression was hard to read. "The bank president started an account at his bank for young Richard Stevenson in the amount of five dollars," he told me. "Wasn't that nice?"

"Great," I said. Then I began to laugh.

Do you blame me for not liking kids?

Dear Fans:

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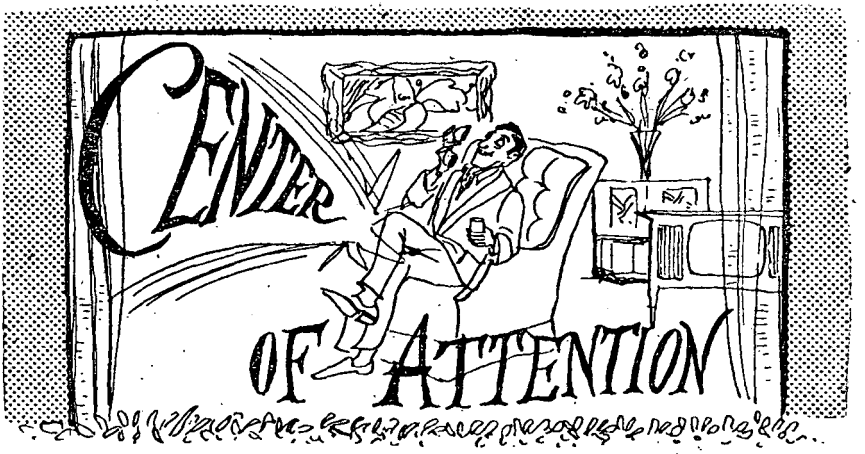
I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

Woman is reputedly woman's best ally—but occasionally man is an unwitting abettor.



BRENT Wilson smoothed the lapels of his dinner jacket before stepping in front of his eight-by-ten foot window, more to be expected in a department store than in a ground floor cooperative apartment. He enjoyed the stares of passersby negotiating the wide sidewalk outside. Seen from the street, the 30-inch color TV, the hi-fi with its numerous shiny dials and knobs, the highly polished Danish modern furniture, the well-stocked bar, and the tasteful prints contributed to a projection of Wilson's image of himself as a sophisticated clubman taking his ease before going out to dine.

By DAN J. MARLOWE

Wilson delighted in showcasing himself each evening for the plebeian hordes although he never acknowledged the existence of the people outside the window. He was careful at all times to act as though brick separated him from the street instead of glass, yet moved about the handsome room in the peculiar sidling gait of an

actor unwilling to turn his back upon his audience. The hint of the slightest notice by anyone passing by—especially a woman—gave him the most intense pleasure.

The telephone rang, and he crossed the room leisurely to answer it.

"Is this Mr. Wilson?" a husky feminine voice inquired.

"Yes, it is." Conscious of the carefully centered telephone table, Wilson raised his chin slightly to keep the flesh of his neck smooth and firm, erasing the suggestion of the double chin forming in his thirty-fifth year.

"My name is Gilda."

"Gilda?" Wilson touched the fingers of his free hand to his brow in the theatrical gesture of a man thinking. "I don't—"

"We've never met. I just wanted to talk."

He kept his expression amiable, but his voice hardened. "Whatever you're selling, I don't want it."

"Oh, no!" the husky voice protested. "I see you night after night standing in your livingroom, and it's almost as though I know you. I got your name from the directory in the building lobby and your number from the phone book. I'd just like to talk."

He wondered which of the regular passersby she was. A nut, of course, but it was flattering. "Tell me about yourself, Gilda."

"My looks, you mean? Well, I'm five six, a hundred twenty-five pounds, naturally blonde and quite attractive, I'm told, and I was graduated from college with a degree in psychology."

"Beauty *and* brains," he remarked, arranging his features in a whimsically-amused pattern. The self-description was far from revolting. "Would you care to stop in for a drink?"

"Oh, no! We can never meet. I'm just looking forward to our having long, honest talks together."

A real nut, he decided. "If you stopped in, we wouldn't have to waste time talking, would we?"

She giggled. "You're forceful, aren't you? We—I've got to hang up," she interrupted herself. "I'll call tomorrow night. Eight o'clock."

The following evening he stood beside the bookcase near the telephone, waiting for her call. It didn't come until ten after eight. "Bet you thought I wouldn't call," she said cheerfully.

He was annoyed with her for having made him wait and himself for having waited. "It hardly mattered," he said stiffly.

"You don't sound very comfortable. I fixed myself a highball before dialing you. Listen!" He heard the tinkle of ice cubes against

crystal. "Why don't you fix yourself a drink at that cute little bar of yours? Then we can talk in comfort."

"A good idea," he said, mollified, and set down the phone. The bar was on the other side of the room, the furniture not having been arranged for his convenience but to display it most attractively from the audience's viewpoint. He poured two inches of a rich, golden bourbon from a cut-glass decanter and added a splash of soda from a matching siphon. "That's better," he said into the phone.

"Good!" she exclaimed vigorously. "Did I say last night that I'm very intelligent? I was on the dean's list all through college. My grades were fan*tas*tic."

"How long have you been out of school?" he asked, having a sudden vision of a forty-five-year-old square-rigged barkentine.

"Three years."

"You're sure you don't want to stop in one of these evenings?" He seated himself in a leather armchair facing the window, took a sip from his drink, and crossed his legs carefully.

"Oh, no! My husband would have a fit if he knew I even *talked* to you!"

Another restless housewife, he thought cynically. "I didn't know you were married."

"Ever since my freshman year in college. The washing machine in the sorority house broke down, and Steve came to fix it." There was a slight pause. "He's the stupidest man in the world."

There was a woman standing outside the big window, her nose almost pressed to the glass. Wilson stretched his left arm and glanced at his ultra-thin wristwatch. The woman looked embarrassed suddenly and hurried away. Wilson smiled. "If that's the way you feel about him, Gilda, why did you marry him?"

"At first there was sex, silly. He *is* a handsome animal. A hunter—outdoorsman. *You* know. But now I can't talk to him."

"There's always divorce," he suggested, uncrossing his legs deliberately and re-crossing them the other way.

"That's impossible."

"Impossible? Why?"

"He's too possessive. I know him. I'm a psychology major, remember?"

Wilson took a long, slow pull at his drink for the benefit of a middle-aged man who had paused in front of the window. The man lingered an instant before moving on. "Then what will you do?"

"I told you I was smart. I've arranged—he's at the door. Goodnight."

"Tomorrow?" he said quickly.

"Mmmmmmmmm." The telephone clicked in his ear.

The next evening Wilson put on his maroon smoking jacket and mixed himself a drink while he waited for her call. She was right on time. "Hi!" she announced herself. "It's Gilda."

"You sound—excited. Have you been drinking?"

"No. I'm just happy. My problem is solved."

"Steve agreed to give you a divorce?"

"Better than that. A divorce can be so messy. No, I told him all about you and our phone calls, and I said we were in love and wanted to get married."

"You're not under the impression that any part of that statement is true?" he demanded, coldly furious.

"Of course it's not true. I'd never marry *you!* You're almost as bad as muscle-minded Steve, with your posing in your window the way you do. I think you're the most narcissistic, self-centered individual—" her voice went on and on.

He jerked himself upright from his armchair, for once forgetful of how the ungraceful movement must appear to anyone outside. "Listen to me, you—you female," he began.

Her husky laugh interrupted him. "Steve is very possessive, very primitive, and very angry. Goodbye, Mr. Wilson."

"Goodbye? What do you—"

A blue sedan squealed to a stop at the curb in front of the big window, and a man sprang from it quickly, dragging a long-barreled rifle after him.

Sweat popped out on Brent Wilson's brow, and he cried frantically, "Gilda!"

"I'll call the police now so there'll be no chance of his getting away," she said calmly.

Brent Wilson stood transfixed as the rifle barrel swung in his direction and yellow-red flame spurted from it, crazing the eight-by-ten window in a spider-web pattern. A heavy weight smashed into his chest, and he slid slowly to the floor, sprawled awkwardly upon the Oriental rug, while the front of the maroon smoking jacket gradually turned a darker shade.

One who longs to plot the perfect crime might do well to think twice before discarding the virtue of honesty.

by C. B. Gilford

DEXTER RHODES kept a lonely vigil by his wife's bed. He was terribly sleepy, for the hour was late, and sometimes when even matters of life and death are at stake, the weak human creature tries to escape into slumber and oblivion. Still, Dexter fought against dozing; plenty of time for that when it was all over. Then he could really relax, and his sleep would be deep and undisturbed.

Quella lay quietly under the white sheet. She hadn't moved now for more than an hour. Her thick, formidable body seemed to have softened into a curious limpness, like a worn-out rag doll when thrown aside. One pudgy, flour-white arm was thrust outside the sheet, only loosely attached to the shoulder. The features of her round face had melted and run together somewhat under their covering of powder, rouge and lipstick, and her tight little arrogant blonde curls had unwound.

She was not yet dead, however. Quella was a strong-minded person, and even asleep, her subcon-

scious would stubbornly assert her will and right to live.

He tried staying awake by going back over the ground again. The physical details had been easy enough to arrange. He had carefully wiped his own fingerprints from the bottle of sleeping pills, had taken Quella's unresisting hand and planted her prints on the bottle instead. Then he had followed the same procedure with the water glass.

Of course Quella hadn't taken any pills voluntarily, but she was well known to have used them. She had purchased this particular bottle, on prescription, just the day before, but it was he who had administered the pills this time. He'd ground them up and mixed them into the chocolate pudding, for which he knew Quella would raid the refrigerator before retiring.

Motive? Well, he presumed he'd taken care of that too. That had required more bravery than the act of adding the pills to Quella's pudding. He had provoked Quella deliberately. He had defied her. She had wanted to play gin rummy. After years of gin servitude, he had flatly refused. Then, when she'd turned her fury upon him, he'd simply walked out of the house and spent three hours in a movie.

On his return he'd discovered that Quella had performed predictably and quite to his satisfaction. First there was the unfinished letter to her sister. Quella had often begun letters to her sister, seldom completed or mailed them. The letters were only gestures; the sister couldn't have been less concerned with Quella's problem.

It was a beautiful letter. "Dear Marie," it began. "I am mad with grief. What shall I do? I have absolute proof that Dexter doesn't love me any more. And Dexter means everything to me. You know how I adore him. What do you think he's done just now? He's walked out on me. I'm sitting here all alone, crying. Do you see the tearstains on the paper? (If the spots were indeed caused by falling tears, they had been tears of rage.) What if I've lost him? How can I go on living?"

That was all, but more than enough. He could scarcely have improved upon it if he'd dictated to her. All lies, of course. Quella liked to pretend and dramatize, and this little habit of hers was convenient now. That letter would serve as a suicide note.

What else was needed? Nothing in the way of preparation. Only the final act of cooperation on Quella's part: to stop breathing.

He dozed fitfully, and flotsam

of memories swirled on the roiling waters of his mind. What a weird bargain he'd struck when he'd married Quella—weird, yet with a certain logic to it.

He was a painter, or had been in those days. Some people told him he had talent, but raw talent, requiring development and maturity. Time was his problem; he had so little time to paint. When he met Quella he'd just been fired from his despised job of shipping clerk in a cookie factory, where he spent his time loading boxes and cartons of cookies onto carts and then into trucks when he should have been engaged in maturing his art.

His attitude had made him, of course, a very lousy and inefficient shipping clerk, as he'd been lousy and inefficient in the thirty-six other jobs he'd held for a week or two at a time. So he very seldom had any kind of job at all, scarcely ever had sufficient money to buy both food and artist's supplies simultaneously.

When he had money for canvas and brushes and paints, he worked furiously. Then he'd take his work to all the little sidewalk art fairs and sit there trying to peddle them, or hoping that some rich, influential patron would recognize his budding genius, set him up in a studio, support him. Well, Quella was that patron, as it developed.

She strolled by one of those days, looked at his work, at him. He wasn't attracted to her. She was fat, too old, loud, overbearing, wore garish makeup—a personification of poor taste in every way. Yet she was rich and—he had to admit it—shrewd. She noted his thin face, his frayed collar, and reached an accurate conclusion: he needed a patron. But she had a price: marriage.

Fool for his art that he was, he accepted. Her proposal was frank, and so he believed it was also honest. She owned a house, and refurnished one pleasant, sunny room as a studio. She bought supplies. She fed him. He did not have to work at any cookie factory, but there was one essential item she did not allow him—*leisure.*

Quella was a demanding woman. She'd married not to subsidize artistic talent, but to acquire a constant companion. She began by watching him paint, and chattering and commenting all the time. Then she demanded that she be his model. Gradually, however, she dropped all pretense of being interested in his work. She wanted his company, at the luncheons and teas and the thousand other little society events where she could show him off as her prize poodle,

then at home, where the poodle was supposed to spend all his waking hours at gin rummy or merely gazing fondly at his mistress.

So the time of decision had inevitably arrived. He could leave Quella and return to that other tyranny, the job he couldn't hold, or he could arrange to enjoy Quella's money without her insistent presence. If there was any other means of accomplishing this second alternative, he couldn't think of it. Murder was the only way. It really hadn't been a very difficult decision to make.

In a moment of wakefulness he glanced at the clock on Quella's night table. The time was two a.m. He rose stiffly from the chair and walked to the bed. Gazing down at her, he could see no indication of life, no rise and fall of the ponderous bosom. Perhaps he should have tried to locate a pulse in the chubby wrist or pressed his ear against her chest to listen for a heartbeat, but the flesh that he had considered repulsive in life he now found absolutely loathsome in death. So he contented himself with a long, inquiring look.

Then, weary but content, he went off to his studio, stretched himself on the couch, and slept the sleep of the just.

He imagined at first that he was experiencing a nightmare when he suddenly sat upright on the couch, with the morning sun shining brightly in his face, and heard Quella calling weakly, "Dexter!" He listened, unbelieving, and the summons was repeated. A chill shuddered through him. Which was the dream, this now, or last night when he had murdered Quella?

He stumbled to the bedroom, hoping the evidence of his eyes would contradict his ears. No, there was Quella, pale, bedraggled, apparently unable to lift her head from the pillow, but with her eyes open, the lids blinking slowly. She was alive.

"Call a doctor."

The words came out haltingly, but it was Quella's voice, and she was issuing a command. Accustomed to obedience, he moved closer to the bed. Her eyes looked at him coldly, knowingly, and the fear that he had of her, the fear that had become so ingrown in him, seized him now in a tight new grip. He might have put a pillow over her face and suffocated her. She was physically too weak to resist. With all the drug in her system, it still might appear to be an overdose of the pills. The temptation occurred to him, but instead of taking the pillow and completing what he had begun, he went to the bedside telephone and dialed the doctor.

After the phoning, he couldn't face Quella. He left the bedroom and waited by the front door. Because Dexter had pleaded an emergency, Doctor Gilman wasn't long in arriving. Dexter didn't go into the bedroom with him. Gilman was in there alone with Quella for maybe fifteen minutes, then came to the door and crooked a finger at Dexter.

When he entered he saw that Quella had been propped up with an extra pillow. She looked brighter and more alive already. Their eyes met, and it was Dexter whose gaze dropped first.

"Mr. Rhodes, your wife just had a very close call," Gilman was saying. He was a bald, fussy little man, Quella's regular physician, the one who had written the prescription. "Were it not for the fact that probably her constitution had become somewhat desensitized to this particular drug through constant use, she certainly would have died from this overdose."

Dexter waited for the blow to fall, for Gilman to say that Quella

had taken no pills last night, and that he, Dexter, must have given them to her somehow. Gilman said no such thing. Speaking to both husband and wife, he rattled on about the necessity for caution in the future, and how Quella must rest for a while and let the influence of the drug wear off. Then he packed his instruments into his little black bag and was off, leaving Dexter gaping and stupefied.

"Sit down, Dexter." Her voice, stronger than an hour ago, was that of a commander, the old Quella, unchanged. Obediently he looked for a chair. "No, here on the side of the bed. Let's not be so formal. After all, you are my husband."

He sat down as near to the edge as he could, but he looked at the floor.

"Where were the pills?" she asked him.

"What do you mean?" Mechanically he evaded as long as he could.

"I didn't take any myself. How did you give them to me?"

"In the chocolate pudding. I just ground them up and stirred them in."

"Very clever. Very nervy too." For almost the first time since their marriage, she betrayed some grudging admiration for him. "I suppose you were trying to make it look like suicide, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then everything I was writing to Marie was correct." Even now she couldn't resist the pose and the pretense. Then her voice became harder. "That letter to Marie was the suicide note, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"My, my, Dexter, you really are clever. Do you hate me that much?"

"I despise you. That's the better word."

"Why did you marry me?"

"So I wouldn't have to look for another lousy job." He rose to his feet, finding courage again. "We both know the score, Quella. I was your paid companion and prize pet, you were my meal ticket. I got tired of the arrangement, that's all."

"But you didn't want to go back to a cookie factory?"

"No."

"You'd rather be a parasite, wouldn't you?"

"I always earned my keep. Look, we're wasting time. Whom shall I telephone next? The police?"

They stared at each other for a long moment of silence, weighing, measuring. Then with the tiniest of motions, Quella shook her head. "No, I don't think so," she said.

He waited, amazed again.

"I see no reason," she went on,

"why we shouldn't continue as before. Except, of course, that our relationship is a little clearer now. I still need companionship, and it would be very embarrassing to have to admit to my friends that my husband tried to poison me, or even that he doesn't love me. You still need a meal ticket. We understand each other perfectly. Of course I'll be very careful about what I eat and drink."

"Then you're not going to tell the police?"

She smiled, and the smile was uglier than usual. Her close-set blue eyes, rather piggish, regarded him malevolently. "You belong to me, Dexter," she told him, "and you'd be no good to me in prison."

Over the next two days he debated what to do. What he wanted most to do was to try murder again. There were plenty of the sleeping pills left, and next time he would make no mistake about the size of the dose. He didn't worry about Quella's caution concerning food. She was too much of a glutton. The person who did worry him was Doctor Gilman. The police might not know about the first murder attempt, but Gilman did know, and even that incompetent old quack might consider two accidents, or one accident and a suicide, just too much of a coincidence. So there was a considerable risk involved.

Another alternative was simply to leave Quella. Go back to the cookie factory, or some factory. Still, he hated factories, and it was nothing to rush into.

The third alternative was to accept Quella's generous invitation to continue as her husband. This was the alternative he chose, temporarily at least, until he could make new plans.

But it didn't work out exactly as Quella had promised. They didn't go on quite as before. Quella didn't react to her near-murder as most women probably would have. Those other women would have been afraid, always on the defensive. Quella became more aggressive and belligerent than ever.

It took her only those two days to recover her health. He had waited on her hand and foot during that time, always to the tune of scathing and bitter complaints that he wasn't doing a better job of it. Then when she was on her feet again, she took full charge.

He'd been to get himself a haircut, something even a painter has to have once in a while. When he returned he found Quella not only out of bed, but in his studio, where every canvas had been ripped to shreds, whether it had a picture on it or not. Frames were broken

and splintered, good now for nothing but firewood. All his color tubes were squeezed out into one gooey conglomerate mass. His brushes were snapped into pieces, his palettes smashed, even his books ripped open and gutted. Quella stood triumphant in the midst of the wreckage, an avenging fury in hair curlers and a red kimono.

He was too shocked to utter even a syllable of outrage. It wasn't that any of his paintings had been of real value—he admitted he was still immature and mediocre. Nor was it that the supplies were irreplaceable. Rather it was simply that an uncouth and barbarian hand had desecrated a temple of the Muses.

"I'm making an announcement," Quella boomed. "Hereafter there'll be no more foolishness in my house. You're going to be my husband, Dexter boy, and you won't have time for anything else." She showed him a wide grin. Quella didn't have very good teeth. It was a grin he might have painted to adorn a demon in a portrait of hell.

"Oh no," he shouted back at her, finally discovering his own voice, "I'm getting out of here."

He turned on his heel and scooted for the front door. She screamed for him to stop, and then when he paid no attention, she ran after him, caught up with him at the door, grabbed his shoulder and whirled him around to face her.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, her face purple with rage.

"Back to where you found me," he said proudly and confidently.

"How will you eat? How will you buy equipment?"

"I'll get a job."

"Yes, but you can't keep a job. And you're spoiled now. You're used to eating. You've gotten out of the habit of being the starving painter. You'll be worse off than when I found you."

He fell back against the door frame, pale and shaky. What Quella said was true. He never had been able to cope with the world. He wasn't made for it. He was an artist. Now he was used to being sheltered, and he had liked that part of his existence with Quella. The thought of going back into the world, now that he had announced he was going to do it, suddenly terrified him.

"Quella," he begged in a fever of fear, "let me stay."

"Of course, dear husband, I'll let you stay."

"But let me paint. Not much, just a little. An hour a day, just give me an hour a day to paint, and the rest of the time I'll do whatever you say."

The virago shook her head so swiftly that the metal curlers blurred before Dexter's eyes. "Not a chance," she answered with an ugly laugh. "You can leave and be a painter if you want to, though I don't know how you'll ever buy the stuff to paint with. But if you stay here, buster, you'll never touch another brush."

He closed his eyes, shutting out her awful face. How could an artist endure such a face? Yet where could he go? This was what he'd accomplished with that murder he'd fumbled, as he fumbled everything practical. He had forfeited what he'd had, and was now left with nothing. Crime and punishment.

That was when the idea came to him. He opened his eyes, straightened up, squared his shoulders, and gave Quella a curt little bow. "Goodbye, my dear," he said. "There is one place I can go."

Then he walked out, savoring the scream of frustrated rage that he left behind.

"Now let me get this straight," said Lieutenant Train. He was a grizzled man of about forty, suspicious and incredulous by nature and experience. "You're confessing to an attempted murder?"

"That's right," said Dexter Rhodes.

"We've had no report of this attempted murder."

"That's because Doctor Gilman didn't realize there had been an attempted murder. He thought the whole thing was an accident."

"And you say your wife knows you tried to kill her?"

"She knows."

"Why didn't she report it?"

"My wife is a strange person. You'd have to know her."

The lieutenant appeared skeptical, but then he ran into a lot of queer people in his line of work. "Okay," he said, "we'll check it out. Let's take a ride to your house."

"Is that necessary?" Dexter wondered in mild alarm.

"It's necessary," Lieutenant Train assured him.

Before they went, he contacted Doctor Gilman by telephone. Gilman corroborated Dexter's story. Train seemed a little more convinced.

"Do we have to consult Quella about this?" Dexter asked again.

"I'm very curious," said Train, "about why any woman wouldn't report an attempt on her life, and then would go on living with a man who'd tried to kill her."

They drove an unmarked police car. When they arrived at the house, Dexter rang the bell, lacking the courage to walk right in.

Quella, still in her hair curlers and kimono, admitted them only after the lieutenant displayed his police identification.

In the livingroom, with all of them sitting down, the lieutenant stated his business. Dexter Rhodes had confessed to trying to murder his wife. How about it, Mrs. Rhodes?

Quella clucked, shook her head sadly, and said, "I was afraid he was going to do something like that."

"Would you please explain?" Train asked patiently.

She did explain, briefly and logically. "Dexter is a strange boy," she began. "That's what he is really, only a boy. Artists, you know, never grow up in the practical sense. Well, the night it happened, Dexter and I had a little argument. I was at fault, I must admit. I'm a woman of the world, and I don't fully understand my husband. I told him so. I told him I didn't understand how a grown man could do nothing but sit around the house and paint pictures all day. We had a terrible argument over it, and I have an awful temper, Lieutenant. Here, let me show you what I did."

She led the lieutenant to the wreckage of the studio. "I did this," she told him. "We had a little brawl, you might say, and Dexter got mad. I can't blame him. He walked out on me. Then the minute he was gone, I was sorry. I realized how much I loved him. But it was too late. I thought sure he had left me forever. I sat down and started a letter to my sister. I'll show you that too."

They returned to the livingroom. She retrieved the letter from the desk and handed it to Train. The detective read it through several times, finally looked up with a puzzled frown. "What are you getting at, Mrs. Rhodes?"

"Isn't it obvious? I tried to commit suicide."

The lieutenant's frown darkened to a scowl, and he rubbed his chin meditatively. "Okay, but then why did your husband come down to headquarters and confess to attempted murder?"

"I think that was very sweet of him."

"What?" Train's eyes opened very wide.

"He knew what I'd done, don't you see? He knew that I'd come very close to dying. And he knew why, because he'd walked out on me. So he put all the blame on himself. Artists are very sensitive people, Lieutenant. In Dexter's eyes, he had nearly murdered me, even if it was indirect. That was why he confessed. But he's wrong, very wrong. I assume all the

blame. He is completely innocent."

Dexter couldn't stand it any longer. "She's lying!" he shouted. "You don't believe her, do you?"

The lieutenant thought in silence for a long time. "Yes, I do believe her," he decided finally. "Her story sounds pretty logical to me, mainly because she wasn't broadcasting it. On the other hand, you —well, first of all, you don't say anything to Doctor Gilman when he comes here. And then suddenly you get a cockeyed notion and you come to me with it. Now if a guy really had tried to commit murder, would he come to the police about it? I hate to say this, Mr. Rhodes, but I'm afraid you're some kind of a nut."

The lieutenant stood up, twisting his hat in his hands. "I've got to go now," he announced. "I just have one thing to say. When you folks have your little spats, why don't you lay off the sleeping pills, huh, Mrs. Rhodes?"

He exited quickly, leaving Quella and Dexter considering each other in the livingroom. They were silent for a time, Quella with a little satisfied smile, Dexter in brooding despair.

"So you thought you'd like it in prison," she said at last.

"They don't fire you from your job there," he answered. "You have a little money to buy paints and things. And at least some of your time is your own."

"But I told you, Dexter," she said softly, "that you're no good to me in prison. I want you here with me all the time."

Lieutenant Train went to the Rhodes house again two months later. It was not too long after the call came in, but the crew was already there, working the place over. He found Dexter Rhodes sitting in the livingroom, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands.

"Tell me what happened, Mr. Rhodes," the lieutenant began.

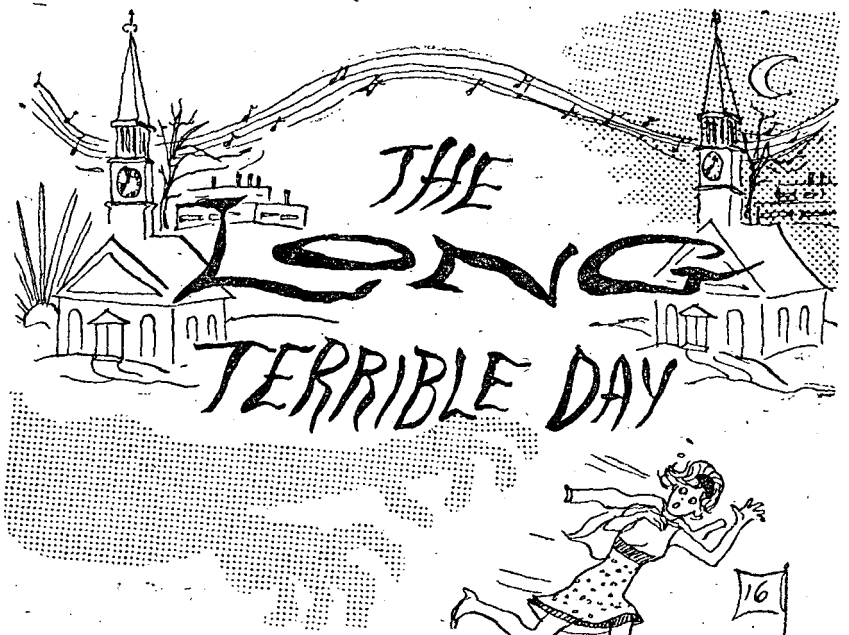
Dexter Rhodes glanced up. He was pale, haggard, with the look of a man who had been through two months of hell. "I did it," he said in a voice that verged on hysteria. "I killed her. I gave her a bunch of those sleeping pills . . ."

They were interrupted by a man in shirtsleeves who came up and spoke quietly to the lieutenant. "We checked the prints," he said, "on the box of pills and on the glass. Mrs. Rhodes'. Nobody else's."

"I killed her," Dexter repeated.

The lieutenant shook his head. "Let's don't play games, Mr. Rhodes," he said. "Take your troubles to a psychiatrist, not to the police."

A long terrible day may stretch into a lifetime, but perhaps restless curiosity will ultimately curtail it.



A NOVELETTE

BY

CHARLOTTE EDWARDS

THE long terrible day started at exactly eight o'clock. The siren hooted from the paper mill and the chimes of the church on Main Street clanged in the steeple, telling the time as they always did.

Ernie's chair scraped as he pushed it back. Clearing his throat, he said, "Time to be off," which he

announced every workday morning.

I sat at the table in the breakfast nook, a cup of coffee halfway to my lips. The paper was spread before me, but my eyes were on my husband.

What I had just seen in the middle of the front page formed an after-image that fitted over his features; fitted perfectly, neatly, in every detail—except the mustache, crewcut and twenty extra pounds.

Ernie leaned across the table and patted four-year-old Steve on the head. "Mind Mama," he commanded.

Steve nodded, his mouth too full to answer.

Ernie walked around in back of me, his steps heavy and sure, to the high chair. "Daddy's girl be good today," he coaxed.

Liz chortled and offered him a spoon of oatmeal from which the overload dropped rhythmically.

"Some kid," Ernie gloated, then moved behind my chair. His hand lay, heavy as his footsteps, warm and sure, on my shoulder. "You're going to spill your coffee." Large, broad-shouldered, powerful, he looked down at me.

I smiled up at him.

"Eyes, amber, green-flecked. Small scar dividing the right eyebrow, tilting it up."

I lowered my gaze, set the coffee cup back in the saucer, picked up the paper. "Ernie," I said, "There's the craziest thing here—"

He didn't look, but bent to kiss me. His lips were warm and gentle. His mustache tickled a moment against my mouth and was gone—the red mustache, small, neatly clipped, almost rusty; grown the first year of our marriage.

"Gotta rush, kid," he said. "Big day. Save it, eh?"

"But it will only take—"

He rumpled my hair, then he was gone.

I was alone in the house with my children. The long terrible day was fifteen minutes old—only I didn't know it was a long terrible day, not then.

He'd have gotten a bounce out of it. Ernie could take a joke, even when it was on him—if he wasn't upset, wasn't angry, wasn't hurt.

I stood up abruptly. Maybe he was still upset about last night. Maybe that's why he wanted to hurry. I shook my head. Ernie didn't have to have a reason for rushing to work, for cat's sake. He did that often.

I began to clear the table, ignoring the paper, awkwardly folded there beside my plate. I rinsed the dishes carefully and wiped around Steve's comic book, around the *Daily Express,* leaving them like two puddles to be mopped up later. I pulled Liz from the high

chair, washed the accumulated debris from around the smiling mouth, and carried her into the livingroom, setting her carefully in the playpen, handing her an assortment of soft toys.

For a moment then, I stood still, as if waiting for something. As if it needed only physical quiet to start it in motion, a hammer, a deep, slow, heavy-swinging hammer, started pounding inside the cave of my left ribs. Thud, bong, thud, boom, it picked up tempo, faster and faster, heavier, louder. When it filled my ears, filled the neat small room, the word came out, sharp, sudden. "No!"

The hammer slowed almost to a stop. "All I have to do," I said to myself, "is go back to the kitchen and pick up the paper. Look at the drawing again, carefully, don't snatch impressions."

Shame began to crawl through me. I hated women who checked for lipstick, notes, phone numbers; suspicious, untrusting wives.

With sudden determination I walked briskly to the kitchen, but instead of picking up the paper, I found myself washing the dishes. Sounds came remotely: Liz gibbering, Steve rumbling, the roar of cars on the freeway.

"I *will* look." I went to the table, propelled by my own loud words. The headline was louder than my voice in its grim declaration: "GIRL FOUND BLUDGEONED TO DEATH ON GOLF COURSE."

"The body of Marylee Adams, 18, was discovered early this morning, head gashed by repeated heavy blows, in bushes by the 16th hole of the Arnaughton Golf Course. There was no sign of the murder weapon.

"Miss Adams, who lived at 1617 Central Street with her mother, had many suitors, according to the information so far obtained.

"Police Chief J. Hampton Jones remarked upon the similarity of this crime and that of the killing of one Sandra Hims, also 18, on a public golf course in Kansas City about five years ago. At that time the murder weapon was found, a heavy car jack.

"The drawing (at right) was forwarded from that city, and is based on a witness' description of the suspect, the man with whom Miss Hims was last seen leaving a Kansas City bar."

My eyes pulled from the words, fastened on the four-column picture centered on the page. The hammering started again.

I began at the wavy hair, growing clean and straight above the broad forehead, followed the line of the nose with its rounded tip, the cheeks that hollowed in a little

just above the square chin. I traced the thin, determined curves of the mouth.

Heat rose in me until I was scorched with panic. I stared, horror blazing through me, at the face of Ernie, my husband, staring back at me from the printed page of the *Daily Express*. Except for the mustache, the crewcut, and the twenty extra pounds, it was Ernie as I first knew him, when I first met him.

The chimes from the church on Main Street spoke out nine times.

I stared out of the window at the two orange trees showing in the yard. Ernie took good care of the trees.

The picture was a thing to laugh at, and over, with Ernie, a product of an artist's imagination five years ago. So what? Nobody else would notice except a fantasy-ridden, silly wife. Ernie'd had a mustache ever since we came here; and extra flesh; and short hair. Talk about lipstick crazy wives!

"You done any killin' lately?" I could hear Jim, Ernie's boss, roar; Jim, who wouldn't take a mint for Ernie.

Everybody loves Ernie—kids, dogs, men, old ladies, neighbors. No one would believe it for a moment.

I love him and I don't believe it for a moment, either. You don't love a man who could smash a girl to death. You'd know about a thing like that. It wouldn't be in a gentle, quiet man like Ernie. When things close in on him, he just gets up and walks out. A couple hours of walking around and he's back, sweet, trouble forgotten—like last night.

I closed my eyes and leaned forward. The chair squeaked, like the squeak I'd heard in the night and had barely roused to notice.

When was that? What hour? What time?

Eighteen is just beginning to live. Was Marylee Adams blonde? Was her hair freshly set in rollers and pin curls, the way kids go around, and a scarf?

Eighteen—I was eighteen five

years ago when I first met Ernie, first saw his hands, square and strong and clean. He didn't work in a garage then. He was dapper and a bachelor, and he came to the door of my mother's house selling appliances.

Mama liked him at once, and when Papa came home from his sales trip, he and Ernie talked half the night and ate nearly a whole cake, baked by me with love. Yes, it was love, even that first week.

Every weekend for over two months he came to the white house in the small town, and Sunday evenings came too soon.

"I don't like to say goodbye to you. I don't like going back to the city anymore," Ernie would say.

Then one Saturday he came, breathless in his quiet way. "This man in California advertised in the city paper, a good steady job in a garage. I wrote him, and he called clear across country—and hired me!"

That week we were married. On the train, Ernie was already sprouting the mustache above his firm upper lip.

Eighteen—five years ago—the white house was left behind, the city left behind. The city; what city?

Did she have rollers, and pin curls? Oh, it would hurt worse with pin curls, all those little steel clips ground into the bones of her head . . .

Like the lost morning hour, I had no recollection of leaving the house, of starting the old jalopy which ran like new because of Ernie's skill. Liz was beside me, Steve stood, eager, talking. I started to make a grocery list in my mind.

"Bread, margarine, the city, eggs, cereal, what city, shortening, Kansas City. That's the city. Kansas City, sugar—twenty-five miles from the white house and Mama and Papa—"

Steve began to count the bongs in the steeple. Ten o'clock, two hours since eight. "Eight—nine—ten," Steve said it for me.

The doors of the supermarket flashed open in that miraculous way that intrigued Steve.

I walked through, lopsided to hold Liz' hand. The store was so bright I felt as if I'd emerged from a tunnel. The normalcy, the bustle, the clang of registers and rustle of bags, slowly oozed into me.

Sorting, pricing, watching the basket pile high behind Liz, the displays were walls protecting me from the morning, the paper, awkwardly folded over on the kitchen table.

There was a bad moment at the meat counter.

"Round for Swiss?" I asked.

The butcher nodded. "Okay, Mrs. Cochran. Pounded like usual?"

"Like usual."

I stared into the big mirror lining the wall behind the butcher: like usual, short brown hair, brown, seemingly untroubled eyes; typical young mother, typical week's shopping.

Then, beside my reflection an arm rose. In the hand was a hammer-hatchet. It went up. It came down with a dull thud. Up, down, up, down—BLUDGEON.

"That's enough, Peppy," I called sharply.

The arm stopped. "Heck, it ain't pounded half as much—" He shrugged, wrapped the gummy red meat in thick white paper, wrote red numerals on it, and shoved it toward me.

It took all my self-control to pick up the package.

At the cheese case Jim's wife called to me. "See you tonight."

"Tonight, Eloise?"

"Pot luck, remember?"

Every other Friday we got together with seven other couples. Eloise's house was the meeting place this time.

"I'm not sure. Baby-sitter trouble—"

"Bring 'em along. Tuck 'em in."

I began to move toward the checkout counter. "Ernie wouldn't like me to do that though, so—"

Eloise laughed. "Ernie likes whatever you want."

I swallowed. It hurt. The truth hurts.

What he couldn't buy, Ernie made up for in effort, like feeding the kids on Sundays, emptying the rubbish, scrubbing the kitchen. Bigger things Ernie did, like not being a bachelor in a good-looking suit anymore, but wearing coveralls, for all the greasy dirty work he did. And the hard work was for me, wasn't it?

Or was it—my mind talked straight at me—because a well-dressed salesman with amber eyes and curly hair couldn't be so easily traced if he were a garage mechanic in coveralls in a city a couple of thousand miles away?

I looked for Steve at the checkout. He was sitting on the magazines, doubled over a comic book. My eyes slid from him and lighted on the paper stand.

BLUDGEON yammered out at me, Ernie's five-years-ago face yammered out at me, the cashier, Eloise—I gripped the counter's edge.

Eloise's arm went around me. "Kid, you're white. What's the matter? You scared?" She laughed. "That guy's five hundred miles away by this time, honey."

I pulled myself together, said,

"I'm all right. It's really nothing."

I followed the boy with the carry-out basket. The sun hit me without heat. Funny, the market had seemed so bright. Now the market was a tunnel, and the outdoors brazen.

"You want these in the trunk, ma'am?"

I nodded.

"Then I gotta have the keys."

I pulled out my case and walked to the back of the car. I inserted the round key, noticing impersonally that my hand shook. I turned the key. The boy reached over to lift the trunk lid, then transferred the cartons. I lifted my arm to bring the trunk lid down.

Suddenly, my hand was halted. My heart was halted. Even with the cartons, the trunk looked—different, not right.

I stared at the boxes, at the spare tire, waiting for it to hit me, to know what was missing from the rear trunk of the jalopy.

I stared, seeing where it should be. I tried desperately to see it there. I leaned forward, finally, and pushed the heavy cartons aside, one knee on the back bumper to put myself closer. I peered into the corners and felt behind the spare.

The car jack was gone! The heavy, solid, old jack, that Ernie insisted should be there because the tires were recapped, was now gone.

Roars hit against me, bruising and sharp. Eleven of them bounced and hurt before they faded. I was pulling into our driveway before I realized they weren't roars at all, but the chimes in the church steeple striking the hour before noon.

All right, so the morning was almost gone. See, World? I'd washed the dishes and done the shopping. Now I'll burn the rubbish. That *Daily Express* on the table will catch quickly, burn the crazy ideas, the weird wicked thoughts; ashes and dust—and Marylee Adams was pretty as a picture.

I got my scissors from the sink drawer and sat down at the kitchen table. Carefully I cut out the front piece of the *Daily Express,* picked up my purse from the drainboard, folded the cut piece into a tidy square and tucked it into the zippered compartment. Then I crunched up the paper, put it in the top of the wastebasket and carried it to the back of the yard. I emptied the basket and struck a match. I was right. The *Daily Express* burned fast and set everything else on fire—but it burned away no evil thoughts.

As I went through the kitchen door the phone rang.

"Hello," I heard, a tinny voice but a close voice. "That you, Sara?"

For a moment too sheer to hold, comfort oozed into me. "Yes, Ernie?"

"I been ringing all morning." He sounded worried.

"I went shopping."

"Oh. You still mad? About last night?"

That depends, I thought calmly, *on what happened last night.* "No. Why?"

He hesitated. "You seemed so—kind of funny this morning."

"Funny?"

"You still seem funny." He sounded strange this time; on guard, yet prying.

"I'm all right."

"Look, Sara," he spurted, "I took a walk is all. Got that? Sure, I was sore. I took a walk."

I held up my hand and studied it. "A long walk?"

I could hear him breathe before his answer. "Pretty long. You were asleep when—"

"I know."

"Weren't you?"

I thought about that. "Sort of—dozing."

"Oh, I wish—"

"Why?"

"Never mind. You still sound funny. Look, I forgot my lunch. I have to work right through. I'm—I'm doing a paint job on old Tinsdale's car—"

"I'm sorry." I was. "I forgot to fix your lunch." There *was* an hour then, before eight o'clock. "Then I sat down to look at the paper—" I bit my lip, hard.

"What was that about the paper?" His voice was harsh, louder.

"Nothing."

"Jim just rolled a cart through here. What was—"

"I'm sorry—"

"Well, look, could you bring it down to me? Like I said—"

"I heard you."

Could I bring it down? Could I talk to him, with the square of paper in my purse and mind, and sound like Sara Cochran, the mother of his children, the wife of his bosom?

"Something is the matter." He slowed his words. "I think you better come on down here."

"The kids—"

"I want to see you, Sara." Ernie had never spoken like that; flat, in command.

I hung up slowly, slowly, cutting off his tone.

The phone rang again instantly.

"You hung up. Why?"

I grabbed for breath. "Because I wanted to fix your lunch, silly."

He grunted. "Well, say, the other thing. Last night—you know when I took that walk—I, well, I stopped in here. Thought I'd maybe try to mix the paint for Tinsdale—"

"Yes?" *Oh, please, no, not that!*

"Well, I got a few spots on my gray slacks. Jim's all set for the shindig." He made a funny sound. "You know me. One-pants Cochran. Be a good kid and clean those spots out for me, will you?"

"All right."

"And Sara—"

"Yes?"

"If it's too much trouble—I'll ask somebody to bring me a hamburg."

"You sure that's all right?" *Calm and easy now. Get ready for the question.* "I've got a washing started—" *That sounds good, Sara.*

"Sure, it's okay. Just that you were—"

"Funny, I know. Well, I'm not now."

"Good. I'll see you tonight. And remember the gray pants, eh?"

"I'll remember, Ernie." *Now! Ask it now and fast.* "Ernie?"

"Yes?"

"Old Man Tinsdale? What color's he having you paint his car?"

Ernie did laugh this time, short. "Bright red. Isn't that a howl?" He hung up.

I walked steadily back into the bedroom and opened the closet door. Ernie's slacks were on a hanger. I carried them, not glancing down, into the kitchen, to the window, to the brightest light. I held them out, letting the sun touch them shrewdly to be certain.

They were spotted all right, small spots, but a lot of them. Maybe Old Man Tinsdale's car was supposed to be bright red—but the paint didn't hold up on flannel. All those little spots were brown, rusty brown.

All hell broke loose suddenly, inside and outside of me. The noon whistles shrieked. Liz began to cry. Steve slammed into the house. The room, the house, reverberated with the noises.

But the biggest sound, the loudest yell, the highest whistle, came from inside myself, a noise that grew and grew and tore me apart.

Ernie Cochran, my husband, was a murderer!

When you are afraid something is true and you fight off the knowledge with everything in you, and when at last the proof of the truth seems indisputable, a stillness comes. I knew that stillness. It lasted until I had the kids in for their naps. I bent to kiss them.

That was a mistake. That pushed the first tickle of the knife into the shock. These two wonderful children, how could they grow? With a murderer for a father?

IF he is, part of me staunchly cried. IF. IF.

I shut the door and went into the livingroom to the little desk. The morning, I decided, was one

segment of a continued play. The new hours, they would be the next installment.

What next then?

I unzippered the compartment of my purse in the kitchen and pulled out the clipping.

How could I doubt it? There before my eyes?

I was, I knew, dodging a decision. "Accessory after the fact," came neatly to my mind. What do you do when you believe your husband is a murderer and nobody else suspects it?

Suppose nobody ever suspects it? My heart leaped with a strange looseness, a relief. Suppose you just go on, and every morning he leaves and every night he comes home to you and nobody ever dreams that Ernie Cochran has battered and crumpled and shattered and crushed—everybody loves Ernie.

The looseness tightened into a sudden knot. What if he does it again?

I went to the phone, compelled. I dialed quickly. After hours the voice came, heavy and remote.

"Police department."

"Homicide," I heard.

The voice lost its casualness. "Homicide? Lady, you mean murder?"

"I mean murder." *Who said that in that strange easy way? Not Mrs. Cochran. Not about Mr. Cochran.*

"Just a minute."

In an office somewhere in the heart of the city men were moving and stirring, maybe pounding from door to door, asking and demanding, trying to get a clue.

My eyes landed on the gray flannel slacks, folded over the back of the kitchen chair. *Come to the phone and I'll give you a clue,* I thought, a little wildly now, with the waiting, the hum in the line going right into my ear and brain.

"Sergeant Anderson speaking." It was a new intense voice. "Homicide."

"I—" I began. "I—" I swallowed. I lifted my head from the dial that seemed to be going around and around of its own free will. "I want—" I swung my glance toward the door.

Ernie stood there. His shoulders seemed to fill the entire doorway, like Goliath, like Samson. His eyes looked all green, not amber and flecked. His mouth, under the mustache, was tight and small.

"Lady," the sergeant's voice came again. "Hey, lady—"

I felt the receiver slip from my hand and knew vaguely that I was slipping with it. All the way down to the floor into unconsciousness, my eyes were tied to Ernie's. I took them with me into the blackness—his eyes—and the simple un-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adorned sound of the church bell tolling a single note.

For what seemed an eternity I tried to climb up a black velvet ladder which sagged. It was unutterably difficult, but I had to try. Somewhere at the top a voice insisted, commanded, cajoled. Then, flashingly, the velvet was torn, the voice was loud, and all was bright. Ernie's face was so close to mine I could see the pores of his tanned skin. His arms were locked around me, holding me tight against the bed.

Relief filled my chest and eyes, and tears rolled down my cheeks. "A nightmare," I babbled. "Just a bad dream. Oh, Ernie—honey—I dreamed that you—that you—" I looked at his eyes then. It was no nightmare.

"I never knew you to pass out like that before," he said thoughtfully, then turned toward me quickly, his hands urgent on my shoulders. I felt the shudder begin where his fingers lay, and travel, secret and sick, down my body to my toes.

"You're shivering. On a day like this." He got up. "You lie still. I'm going to call the doctor."

Let him, the voice inside said quickly. *The doctor is somebody in the house.* I listened to his heavy footsteps down the hall to the kitchen, pause, then start back.

Ernie came toward me again. "He's out, but I left the message."

The most awful of all thoughts of this horrible day came to me then, as Ernie walked slowly toward me, his big hands extended. I had left the clipping on the kitchen table, naked and revealing. If he had seen it, had read it, had picked up that receiver, had heard the voice of Sergeant Anderson—then Ernie would want me dead, too!

Maybe not want—but most certainly need!

I began to talk fast. "How did you happen to come home?"

"Spray gun jammed. Jim said we needed a new one. We hopped in the truck—"

Hope was a beat in my throat. "Jim's here?"

He shook his head. "Dropped me off for lunch." He was beside me now, bending over.

More fear—*if he kills me now, having already called the doctor, could he make it look natural*—"Don't!"

He pulled his hands away.

"I—my head aches."

Steve called, "Mama."

I pushed myself up. Ernie pushed me down. "Tell you what. I'll dress the kids and take them to Eloise's."

It sounded fine. The children would be safe.

He paced out of the room.

I was out of bed instantly, tiptoeing to the kitchen, grateful that Ernie had removed my shoes. The receiver sat crosswise in its cradle. The clipping was still on the table beside my purse. Had it been moved?

I snatched up the clipping and grabbed my purse, tucked the paper into it, zipped it shut again and carried it back to the bedroom to stuff it under my pillow. Then I lay down, breathing hastily.

Outside a shrill horn bleated and Ernie hurried into the room.

I sat up. "You go along. I can take care of the kids. Honest."

"You look—funny," he said slowly. "You act—funny. You got something on your mind?"

Maybe, then, the hope bubbled, he hadn't seen the clipping. "You go, Ernie. Don't worry. I'll be here when you come back." It was a promise, strong and meant. I had to see what he would do. I had to know for sure, even if it killed me!

He said, "Reason I couldn't get a hamburg, kid, I'm broke."

I reached under the pillow and pulled out my purse.

"How did that get there? It wasn't there when I carried you in."

I swallowed a thick lumpiness. "Sure it was. You were—excited." *Dear God,* I prayed silently, *don't let him get excited again.* I reached up and tucked the money into his coverall pocket and forced a smile.

Jim's horn sounded twice, roughly. As the kitchen door closed behind Ernie, the phone rang. By the time I picked up the receiver, the rings had synchronized themselves with the two bongs of the church bell.

"Yes?" I sounded brusque.

"Sergeant Anderson speaking. You all right, lady?"

"Of course I'm all right."

"You hung up. You said murder and hung up."

"Police? There must be some mistake."

"We traced the call."

"But I haven't used the phone."

"Something's haywire here. There anybody else in your house?"

I laughed, high, strange, but he wouldn't know. "Two small children."

He said something I could almost hear to somebody I couldn't see. Then, "Don't see how it could happen, lady. Sorry to bother you. Some crank maybe. With a psycho on the loose—"

"Yes." *Psycho.* That was the word I had been searching for all day!

"Okay then."

I held the receiver for a long moment, listening to the remote hum.

So, that was the way it was go-

ing to be. I couldn't turn the clipping, the slacks, and Ernie over to the police. Five years and two children—I couldn't point the finger.

Why couldn't I point the finger? It had to be proved. I had to be sure.

I called the doctor's office.

"Mrs. Cochran," the girl said in answer to my question, "there's no record of any call from your husband."

I hung up.

Ernie hadn't called the doctor. Why? If I thought the doctor was coming I would stay home. I would be there whenever he could fix an alibi and sneak out of the garage to come to me—and with a "psycho on the loose"—be safe.

Wait a minute, this is Ernie I'm thinking about, my Ernie. Please, the benefit of the doubt.

I called Eloise. "I have to get to the bank before it closes. The kids—could you—"

"Love it."

"I'll be right over."

Eloise's house looked very safe. I could stay here, too. Yet I drove on to the neighborhood bank, withdrew all the money in our joint account and turned it into traveler's checks. There wasn't a great deal, but there was enough to get my children and me back to the white house twenty-five miles from Kansas City, within the sanctuary of my parents' circle. Then maybe I could point the finger.

If I were a detective where would I start? Where Ernie started last night.

I drove back toward the house and cruised to the end of the block. To the right was the movie theater. I stopped before the marquee. Sandy, the ticket seller's name was.

"Sandy," I said quickly, "you know Mr. Cochran when you see him?"

She laughed. "Everybody around here knows Ernie."

"Sandy, last night—were you here last night?"

"Sure. You know me—Old Faithful."

"Did you see Ernie—Mr. Cochran? Did he come in here?" By the sudden ache in the pit of my stomach, I knew I had been hoping that Ernie had walked this far, been tired, had stepped inside and let the picture ride by until he was calm again.

"He didn't come in."

"He didn't come in?" I repeated sharply. "You mean you saw him?"

"Yeah. About nine-thirty, little earlier maybe. I give him a "hi," but he didn't seem to see me."

"Thank you." I went back to the car.

Sandy called. "He went that-a-way." She flipped a thumb to the

left, and I followed its gesture.

Halfway down the block I stopped the car again. Sometimes Ernie brought me to Joe's Cafe for a sandwich and a glass of beer. Big deal.

It was dark inside after the glare of the sun. Joe's voice reached me before I saw him. "Be with you in a sec." His voice changed. "Mrs. Cochran." He belched a hearty laugh. "You taken to drink in the daytime?"

"What I wanted to know—well—I don't want to be a prying wife, but Ernie—"

"You checkin' up on that man of yours, eh?"

For a moment I wanted to turn, to run. This thing I was doing to Ernie was as bad as pointing the finger, planting suspicion. Sandy now, would she remember Sara Cochran trying to find out where her husband had been? Would Joe add two and two when the paper was tossed on the bar?

No, Ernie was too different now. I, Sara, I alone, remembered how he looked five years ago—and Ernie, himself.

"It's a joke," I said quickly. "But was he—last night—"

He nodded definitely. "Sure was."

A funny looseness came around my heart again. If he sat here and tied one on until all hours—it would be an alibi, wouldn't it? "How long—"

The laugh bounced. "In again, out again, one quick glass."

This see-sawing. This up-and-down.

Joe reached to an intricately carved clock behind the bar. He began to wind it. "I remember," he said. "Ten o'clock on the nose by Oscar here." As if to seal it, a small bird popped quickly out above Joe's head. "Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo," he crowed proudly, and snapped himself back inside.

I left the cafe, walked steadily toward the corner. Cuckoo, what next? Ernie left home about nine-thirty. Down the street, turn right, by the movie, one beer, ten o'clock and what time did he get home?

I stared at my sandals following each other. If they could have a nose, like a dog on the scent, they could pick up one clear scent, of Ernie Cochran, to lead me where Ernie walked—and keep him away, away, away, from the Arnaughton Golf Course—but, of course, they couldn't. Six blocks, seven, ten, steadily forward, until the stores were gone, then on to the sign, a wide brown board with worn gold words: ARNAUGHTON MUNICIPAL GOLF COURSE.

I watched the doll-like figures tossed out over the course. Last

night, when the Arnaughton Golf Course was black instead of green, a labyrinth to snare her feet, Marylee Adams, eighteen, was smashed down in the bushes by the sixteenth hole.

Suddenly I couldn't take any more. I couldn't walk onto that course and find the sixteenth hole. I wasn't a detective. I was the wife of Ernie Cochran, who had trusted him completely until today. I wanted him innocent with all my heart.

I ran, until there was pain in my side and a wild bumping in my chest, until I reached the jalopy. There I sat, blind haze before my eyes, my hand on the ignition key, and watched the rain begin.

When I could breathe I started the car and steered it carefully back home. I got the big suitcase from the top of the neat shelves Ernie had built in the garage. I gathered all the children's clean clothes, packed them in and clicked the case shut. I lugged it out to the back and shoved it into the trunk of the jalopy, avoiding the place where the jack should have been. I stood still, knowing something was forgotten, something I would need.

I darted back into the house. They were still there, over the kitchen chair—the slacks I was supposed to clean, the little rusty spots. I rolled them up tightly and wrapped them in brown paper. My hand was on the door when the front chimes rang.

Instinctively, the brown package still in my hand, I went to answer it. A tall man stood there. Black patches of rain were soaked on the shoulders of his coat and the rim of his hat.

"Yes?" I clutched the package.

"Mrs. Cochran?"

I nodded.

He did a sleight-of-hand and a badge appeared in his open palm. "Police. Sergeant Anderson. I'd like to talk to you."

"Me?" It came out a croak. "Come in." I stepped back.

The wedding clock on the mantel, Mama's wedding present ("To keep track of happy times, Dollie") pinged in its breathless way, one, two, three, four pings.

"Nice little house you have here."

Trying to throw me off the track? Trying to make me think everything's all right? Had he been to places I hadn't thought of? Because I'm a wife, you see; not a detective.

"Won't you sit down?"

"I don't intend to stay, ma'am."

Suddenly the weight of the package under my arm turned from wool to lead, and I set it

down on the planter, feeling each rusty brown spot as a pound, a ton, in the muscles of my conscience.

Sergeant Anderson watched me. "You look like a sensible woman," he said abruptly.

"I do?" The croak was back.

"You look like a woman who, if she had information the police needed, would be telling it."

I might have known. Somehow they'd traced Ernie. They'd come this close.

"Mrs. Cochran," the sergeant said quietly, "last night a young girl was beaten to death. Everybody knows that. She wasn't much, but nobody, good or bad, deserves to die like she did."

I asked sharply, "What has all this got to do with me? You think I killed her?"

He smiled. "Of course not. I'm here because of that phone call. Like I told you when I called you back, somebody mentions murder, we hop on it. First when we traced your call—"

Did I let the receiver slip when I fainted? Did I hang it up myself, the way it was when I went back into the kitchen?

"When I talked to you first, I thought, some mistake. You sounded calm. But operators don't make mistakes."

"Everybody makes mistakes."

He nodded. "I think I made one. I got busy after I talked with you. Then, when I was going over the scene of the murder, your call came back to me."

"I didn't call."

"Okay. But somebody called. This woman said she wanted homicide. You remember what she said?"

I swallowed thickly. "Don't try to trick me. I didn't call."

He shrugged. "She said, 'I mean murder.' "

"So?"

"So, I came to the phone. You—she—said, 'I want—I want—' Then she shut up. The wire hummed a long time. Three, four minutes."

I said, anger bright in my voice, "What are you trying to prove?"

"That I'm a dope. You—she could have been murdered, the way I loused around. Out on the course there, it came to me. When you—she—didn't hang up she sort of faded away. Then, after that hum, somebody picked up the receiver. I heard breathing."

"Breathing?"

"Yeah. Not a woman's. Not yours—hers. A man's—heavy, lower breathing."

Panic bit like teeth against the back of my throat. "Did he—say—anything? Ask who—"

The sergeant shook his head. "Not a word. You're okay, but you

look me in the face and lie in your teeth. Why?"

I was wild with desire to tell Sergeant Anderson everything, before what he was afraid could have happened really did. Tell him, and not have to get in the packed jalopy with the brown package. I didn't even have to say it. I could just hand him the package and tell him, "These slacks were worn by my husband last night." He'd do the rest.

Then the pendulum swung again. I was equally wild with the desire to get him out of the house, and Liz and Steve out of the state, until I could run to my father's arms and ask him what to do.

"I'm so ashamed," I heard myself say. "I'm—a scaredy cat." It sounded coy. "Neither house beside us is occupied. The yard backs up to that orange grove."

Suddenly I was really scared. It was true. Ernie could come after me and I could scream my head off and not be heard.

I took a big breath. "Well, this morning I read all that. When I emptied the rubbish, I—I thought I heard a noise. I locked everything and called the police. When I heard your voice, so official, I nearly—fainted. If there was a man, it was the owner—"

Sergeant Anderson looked tired. "Okay. I'll just take a look around." He walked past me to the door.

I picked up the brown paper package and hurried to the bedroom. The phone rang as I tucked it on the top shelf of the closet.

"Honey," Eloise cried, "Ernie rolled along home with Jim to unload the case of beer. He's taking Jim's truck to bring the kids home."

"He's leaving?"

"He's left." She hung up.

Left. How long ago? There was a knock on the back door.

"Everything looks okay around here," Sergeant Anderson reported.

Go, I willed. *Any minute Ernie will clank up in Jim's old truck and step out—the man in the picture, the face you have studied so hard that twenty extra pounds, a crewcut and a mustache wouldn't fool you a bit.*

"I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble."

"That's all right." I started to close the door.

He turned. "Mrs. Cochran," he said, "when you're scared you sure freeze at the receiver. You sure breathe like a man." He walked quickly down the sidewalk to his car.

The start of his motor fitted itself with two other sounds: the church steeple bell striking the first of five strokes, and the clatter of

Jim's old truck swinging into the back drive off the alley.

Softly now, all things softly. My hands gripped themselves together in a gesture that was both a wringing and a prayer.

Through the window Liz and Steve, being lifted from the truck by Ernie, made a pretty picture; Daddy and the kids, the sun just coming out after the rain, and all small human troubles drying up from the late afternoon heat. Seeing them, everything in me denied the events of the day and my mind. Then Ernie, with Liz on his shoulder, strode to the back door and we stood staring at each other.

Look at his eyes, I commanded myself. *What is that hardness way in back, like a rock under soft water?*

There was some of the hardness in his normally warm voice. "Whose car was that out front?"

I stammered, "Just a man, selling books for children."

"You must have let him go through his whole spiel. The car was here when I came down Jim's street. I saw it from the corner."

"He was quite a talker."

Ernie looked at the clock. "Ten after five. Time to do a couple jobs before we get dressed."

Dressed! The slacks I was supposed to clean! "Ernie," I said carefully, "you know those gray slacks you wore last night?"

Did his mouth tighten?

"I couldn't seem to get the—paint—out. I dropped them at the cleaners'."

He was still silent.

"I'll press your brown ones."

He spoke then. "You feel better?"

"Fine."

"Eloise said you went to the bank. Why?"

I was the silent one.

"Was it to get money for the dress we talked about?"

I shook my head.

"It's your money, too."

"Forget the dress. It's caused enough trouble. Forget last night." I fought the tears.

"I'd like to forget last night," Ernie said, very softly.

"I'll press your brown pants. But I—my head—I still feel a little rocky. Anyhow, I couldn't find a sitter—"

Ernie said flatly, "I won't go without you."

My moves then, were like the ones in the hour I couldn't remember before the long terrible day began. When it was all done I knew I was going to Eloise's and Jim's with Ernie. It was a way of buying time, putting off the hour when I would be alone with the man in the drawing, while dark pulled itself down around the tract

house and the orange groves, and grew blacker and thicker.

I saw it all, I watched, Gulliver-high above a doll house, while a doll man leaned over a doll woman's bed and lifted a car jack with infinite slowness. I found myself, normal size, out on the street, running and running. As I ran, I knew for the first time exactly what I would do.

I would get old Mrs. Callahan to stay with the children. I would get dressed and go with Ernie to Eloise's and Jim's to laugh and talk. When the men got into the poker game in the dining room, which couldn't be seen from the patio, I would excuse myself to check on the children. I would take the jalopy, get them—and go.

When I was back in the white house, when my father knew the whole story, I would mail the slacks to Sergeant Anderson with a slip of paper reading: "These belong to Ernie Cochran." It would be settled.

With Mrs. Callahan's agreement, a quietness seemed to be over everything on the walk home. At the open door of the garage a tiny noise broke the stillness.

Ernie stood with his back to me, whistling between his teeth contentedly. His right arm moved rhythmically. A greasy rag flipped back and forth.

I stood very still, but as if he sensed me, slowly he swung around, his arms never stopping. I forced my eyes to go with equal slowness from his face to his shoulder, down the length of his powerful arm, to his hands. Rub-a-dub-dub, smooth and gleaming in the maw of Ernie's strong greasy hands lay the missing jack from the trunk of the old jalopy!

Suddenly the church bells rang, grew louder and louder, until each of the oranges in the grove seemed to have a clapper in it, ringing, ringing, the news that it was six o'clock.

Ernie's whistle stopped. "You look awful. Did the doctor come?"

"Did you call him?"

His eyelids flickered. "You

know I did. No, wait." The rag fluttered. "The line was busy. I called from the garage."

"You told me you called him."

"Didn't want to worry you. Did he come?"

"I told him not to. I got old Mrs. Callahan. I don't want you to stay home because of me."

"Maybe we'd better. You look so —funny—"

I laughed. "You've been saying that all day. Where did that jack come from?" It sounded casual.

Ernie came toward me suddenly. He put his hands on my shoulders and pulled me against him, hard. The greasy rag touched one of my arms and the jack felt long and cold and hard against the other. Ernie put his mouth against mine. I pursed my own lips, trying to keep them soft and responsive.

"That's better." He let me go and once again the rag began to slick its way along the jack. "It always makes me feel—bad—when we quarrel."

How bad, Ernie? Miles beyond my numbness a sort of pity stirred impersonally. There must be thousands like Ernie—people who had, deep and hidden, maybe even from themselves, a sickening twist of mind that turned them from the normal into hideous places of darkness and terror. When? When they felt bad. I remembered Sergeant Anderson's voice. "Psycho."

"Ernie," I said as he started toward the back of the jalopy, "what are you doing?"

"Putting the jack back where it belongs, of course."

"No." I ran to him. Was the trunk locked? It must be or Sergeant Anderson would have noticed—

Ernie tugged at it. "Darn," he said mildly. "Where are your keys?"

I took his arm and smiled at him. "Later, friend. We're going to a party, remember?"

"I don't get you." He shrugged, walked back into the garage and laid the jack on the workbench. He seemed tired of the whole thing as we went into the house, the bedroom, and I heard the shower begin.

I picked up my purse from the kitchen shelf, took out the traveler's checks, put them into the zippered compartment along with the clipping. I looked for a place. Finally, I bent to the lowest shelf and put the purse in the heavy Dutch oven, settling the cover on tightly. Ernie loved stew made in a Dutch oven. Then I went to get dressed.

"Let's go," Ernie said, when Mrs. Callahan was in, briefed, and before the TV. "We'll take Jim's truck back."

I hadn't thought of that, and gratitude went through me. No matter how engrossing the poker game, if I took the jalopy from the party Ernie would hear. He knew each cough of the motor.

High in the truck, he drove slowly. Over the noise I said, "Funny, when I put the groceries in the trunk this morning, the jack —it wasn't there." I snapped a glance at him.

"Of course, it wasn't."

"Why not?" I was afraid to ask but I had to find out.

"Because I took it out to clean it." He stared straight ahead.

"Do jacks get dirty, even when you don't use them?" I tried to sound feminine-stupid.

"Anything gets rusty."

"I didn't see it anywhere—"

He switched toward me. "You mean you looked?"

"I thought, what if I'd get a flat tire."

His laugh was short. Was it hard? "You've never changed a tire in your life."

"Oh, what difference?" I tried to laugh. "Just making conversation, is all."

He waited a moment. "I see."

We parked in Jim's drive and Ernie cut the motor. The sound of the patio party reached thinly out to us.

If Ernie was pondering about me the way I had about him, then he knew that I knew. He could be deciding what move he should make—when we were alone, when the time was right.

"Seeing as how you're so interested," Ernie said, opening the truck door, "the jack was on the top shelf above the workbench for the last three days."

We walked together through Jim's gate, and I could see the two of us, the Cochrans, Ernie and Sara, as nice a couple as you'd want to meet. Our feet made a matched scuffling, louder than the voices of greeting, louder than the church bells, sounding muffled this time, far away and muffled and seven o'clock in the evening.

Almost at once, though, it was better. There were all these people, these friends. They made a ring around me, as my father's house would make a ring if I could get there. They protected me, not only from Ernie—from actual physical Ernie—but for a little while from all of the thoughts that had tormented me. The things they said were so usual.

It was wonderful, like when a toothache stops. You know it will hurt again, and will have to be drilled and cleaned out and packed with something new to take the place of the diseased portion. But at the moment it doesn't ache, and

that little respite is wonderful.

The toothache stayed away until I heard Jim's voice over supper. ". . . no clues yet. What kind of a monster would do a thing like that? And to think it's so close."

Eloise cried, "Oh, Jim—cut it out."

Ernie said, close, just the width of the redwood table away, "Sara?"

I kept my eyes down then. I pretended not to hear, and called to one of the girls.

We ate. We cleared the tables. We played records and danced on the uneven bricks. We drank beer. The dusk was gone. The spotlight beside the garage sent down a shaft of light that widened as it slanted, so that the movement, the rhythm, was light and dark, swift and shadow—and Ernie didn't come near me, not even to ask me to dance.

Then the men moved, as if on signal, into the dining room for poker. The women sat in the deep light chairs, feet high, heads back. I lay there, too, looking upward. It was as if I had never seen a sky before.

In these clothes, then, this yellow dress and this white stole, would I start the long ride home, two sleepy babies soft against my lap? From these friends, then, would I go up over the mountains, which had always frightened me, across the desert which always seemed unending, into the middle west country?

I thought suddenly, *I could call Sergeant Anderson from the phone in Eloise's room. All these people would be around to protect me. Or I could tell Jim what I knew, let him carry the burden.*

Lying there, ankles crossed, the skin cool against skin, my hands folded, quiet, relaxed, too filled with tension to allow themselves the luxury of tenseness, I shook my head at the stars. I knew I could do neither.

I could run away from Ernie, even be caught by Ernie, but somehow, all day and now tonight, I could not stand up and tell these people, tell anybody, that Ernie Cochran was a monster—a murderer and a monster.

Eloise's hand came down on my shoulder. "Let's go make the girls some lemonade."

I pushed myself up out of the chair. After the bells, the sirens, the wedding clock, the cuckoo, had cut each hour off sharply with razor-like strokes, now, outdoors in the dark, cool, silvered night, I had been given this refreshment. Now, the time had come.

"I have to run home a minute," I whispered to Eloise. "Don't bother about me. Mrs. Callahan—"

She patted my shoulder. "Okay. Bring some ice cubes, will you?"

I nodded. I moved toward the gate. The clock seemed loud. I walked quickly, silently around the house. The street stretched before me. In all of the tract there were no lights.

This was the way, then, that the world looked to Ernie, on those nights when he was troubled. This was the way it was for Ernie last night—the darkness, widespread, acres of it, eighteen holes of it—with a stopping place at the sixteenth hole where the bushes were darker than the greens, where anything could happen and nobody would see. Not until dawn came and revealed—

It was then I heard the footsteps. They were unhurried, wider than mine. They grew closer, heavy, steady, closing in.

I walked faster. I trotted. Then I began to run. The footsteps ran, too. Light exploded behind my eyeballs. Pain rolled into my armpits. Then I was on my own porch. My hand was on the knob—and Ernie's hand crashed solid and tight against my shoulder.

I screamed. Ernie put his other hand against my mouth.

Mrs. Callahan opened the door. "Sakes alive," she yelped, "you near scared the life out of me."

Ernie said, breathlessly but quietly, "Sorry. This girl was giving me a race."

I pushed my heart down out of my throat. "Ernie'll walk you home," I managed. "Then he's going back to the party. Me—I'm going to bed."

Ernie said, "Me, I'm going to bed, too." He slipped Mrs. Callahan's shawl over her shoulders. "Let's go, madam."

I closed the door and leaned against it, like they do in the movies. Then I went, weak and shaky, into the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. The jalopy sat in the drive, with its suitcase. "What will I do now?" I asked aloud. The question seemed tinny, stretching, bouncing, echoing around the room.

The front door opened and shut, quietly. I could hear Ernie's breathing, the click of the night lock. I listened to his feet, the heavy feet that had chased me down the street, had caught me, too late, on our own front porch.

What if those feet had caught me in the middle of the first block? Or the second?

I looked down at my yellow dress. *These are not the clothes I will run away in,* I thought with deep hopelessness. *These are the clothes I shall die in. The yellow all smudged and stained. The white turned red. And my hair—*

Ernie was in the doorway. "That was a fool thing to do."

I nodded dumbly.

"Where did you think you were going?"

"How did you know I was gone?"

"I went to the kitchen—Eloise told me."

The silence closed in.

Ernie said, "You should have known better. After last night."

"What about last night?"

"A girl was killed on the golf course."

"I know."

"A man who can kill once can kill twice."

"I know."

Ernie moved. I gripped the slick tile of the sink, but he didn't come near me.

"I think we'd better settle this once and for all."

"Settle what?"

"What's on your mind. What's been on your mind all day."

The words were there to yell at him. *Settle it, then,* they screamed in my throat. *Grab something. A knife, or get the jack. It's cleaned and ready again. Kill me. Go on. Murder me. But—get—it—over—with!* But the words stayed inside me.

"I'm going to bed," Ernie announced surprisingly. "I'll wait for you."

In the dark then, like the doll house.

When he was gone, I walked weakly into the livingroom and sank down in the nearest chair. *A reprieve. Maybe he would fall asleep. Maybe he was in no hurry. Maybe he wanted me to sleep first.*

If he would sleep, I could call Sergeant Anderson. Or perhaps, by a miracle, by prayer, I could get the children out to the jalopy. I closed my eyes and let the prayer fill me.

After a while I leaned forward and switched on the TV, keeping it soft. The grayness came and the hum, and finally the eleven o'clock news face, its mouth moving quickly.

The words that tumbled from the fast mouth made no sense at first. Then they caught me like a tossed lariat.

". . . brilliant police work. The young man—he's just turned seventeen—was recently released from a mental institution. He admits having followed Marylee Adams for the past week. Last night he stole a car. He offered her a ride when she left work. He says she did not object to driving up the back road behind the Arnaughton Golf Course. He became chaotic about the actual crime, but he took the police to the place where he threw away the murder weapon—

a golf club given him by a man for whom he caddied, which he'd hidden in the back of the car. His reason? 'I don't like pretty girls.'

"And now to the weather picture for southern—"

Seventeen! I leaned forward and clocked the dial. My body felt as if warm milk flowed sleepily through my veins. I lay back in the chair. I floated for a long long time.

The trip back to reality was short and brutal. I sat up, pain all through me.

In the bedroom was Ernie Cochran. He was waiting for his wife. He was wondering, and hurt, by her actions of the day. Good, kind Ernie Cochran.

The pain grew and spread. A murder had been committed. Oh yes. I, Sara Cochran, had committed it. By suspicion, by lack of faith, I had killed the goodness of Ernie, my husband. I had turned him from the man he was into a monster.

That was the reason I couldn't point a finger. A deep instinct had kept me from telling Sergeant Anderson or Jim or anybody. The knowledge that Ernie Cochran was good—good and could do no real wrong.

I began to cry then, all of the day in the thousand tears that streamed down my face and choked in my throat. Filled with them, I stumbled down the hall. I went directly to Ernie's bed and flung myself down on my knees.

"Forgive me," I heard myself murmur, over and over. "Forgive me."

Then I was pulled up into Ernie's arms. "Forgive you for what, darling?"

That moment was the worst of all the moments of the day. I couldn't tell him. I could never tell him. The shame and the guilt were mine to hold alone all the rest of our years together. What man could live with the thought that his wife believed him, even for one day, capable of brutal murder?

After a while my sobs slowed.

"All day," Ernie was saying, "I've felt awful. You looked at me so strangely. On the phone you were so cold. This noon—oh, honey, you scared me silly."

His kiss was long now, an interlude and a promise.

"Then I called this afternoon and you were gone. I saw the man—quite close. He looked smart, sure of himself. The suitcase was gone from the shelf—and you didn't want me to look in the trunk of the car—"

It was all there. Ernie had been puzzled, too. He had added up the strangeness of my actions, words, looks, and had persuaded himself

that his wife no longer loved him—was leaving him—was unfaithful.

Such tenderness filled me that it beat with an ache against my skin. I wanted to help, but if I eased his mind in one way I would kill him again in another. I kissed him instead.

So, that was the way it had to be. I lay in the circle of Ernie's arm and listened to his contented breathing beside me. I closed my eyes and drew my breath easily through the lungs that could now go on breathing without fear.

Far away, gentle, sweet, silver, the bells of the church steeple chimed slowly, the long count, from one to twelve.

I drifted with the chimes: *Tomorrow I'll make Ernie a stew. He loves stew made all day in the Dutch oven—in the Dutch oven. The traveler's checks—I can take them back in the morning.*

The long terrible day was over.

On the brink of sleep, on the very cliff, ready to fall softly into nothing, I sat bolt upright, awake, staring into the dark, the now familiar clawing of my heart tearing at my chest—the Dutch oven!

"Police Chief J. Hampton Jones remarked upon the similarity of this crime and that of the killing of one Sandra Hims, also 18, on a public golf course in Kansas City about five years ago. At that time the murder weapon was found, a heavy car jack.

"The drawing (at right) was forwarded from that city, and is based on a witness' description of the suspect, the man with whom Miss Hims was last seen leaving a Kansas City bar."

(Continued from other side)

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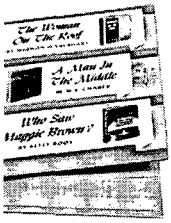

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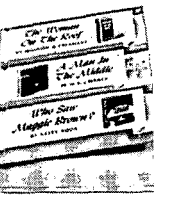

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