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ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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

May 1968

Dear Reader:

It seems to me it is generally accepted that rearing children is much more gratifying than raising, say, the roof, although the two often are complementary. However, if further inducement is needed toward parenthood, we have the annual Mother's and Father's Days that are once again nigh.

Despite the fact that Mom and Dad are the last to need the reminder, it is a homey custom to set aside one day out of 365 in honor of each. Because I can do no less for the oppressed, I have seen fit to include herein more than one tale that may cause a mother here and a father there to pause for a moment of gratitude—and all of the others to start wondering what the children might be up to.

I am curious whether it would follow that, since a meager two days of the year are dedicated to parenthood, the remaining 363 are unconsciously, or otherwise, known as Child's Days . . .

If it is human to err—in qualifying for homage on May 12 or June 16, for example, or in missing your favorite magazine at the newsstand—I will forgive those who follow the directions on Page 160 or the back cover.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 13, NO. 5 MAY 1968

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 13, No. 5, May 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.

Mental vacuity, not generally deemed an asset, cannot be universally condemned.

Cognizance

By Edward D. Hoch

SUE PARKMAN worked every day till five-thirty, then walked three blocks east to the bus line that went by her apartment. It was a routine she'd followed for more than a year, ever since moving to her present place from the dingy fourth-floor walkup she'd shared with two other girls. Occasionally there would be men who eyed her on the bus, for she was far from plain, but until this night no one had ever followed her when she got off at her stop and crossed the street to her apartment.

This man was old; old and shabby, with a pale, wrinkled face and burning, deep-set eyes. She'd paid him no attention until he left the bus at her stop and crossed over behind her. The apartment was not in an exclusive section of the city, but shabby men were rarely seen here. It was an area of young families and working girls, of well-kept lawns and middle-class apartment buildings.

Sue Parkman walked faster, not looking back, and almost ran the last few steps to her door. It was not yet dark on this September evening, but suddenly she had the feeling that even the usually safe mantle of daylight offered little protection from this man who followed her. She slammed shut the self-locking


APARTMENT
CITY BUS
BUS STOP

front door and walked quickly down the carpeted hallway to her ground floor apartment. For the first time since moving in, she wished she had a roommate.

Then the doorbell rang

Sue froze, gloves half off of her fingers. There was no doubt in her mind who it was. The bell sounded again, prolonged, insistent. She opened her hall door softly and walked quickly down to the corner, sneaking a look at the enclosed lobby where the doorbells and mailboxes were at the disposal of any casual stranger.

Yes, it was the shabby old man. As she watched, he pressed her buzzer again, waiting expectantly. She went back to her apartment and locked the door. One more ring, just one, and she would call the police.

The fourth ring did not come.

Sue relaxed, opened a can of cold beer, and started to fix herself a light supper. Perhaps later she'd call Jane or one of her other girl friends, suggest a movie to calm her nerves. Surely the man must be gone by now, yet something about his brazen ringing of her doorbell still sent a shiver down her spine.

She was just pouring a glass of tomato juice when the telephone rang. Her hand was on it before she thought again of the old man, but she dismissed him as quickly. Surely he wouldn't be boldly calling her.

"Hello?" The voice, old and cracked, queried, "Sue Parkman?"

She wanted to hang up, to slam down the phone and cover her ears against the flood of obscenities which was certain to follow, but instead she brazened, "Who is this? What do you want?"

"You didn't even recognize me on the bus, Sue." The voice was suddenly filled with emotion. "This is your father."

Sue had been in the second grade when he went away; seven years old, and hardly able to remember it now. What she did remember from fifteen years back was mostly the result of the stories her mother had told before she died, stories often colored by a lonely woman's bitter memories.

Harry Parkman had grown up during the free-spending days of prohibition, had personally run a cargo of Scotch whiskey onto a Long Island beach from a rum-running ship anchored beyond the three-mile limit, and had used the proceeds of this adventure to open his own restaurant and speakeasy before he'd reached the age of twenty-five.

Harry had married late, when the repeal of prohibition had given him time for other, more lawful, pursuits. Sue's mother had been a waitress at his restaurant, and she con-

tinued to work there for a number of years, finally promoted to hostess. Harry had been forty and his wife ten years younger when Sue was born.

In those years just after the war, when Sue was still a baby and her mother was at home with her, it became obvious that Harry Parkman was a man who took what he could get out of life. He would go happily to church on Sunday mornings, throw a couple of quarters into the collection basket, and then walk over to the rectory afterwards where the proceeds were counted. When the coins were wrapped for delivery to the bank, Harry would write the church a check for fifty dollars and take that many coins off their hands, "to use down at the restaurant." He did this every Sunday without fail, and each year he produced the 52 cancelled checks and deducted $2600 in church donations from his income tax. No one ever caught on to that one, but he wasn't so lucky in some of his other dealings.

The restaurant license was suspended twice for sales to minors, and a gradually changing neighborhood began to resent its garish presence. Harry fell out of favor, first with the politicians and then with his customers, but he still managed to live high and well, so well that rumors of other activities began to circulate. Sure, you could lay a bet at Harry Parkman's restaurant, or meet a girl who would entertain you for the night.

The end came for Harry one night when an off-duty detective tried to arrest his bartender for taking bets. Harry slugged the man with a heavy glass ashtray, and he died two days later without regaining consciousness. Despite the fact that it was a cop-killing, anyone else might have gotten off with a manslaughter rap, but Harry had lost the last of his friends by that time. It was called second-degree murder, and he drew twenty years to life in prison.

His wife never went to see him. For all she cared, he might have died that day he went off to prison. She burned every picture of him in the house and began a relentless campaign to blot him out of her child's memory. Sue Parkman almost forgot she had a living father.

When she was seventeen, just once, she almost visited him in prison. Her mother had died the year before, and Sue was living with her maternal grandparents. She went so far as to take the two-hour bus journey to the prison only to find that Harry Parkman was gravely ill in the prison infirmary and could have no visitors. She left no message and never went back. Perhaps she simply lost her nerve. Perhaps she

thought, or wished, that he had died in that prison infirmary and ended it all—but now there was this voice on the telephone, a voice she did not know, speaking from the past.

"Who did you say?" She could feel her heart thumping, her hands suddenly clammy.

"This is Harry, your father! They finally let me out."

"I . . ."

"Let me come up and see you. I rang the bell, but you didn't answer."

All right, it had to be faced. "Certainly. Of course I want to see you, too. Come right over!"

She sat on the edge of the chair, nervously smoking a cigarette until the doorbell rang. Then she pressed the buzzer that released the outer door and went into the hall to greet him.

"Hello, Sue," he said. "You grew into a beautiful girl."

She saw now, studying him closer, that he was not quite as ancient as he'd seemed on the bus. The skin of his face was pale from long imprisonment, and the hair was gray, but without those shabby clothes he might not have seemed older than his—what?—sixty-two years? "Hello, Father," she said, because she could think of nothing else to say. "Let me take your coat."

"Ah, this shabby old thing? They issued me a new suit when I left prison, but I hocked it first chance I got. Needed the money to get here and see you."

"How long have you been out?"

"Two weeks tomorrow. The world takes some getting used to after fifteen years, I'll tell you that. Took me a few days to find you. That's why I needed the extra money."

She sat down opposite him on the couch, still ill at ease, still feeling as if she were confronting a stranger. "Mother is dead. You knew that?"

"People told me in the old neighborhood. That's how I tracked you down. I shoulda spoken to you on the bus, but I didn't want to startle you too much."

She shook her head. "It's . . . well, it's just that you're like a stranger to me, Father. I was seven years old when you went away."

"They took a good chunk of my life for killing that guy. And I'm still on parole! They never let go, once they get their teeth in you."

She lit another cigarette, noticing that her hand was a bit steadier now. "I went to see you once, five years ago. After mother died. But you were sick, and I never went back."

He nodded his gray head. "Pneumonia. I almost didn't pull through that time."

"You seem so different, some-

how. I remember you as being so tall and straight . . ." She saw the pain in his face, and was immediately sorry she'd said it.

"Oh, you were a lot smaller then, love." He frowned down at his hands. "And maybe I was taller, too. Prison does things to a man."

"Are you going to stay in town? Get a job?"

"Who wants an ex-con who's sixty-two years old? I might look up some of the old crowd, who knows? Maybe I could get a job washing dishes at my old restaurant."

"They've torn it down," she told him. "It's a city parking garage now."

"Times change." Now he looked up from his pale, wrinkled hands. "Got a drink for an old man? A little whiskey, maybe?"

"Sure, Dad." What did you call him after fifteen years? Father, dad —they both sounded strange on her lips.

"I used to carry you around on my shoulders," he said, following her to the kitchen door while she made the drinks. "Remember that? Remember the picnics during the summer, and the time you fell into the lake?"

Those were vague, vague memories that refused to form themselves in her mind. "I remember the cottage," she said. "I still own it and rent it out in the summers. It was about the only thing mother had left when she died."

He nodded slightly, as if remembering those summers long ago. "I'm glad you kept it."

"Let me get you some supper," she said suddenly, feeling more kindly toward this stranger who sat in her livingroom and talked about the past.

"I'd like that."

They ate—nothing fancy, only sandwiches—and talked some more about the past. There were a few things that Sue vaguely remembered, and many more that she did not. "Was it so bad in prison?" she asked once.

"It was bad, yes. I'm glad to be out, even if I am still on parole." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "But I've taken up enough of your time for a first meeting. You must be tired."

"Oh, no!" she insisted, but in truth she was wishing he'd be gone. They'd run out of memories.

"Let me phone you in a couple of days, and we can get together again."

"Where are you staying?"

"A little hotel downtown. It's not much, but after a cell it seems like a palace."

"All right," she said with a smile. "Phone me."

He paused at the door. "I'd like to go up to the cottage one day. Just to

see the old place and look around."

"Sure. I even have a little car, though I don't bother taking it to work. It's so hard to find parking spaces. We could take a drive up to the cottage some Saturday. I have to close it up for the winter anyway."

"Good." He smiled and gave her a little wink. "I'll phone you soon. It's good to have a daughter again."

She closed the door behind him and stood for a long time with her back against it. There was no reason now to fear this man who had followed her from the bus, and yet she gave a little shiver.

He called her two days later, on Friday, and suggested they have dinner together. He had a job, he said, and he wanted to tell her about it.

"Well, I'd certainly like to see you . . ." She hesitated, remembering the date with Earl Compton, a young lawyer who took her out on occasion. "Look, I'm dining with a friend, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind your joining us. I'm meeting him at the Brockton, a bit after six."

"If you're certain I wouldn't be imposing. I would like to see you tonight."

"Come ahead. I'd like Earl to meet my father."

So it was arranged. She phoned Earl to prepare him, then hurried off for some noontime shopping with a girl friend from the office. Things got suddenly busy just before five, and she had to hurry to reach the Brockton by the appointed time. Earl was already there, looking ruggedly handsome in an expensive suit and conservative tie, and within five minutes her father appeared on the scene.

Harry Parkman had tried hard to dress up for the occasion, but she could see the frayed collar on his

shirt and the spotted necktie that was no longer in style. Still, she could hardly blame him; he'd spent the past fifteen years in prison. "My father, Harry Parkman, this is Earl Compton."

They smiled, shook hands, and went in to dinner. The meal was generally successful, and both men seemed to enjoy it, though about halfway through the main course Sue became uncomfortably aware of the fact that Earl Compton was viewing her father as a lawyer would, seeing perhaps the slight tremor in the hands, the pale complexion, shifty eyes and shuffling feet of an ex-convict.

"Sue never mentioned you," Earl said at one point. "Have you been away?"

"Away, yes. Traveling." Harry lowered his eyes and concentrated on his food. He ate hungrily, as if it had been a long time since he'd had a meal that good.

When he excused himself to visit the rest room while they waited for dessert, Earl asked, "He's been in prison, hasn't he?"

Sue Parkman looked away. "I . . . yes."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I was only seven years old. I don't even remember him, really."

"Fifteen years," the lawyer mused. "That would have to be murder—or a third felony offense."

"It was murder. An accident, really, but they called it murder."

Harry Parkman returned to the table, and the conversation quickly shifted to the weather and its weekend possibilities. He lit a cigar that he'd purchased for himself while he was gone. "What do you think, Sue?" he asked. "Should we take a run up to the cottage tomorrow or Sunday?"

"Well, I don't know." She was hesitating, for some irrational reason. "Let's see if the weather's good."

"It's supposed to be. Sun's shining now. A good sunset means good weather tomorrow." He tapped the ash from his cigar. "I'd sure like to see the old cottage again."

"I've been renting it out," she mumbled. "Don't know if the people are gone yet."

"It's after Labor Day. They should be."

"I'll see," she said, putting a firm end to what was somehow developing into an argument between them.

After dinner Harry left them outside the restaurant, with a promise to phone Sue in the morning, and Earl took her for a walk along the river. It was dusk on a September's night, and a little breeze played across the surface of the almost calm waters.

"There's hardly any current," Sue said.

"They must have the sluice gates closed." He strolled along at her side, silent for a time.

"You're awfully quiet all of a sudden, Earl."

"It's nothing. I guess I was thinking about your father."

"He owned a restaurant, and he accidentally killed a detective in a fight. The city officials were down on him at the time, so he got the book thrown at him. I hardly remember it myself; only know what my mother told me before she died."

"You don't remember him at all?"

She shrugged helplessly. "He's like a stranger, really. The first time I saw him following me I ran home and locked the door."

Earl lit a cigarette and tossed the spent match in a glowing arc toward the water. "Are you certain he is your father, Sue?"

"What? What do you mean?" The chill was back, gripping her spine.

"Well, you say you don't remember him at all. Couldn't anyone show up and claim to be Harry Parkman?"

"Why would anyone do that?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Besides, he told me things I remembered, about the cottage and falling in the lake once. About mother."

Earl Compton thought about that. "He could have known your father in jail. He could even have been his cellmate."

"But *why?*"

"I don't know," he repeated, "but I do know he seems awfully anxious to go up to that cottage with you. If he's not your father—"

"Oh, Earl, now you're really imagining things! You'll have me so I won't be able to sleep tonight!"

"Do you have any old pictures of him?"

She shook her head. "Mother threw them all away."

"There must be one somewhere. How about the newspapers at the time of the trial?"

"I never thought of that."

"If he was well known around town, they certainly would have published his picture." He stared out at the water for a moment. "Look, Sue, here's what I want you to do. First, do *not* go out to the cottage with him this weekend. Use some excuse to put him off for a week. I'll check with the prison on Monday and see what I can learn. In the meantime, go down to the library and see if you can find a picture of him in the old newspapers."

"This is all foolish," she told him. "Of course he's my father."

"Maybe, maybe not, but I don't like the look of the thing. If you must know, I didn't like the look of

him, the way he was eyeing you. It didn't seem very fatherly to me."

She had no answer to his words, only an emotional sort of argument. "But what if he *is* my father? Hasn't he been through enough already without us making it worse?"

"He'll never know we're checking, Sue. I just want to be sure, for your sake. Call it my lawyer's mind, if you will." He smiled and took her hand. "Don't worry. Just humor me, that's all."

She looked up at him and tried to smile.

On Saturday Sue went shopping with her friend Jane McNeil, so it was Monday noon before she had an opportunity to visit the public library. Harry Parkman had phoned her as promised on Saturday morning, but she'd managed to postpone the drive up to the cottage for a week—though she had to admit he seemed unreasonably disturbed at the delay.

Now, flipping through the microfilm reel, watching the fifteen-year-old news pass by her on the screen, she almost feared what she might find. When it came, its suddenness surprised her, the black headlines covering four columns: *Cafe Owner Charged In Cop's Death*. All the details were there, a picture of Harry Parkman being led into Police Headquarters, his face partly hidden by a hat he'd used as a shield. She couldn't be sure . . . After fifteen years of aging in a cell, who could say if this half-hidden face was that of the man who claimed to be her father?

She turned to follow-up stories, but there were no other pictures of Harry Parkman; the dead detective, his wife, a witness, but no photo of her father. She removed the reel from the machine and returned it to its box. It was impossible to decide whether she was disappointed or relieved by her failure.

That evening Earl Compton phoned her from his office to ask about the library search. She told him of the inconclusive result. "It could be him, Earl. I just can't be certain from the picture. The hat covers about half of his face, and the whole thing is sort of blurred."

"Never mind," he said. "I'm having a check made at the prison. I should have a reply tomorrow, and if there's anything phony about this I'll have a little talk with the supposed Mr. Parkman."

The phone was cool against her cheek "I don't know, Earl. I don't know why you're trying so hard. I'm satisfied that he's my father. Why can't you be?"

"You're satisfied because you want to be satisfied, because the alternative might not be too pleasant to contemplate."

"You're basing all this on the way

he looked at me or something else?"

"That and one or two other things. His shabby clothes, for instance. Every ex-convict gets a fresh suit when he's released."

"He explained that. He hocked it to get money for his trip here."

"I see." He sighed into the phone. "Well, let's see what tomorrow brings, Sue. And don't worry."

"I won't," she promised, but after he'd hung up, she sat for a long time only staring out at the night.

All the next day Sue waited for a call from Earl, but none came. If he'd learned anything from the prison, he was keeping it to himself. By evening she was ready to phone him, but a call from Jane McNeil came first.

"Sue, have you heard the news?" she asked breathlessly, with something like anxiety in her squeaky voice. "On the radio?"

"What news?"

"About Earl Compton. He was hit by a bus!"

Oh no! "No . . ."

"I don't know how bad. He's at the Westside Hospital . . ."

Sue drove the five miles across town in a sort of daze, not really seeing the stoplights and cars and other people. She tried all the way to keep her mind a blank, to think of nothing but her destination. When she pulled into the hospital parking lot it was just getting dark, and the scattering of family groups she passed as she entered told her that visiting hours were ending.

"Compton," she managed to ask the nurse at the desk. "Earl Compton. They just brought him in."

"I'm sorry, we don't . . ."

"I have to see the doctor, anyone. I'm a close friend."

A man cleared his throat behind her. "Perhaps I can help, Miss. I heard you asking about Earl Compton."

"I . . . yes." She'd turned to face a smartly dressed, middle-aged man whose slight boyish smile did not match the coldness of his deep-set eyes. "I heard on the radio—"

He held out his hand. "I'm Fox, Detective Bureau. We're doing a routine investigation on the accident."

The hand was coldly impersonal, matching the eyes. She dropped it as quickly as she could. "How is he?"

"I'm sorry. They don't know if he'll pull through. He has serious head injuries and hasn't regained consciousness."

She felt the breath catch in her throat. "How did it happen?"

"That's what we're investigating, Miss . . ."

"Sorry. Sue Parkman, I'm a friend of his."

"Miss Parkman, it seems that Mr. Compton was waiting to cross a

downtown street and he fell in front of a bus. There was a crowd at the corner and he might have been jostled."

"You mean pushed?"

"Well, not deliberately, I'm sure." Those were his words, but his very presence at the hospital put the lie to them. Someone had pushed Earl in front of a bus, and she didn't want to think who that someone might have been.

She gave the detective her address and phone number, and then drove back across town to her apartment. The telephone was ringing as she walked in the door.

"Hello?"

"Well, finally got home, huh? How's my little daughter tonight?"

She sat down by the phone and tried to get out a cigarette with her free hand. "I-I'm fine. How are you, Father?"

"Good, but you could make me a lot better. I've heard of a job out of town. I'd like to go see about it this weekend, but I do want to get up to the cottage before I leave. I was wondering . . . I hate to ask you this, Sue, but I was wondering if you could drive me up there tomorrow evening after work."

"Tomorrow?"

"That's right. Then I could be on my way Thursday to see about this job. I'd really like to see the old place."

"Tomorrow, and not Saturday?"

"I couldn't wait till Saturday. You understand, don't you?"

"Certainly. I—I just don't know if I could . . ." And then, in a flash, the choice was clear to her. If she refused him now, it would mean she doubted him. It would mean she suspected him of trying to kill Earl. Had he served fifteen years in prison for this, to have his own daughter turn against him with half-formed suspicions?

"Of course," she said finally. "I'll be glad to drive up there with you tomorrow."

"Fine! Six o'clock at your apartment?"

"Yes," she agreed, and quickly said goodbye. She trusted him, she wanted to believe in him—yet she wondered why she hadn't mentioned Earl's accident to him.

The next morning at work she called the hospital and learned that Earl's condition was still serious. He hadn't regained consciousness yet. She phoned his office next, but his secretary knew nothing of any communication from the prison. Sue sat at her desk thinking about it, and finally composed a brief telegram to the warden of the prison she'd visited on that day years before: *Urgent I know whereabouts of my father Harry Parkman serving twenty-year term. Has he been released?*

She sent the telegram and then sat down to wait. It was afternoon when the reply came, and she was almost afraid to tear open the envelope. She put it on her desk for a full minute, staring at it, before she had the nerve to open it and read: *Harry Parkman 3467767 paroled August 15th this year. Believe him to be patient at asthma clinic near Phoenix Arizona.*

She relaxed and released a long sigh. All these days of doubting, for nothing! Of course the man was her father! Certainly if he'd died from that illness years ago they would have notified her; and whatever happened to Earl had no connection whatever. A simple accident, that was all.

All right, she kept telling herself on the bus trip home, what they believed and what was true were obviously two different things. Her father had been released from prison, so obviously he was here. No asthma clinic, nothing like that; her father had never had asthma. Or had he? Would she know, one way or the other? Couldn't he have had it all his life, or even contracted it in prison, without her knowing? She remembered his serious illness at the time of her visit, an illness of which she'd never known its nature.

The man she knew as Harry Parkman showed no signs of asthma. Was he really a fraud? Had Earl confronted him with this very information and been pushed beneath a bus for his troubles? No. No, no, that couldn't . . .

She chained the apartment door behind her and paced the floor, smoking one cigarette after another. He would be here soon, in a matter of minutes. Then there would be the drive to the cottage, where she would be alone with him. If he wasn't her father. . . .

She phoned the hospital again, but Earl's condition hadn't changed. Next she called Jane McNeil, and after a moment's pleasantries asked, "Jane, are you busy tonight? I was wondering if you could drive up to the lake with my father and me, just for company. I told you he was in town, and I'd like you to meet him before he leaves."

"Love to, Sue, but I've got a date. That new fellow at the office is taking me to dinner and a movie. Hope I can meet your dad some other time, though."

"Yes, well . . ."

"Have you heard how Earl Compton is?"

"About the same, I guess. Look, Jane, I've got to go now. I was just hoping you'd be free tonight."

"Sorry."

Sue hung up the phone and glanced at her watch. He'd be arriving in another five minutes, and she knew he wouldn't be late. What to

do now? She remembered the detective, Fox, and her hand reached for the telephone once more. But what could she tell him—some half-formed suspicion which would only bring more grief to her father? If only she had a picture of him . . .

She went running into the bedroom and rummaged through a half-forgotten drawer, until at last she came up with the snapshot she sought. It was a black-and-white photo of Sue and her mother and Uncle John, her mother's brother, taken one long-ago summer in front of the cottage. It was not her father in the photo, it was only Uncle John, but if the man was a fake he would not know this. He certainly had no way of knowing that her mother had destroyed all photographs of Harry Parkman.

The buzzer sounded and she pressed the release for the outer door. In another moment he was inside the apartment, still shabby but smiling. "How are you, girl? Have a good day at the office?"

"Yes. Sure."

"I saw in the paper where your lawyer friend was in an accident."

"Yes."

"Too bad. Too bad. Seemed like a nice enough fellow. Well, ready to get started for the cottage?"

He was standing very near her, perhaps too near, and she feared he'd be able to detect the pounding of her heart. "I'll just get a jacket," she said, "in case it turns cool." Then, "Oh, I found this picture of us all up at the cottage, a long time ago."

He barely glanced at it, and replied with a grunt.

All right, she had to know. She had to ask him. "Is that you in the photo, dad?"

He looked at it again. "Of course not. Doesn't look anything like me."

Relief flooded over her once more. Another little test passed, but she had to be certain before she'd trust herself alone with him at the cottage. "I went to visit you in prison and you were sick. They never told me what was wrong with you, but you said the other day it was pneumonia."

He nodded. "That's right."

"Did it leave you with any ill effects? Are you sick now?"

He gave her an odd, searching look, then answered slowly. "Oh, a bit of asthma now and then. Nothing too serious."

She closed her eyes in relief. "I'm glad," she told him. "Now let's get going so we reach the cottage before dark."

"I just want to look around for an hour or so and then we can come back. You understand, don't you?"

"Sure," she told him, feeling a surge of guilt that she'd ever doubted his identity.

The road to the lake was almost deserted on a Wednesday night, and they reached the cottage in just over an hour's driving. Many of the other places were already shuttered for the winter, but here and there some hardy residents were making the most of the remaining September warmth.

"Well, here we are," she said finally wheeling down the gravel driveway that led to the little white cottage at the water's edge. The place was somewhat isolated from its neighbors by stands of scrubby trees on either side, which had always seemed ideal until tonight. She searched in vain for any nearby lights as darkness began settling over the calm waters.

But why? She caught herself in mid-stride, about to unlock the cottage door. She was still uneasy, though there was no longer any reason for it. Perhaps it was just Earl's wild suspicions, and then what had happened to him. "Come on in," she said, throwing open the door.

He smiled and shuffled past her into the paneled livingroom. "The place hasn't changed much," he told her, because she was waiting for his reaction.

"I think it has. This paneling is new, and the kitchen."

"Oh, well, that's true." He walked to the big front window and stared out at the lake. "I was thinking of the area, the water and all. Just like it was fifteen years ago."

She opened the refrigerator and glanced inside, hoping for a forgotten can of beer to quiet her nerves, but there was nothing. She went back for her purse for a cigarette.

"Yes," he was saying at the window. "Yes, yes, yes."

"What?" She dropped the match and ground it out underfoot.

"The bedroom. I want to see the bedroom."

"You don't know where it is?"

"I've forgotten." But he walked to the right door, and through it.

Sue's doubts returned. What if this man was not her father, but her father's cellmate as Earl had suspected? Not only would he have known the facts of her early life, but he would have known that the man in the picture was not Harry Parkman. He had shared a cell with the real Harry Parkman, and he would have known about her father's asthma too.

She had asked the wrong question. She should have asked who the man was in the picture with her. Her real father would certainly remember his brother-in-law, but a fake couldn't know the man's identity.

"Is there a hammer around here?" he asked.

"What? Why?"

"I want a hammer."

"No." God, no! Not that way!

He disappeared into the bedroom again.

"Father?" Calm, keep it calm. Don't let him know.

"What?"

"Who was that man in the picture I showed you?"

"Why?"

She was in the doorway now, almost shouting it, all control gone. *"Who was the man in the picture? Tell me!"*

He'd been kneeling on the floor by the bed, almost in an attitude of prayer, but now he rose slowly and came toward her. "What is it, girl? What's the matter?"

The terror was in her throat, choking back a scream as he reached for her. *"You're not my father!"*

He slapped her, hard, sending her reeling onto the bed. Then he was out of the room, rummaging through a utility closet until he found what he wanted. Then he was back in a moment, while she still sprawled sobbing on the bed.

"This'll do the job," he said softly. In his hands he held a long-handled ax.

That was when she started to scream.

When she regained her senses he was chopping at the floor, cutting it again and again like a man possessed. Her head hurt where he'd hit her, and there was a slight smear of blood along one temple. She raised herself on one elbow, trying to follow his movements as he dropped the ax and bent to the floor. Then his hands disappeared into the hole he'd made, to reappear holding two canvas bags. He opened one to spill out a wad of money.

"That was it," she managed to mumble, not caring about herself any more, knowing there was no escape from him now. "You were my father's cellmate, and he told you where he'd hidden that money. He told you a lot of things in fifteen years, about me and my mother, but he didn't tell you exactly where the cottage was, so you still needed me to guide you here. When Earl became suspicious and confronted you, he conveniently fell in front of a bus."

He was stuffing the money back into the bags, and now he reached to pick up the ax again. "Your father collected close to a hundred thousand dollars, mostly from gambling and narcotics," he told her. "I wasn't going to let it rot here another fifteen years. That lawyer friend of yours found a picture of Parkman and guessed the reason for my visit. I guess I was too interested in the cottage. He met me yesterday and told me to get out of town. I wasn't trying to kill him, just . . . I don't know—remove him."

"And you're not going to kill

me?" she whispered, edging off the bed.

"I'm taking the car," he said, "and leaving you here." He was moving toward her now. "That was what I needed you for; not to show me the cottage, but to supply a car to get me here and away."

"Where's my father? What have you done with him?"

"He's all right. He headed west when they released him. Said he was going to an asthma clinic."

"Keep away!"

Suddenly the brightness of headlights hit the back window. A car had turned down the gravel drive.

"Someone's coming!"

She tried to slide off the bed then but he dropped the sacks and grabbed her, twisting her arm up behind her back. "A boat—I have to have a boat!"

"There is no boat."

He threw her down and grabbed up the sacks, running with them to the door. The ax still hung from his other hand, relaxed but firm. She made it to the door in time to see the headlights pick him out as he ran toward the water. Then Fox, the detective from the hospital, was out of the car and at her side.

"You all right, Miss?" he asked.

"I . . . yes. He has the money. And an ax."

Fox nodded and drew a pistol from beneath his coat. "Your lawyer friend came out of it okay. He told me he figured there was money hidden here, and that this bird pushed him in front of the bus. Then your girl friend Jane confirmed that you'd come here with him. I thought I'd better tag along."

They heard a splashing as he reached the water, and then Fox started after him. "Come on," he said. "You're not going anyplace with that money. Except back to a cell on a felonious assault charge."

Now Sue was running too, following them out of the headlights' glare into the dimness at the water's edge. "Keep back," the man's voice snarled, and suddenly he didn't seem so old any more. He was a tiger at bay, a man fighting for his life or his freedom. As Fox came closer he dropped the sacks of money in the shallow water, gripped the ax with both hands, and charged.

Fox fired once and dropped him with a bullet through the heart.

"He's dead?" she asked, staring down at the body in the water.

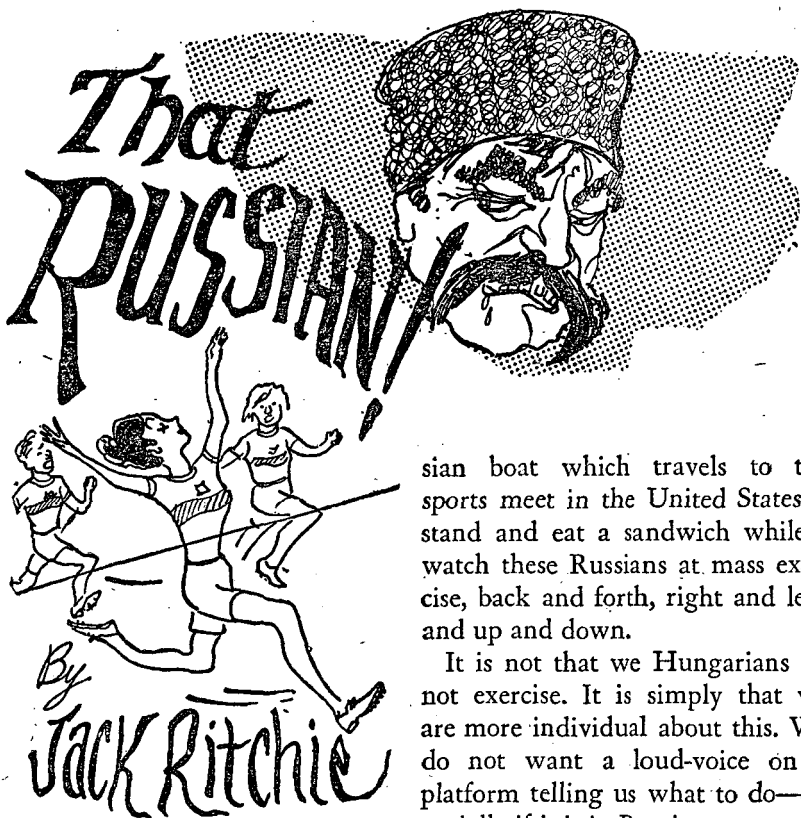
"Yes," Fox said. "I'm sorry."

"You had to do it," she found herself saying. "You had to kill him because he wasn't my father."

The detective put his gun away and came up to stand by her. "A cop died fifteen years ago," he said. "I didn't want it to happen again. I had to kill him because he was your father."

The ship is always Redder on the other side of the sea.

That Russian!



By Jack Ritchie

AH, how Nadia could run—like a gazelle, like an antelope—for at least ten seconds; Mariska too.

For myself, I throw my weight around—which is the hammer.

On the upper deck of this Russian boat which travels to the sports meet in the United States, I stand and eat a sandwich while I watch these Russians at mass exercise, back and forth, right and left, and up and down.

It is not that we Hungarians do not exercise. It is simply that we are more individual about this. We do not want a loud-voice on a platform telling us what to do—especially if it is in Russian.

I observe the women's group down below and the overwhelming number of sturdy legs, but Nadia does not have sturdy legs. They are long and at a glance one sees that she can run and probably

must, for she has lustrous black hair and violet eyes and one thinks of the ballet rather than the cinder track.

Mariska appears at my side. "You are watching Nadia again?" she asks. "That *Russian?*"

Mariska is the fastest woman in all Hungary. This is true also for events in Poland and Italy. However, in Western Germany and France, she comes in second to Nadia in the 100 meter dash.

It is obvious that Mariska is very jealous of Nadia's running—fifty percent of the time, at least—and from the narrowness of her eyes, I have the feeling that in America they will settle this once and for all.

"We should have defected in Germany or France," Mariska says. "Or even Italy."

I shake my head. "No, Mariska. Since our ultimate goal is the freedom of America, does it not pay to remain with the team until it arrives there? In this manner we are assured free passage."

We become aware that Boris Volakov has moved beside us.

Boris is a most unpopular man. He is commissar for the Russian team, plus in overall charge of the voyage. It is a rumor that his unfavorable reports have caused the disappearance of one high-jumper, one long distance runner, and one hop, skip, and jump.

"You are attending the All-Nations Friendship Party on board tomorrow night?" he asks.

With the Russians, we speak English. It is a beautiful language and besides it irritates them.

"I am sorry," Mariska says, "but I am developing a cold."

"I have this trouble with my sinuses," I say. "This always requires forty-eight hours for the cure."

Boris smiles like a shark and is not disturbed. "I have talked to the leaders of all nationalities and they will see that medical problems of that nature are cleared up by the time of the party."

He looks Mariska up and down. "I have always admired the Hungarians. I have spent some time in Budapest."

"Oh?" Mariska says with great sweetness. "As a tourist?"

He clears his throat. "Not exactly."

Now, on the deck below, the exercises have come to a close and the group is dismissed.

Boris excuses himself and walks toward the iron stairs which lead to the lower decks.

Nadia looks up and sees that he is coming down. Very casually, but firmly, she begins to walk away.

It is interesting to watch—from my height—this pursuit and the evasion, this looking back over the

shoulder, this increasing of the pace, this series of sharp right and left turns around lifeboats and funnels.

I study the situation and see that eventually she is about to be trapped—for this Boris is tricky and foresighted.

"I think I will go downstairs," I say to Mariska.

She looks at me, but says nothing.

I go down the stairs and after five minutes, manage to intercept Nadia. "This way," I say, and take her arm.

"Oh," she says, "it is you again," for we have met and talked before whenever I was able to create the opportunity.

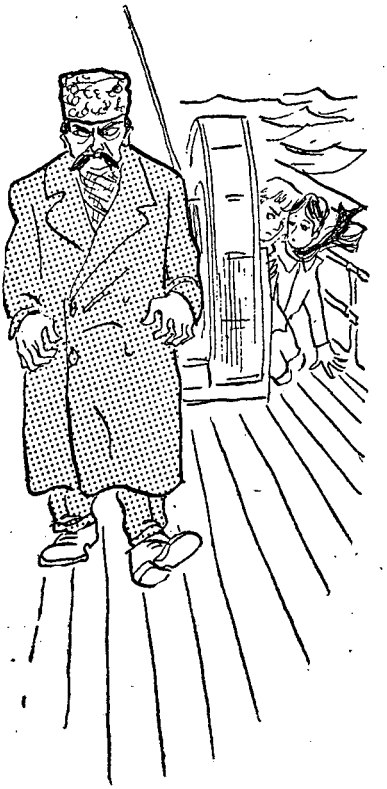
She comes where I take her, which is to crouch behind a winch, and we wait. Soon Boris passes by, the yellow gleam of pursuit still in his eyes.

Nadia takes a deep breath. "So far I have been saved by one thing or another, but I am running out of miracles and excuses."

"Why are excuses even necessary?" I say. "Is not a simple 'no' in his face enough?"

She looks at me like I am a child. "Life is not always that simple. Boris is a man of much influence."

"Ah yes," I say wisely. "I understand that he has sent three men to Siberia."



She smiles, but tightly. "They were not men and they were not sent to Siberia. We are no longer that primitive in the treatment of our athletes. They were women who said 'no' and they were simply dismissed from the team. Today they are teaching calisthenics to pre-school children in Kandalaksha, which is just beyond the Arctic Circle, but still in Europe."

"Nadia," I say, "France is a nice

country and free—in a capitalistic way, of course—and this is true also of Western Germany and Italy. Why did you not seek asylum in one of these places? It is unlikely that Boris would have continued pursuit."

She shakes her head. "No. I could not do anything like that."

"You have relatives in Russia? They would be liquidated?"

"We no longer liquidate relatives," she says stiffly. "However, I do not wish to leave the team. It is a great honor to be a member and this I would not willingly give up."

I feel anger stirring. "So remaining on the team is of greater importance than your honor?"

She looks frosty. "I would prefer to have both."

She thinks more on the subject of Boris. "He is the commissar of the athletes," she says bitterly, "but in his life he has yet to run even the one hundred meter dash. He is greedy and opportunistic. He goes as the wind blows—wherever it is easiest, wherever he has the most to gain for himself. This is how he has come to his present position, after beginning as the custodian of the uniforms. Also, I think that in Russia he was a speculator in the black market, but has always been too clever to be caught."

I rub my jaw. To me has come the expression that if a mountain does not come to the Mohammedans, then it is necessary for the Mohammedans to go to the mountain. "Do not despair," I say, "I will personally work on this problem."

That evening in the dining room, I sit at Boris' table—which is easy, for there is always room—and over tea I ask, "Have you ever been to New York?"

"No," Boris says. "I know nothing about America except that the poor are exploited by the rich."

"How true," I say, and then sigh. "It is unfortunate, but I will not be able to visit my cousin Stephen when we arrive there. He is one of these rich exploiters."

Boris is interested. "Rich? But why can you not go to see him?"

I smile sadly. "Because he is a defector and as a loyal member of the party, I certainly would not want to be seen in his presence. He fled from Hungary two years ago."

Boris' mind fastened on one point. "A *rich* defector? Before he defected, did he somehow manage to—ah—transfer money to some Swiss bank? Hm?"

"No," I say. "When Stephen arrived in America, he was penniless."

Boris thinks on this too. "He defected but two years ago, but *today* he is rich?"

I nod. "He has a large estate in

Hoboken, a swimming pool, two limousines, three mistresses, and eight horses."

Boris is impressed. "Three? But how did this all happen?"

"It is all the responsibility of his agent, who has the strange American name of John Smith. This John Smith has Stephen's experiences written into a book which has become a best seller. And also it will soon be made into a motion picture in which Stephen will hold a percentage."

Boris is puzzled. "But there are tens of thousands of defectors. Surely not every one of them could write a book and expect to make so much money?"

"Of course not," I say. "But Stephen was an important man behind the Iron . . ." I clear my throat, ". . . in our country. He was a *commissar* overseeing the Fejer Building Institute. Perhaps you have heard of his book? *I Was a Commissar for the F.B.I.*?"

Boris frowns. "It is somehow vaguely familiar."

"People are extremely interested in Stephen," I say. "There is a shortage of commissars in America, for not many of them defect. They know when they have it good."

Boris agrees. "Good, yes. But riches, no." He looks very casual. "This John Smith agent, where does he live, this capitalist pig?"

"In Chicago at a place called State Street. Probably his name is in the telephone book."

When I rise to leave Boris is still thinking about my cousin Stephen, who does not exist.

The night of the Friendship Party there comes a thick fog upon the ocean and it is necessary for the ship to slow almost to a halt and blow its horns often. Even so, we almost run into other ships, for we are now near New York and the traffic lanes are heavy.

In the dining room, I find that Nadia, Mariska, and I have been assigned to Boris' table.

He talks hardly at all. Mostly he is preoccupied and he drinks a good deal.

It is a yawning evening until ten when there is trouble in the bar among the united Czechoslovakians. The Czechs and the Slovakians begin to fight and the Ruthenians watch and smile.

When order is restored, I notice that Boris has left his previous thoughts and is now looking at Nadia.

His voice is thick with the drink. "Nadia, let us, you and I, walk about the deck."

"No," Nadia says. "The fog is bad for my throat."

"You are not a singer," Boris snaps and then he glares at her.

"How would you like to teach calisthenics to pre-school children?"

The band strikes up with dance music and I immediately sweep Nadia upon the floor.

"Nadia," I say, "this is not the moment to spill the soup in the ointment. You must cooperate with Boris for the time being."

She is shocked. "You, of all people, to say *that?*"

I explain hastily. "I mean only for this walk on the foggy deck. You can come to no harm, for I think that he has drunk too much to be dangerous. I even wonder whether he can still walk at all."

She studies me. "Just what are you up to, Janos?"

I smile. "I have a clever plan and I will tell you when it works. I have the feeling that soon you will never see Boris again."

When we return from the dance, Nadia is more friendly and soon she and Boris rise and move toward the door. He walks much better than I anticipate and so I begin to worry.

Finally I too rise and walk out into the fog. I hesitate. Where have they gone? To the right or to the left? I listen, but I hear nothing.

I turn to the right and after a dozen steps I bump into two people who are much close together. I recognize the man as a Czech high-jumper and the woman as a Rumanian gymnast, which is bad politics at the present time, but they do not seem to care.

"Pardon," I say. "Did anyone pass this way recently?"

The man peers into my face and is relieved that I am not a commissar. "No," he says. "Not that we notice."

I go in the opposite direction, bumping into objects occasionally and listening. All I hear is the groan of horns near and far, and when there is no horn noise, it appears that I am in a vacuum of silence. I think that I may have taken the wrong direction after all, but then I hear the commencing of a scream. It is muffled by the fog and yet I feel that it is near.

I press on immediately and after only twenty feet I come upon Boris and Nadia, and I see that he is considerably less drunk than I had thought. When I see what could be impending, fury springs into my blood and I forget all about Mohammedans and their mountains. I spring forward shouting a nationalist war cry.

Boris is considerably surprised by my entrance out of the fog, but he becomes even moreso when I immediately grasp him by one arm and one leg and swing him in a circle . . . once . . . twice . . . and then I let go.

It is a great fling, perhaps a world's record for this type of event. Boris and his scream fly through a thin patch in the fog and over the ship's rail.

Nadia joins me and we look into the swirling white gray which hides the water.

"Was this your clever plan?" she asks.

"No," I say sadly. "There is many a slip between the cup and the ship."

We are now silent and I try to think about this predicament.

"Nadia," I finally say, "I will surrender myself and confess. I will say that you were not even here. It was a personal quarrel."

"Nonsense," Nadia says. "Since no one has rushed here, evidently the fog muffled his scream and he was not heard. We will simply walk away. Boris just disappeared, and we know nothing about it at all."

"But you were seen leaving the ballroom with him," I say. "There will be questions asked. And there is no Supreme Court to throw out the confession that will inevitably follow."

Nadia offers another idea. "We will say it was an accident which we both witnessed. Boris slipped and fell overboard."

I shook my head. "I do not think we will be believed. It is generally established that commissars do not meet death by accident."

We are silent again and then I sigh. "Nadia, I do not worry for myself. If no one heard the scream, I do not think that Boris will be missed before tomorrow and we will have arrived in New York by then. Freedom is but a leap or a dash beyond."

She is wide-eyed. "You are going to defect?"

"Yes," I say. "We have planned upon this for a long time."

The wide eyes become narrow eyes. "We? Who is we?"

"Mariska and I."

Her lips tighten. It is strange how these women athletes are so jealous of each other's ability to run. Among men, there is more sportsmanship.

"America is a big country," I say. "It is big enough for *two* runners of excellence."

"I doubt this," she says, but sighs. "However, I do not think I have much of a choice."

We arrive in clear weather at the Port of New York the next morning. Soon we descend the gangplank while the ship's loudspeaker calls out for Boris to report to his contingent.

There is a rumor—which Nadia and I have started—that Boris has drunk too much and fallen asleep in some corner of the ship.

We step without trouble onto American soil and are taken to the hotel.

I would have preferred to participate first in the sports meet before defecting—as would Nadia and Mariska—but to postpone our defecting could possibly be fatal. So at the first opportunity, the three of us join and find the nearest police station and declare ourselves to be political refugees.

It is something I have never regretted, and three months later—at my wedding—I see Bela, a pole vaulter on our team who also defected, but after the meet. Evidently he has heard that I was to marry and wished to attend the event.

We shake hands and he smiles. "So it was you who threw Boris overboard," he says.

Perhaps I pale a bit, for if this is made public information, I am ruined. The Americans would not shield a murderer, even if the victim is a Russian. "Did you witness the event?" I ask quickly.

He shakes his head. "No. But I have just heard that Boris himself maintains that this happened."

I blink. "Boris Volakov is alive?"

Bella smiles. "You tossed him overboard just as a small freighter glided past in the fog, and Boris landed unnoticed on the canvas top of a lifeboat. The length of the fall, however, rendered him unconscious for perhaps a half hour."

I take a breath of relief.

Bela continues. "When Boris awoke and ascertained that he was alive and on another ship, he rushed immediately to the captain on the bridge and announced that he was declaring himself a political refugee who wished to remain in the west, and he also wanted to send swiftly a radiogram to a Mr. John Smith of State Street, Chicago."

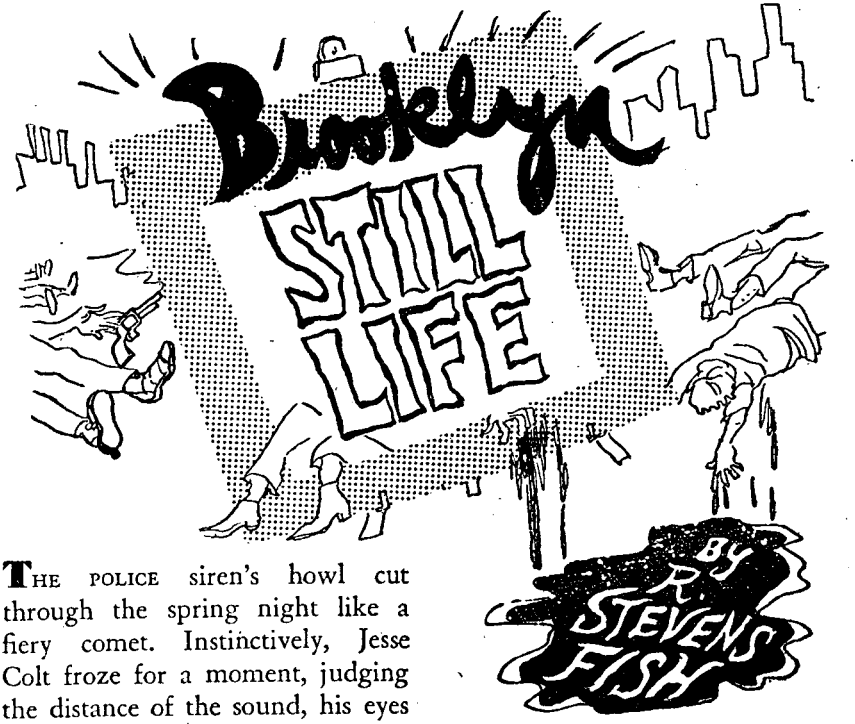
I sighed. "So Boris is now in America?"

Bela smiled again. "No. Unfortunately for Boris, the ship upon which you tossed him turned out to be a Russian freighter."

It was a successful wedding. I was handsome and Nadia, my bride, looked beautiful.

The maid of honor, of course, was Mariska, my sister.

Strange thoughts are frequently companions of the night—and, occasionally, impromptu courage.

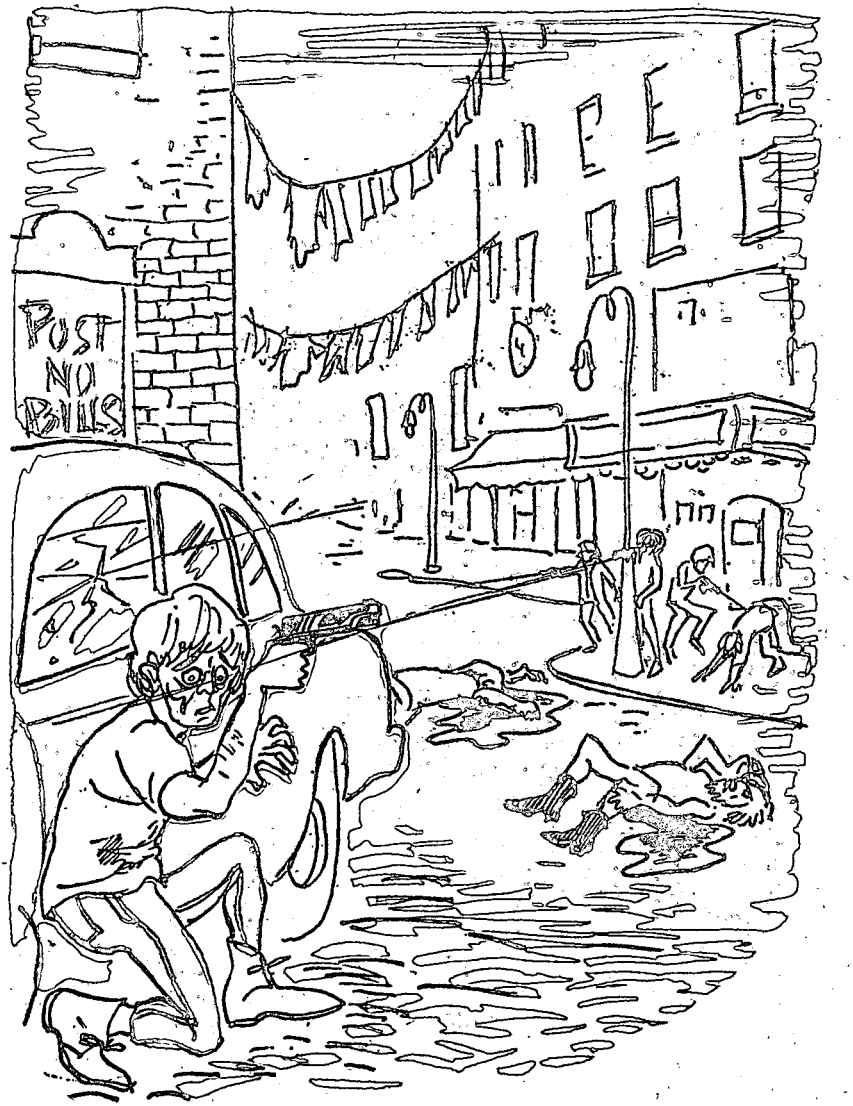


THE POLICE siren's howl cut through the spring night like a fiery comet. Instinctively, Jesse Colt froze for a moment, judging the distance of the sound, his eyes never leaving the battle around him.

Norm lay face down in a pool of blood. Moses, his face and neck raw from being whipped with a car aerial, slumped in a doorway, unconscious. The Coney Island Kid writhed with a bullet through his leg.

More gunfire came from the tenement roofs. The firecracker noises stood out sharply from the pulsating roar on the street, each pop making a shiver run through Jesse.

He gripped his pistol tighter, the unfired pistol. For the first time in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his life, the fear of battle had control of him, was keeping him from shooting back at the attacking gang. Stunned, he knelt, pressing himself against a car.

His men, the Monarchs, were being brutally cut down by the Comanches, a rival gang. Trapped in a street, the unsuspecting Monarchs had been hit from four sides at once. After a short furious struggle, the Comanches had pulled back and let the snipers on the rooftops take over. Many of the Monarchs were hit before they could take cover behind cars and in doorways.

Jesse could taste blood from being hit with a tire chain. Instead of jolting him to anger, the warm sweet taste made him shudder. Above the street lights, he saw only darkness and an occasional spark from a gun barrel.

The siren was louder, bearing down on him. The Comanches began to run, and the few Monarchs who were not hurt were frantically throwing away their weapons and regrouping, helping the wounded.

Jesse pressed harder against the car, ignoring the cessation of gunfire. A drop of blood fell from his chin.

The cops were coming and he was going to be busted—thrown in jail again.

The siren was a knife, cutting into the old scars, the eerie nights in the Tombs, the kicks in the gut and the sicknesses. The wavering, recurring wail made his head ache, made him want to cover his ears and kill the sound.

By running now, he might escape jail. He could go home, get his motorcycle, and be far away in Jersey by dawn. They'd never catch him. Legs numbed by his long squatting, he shifted in readiness.

The siren screamed again, almost upon him.

He leaped up and ran, stretching his muscular legs to their fullest, running for his motorcycle. Jesse Colt, war lord of the Brooklyn Monarchs, was running away.

Breathing hard, not looking back or hearing the angry shouts of his friends, he cut across empty lots and charged down black menacing alleys. He saw the shadow that was his bike underneath the fire escape in the back of his apartment. Leaping astride the cycle, he felt his fear begin to ebb away, as though absorbed by the bike through his hot grip on the handle bars. He squeezed in the clutch, then thought, *I'll never get away. Besides . . .*

His gaze went up to the third floor, where a light shone through a pulled yellow shade. He could not run out on Laura, his wife.

Spitting out some more blood, he slowly got off the cycle. That was a pretty stupid trick, running like that, when Moses and everybody needed him.

After wiping his hands on his pants, he scrambled up the fire escape, squeezed through the window of his apartment, pulled down the shade behind him. Laura was standing in the middle of the room, hands pressed against her skirt.

"Jesse, you're hurt," she said.

He looked down at himself. Blood speckled his T-shirt. With

one angry motion he tore it up the front and stripped it off his wet torso.

"Quick," he said, walking to the closet and tossing the T-shirt to her, "go burn this. Cops comin' any minute." Efficiently, he hid his pistol under a floorboard in the rear of the closet as his wife left.

In the tiny paint-chipped communal bathroom in the hall, Jesse glanced at the tensed muscles of his chest glistening with sweat. Then he saw the ugly cut on his too-thin upper lip. The smell of stale urine was strong tonight, making Jesse narrow his eyes in disgust. As he wished every time he came into this roach-ridden hole, he wished he could afford to move to a better apartment, one with a private bathroom.

Clumsily he blotted an astringent on the raw, purpling wound. Sweat trickled down his forehead from his black hair. His wife edged into the cubicle and locked the door behind her.

He watched her in the cracked mirror. Her fine auburn hair, curling up just a bit as it rested on her neck and shoulders, never failed to fascinate him. Her large eyes were wide apart, almost sleepy looking. Jesse watched her until she rested her thin body against his broad back, holding him around the waist.

"They won't put you in jail again, will they?" Her voice was soft, pleading.

Jesse winced as he jabbed at the cut. "Maybe," he mumbled, trying not to think about it. He met the distorted reflection of his eyes in the mirror for a moment, then

dropped his gaze to work on his lip again. "It was bad tonight. I ran out on 'em," he said vaguely, almost to himself.

Laura's grip on his slender waist tightened. "They won't know to look for you."

Jesse knew they would. Running away was stupid; the cops knew every member of the Monarchs, personally.

Giving up on his lip, he turned and slipped one stocky arm around Laura's white shoulder, drawing her closer. He kissed the top of her head, closing his eyes at the smell of her clean hair, at the light scent of her body that he loved. Then he leaned down and kissed her on the mouth, lightly because of his torn lip.

"It's all right," he whispered, trying to smile.

When he opened the bathroom door, two policemen were standing in the dimly lit hall.

"Hello, Colt," one said.

Jesse was out of jail within a few months, but they had seemed like years. Half the Monarchs were still behind bars. A few were just getting out of the hospital. Norm had died from a gunshot wound in the neck.

Coming from prison, Jesse walked up out of the subway onto his block, domain of the Monarchs. A light summer breeze brought him the familiar ghetto smells and sounds. They were bittersweet to him, combining the gutter, the kitchen, the john, and the bar—discordant, sharp smells and sounds, close to the life-death force that spawned them. The street held a fundamental unconscious attraction for Jesse, he felt secure on it, a part of it; he sensed rather than saw it.

He went to his apartment. Laura wept as she held him and they lay in bed together for hours. They had been married for a year and had honeymooned in this one-room flat. Lying on his back, smoking, Jesse watched a bug crawl across the dirty rose-colored ceiling.

"Moskowitz says he won't take you back on the job," Laura said, her lips nuzzled against his shoulder.

Jesse grunted. The bug lost its grip on the ceiling, falling onto the bed where Jesse burned it to death with his cigaret. This was the second job he had lost for going to jail. Tomorrow he'd look for another one.

When it was dark, Jesse got up and dressed in black denims and a T-shirt. Leaning over the bed, he kissed Laura. She asked him to come home early. Taking his old windbreaker from the nail in the

back of the unpainted door, he went downstairs to the bar where the Monarchs hung out.

The Brooklyn Monarchs—a gang made up of men from the same neighborhood, both white and Negro, in their mid-twenties —had formed years earlier as a sort of vigilante group to combat the Comanches, a hostile bunch of delinquents a few blocks away.

The Comanches stayed young and tough because older members continually dropped out to become small-time gangsters, or to stay home and watch television, and teenagers quickly took their place.

The Monarchs, however, were clannish, refused to let younger boys of their neighborhood in, wanting to preserve the original group. They claimed they couldn't disband because the Comanches were still a threat but the real reason was that they were trying to hang on to their youth. None of them would admit to a beer belly or receding hairline.

With this narrow attitude, the Monarchs had become smaller in size, softer, and more vulnerable each year. Their meeting-place was Willy's Sunshine Bar & Grill, a greasy rat hole run by a one-eyed ex-merchant marine.

Jesse entered, his nostrils smarting at the rancid odor of beer and cigar smoke. At the bar sat the Coney Island Kid, a big stupid fellow named Harry Karry, Buck, Lord Byron, who had a club foot, and Moses, the Monarchs' leader, tall, short-tempered, and violent.

Harry saw Jesse first. "Hey, it's Colt." The other four turned, their eyes flat.

Jesse stopped, his view focusing down from their eyes to the bright scar on Moses' cheek, souvenir of the Comanche car antenna the night of the tragic fight.

"We oughta kill you," said the Kid, spitting on the floor.

"Runnin' out on us, jeez, what a punk," Buck added.

Lord Byron tossed down the last of his beer. "Big war lord you are, gettin' us in that ambush."

With one step Jesse was at the bar, twisting Byron's shirt up under his chin, forcing his head back.

"Don't hand me that bull," Jesse said softly and slowly. "I had it all set up with Angel, the Comanches' counselor, to meet at the Green Street park. Neutral territory." He looked around at the others. "They figured we'd come down Allen Street together; we had to, to get from here to the park. They just jumped us early. I told you guys a long time ago we couldn't trust them. Next time—"

Moses leaned against Jesse's shoulder. "Leggo Byron, Jesse, you're messin' him."

Jesse stared at Moses, the scar on his face bright red, and loosened his grip, feeling that he had salvaged a little from the encounter. "Where's everybody else?" he asked, and signaled for a beer.

Buck looked deep into his glass. "Little Joe, Pedro, and Billy are still in jail," he said in a thick voice. "And Norm's dead."

Jesse nodded. He didn't know what to say, so he lit a cigaret.

Lord Byron tugged his shirt back to its normal position. "And you're out, man. We don't want you in the Monarchs no more."

Jesse stared at the bottles behind the bar, one hand resting on the smooth cool wood.

"Anybody's yellow like you, running out on your own men, oughta get it knocked outa him," chimed in Harry Karry, hunching his shoulders. "If it was up to me, I wouldn't stop at just throwing you out."

Jesse took a deep breath and waited for Moses to tell everybody to shut up, that it was up to him who was in and out. Moses was silent.

Jesse felt the large muscles on the outside of his thighs tighten. He wanted to say something himself, to put these idiots down, to make them know he was cool and above it and that he didn't care, but he didn't know what to say. Dropping his cigaret, he turned and walked out slowly.

Laura, naturally, said that it was all right, that it was better this way. He could stay home nights with her, the police would leave him alone, and they'd be much happier.

Jesse clenched his teeth and looked down into the dark empty street. It wasn't right. He wasn't really a coward, and he liked being a Monarch. But what could he do?

A train whistle moaned away in the freight yards behind the buildings.

After a week, Jesse hadn't found work. His savings were almost gone. Behind his building, he knelt beside his proudest possession, the black and chrome motorcycle. He had bought it just after he got married, a time when he was flush from having gutted a gangster in stud poker, had paid a thousand dollars for it. He and Laura had taken long trips on it through Jersey and Connecticut.

Jesse had stripped it down completely three times, cleaning each piece carefully, lovingly. With a natural affinity for machinery, he had made his bike into, for him, a living vital thing. He ran his hand up and down the pebbled leather seat. The smell of oil and wax hung over the huge black bird.

Jesse knew he would have to sell

it now. His thin lips compressed as he mounted it and angrily kicked it over for the last time. The husky throb of the tuned engine soothed him, and he let it idle for a few minutes, his hands resting on the long, curved handle bars.

He drove it into Manhattan and got only four hundred for it. Dejected, he stood up in the subway all the way back to Brooklyn.

Jesse was on parole, along with all the other Monarchs. As he was leaving the station house after his second report to his parole officer, a detective called him into an empty office.

The detective, solidly built and rugged looking, closed the door and offered Jesse a cigaret. Jesse lit up one of his own.

After making small talk for a while, the detective came to the point: knowing Jesse's troubles, both with finances and the Monarchs, the police wanted him to turn informer. They would pay him, not a lot, but steadily.

Feeling his heart sink, Jesse lowered his head and swallowed. The room was hot. His hands hung loosely between his knees. He said nothing.

Finally the detective said, "Okay, Jes, go home and think it over. I'll see you again."

He did. Everytime Jesse reported, the detective tried to persuade him to become a police contact. Jesse would look down, or out the window, frowning, silent.

One day Lord Byron met him on the street. "I've heard it around that you're a stoolie now," he sneered, his tiny eyes sparkling.

Astonished, Jesse stared, then shook his head.

The police must be trying a new game: if he wouldn't turn informer in secret, maybe he would out of defense if everyone thought he was one.

"I'd never do that," he said in a sad, almost begging tone, still shaking his head.

"Man, you are really a rotten coward," Byron yelled, hobbling away.

Crushed, Jesse stayed indoors for the next few days. He just didn't want to go out, not to look for a job, not for anything. He didn't even have his cycle anymore.

"I understand, darling," Laura would say. "I know you're unhappy. I wish I could do something to help you."

Jesse, his shoulders sagging, would turn away to stare out the window.

A few weeks later, Laura ran into the apartment and bounced into Jesse's lap as he sat reading a newspaper. Her face was flushed

with excitement. She kissed him.

"I got a letter from my brother in Oklahoma City," she said breathlessly. Blinking slowly, Jesse looked at the letter and envelope in her hand.

Her brother Vic had moved from New York, had gone west after a brush with drug addiction to straighten out. He had stayed, married, and was now a successful car mechanic.

"Just listen," Laura said smiling. "His garage is expanding and his boss wants to take on a new mechanic to work on motorcycles. Vic talked him into offering you the job."

Jesse looked out the window at a flock of gray and white pigeons on the tar roof across the street.

"You're heavy," he said.

Laura got up. "Vic's wife says we can stay with them until we find a place," she went on. "The pay is sixty-five a week to start."

Frightened by something unseen and unheard, the pigeons sprang from the roof in a single mass of flap-flapping wings.

Laura said, "Then you'll be away from all this and we can have it like it used to be."

Jesse's arms felt like lead. Laura took his face in her hands, turning him away from the window, and said, "You can have a motorcycle again."

Jesse had to smile. She knew his weakness. Without emotion, he said, "Let me think about it."

After another week Jesse reluctantly said yes, he'd go to Oklahoma City.

Then the last of the Monarchs got out of jail. They were bitter, especially over the death of Norm, and Jesse heard they had challenged the Comanches to a rumble, a shoot-it-out, an open war. The Monarchs' lust for revenge had blunted their caution; in their desire for a match, they had offered to let the Comanches choose the spot.

The Comanches picked Duncan's warehouse, a black, ugly building that covered a full block on a dead end street next to the river.

Jesse visualized another slaughter. The Monarchs would be sitting ducks. Having been apart from the gang so long, he was able to see some of their faults and weaknesses that were constantly putting them on the losing end.

The next afternoon Jesse and Laura packed their few belongings into three battered cardboard suitcases for the trip. Laura was bubbling with happiness and couldn't stop talking.

"We'll live in a house, Jesse, okay? With a yard and all where I could grow real flowers."

"Yea, yea, now shut up," he snapped. Laura was hurt.

The bus was leaving at midnight. At eight-thirty Jesse went downstairs for some hamburgers. *What the hell,* he thought, *it'll be good to get out of New York. Why am I down in the dumps? I'm about to start a new life.*

Walking back, the white waxed bag warm in his hand, he passed by Willy's Sunshine Bar & Grill on the opposite side of the street. As he looked over out of habit, fifteen men swaggered out of the bar and began walking toward the river—the Monarchs.

Jesse stopped, his heart pounding. The rumble was tonight. The date of this grudge fight had never leaked out. He watched them pass under the streetlights. Some were weaving, and yelling too loud. They were drunk.

Jesse gripped the sack tighter. What stupid idiots, fighting with a load on.

Suddenly he was running. Up the stairs, he burst into the apartment.

Laura was sitting on the naked bed, her hands in her lap. Jesse saw her slim shoulders outlined in the frail dress, her auburn hair up in a roll for traveling.

Dropping the hamburger bag on the bed, he went to their closet, knelt down and pried up the loose board, then reached deep within.

Laura stood over him. "What is it?"

"I'm goin', honey. I gotta go with 'em." His voice had an edge to it.

A canvas sack came up from the hole in the floor, and Jesse shook out the blue-black pistol into his trembling hand. He looked it over quickly; the smell of gun oil clung to it. It was loaded.

Jesse took a deep breath. Laura hung on his arm.

"Don't go, Jesse, not tonight. Please."

Jesse shook her off as gently as he could. "I'm only gonna follow them, kid. If I see they're in trouble, I'll try to help." The gun was heavy in his hand. "If they don't need me, I won't do anything, I'll just come on home."

Laura's eyes filled with tears. "The bus, we'll miss the bus."

He said, "I'll be back as soon as I can. If we miss this bus, we'll just get a later one."

He put the gun in his pants, next to his stomach, and went to the door. Laura was crying now.

"I need you, Jesse," she said, and started to follow him down the stairs, screaming, begging him not to go.

He turned and slapped her. For an instant time and motion stopped. He had never hit her be-

fore. Then he heard water running in another apartment. He realized he had been holding his breath.

"Wait for me in the room," he said hoarsely.

He could still hear her sobs as he went out the front door. The sound tore at his nerves. Trying to shake off his guilt, he ran, holding the pistol to his side.

It was simple to find the Monarchs, they were making so much noise. Jesse kept to the shadows behind them.

He never would have been seen if the Coney Island Kid hadn't come running up behind him silently. The Kid was always late for everything and he almost tripped over Jesse in his haste to join the Monarchs.

"Hey, c'mere you guys," he yelled.

Jesse planted his feet wide apart, trying to look defiant as the Monarchs came back, most of them staggering by now.

"It's the stoolie."

"Let's kill him."

They took Jesse's gun. He knew it wasn't any use trying to explain to them. After a short discussion with Buck, Moses decided to force Jesse along with them.

"If the cops are layin' for us, we'll blow your head off," Buck threatened.

"No use your having your gun," Harry Karry laughed. "You're too chicken to use it."

As they started toward the river again, Jesse asked about their plan of action. They ignored him.

He tried to warn them about the treachery of the Comanches, of the dangers of an ambush in the warehouse. They ignored him.

The windowless storehouse hulked against the brooding sky. A damp rotting odor blew in off the river. Jesse shivered and pulled his collar up.

The Monarchs walked in through a small side door. The interior was dimly lit by three huge lights hanging from girders thirty feet above the floor.

Jesse surveyed the gigantic single room—it was a jungle of steel platforms, crates, oil drums, cranes, and machinery of all types, old and new. Over by some oil drums, he saw a row of secondhand motorcycles.

In a cleared space near the middle, under one of the lights, stood five Comanches.

Moses yelled, "You ready?"

One of them pointed to a crane. Two watchmen, tied and gagged, were sitting in the cab.

"Remember what we agreed to?" the Comanche shouted.

Moses shouted back that he did.

The Comanche laughed, the

noise making Jesse suddenly frightened. He kept looking around him.

The Comanche said, "We've changed things," and he laughed again as gunfire broke out, hitting three Monarchs standing in the front.

The others, panicking, dived for the nearest cover, the long row of oil drums. Jesse hugged the ground as a bullet clanged off the edge of a drum by his ear. They were in for it now, with all the Monarchs in the same place and no chance to spread out.

"They've got guys up in the roof girders," Buck moaned. "Man, they're all over."

The group was beginning to go to pieces, shooting back wildly, blindly. The exit door, a small red bulb glowing above it, was fifty yards away and there was no cover for the entire distance.

Little Joe began to whimper. "I'm gettin' outa here," and he got up to run.

Jesse knocked him down. Angry, and breathing hard through his mouth, he remembered the cycles behind him. He licked his dry lips. There might be a way out yet, if any of those birds had gas in them.

Jesse told Moses what he wanted to do. Aiming carefully, Moses shot out the three lights, putting the warehouse in complete darkness, and the Comanches opened fire on the route to the door, thinking the Monarchs were making a run for it.

Heart thumping, Jesse jumped up and ran to the cycles. In the dark, he shook each one vigorously, swiftly, testing for gas in the tank. He could hear Comanches working their way along the girders, closer to a wide-open shot as soon as someone found a switch for the other lights.

The third machine had gas in it. Quickly pulling in the clutch, he wheeled it over to the huddling Monarchs. Straddling it, feeling the potential power of the bike surge up through his legs and arms, he whispered authoritatively, "As soon as I start this bird, run for the door. It's under that red light. And I mean *run!* Now gimme my gun."

Moses handed it to him, and Jesse jumped on the starter. After five kicks, the engine coughed and caught. The Comanches stopped shooting.

Still breathing rapidly, Jesse revved up the engine and shot out past the drums toward the center of the warehouse. The roar reverberating inside the steel and cement room was like a jet plane.

Jesse switched the headlight on, jammed the throttle open, then

slid off the back of the cycle. The machine careened over a pile of lumber, staying upright, bouncing and thudding. Jesse rolled to a stop, his shoulder and back bruised from the fall, and pulled out his gun.

The initial shock to the Comanches having worn off, they were shooting at the bucking cycle.

His face streaming with sweat, Jesse fired at the powder flashes winking in the dark. He heard a scream—his aim was good. Blinking rapidly, he crawled to a new position.

The motorcycle was on its back now, light pointed to the ceiling, motor whining, and Comanche gunfire had died out.

Warily, Jesse looked behind him, saw a faint blue patch—the door was open, the boys made it.

Now it was his turn. Excited, he got to a crouching position and slowly, careful not to make a noise, he inched toward the door.

He was going to make it. He'd be able to meet the Monarchs at the Sunshine and have a last beer. He licked his lips, taking one slow step at a time. Then he'd go to get Laura and—

He froze. Someone had turned the lights on. Sickly yellow lights from the girders bathed the warehouse.

Jesse, turning his head, looked up and saw at least six Comanches on the steel supports, grinning cruelly. He broke into a run, zigzagging, trying for the door. Bullets ricocheted off the cement under his feet. Leaping, twisting, his breath came in agonized gasps.

Twenty feet from the door, a bullet buried itself in Jesse's back. He fell, sprawling. The pain was terrible. On his back, he slowly raised his gun.

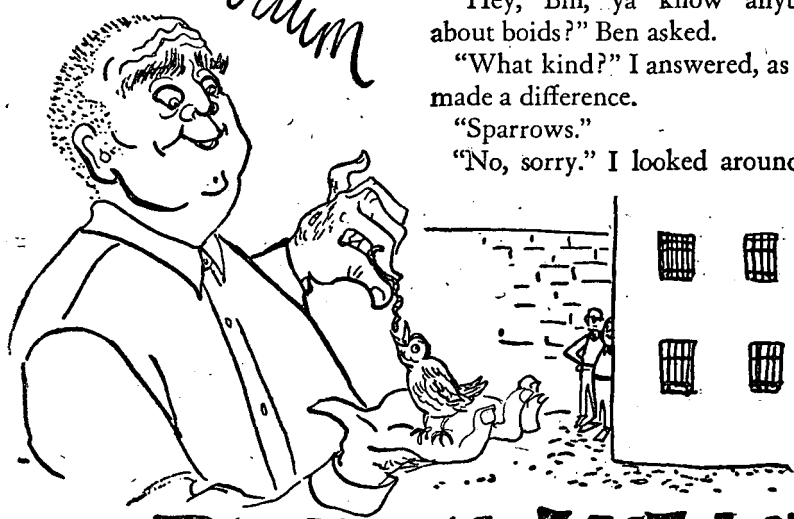
Two more bullets hit him.

Groaning, Jesse dropped the gun. His head rolled back and he saw the black sky framed upside-down in the doorway. A cool river breeze caressed his sweating face. He felt cold, very cold, and for a long moment everything was quiet.

Then, as Jesse's body relaxed, from far away the lonesome cry of a police siren broke the silence.

Stone walls are the least of a man's prison.

by Al Nussbaum



THE PATERNAL INSTINCT

BIG BEN came up to me near the side entrance to Leavenworth Penitentiary's B-cellhouse. Everyone calls him Big Ben because he tips the scales at 250 pounds and his first name is Benny. The nickname has nothing to do with time, or the famous London clock, despite the long sentence—thirty years—he's serving.

"Hey, Bill, ya know anythin' about boids?" Ben asked.

"What kind?" I answered, as if it made a difference.

"Sparrows."

"No, sorry." I looked around to make sure no guards were close. "You have one?"

"Yeah, look."

I'd noticed that he had his right

hand cupped. Now he held it out to me and opened it. There on his palm huddled the most ugly little creature I'd ever seen. It was about an inch and a half of naked flesh and the head was all beak. There were no feathers.

"*That's* a bird?" I asked.

"Sure. He's just a baby. What d'ya think I should feed him?"

"Where'd you get it?"

"Found him outside. A nest was blew down an' all busted up. I waited a while, but there wasn't no mama boids around, so I picked him up."

Hearing Big Ben say "mama boids" was comical. I almost smiled—but I didn't. I didn't want to take the chance of having him think I was laughing at him. "Birds eat worms; bread, too. Guess you could feed it bread and worms," I offered.

That was on Friday afternoon. I didn't see Ben again until the following Monday. We both were assigned to the Education Building—Ben as an orderly, and I as a helper in the library—and I met him on the way to work. "Still got the bird?" I asked.

"Yeah—see?" He opened a cigar box he was carrying and thrust it proudly under my nose. He had lined the inside with soft rags and the tiny bird was nestled in the center of them.

"You taking it to work?" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah, sure. Can't leave him in my cell. I gotta feed him. 'Sides, they might shake-down and find him. Pets ain't allowed, ya know."

"What're you going to do with it?"

"Gonna put the box on one of the windowsills of A-cellhouse. He'll get lotsa sun an' air, an' I can come out an' feed him every chance I get."

And that's just what he did. Several times that day I looked from a side window of the Education Building. Once I saw only the cigar box on a window ledge of the building thirty feet away; the other times Ben was out there feeding the bird and whispering to it.

The next day I noticed that two pieces of corrugated cardboard about eighteen inches square were lying on the grass plot between the Education Building and A-cellhouse. This was unusual because trash doesn't get a chance to accumulate at Leavenworth. You seldom see an empty cigarette package, let alone large pieces of paper. I was wondering how they had been left there when Big Ben appeared.

He knelt, lifted a corner of one of the squares, and quickly reached under it. He got to his feet

with a pink worm dangling from between his thumb and index finger and went to the cigar box.

I went outside to see what was going on. I heard Ben say, "Ya wants another woim, Baby?" as I approached, but he stopped talking to the bird when he saw me.

"I saw you get a worm from under the cardboard," I said. "How d'you do it?"

"Tore a couple of pieces from a box, soaked 'em in water, an' put 'em on the grass," he said. "Woims come outta the groun' under the paper last night. They didn't go back into the groun' when it got light. They don't move fast an' I can catch 'em."

I stood there watching. Ben fed three large worms to the bird, and it continued to open its beak and scream for more. When there were no more worms to catch, Ben took small pieces of bread, dipped them in water, rolled them into little balls, and then dropped them into the bird's open mouth. The bird would be quiet for a few seconds while it swallowed the bread, then it would open its beak and yell: "Cheep! Cheep!"

"He sure likes to eat," Ben observed fondly.

After that it seemed as though every time I looked out of the window I saw Ben feeding Baby. It wasn't difficult to see why Leavenworth or any prison would outlaw pets. If they were all as demanding and insatiable as Baby, no work would ever get done. Pets would quickly disrupt all order and discipline.

But they would fill a need, too.

It became clear to me that just as woman has a maternal instinct, man has a need to care for and protect a fellow creature. I could see proof of this every time I looked out the window. Big Ben, who wouldn't hesitate to break your jaw if he suspected you were slighting him, thought nothing of gently nursing a tiny bird. I suddenly realized that the empty feeling in my stomach wasn't hunger; I wished I had a skinny, ugly bird to nurse, too.

No one in prison pays much attention to time unless scheduled to get out soon. A week or two, or a month or two, passed. Then I looked out one morning and spotted Ben near the walk at the front of the building. He was on one knee in the classic crapshooter's pose. He opened his hand and released a small, mud-colored bird.

It was hard to believe that this was Baby; he had grown so. He wasn't as big as an adult bird, but no one would have any trouble recognizing him as a bird. The little guy beat his wings frantically

and fluttered from side to side, then landed on the soft grass about twenty feet from where he'd been launched. Big Ben lumbered over to where the bird lay on the grass and scooped him into his hand. I could see his lips moving and I knew he was muttering praise and encouragement to the bird.

I watched a few more flights from the window. Baby kept flying increasingly greater distances, but wasn't getting much altitude. Several officers entered and left A-cellhouse through its side door. Each glanced at Big Ben and his bird, then quickly looked away. None wanted to enforce the regulation against pets, so they pretended not to notice. After a while Ben stopped giving the bird flying lessons, and I left the window and went back to work.

I looked out the window several times in the next few days, but I must've picked the wrong times because I didn't see Ben. Other guys kept telling me about Big Ben and his bird and how well it could fly and how it came to him when he whistled for it. Baby became the chief topic of conversation around the Education Building. A couple of men joked that they wished Big Ben would teach them to fly—they wanted to see what's on the other side of the prison's 35-foot wall.

Then one day I saw Big Ben sitting alone on the steps of A-cellhouse. I sensed that something was wrong and went over to him. "How's Baby?" I asked.

"He's gone," Ben said. "Flew away. Sat up there," he motioned vaguely toward the wall, "and looked back once, then flew away."

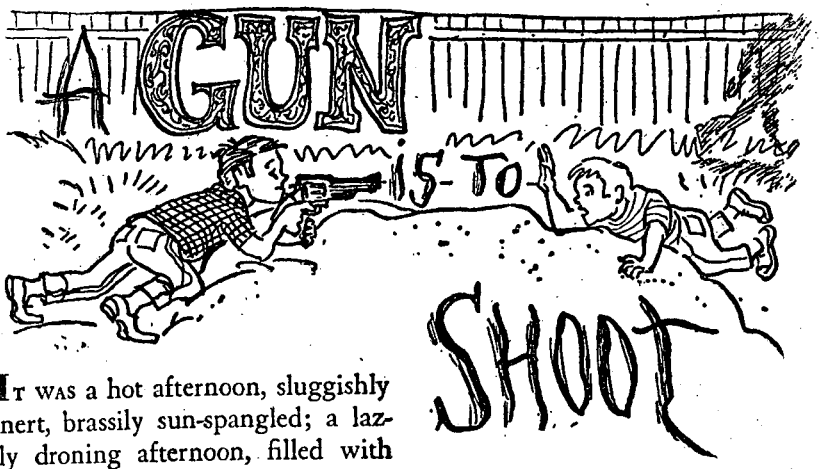
"Maybe he'll come back."

"Naw, he won't come back." His voice held notes of both pain and anger. "Boids is like people. When they don't need ya no more, they forgets ya."

I remembered that someone had once told me Big Ben hadn't received a letter in two years. "Maybe Baby just decided to look around," I said as cheerfully as I could. "Birds do that all the time. It wouldn't surprise me if he came back. The swallows *always* return to Capistrano."

Ben gave me a cold look, then ignored me, so I went inside; but I was a little worried and kept going to the window to keep an eye on him. That's how I happened to be around when the bird returned a few hours later and perched on his shoulder. He cupped it in his huge hands and sat talking to it for a long time. Tears ran down his cheeks, and his back shook. I watched as he touched the bird gently with his lips, then squeezed the life from it.

Inexplicable silence is often more obtrusive than accustomed clamor.



IT WAS a hot afternoon, sluggishly inert, brassily sun-spangled; a lazily droning afternoon, filled with nothing to do.

Joey, on one side of the oak tree, watched the boy next door without seeming to. He wasn't really the boy next door; he was the boy who was visiting his grandmother next door, a stranger therefore, an alien in the neighborhood.

While Joey pretended a studious interest in pressing a marble into the softened tar that mended a gash of the oak tree, the boy next door pretended to be looking for something in the tall grass along the fence which the mower never quite reached, occasionally stooping to peer into it as if he almost saw the nonexistent object he was not seeking. Now and then, by mistake, the two boys raised their eyes simultaneously so that their yearning gaze clashed and wavered away again in hasty embarrassment.

The boy next door broke first. "What are you doin'?" he asked.

"Puttin' a marble in the tree," Joey answered, puffing with renewed effort.

"Let's see," said the boy, and crawled through between the fence

bars for a closer inspection.

All pretense was now forgotten. The wary bridge of suspicion had been crossed. The two began immediately to develop a common status level as they swung on the lower branch of the tree, kicked imaginary footballs, crawled with Daniel Boone intent through the tall dry grass along the fence edge, and finally ambled toward the back porch.

"You got a bike?" Rick asked.

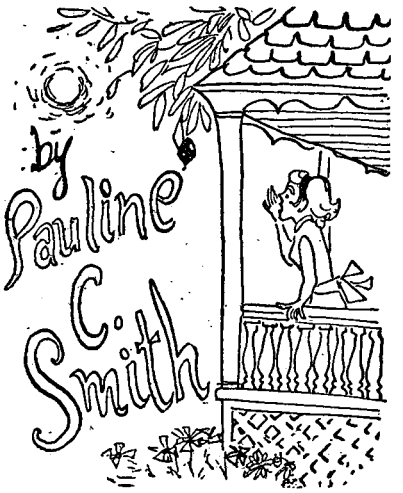
"Sure," said Joey.

"A basketball?"

"Sure."

"I got a punching bag."

Oh, ultimate in material worth! Joey's silent mind scrambled for a possession of comparable value. Before he could find it, his mother came to the door.



"Hello," she said to Rick. "You must be Mrs. Moran's grandson."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you having a good time at your grandmother's?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you boys like some lemonade?"

They lolled on their stomachs on the sun-striped porch behind the railing, drinking lemonade, saying nothing, now that everything had already been said.

A searing blast of air whirlwinded suddenly out of the quiet afternoon to stir the dry leaves and sail a fly on the gray landing field of the porch. The boys stared at the fly as if they had never seen one before. Slowly then, Rick hunched himself to his knees. Cautiously, he slid one hand across the boards and clapped it flat over the sun-dazed fly. "Shall I smash him?" he asked Joey.

Joey didn't like the idea. "No," he said, and looked away so that Rick would not know how definitely he did not want the fly smashed.

"Okay. I'll drown him then." Quickly and deftly, Rick hunched the flat cell of his hand into an inverted cup, drank his lemonade down to the last quarter-inch and laid the glass on its side so that the liquid ran out, onto the floor, along the edge of his palm and under-

neath, to form a sticky trap.

"You think he's dead yet?" Rick asked Joey with a level, waiting gaze.

"Sure. I s'pose so." Joey had to look. His eyes were drawn to the cupped hand surrounded by liquid. Rick lifted it and the fly rose gracefully from its tiny dry, circular island, to spiral, with contempt, into the air.

"Hah! You never even touched him. Hah!" Joey rolled on the porch with delight. "You thought you drowned him and you never even got him wet."

The heat was already drying the lemonade on the porch, leaving a glassy smear. Rick licked the stickiness from the edge of his hand and the tips of his fingers. He stuck out his lower lip and blew a breath of air over his face, then turned to Joey crossly. "Don't you have *anything* to do here? You just sit *around* like this and do *nothing* all the time? Gosh, at home I've got things to *do.*"

"We got things to do here, too. We could ride double on my bike or shoot baskets . . ."

"I sure wish I had my punching bag," said Rick and leaned pensively forward, his chin resting upon his brown pointed knees, and stared morosely out into the heat waves. "What's that?" he asked suddenly, pointing.

"What?" Joey said, squinting.

"That hill over there before you get to your back fence."

"It's a shelter."

Slowly, incredulously, Rick raised his head and turned it toward Joey. "A bomb shelter?"

Now Joey had the advantage. Here was something to surpass an old punching bag any day. "Sure," he said nonchalantly, and collapsed upon the floor, burdened by a surfeit of superior possessions. "Haven't you ever seen a bomb shelter before?"

"Hey . . ." Little flames of excitement flickered in the centers of Rick's eyes. "Can I go inside, huh? Can I?"

Joey could no longer hear his mother in the kitchen. She must have gone into the front of the house where the air conditioner was. He sat in attentive catalepsy, listening before he answered, knowing without a doubt that should his mother overhear one word about the shelter, she would leap forth and cry: *Now, you boys stay away from there* . . . but she didn't hear.

On safe ground now, Joey gave the matter some profound thought before he conceded, "I s'pose I could let you see inside it." He rose then, negligently, as if this were old stuff to him, but inside Joey's breast anticipation flared

and crackled, for never before had he entered the shelter unaccompanied by his parents. During those times, just let him play one little game, like diving his hand through the air and making like a rocket, and Dad was on him like a flash. "Now, see here, son, this is nothing to joke about, it's dead serious business," and his mother would follow with, "Such a shame that normal, civilized human beings have to burrow into the ground for survival." They took all the fun out of it.

"Come on," said Joey, "let's go." He could feel his feet squash wetly inside his sneakers as they moved across the lawn.

Joey walked with dignity while Rick capered. "Did your dad build it, huh? You got it fixed so the minute that old bomb goes off you can run and get inside and come out alive?"

"Sure."

"You got it fixed so you can sleep and eat down there and not come up until everybody's dead?"

"Sure."

"Gee!"

The trap door was flush with the side of the earth mound, grass-covered now and peaceful in the shade of a peeling eucalyptus that shivered its dry leaves through the faint, hot stir of the breeze. Both boys scrambled up the grassy hill and grasped the iron ring on the door.

Joey gave one wary glance toward the house, sun-dappled and sleepy at the front of the property and close to the side fence. "Now, pull," he directed, and slowly the door lifted, bringing with it a breath of cool, earthy air.

Awed now, and properly impressed, Rick bent and crept down the rough cement steps.

"I gotta close this," Joey said, reaching out and grasping the inside ring. He gave it a jerk as he had seen his father do, ducking at the same time. The trap door came to with a clap.

"Hey, it's dark," cried Rick from the bottom of the steps, fear edging his voice.

"Sure. What'd you expect?" Joey felt the same fear, but he covered it with the bravado of past familiarity and present importance. Guiding himself by the rough cement of the side walls, he descended the steps, pawed Rick's perspired shoulder, clammy now, and pushed open the lower door. Reaching forward and waving his arm in the darkness until he felt the knotted string, he pulled it and clouded the room with dim light.

Rick let out his breath. "Hey," he said, "you got electricity."

"That's for right at first," Joey explained. "Then, when the elec-

tricity goes off, we got these." He indicated lanterns, lined up like soldiers on a lower shelf.

The light gradually diminished Rick's awe, and curiosity rushed him into action. He tested each of the three cots, he squatted to stare into the clear depth of the water jugs, he studied the stacked cans, the packages and tins of food. "Gosh," he punctuated each new discovery. "My gosh, you even got cards and games and puzzles and stuff."

"Gotta have things to do while we're down here," said Joey with elaborate unconcern.

Then Rick saw the gun on a shelf. For a moment, he was speechless. Round-eyed, he stared at it. "Is it real?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Sure it's real. It's loaded, too."

Rick's pent-up breath gushed forth in a grunt. "A real gun. A real, loaded gun!" His hand crept forward and hovered.

"Leave it alone," Joey commanded sharply.

Rick yanked his hand away and backed off to drop to one of the cots. "Hey, what have you got a gun down here for, anyway?"

"What *is* a gun for?" asked Joey loftily. "It's to shoot. That's what's for. It's to shoot the neighbors."

Through a deep and discerning silence, Rick thought it over, to find the explanation not only rational but inspired. "Sure," he said with revelation. "If they try to get in here they'll get their brains blowed out, won't they, Joey?"

Joey didn't enjoy the picture the words formed in his brain.

"Anybody but us, huh, Joey? Anybody but us'll get it right between the eyes. Bang bang, splat, and there they'll be, lyin' dead right on that grass out there. They'll say 'let us come in' and we'll let 'em have it, won't we, Joey?"

"Let's go outside," said Joey.

"Why you want to go outside? What's the matter with right in here? It's cool in here. I like it. We could play bomb shelter and shoot everybody that tries to get in."

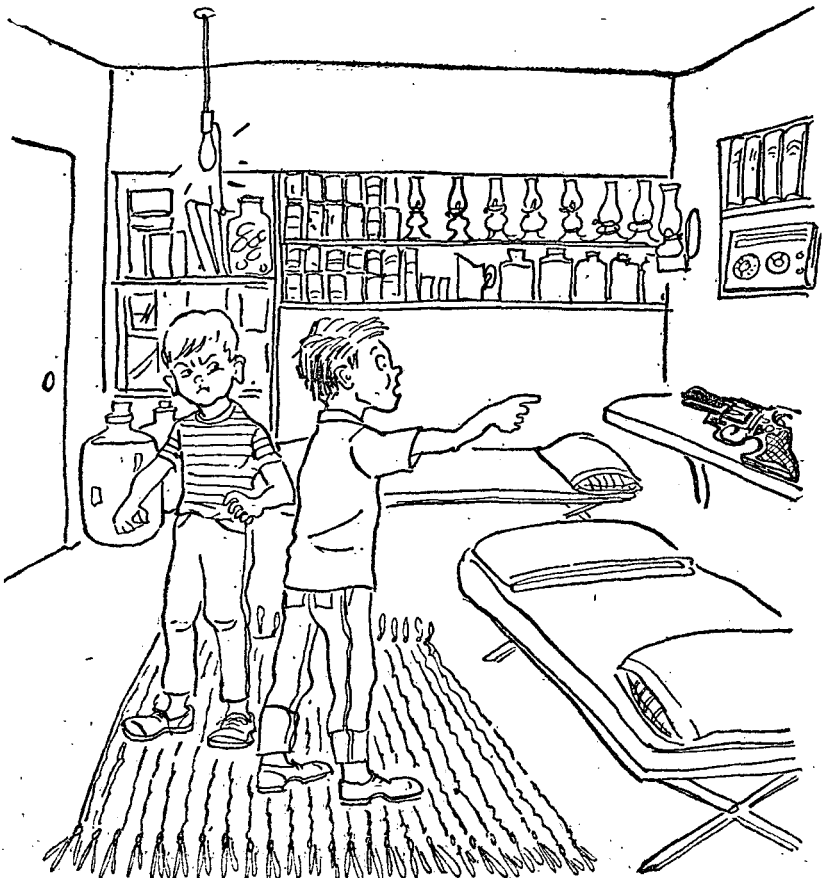
"No. Let's go outside. My mom'll be looking for us in a little while. She won't like it if she knows we're in here." Joey began to sidle toward the door, feeling the pressure of his own words. "Come on. She'll get mad if she finds us."

"Maybe she won't. Maybe she'll hunt everyplace but here because of the gun. Maybe she's scared we'll shoot her dead."

"Come on, Rick. I'm gonna turn out the light, then you'll be all alone in the dark."

"Okay. I'm comin'."

Joey reached up for the string



which had sprung back and doubled up on itself, the end catching and clinging to one of the knots that gave it weight. He rose to his toes, staring into the naked bulb above as he strained his arm, wiggling his fingers to touch the loop in order to loosen it and bring the string within his grasp. "Better come on. As soon as I get hold of this thing, it'll be dark."

Rick was moving across the shelter.

The dazzling center filament of

the bulb had become a purple ball of light in Joey's eyes. He jumped, knocked the loop loose and the string dangled. "I'm turnin' it off now, Rick."

"Yeah, okay," came Rick's voice from alongside the shelves.

Joey pulled the string, and in the dense darkness pinpoints of echoed light danced in his wide blind gaze. "Well, come on. Help me find the door handle." Joey, groping in the darkness, felt a panicked anxiety to emerge. His fumbling hand found the door handle at last, comforting and warmer than the smooth sheet metal of the door. He pulled—into the earthy smell—and called, "Where are you?"

"Right here." Rick's voice was as breathless in the dark as if he had been running.

They crept up the steps. "Ouch," cried Joey, bumping into the trap door. He descended a step, then reached up and pushed. "Well, help," he said petulantly. "This thing is heavy."

"I am. I only got one hand . . ."

The door eased open. The boys blinked in the sunlight and a blast of stunning heat.

"Whew." Joey scrambled up the rise and pushed the door closed, then sent a quick, apprehensive glance toward the house. His eyes had started to focus just enough so that the spread-out shimmering strangeness began to fuse into familiarity. The house was sleepily unalarmed, resting in the afternoon heat. Joey let out his breath.

Probably still in the livingroom, close to the air conditioner, his mother would begin to wonder and, as she always did with clocklike regularity, she'd check on him. "Joey-y-y-y," she'd call, leaning over the porch railing. Joey breathed deep the above-ground sunshine of obedience. Now, at the first "Joey-y-y-y," he could yell back with righteous alacrity, "Right here, Mom," as if he'd never moved from the spot, and she would say, "Oh, all right. I just wanted to be sure."

Joey slid down the grassy mound and faced the muzzle of the gun. He was so surprised, he fell back upon his hands and froze for one outraged moment. The vision of Rick's finger curled possessively around the trigger of *his* gun raised a knot of injustice to his throat. *He* was not allowed even to *touch* the gun, yet here was Rick sighting a bead as if he had every right! Joey's voice rose, shrill and piercing, to split the hot afternoon in a single outcry of foul play.

A door slammed. "Joey-y-y-y."

"Hey . . ." Instinctively, Rick concealed the gun. Jerking his head from side to side, he hissed,

"There's your Mom. Why'd you holler like that?"

"Joey-y-y-y. Was that you?"

"Go on, answer. You want her to come out here?"

No, Joey didn't. Parental displeasure immediately became more imminent and comprehensive than the theft of the gun and the just deserts of the culprit. He leaped to his feet. "It was me, Mom. We're only playin'." He frowned furiously at Rick.

"Well, don't play so loud," his mother called back. "It's too hot." She peered out through the sunlight. "For heaven's sake, find some shade."

She lifted her hair off the back of her neck, then opened the screen door again and went back into the house.

"See? You almost got her out here, hollerin' like that," accused Rick. "Then what?" He brought the gun out from behind his back to examine it with fond attention.

"You put it back. You put that gun right back in my bomb shelter," Joey whispered passionately.

Simulating a fast draw, Rick answered, "Bang!"

"It's loaded. Didn't I tell you it's loaded?"

Now, virtuously, Joey remembered his father's warning: *"You keep your hands off that gun if you know what's good for you."*

"Sure I know it's loaded," said Rick. "I checked. See?" He broke it and spun the chamber. "See? Six bullets." He snapped it back.

"Be *careful!*" Joey whirled and flung himself to the ground in anguish. "You fool around with it and it'll go off." He rose to his knees, wild-eyed, visualizing the awful results of the gun's roar in the afternoon stillness.

"Simmer down, I got the safety on," said Rick. "See this? You cock it. Now the hammer's locked." He demonstrated with the muzzle of the gun straight at Joey's heart. "For Pete's sake, I know all about the safety. Who doesn't know about the safety?"

Joey didn't. He became plaintive. "Look, let's take the gun back down to the shelter, huh? It's hot, we don't want to play with an old gun when it's hot."

"How come?" Rick hefted the gun thoughtfully on the palm of his hand, then looked at Joey. "If you were visiting me, and even if it was hot, I'd let you play with my punching bag."

Joey considered this display of distant hospitality and was flattered. Then, reconsidering, he realized Rick's punching bag was Rick's own to offer, but Joey's gun happened to be his father's. Joey opened his mouth to set forth this argument, then closed it again. To

establish the gun as his father's and not his own would strip him of importance. "Okay," he said with hesitant largesse, "you can play with it for a while."

Immediately, Rick threw himself flat and picked off three Indians who stalked through the glittering sunshine. "Bang, bang, bang."

The sun inched hotly across the sky until the eucalyptus shadow deepened upon the boys in ambush behind the shelter hill. They had passed through a doubtful history as Quick Draw McGraw lying in wait for the rustler who lurked behind that soddie out upon the parched plain. "Bang. You're dead." They were Wyatt Earp staked out to watch a gambling hall. "Bang. Got him."

Joey's mother stepped to the porch during their Untouchable era, leaned over the banister and called, "Joey-y-y-y."

Joey sprang to his feet. "Here, Mom. I'm right here."

"Oh. Is Mrs. Moran's grandson still with you?"

Rick laid the gun upon the ground and stood. "Yes, ma'am," he yelled.

"You be good boys," said Joey's mother and let the screen door slam behind her.

Once more the boys sprawled out upon the rise of the concealing hill. "That was a close one," Rick said. He snapped the safety, sighted the empty porch, then cocked it once again and looked seriously at Joey. "She sure looked like a squealer gun moll to me. I almost let her have it."

The eucalyptus shadow lengthened and spread. A breeze sprang up without cooling the air. "Maybe we better get the gun back down in the shelter," suggested Joey as he squinted upward in an attempt to discover how close was the zero hour of his father's return from work.

Rick, again on the side of law and order, was in the Naked City now, his all-seeing eye upon the house at the corner of the lot, protecting it with his policeman's gun from the killer who was sure to appear. "You watch that side," he instructed Joey with authority, "and I'll case this one." They crept to their posts, each seeing a different picture on the lawn.

The late afternoon began to buzz with the drone of insects and to quiver with the rustle of leaves. Suddenly, Rick crawled over to his stake-out companion. "You see what I see?" he whispered, hoarse with excitement.

Joey did a slow double-take. "Yeah," he breathed. "Yeah, a man."

"A *man?* Watch him. He's a

goon, I betcha. A prowler . . ."

The man turned from the alley and stopped, seemed to be wavering upon a decision as he looked first at the Moran house, bright in the slanting sun, then at Joey's, shadowed now by the oak.

"He's goin' to your grandma's," whispered Joey.

"No, to your house." Rick trembled at Joey's side. "That guy's a killer. *Look* at him . . ." Rick snapped the safety, trained the gun, his eyes blazing.

Fiercely, Joey knocked Rick's arm from its aim. "Don't *do* that. You crazy? He's probably the milkman."

Cocking the gun once again, Rick turned on Joey with utter contempt. "Where's his milk then? And whoever heard of a milkman comin' in the *afternoon,* for Pete's sake?"

Rick had a point there. Watching the man move along the fence where the grass grew tall, Joey thought he could detect a sinister hunch to the shoulders and an overbearing swagger in the walk.

Rick panted at his side, almost incoherent, "Look, he's *sneakin'.* Anyone can tell he's sneakin'. Look at him. He's goin' soft." Rick's breath blew annoying little puffs of excitement down Joey's neck.

Joey pushed him away. "Anybody'd go soft along there. What's to go hard? It's dirt and grass. There ain't no sidewalk . . ."

The man turned to survey the way he had come and the boys ducked.

"He's lookin' to see if anybody's around," hissed Rick.

"Nah. He's lookin' to see if he dropped something. He's prob'ly the dry-cleaning man," said Joey.

"All right, wise guy. Where's the cleaning stuff?"

"He's comin' to get some."

"How about the truck?"

Joey peered through the shrubs and trees at the back of the lot. "It's prob'ly in the alley."

"I didn't hear it come." With businesslike efficiency Rick snapped off the safety, aimed the gun and closed one eye to sight his quarry. "That guy's up to no good," he snarled. "I'm gonna blast him."

Leaving the shielding fence along the side of the property and the protective spread of the oak tree, the man walked briskly across the sun-dappled lawn that led to the back porch.

Rick's muscles tensed, his finger tightened on the trigger, and Joey felt icy terror tingle his spine. He watched Rick's one-track intensity for one panicked moment knowing, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he would fire the gun. With a single swift motion, Joey rolled, raised his sneakered feet

and knocked Rick off balance. He toppled and the gun dropped from his hand, fell harmlessly to the grass.

Gnashing his teeth, his eyes still dazed, Rick sprang to his knees. "What'd you do that for?" Still on his knees, he struck a fighting pose. Then he looked toward the house. "The man's gone," he said, surprised. "He ain't there anymore." He grabbed the gun. "I bet he's inside."

Joey let out his breath and collapsed to his stomach. "Mom prob'ly let him in. *Put the safety on the gun!*"

Rick cocked it. "You should have let me kill him. Now he's in your house."

"That proves he's prob'ly the cleaning man. Mom let him in to wait until she got the stuff to be cleaned together."

Rick gave Joey a scornful look. "I've seen lots of cleaning men. I see 'em all the time. I never saw one like that."

"I see 'em all the time, too," countered Joey, "and they all look like him. Every one of them."

Thoroughly disgusted, Rick crawled to the other side of the hill. Both boys lay there, backs to each other, each watching the house, no longer interested in conjuring up cattle rustlers or Fed men or killers, but listening now to the sounds in the grass, the lazy chirp of birds and feeling the western rays of the sun beat through the leaves.

Suddenly Joey rolled, sat up and stared at Rick. "What did you *do?*" he whispered loudly.

"Me?" Rick looked back over his shoulder. "I didn't do nothin'."

"It sounded like you popped that safety thing again."

"Well, I didn't." Rick sat up and turned sullenly. "It must have been something in the house."

" 'Course it wasn't anything in the house." The afternoon abruptly went sour on Joey. He didn't like Rick or the gun or the dry-cleaning man. He didn't like the heat or the sweaty dirt on his body. He didn't like the sticky feel of his feet in his sneakers. Getting up, he said, "Let's take the gun back down in the shelter."

"Sure, okay, okay." Rick got to his feet. "Let's take the gun back. That's all you been sayin'. Let's take the gun back. Okay, let's take it back . . ."

The screen door slammed, and both boys whirled and stared.

"Wow!" exploded Rick. "You see that guy go? He sure left in a hurry. Went around to the front this time."

"That's prob'ly where his truck's parked," said Joey. "Come on, let's take the gun back down in the

shelter. My dad'll be home pretty soon."

Rick laid the gun down beside the trap door and both boys grasped the ring.

"Ri-i-i-ck." Bent over the trap door, their hands on the ring, they looked across the lawn, over the fence and through the next lawn at Mrs. Moran on her back porch. "Ri-i-i-ck."

"I'm comin'," Rick shouted and let go the ring. "That's my grandma," he explained to Joey. "I gotta go."

"You can help me take the gun down first." Joey wanted to cry because everything was going wrong. He had a scratching feeling that everything had been going wrong for some time now. "I should think you could at least help me take the gun down first."

"It's my *grandma.* I gotta go. Right now," and Rick took off.

Hopelessly, Joey watched as Rick sprinted a zigzag course along the shadows of the trees and squeezed through the fence bars. Then Joey looked at the house, shady now and quiet—very, very quiet—enough to frighten him.

The thought occurred to him that his mother should have checked on him. It had been a long time now. Why hadn't she come out, leaned over the banister and called, "Joey-y-y-y. Are you all right, Joey? Answer me, Joey."

The house was so still in its pool of shade—so still. The setting sun slanting upon the windows made them look like bright orange eyes.

Joey began to run toward the house.

"Mom," he called. "Mom." Why doesn't she answer? "Mom. Oh, Mom."

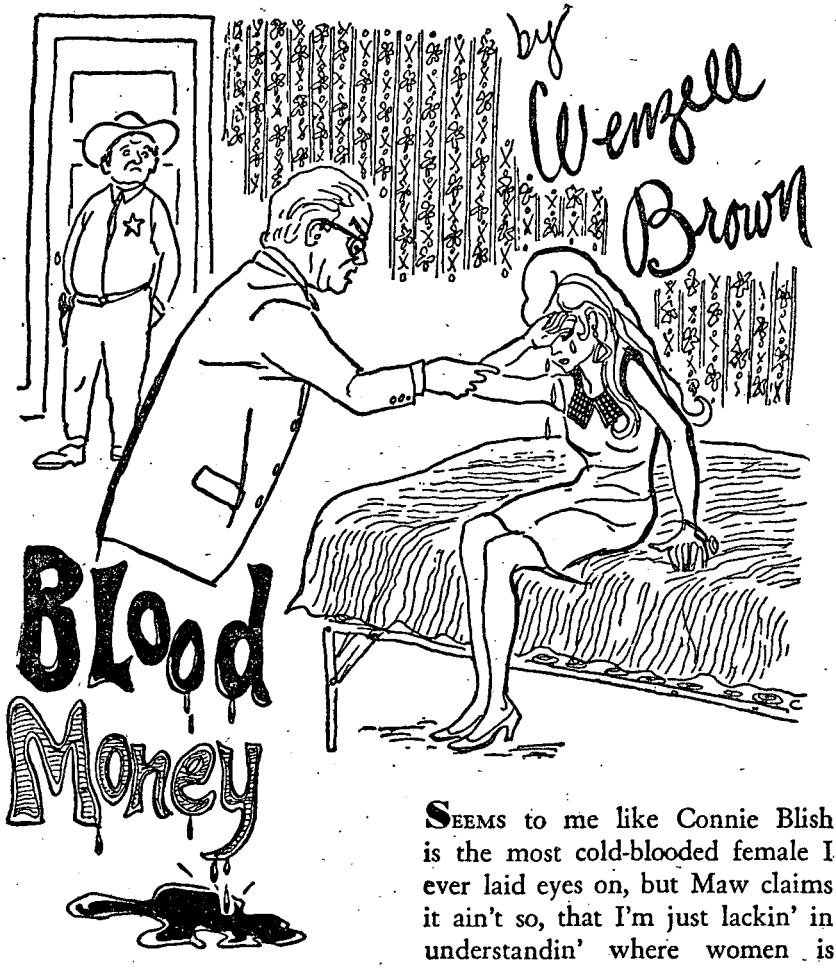
Joey ran faster, stumbling as he ran.

"Mom?"

New people now live in the house, but they know of the five-year-old tragedy.

Mrs. Moran told them, "Didn't hear a thing that day. A fiend he was, just a fiend seeking a victim on a hot day. If only the boys could have had a gun and shot him when he came from the alley and started into the yard . . ."

It would seem to me that in certain cases a reward is not unlike life insurance . . .



SEEMS to me like Connie Blish is the most cold-blooded female I ever laid eyes on, but Maw claims it ain't so, that I'm just lackin' in understandin' where women is concerned. I reckon she scores a

point at that. We been hitched nigh onto thirty-three years, ever since I was first elected sheriff o' Pisquaticook County, and I ain't even pretendin' to understand her yet.

I just happen to be sittin' in the county car in front o' Powers' Fillin' Station the day that Connie hits Cripple's Bend. More often 'n not the big bus headin' north zooms right past, but today it swings onto the apron, the door swishes open and a woman steps out. I don't know it at the time, but she's Connie Blish.

Connie ain't exactly a beauty but there's somethin' about her that catches your eye. She's got ash-blonde hair worn low over one shoulder, fair skin and nicely rounded calves. She's a bit on the skinny side for my taste and her shoulders slope like she's carryin' a weight around with her but for all o' that she's graceful as a cat.

I'm watchin' her so close I almost miss the second passenger. He don't get off 'til Connie's out o' sight somewhere in Powers' place. To tell the truth, he ain't much to look at. He's middle-aged and middle height, with horn-rimmed glasses and a face so ordinary you'd never do a double take 'less, like me, you was sorta on the lookout for strangers in town.

I don't think no more about either of 'em 'til next day when I go into Gimpy's Diner and find the girl waitin' on table. I call Gimpy over and ask him how come. He shrugs. He says the girl just showed up in the mornin' askin' for a job and, as the summer crowd'll soon be pilin' in, he decides to give her a tryout. She's on the quiet side but she seems to be workin' out pretty well.

Later on when I want seconds on coffee, I beckon to Connie. Close at hand she's both older and prettier than I'd thought. Her eyes is clear blue and her features fine cut, but her mouth's on the sulky side and there's traces o' blue veins around her temples and dark pouches beneath her eyes. I ain't much on guessin' women's ages but I reckon she won't never see thirty again.

She brings me my coffee and gives a polite sort o' smile when I crack a joke, but she don't say nary a word.

That afternoon a visitor comes to my office. I don't recognize him at first, then I realize he's the man as got off the bus the same time as Connie. He ain't the talkative type and we spar around 'til he shows me his credentials. His name's Clarence Judson and he's an FBI agent. I don't like it much. In all my years as sheriff there

ain't been no trouble in the county I warn't able to handle myself.

He says, "I'm checking a woman recently come to your community."

"Meanin' this girl Connie who's workin' at Gimpy's, I take it."

He turns on a smile and says, "You're very astute, Sheriff."

Sure, I know he's butterin' me up but I feel myself warmin' to him all the same. I says, "She ain't been stealin' gold from Fort Knox, has she?"

Judson laughs like the joke was a real good un. "No. Nothing like that. The truth is I'd hate for Connie to get into trouble. You see, she's not the one I really want."

I don't see nothin' but I nod anyway. Judson waits like he's expectin' me to fire questions at him, but I decide to let him carry the ball.

He says, "Does the name Bob Yoder mean anything to you?"

It rings a bell and I reach into the lower left-hand drawer of my desk for the "Wanted" flyers I keep there. I don't have to look far afore I find Yoder. He's a young feller with a dark, lean, handsome face, who looks more like a matinee idol than a crook.

I glance through the flyer. Yoder's high on the list o' the FBI's most wanted men. He's thirty-two and has no record 'til about a year ago. Then Yoder starts at the top, so to speak. He pulls a bank robbery single-handed and gets away with close to forty thousand dollars. That's bad enough, but when the police close in on him in St. Louis, he shoots it out and kills an FBI agent named Lance. So they want him, like a baby wants his bottle, and they ain't never goin' to give up 'til they see him strapped in the chair.

I'm listenin' but I don't see what all this has got to do with Connie Blish, so Judson spells it out to me.

Seems like Connie, when she's still in her teens, wins a beauty contest out west somewhere that entitles her to a trip to Hollywood and a screen test. I reckon Connie's luckier than most. She ends up with a contract, some bit parts and the lead in a horse opera or two. For a time it looks like she's goin' great guns and that's when she meets Bob Yoder. He's been a bit actor in New York and lands up in Hollywood with a stack o' clippin's in his wallet. Like Connie, he starts the long climb to what looks like stardom and, like Connie, he gets dumped.

The two of 'em just naturally drift together. Yoder's got a wife somewhere who's walked out on him without botherin' about a divorce. He promises Connie as

soon as he's free he'll marry her. Mebbe he means it and mebbe not, but the promise is enough for Connie to start keepin' house with him.

Both of 'em is waitin' and hopin' for the big break, the phone call that'll tell 'em they're back in show business. Meanwhile, Connie works here and there as a waitress, a hat-check girl, or whatever comes along. Yoder takes a job once in a while but he never keeps it more 'n a day or two. 'Tain't too long afore they both realize they're washed up, but they take it in different ways. Connie wants to leave Hollywood and settle down to an ordinary life in a small town. That ain't good enough for Yoder. He wants big money and he wants it fast, and that's how he comes to plan and carry out this here bank robbery.

Yoder's got more money 'n he can spend, but he's been identified and he's on the run. Connie rides along with him 'cause she's still head over heels in love. She's with him in the St. Louis motel the night he shoots the FBI agent. After that they split up and Yoder drops out o' sight. But the FBI don't have no difficulty in pickin' up Connie's trail. They stick to her like they're glued to her tail 'cause they're certain it won't be long afore she and Yoder are back together again and tryin' to run.

All the time I'm a-listenin' to Judson, I keep seein' Connie in my mind, with her bent shoulders and the pouches beneath her eyes. I ain't got no sympathy for Yoder. A man who'll kill once will kill again, I reckon. But I can't see Connie as a menace to no one and I say as much to Judson.

His mouth goes hard and mean. "She's an accessory after the fact and, maybe worse. Either she'll play ball or she'll spend the next ten to fifteen years in a federal penitentiary, I'll guarantee that."

"What do you want her to do?"

"Help lay a trap for Yoder. If she hands us Yoder, she'll go scot-free. But if she doesn't—" He bit off the words and then added, "I'd better tell you something, Sheriff. Lance, the man Yoder killed, happened to be my best friend."

Like or not, I can see there ain't nothin' I can do but cooperate. That afternoon, when Connie's through at the diner, we go over to Cripple's Inn where she's rented a room. Judson does the talkin' and I do the heavy lookin' on. Connie's defiant but she ain't much of a liar. At first she denies she's Connie Blish and claims her name's Constance Warren, which is the one she's workin' under. As for Bob Yoder, she says she's

never heard of 'im. Judson hammers away 'til she caves in and admits she was with Yoder in St. Louis, but she insists they had a fight and she's left him once and for all, that she ain't got the ghost of an idea where he's holin' up. By this time she's cryin' and wringin' her hands.

Judson lays it straight on the line. He says, "Either you help us catch Yoder or I swear I'll send you to prison 'til you're an old, old woman."

Connie throws me an appealin' look. "Can he do it, Sheriff?"

"I reckon he can and sure as tarnation, he's goin' to try."

Connie's sobbin'. "I still love Bob. I can't play Judas. You can't expect me to."

I shrug. "Look at it this way, Connie: the FBI ain't never goin' to rest 'til they grab Bob. It ain't a matter of your skin or his. He ain't got the chance of a snowball in hell, but you can still save yourself."

Connie throws herself face down on the bed, and has as fine a set o' hysterics as I ever did witness. But it don't do her no good. Judson sits beside her and goes over the same ground again and again: "Why throw your life away to give a killer a few more days of freedom?"

Finally she sits up and spits at him, "I won't betray him. I won't, do you hear?"

Judson's voice is cold as ice. "In that case, you're under arrest, Miss Blish. Put on your coat and come with me. And I want this clearly understood—once you pass the threshold of this room, there's no recanting. I swear before everything I hold sacred to send you to prison."

Connie gets up slowly and puts on her black coat. Judson takes her arm and starts leadin' her toward the door but when she gets close to the sill, she hangs back.

Judson snaps at her, "Make up your mind, Miss Blish. One side of this sill means freedom; the other side means the penitentiary."

Connie's hands fly up to cover her face. Then she swings 'round and crosses to the dormer winder that looks out over the bay. She says over her shoulder, "I'll do what you want. I guess I'm a coward, but I'll do it."

There's a rockin' chair by the winder and she sits down and rocks back and forth while she spills all she knows. She and Yoder has split up right enough and she swears she ain't got the slightest notion where he is. He reckons they'll be safer travelin' separate and he'll be able to lose himself in a big city, 'specially seein' as how he's skilled at makeup. He tells

Connie to find herself a job in some small town off the beaten track and, when she's sure there's nobody on her tail, to insert a message in the personal columns of a weekly New York paper called The Voyager. The ad is to read: "Byron, please come home," then the name o' the town and that's all. She's to wait to hear from him afore the next move.

The way the words is wrung out of her, there ain't no doubt she's tellin' the truth. Judson nods when she's finished and says, "You better write that letter right away."

Connie don't argue. She goes over to the writin' desk, prints out the message and addresses the envelope. Judson takes it from her and slips it into his pocket. As he goes out he says to her coldly, "You're a free woman, Miss Blish, but you won't be long if you try any tricks. From now on, our cause is yours. There'll be no excuses for failure, no second chances."

Judson goes out, and me with him. He stops at the reception desk and talks to the night clerk. By this time he's got a couple more agents workin' with him. Things is fixed up so Connie can't get a phone call through or post a letter without it bein' stopped. He's got the bus stop covered and even the ferry as runs across the bay. Connie may be a free woman but it don't look to me like she's goin' to travel far, no matter how much she may want to.

I leave Judson outside the hotel and head home for supper, but even though Maw's fried up a fresh mess o' tinker mackerel, I can't seem to work up no appetite. After dark I take the county car and go back and park outside o' Cripple's Inn. 'Tain't long afore I spot a battered black sedan half-hidden in the shade of a horse-chestnut tree up the road a piece. There ain't a sign o' life about it, but I got a hunch that Judson or one o' his men is a-watchin' the same as me.

It's close to midnight afore Connie climbs through a winder to the porch o' Cripple's Inn. She's wearin' her black coat with the collar turned up and a dark bandanna around her hair. She's so like a shadder flittin' across the porch and dartin' in and out o' the dark patches in the lawn that I have to rub my eyes to make sure I ain't seein' things. She works her way to the back o' the hotel and along a field that's fringed with scrub pine. I got a good idea where she's goin'. She's headin' for the blacktop that leads out o' Cripple's Bend and joins with Highway Number One at Bradford. There's enough moon-

light so I can circle around without lights and cut across Bay Road to the blacktop. In my rear-view mirror I can see the sedan follerin' me but I don't pay it no mind.

Once I'm on the road, I snap on the lights and start cruisin' slow and easy. The sedan drops back and leaves it up to me. I ain't gone far when my lights pick out Connie, standin' by the road and signalin' for me to stop. I pull up aside her and she runs over and opens the door. When she recognizes me she gives a moanin' sort o' cry and then freezes.

I say, "Don't be a dang fool, Connie. Hop in and be quick about it. Judson or one of his boys is back there and, sure as shootin', if he catches you hitchhikin' he'll cook your goose for good."

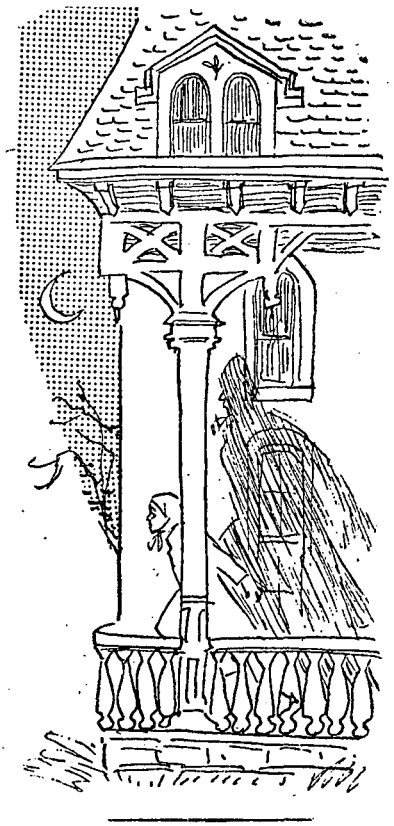
She climbs in and sits beside me, holdin' herself ramrod straight. She says, "I can't go through with it. Somehow I've got to stop that message. If I don't I'll have blood on my hands."

"Lookin' at it from Judson's point of view, you got blood there already."

"Can he really send me to prison?"

"I can't say for sure, but it would sort o' surprise me if he couldn't. Did he tell you Lance was his best friend?"

She gasps at that but she don't say nothin' more. When we're back at Cripple's Inn, I see her as far as the top o' the stairs. When I come back down the walk, the black sedan's beneath the horse-chestnut tree like it ain't never left. I amble over. The winder's rolled down and Judson's sittin' behind the wheel.



He lets out a long sigh. "You're very chivalrous, Sheriff."

The way he says it gets my

dander up. I snaps back at him, "There warn't nothin' to stop you from takin' her in if you wanted to."

"You're forgetting something, Sheriff. Connie Blish is just a pawn in this game. It's Bob Yoder I'm after. All I want of Connie is that she stays put. Have you got some woman you can deputize to make sure she does?"

I think it over. The only female in Cripple's Bend I dare trust on such a mission is Maw. So I swear her in to serve as deputy without salary as long as Connie's in town. Maw sleeps in the room with her and sticks to her like a leech savin' when Connie's workin' at Gimpy's Diner.

A week goes by and nothin' happens. We got the hotel staked out and the diner, too. Judson reckons Gimpy's is the most likely spot for the contact. Yoder ain't got no address in the town but he knows Connie works as a waitress. Besides, the diner's a more public sort o' place where he can move out fast if he don't like the looks o' the setup.

Meanwhile, Maw and Connie's gettin' thicker'n thieves. Accordin' to Maw, Connie's still crazy in love with Yoder. She spends a lot o' time cryin' and a lot more recollectin' the good times they had together. Maw's certain if Connie could think of a way to warn Yoder against comin' to Cripple's Bend she'd take it and suffer the consequences. But Judson's got everything nailed down tight. There ain't no escape from the trap.

The week stretches into ten days and I'm beginnin' to think that Yoder's got a whiff o' trouble or that mebbe he's ditched Connie for good. Even Judson is growin' tense and snappy.

When Yoder does show up, I almost miss him. Even though I know he's good at makeup, I'm still expectin' a young man and a handsome one. This feller who waddles into Gimpy's has a paunch and heavy glasses. His hair is gray and his nose looks like it's been broke and ain't set right. He's leanin' on a cane and his blue serge suit is rumpled and dirty. He limps over to the counter and raps on it, demandin' tea with two pieces o' lemon.

Connie brings the order and I see her eyes go wide with fear. She's so nervous she spills tea all over the counter. Judson's half-hidden in one of the booths. He comes out fast and silent. He's quicker'n me to fill in the picture, but I'm closer and between Yoder and the door. Yoder swings around on the stool and he's in a crouch. His hand has darted into his belt and I see the ugly snout

of a revolver pointin' straight at my chest.

I pull up short but his finger's already white on the trigger. Connie's arm snakes out from behind the counter and with the flat of her hand she jerks Yoder's wrist up. The two shots come so close together it sounds like a single rumblin' report. Yoder takes two staggerin' steps forward and then he sprawls on his face. I reckon he's dead afore he hits the floor.

I just stand still. It takes me the better part of a minute to realize I ain't hit and another to reckon out that Yoder's bullet went high and at the same moment Judson pumped a bullet into him.

Things get pretty confused after that. Maw shows up out o' nowhere and hustles Connie back to the hotel. Judson takes charge and everythin' runs so smooth and easy that by the time the newspapers catch onto the story, there ain't nothin' to show. Somehow Connie's name never comes up and Judson's good as his word about quashin' charges against her.

Me and Maw goes up to see Connie afore she leaves town. The way I work it out, I owe Connie a debt. If she hadn'ta tilted Yoder's arm up, like as not I'd be dead. But Connie ain't the same as she used to be; no more cryin' and no more hysterics. Either she's got herself under iron control or she just don't care no more.

We take her down to Powers' Fillin' Station to wait for the bus. We see it comin' 'round the bend and I turn to Connie and say, "If there's anything I can ever do for you, let me know."

She gives me a long steady look. "I'm glad to hear that, Sheriff," she says. "There was a five thousand dollar reward posted for the capture of Bob Yoder. I want that money, and it seems to me I earned it."

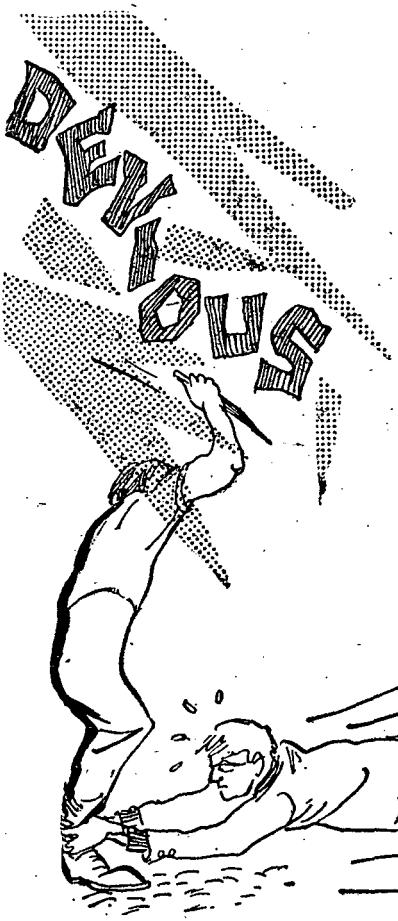
The bus is swishin' to a stop and the door flies open. Connie hugs Maw and kisses her on both cheeks. Then she hops aboard and that's the last I ever seen o' Connie Blish.

But she collects her reward money right enough. 'Tain't long after that she writes to Maw as how she's gettin' married and the money's goin' for a down payment on a home.

When we learn about it, Maw says, "A woman's got the right to build a new life out o' the ashes o' the old."

It seems to me some'at like takin' blood money, but I ain't arguin' none. I'm just a-statin' the plain facts because I reckon folks have got a right to decide for themselves about the kind o' woman Connie Blish is.

The only difference between one man and another, according to G.B.S., is the stage of the disease (of life) at which he lives.



I'D walked to the drugstore to get cigarettes and was returning home when I heard this cracked, singing voice. A fellow had just lurched around the corner and was walking toward me. I watched him weave from side to side and thought, boy, he sure has a snootful. He drew nearer and I moved to one side, giving him plenty of room to pass. Lucky I'd had that nervous, jumpy feeling for days, because he straightened suddenly and I caught the gleam of the knife rising in his hand. I ducked and dropped to the pavement. He was right after me, but I clamped a hold on his ankle and yanked. He tumbled hard and rolled over. I heard the clatter of the knife. Then

By IRWIN FORGES

he was on his feet and running. I had no intention of chasing him. I just sprawled there and tried to catch my breath.

When I got home and poured myself a drink, I decided it was time to examine all the angles. After a *second* attempt on my life, there was an obvious question to be asked: what enemy do I have? I considered making a list of names or setting up columns headed *Friends, Acquaintances* and *Enemies.* Then, by elimination I might come up with the right answer. I even took a sheet of paper and began writing, but after a few minutes I crumpled it up and threw it away.

I said to myself, use common sense. You're Martin Brooks and you're planning to marry a girl named Dana Loret. She's lovely and is going to inherit piles of money when her old Uncle Alf Nesbitt dies. Alf, a retired business buccaneer, wasn't too concerned about who got trampled when he was busy amassing his fortune. Then there's George, Alf's adopted son. He's cut in for a slice of the money in Alf's will, and he's also out to marry Dana. Nothing like being hoggish, combining all the money in one fat heap, and he had clear sailing until I appeared on the scene. Now things look kind of seesaw. Could be that he won't get Dana and all the loot.

Well, where does logic point? Right at George's slick, glowing face. On the surface George is all smiles and exudes sportsmanship—you know, may-the-best-man-win stuff—but beneath that phony facade George is concealing mayhem. He has to be the one. Who else would have a motive? First there was the bullet that came from a passing car and almost parted my hair, then a fake drunk tried to puncture me with a knife. I'm convinced that George's neat little brain devised these capers.

Sure, I've been accused of having a tendency to complicate things. That's why I'm being sensible *now,* keeping myself scientifically rational, refusing to let my imagination run wild. It's George, of course. That's definitely settled. I'll prove Miss McElroy wrong yet. She was my old teacher. She used to say, "Martin, there's only one word to describe you—*devious.* It never occurs to you to do things directly. You never heard of the shortest distance between two points. With you, lines always zig or zag."

She was right—Miss McElroy was usually right—and I kept reminding myself of that as I drove down to the office. I work at the Wellman Corporation, sitting at a desk and shuffling papers around. I've been there three years. Let's

face it, I'm just a clerk, a kind of minor flunky. At one time that used to bother me. I fretted about the chances for promotion, was eager to work overtime, tried to make an impression on Franklin, the office manager. Now I'm indifferent to the whole petty business. If there's an assistant manager's job opening, let Edgar Appleton have it. He wants it bad enough. He's been there longer than I, and he's the likely candidate for the job. I intend to keep my eye on the main chance, as the British say, and that's Dana and her inheritance from Uncle Alf. Once I win *that* prize, it's goodbye to shiny desks, paper clips and office memos.

When I got to the office I found it hard to settle down to work. Thinking about George and the murder attempts made my mind foggy. I must have been staring into space, because I didn't even realize that Appleton was standing on one side, gabbing in my ear.

"You seeing a vision?" he was asking. "Or was the alcohol flowing too freely last night? Get with it, boy, get with it."

"Get with *what?*" I said. "Look, Edgar, I can operate this job with half a mind. That's all it takes, half a mind."

"Maybe that's all you've got," he said, snickering at his own joke. He walked off, shaking with laughter.

I dug into the chores for a while, working to clear the mound of papers off my desk. Several hours later, when it was time for a break, I went down to the coffee machine. I sat and sipped, and began to meditate about George again. It had seemed so plain before, but now it didn't make sense. Consider George—intelligent, a college grad, sharp mind—would he do anything so stupidly obvious? We're rivals for Dana's hand and fortune. If I were murdered, wouldn't all the suspicion fall on him? George would not only be suspect, he'd be the *only* suspect. He *must* be aware of that.

No, I can't accept the theory that George is behind it, and I've got to stop worrying about what Miss McElroy said. Let's look at it another way. Intelligent people *are* devious, aren't they? A man with George's background would simply be too devious to operate so crudely. Well then, who else?

Wait; there's Anthony Oliver, Uncle Alf's combination secretary and valet. We'll follow that thread and see where it leads us. He's been with Alf for years, and of course he'll inherit a juicy sum in the will but, naturally, he wants more. How to get it? I think I see what he's been doing. Clever—

clever. *He* fired the shot and wielded the knife, but was he *really* trying to kill me? Of course not. He just wanted it to *appear* that way. He knew I'd suspect George. Then Anthony figured I'd arrange a little escapade of my own—get even with George, eliminate him. Real neat. I'd do Anthony's dirty work for him, and at the end he'd wind up with a double share. To think I'd actually been considering it. *That* was a narrow escape.

Hold it. I could be missing something. Let's line it up another way. Suppose Anthony *planned* to kill me. He'd never be suspected. George would. Maybe he'd even plant something so the police would grab George. I never realized how clever that guy is! Talk about being *devious,* he's working on a scheme to eliminate two rivals at once. He kills me, and then George is arrested for my murder. Anthony stops me from marrying Dana and cutting in on the gravy, and he pulls up at the finish line with George's money.

I'm sitting there, the coffee forgotten in my hand, when I hear a woman's voice. "Lost in a dream, or is it a daze?"

I could tell who it was without looking. The scorn was thick enough to cut with a knife. That's the way Jeanette's been sounding ever since I stopped dating her. She's Franklin's personal secretary, and at one time she was beginning to get ideas about me and her. You know, the usual cliches, a cozy little home in suburbia, commuting during the week, gardening on weekends, a couple of chubby kids, a life spent clawing my way up the ladder at Wellman Corporation. I never encouraged her too much, but I figured she might be kind of helpful in boosting me to Franklin. That was all before I met Dana. Once I broke it off, Jeanette turned as icy as a winter day in the Arctic.

"Company business," I answered her. "Just sitting here, my mind's tossing around a scheme that'll save the corporation thousands of dollars."

She glared at me, swung around and stalked away. I could imagine the kind of poisoned comments she'd be pouring into Franklin's ear. Lucky I'm not interested in promotion anymore.

I gulped the rest of the coffee and headed back to my desk. Going down the aisle, I could see Jeanette bent over, batting her lashes at Gerald Wilson. He was new around the office and sort of young and impressionable. She was pouring on the allure, and he had the hypnotized look of a rabbit face to face with a beady-eyed snake. I was wise to Jeanette's act.

The week before, when I walked by, she was hovering around stodgy Appleton. When she focused her sultry gaze, I could practically hear the guy panting. Now I swept past them, putting on a preoccupied look.

By the time I arrived home I'd made up my mind. No question about it, Anthony was the man, and the course of action was plain —get him before he gets me. I already knew quite a bit about him. He was a nature lover, one of those guys who likes to plod along the beach, examine rocks, and pick up shells and listen to them. He always had his face flattened against a pair of binoculars, staring out at the sky or some bird that was flapping around.

That weekend I decided to follow him to see if I could get any ideas. He started to drive and I was right on his trail. He maneuvered his car up a twisting road that climbed to a crest where a narrow cliff jutted out. I parked below and clambered up to watch him. He sat on the edge of the cliff, his legs dangling, and peered through his binoculars. He seemed content to sit there by the hour. I'd seen all I needed and crawled back down.

The next day I followed him again, chugging along behind, out of sight. I parked below and climbed up again to see what he was doing. This time he was standing, the binoculars tilted toward the sky. I scrambled down in a hurry, got the car and sent it roaring up the slope. When I reached the top I swung it around in a wide curve, like a driver circling to head back. He turned, smiled as though he recognized me and even lifted a hand to wave. I swerved suddenly, seemed to lose control of the car. It slid straight toward him. He dodged backward. I jerked the wheel around just before the cliff's edge, catching him in the same second, and sort of nudged him on the side. He let out a croaking yell and plunged over the cliff.

I parked the car and walked over to look down, although I was certain that where he'd tumbled there'd be no returning. He lay sprawled out on the rocks. The whole scheme was foolproof. If the police found a bruise on one side, they'd think it was caused by the fall.

With *that* obstacle out of the way, I could settle down to the business at hand—namely, Dana. Of course there was the tragedy of poor Anthony, which upset her for a while, but that wore off and I was seeing her again regularly. She even seemed more receptive to my pleas that she set the date. I re-

turned home one evening particularly pleased with events and convinced that Lady Luck was on my side. I definitely had the inside track with Dana. George was writhing with jealousy and chagrin.

I sat near the window, reading the paper, the lamp glowing over my shoulder. I think I heard the splintering noise and felt the jagged fragments of glass before I could figure out what had happened. Next I was aware of a pain in my ear and I reached up to touch it. Blood was dripping from the lobe. I saw the hole in the glass, remembered the explosion, and everything added up. I'd been nicked by a bullet.

For a moment I was too stunned to think. Then the whole significance dawned. It hadn't been Anthony, after all. Someone was still out to get me. While I was bandaging the ear, I forced myself to concentrate. Nothing would come. I sat down at the desk, took a sheet of paper and began writing names. This time I'd do things in a calm, organized manner. I wrote *George, Uncle Alf, Dana*—who else was left? A lot of minor characters—Frank, the handyman, the chauffeur, butler and maid—but that didn't make sense. I had no suspects.

I *must* be missing someone. I'd had that feeling right along. Then it came to me. Man, I'd been stupid. The lawyer—the family lawyer—came over to see Uncle Alf quite often. What was his name—Eller, David Eller. A real cool, slippery customer, but what was his motive? Why should it be any different from anybody else's? Money, of course. He handled all of Alf's investments. Let's follow *that* through. Obviously, he's been embezzling, lining his pockets with Alf's dough. But why should he want to kill me? I can't see any connection . . . unless . . . that's it. Dana is kind of simple and trusting. Once Uncle Alf is dead and she inherits her money, she'd never inquire about anything. She'd just take it for granted that good old Eller, family lawyer and friend, is one hundred percent honest, but with me married to her, well, foxy old Eller would know I'd pry and investigate until I'd uncover all his juggling and pilfering. He couldn't afford to take any chances on that. Eliminate me—*that* was his project.

Eller's exit from this world had to be the first item on the agenda. One thing was certain, a shifty guy like him must be weighted down with enemies. I didn't have to worry about making it appear an accident. It turned out to be easier than I thought. I only had to fol-

low him twice and then the inspiration came. He lived alone in one of those plush hillside homes. What's the first thing that most people do when they come home from work? It's a universal habit. They walk through the gate or up the front stairs, and they open the mailbox and stick their hand inside. Taking it from there was child's-play.

I waited until the afternoon, watched the mailman leave, and then set to work. I wired the mailbox cover so that the bomb would go off as soon as Eller lifted the lid. Then I parked in a nearby cul-de-sac and waited. The explosion was as loud as a sonic boom. I didn't have to go back to look. Besides, the papers told the whole story. Old Eller had been blown across the great divide. The police were sifting through his tangled affairs. They had nothing but suspects—a long list of shady clients that would keep them occupied for at least a year. They detained four guys in five days and wound up releasing all of them. I wasn't worried. They had an inexhaustible supply.

Everything was clear sailing now. All I had to do was to keep applying the pressure and Dana was bound to say "Yes."

That noon I was taking my usual after-lunch stroll around the block. I stopped to gaze at an old boarded-up house, noticing the sign that announced plans for the erection of a medical building on the site. The huge stone that came whizzing down missed my head by inches. It crashed on the pavement, shattered, and a large piece ricocheted against my shinbone. I clutched the leg and hopped around in pain. From the top of the house I could hear creaking noises. Somebody was probably running down the back stairs.

I sat on the curb and rubbed my bruised ankle. When the pain subsided, I limped back to work. At

the desk I tilted the swivel chair and just lay there staring at the ceiling, too bewildered and frustrated to start that old train of thought again. Reclining, with my eyes half-closed, I heard the nagging voice of Franklin, the office manager. "Maybe we ought to furnish beds," he said. "Have you looked at the clock lately?"

I let the chair drop with a thud and gave him a sour look. For the past few days he'd been as edgy as a mother bear with a litter of cubs. I knew what was agitating him. The big mogul, old Randolph Wellman, founder of the corporation, was scheduled for a visit, and today was the day. I happened to be aware also, through the office grapevine, that there was an opening for a West Coast Manager. Franklin was dying to get that position.

Later that day I could tell by the excitement that Wellman had arrived and was being conducted on a tour of the place. I was poring over a mound of papers when he and Franklin approached my desk. I started to spring to attention, but Wellman gave a cackling laugh and said, "As you were, son. No ceremonies. All wrapped up in your work, eh? That's the way we like to see 'em. Right, Franklin?" He tittered again and Franklin joined in.

The introductions were made and the old man nodded and beamed. "Brooks, eh? One of the ambitious ones, I'll bet; one of the bright young men who'll guide the corporation in the future. Brooks, is that it? I never forget names. I've heard of you, I believe. A favorable report, young man, a favorable report." He looked at Franklin and served up another cackling noise.

Old Wellman sounded senile to me. I didn't know what to make of him. This business of "bright young men" and "favorable reports" seemed like a corny line that he carried around with him and dispensed at all the branches, but I noticed that Franklin wasn't exactly happy about it. The word "young" made him wriggle. He was in his mid-fifties and I'd bet he was scared stiff that some young man would snatch the choice promotion. I caught the irritated gleam in his eyes.

Wellman clucked approvingly. "Keep it up, young man, keep it up. The world needs youth." He clapped me on the back. "Bursting with ambition and impatience, eh? Can't wait to start climbing the ladder of success? Well, I want you to know we've got our eye on people like you." He turned to Franklin. "I'm sure you recall memo number A-784 that was sent

around recently, the one headed, *The Modern Corporation Looks at Promotion*? Great new approach, eh?"

Franklin offered a mechanical grin, but his face had a white tinge.

"A forward looking policy," said Wellman. "Today's corporation doesn't always go through channels, doesn't always stay in old ruts. Promotion mustn't always be automatic, based upon seniority. The corporation has an obligation. When it spots a qualified young man it can promote him at once, move him up so that he skips a few rungs of the ladder. Right, Franklin?"

Franklin nodded feebly.

"Anything is possible." Wellman chortled at me. "Who knows—West Coast Manager, or even General Manager—these could be awarded to some outstanding young man."

I mumbled and smiled while he pounded my back again. Then he walked off, and Franklin, his complexion a dull gray, dragged behind him. It was a pity that promotion was the farthest thing from my mind. If I really cared to put forth the effort, I might grab the big job away from Franklin.

I sat around that night in a gloomy mood. The big question still hadn't been answered. Who was plotting to rub me out? I stared at the three names over and over—George, Uncle Alf, Dana. Nothing came. The letters just floated before my eyes. I got disgusted and decided to take a drive. I'd drop in on Dana.

Fifteen minutes later I pulled up at Uncle Alf's big house. The butler let me in. I walked up the staircase to the second floor. I was going to call Dana when I heard her voice coming from the library. The door was closed. I listened. Uncle Alf was growling and sputtering. He was obviously in a rage.

"I don't understand," Dana was saying. "Why shouldn't I see Martin?"

"Why shouldn't you?" Alf shouted. "I'll tell you why, since you haven't got brains enough to see it yourself. He can't be trusted. He's a fortune-hunter, just after your money, that's all. Good heavens, girl, isn't that plain?"

"Really, Uncle," said Dana, "you've said that before. But it isn't true. He never even mentions money to me."

"Never mentions." Alf made a jeering sound. "Of course not. He's too crafty for that. A slick article—he knows how to pretend. He's sure pulled the wool over your eyes. I want to tell you something." He was shouting again and pounding on the desk. "He's not going

to marry you. Do you hear? I'll never allow it. I'll do anything to stop it—anything."

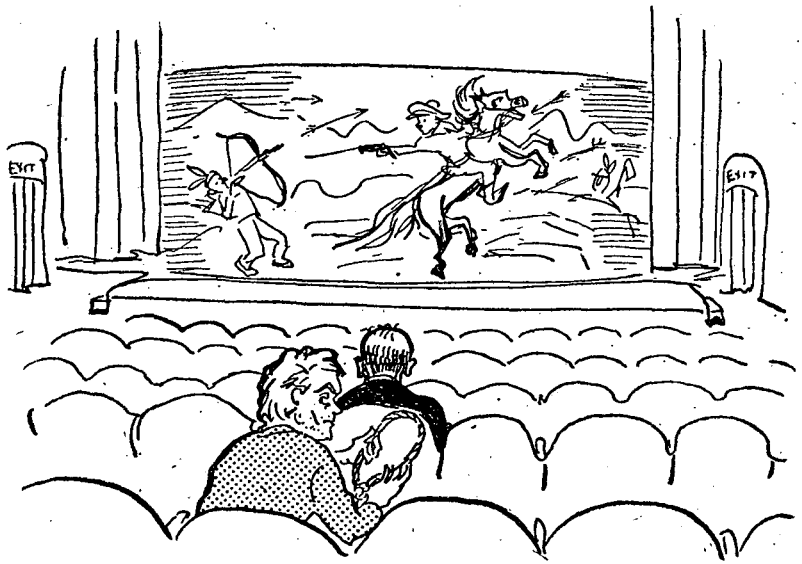
I heard a noise on the stairs and walked away. I was so shocked I just chatted with Dana for a few minutes and then left. At home I wrote the three names again and scratched out *Dana* and *George*. My eyes were finally opened. Of course it'd been Alf all the time. He was the mastermind behind the murder attempts. Who was doing his dirty work? The handyman? A hired killer? Alf had said he'd do anything to prevent the marriage. Well, he wouldn't stick at murder. The old pirate had no scruples. He was absolutely ruthless, had wiped out more than one rival who stood in his way. I could see now I'd have to move fast.

I spent the rest of the evening devising and rejecting schemes. Alf may have been old, but he was still alert and cunning. He'd be hard to catch. To get him alone at home would be difficult or even impossible. No, the job must be done someplace else. It was a question of habits. I discovered that once a week his chauffeur drove him into town and, after finishing his business, Alf always headed for a movie theater. He was especially fond of Westerns and war pictures. The chauffeur would deposit him there and return to pick him up later. I couldn't have had a more perfect setup.

When he went inside the theater I was right behind him. To make sure he wouldn't recognize me and that nobody could identify me, I wore a three day's beard and sunglasses, and had my hair combed wild and hanging down. The place was half-empty. He walked down to the fourth row, where nobody else sat, and I took a seat right behind him. There was only one other fellow in my row, and after a while he got up and left.

I had the noose ready in my pocket. In the middle of the Western, while the cowboys were shooting at a horde of Indians, I moved forward, threw the noose around his neck and jerked it tight. He had only time to make one gurgling sound. I pulled him hard against the seat. He kicked and clawed at the rope for a while, but I held firm. Seconds later all his motions stopped. I waited, then slipped the noose off, shoved it in my pocket, and got up and left. Nobody had the slightest suspicion of what had happened.

As I drove away, I felt supremely confident that the whole business was finished. I'd even accomplished something I hadn't planned to do—given Dana her inheritance, and removed any dan-



ger of Alf turning her against me. I arrived home, walked into the livingroom and switched on the lamp. I heard an odd rustling in the opposite corner of the room. Startled, I swung around. A man's voice called, "Don't move."

I peered into the darkness, unable to make out who it was, but there was certainly a familiar ring to the voice. "What do you want?" I asked.

"Want?" The man laughed. "You know what I want. This time your luck has run out. Tonight I won't miss."

He took a step toward me and I could see who it was. I found it hard to believe. *"You!"* I said. Thoughts raced through my mind. Why would *he* want to kill me? Of course, the reason was obvious, but the poor fool—he was mistaken.

"Appleton," I said, "you're all wrong. I don't want that assistant manager's job. Believe me, it's all yours. I'm not even in the running. It means nothing to me."

"Assistant manager's job?" The words choked in his throat. "Who cares about that? You think I'd want to kill you for something like that?"

"Not the manager's job?" I gaped at him, incredulous. "Well, what then?"

He was trembling with rage. "I hate you, that's what. I've always hated you from the first day you

came to the corporation. You act so high and mighty, think you're so superior to everybody."

"Appleton!" I cried. "What are you trying to tell me?" It was unbelievable. "You don't kill people just because you *hate* them. That's no reason. Are you out of your mind?"

"Oh, I don't, don't I?" He was almost incoherent. He raised his gun. At the same moment I picked up the desk lamp and hurled it at him, then dropped to the floor and rolled behind the desk. The bullets whistled over my head. I lay still. The room was silent, but I could hear his breathing. My only hope was to get my revolver out of the bottom drawer of the desk. I opened it slowly and slipped my hand inside. The floor creaked. I knew he was coming around the side toward me. My hand touched the cold metal. I saw the moving shadow just as I pulled the gun out. I turned and fired. He let out a cry and staggered. I fired again. I saw his white hand clutch his chest, heard his gun drop, and then he fell to the floor.

I stood gazing down at him. He stared up and his lips moved. He was trying to tell me something. I knelt close to him.

"Didn't succeed." His face twisted in pain. The words were forced through his lips in a whisper. He was saying something else that I could barely hear. "Tried . . . times . . . still failed . . ." Was that what he said? I wasn't sure. He head fell back and his eyes closed. He was gone.

I got up, feeling weak and dizzy. It had been a close call. I poured myself a drink and sat down to think it over. So it had been Appleton all the time. And the reason? Just because he hated me, as simple as that. I thought of old Miss McElroy. She was right, as usual. I should have listened to her. Life wasn't complicated, it wasn't devious—it was simple. Appleton had proved it. What a fool I'd been. Well, there was one consolation. I'd finally gotten the right man.

So it was all settled. But was it? I had an uneasy sensation. Something about this didn't ring true. Let's be logical. People don't kill other people just because they hate them. There has to be a motive. Take Appleton, a timid nonentity, a stuffy fuddy-duddy. Was he the kind that would plan these murder attempts? *On his own?* I'd almost lulled myself to sleep. Of course Appleton wouldn't do it on his own. Someone was behind him, but who? Let me think. *Franklin*! Why hadn't I seen it before? He's known about the

new promotional policy for some time, and he knew that Wellman was impressed by my ability, was actually weighing *me* for the job. I was in line for the fat position that Franklin coveted. He egged Appleton on to do his dirty work.

But wait, I've forgotten somebody else at the office. What about the old saying—a woman scorned . . . or, the female is more deadly than the male. Could it be Jeanette? She was always whispering in Appleton's ear. She manipulated him, planned everything. Clever—clever. Jeanette pulled the strings and he was the puppet.

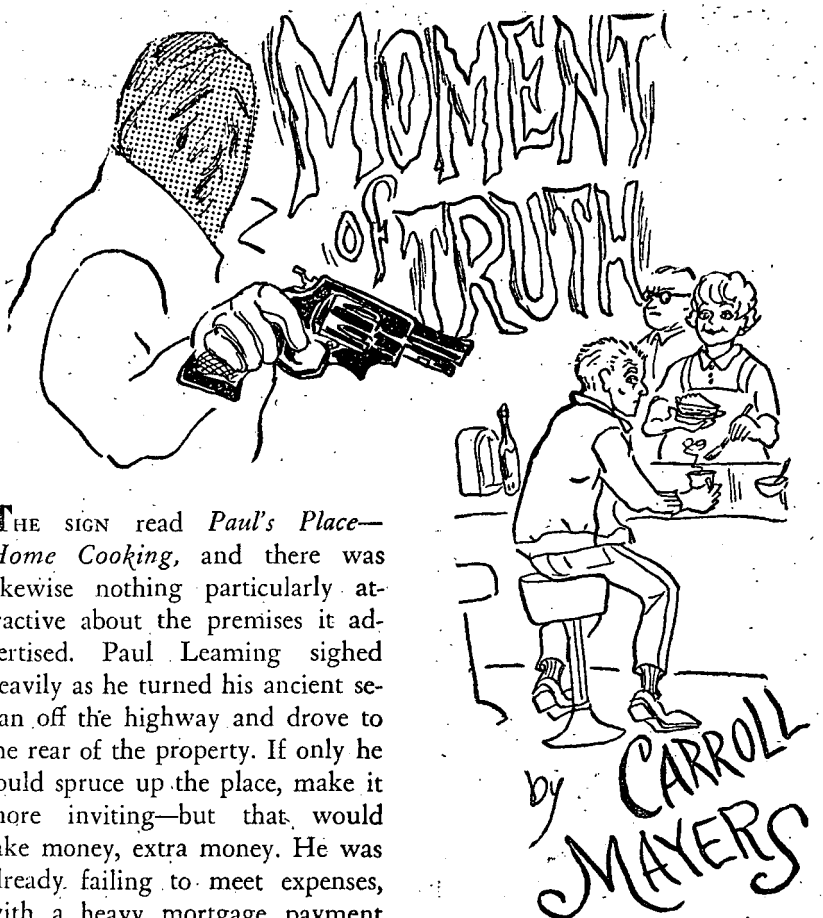
This time I won't be hasty. I've an uncomfortable feeling that something has escaped me. It's coming back to me, Appleton's lips, barely moving. What did he say? *Tried three times* . . . Wasn't that it—*three times?* His lips shaped a "t". I'm certain of that now. He said *three* times. But how could that be? Counting tonight, there'd been *five* attempts on my life. How blind I've been!

I took a sheet of paper and wrote the names—*Franklin, Jeanette, George, Dana.* It was clear as crystal to me now. *Two* people had been trying to kill me all this time, and I'd overlooked the two most important ones, George and Dana. Which one is it? Cunning George, of course, he knew I'd never suspect him. His murder attempts were fakes, just to trick me into retaliating, and I wiped out all of *his* rivals for Alf's money.

Or is it Dana? I wonder if I'm getting a bad headache. Where was I, oh, yes—Dana. She *is* sitting pretty now, a real smoothie. Of course the argument with Alf was deliberately staged by her. She *knew* I was listening outside the door. She manipulated me so that I got rid of Alf for her and she raked in a pile of dough.

Wait—are they working together, in cahoots? Could that be it? What's the matter with me? I've got a funny buzzing in my head, and my eyes are blurred. I seem to be having a dizzy spell. I must get hold of myself. Remember what Miss McElroy said . . . watch it . . . don't be devious . . . watch it. I'm all right . . . I'm calm and logical. I'll list the names again. Let's see, there's *Anthony* and *Franklin* and *Dana* . . . why do the letters swim around? Anthony? Did I write *Anthony?* Wasn't he eliminated? Or was it Franklin? I'm not sure. I'll start over again—*George, Uncle Alf, Dana, Eller*—now, let's see. George? Is he still here? I thought he was gone. No, no, it's Uncle Alf . . . silly, it's Eller, I'm sure . . . but could it be . . .

A moment of truth may be an extension of time.



THE SIGN read *Paul's Place—Home Cooking,* and there was likewise nothing particularly attractive about the premises it advertised. Paul Leaming sighed heavily as he turned his ancient sedan off the highway and drove to the rear of the property. If only he could spruce up the place, make it more inviting—but that would take money, extra money. He was already failing to meet expenses, with a heavy mortgage payment due in three weeks . . .

Leaming's wife, Edith, was pol-

ishing the coffee urn as he came into the diner. She was a frail woman, with more silver in her hair than he cared to see. "It's about time," she chided him fondly.

Leaming kissed her. "I was longer than I expected," he rejoined simply. He avoided meeting her gaze, and switched on a small counter radio full-volume as if to stem further conversation.

Edith Leaming regarded her husband with quiet intensity. "You couldn't get another extension?"

Leaming was a thin man, with worry lines etched deep in his lean features. He turned down the radio's volume, slowly lifted his eyes. "No."

"You explained to Mr. Plummer how things are going a little better?"

"Yes, I did." Leaming inhaled deeply, trying to relieve the tension his trip to town had engendered. "Mr. Plummer's a banker, Edith. He has to safeguard his bank's interests."

"But four hundred dollars can't mean that much to the bank."

"It's not just the amount," Leaming said soberly. "We've already had two extensions. Mr. Plummer has no choice—" Leaming drew his wife to him. "Edith—the bank has to foreclose. We can't hold onto this place."

"But we can, Paul!" Her confidence intimated she failed to fully comprehend the seriousness of what he had said. "There's still three weeks. And we *have* been doing better—"

Edith Leaming broke off as the diner door whined and a well-built youth, perhaps sixteen, came in. Hatless, he wore a black corduroy jacket over a faded blue work shirt, and soiled blue jeans. He straddled a stool, flashing Leaming a brief glance. "Pie and coffee."

The thirty-five cent order was in character not only with the youth's appearance but also with the general trade they had been getting. Leaming queried, "Apple? Cherry?"

"Apple." The youth did not look at him, and spoke as though choice was immaterial. His close-cropped blond hair and smooth, tanned cheeks made him appear singularly young. Leaming was about to scale down his original age estimate when he caught the expression in the kid's averted gray eyes. He had seen the same sardonic look in forty-year-old sharpies.

Realization that this stolid boy was old beyond his years shook Leaming; he abruptly found himself speculating as to the true reason for his visiting the diner. Leaming thought about his clothes. He didn't know about the jacket,

but the shirt and pants suggested both utility and regimentation. An institution?

Vaguely uneasy, Leaming swung to the coffee urn. He wanted to whisper something of his disquietude to his wife, but the radio was blaring a rock and roll number. For her part, Edith Leaming appeared unaware of any sinister nuance as she knifed a portion of pie.

Leaming bit his lips; he was building something from nothing. The kid had stopped for pie and coffee. How he was dressed was his own affair. In fifteen minutes he'd be gone.

Still, Leaming lingered at the urn, covertly studying the boy, and felt his scalp prickle. The kid was just as covertly making his own survey. His veiled gaze flicked over Leaming, his wife, and the cash register.

Leaming's temples picked up a beat; he was positive he was right. The kid was a reformatory escapee, had found a gun—that bulge in his jacket pocket?—and was stalling for the most propitious moment.

A chill traced Leaming's spine. He didn't care about the money in the register, he cared only about his wife. If someone should come in just as this calculating hoodlum made his bid, and the kid panicked, started shooting . . .

Leaming could delay no longer. He turned and set the coffee before the kid. Edith Leaming brought the pie, and watched placidly as the youth forked the first piece. Leaming tensed. The kid was young and strong, but perhaps even at fifty-four Leaming could take him. Maybe he could push his wife clear, grapple with the kid across the counter—

". . . we interrupt for this local news oddity." The rock and roll number abruptly died as the radio announcer broke in. "A gunman wearing what personnel described as a stocking mask and flourishing a revolver entered the Acme Finance Company shortly after noon today.

"After ordering Mark Oberman, senior clerk, to hand over the money in his drawer, the would-be bandit appeared to hesitate. A moment later, he inexplicably turned and fled, taking none of the cash.

"Oberman and the rest of the staff were unable to furnish any definitive description, but police are pressing an investigation."

The sudden transition had caught the kid's attention. As the music resumed, his upper lip curled. "Stupid clown," he muttered.

The remark was involuntary, not conversational, but Leaming seized upon it. If he could get the

youth talking, put him off guard . . . "How so?" he asked casually. The kid's gaze lifted, scorn for Leaming's ingenuousness flicking openly. "He had it made," he said shortly.

"Made?"

"Home clean." The kid's lip quirked again as he put down his fork. "They didn't nab him; he might just as well've grabbed the money. Only, when the chips were down, he chickened out."

Perhaps he was pressing too much, but Leaming figured an irritated kid, arguing, might be less cautious, might give him the opening he wanted before the gun was flashed. "And you wouldn't have?" he said.

Those gray eyes held steady now. "I'm no jerk, mister."

Leaming shrugged, tight chest belying his apparent indifference. "Maybe he had a second thought."

"Eh?"

"Maybe he didn't chicken out. Maybe at the last moment he deliberately decided against the holdup."

"You mean conscience?" The kid mouthed the word as though it had a foul taste.

"Something like that."

"That conscience stuff is for the birds."

"Not necessarily," Edith Leaming suddenly said quietly. "It could be the same with you, young man."

A tic rippled the kid's cheek. "What does that mean, lady?"

She eyed him directly. "I believe you know what I mean."

Alarm flooded Leaming. His wife had also sensed the true situation and was deliberately standing up to this kid with a gun. He tongued stiff lips, said, "Edith, that urn's dripping."

She gave him an understanding glance but did not move back. "You've been stalling, son, working up your nerve," she told the kid simply. "Is this the first time?"

The kid's jaw bunched. Abruptly, he slid from the stool, hand whipping in and out of his jacket pocket. "Suppose it is?" he countered thinly. "I'm taking all the money. I need it. Don't try to stop me."

He did not have a gun. He had a six-inch switchblade, and he menaced Leaming and his wife with short arcs as he moved toward the register.

Frustration was a sour lump in Leaming's stomach. He had waited too long, should have taken his chances sooner. He caught his wife's arm, fearful she might attempt some move.

Edith Leaming stood passive. "There's still time," she told the boy. "You're still not a thief."

At the register, the kid said,

"Were you ever in a foster home, lady?"

"No."

He punched the release key. "I was—until yesterday."

"And now you've run away and become a thief."

His jawline knotted again. "Don't preach to me, lady. I know what I'm doing."

She nodded soberly. "So do I. Selling your self-respect for a few dollars."

For a long moment the kid eyed Edith Leaming boldly, unblinking. Then his mouth set and his free hand plucked a sheaf of bills from the register. He was stuffing the money into his pocket when the squeal of brakes sounded.

The kid whirled, then froze like a trapped animal, eyes wide and darting, fearful at recognition of the sheriff's black and white car.

Leaming sweated. The sheriff's entry could trigger the violent reaction he had feared.

Edith Leaming remained calm. "Put the knife away," she told the youth.

He remained immobile, stricken with uncertainty.

"Put it away!" Her voice was taut, insistent. "And get back on your stool!"

Comprehension of his wife's intent registered with Leaming. He blurted, "Edith—"

She ignored him. With a final gesture to the kid, she moved down to the register. When Joe Guenther, county sheriff, came into the diner, the impromptu tableau was complete. Leaming was swabbing the counter, his wife was checking change in the register, and the kid was back at his place, forking the last of his pie.

"Hi, Edith, Paul." The sheriff was plump-jowled, ample of girth. He settled heavily on a stool, giving the youth only a cursory glance. "Coffee," he smiled at Leaming.

The climax and his wife's resolution had come swiftly. Doubt as to its wisdom still nagged Leaming, but once initiated he had followed her lead. He drew the cup, making conversation. "Out this way officially, Joe?"

The sheriff took a full swallow. "Official wild goose chase, more like," he said. "Woman reported a masked man acting suspiciously at a road market over on route three. Thought it could be the same guy who bobbled a finance company holdup in town earlier."

Edith Leaming cleared away the kid's pie plate. The kid's eyes lifted briefly, and she gave him a look that meant, *Sit tight.* The sheriff remained oblivious to the by-play.

"And it wasn't?" Leaming asked.

"It wasn't." Guenther's sigh was

tired. "Just a fellow with most of his face bandaged with some skin disease."

Leaming said, "You're probably used to those false alarms by now."

The sheriff sighed again, finished his coffee. "If I'm not, I should be," he muttered. "Well, be seeing you folks." Thumbing change onto the counter, he gave the kid another impersonal look, and left.

The kid made no move until he heard the sheriff's car engine and the spurt of gravel. Then he stood erect. His lips were quirking, his eyes again wide, probing, but now a somewhat different light glinted in their depths. He turned, checked himself, swung back. He thrust one hand into his jacket pocket, his throat constricting as he once more hesitated. Abruptly, he pulled out a fistful of money and slapped it on the counter. Then, wordless, he spun about and fled from the diner.

The slam of the door released the tension that had gripped Leaming. He stiffened weak knees. It was over—and nothing had happened. His wife's ploy had succeeded.

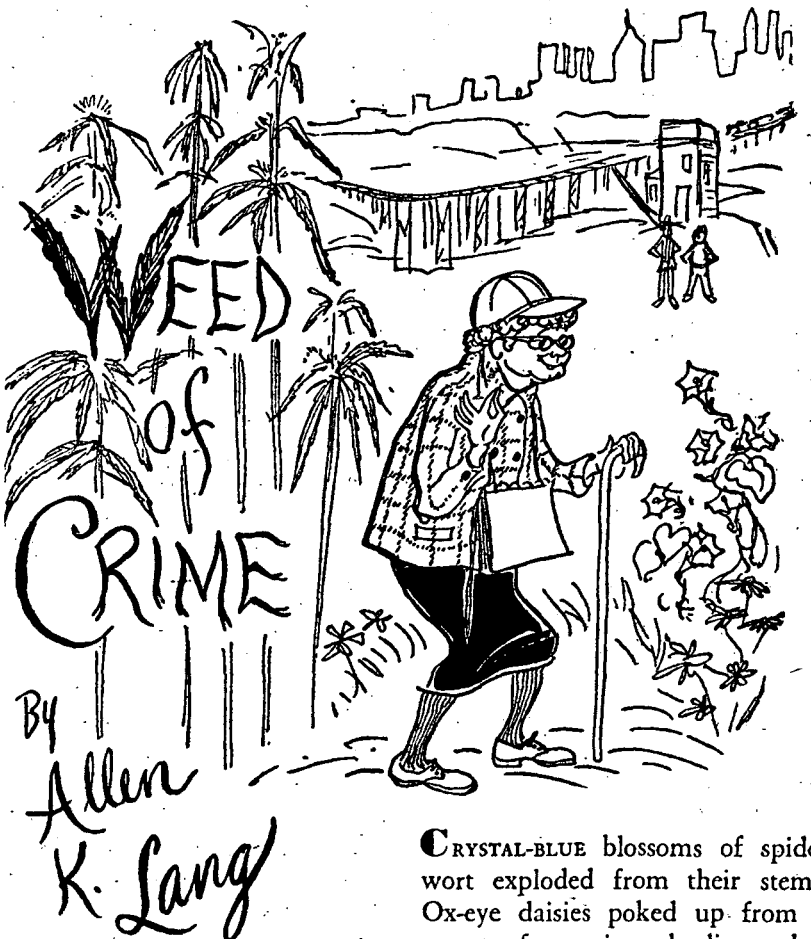
Edith Leaming gave her husband a smile as she counted the money. "He didn't keep any of it," she said. "He was only a boy, and I do believe it was his first time. Did I do wrong, Paul?"

Leaming shook his head. "No, you didn't," he told her, because he felt she truly hadn't. The kid's remembrance of this day, when he hadn't turned thief, could very well serve him the rest of his life.

Leaming hoped so. But he knew the youth had no exclusive claim on the moment of truth, knew also the true reason he had gone along with his wife so the kid might have another chance. Conscience could burgeon in age also.

As his wife resumed polishing the coffee urn, Paul Leaming went back to the ancient sedan and took from the glove compartment the stocking mask and revolver last seen by that finance company personnel. He buried them behind the diner Edith Leaming was so convinced they would manage to keep. He buried them deep.

Boredom is said to have ceased from the moment of woman's creation; so, forthwith, Felicia.



CRYSTAL-BLUE blossoms of spider wort exploded from their stems. Ox-eye daisies poked up from a carpet of creeping charlie, and a hundred purple morning glories

trumpeted up at the sun. "And there's a dragonhead mint!" Felicia Vickers said, and tucking her cane under one arm she flipped open the notebook she wore on a shoestring around her neck, like a placard. Applying her soft black pencil vigorously to the paper, Felicia sketched the sharp-toothed leaf of the mint. "Goodness, but it's nice to be back in Chicago," she murmured.

The city had changed in the thirty-five years since she'd made her plant census here, for her master's degree. This scrap of wasteland between the highway and the railroad tracks was still the vest-pocket Eden she remembered, although the girl she'd been had become this arthritic grandma.

A twelve-car train roared toward the Loop, hustling a thousand men and women to their desks, where they'd use up this lovely day by stapling papers together and murmuring "Yessir" into the telephone. "While I," Mrs. Vickers gloated, "will roam the woods in the morning and sit the afternoon in the Wrigley Field bleachers, cheering the Cubs on to clobber the Pirates."

Finished sketching her *Dracocephalum,* Felicia dropped the pad and pencil to dangle around her neck again. Not an attractive device, but convenient when one had to dodder along on a stick. "Speaking of dodder," she said, "there's one, sucking the juice from an Indian mallow. I've known people like that." The stringy dodder twined tight around the larger plant, hanging on with dozens of rootlets, through which it tapped off the sugars it couldn't make for itself.

The soil would be richer down at the base of the embankment, Mrs. Vickers decided. She'd climbed up here, and she'd darned well get back down if she had to slide on the seat of her skirt.

The path down was over beside the abandoned switchman's shack. There was a large patch of silvery cinquefoil there. Or was it cinquefoil? "No!" Mrs. Vickers tugged down the bill of her cap and limped toward the stand of weeds, thick as untrimmed hedge, tall as she was. "A regular forest of it," she marveled. She touched the hairy stem of one of the plants with her pencil, then sniffed at the resin that stuck to the point. "Characteristic odor, yes. Palmate leaves, yes. It's *Cannabis sativa,* without a doubt."

Felicia had tucked a single-edged razor blade into the spine of her dangling notepad, handy for heavy-stemmed plants like these. She used it to slice off two foot-long plant heads, one bearing male

flowers, the other female, then tucked the blade back into the lining of the notebook. "Hope I'm not challenged by John Law on my way back to the apartment," she mused. "An old lady school teacher might have trouble explaining to a Chicago cop why she's toting enough marijuana to stuff a dozen reefers."

"Drop the weeds, Grandma," someone said.

Felicia Vickers dropped them and turned slowly, using her cane as pivot.

There were two men standing in the doorway of the switchman's shack. The man who carried the weed cutter was all lumps and bulges, like one of those cloth dolls children spoon full of sand at the beach. The other was skinny as a ragweed stalk.

"Why you tromping through the middle of my farm, Granny?" the lean fellow demanded.

"I'm a retired teacher," Felicia Vickers said. "Thirty-five years ago I made a census of the casual flowering plants of the city. As a hobby, I'm bringing my census up to date now."

"Leave my name off your census," the man with the chopper said. "What we going to do, Jimmy Lee?"

Jimmy Lee fisted his right hand and rammed it into his companion's plump shoulder. "First of all, Chester Allen Lewis, we're going to mention each other's names so Grandma will know who to tell the cops to get."

"Ow!" Chester dropped the weed chopper to rub the bruise. "I didn't mean any harm, Jimmy Lee."

"You are the dumbest creature this side of the Pee Dee River," Jimmy Lee observed, then returned his attention to Mrs. Vickers. "Grandma, you know what we got here?"

"Of course," she replied. "*Cannabis sativa,* also called Indian hemp."

"Likewise, Mary Jane, boo, pot, muggles, pod, and Tijuana catnip," Jimmy Lee explained. "So what's your plans?"

"First of all," Felicia said, "I'm going to add *Cannabis* to my census. After that, I'm going to call the police."

"Call loud," Chester advised. "Nobody can hear nothing, not with that electric train banging by."

A train of three cars roared past, holding up its six pantographs as though to balance it on the tracks. Felicia Vickers waved her cane in an earnest semaphore for help. The one rider on the east side of the train who was not immersed in the *Tribune's* sports section waved

back, smiling through the window.

"Damn!" Mrs. Vickers said.

"You're going to give Chester a heart murmur, using such language," Jimmy Lee said.

"You two are obviously criminal types who have evidently cultivated this field of marijuana for illicit profit," she said.

"Evi-you-bet-your-eyes-damndently!" Chester said. "I pulled out nettles till my hands was furry with their stingers, and I spent all last fall chopping out weeds and stomping them little brown seeds into the cinders. I worked hard farming this railroad embankment, Grandma. Me and Jimmy Lee ain't about to see it mowed by no vice squad mower."

"A clever project," Mrs. Vickers admitted. "Who would look for a roach ranch right in the middle of town? And who cares what grows on this trash land?" She gazed down the embankment. The tangle of stiff plants grew even more densely below. "I would guess that you have a ton of this peculiar hay ready for harvest."

"Feels like a ton when I got it in sacks and carry it down to the truck," Chester said.

"That would be about five thousand dollars' worth a year?" she asked.

"More like ten grand from this patch," Jimmy Lee said, looking smug as a 4-H Club ribbon winner. "And we got a couple other patches, here and home in Kansas City."

"Ah." Felicia Vickers planted both hands on her cane and leaned on it. "So that my going to the police would be interrupting no mere hobby, but would destroy a major industry; is that it?"

"Last fellow with a mind to stop us farming ended up underground, right down there," Chester confided, pointing to a clump of trees at the bottom of the hill.

"You gristle brained shoat!" Jimmy Lee shouted, and pounded him again.

"So there's a corpse in yonder copse," Mrs. Vickers said. "I believe I see the little hummock where you buried him, with violets growing over it. *Sit tibi terra levis,*" she added.

"What say?" Chester asked.

"May the earth lie light upon you," Felicia explained. "An epitaph for one who died before his time." She sighed. "I taught Latin for a while, years ago."

"When you were teaching, folks were likely still speaking it," Jimmy Lee said. He held out a loop of keys toward his partner. "Go unlock the truck. I'll bring Grandma."

Felicia Vickers glanced at the

keys, looked down the hill toward a certain spot, then lashed out with her cane.

Jimmy Lee howled as the cane tip struck his hand. The sparkling oval of chain flew down the hill toward the solitary hawthorn tree that stood in the thicket of weeds. "You crabbed old witch!" the skinny man yelled, and swung out to lash the back of his hand against Felicia's mouth.

She swallowed hard, blinked back the tears, and pressed her upper plate back where it belonged. "Young man," she said, "you are a beast."

"Grandma," Jimmy Lee replied, "people who hit at folks with a stick can't hardly complain when they get whomped back. Chester, you best go find them keys. They's the only set we got to hand."

"How come I always get to do the dirty work?" plump Chester asked.

"Because," Jimmy Lee explained, "you're too all-fire dumb to do anything else."

Chester dropped his weed cutter and scuffed down the side of the embankment toward the hawthorn. "We ought to have two, three sets of keys," he complained loudly. "Anybody with an ounce of sense knows you should have extras."

"Just you find the keys, fat boy," Jimmy Lee yelled down, angrily.

"Hillbilly, if you're so smart, you come on down and find 'em," Chester shouted back. He grubbed around by the tree trunk, his face buried in the greenery. "Everything's so tangled up in these stupid vines a body couldn't find a cow down here, not if she wanted to hide; let alone a little bitty set of keys."

Jimmy Lee grabbed the weed cutter and bounded down the embankment. "You stay put, Grandma," he said. "Even old Chester can outrun you." Like an inept golfer trying to blast out of a trap, he slashed at the vines and roots that were bound to the trunk of the hawthorn tree. His blade spewed up a green ash of leaves and chopped stems. "Now find them," he challenged Chester.

The heavy man knelt in the silage his partner had chopped up and sifted the sap-bleeding leaves through his fingers. "A little closer to the tree, I believe," Felicia Vickers called.

Jimmy Lee raked the weed cutter around the tree, scooped up handfuls of trash, sifted and swore.

Chester stood up, dangling the chain from one finger. "Look what I found, Jimmy Lee."

"So go unlock the back of the truck," the thin man said. He

wiped the sweat off his eyes with his hand, leaving a green streak across his forehead.

"But we ain't finished loading up," Chester protested.

"All we're going to load is what we got, plus Granny," Jimmy Lee said.

"Where you gonna take her?" Chester asked.

Jimmy Lee frowned at Felicia Vickers. "I don't reckon it would be smart to plant her here on the farm," he said. "One corpse underground might be overlooked, but two makes us liable for a cemetery license. So we'll take her off to K.C."

"You know how far Kansas City is from here, Jimmy Lee?" Chester demanded.

"We make the trip twice a week; sure I know," the skinny man said. "You know that old sedan with the big trunk, rusting away out by your Pa's barn? That trunk is just where Grandma is going to spend the next few years."

"Couldn't we dump her in Lake Michigan?"

"Sure, Chester. Take her out on Rainbow Beach, past the lifeguards and the pretty girls in bikinis and little kids' sand castles and fling her on in. Wave to Sergeant Rowan's police boats while you're doing it; and give my regard to the Coast Guard."

"OK, Jimmy Lee. We'll put her in the old car."

"My daughter expects me home for lunch," Felicia said. It wasn't true, of course; she and Joe and the kids would be in Europe for another month. "If I don't show up, she'll call the police."

Jimmy Lee took his pocketknife out, unfolded a blade and slashed a burlap bag into two-inch ribbons. Working deftly, he stuffed one of the strips between Mrs. Vickers' upper and lower plates,

pulled the ends tight behind her ears, and knotted the gag firmly in place. Chester grabbed her hands, took a length of jute and strapped them together behind her.

Jimmy Lee picked up the cane, said, "Mush, Granny," and poked her toward the edge of the embankment. "The truck is right down the hill. Don't worry about falling; it would just get you there faster."

Without her hands to balance her, half-smothered by the gritty rag in her mouth, Felicia stumbled down the cinder slope. In the middle of Chicago in the middle of the morning, why was no one here to help her? Screened by the hemp plants, though, the three of them might as well be in a jungle.

The truck, as Chester and Jimmy Lee called it, was parked a few dozen yards from the far edge of the marijuana-patch. It was, in fact, a hearse, gray body with black trim, buffed and polished as though ready to bear an elegant corpse off from a society funeral. The windows were tastefully frosted. Chester twisted his key to open the rear door.

"We'll lock you in to make sure," he said. "You should ride real comfy on those there sacks." He shoved her forward onto the filled bags of marijuana, slammed the door, and locked it.

The way her arms were pulled behind her by the wrist bonds made Mrs. Vickers' arthritic shoulders feel as though their nerves and bones were being twisted apart. She settled back, conscious of the resinous odor that seeped from the bagged weed beneath her. She heard the two men get into the front seat. Jimmy Lee pushed aside one of the little frosted-glass panels to look in on her. She lay still. He slammed the window shut. The hearse crawled up onto the road, turned, and headed southward toward the highway.

It was about five hundred miles to Kansas City, Mrs. Vickers mused. If these fellows held to the speed limit—and carrying their double load of contraband, they'd have to—she had nine or ten hours before her execution was scheduled.

Breathing was difficult with the burlap strap pulling tight against the corners of her mouth, and she was starting to feel gaggy, the way she did when the dentist pushed those horrid little folds of x-ray film 'way back. Felicia tried to grind her teeth into the cloth, to gnaw through. A wave of nausea stopped her. Maybe if she could loosen the plates? She tongued the lower one free, wriggled her lower jaw, trying to scoot the gag down over her chin. Easy, now.

If she made herself sick with these maneuverings, she'd die nine hours earlier than the men up front had planned. She wagged her jaw from right to left. There! The thing was free, dangling down around her notebook. And that whistle she heard outside would be a traffic cop in Joliet.

Like a giant lavaliere, her notebook lay suspended by its length of shoestring on her bosom, and set into its spine was the razor blade. Sitting up straight on the crackling sacks, Felicia Vickers leaned forward till the notebook hung free, then nodded her head in a quick circle. The book spun around her neck on its string like a miniature hula hoop.

She glanced up at the translucent window that stood between her and the two hemp farmers. "Wouldn't want them to see me with my lipstick all smeared," she told herself. Felicia tilted herself back—oh, but her shoulders hurt! —until she lay with her feet propped toward the front of the hearse. Her hands were busy behind her, trying to tease that razor blade free with fingers so cramped that they felt like twin bundles of sticks.

Now the blade was out. Her right hand was crossed outside the left. To bring the blade edge to bear, she'd have to whittle left-handed. "One slip, and my concert-piano career is shot," she observed. Ooops! Cut a little too deep with that stroke. Suicide would be a waste of time in her situation, with two men ready and eager to do her in at no inconvenience to herself. Thinking of Jimmy Lee's enormous pocketknife, Felicia sawed a little more fiercely at the burlap stretched across her right wrist.

Both shoulders ached so she could hardly move her hands. Forgot to take my vitamin-D-and-calcium capsules this morning, she remembered. No wonder the old skeleton's throbbing. She tugged. Her hands were free. She eased her arms out to look at her wrists. The right one was cut for sure, but the cut was shallow and over to the margin, away from the tendons and important nerves. "Mustn't waste any of that blood." Using her right wrist as a sort of red rubber-stamp, she leafed through her notebook, printing evidence of her hurt on every page. "To prove that I'm serious," she murmured.

Sprawled on the floor like a teen-aged girl at the phone, Felicia pulled the notebook close and reeled in the stubby pencil on its line of shoestring. HELP she lettered on the top sheet, next to the bloodstain. I AM PRISONER IN HEARSE HEADED FOR K.C. ILLINOIS PLATE HC-5508. CALL POLICE, PLEASE.

She carefully tore off her first note and set about folding it into a neat fan. Working around the edges, she folded tiny paper petals. A crumpled piece of paper would win no attention on the average city street. A bloodstained white rose, though, might well be picked up and examined. Those hours she'd spent beguiling the grandchildren with Origami, folding birds and beasts, flowers and toys from squares of bright-colored paper, would pay off now if some curious pedestrian plucked this little rose from the gutter. Grimly, Mrs. Vickers set to work lettering another HELP-note. This

one she folded up as a perky penguin.

They should be heading through a city soon, either Springfield or Davenport, depending on which route Jimmy Lee had elected. Felicia had four Origami roses ready, three penguins, and two birds who beat their wings when their wishbones were squeezed; a swan and a little paper box with LOOK INSIDE ME lettered on all six sides. She'd stopped with this collection only because she'd run out of pencil. Sharpening it with her sap-stained, bloodstained razor blade, Felicia had been forced to waste a good deal of it. Now to get her messages outside the hearse.

A car honked angrily, somewhere close. A train or maybe a streetcar clattered past. The hearse stopped for a moment, then went on again. Obviously they were in a city now. Here goes, Felicia decided.

The back door was locked, as though the hearse had been designed to transport unwilling passengers, but the rear window, though frosted like the others, would roll down. Crossing the fingers on one hand, Felicia occupied the other in cranking the window open.

Beer signs proclaimed civilization on either side of the road. Traffic poured past, headed in the opposite direction from the hearse, suburban-bound. A red compact stood chugging at the traffic light a block behind. "Catch up, little bug!" Felicia Vickers whispered, and dropped out a rose and a flying crane. No pedestrians in calling distance, no police at the corner, but the little car was humming up closer. She tossed out the little box, another rose, and a white penguin.

A girl about six years old sat beside a man in the front of the little car. "Help!" Felicia shouted. "I'm being kidnapped!" The child turned to the man, and Mrs. Vickers could see her lips forming the words, "Daddy, look!"

The hearse swung over to the side of the street, and the little car buzzed up to stop alongside. A key turned in the back door. Chester huffed in, slammed the door behind him, and cranked the rear window shut again.

Felicia heard the other driver's questions, heard Jimmy Lee say, "Crazy as a coot, poor old thing," and something about a hospital. Then Chester brought his fist down against her neck, and she was out of the game for an inning or two.

It was dark when she came to. Cross-legged on a sack of weed, fat Chester glared at her.

"Where are we?" Felicia asked.

"'Bout half hour west of Columbia, Missouri," he said. "Almost home. You sure are a tough old bird."

"Thank you," Mrs. Vickers said. "You didn't happen to hear how the Cubs did this afternoon, did you?"

"Been too busy itching to fuss my head about ball games," Chester said. "When it ain't you raising hell out the rear window, it's me having to scratch. Like I got all seven years of a seven-year-itch at once. And my eyes feel funny. Like this weed is stinking up the air in here."

"Rub your eyes good, Chester," Felicia suggested. "Rub them good and hard. That'll help; you'll see."

"Maybe so." She heard his eyebrows rasp as he massaged the heels of his hands into his eyes. He peeked out at her. "Don't try no tricks," he cautioned her. "I'll have to whomp you again if you try; and you won't come to again if I do." He rapped his knuckles against the window in back of the driver's seat.

The panel slid open. "What's the matter?" Jimmy Lee shouted over his shoulder. "Can't you handle one senile school teacher?"

"All I want," Chester said, his tone wounded, "is a tissue out of the glove compartment. My eyes is both weeping something fierce."

"I used it all up blotting at my eyes," Jimmy Lee said, "so settle down, Chester."

Headlights from an approaching car stabbed through the windshield and into the coffin compartment of the hearse. Both men's faces were swollen, Mrs. Vickers observed. Chester was scratching his. "Harder," she advised him.

"I can't see so good," Jimmy Lee said. "Itching so I can't hardly hold to the steering wheel. Chester, why don't we trade places the rest of the way?"

"I'm scratchy as you," Chester protested. "It's only a small piece down the highway; then we'll dump Granny into the back of Pa's old sedan and get ourselves a night's sleep."

"Those idiots won't dim their lights." Jimmy Lee swore at them. "Enough to blind a fellow. Gotta squint to see the road." Another pair of lights probed in. Felicia heard Jimmy Lee's heel stabbing at the floor switch, flicking his highs at the oncoming driver. "Watch out!" he yelled.

The hearse's right wheels jumped down to the gravel margin of the road, skittered, then coaxed the left wheels over to join them. Bright lights spun past on the left. The hearse ground-looped further right, then folded its hand-

some nose against the side of a tree.

"Burr-oak, I believe," Felicia grunted. Although she'd been padded between sacks of marijuana, the crash had rammed the breath out of her. "Might burn," she said. "Chester, get us out of here."

"Can't see," the fat man panted, scrabbling his fingers at his face.

"Good," Mrs. Vickers said, then cranked down the rear window again, reached out, and opened the door. Chester was busy scratching, so she walked around to look in on Jimmy Lee, a handy length of burlap in her hand.

The driver was bent over the steering wheel, peering down through it as though he'd lost something valuable on the floor. He wasn't likely to find whatever it was, even when he woke up; his face was as swollen and lumpy as a broken fist. Felicia strapped his wrists together, then switched off the ignition key, a move she'd heard recommended for after a wreck. After lifting matches from Jimmy Lee, she dragged four of the big bags out toward the highway and set them afire, using two penguins and an Origami swan to get them started. "I've been told that burning marijuana brings the police," she remarked to Chester.

He paid her no attention. Seated at the opposite side of the tree from the hearse, he gave full attention to scratching first one forearm, then the other, then his face.

"Here's company, Chester," Felicia called to him.

The squad car parked at the side of the highway, its Mars-light flashing. A young patrolman jumped out and sprinted over to Felicia, who was poking at the weed fire with her cane. "Are you all right, Miss?" he asked.

"Quite well, thank you very much," she said. "Officer, I think you should know that these two men are murderers, and that the pungent smoke you smell comes from the several hundred pounds of marijuana they've brought across a state line. I'm sure you know what to do. Meanwhile, I have a question."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"How did the Cubs make out today against Pittsburgh?"

"Bill Hands put the Pirates under, two to one."

"Thank goodness," Felicia said. "I worried about that game all afternoon."

The policeman played the beam of his flashlight over Chester's face, then looked in on Jimmy Lee. "What happened to these two?" he asked. "They look as though they've been shaved by a blowtorch."

"If you'll lend me that flashlight

for a moment, I may be able to help them," Felicia said.

Taking the light, she hobbled down into the woods alongside the highway, while the policeman herded the two scratching men to his squad car and waited.

In a moment Mrs. Vickers was back, waving a bouquet of vines and pale yellow flowers. "I thought I'd find this growing down by that little stream," she said.

"More marijuana, ma'am?"

"Oh, no!" she said, and got in the police car. "This is wild touch-me-not."

"That's nice." The young man sighed.

"Here in Missouri, I believe you name it jewelweed."

"Can't see," Jimmy Lee moaned.

"This should help," Felicia said as she set about squeezing one of the lumpy vines she'd gathered, patting the juice over his face and arms and allowing a little to trickle under the handcuffs. Finished with him, she repeated the treatment on Chester.

The patrolman started the car and eased it onto the highway. "Would you mind telling me what you're doing?" he asked.

"I'm responsible for causing these men a lot of suffering," Felicia said. "I tossed their keys into a patch of poison ivy. They chopped and mashed around in it till they had themselves a third-degree dose. They were bringing me to Missouri to kill me, Officer, and I wanted to do anything I could to interfere with their plans. And I must admit, even though no one followed up any of my fancy little notes, I did pretty well."

"Well enough," the policeman conceded. "Is that juice you're marinating them in supposed to finish 'em off?"

"Heavens, no!" Felicia said. "Jewelweed is the best thing in the world to stop poison ivy itching; and you see, Officer, I don't want to have Jimmy Lee and Chester scratching themselves while you're telling them about their Constitutional rights. No sir; I want those two fellows to stay in jail once they get there."

One never sees the gambling bug, but its bite is highly infectious, the affliction tenacious.

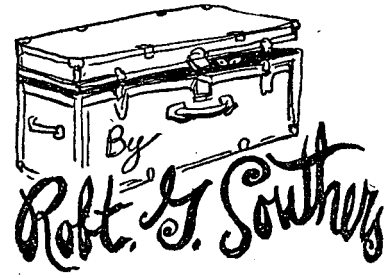
I KNELT by the bank of the little stream, cleaning the day's catch of trout. My nose wrinkled; it's funny how another man's fish stinks worse than your own.

A burst of laughter came from the cabin on the hill behind me. It was my Uncle Ben's laugh, loud and rich, like my Uncle Ben.

Ben and his buddy, Max, were up there playing tonk for twenty bucks a game. They treated money as if it were so much blank paper. This morning they'd had a fifty dollar bet on who would catch the first fish. Max won on his third cast.

Then they had bet another fifty on who would catch the biggest fish of the day, and Max won again. Ben merely grinned that silly grin of his and passed over the dough.

Every year it was the same. Ben and Max would come down from Vegas to spend a few weeks loafing in the sun, Ben would toss my old lady a few bucks, and she would give them the run of the place. I always got thrown in as



their personal slave, all for free.

It wasn't that way when my Pa was alive. Ever since he left us, things started going downhill. The cow got loose on the highway and got herself crippled by a truck; the last big wind had blown half the shingles off the roof; the whole north section of fence was down; my old pickup needed a valve job in the worst way. Things were piling up so fast that I couldn't get ahead even by working from dawn to dusk.

The worst part of all was playing flunky to Uncle Ben. He was always so sure of himself; always right on top of every situation. Ben could make more in a couple of hours than I could by breaking my back sixteen hours a day. It just didn't seem fair.

I filled the pan with fresh, clean water and carried the fish into the cabin. Ben and Max were still hunched over the table, playing head to head. Neither man looked up.

Max drew a card from the deck. He flipped over a queen to top off Ben's spread, played a three card run of treys, and slapped down his discard. He had rummed out again.

Ben fingered a crumpled twenty from his pocket and handed it over silently. The diamond on his finger winked as he touched his neat little moustache. "Be long before supper, Al?"

"Not long," I said.

Max grinned as he gathered in the cards. "Good. Maybe you can play a hand or two later."

I just looked at him. Max knew I didn't have any money.

"Deal, Max." Ben patted the supply of bills in his pocket. "We can still get in a few more hands."

"I never knew anyone so anxious to lose his money." Max blew a stream of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Deal. Deal."

In the time it took me to fry the trout and bake a pone of cornbread, Ben lost four more twenties. It didn't seem to affect his appetite; he ate as if there were no tomorrow.

I chopped plenty of kindling and filled the wood box while they ate and gabbed about the big town. They talked about all the money they had won, and of all the women they had known, until I was sick of it. They had been to places I'd never be able to go and done things I could never do, and I hated them both for it.

After they finished their coffee, I cleared the table and washed the dishes as they got into another game.

This time the cards fell to Ben. He took back his dough and tore

into Max's roll for over a hundred dollars. I stood there for a while, watching them pass that money back and forth and hoping they would choke on it.

"I'm going home," I said. "I've got a lot to do tomorrow."

Ben looked around. "Okay, Al, we'll be seeing you. And tell your mother we'll be leaving in a day or two."

I nodded glumly. It couldn't be too soon to suit me.

Max stood up, stretching. "Let's take a break. Anyway, it's time for your medicine."

"You'd make a great little old lady, Max," Ben griped, but he was rummaging through his battered old footlocker for his pills as I stepped out onto the porch.

It was cool and dark outside, and I paused for a moment by the truck to enjoy the sounds of the night creatures. This was the best part of the day. I relaxed and dug a half-smoked butt from my pocket.

Max's hand reached over my shoulder, thumbing a flame from a heavy gold lighter. I turned to look at him and bent to take the light.

"Thanks," I grunted.

Max fired up a super king size of his own and settled back on my truck. "Why do you stick around a place like this, Al?"

"I live here. Likely always will."

"You ever think of living someplace else?" He studied the end of his cigarette. "Vegas, maybe?"

"Yeah," I snorted. "I've thought about it. Thinking doesn't cost anything."

"A smart guy like you could make out anywhere."

"I suppose."

"Sure you could." Max leaned closer. "Think of Vegas or Reno, with maybe ten grand in the kick. Everything you've been missing, kid. Booze, women . . ."

I dropped the butt to the sand and toed it out. "What do you want, Max?"

He looked at me for a long, quiet moment. A whippoorwill called down by the creek. "If you ever breathe a word of this, Al, I'll deny it. Your little rump will be in a sling real quick." His voice was low and even. "Do you doubt me?"

"Either say something or shut up," I whispered. "I'm too tired to listen to a lot of bull."

"Okay," he grinned, "okay. I just want you to understand I mean business."

"All right. You mean business."

He looked quickly to the cabin. "I'll spell it out for you. It would be worth ten grand to me if your Uncle Ben wasn't around anymore."

I said nothing, but I scowled.

"Why look so shocked? Admit it, kid, you hate his guts. You hate him and me too!"

"Maybe I don't like him," I said. "That's no reason to kill him."

"There's ten thousand reasons. Besides, I didn't say anything about killing him." He clapped his hand on my shoulder. "You know what kind of a heart Ben has. One more attack, and . . ." He snapped his fingers.

Max opened the door of my pickup.

"You think about it, Al. Think about it real hard and let me know what you decide."

It was a while before I could start the truck. Then I lay in a room much too hot for sleep, and I thought about it some more as I floundered around on a sweaty bed until five in the morning.

Sitting on the edge of the bed and struggling into my boots, I thought of all the things a man could do with ten thousand dollars. No more sweat about the old truck falling apart when I needed it most. The roof could be repaired. I could even get someone to help me with the fencing.

I was extra careful not to wake the old lady as I scrounged up a piece of toast and scraped the last spoonful of instant coffee from the jar. Lingering over a morning cigarette, I dreamed some more while I drained my cup.

Day was just breaking as I pulled the front door shut quietly. I threw some tools into the truck and took off for the north section just as the world was coming to life.

It must have been past noon when I saw the thing lying hidden in the shade of a boulder. A four-foot diamondback, coiled like a heavy-duty spring, was staking his claim to the whole hillside. The quivering mass of meanness lay there ready to fang anything that came within reach.

I snatched up a head-sized rock and hoisted it high, ready to smash that buzztail into the earth. The snake whirred a frantic warning. Its black little eyes locked with mine; its tongue flicked.

Time ceased as I stared at the serpent. I stood holding a heavy, sun-baked rock while the sweat dripped into my eyes, and yet I felt a chill creep over me. The thought of ten thousand dollars flashed into my mind again, and I dropped the rock to the ground.

I sprinted for the truck, clawing a tow sack from the bed and grabbing up the posthole diggers on a dead run.

The rattler was crawling away; he had almost made it to a crevice

in the rocks. I jabbed at him with the diggers and he twisted into a coil and struck. He hit the diggers with a bang and I pinned him to the ground before he could coil again. He was rattling furiously when I stepped on his head.

The thing was thrashing wildly and gave off an odor almost like mellow-ripe apples. I could feel that awful head squirm beneath the worn sole of my boot.

I reached down and gripped the snake close to the head. Its body wound around my arm and I nearly let go. My hands were slippery and that snake was strong. I knew I couldn't hold him much longer.

Pulling that creature free of my arm was a bad job, but dropping it into the sack was even worse. I twisted the burlap and knotted it quickly. I dropped to my knees in the sand. My shirt was drenched, and I heard a pocket rip as I fumbled vainly for a smoke. With a feeble oath, I settled back exhausted, and waited for my hands to stop shaking.

The sack finally stopped buzzing and only now and then could I see the thing moving inside. I sat there staring at it, wondering if I could actually go through with it. Ben wasn't my favorite person, but he was a human being. He had feelings just like any other man, and he was my uncle.

I dropped the sack onto the bed of the truck.

The cabin looked empty when my old truck wheezed over the rise in the trail. The front door stood open; not a soul was in sight. As the truck started down the grade, I turned off the engine and let it coast up to the porch. Ben's voice drifted up from the creek, and then I heard Max answer him. They were probably making another bet.

I eased the screen door open

and stepped inside, holding the bag well away from my legs. Since I was going through with this, I had to do it right. The thing would have to be put where only Ben would stumble upon it. I couldn't afford to let anything happen to Max—yet.

The place was a mess. I looked around slowly. The breakfast dishes cluttered the table, and the bunks were unmade. Cigarette butts were strewn on the floor. The wood box was empty again. Everything waited for me, but it would all have to go on waiting.

I found what I needed: Ben's footlocker.

I flipped open the catch. The dented lid lifted soundlessly. Inside were two fresh changes of clothes, a half-dozen unopened decks of cards, nearly a full carton of cigarettes and three little bottles of pills.

This had to be it. I could feel myself getting shaky again as I gingerly undid the knot in the bag and watched the snake pour slowly into the locker.

I slammed the lid. A great drop of sweat rolled from my forehead and splattered on the metal box like summer rain on a barn roof. My head swam; I fought to control myself.

Willing myself to settle down, I strode to the door, pausing to look everything over. It was not too late; I could still turn back. No one would ever know.

I stepped outside, letting the screen door slam behind me.

The little path to the creek wound through the trees. It was cool and dark and lined with blackberry briars. This had been one of my favorite places when I was a child; it was one of my favorite now. I walked slowly, listening to the mountain birds, and wishing I had taken a pack of Ben's cigarettes.

The woods opened suddenly on the little creek, and I saw them both hip-deep in the swift little current. Their fly rods whipped gracefully. Ben made a beautiful roll cast beneath an overhanging willow, playing the line expertly through his fingers. He saw me then, and waved, shouting something I couldn't make out over the noise of the shoal.

Max waded over. "Hello, Al."

"I need a smoke," I said.

He shook out a cigarette and handed me his lighter. I lit up and hunkered beside him on the bank, turning the gleaming metal over in my fingers.

Max rummaged through his tackle for another fly. "You do any thinking about our talk last night?" He considered a long-tailed streamer.

"Yeah." I picked the streamer from his fingers and handed him a dry fly. "I did some thinking."

"And?"

I nodded, handing him the lighter.

"You mean you'll do it?"

"Not for no ten thousand."

Max studied me as if I were one of his flies. "Fifteen?"

"Twenty-five."

A kingfisher shrilled from the dead snag downstream. Max and I stared at each other much the way the snake and I had stared an hour ago. Finally, he shrugged.

"All right, Al. You've got yourself a deal. How do you intend to take care of it?"

"Never mind," I said. "It's already been taken care of. Just keep away from his footlocker."

"You really did it." Max shook his head slowly.

"It's what you wanted, ain't it? When will I get the money?"

"You'll get it when it's over!" He didn't try to keep the disgust from his voice.

I turned and started back up the trail. To hell with Max; he had no right to look down his nose at me. It had been his idea. I was still fuming when I climbed into the truck.

The rest of the day seemed endless. Two smashed fingers forced me to give up on the fence line, and I just wasted the remaining hours by dreaming of all that money. Twenty-five thousand dollars was a fortune to me; more dough than I could save in three lifetimes. Sure, this was rough on Ben, but he was a gambler clear through. He would be the first to admit that you can't win them all.

It was late when I started back to the cabin. Dark brings a chill up here and I pulled on my worn old brush jacket. The truck ground slowly to life and I started out at a crawl, annoyed at myself for stalling. The closer I came to the end of the trail, the more I dreaded what I would find waiting for me. I knew that I couldn't put it off forever, and I gave her the gun as we topped the rise.

Max was having a smoke on the porch as I pulled up. I hoped desperately it was all over, and searched Max's face for some sign. He simply shook his head.

I walked past him without speaking, and entered the cabin. Ben was winning a game of solitaire, and he smiled, almost as if he were glad to see me. I chanced a quick glance at the footlocker.

"Any fish to clean?" I asked.

"We only caught a few small ones. Threw them back."

He offered me a smoke and I took it, pulling out the chair farthest from that metal box. I had

to hurry this up some way. I couldn't stand waiting; he had to open that locker.

"Mom says to ask how you've been feeling."

"She sounds like Max." He smiled. "Tell her I'm fine."

"She's just afraid you'll overdo it," I said. "Remember, you do have to take care of that heart."

Ben's hand went automatically to his breast. He looked at me sadly. "You and I have never been very close, Al. I've always regretted that. I wish we could get to know each other, somehow." He reached over and pulled the box in front of his chair.

I sat up straight, wondering if he could hear that thing inside. There wasn't a sound. I forced myself to settle back, to drag deep on the smoke, to wait. My mouth went dry as he bent over the locker. Strange, I had never noticed before how gray his hair had become.

"Ben!" I spoke much too loudly. He straightened, looking at me strangely.

"Nothing," I said. "I didn't mean to yell like that."

"You work too hard, Al. You really should take a vacation yourself."

I pulled the cigarette nearly down to my fingertips. "I intend to. Soon."

The screen door banged shut behind Max, and I nearly jumped out of my seat. He gave me that sneery little smile, and right then I hated him ten times worse than I had ever hated Ben.

"I've never seen anyone so jumpy." Ben looked concerned. "What's wrong with you this evening?"

Max chuckled. "Maybe he's been working too hard."

"Why don't you just keep quiet!" I whirled on him. "Nobody said anything to you!"

He merely smiled at me.

"I'm sorry." My hat crumpled in my hands. "I am tired. I want to apologize for the way I've acted this evening."

"No need for apologies, kid. We all have our days." Max smirked openly. He held out his wrist to Ben, tapping his watch. "Isn't it time for your pills?"

Ben gave a weak little laugh. "You never forget, do you?"

"No." Max looked at me. "I never forget."

I was standing in front of Ben when the latch clicked open on the locker. The lid rose slowly, and the hair on my neck rose with it. I watched Ben's face.

He never even changed expression. He calmly reached for the pills he wanted, popped them into his mouth, and closed the lid.

Dear God, that snake was loose! It was free somewhere in the cabin! My gaze swept frantically under the table, the chairs, behind the wood box. How could it get loose?

I jumped as Ben clapped his hands together loudly. "All right," he said. "Let's play cards. Grab a seat, Al."

"No! I gotta go! Work tomorrow . . ."

Max gripped my arm. "Come on, kid. One game."

"No!" I spun out of his grasp, bolting for the door. How could it get loose?

A chill went through me as the night air knifed into my sweaty clothes. I fumbled open the door of the truck. Too late, I heard that insane rattling. A fruity smell had filled the dark insides of the pickup. A heavy body whipped across the frayed seat. My ears rang with my own scream as I felt the fangs pierce my arm.

I wheeled away from the truck, stumbling in panic. Somehow, I made it back inside the cabin. I tore away the sleeve of my jacket as if it were tissue paper. My arm was throbbing horribly all the way to the elbow.

"Snakebite!" I had Ben by the shirt, shaking him. I couldn't get him to understand. "Snakebite!"

Ben put his hand to my face and shoved me away violently. I crashed into the wall, jarring the windows. My arm hurt even worse now.

He said softly, "You slimy little piece of scum." His fist lashed out and I slammed into the wall again. "I just dropped a bundle on you, Al." Again his fist pistoned into my face.

"Ben, help me!" I pleaded.

"Max bet me he could talk you into a crazy scheme like that. My own sister's boy!"

Ben knew everything. He wasn't going to help me. I had to think! The truck! I could make it to town; I could get help! I wouldn't die!

I lunged for the door, jerking to a halt as Max jangled the key chain in front of me. A sob caught in my throat. Each pulse beat throbbed up my arm like a hammer blow. I reached for the keys. "Please . . ."

Max stepped around me. "Tell you what, Ben. I'll give you a chance to get your money back."

"How?" Ben never took his eyes from me.

"He's a big, strong kid. Healthy," Max said. "But the way he's scared, I'll lay five to three he won't make it till morning."

Ben still watched me as he reached for his wallet. "You're on," he said.

Obviously, "double entendre" is French in origin, but its practice, we learn, is not confined to de Gaulle-land.

FAT JOW AND THE WALKING WOMAN

by Robert Alan Blair

NG HAR, the fowl merchant, appeared early at the herb shop, while Fat Jow still prepared for the day's business.

"My brother Ng Chak has disappeared," announced Ng Har.

Fat Jow's only response was a grunt, as he continued his small tasks. Ng Chak was a conscienceless opportunist who lived, not by working hard or gambling wisely, but by exploiting weaknesses. Occidentals would call him a swindler, but as yet he remained within the law.

"I know you do not like him," went on Ng Har, "nor indeed do I; but family loyalty requires my concern. A month has passed without word since he took an apart-

ment on the other side of the hill, believing that his landlady concealed her wealth somewhere in the house. Never has Ng Chak let more than two weeks pass without coming to borrow money." Ng Har's weakness was his inability to say no.

"Perhaps," said Fat Jow drily, "he found his landlady's wealth, and no longer needs to borrow. What have I to do with it?"

"I come to you, because his landlady is the walking woman."

Who in this section of San Francisco has not seen the walking woman, somewhere on her daily circuit on Van Ness to Bay, and on Powell to Clay? Out of another century she comes, erect and resolutely striding, her fine strong hands swinging freely at her sides, clenched as though disapproving the world through which she sweeps.

Her ankle-length gown of black alpaca, with touches of black lace at wrists and throat, meets black high-buttoned shoes. A black sealskin jacket and a great picture-hat atop massed white hair complete her outfit. A stern, square jaw, and direct eyes meet one not vacantly but fiercely.

His interest sharpening, Fat Jow stopped work and faced Ng Har. "She was in my shop not long ago."

"I know. She was seen by others. What can she, a foreigner, find to buy from a Chinese herbalist?"

"It is not the first time that she has stopped here. She appears to have a considerable knowledge of herbs and their properties. She buys preparations for the stomach, for pain, for sleep."

Ng Har asked softly, "And for death?"

"In sufficient quantity, many may be fatal." Fat Jow opened the shop door. "Go your way. I shall learn what I can."

For most of the morning Fat Jow attempted to dismiss the thoughts aroused by Ng Har's grim imagination, but at midday, aware that he could not put them aside without seeking light, he closed the shop and strolled across the hill. The day was pleasantly cool, and the sun was beginning to burn off the morning fog.

The house lay not far off Van Ness, among the westerly lapping waves of Chinatown that wash unevenly down the slope from the double crest of Nob and Russian hills. It was an island of angular antiquity in a sea of box-like apartments, a narrow three-story pile of Victorian elegance, all in excellent repair. A giant palm tree, surely as old as the city, shaded a patch of front yard, crowding out the grass and heaving sod and sidewalk

alike into a slanting mound at its roots.

An "apartment for rent" sign hanging in a window to the left of the heavy front door suggested his direction. He mounted three steps to the broad-roofed veranda, and from the polished brass plate beside the door selected the lowermost of six doorbells, one marked "Adah Baxter, Manager."

She was even more imposing here in her own domain. A closer look at her face revealed a tracery of fine lines which could have been the tracks of a hundred years.

"I come about the apartment," said Fat Jow.

Her voice was deep and smooth. "I know you. You're the man from the herb shop." She opened the door wider. "Please come in."

Fat Jow stepped into splendor undimmed by years, a vast foyer soaring the full three stories to a stained-glass dome which filtered the sunlight into cascading rainbows. He stood upon a polished parquet floor of a basketweave pattern, surrounded by richly-dark woodwork and paneling of redwood. Carpeted twin staircases rose upon either side to a balconied landing, thence in converging angles to the upper stories.

"You're impressed," she said. "Good. You know already why I try to choose my tenants. This house is my life. I can't ask people to love it as I do, but I demand respect."

His eyes continued to rove the far recesses of the foyer. He was becoming far more interested in Adah Baxter and her house than in the missing Ng Chak. "But it is a house eminently worthy of love," he said sincerely. "It breathes the old city, the city that lived before the fire."

The stern old face softened; he could not recall ever seeing her smile before.

"I think you'll do," she said, turning toward a door on the right of the foyer. "Let's go in my place and talk."

Her parlor was as sentimentally reminiscent as she: oriental rug, fireplace of yellow Italian tile, black-draped oil portrait of a mustachioed relative, green tufted horsehair sofa and chair, platform rocker, lion-ball table with marble top, globe-shaded lamp converted from kerosene to electricity.

She motioned him to a chair, planted herself before the fireplace with arms folded. "You'll have to forgive me if I seem to pry, but I have a sound reason. Do you live alone?"

A cautious, "Yes . . ." If he expected answers later, he must be candid now.

"Are you fairly well-off financially?"

"Modestly so. My wants are few. Acquisition of material substance has no appeal, for it exalts the sham values of position and possessions. In my own eyes, I am a success . . . and of that, I am the sole judge."

She studied him for a long, thoughtful moment. "I wish you'd turned up long ago. I want somebody in there who's not after my money. And I prefer an oriental gentleman. Mine is the only other apartment on the ground floor, and you know how tongues wag."

Eyes lidded, he nodded almost imperceptibly. "I understand. And your former tenant—was he an oriental gentleman?"

She said distastefully, "Only half right. Oriental, yes."

Fat Jow placed his fingertips together. "Ah . . . ? You had difficulty with him?"

"No—real difficulty. When I found him snooping around, I just had to get rid of him. I can't stand for that, you know." She moved to the door. "Come see the apartment."

She took him through curtained French doors at the left of the foyer into what had been the ballroom of the mansion. Here, still, were the dais for the orchestra, the crystal chandelier, the mirrored ceiling and walls reflecting all.

She pointed to a cracked wall panel. "That's been there since 1906, my souvenir of the earthquake. I never could bear to have it fixed. It wouldn't have been the same, with a brand-new pane of glass in there. I like to believe these mirrors are priceless with the trapped images of all that's gone on here."

Fat Jow was entranced. "These walls, and you, must tell a fascinating story."

She sighed, turned away to show him the rest of the apartment. "I suppose so—but a story nearly ended."

Then she told him of the Baxters, who had mingled casually with early giants like Crocker, Flood, Stanford, Vallejo. They had seen the Embarcadero black with forests of sail-rigging, had helped build the young and boisterous California. That foyer had welcomed Robert Louis Stevenson, Ulysses Grant, Sam Clemens, Enrico Caruso, Jack London. There had been receptions, balls, lectures, recitals, with carriages drawing up in file before the palm tree to discharge jeweled ladies and whiskered gentlemen, and through it all, a small girl, who was supposed to be in bed, had watched from the third-floor landing.

They returned to the foyer, and

Adah Baxter said pensively, "All very lovely, but it spoiled me. My silly little head got so stuffed with reflected glamor that I quite forgot about me, and lived the dream-lives of all those glittering people. Finally, I looked around and everybody was gone; I was grown-up and alone, and life had passed me by. Do you know why I

always walk along the streets?"

"Many have wondered," murmured Fat Jow.

"I can't meet people. I'm really terrified of the world outside my house; it's still a mystery and a threat. For more years than I care to remember, I've forced myself away from the house, to walk through the city. But if somebody speaks to me on the street, I want to drop through the ground. So I glare them down, and pass on. The only place I feel safe is here." She nodded toward the door of her apartment. "Four rooms . . . the last sanctuary I can call entirely my own, when once the house was mine to roam. I try to preserve it, but when I'm gone . . . who knows? They'll probably pull down the old place and put up more apartment buildings. Builders have tried to buy it out from under me. Ghouls! I'm just glad I won't be here to see what they do with it. I'm the last of the Baxters, no one to leave it to."

Fat Jow clucked in sympathy. "Have you no attorney, no banker, to protect your interest?"

She stiffened. "I trust no one. They're all out to get what they can. And because I'm old, and individualistic, and rich, they think there's easy pickings. Well, I'm not stupid. I've seen them come and go, and I've proved them wrong. They don't touch me. My father taught me well. 'Never give 'em a chance,' he said. 'Trust betrayed is the one unforgivable sin.' "

"A remarkable man," observed Fat Jow, "for his day—but he was a product of the frontier, where each man must be a law unto himself. And is not that day gone? What you fear for the house will surely come, if you do not provide for its use now. I strongly advise you to consult an attorney."

She cocked her head and peered speculatively at him. "You have a feeling for the house. How about you?"

"You flatter me, but the responsibility would weigh far too heavily. I would not attempt to manage your affairs . . ." he smiled, ". . . lest I betray your trust."

She startled him with a full-throated laugh that echoed high under the dome. "Better and better! You and I will get along."

Fat Jow expressed, tentatively, an idea which had just occurred to him: "Although I might buy—"

"Buy? You?" She was not rejecting, merely testing. "Well, now I think of it, there's no one I'd rather sell to—if I decide to sell."

"With a clause in the contract obliging me to maintain the property as it is."

"*If* I decide to sell," she repeated firmly.

Fat Jow spread his hands. "Until you decide, let me be simply your tenant."

Her eyes lighted. "You'll take the apartment?"

"It may be foolishness. I have been quite comfortable where I am for many years, but your house radiates a charm I cannot resist."

She grasped his hand between both of hers. "You can't know what a comfort it will be to have someone here who doesn't *want* anything from me."

A faint twinge of conscience? "Different people want different things," he said vaguely.

"I was about to offer you tea but this calls for something stronger. Come, you must see my father's wine cellar." She led him between the staircases to a corridor serving the rear of the house. "He stocked it with imported wines and brandies a hundred years old and more. I've had little enough use out of them, don't believe in drinking alone. A single woman has to be careful."

The door opened on narrow dark steps, going down. She reached in to switch on a dim light below. "There's plenty of room, if you have any trunks or boxes you don't care to keep in your apartment. But watch for dampness, or things will mildew."

They descended into an atmosphere compounded of dust, dampness, fuel oil, and the heavy-sweet scent of ancient wine. The basement was a single large enclosure, dotted by thick redwood posts supporting the beams of the house. Its only light was the bulb hanging above the foot of the steps. Fat Jow could not have explained why his quest for Ng Chak, gradually banished to a remote area of his mind, came forward now with an annoying impetus of its own. He resented Ng Chak the more. What right had that despicable one to victimize an incomparable person like Adah Baxter?

They were barely down the steps when a harsh buzzing sounded from somewhere above. She turned back. "Oh, it's the grocery boy. I'll have to let him in."

"May I go?" offered Fat Jow.

She pattered up the steps. "No, no. I still owe them from last week." At the top, she turned in the open doorway. "The wine cellar's straight ahead of you. Pick out a likely bottle and bring it up, will you?"

He heard her withdrawing along the carpeted corridor, and his attention wandered away from the rows of dusty, cobwebbed bottles to survey the gloom of the cavernous basement. Another scent now intruded, one which disturbed him: fresh cement.

Slowly, he wandered from one foundation wall to the other, head down as in deep thought, hands clasped behind him. What he sought he would not consciously admit, but he found it in a shadowy corner at the rear, a new patch of silver-gray in the age-darkened concrete floor, measuring roughly six feet by two.

Several innocent possibilities presented themselves—faulty plumbing, broken floor, blocked drain, cave-in—yet he felt that it was none of these, and that he now had an answer for Ng Har.

He stood rigid as a chill touched his shoulders, and the pounding of his heart was the only sound in the world. But fear had an antagonist, sorrow; not for Ng Chak but for Adah Baxter, and for what Fat Jow must now do to her. He wished fervently to retrace steps, to reclaim moments. For Ng Chak, he had only anger, for having placed him in this painful situation.

The single dim light winked out, engulfing him in infinite blackness unrelieved by a tiny grime-coated window high in the far wall. Involuntarily Fat Jow cried out, then checked himself. He dared not move. His imagination, suddenly sensitive, placed her within arm's reach. Perverse justice, perhaps; was he not planning, though reluctantly, to betray her trust?

Adah Baxter's deep voice floated down from above. "Oh, are you still down there?" The light came on again, and she stood in the doorway at the head of the steps, her hand still on the switch, her face blank. "I'm sorry. I thought you had come up."

Fat Jow summoned enough courage and strength to come hesitantly up the steps. "It is no matter." The words bobbed erratically in his throat, but he made no excuse, for it would have been as transparent as the fear behind it.

She said only. "You didn't bring the wine."

Anger? Disappointment? He tried to read what passed in her mind, but frequently the occidental face was inscrutable to him.

He fought to control his voice. "I find that I cannot stay, after all." He reached the top, and she stepped aside to allow him access to the corridor. The foyer and front door still seemed a great distance away, and she was a larger and stronger, though older, person than he.

She asked, "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"I must go." He sidled away from her, and she made no move to hinder him. Encouraged, he walked faster, and then she fol-

lowed quietly, echoing his steps.

From the softness of the corridor to the bare wood of the foyer, their footfalls tapped across the parquet floor. Only when Fat Jow's hand touched the cold reassurance of the front doorknob, and he pulled the door wide to the free bracing air, did he turn. He winced at the obvious hurt in her face. "I am indeed sorry," he said.

"Please, is something wrong? Have I said anything?"

He could deceive her no longer, but he must have a ready route of retreat. Emerging from the hush of the foyer into the brilliance of day, where the basement and its secret faded into unreality, he drew a deep breath, then asked gently, "This I must know, Miss Baxter. Where is Ng Chak?"

She stopped upon the threshhold, eyes widening in genuine surprise. "You know him?"

"As well as I care to. His brother is my honored friend."

She fluttered a hand. "But he's not worth bothering about."

"I agree, but I have given the brother my promise. Where is Ng Chak?"

She said easily, "Downstairs, of course. I told you I'd got rid of him."

Fat Jow stared. "But how?" he whispered.

She patted his arm and smiled. "Your herbs—they're most effective in tea, I find. Cream and sugar and lemon quite cover the taste."

The sorrow swelled within him, along with some uneasiness that he was her unknowing accomplice. Her method, he allowed, was discreet and refined, appropriate for one as meticulous as she. He said sadly, "I shall have to inform the authorities."

She was her old warm self. "Oh, if that's all that's bothering you, they already know. I reported it the minute it happened. I'm a law-abiding citizen; I wouldn't withhold information from the police. What a relief! I thought you weren't going to take the apartment, and I've been looking forward to your moving in."

She was quite mad, Fat Jow allowed. Muttering, "I shall call you," he hurried down the porch steps.

She called after him, "I don't have a phone, but come anytime. Your apartment will be ready."

He could not face her again. When he looked back from the corner of Van Ness, she still stood on the porch, waving.

At once Fat Jow hunted a public booth, and telephoned the police. He asked for his friend Detective-lieutenant Cogswell, for who else would believe him? After a delay, Cogswell came on

and listened to Fat Jow's frantic report with characteristic understanding silence.

Finally Cogswell said, "I wouldn't worry about it. She's just a harmless old eccentric. The Department has a file on Adah Baxter going back fifty years. Every few years she goes through this same routine. Calls the police, hates to bother us again, but she's had to dispose of another tenant—in the usual way. Check that basement closer—and you'll find half-a-dozen other 'graves' that she's prepared, to convince herself it's all real. We always thank her kindly for her public-spirited concern, and assure her we'll file a confidential report to avoid embarrassing her. That seems to keep her happy for another few years."

"But where is Ng Chak?" demanded Fat Jow.

Cogswell laughed. "Probably hasn't stopped running yet. Guilt can prod a man into a fair show of speed. She scared *you* into a near heart attack, didn't she? And you weren't doing anything. What if you'd been after her money? Oh, and that money of hers is just as much a delusion as her buried tenants. She has nothing. Charges rents that went out of style before the first world war, and lives up the income. She's nearly bankrupt, but her creditors all carry her, out of sentiment. She's a city institution; the place wouldn't be the same without the walking woman. Let her have her fun."

Fat Jow stood before the silent telephone while he collected his shattered thoughts. He was at once ashamed of his macabre suspicion, and glad that he might now indulge his whim of living amid the nostalgic opulence of the Baxter ballroom. He would insist upon paying her a realistic rental and, at leisure, would discuss with her the terms of purchase, for he was confident that she would sell.

A burden gone from his heart, Fat Jow returned to Chinatown, to its commercial Grant avenue, which was beginning to clog with weekend sightseers and shoppers. Ordinarily he avoided the bustle and crush of foreigners in the narrow one-way street, but this afternoon he had a certain responsibility to discharge at the fowl market of Ng Har.

As soon as he could disengage himself from a customer, Ng Har approached, wiping his hands upon his soiled apron. "You have word?"

Briefly, Fat Jow related what he had learned. As he repeated Cogswell's remarks, Ng Har burst into shrill laughter.

"Ng Chak has lost face," he crowed, "by bolting in terror from

the walking woman. He will not soon again show it in Chinatown."

Fat Jow shrugged. "He will not be missed."

He moved into his new apartment early the following week, and was warmed by the frank pleasure with which Adah Baxter welcomed him. Knowing that she would not accept a check, he had obtained a $100 bill at his bank for the first month's rent. The unfortunate woman could not have seen a bill of such size since the lavish days of her father, yet it caused no visible reaction, and she resisted only slightly his insistence that the money be not two months' rent, as she had suggested, but one.

After he was partially settled, and while he sorted items into a trunk and several boxes for storage in the basement, she rapped at the open French doors. "I'll have to bother you now and then," she apologized. "Always before, I've had to wait to get at my hiding-place until the tenant went out, but now I don't have to worry." She then removed a large triangular fragment from the cracked panel, uncovering a large hollow space behind. "I think it's rather an ironic touch, don't you, keeping it here under their noses?"

She lifted out a brown steel file-box, and Fat Jow saw at least two others remaining. Setting the box on the dais, she unlocked it with a key on a chain around her neck, and raised the lid.

Fat Jow felt the benevolence drain from his face. The $100 bill he had given her went to join unguessed numbers of its fellows which filled the box to bulging.

Adah Baxter replaced the box in its cranny, wiped the smudges from the glass. As she went out, she turned, saying, "I know you'll be very comfortable here."

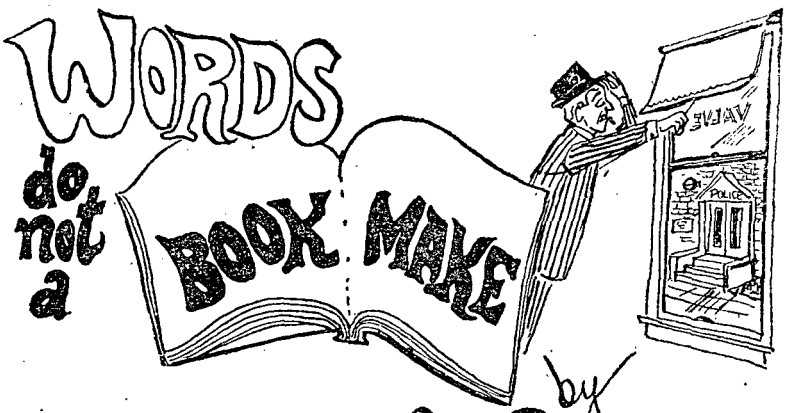
Fat Jow stood long without moving, under the crystal chandelier.

Presently, Fat Jow has made room in the apartment for the trunk and boxes, therefore has no occasion to go near the basement. He asks no further questions, whether of Adah Baxter, the police, or himself, for fear of answers he prefers not to hear.

Deliberately he ponders how best to approach the subject of purchasing, without offending, without upsetting. He is not in haste, for he assures himself that his major task as owner (but only after Adah Baxter is gone) must be to re-pave the basement floor.

Meanwhile, unless he happens to see Ng Chak sound and well, he takes tea with his landlady only when he prepares it himself . . . and wine, not at all.

Prolixity, perhaps, is not an incontrovertible complement of proximity.



I WENT to the window, lifted the shade and looked out. Then I pulled down the shade in a hurry and spun around to face Herbie.

"You fathead!" I yelled.

He gave me an innocent look. "What's the matter, boss?"

I managed to stay calm. "Oh, nothing important," I said. "Except for one tiny little thing. *The police station is across the street!*"

"I know," Herbie said calmly.

"You know," I repeated. "Well, that's nice, isn't it?" I waved my hand at the telephones, the dope sheets, the rolls of flash paper, the racing schedules scattered across the room's two desks. "Won't they be ever so happy when they break in here? No long rides in the wagon. Just down the stairs, across the street and into a cell. Think of the time and expense we'll be saving the taxpayers. You fathead!"

"They aren't going to be breaking in here," Herbie said.

"No, huh?"

Herbie shook his head. "Don't you see? The setup is perfect. It couldn't be any better."

"All I see is a cold damp cell in that cop factory over there."

"Didn't you ever read *The Pur-*

loined Letter?" Herbie asked him.

"The which letter?"

"Purloined," Herbie said. *"The Purloined Letter.* By Edgar Allen Poe."

"Yeah?" I said. "Never heard of him. What is he, some handicapper for one of the Eastern tracks?"

"He was a writer," Herbie said patiently. "He died over a hundred years ago."

"What's some croaked writer got to do with this?"

"I'm trying to tell you, boss," Herbie said. "He wrote this story called *The Purloined Letter,* see, and everybody in it is trying to find a letter that was supposed to have been stolen, only nobody can find it. You know why?"

I shrugged. "Why?"

"Because it was right under their noses all the time."

"I don't get it."

"Everybody's looking for the letter to be *hidden* some place," Herbie said. "You know, stashed out of sight, but they never think to look right out in the open, right in front of them."

I shrugged again. "So?"

Herbie sighed. "We got the same type of thing here. The cops might get wind we've opened a parlor. They could get that much on the grapevine. So if that happens, they'll be looking for the setup, right?"

"Yeah, right. They sure will."

"Okay. So they'll be checking all the joints in town, all the places where the layout might be hidden away, but they'll never figure to look right under their noses. Right across the street."

I thought about that. "I don't know," I said. "It sounds crazy."

"Sure it is," Herbie said. "That's the beauty of it. It's so crazy it can't miss."

"What'd you tell the guy you rented this place from?"

"I told him we were a manufacturer's representatives for industrial valves. No warehouse stock; just a sales office. I even had some sign painters put a phony name on the windows."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Same thing on the phones?"

"Sure. No problem there."

"This landlord," I said. "Any chance of him coming up here when we ain't expecting him?"

"None. I said we didn't want to be disturbed. He said he understood how it was, and not to worry about a thing."

"What's downstairs?"

"Insurance company," Herbie said. "No bother on that end."

I did some more thinking. Herbie might be right, I decided. The cops sure wouldn't think of looking out their front door for the new book in town.

"Okay," I said to Herbie. "It might just work out."

"Sure," Herbie answered. "It's duck soup."

"All the contacts lined up?"

"I took care of everything before I called you, boss. I got eight guys —five bars, a cigar store, a billiards parlor and a lunchroom. All I need is the go-ahead and we're in business."

"All right," I said. "Put the word out, then."

Herbie smiled. "'Of making many books there is no end'," he said.

"Huh?"

"I read that somewhere."

"Keep your mind off the reading and on the book," I said.

For some reason Herbie thought that was very funny.

At nine-thirty the next morning, the first contact phoned in his list. Herbie had given them the go-ahead to begin booking bets the previous night.

The other seven contacts followed with their lists at five minute intervals. Judging from the size of each list, this town was going to yield a gold mine.

I sat at one of the desks, copying the bets onto the flash paper. It's thin paper, like onion skin, and the reason we use it is that in case of a raid you just touch a match to it and the whole roll goes up in nothing flat. No evidence, no conviction.

Herbie, I was thinking as I wrote, you are a genius.

At ten forty-five, one hour and fifteen minutes after we had opened business, somebody knocked on the door.

Herbie and I froze. We looked at each other. "Who is that?" I whispered.

"I don't know," Herbie said. "The landlord, maybe?"

"I thought you said he wouldn't bother us."

Herbie rubbed his nose.

The telephone rang.

I jumped. "Muffle that!" I hissed.

Herbie hauled up the receiver. "Ring back," he said and put it down again.

There was another rap on the door, louder this time.

"Maybe you better answer it," Herbie said. "If it's not the landlord, maybe it's the mailman or somebody."

"Yeah," I said.

"I mean, it's nothing to worry about," Herbie said. "Cops wouldn't *knock*, would they?"

I relaxed. Sure, if it was the cops they would have come busting in already. They wouldn't stand out there knocking.

I got up and went over to the door. "Who is it?" I asked, cau-

tious just the same, but no answer.

Another rap, and I cracked the door open.

The first thing I saw was a badge—big and silver and shining—and it was pinned to the front of a blue uniform shirt. My eyes moved upward. I saw a neck, a huge red neck, and perched on top of it was a huge, red, balding head.

"Hello," the head said, smiling.

I saw another blue uniform. "Arrgh!" I said.

"I'm Chief of Police Wiggins," the head said, "and I—"

I slammed the door, leaning back against it, jaw trembling.

"Herbie," I croaked. "Her-*bie!*"

"What?" Herbie said, eyes wide.

"Cops!" I yelled. "The flash paper! Herbie, the flash paper!"

"Cops?" he yelled.

The door burst open. My backside was in the way, but not for long. It felt like a bull had hit that door. I flew into the room, collided with a chair, went fanny over teacups, and landed on my head.

A booming voice said, "What's going on in—" And then, "Well, I'll be darned!"

"Cops!" Herbie yelled, leaping to the desk.

"Watch it, Jed!" the booming voice boomed. "Flash paper!"

A blue uniform blurred past, blocking Herbie, and a hand whipped across the desk. Papers fluttered to the floor, intact.

"Bookmakers," the blue uniform said, awed.

"Hoo-haw!" the booming voice said. "Hoo-haw-*haw!*"

"Right across the street," the blue uniform said, still awed.

I reached up and touched my head. I could feel the lump growing. I looked around from my prone position and located Herbie, now cowering in the grip of a long arm. "Herbie," I said, "I am going to kill you, Herbie."

"But, but—" Herbie said.

"Right across the *street!*" the blue uniform said, shaking his head in wonder.

"Hoo, hoo, hoo!" said the booming voice which belonged to the huge, red, balding head.

So, down the stairs we went. Across the street we went. Into a cell we went.

Fortunately for Herbie, it wasn't the same cell.

I sat on the cold, damp cot. The lump on my head grew and grew. It was nothing, I told myself, to the lump that would grow and grow on Herbie's head.

A little while later they took me to the chief's office. He took one look at me and broke off into a fresh series of hoo-haws. I sat in a chair and glared at the wall.

The chief wiped his eyes with a

handkerchief. "Darnedest thing I ever heard of," he said. "Settin' up a parlor within spittin' distance of the police station."

I gritted my teeth.

"It's one for the books, let me tell you." He thought about that for a minute, and then broke off hoo-hawing again.

I turned, fixed a steely eye on him, said, "Oh, shut up!"

He said, "What could have possessed you, son?"

"Listen," I said, "can I have a couple of minutes alone with Herbie?"

"What for?"

I smiled evilly.

"Oh, I get it," the chief said. "His idea, was it?"

"Yeah, his idea."

"Darnedest thing I ever heard of," the chief said again. "It's really one for the—"

"All *right,*" I said. "Look, how did you find out, anyway?"

"Well, to tell the truth, we didn't actually find out at all. We didn't have no idea what you fellas was doing over there. Not till we busted in, that is."

"Then how come you came over there?"

"Business license," the chief said. "You got to have one to operate any kind of business in this city."

I still didn't get it.

"Saw them sign painters over there the other day," the chief said, "painting the name of this valve company on the windows."

"So?"

"New company settin' up shop in town," the chief said. "Good for the growth of our fair city, you know, but they still got to have a license to operate. It's my job to see that the law is upheld, so I did some checking and found out this valve company never applied for a license."

Herbie, I thought, feeling ill. *You idiot.*

"So," the chief said, "this here company was breaking the law. But, like I said, a new business is good for the city. Didn't want them to get rankled over a minor thing like a license and maybe move elsewheres, so I figured to sort of welcome them officially, and then bring up the matter of the license afterwards. Kind of keep from ruffling feathers that way."

"You always go calling in person for something like that?" I asked. "There are telephones, you know."

"Sure," the chief said. "Probably would have used the telephone, too, except for one thing."

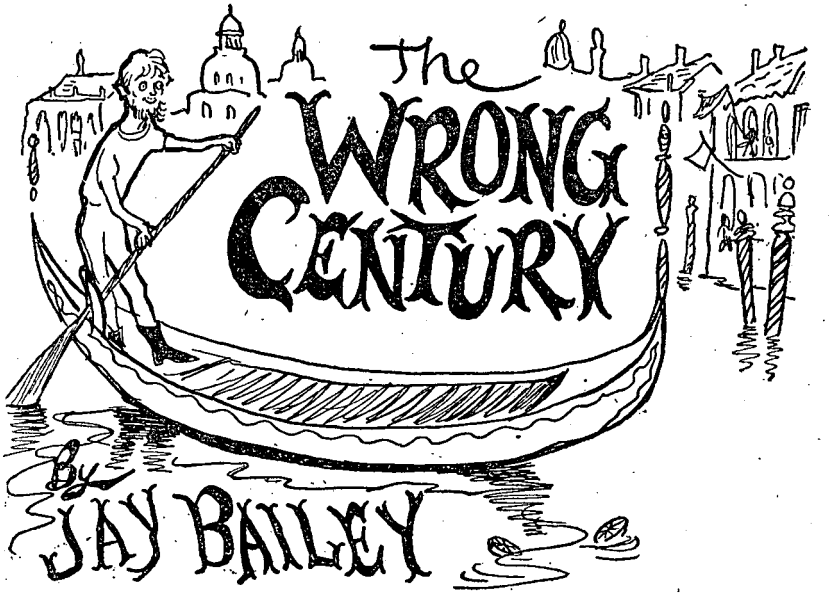
I sighed. "What's that?"

The chief smiled broadly. "Well, son," he said, "you was right across the street."

Those who believe they were born too late may yet find their way back.

TO ME, little old Kelly John Kelly, was parked on a stool at the Terrapin Inn contemplating my future and drinking a cola. Whither, whence, thought I. Now, I pride myself on being a pretty good sculptor, or at least I'm in the process of becoming same and I want to learn everything I can, including painting. I'd been studying at the Art Center and beating myself on the head because I didn't know *more*. I'd just blown a sculpture that day and, as I'm a perfectionist and a fanatic (so was Michelangelo), I felt mighty low, mighty low indeed.

Anyhow, as I was sinking into my ratty old peacoat and my own self-abuse and misery, in walked this really impressive-looking beard, all gray and black, with a neat looking little old guy behind it. He was wrapped up in a nutty



looking poncho, like he'd made it himself, and he had great big squeaky sandals on his dirty *bare* feet (and in this weather, too). Up here in Point Magiway, man, it gets *really* cold, so immediately I thought, wow, here's a tough old character.

About this village, there are sure some great people who make it, like good rough and ready types, loggers and fishermen. The artists who can't take it just disappear, and the really serious ones stay on and study at the Art Center. Only six teachers, but just *fantastic,* so this place is, like the core of where it's *happening*. Those teachers—oh, rats magoo, how can I say it, but they're people who are just as fanatic as I am and that's pretty far out. I'm not very articulate sometimes—I just know what I know. When I'm working with my hands, that's a different matter. Then I don't feel so sort of tongue-tied.

Anyhow, in walked this little man. He sat down beside me and of course we started talking, what with me being lonely and hating myself at the moment, and as it turned out we were both in the same racket, like art.

"My name is Wilfred Block," said he, pulling his poncho around him and leaning over his coffee and sort of inhaling it.

"Hi," I mumbled, hunching over my cola. Some character this!

"I'm teaching, you know, m'boy —up at the Center. Do you know the Center, lad?"

Well, did I know the Center? Hell yes. So we engaged in conversation and suddenly I felt greatness all around me, and my scuzzy beard embarrassed me because his was so good and *old*.

Pretty soon I was flipping out of my depression because this ancient guy could teach me about paint and like that and so right there I enrolled in his painting class. Finally we were really buddy-buddy, like I was his son, and somehow the subject got around to a recent art theft in Southern California.

"Lad," whispered Mr. Block as he sipped his coffee and pulled his shoulders up even higher, "one of the most magnificent paintings in the world was stolen. Did you know that, lad? *Hey?* Surely you've seen reproductions of Calagria's work? No? What is this world coming to, tell me that, pray."

I just sort of smiled and nodded and waited, knowing I'd get some information laid on me.

"My boy, the Venice Street Scene. *The Venice Street Scene.* Or, in this case you might call it the Venice Canal Scene . . ."

I thought to myself, Kelly John Kelly, this is a scene in itself, but I

just kept my little mouth shut and waited.

"One of the most magnificent paintings on this planet, lad. Yes, *stolen*—by, if I remember correctly, Lawrence Weber Weeves. Fine artist, pity. At least all evidence points in his direction. I've seen the painting myself. Exquisite! You know, Calagria," and here he started whispering, his eyes darting around, "was intelligent enough to use seasoned back-braced wood for his paintings. Each was covered with five coats of gesso, which if you don't know, boy, is a blindingly white sort of chalk mixture." Then his voice dropped even lower, almost like he was telling me some sort of crazy secret. "And with the patience of the Venetian craftsman that he was, he waited for each coat to become thoroughly dry, then rubbed it down with fine sand to give it a satin finish! IMPECCABLE! NOW WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THAT?" His voice rose almost to a shout and the waitress looked at us funny. Then he shot his elbow into my ribs and I choked on my drink.

"Great, sir, *great,*" I squeaked. Man, I couldn't wait to go to his class, like he was a wise little old elf with a secret. Ageless.

Well, the next week I started in with his painting class. Wizard! With his old beard and moustache and long salt-pepper hair and his poncho with the collar turned up, all you could see were his funny no-color eyes looking all secret and, well, *weird.* Old Mr. Block really had the knowledge, European training, the bit. Beautiful old guy. *Anyhow,* I started learning. He put up with the "new" techniques—oil and acrylics. All the time I thought oil was as old as God, but Mr. Block said no, that egg-tempera was first, although he knew the rest of the jazz like he knew his beard.

Then, in his lectures, he'd get off on old Calagria and how that cat was the *real* master and not enough people knew about him and how his paintings hadn't cracked or faded through the centuries and somehow Mr. Block would suddenly look like one of those Venetian princelings that he kept talking about in the classroom.

Finally, after about three weeks of study with this eerie guy, he drew me aside after class, out under the cypress trees and said, pretty excitedly, I thought, "Kelly John, my boy, would you like to see—" then his voice dropped to a hiss, "would you like to see a copy I made of that Calagria that was stolen? Hey?" Then he sort of shot his eyes around like somebody might hear him and I thought, so

what's his problem? We were alone.

Anyhow I answered, well, yes, sir, I would, and he invited me to his pad that night for a little meat, bread and wine, as he put it. Man, I felt like I was in Paris!

Unfortunately my teaching job in Southern California afforded me less money than I had hoped for. Such a shame. Teachers in this country are pitifully underpaid, even such trained and experienced professors as I. My age was against me, I fear. I am approaching seventy-one, but am quite spry and healthy—I often liken myself to Picasso. I'm also a respected artist; not of the stature of that Spanish gentleman but I have my fans and a few of my paintings are hung in museums about the country.

That day, that humiliating day when I was impoverished and worried about some of the more foolish students in that small but prestigious college where I had been teaching, I decided to drive my old automobile to a rather poor museum a little south of the small town in which I was teaching. I put on my homburg and carried my walking stick, remnants of a more prosperous time. I also donned my greatcoat, as it was chilly due to an almost impenetrable coastal fog.

In the museum (bad lighting, dust—*shameful!*) I dashed about, hands clasped behind me, peering at one picture after another. And then I saw it. *How had I missed it before?* It was hung in a dark corner, but there it was.

THERE WAS THE CALAGRIA! It was no larger than a sheet of typing paper, but as I squinted, the tiny figures came to life—women haggling about the price of fish; orange rinds floating in the canal; dandies swaggering; clothes blowing on lines strung from one building to another; tarts with bleached hair and scandalously low necklines strutting beside the water; gondolas being propelled by muscular gondoliers. The true Venice. The Venice *then*. I was there, back where I should have been. I was born in the wrong century.

I stood for a few moments. The painting was slightly tilted, which offended me, so, reverently, I touched it, merely to make it straight with its fellow paintings. Then, the noise! Buzzers and bells rang and guards came dashing from every which way and I was grabbed roughly and hustled off to the office of the fusty old curator.

"Thief, eh?"

"No—I insist, no—the picture was a bit out of line—I merely tried to straighten it—"

"And *who,* sir, are *you?*" he asked, raising his gray eyebrows.

"*I,* sir," I announced as I straightened, "am *Lawrence Weber Weeves,* artist, teacher, and you have a painting of mine hanging somewhere in this embarrassing establishment. Now," I said, brushing the sleeves of my capacious coat, "I would like the courtesy of an apology immediately."

"Oh my," mumbled the distraught and harrumphing curator (I forget his name—it wasn't worth my time and effort to remember it). "Mr. Weeves, please accept our apologies, sir. What can we do to make amends? Would you enjoy a glass of fine claret, which I, ahem, keep on hand for the pleasure of distinguished guests? My, my, I am so dreadfully sorry."

"I'll accept, sir, and gladly."

As I sipped and chatted, my plan was *there,* as though the muse had whispered into my ear—a truly creative plan indeed.

"Yes, well, to make amends, you say. I would be delighted if you would allow me to peruse your extremely fine museum for two hours, buzzers off, and let me straighten paintings to my heart's content."

"Mr. Weeves, it will be a *pleasure.*"

We shook hands, toasted each other, and for a while I reveled in paintings, straightening one here, dusting one there. Then I bade farewell to the curator, and as an afterthought I said, "Sir, there is a small Bonnard I wish to observe again—I'll just leave by the back entrance, and thank you, sir."

I tipped my hat, went swiftly down the hall to the Calagria in the dim corner, removed it from the wall, slipped it under my coat and then I walked out, got into my car and disappeared into the fog. I drove directly to my bank, removed my small savings and then I simply vanished, leaving my personal belongings and that college town forever.

Well, yours truly, little old Kelly John Kelly, went to Mr. Block's pad. Too much! There was an old mandolin in the corner and prints and paintings were stuck all over the redwood walls and, believe it or not, there was a skull on a big desk with a candle burning in it. I later found out the old guy had lived in the mountains for a couple of months, digging for stuff, and he guessed the skull was Indian. On the scarred table in the middle of the kitchen was a huge loaf of French bread, with a *stiletto,* yet, lying beside it. It sure was a wicked looking knife: also a big hunk of salami and a jug of local

wine, the kind that turns your teeth black. He wasn't kidding when he said meat, bread and wine. His eyes glowed and I was beginning to think he was some kind of a nut, but then most artists are sort of, you know—odd—but Mr. Block was giving off really weird vibrations, like he was going to show me a corpse or something.

After we had eaten—man, it was good—and talked about painting, he suddenly yelled wildly, "AND HERE IT IS!" I almost heard trumpets and drums. He jumped up and threw some curtains apart at the end of the kitchen and here was this little bitty picture. Then he flipped on a little light and, man, I almost *died*. I crept up closer and closer and there it was, just like he said. Those Venice people were walking and talking and *breathing* and, well, it was just too *much!* But I knew something else, too. I'm no dummy. This was no copy, man, *this was the real thing!* Thousands of bucks' worth of picture, right there in front of my little scared eyes. This was most definitely not Wilfred Block. *This was Lawrence Weber Weeves who had very neatly pulled the theft of the decade.*

Oh my, oh mercy me, I thought to myself, what shall I do now? I just stood there and tried to gather my cool. There's something about an original painting you can almost *smell*. Well, I thought, this old geezer is as nutty as a fruit cake. If I'd said anything right then he probably would have bonked me on the head, so I turned around and kind of chattered, "You sure are a good painter, sir, and I sure would like to see the real one sometime, if they ever find it, that is . . ." Then I sort of dribbled out of words and blushed.

He was looking at me real funny by now and his wild little eyes got narrow and glittery. That old stiletto was still lying around somewhere, and I knew damn well if he'd gone as far as he'd gone to get the picture, he'd go even *farther* and maybe stick that wicked knife into little chicken me.

"Now lad," he said real low, "it's late and you'd best go." Then he almost pushed me out the door.

I made haste, indeed, and paddled my little boots home real fast. It was like he *had* to show it to someone before he blew a gasket and then he got sorry. You know how people are, just can't keep a secret—like a teakettle with the lid on tight and then *whoosh*, off she blows. He gave me the willies and I was really dreading his class next day, like if I didn't show up he'd positively know I knew. I was pretty upset but I made it home and then had nightmares, like this

cat with a knife was chasing me around in Venice and everywhere I went there he was, and just before the knife went through my skinny neck I woke up, all sweating.

Alas, I do believe I have made a rather serious mistake, or a "booboo" to quote Kelly John. I'm quite certain he knows the truth. It was quite difficult to "hide out" in order to change my identity, but I managed nicely and no one has suspected me, until now. That boy is entirely too perceptive, which of course could contribute to his being a fine artist one day, but unfortunately that day will never come. It is most obvious that it has become necessary for me to dispose of him. The Calagria is my life, my wife, my child, sustenance and friend—the only great thing which has ever entered my somewhat barren existence.

You must have realized by now that I *am* Calagria—at least I'm his reincarnation. This knowledge has come upon me slowly, but now I am *sure*. (I keep this journal locked in my desk at the Center, incidentally, in case robbers should enter my little house.) As I did the painting hundreds of years ago, why *shouldn't* I have it? Let us simply say that I repossessed it. Sometimes I stare for hours at my painting, then something clicks and I'm *there*—there beside that canal. Occasionally I'm on the steps of the palazzo looking at my city with the piercing eyes of the artist. At other times I'm in a gondola sketching the bustling life about me. Always I'm dressed in slashed doublet, hose and swirling cape. Often Leonardo and I discuss the Medici family—fine people, fine people. If there were only more patrons in the world like Lorenzo. Ah yes, poor Kelly John. As we have wells here in Point Magiway (there is an unused one in the field in back of my house), it will be a simple matter for me to, shall we say, allow him to vanish. A pity, but there it is.

Little Kelly John, me, I went to class anyhow, in spite of my teeny shrinky soul. I decided that *everybody* should see that picture, not just one wiggy little old man, so I tried to figure something out. I was too much of a marshmallow heart to turn him in—he'd just die away—and he was a good artist and a great teacher, so I had what I guess you'd call a moral problem; or ethical, or something. I knew there was something loose in his brain; poor old guy, but dangerous.

Well, in class he started looking at me kind of spooky when he

thought I wasn't watching. I'm of a nervous type nature and under this mouselike exterior beats the heart of a mouse. Believe it or not, yesterday he showed up in class with his beard and moustache all trimmed kind of sharp and pointy, and wearing a cape that looked like he'd made it himself out of an old bedspread. Yet he didn't look funny at all—he looked like Lucifer, but seemed to be younger or more determined; something like that. Anyhow there was a creepy change and I could barely hold my paintbrush.

Standing at my easel slopping away I heard him creep up behind me and then he sort of breathed into my ear, "Kelly John, you're doing fine. Wouldn't you like to come over tonight and partake of some humble food? We're not ready for egg-tempera technique here in class, but I'll be only too happy to show you, my boy. Hey, what?"

"Oh yes, sir, I guess so, sir, thank you, Mr. Block, sure, I'd like that fine," I babbled.

My cool had definitely departed and I droobled some paint where it shouldn't be and I heard him padding away, sort of chuckling under his breath. Yikes! What had I *done?*

After classes, while I made it back to my room, I wondered should I be honest and tell him I knew—like put it to him straight—or should I bluff it through or what? I damn near chewed my fingernails down to my wrists. He sure seemed pretty far gone to me, and I knew, I mean I *knew* he was going to do something entirely illegal which might hurt me, like maybe I would cease to exist unless I thought something out and quick. I kept thinking of that stiletto looking too sharp and pointy, like old crazy's beard. *Mercy.*

I finally decided I'd play all innocence, never turn my back on him and maybe it would all go away. I'm pretty fast on my feet and he was an old man, but no telling what he'd do if something gave—like he might get extra adrenalin. If he did manage to do me in, it sure would be one heck of an artistic way to go, with a Venetian stiletto between my bony little shoulder blades. But I didn't intend to die, even *artistically.* I mean, I'm just a young cat and I have a lot of living to do.

Yes, tonight is the night. I shall play it cool, to quote my young and entirely too perspicacious friend. I do feel the entire situation is unfortunate, but what am I to do? The stiletto, of course. I remember when I bought it in a Los Angeles antique store. How many intrigues had it seen? Had it belonged to one of the Borgias? Well, the time has come for it to come to life again. Has it been waiting for all these years to taste that precious thing, blood? I have already removed the cover from the well—those heavy cement lids are difficult to manage, but this is something which must be done and I find that my strength is now that of ten.

I, Calagria (I have become bold enough to use my true name), must now protect myself so that I may continue to offer the world

my genius, *for what is one lad compared to the deathless paintings which I shall produce?* Life is short and art is long; a cliché, but so true, so true. The boy has great talent, yes, but then another will come along. Through the centuries great talents have always been with us, sung and unsung. It would be best for me to spare the poor child the intense pain of maturing in this violent world, where his sensitivity might be permanently damaged. In a way I'm doing him a favor. It is all so simple, really. We shall have our dinner, I will interest him in the process of egg-tempera paint and, knowing the lad, he will become so involved with the new knowledge that it will be quite easy for me to, shall we say, send him to a happier place.

While gazing at my painting last night I was discussing with Lorenzo deMedici the fine art of people disposal, as I prefer to call it.

"Diversion, diversion," he said, smiling, as he fingered one of his priceless rings. Of course Lorenzo himself would never do such a thing, but he *did* have people working for him. We Venetians are clever, subtle people. I have prepared what might be termed a "last supper" for the boy. I do feel that the lad should spend his last night upon earth happy and well fed. Only two more hours and he will be here. Everything is in readiness. The lasagne is waiting only to be popped into the oven and the wine is chilled. I am prepared.

Hoo boy, Kelly John Kelly, I mumbled to myself as I combed what beard I have, here we go. It sounds sort of, well, melodramatic, and like it would be easier just to turn the poor guy in but, I repeat, I'm a fanatic about art and I just couldn't hurt him. I was sincerely hoping that it could all be settled, like nice and peaceful. So off I went. One of the of-age students had bought me a half pint of vodka and I'd downed some of it —Dutch courage, my old grandmother used to say. I trundled along, sort of all drunked up under the spooky moon, and as the one sidewalk in this village sort of rolls up at eight o'clock I really never felt so alone in my life, like going to my doom.

I finally came to the little shack, looking dark and forbidding, in the middle of a weed-patch, with dinky glimmers of light coming through the window—like a goblin house. Up I tippy-toed and knocked on the door, gulping oxygen all the while. Then I stuck my chin up and tried to relax. Man oh man oh manaroonian, I was *scared,* but still feeling the vodka, like the

rough edges were sort of dulled.

The door slowly squeaked open and there he was, grinning through his beard wearing, for pete's sake, this Venetian-type costume, like one in the Calagria picture.

"Ah, my boy, come in, come in. Delightful to see you, yes indeed."

The food smelled great. He poured me a glass of wine—real good stuff this time, though I couldn't help wondering about poison—but seeing as how he poured a glass for himself out of the same bottle and I didn't see any funny stuff going on I started to relax and pretty soon my worries were sloughing off. It was warm and cozy and I thought, well I've had a paranoid spell. Hell with it.

Then and there I decided, oh, let him keep the picture. Who am I to deprive this neat old artist of his precious picture? Who really cares about an old painting anyhow? Most dumb people don't even take the time to look. So, what with everything, we were talking away over a fine dinner. He had opened the curtains that covered the painting and, man, after a while I felt like I was back in Venice eating and drinking and being merry and he was yabbering about that egg-tempera technique and I was feeling like an idiot. Me and my fantasies. Maybe the picture *was* a copy. Who cares?

Then after we'd burped for a while and he'd put the dishes in the tiny sink he said, sort of grandly, "And now, lad, for the egg-tempera process."

He cleared the table of the rest of the stuff and brought out all the paint and the eggs and a hunk of wood with gesso on it. Then he started to tell me all about it and pretty soon I was all involved, messing with the paint and leaning over the table with the kerosene lamp in the middle of it. He was kind of pussyfooting around in back of me while I got more and more into what I was doing.

Suddenly the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I glanced at the kerosene light and saw, so help me granny, his reflection. His lips were peeled back and the glints from that stiletto were just too much. I jumped aside, pushing the table over and everything fell off with a big crash and the old kerosene just went *spoosh* and everything was on fire. By now he was screaming—the flames had got to the Calagria—and suddenly he turned into a devil and I was running out the door and he was after me. With that and the old shack burning up like crazy, I thought goofily, oh, man, there goes that beautiful picture.

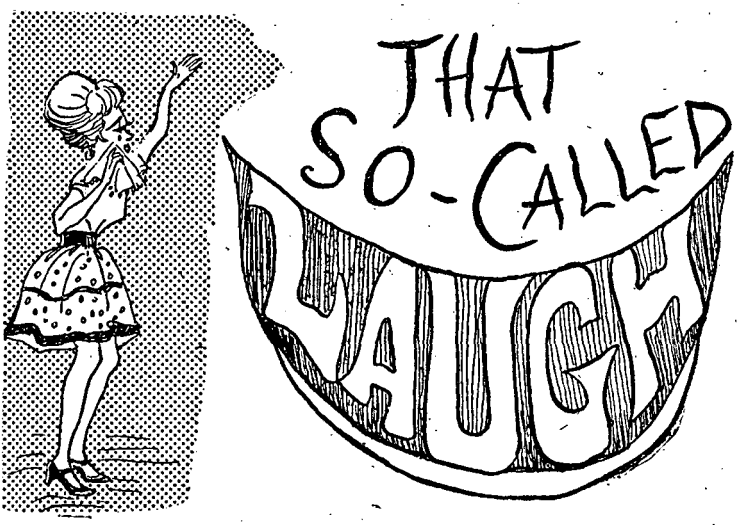
I headed out toward the open field and then I saw this open well so I zigged a bit and zapped around it and there he was on the other side holding that knife and by now I didn't know *what* I was doing. I was plain *mad,* so I thought, well dammit, he tried to get *me,* so I'll get *him* because he's dangerous. I grabbed a stick lying on the ground and we had a duel right there, round and round that open well. Then he let fly with the stiletto. I ducked, and *whiz,* down came my stick on his skull and he went flat and hit his head on the side of the well. I knelt down and saw that poor old Lawrence Weber Weeves was as dead as could be. I started crying. Then I heard the volunteer firemen coming, so, after scrabbling around in the weeds, I found the stiletto and tossed it in the well.

I sort of went into shock for a while. Finally I told everybody we were having dinner when the lamp got knocked over and we ran outside and he tripped over the well.

After that I kind of kept to myself. I think I cried for a month or two. Then one night I bought myself some French bread, salami and wine, sat down at my table and had a sort of memorial dinner for him.

A couple of weeks later I found a reproduction of the Calagria at the bookshop. I framed it and it's on my wall. Man, I can really get lost in that thing, like I was *there!* Sometimes I even feel like I'm one of the people in the picture—or maybe old Calagria himself. I've been working with egg-tempera and I'm doing a copy of the *Venice Street Scene,* or the Venice Canal Scene, actually. It's got everything—women haggling about the price of fish; orange rinds floating in the canal; dandies swaggering; clothes blowing on lines strung from one building to another; tarts with bleached hair and scandalously low necklines strutting beside the water; gondolas being propelled by muscular gondoliers. The true Venice. The Venice *then.* I sometimes get back there, back where I should have been in the first place. I was born in the wrong century.

After a pain-killing injection doesn't one always "laugh from the other side of his mouth"?



CAPTAIN THOMAS MCFATE, the man in charge, turned from the swimming pool and came back to the patio. Again he looked down at the body which lolled in a redwood lounge chair and was obviously clothed in nothing but the terrycloth robe.

A purple bubble above the right eye marked the bullet's point of entry and a little cloud of gnats behind the left ear indicated where it had come out. Big blue-winged flies were exploring the toes of the bare feet.

McFate leaned over a half-filled glass of tepid liquid on the redwood table beside the chair—gin and tonic, about an hour old. An

ashtray contained a self-consumed cigarette, a cylinder of gray. It was then that he noticed the powder-blue envelope protruding from the pocket of the robe.

Crumpled, as if it had been shoved into the pocket with undue

force, the envelope was addressed in a somewhat immature feminine hand to *Norman Markham*. There was no further address and the flap was not sealed. Inside were several pages of powder-blue paper compactly covered with lines of writing that sometimes formed a grammatical sentence.

Dear Norm, read McFate, *even knowing it's useless I am still fool enough to give you one more chance, a showdown, whether it's me or Michele, only I want you to look me right in the eye this time and say it with your own lips and not thru some third party. And if it's Michele as it seems to of been these last few lousy months, well then it's curtains for me, Norm, and this time I mean it so help me.*

I've suffered enough in the name of "love" to be an old decreepit hag, Norm, and here tomorrow I'm going to be just 24 years of age if I live that long. Maybe you'll be able to check it out in the obits, my real age.

I'm penning these words by your swimming pool, the same pool that once upon a time was going to be ours. Remember? If you can force your mind back a million years maybe you can remember and how you used to tell me I was the brightest star on your horizon. It must of been at least a million years ago because I was young enough then to believe every word you said. I was going on 22, Norm.

Don't laugh. I know these are mere words on paper and you are 10 miles away at the studio but I half expect you to laugh as if you were right here looking over my shoulder. Like you had ESP or that Yoga thing. And I can't stand that so-called laugh again, Norm.

Funny how I once thought that laugh was the freakiest thing, good freaky I mean, and I used to ad-

mire how you spooned it out on a bad shooting day to the actors and prop men and the sourballs behind the cameras but I was only a script girl then and I couldn't tell a mask from a pancake job, hardly. Then you gave me those three lines to say in that western pilot, the flop-eroo of the TV season, and I got to know the laugh better, the off-duty side, and the way it could cut a girl's heart to ribbons as easy as any knife.

You employed it the day you pulled the rug out from under our wedding plans. Remember? Friday nite Sept. 29th, a day I won't ever forget, never. We were supposed to drive to Vegas and have dinner on the way but when I arrived at the office you were leaving with two two-suiters and a flight ticket to New York, a big-money emergency, and when I asked how long you'd be gone you said 'Long enough, Sara, just long enough,' and then you made with that so-called laugh which you might as well have throwed a glass of ice water in my face.

What was it supposed to mean, what was I suppose to figure?

Well, I found out later the hard way, didn't I, Norm, when you came back a week later with that so-called redhead, a third lead in a second-rate musical from summer stock, and you didn't so much as give me a buzz and probably wouldn't have looked me up at all if I hadn't taken that overdose of sleeping pills. So then you came to the hospital with flowers and a smooth story how the redhead was simply a new face for the variety pilot and I believed you hook, line and sinker until the next time . . .

"What is it, Skipper—a love letter?"

McFate glanced at the man in the seersucker suit who had just wandered through the French windows. "I'd classify it more a suicide letter, Sergeant."

The sergeant looked at the body. "Suicide? You must be kidding, Skipper."

. . . it was that slinky dame you picked up on location in Mexicali, McFate resumed reading. *I warned you it was she or me, this life wasn't big enough for both of us, but you came on with that laugh of yours. Even when I told you I'd kill myself you gave me the laugh again. 'Have a big sleep,' you said. Well, I almost did, Norm, and you know it. If that extra hadn't left his bike in the garage and come to get it when he did, I'd have slept forever on the front seat of the car with gas purring out of the pipe.*

The story of my life, one imported witch after another, and

this time it's a so-called Frenchy but this time I got a peculiar feeling it's a little different. This time you're talking marriage again, like you did with me long long ago, and though I don't believe you have any real "follow-thru" in your makeup, I never the less have to confront you with the $64 question. Are you serious about Michele or not? If the answer is yes then, Norm, I am really going to kill myself and no near misses this time, no pills, no gas pipe, no razors on the wrists. This time I got a gun with bullets in it—that cute little 2-shot derringer you gave me in an ivory case, so that I could defend myself from all the wolves but you. Ha ha. And I'm going to make you a witness Norm, like it or not, because if it's Michele instead of me I'm going to stand right in front of you and pull the trigger so that you'll remember this moment the rest of your life, what you done to an honest girl whose worst fault was loving you. And I don't think you will laugh this off in a hurry, Norm, wait and see. Always your Sara.

"If it's suicide, Skipper," the sergeant was saying, "where the hell's the gun?"

McFate put the letter in his pocket. "A girl named Sara took it with her, one of the deceased's girlfriends."

"You mean this guy Markham shot himself and some girlfriend swipes the gun?"

"Not exactly, Sergeant. The girl intended to shoot herself but Markham laughed at her. Notice there's still a slight smile of sarcasm on the face."

Dear Fans:

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, California 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

For the mysteries within his own walls, a parent often makes the poorest of detectives—knowingly.

CAMILLE BROWN was a tease. Someday she would be a tormentor, she would have men pawning their souls, conniving, lying, cheating, destroying each other for her favors. She would have women frightened, jealous, hysterical and contemplating horrible deeds. On this hot, windless afternoon, however, she still was only a precocious child, given to restlessness, and currently interested in but one per-

son in her entire world—*him*.

Her laughter was a rich sound echoing a pulse of excitement as she frolicked across the open area behind the Post mansion. She entered the cool of the woods feeling very adult, very carefree. This was adventure. She had again escaped her mother without hearing the familiar warning: "Stay away from *him!*"—and soon *he* would be coming.

Looking back across the open area, she waited impatiently, an expectant smile curving her child's lips. The mansion loomed large. It was a rich man's home; Andrew Post was a rich man. She concentrated on the building behind the mansion, the building that housed a double garage and what once had been yardman's quarters, the building where just a week before, and for the first time in her life, she had known a few seconds of pure fear—fear that was exciting now that it was past. Camille knew *he* now was crouched behind one of the black windows in that building, staring out at her. She wished she could see his tormented face, the indecision in his eyes, the shuffling of feet.

A door in the building opened and *he* appeared. She drew a breath of anticipation. *He* moved away from the building on slow steps, as if still undecided, and hesitated. She stepped from the rim of the trees to stand in full view. *He* remained rooted. They stared across thirty yards. Then *he* broke into a dog trot.

Squeezing herself in triumph, Camille turned back into the trees. *He* could be so much like a puppet on a string. She laughed.

They were of identical age—fifteen. Camille lived in a house down the street. She had round, gray eyes and copper-colored hair worn in a long, single, fascinating pigtail that dropped to her waist, and this afternoon she was wearing a pale yellow, sleeveless dress. Michael Post especially liked the dress because it was a good background for the pigtail and because it exposed her arms. Her skin was so smooth, so white. Standing there, far back of the mansion where he lived with his mother and father, being there with Camille, the blood ran fast through his sensitive, almost frail body. His feet would not be still and his fingertips tingled as he relived all of the nice dreams he'd had about her, dreams in which he entwined the silkiness of the pigtail in his fingers and stroked and smoothed and patted the soft skin and listened to her purr, much like the kitten which had been so content in life until he had killed it by holding it high and squeezing its

neck until its legs finally had stopped twitching.

Camille pirouetted to put her back against a tree. "Hi." She smiled. The gray eyes teased.

He shuffled, looked down. "Hi."

"I'm glad you saw me."

"I just happened to look out a window."

"Oh? Weren't you *watching* for me?"

"No," he lied, "I wasn't watching."

"Hmm. I thought you might have been watching all week."

He shuffled. "No."

"I came out here this afternoon because I don't want you to think I am afraid of you or angry with you. It's my mother. My mother has told me never to play with you, and this past week—well, it's almost as if she *knows*."

Heat flushed him, made him feel as if he were smothering. Her calm fascinated him. Didn't she feel guilt, too? Wasn't theirs a common shame?

"It's all right," she went on. "But we can never—do it again. I like to kiss, but—"

"I—I understand, Camille."

"Do you?" She looked at him steadily and it was as if she were looking inside his head, staring at the confusion of his thoughts, then abruptly she brightened and pushed away from the tree. She laughed, caught his jaw in a palm and blatantly pecked his mouth with her cool lips. He stood rooted in surprise. She laughed again. He reached for her. She danced away. "No."

"But you just . . ." Confusion drowned his faculty for words.

"No," she repeated firmly. "Only when *I* want to. Now come on. Let's go to the ravine."

She walked deeper into the trees. The pigtail swayed like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, and the memory of the last time he had been with her, an afternoon in the previous week, recurred to him, making him feel queasy.

His father had gone to the country club, his mother to the shopping center; Camille had wanted to see the locked quarters behind the double garage, and he had taken the key from where his mother had secreted it. Inside, Camille looked around the small livingroom-bedroom, her face became flushed, her eyes sparkled, and suddenly she kissed him. It was the first time he had ever kissed and he discovered that he liked kissing. Too, he liked wrapping the pigtail around her neck while they kissed and tugging on it until she giggled. The only trouble was, he finally tugged too hard and Camille became angry. Worse, she had even seemed a bit frightened.

"Michael! Michael, come on!"

The sound of her voice brought him back. He moved off slowly toward her. She said, "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Something is. Why were you standing there? Why were you staring? Why did you—look so funny?" She allowed him to walk close to her this time before she spun away. Abruptly she became coquettish. "I bet it was that kiss." She giggled. "I bet *you* want to kiss *me*."

"C-Camille . . ."

"Well, you can't, Michael Post!" She danced away. The pigtail sailed, settled. She laughed. "Because *I* won't let you," she taunted. "Nice girls don't let boys kiss them. My mother says—"

He lunged for her, but she squealed and dodged. He fell to his hands and knees. The fall jarred him, and he froze, his head down, staring without seeing, the only sound being the shrill richness of her laughter. He felt as if he had been humbled. Anger and lost direction confused him. He was not himself; he was another being.

An insect wobbled through the grass at his fingertips. Its hard shell back snapped and grated under the twist of his palm heel.

"Michael!"

The sound of his name came to him from far away. He paid no attention to its summons. Slowly he lifted his hand to reveal the crushed body of the insect. He thought it looked very young; he thought the insect to be a child. Carefully he spread the grass blades around the dead insect. He had killed. There was triumph, but there also was remorse. He should not have killed; it was wrong to kill. On the other hand, he could protect. He could make sure no one took the insect's body, to drain it and then inflate it and allow others to stare at it—some faces cringing in distaste, some long and solemn, some wet and streaked with tears—and then, after days of staring, plop the body into a hole in the ground and throw dirt on it as if the body itself were dirt. He could protect the dead insect . . .

"Michael, what are you doing?"

Camille stood over him, staring down at him. She was not teasing now. She looked troubled.

"I killed a bug."

"Oh, come on! I want to go to the ravine."

She left him again, and did not look back this time. He carefully covered the dead insect with the blades of grass and marked the tree so he could return to the deceased. Then he went after her. There was a calm in him now.

They walked side by side in si-

lence, threading through the trees. Finally she said, "Michael, why do you like dead things?"

"There's a peace in the dead," he said savoringly.

"Gee, that's creepy kind of talk."

"A very special kind of peace," he said. He wanted to reach out and stroke the milky whiteness of her bare arm, but all he did was smile at her.

She shivered. "Dead things give me chills, but you laugh about them."

"No, Camille. I never laugh."

"Well, you smile," she accused. "Look at yourself now. I wish you had a mirror. You're smiling. And you do too laugh. I remember your kitten. You laughed out loud, and you—"

He stroked her white arm on impulse. She was so soft, so warm, her skin so slick with perspiration. But she snapped away.

"Don't! You make me feel . . . you make me feel like I might be your—kitten!"

"I could never hurt you, Camille."

They walked out of the heavy shade of the woods to stand on the edge of the ravine. The ground dropped away sharply. Large rocks jutted from the side of the drop all the way to the bottom where a narrow walk-over creek glistened. He inventoried the bottom and sides of the ravine. Nothing moved. He searched the woods across the ravine. Were there hidden eyes over there? He shriveled into himself.

Camille screwed up her face. "What's the matter now?"

"I have the feeling someone is watching us."

"From where?"

"Across the ravine."

"Well, that's silly. Why would anyone watch us?"

"You. You're so pretty. Everyone looks at you. Especially boys."

"For creep's sake, can I help it if boys look at me? People look at you, too, you know."

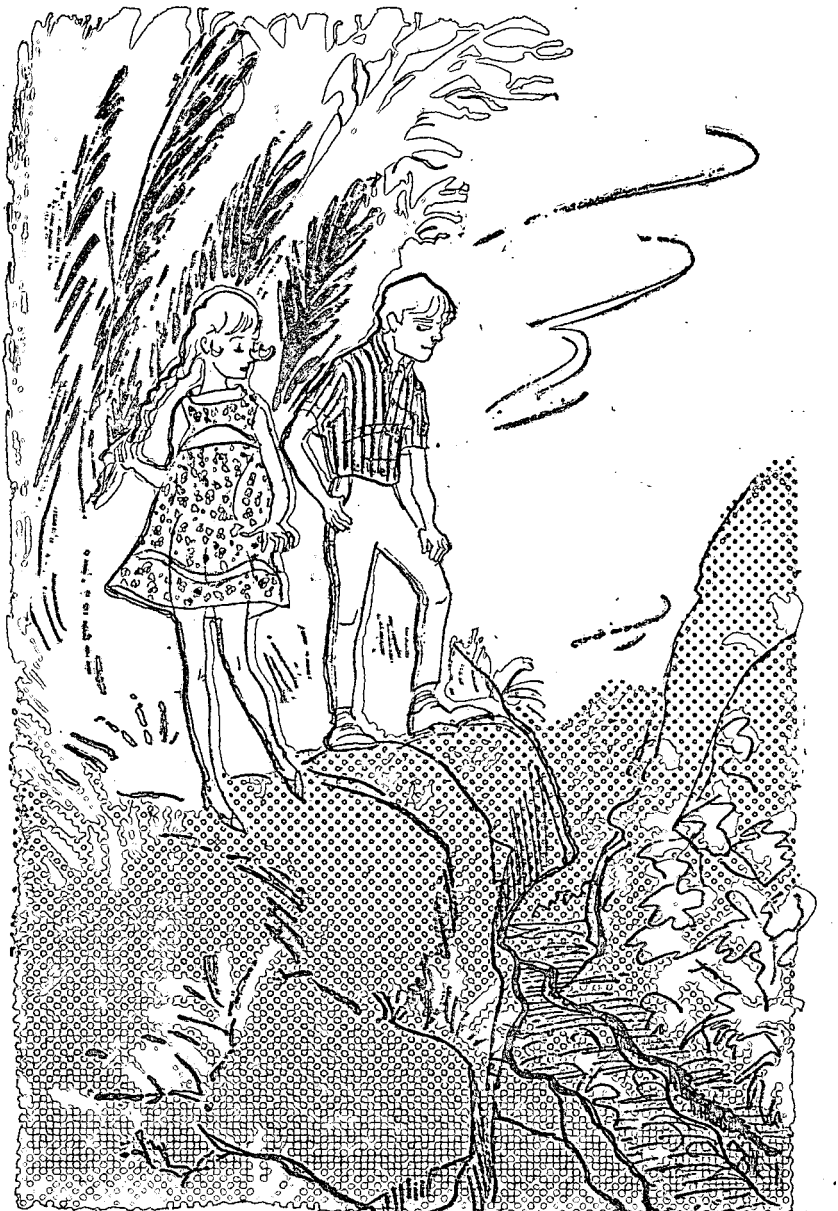
"But it's not the same thing, Camille. Boys want to feel your skin."

"Darn it," she said angrily, jerking her arm from his fingertips. "I told you to quit that! Why do you always have to touch me?"

"Don't run, Camille," he pleaded.

"I'm going home! I shouldn't have come here with you! Mother is right, I shouldn't be with you! I'm sorry I ever let you kiss me, I'm—"

She turned. The pigtail bounced. Her legs flashed. She screamed when he tackled her. They went down hard. His head struck a rock and something happened inside. Everything was so white all of a



sudden; there were no colors, no distinction, no images. There was a screeching that became a tremendous pressure against his eardrums. He felt as if his head were a rotten pumpkin that was swelling all out of proportion and soon would burst if the piercing noise did not end.

"Don't run, Camille! Don't be afraid of me!"

Abruptly there was color again—red. It became so bright it seemed to penetrate his eyes, so he closed them and listened hard. The shrill noise no longer existed. All he could hear now was the hiss of someone breathing very hard. Carefully he slit his eyes, prepared to close them quickly should what he see be unpalatable and offensive, but there was only Camille. She was half under him, and was very quiet now. Her mouth was open, her eyes closed.

He disengaged himself, sat up and found the rock in his hand. There was a wet smear on its rough surface. The smear was reddish in color. It looked like blood. He laughed aloud. Camille did not laugh with him.

He twisted and looked at her. A very large pool of red had spread from the right side of her head. He put a fingertip in the pool. It was warm and sticky. He wiped the finger on his trouser leg. It left a smear. He touched the red on the rock. It, too, was sticky. He put another streak on his trouser leg.

Then he got up on his knees and asked Camille, "Are you asleep?"

She did not stir. Her face looked damp and hot. Strands of the copper-colored hair were plastered against her brow. He tenderly brushed the hair back, pulled out his shirttail and gently wiped the dampness from her face.

Suddenly he knew. Camille was dead.

Righteousness filled him. Now he had to protect her. He had to keep her from those who would put her in a hole in the ground and then ignore her. He had to secrete her as he had the insect.

He carried her down into the ravine and used mounds of old leaves. She would be comfortable and warm under the leaves and he could return each day to sit beside her and talk to her and feel the softness of her skin. He would pamper her, protect her. She belonged to him.

The sun was low in the western sky when he climbed out of the ravine and saw the rock. The red smear on it seemed condemning. He arched the rock into the glistening creek. It made an odd plopping sound, and then it was gone from his sight and he knew that

he never would have to look at it again.

The only trouble was, he had a bad dream that night. He dreamed a policeman held the rock accusingly before his eyes while all around him people clustered in tight little knots and stared at him in disbelief. Camille's mother and father were in one of the groups. Her father had to be restrained from attacking him, while her mother shrieked horrible things at him. His mother and father were in another group. His father was pale and drawn and seemed unable to speak, but his mother understood—his mother always understood—and she drew him protectively against her body and allowed him to shield his eyes so he did not have to look at the red rock. Michael awoke abruptly, to find his mother standing beside his bed.

She smiled gently. "I'm sorry to awaken you, darling, but there is a bit of a disturbance in the neighborhood. Camille Brown has disappeared. Her parents are quite worried, naturally. They are downstairs with your father. There are also some policemen." His mother drew a breath, and her lovely, dark eyes held concern. "The policemen, Michael, want to know if you saw Camille today."

"What time is it, Mom?"

"A few minutes before eleven o'clock. Why?"

"I just wondered. I thought I might be dreaming."

"No. You are awake, dear. Did you see Camille today?"

"No."

"You must not lie, son." Her smile tightened a bit around the edges, but it still held gentleness. "You know I always can tell when you lie."

"Are there really policemen downstairs?"

"Yes."

"I haven't seen Camille for a couple of days now. Honest."

The smile became tighter. "I see." For a moment he thought she was going to demand the truth. Then the tightness was gone, and the smile was genuine. She put an arm across his shoulders and drew him close. "You will have to come downstairs, darling." Her voice was soft, her manner condescending. "For some reason, Mrs. Brown thinks you did see Camille today. You will have to tell the policemen that Mrs. Brown is wrong."

"Yes, Mother."

He could not tell if the policemen believed him. There were three of them, two in uniform and one in a business suit, but their faces were identical—blank. Only the one in the business suit asked questions.

Camille's mother ranted, "The boy is lying!"

Michael sought the protection of his mother, and she cradled him.

His father, angry now, stepped forward. He said, "Mrs. Brown, we appreciate the fact that you are under a great emotional strain, but I do not think you have the right to call our son a liar!"

"Then make him tell us where our Camille is! He knows what has happened to her!"

The policeman in the business suit resumed control. His name was Amazon. He asked the Browns to leave with the two uniformed men.

Mrs. Brown buried her face in her palms and sobbed, "She didn't run away, Sergeant. Camille wouldn't run away. She had no reason to."

The sergeant stood silent until the Browns had disappeared, and Michael watched him guardedly. He was afraid of him. Finally the sergeant asked, "When was the last time you saw Camille, son?" His voice was gentle.

Michael shrugged. "Couple of days ago, I guess."

"Don't you remember?"

"Yes, sir. It was two days ago. It was Monday afternoon."

"And you didn't see her today? You didn't even see her walking down the street, perhaps getting into a car, entering a house or—"

"No, sir."

The sergeant looked thoughtful, then said, "Mr. Post, we're going to look around the neighborhood. I understand there's a woods and a ravine at the rear of your property."

Michael felt as if he were going to cry out, but the fingers on his shoulder stopped him. The fingers squeezed reassuringly. He blinked up at his mother, but she was busy addressing the policeman.

"Mr. Amazon, are you thinking along the line of an accident?"

"We have to check all facets in this kind of case, ma'am."

"Yes, I suppose there could have been an accident or . . . Andrew, perhaps you should guide the sergeant."

"Well . . ."

"An extra hand is always welcomed," said Amazon.

The two men left the mansion, and Michael heard his father speculating as they went out the door: "The ravine, eh? An accident?"

The door closed out the words. Michael turned under the urging of his mother's hand. They went up the stairway and into his bedroom.

"Why can't you tell them you saw Camille today, darling?" she asked in a soft voice.

"I didn't see her, Mom! That's

the truth!" Bolting from her, he pitched face down on the bed. He could not force himself to look up at her. The lie seemed so baldly conspicuous and he did not want to see her face.

Then she surprised him. She drew a sheet around his shoulders, snapped off the lamplight, kissed his nape and whispered, "All right, darling. I'm sure you have your reason."

Giving her just enough time to return downstairs before he left the bed, Michael slid his feet into moccasins and scrambled into a robe. He left the room to inch down the back steps, and crossed the kitchen with his heart pounding fiercely. Outside he broke into a run, raced through the woods and slid on his buttocks down the side of the ravine, forgetting the loud noise sliding rocks can make at night. He sat frozen, his ears tuned to every sound. There were no voices, no shouts, no flashlights. He went to Camille and scraped the leaves from her body. She was beautiful in the moonlight, so white. He did not want to move her but this was a problem of sheer survival now. He managed to lift her, so there would not be drag marks, then carried her to a place below the sharpest rise of the ravine wall and dumped her on the ground. She lay contorted and ugly. The sight revolted him. She did not look like Camille at all.

Returning to the mansion, he went up the back steps quietly, down the corridor and into his room. The lamp was on. His mother sat on the edge of the bed. She was pale and taut. The trousers he had worn that day were across her lap. The blood streaks where he had wiped his finger twice were exposed.

She lifted her arms to him and whispered, "Come to me, baby. I'll protect you."

Camille Brown was buried on a rainy, depressing Saturday afternoon. The Posts did not attend the funeral. The elder Posts were not that close to the Browns, and Michael knew he never could watch Camille being treated with such crassness.

Sergeant Amazon returned to the mansion that Saturday night. Looking grim and determined, he said, "In the beginning, we assumed it was an accident. We assumed Camille Brown fell from the top of the ravine and struck her head on a rock, either on the way down or in landing. Now we think the girl was murdered."

"Murdered!" Andrew Post blurted.

"We found dried blood on the rim of the ravine, Mr. Post. It was

sixty-three yards from the spot where someone wanted us to think the girl had tumbled. Our supposition now is the girl was killed, then carried and pitched into the ravine." For the first time, Michael felt the sergeant's eyes on him. "So you see, it now becomes doubly important that we know the truth. We must know when Camille Brown last was seen, who she was with, if anyone, and *where* she was seen."

Michael felt his mother stiffen. "Are you intimating, Sergeant, that our son has not been entirely truthful with you?"

"I want him to be positive that Monday was the last time he saw the Brown girl."

"Darling?"

"Monday, Mother." Michael nodded, shuffling.

"Then," said Amazon with a deep sigh, "I won't disturb you folks anymore tonight, but if you do happen to think of something else—"

"We will contact you immediately, Sergeant," Andrew Post broke in.

The crispness of his tone alerted Michael. His father knew! Although not nearly as perceptive as his mother, his father somehow now knew that he had lied!

Michael felt wrenched apart inside. He thought he might be ill. His stomach churned, but he sat stiffly, waiting for the policeman to leave.

Then Sergeant Amazon was gone. When his father returned from escorting him to the door, his face was pale, his lips drawn into a thin line, his eyes hard. Michael felt the arm across his shoulders tighten.

"I want the truth," his father said in a voice that quavered.

"Andrew!" his mother admonished. "You have heard the truth!"

"Have I? Son?"

Michael could not speak.

"The truth!" Andrew Post shouted.

"Andrew!" Michael welcomed the strength in his mother's arm as she drew him tighter against her side. "I will not have you shouting! I will not have you berating our son!"

"Did you kill her, boy?"

"Andrew!" his mother shrilled. "How dare you?"

"Because it's true!" his father ranted. "I can see it in his eyes now! He did kill Camille Brown! He killed her just as he killed the kitten, just as he kills insects and dogs and rabbits and squirrels and . . . You're protecting a killer, Helen! There's something wrong with that boy! He's not normal! He's—"

"He's my baby, Andrew! *Our*

baby! Can you turn him over to the police? No, Andrew, you can't. I won't permit it!"

Michael no longer was fond of his father. His father had said some terrible things about him. His father had said there was something wrong with him, that he was not normal.

His father was a horrible man.

Michael loved his mother.

The next morning, Sunday, his father died. Andrew Post put the muzzle of the double-barreled shotgun into his mouth and squeezed the triggers.

The funeral would remain one of the most hideous episodes of his life. Michael felt as dead as the body inside the casket. The casket was lowered into the ground. Dirt was pitched in on top of it. His mother wailed. He turned to her and stood frozen. Sergeant Amazon had come out of the cluster of faces surrounding the grave and escorted her to the car. Michael trailed, his eyes riveted on the policeman's back. He was terribly afraid of the policeman and deeply concerned about his mother. Hysteria—any form of release—could bring babbling, and babbling could reveal the truth.

Michael prayed that his mother would remain in silent shock.

She recuperated at the mansion. There was a doctor, of course, and a full-time, private nurse. The doctor was a patient, noncommittal man and the nurse was a friendly, efficient girl of twenty-five or so with sleek, black hair wrapped in a bun, beautiful red-painted lips, and very soft-looking skin that had been tanned by many suns. Her name was Tammy.

Michael thought about Tammy a lot. In his darkened bedroom at night, when he was supposed to be asleep, he lay wide awake and marveled at the doctor's patience, his mother's gradual recovery, but uppermost in his mind was the beauty of Tammy.

She was a small girl, certainly no more than ninety-five or a hundred pounds, gentle, and he liked the smell of her when she occasionally hugged him and told him his mother was "coming along fine." He liked the warmth of her body, imagined the black hair fashioned into a pigtail, and thought her skin, although darker, was very much like Camille's—so soft.

His mother improved, and finally told the doctor he did not have to come to the house anymore, but she kept Tammy nights, because some of her nights were bad. Michael heard her screams on those bad nights. They would awaken him and he would be frightened until Tammy came smiling into his bedroom to hand him the glass of warm milk and sit beside his bed until he again slept and dreamed about her.

In time his mother took him into her confidence. "Darling," she said, "your father was a good man despite the police now thinking he was some type of child molester. He provided well and he left us comfortable. We will live well, you and I."

"Is Tammy going to live with us?"

His mother frowned. "No," she said slowly. "But I have made arrangements for her to come in evenings, to remain overnight."

"Then it's all right, Mom." The pounding of his heart eased.

"You like Tammy, don't you, darling?"

"Can't I?" he challenged.

"Certainly," she said thoughtfully. "Tammy is good for us, the both of us—I think."

Contentment stole upon Michael. In the next three weeks Sergeant Amazon stopped dropping in at the mansion, his mother seemed to be regaining her composure, and Tammy was in the house every night.

Where Camille had been plump and round, with a look of budding peasantry, Tammy was small and lithe. Camille had been fair. Tammy was tinted. Camille had been flighty. Tammy read books; she stopped at the library in the shopping center every night before coming to the mansion. Camille's hair had been shiny copper, worn in a pigtail. Tammy's hair was black, and gleamed, but in that silly bun.

Michael fretted and discovered that more than anything in the world he wanted Tammy to have a pigtail. He wanted to be able to wrap the pigtail around her neck, and kiss those red-painted lips, and feel the warmth of her, and . . .

Tammy was also, he discovered, a perceptive girl. She saw the disturbance in him and was curious. When she brought the warm milk

one night she asked, "Can I help, Michael?"

He felt suffused in heat.

"Friends share confidences," she said.

He confessed in a rush of words.

"Is that all it is?" Her smile was bright. "Well, I don't know why I can't wear my hair in a pigtail."

"Will you?" His heart suddenly beat very hard.

"If it's that important to you. After all, therapy is part of my duty here, too."

"And will you let me kiss you?"

"Ho-ho." She seemed amused, but she did not kiss him. Instead, she winked and left the bedroom, snapping out the lamplight from the wall switch.

That night his dreams were dominated by a girl who looked like Camille but who had rich, black hair fashioned in a new pigtail, a girl who allowed him to wrap the new pigtail around her neck even though she would not allow him to kiss her. He knew a measure of peace. But the next evening, Thursday, was catastrophic. Tammy appeared at the mansion in a bright, new pigtail that hung far down her spine. He was elated. He felt like shouting. He felt like dancing —until his mother unloaded the bomb.

"Darling, tomorrow night will be Tammy's last with us. I feel I am totally myself once again, you see."

"W-won't we ever see her again?"

"I doubt it, dear."

He could not believe it. He was numb. He ran up the stairway and into his bedroom, to pitch face down across the bed. His legs twitched and his fingers clenched.

"Tammy," he moaned. "Tammy . . ."

From far away he heard his mother's questioning voice. "Darling?"

"Get out!" he shrilled. "Get out —you beast!"

Standing deep in the aisle of books, Tammy Turner knew presentiment. It was as if evil were a shroud closing in on her. She looked to her left and to her right but all she found were eyes. They belonged to a man twice her age who had appeared from around the back end of the book shelves and now stood looking at her in silence. The man smiled, moved toward her. She walked hastily toward the checkout desk of the small, shopping center library and she could feel the pigtail swaying against her back. Suddenly she wished she never had braided the pigtail. She would not have except that it had seemed so important to Michael. He was such a sensitive boy.

She heard the footsteps behind her as she rounded a corner of the desk and handed a book to the librarian to be checked out. She risked a look; the man was there. He nodded to her without speaking and waited patiently while the librarian stamped the card. She took the book and turned to the street door. Another man stood there, a much younger man, and he was looking at her, too. His eyes made her shiver. She thought them animalistic eyes, dark, deep, and intense. The man stepped out into the early Friday evening. Tammy hesitated. She was not sure she wanted to be outside in the same night with the young man. Then she heard her name called softly, and she turned abruptly.

It was the librarian who now was holding a tiny purse aloft. Tammy returned to the desk, passing the older man who still smiled. She retrieved the purse, decided to kill time. She went to the newspaper rack, took down a rack of papers, thumbed through them without seeing them. Finally it was eight-thirty and time for the library to close.

She reluctantly left the building and went down the steps. The night was still and nasty, the stillness pressing in on her along with the fine mist in the air. She looked for the men, saw neither. Why had she stopped at the library this night? The question cried out in her mind, but there really was no reason for wondering. This night was no different than any other. She rode the bus into the shopping center every night, stopped at the library to pick up a book to while away the time at the Post house, then walked the two blocks to the house. She conversed with the boy, Michael, and with Mrs. Post. Then they retired. It was routine.

She shuddered and turned along the sidewalk. Ahead was darkness. She slowed her steps, the presentiment much stronger in her now. Was there a man out there ahead of her, a man buried in the deep shadows of the thicket to her left, waiting for her? Either of the men from the library? She increased her pace abruptly, her steps short, her eyes alert, her heels clicking louder against the night.

Sergeant Amazon shifted in the uncomfortable chair. He wanted a cigarette but somehow he knew that a cigarette would offend the woman opposite him so he did not light up. He said, "We may be making a mountain out of a molehill, Mrs. Post, but at the moment the girl appears to be missing, and her roommate is worried. The roommate called us this morning.

I've talked to her, and inspected the apartment they share. Tammy Turner's only missing personal possessions are the clothing she was wearing last night, and her purse."

"It seems odd," Mrs. Post said softly, "that we should again meet under such trying circumstances."

It's because I seem to get all of the kooky cases, Phillip Amazon wanted to say, but he managed to check himself. "It's because I am supposed to be an expert in tracing missing persons, Mrs. Post," he said. "And right now I have to ask you a few questions. I need to know Tammy Turner's routine—how long have you employed her?"

"Ever since . . . well, ever since my husband . . ."

Amazon waited. The woman looked up, looked away, looked down at her lap again. "Sometimes I have very bad nights," she said finally. "I experience nightmares. Tammy has been staying with me ever since my husband died."

"But she did not show up last night?"

"N-no."

"Was it the first night she has missed since in your employ?"

"Yes."

"Can you speak up, Mrs. Post? My ears aren't what they used to be."

"I'm sorry, Sergeant."

"Did Miss Turner phone you last night to give any reason?"

"No."

"Didn't this disturb you?"

"In a sense, yes; in a sense, no. I thought there might have been a misunderstanding. Last night was supposed to be Tammy's last with me—her final night in my employment. I felt . . . I feel that I have recovered from the ordeal of the past few weeks and . . . well, it was to be her last night in the house."

"Go on."

"Well, when she didn't come I thought she might have been under the impression that Thursday night was to be her last night."

"Instead of Friday."

"Yes."

"Then you had discussed the matter with her."

"Certainly. Early in the week."

"How have you been paying her, Mrs. Post? By the day, the week or . . ."

"I gave her a check every Friday evening."

"Then she hasn't received her check for this week?"

"No. It's made out, but it's still in my checkbook. Frankly . . . well, I mean, when she didn't show up last night I expected to see her today. I still do. I expect her to come here today to get her money."

"I see. Tell me, to your knowledge, did Miss Turner always ride

the 7:55 bus out here? That is, the bus that arrives—"

"Yes. Her normal routine is to ride the bus, then stop at the library in the shopping center and be at the house about eight-thirty."

"The library?"

"Tammy's habit is to read most of the night. She is very good in her work. I don't expect her to stay up all night, but she feels she should. She feels it is her duty to be alert and available if I need her."

"In other words, she worked by night and slept by day."

"I don't know about the sleeping, Mr. Amazon."

"It wouldn't leave her much time for dating, would it?"

"Dating? I don't think she dates. She has been here seven nights a week. In the beginning, I demanded her presence. Lately, however, I asked her to take at least one night a week for herself. I thought she needed a break, but she didn't take it. She seemed to prefer to be on the job."

"And you never heard her refer to a boyfriend or boyfriends?"

"No."

"Her roommate says she has at least one."

"She has never talked about him to me."

"He's in California, the Hollywood area. He has acting aspirations, went out there seven weeks ago. I talked to him on the phone this morning."

"Perhaps Tammy suddenly decided to go to him, Mr. Amazon. Perhaps she is on her way to Hollywood this very instant."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. She didn't pack a suitcase, and she would have no reason to hide such a trip from her roommate. Too, there's her pay, the check in your book."

"Yes," Mrs. Post agreed slowly.

Amazon stood. She looked up. It was the first time she had looked directly at him since he had arrived.

"Are we finished?" she asked.

It was an inane question and it had been mouthed as if she had suddenly found unexpected hope. He puzzled over the question briefly. Was this woman hiding something from him? Then he changed tactics. He gave her a smile. "Tell your son hello for me."

"Well . . . thank you. I will."

He kept the smile. "It's never this quiet around our house."

She looked puzzled.

"I have a son, too. John."

"Oh."

"I'm afraid he's a bit of a rowdy. Sometimes I think he has a personal grudge against the walls in our house."

"Oh. Well, perhaps I am fortu-

nate. Michael is . . . the quiet kind of boy."

"He seems studious. I imagine he gets good grades in school."

"Yes, he studies a great deal during the school year. I mean . . . well, he *is* a good student. He will study every evening if we . . . if I allow him."

"I'm afraid John is just the opposite. Too many outside interests."

"Michael doesn't have many of those."

"A growing boy needs a few, but John has too many."

"Michael has shown some interest in swimming. He is taking lessons at the YMCA."

"Well, I'll be darned! So is John."

"Michael goes on Friday nights."

"John goes on Tuesdays. It's a good program. He hasn't missed a lesson since he enrolled."

"Neither has Michael."

"Well . . . tell the boy hello."

"You may run into him as you leave, Mr. Amazon. He's outside somewhere."

Amazon did not meet the boy and he drove in deep thought through the afternoon heat to the shopping center library. He could not rid himself of the notion that Mrs. Post was hiding something. He entered the library and talked to the librarian who had been on duty the previous night. When he left the building, he was deeply concerned. He decided to walk the route from the library to the Post mansion. His steps were slow. In the first block there was the street on his right and buildings on his left.

In the second block he paid particular attention to the thicket on his left, and his experienced eyes found a green shoe. He stopped, stared glumly through the opening in the brush. Only the toe of the shoe was visible. It was on ginger steps that he entered the thicket. He expected to find a body, but all he saw was the shoe, a book, and a small purse.

Later, at downtown police head-

quarters, he summarized for his superior: "I already have enough evidence to support strongly suspicion of foul play, Lieutenant. I'm positive the thicket was the scene of an attack. There are signs of a violent struggle. I have the Turner girl's shoe, positively identified now by her roommate, her purse, and the book she checked out of the library. I know she left the library a few minutes after closing time last night. That would make it eight-thirty, a few minutes later. I know two men left the library ahead of her. One, a Spencer Frame—according to the librarian, who has no reason to lie—was back in the aisles with her. The other, a Harry Curtain, was standing at the front door."

"Sex?" asked the lieutenant.

Amazon shrugged. "How many crimes would not have been committed if we did not have the enigma of sex, Lieutenant?"

"You begin with Frame and Curtain."

"I *prefer,* Lieutenant, to begin with a violated girl—or a body."

He began, however, with Spencer Frame and Harry Curtain—and he found that each had an ironclad alibi. Each admittedly had seen the Turner girl at the shopping center library on Friday night. Each admittedly had left the library ahead of her, but Curtain had been picked up in a car outside the library by his wife, three children and a neighbor lady, a friend of his wife's; Frame had been met by two associate school teachers. The teachers had gone to a bowling alley one block from the library. They were inside the alley at eight-thirty—before the Turner girl had left the library—and none had left the alley until midnight.

Amazon was fatigued. He sat slumped at his desk in the squad room, and paid no attention to the other detectives there. His thoughts whirled. There was no pattern. He had a missing girl. He had evidence of foul play. Earlier, he'd had suspects, but not now. Frame and Curtain had been cleared.

He picked up the receiver of the telephone. He had something else to check, something he had put off all afternoon.

Amazon hesitated, reflecting grimly. His thoughts churned back to the discovery of a child's body in a ravine—Camille Brown, who had been murdered. He remembered Andrew Post, the man who had put the shotgun barrels in his mouth. The blast of that shotgun supposedly had closed the case of the murdered Brown girl. But had it? He, Amazon, never had been positive in his mind, never had experienced a sense of true satisfaction with the solution of the

murder. It just never added up.

Now he looked up a number in the telephone directory and dialed the YMCA.

Michael sat staring down at his beautiful Tammy. "I love you," he whispered. He fingered the silkiness of her pigtail. His heart beat faster. Outside it was dusk. He drew curtains across the windows, arranged the candles in their holders and lit them. Tammy never was to be in darkness. He bent over her, brushed his lips across her cheek. Then he left the garage quarters and entered the kitchen of the house.

His mother confronted him. Her color was bad, and her eyes held a peculiar brilliance. She seemed very nervous. "M-Michael, where have you been?"

"Outside."

She picked lint from her dress. "All afternoon?"

"All afternoon."

"It's dark now."

"I know."

She did not seem to want to look at him. "Have you . . . have you been to the ravine?"

"No."

"I—I looked for you earlier. You —you haven't had supper."

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"M-Michael . . ." She chewed her lower lip. "Darling, about Tammy . . ." She covered her face.

His heart leaped. "What about her?"

"Well, you know she didn't come here last night. You know the police say she is missing. They think something dreadful has happened to her . . ."

"No, I didn't know," he said.

"It's been on all of the newscasts today."

"I haven't heard a radio or watched TV all day, Mom."

"They . . . the police found her shoe and her purse, and a book—"

"Mom, what's all the fuss?" he asked bluntly.

It was then that she looked directly at him. Her eyes remained round and unblinking, her lips were pinched, she seemed to have trouble breathing. Finally she said in a voice so soft he had difficulty hearing her words: "Michael, I drove to the YMCA this afternoon. I talked to your swimming instructor. You did not attend your class last night."

"Yes, I did, Mom. I was there for almost two hours."

Her lips pinched tighter. "Son . . ."

It was all she said. Abruptly she seemed to collapse. She sat hunched and staring into her lap, and the only sound in the kitchen was the whistle of their breathing. Michael remained waiting for a long time,

but his mother did not move. Then he left the kitchen and went upstairs to his bedroom. His mother puzzled him. He did not understand why she seemed so unhappy on this, a night of happiness.

He disrobed, showered, and began to dress. Standing before the mirror, he smiled at the reflection. A policeman was looking for Tammy? He wondered if it were the same policeman who had looked for Camille Brown.

His mother entered his bedroom. "M-Michael . . . we must talk. I have to know—" She cut off the words with a gasp. She stared at him, her eyes rounded and her mouth gaping.

"Yes?" he said, using his reflection in the mirror to adjust his necktie.

"What—are you doing?" she whispered. "Why have you put on your best suit? Why are you—"

"I'm going to Tammy," he told her calmly.

"What!"

"I'm in love, Mother. With Tammy. She is very beautiful."

"Oh . . . *son!*" she wailed.

Then she pulled him against her and clutched him as if he were dying. He did not understand her tears, her mumbled words, or why she had to cling to him. She was wrinkling his shirt and suit. Didn't she realize what she was doing to him? He wanted to be immaculate.

"Mother, Mother," he admonished. "Tears? This is a happy time. It is not my funeral."

She wailed, "Oh, Michael . . ."

He smelled the smoke. He stiffened. There was a peculiar orange glow outside the window. He pushed his mother away and raced to the window. One wall of the garage was ablaze—the candles!

His mother screamed as he bolted past her and down the stairs. Outside he kicked open the door of the garage quarters and went down hard on his hands and knees just inside the door. The flames crackled. They had crawled up the blazing wall to the ceiling. Bits of fire fell around him, but he could see his beautiful Tammy on the bed. Tiny fires surrounded her and were growing larger. They seemed to spring from the bed covering. Her dress began to curl and darken.

He attempted to reach her, but the fire blocked him. He fell back. The heat pushed at him. Noise pounded against his eardrums. Somewhere there was a shrill scream, and then hands were clawing at his shoulders and yanking him from the garage and his Tammy.

His mother stumbled across the yard with him. She sprawled on the grass. Her voice came to him:

"Dear God . . . dear God . . ." and the sound of sirens joined her wailing.

A fireman in a hideous mask brought out Tammy's body.

Then a small, unkempt man, whom Michael recognized as the policeman who had come to the house about Camille Brown, was attempting to placate his mother, but she was not to be placated. She wailed loudly. She screamed. She fought off those who attempted to calm her. Finally the doctor arrived and did something to make her quiet.

Michael felt better. He never liked to see his mother so upset.

The policeman took Michael downtown. The policeman's name was Amazon. He asked questions, but he did not seem to understand. He refused to believe in love.

Michael told the policeman about another love—Camille Brown. He told the policeman he had loved Camille, too.

Amazon remained unconvinced. How could he, Michael, have loved Camille? How could he have loved Tammy Turner?

Michael told Amazon, but looks passed between Amazon and another man, a man who seemed to be Amazon's superior.

"Lieutenant?" Amazon said.

The other man nodded somberly. "Necrophilia. I've seen one other case, Sergeant."

"My God!" Amazon exploded. "What kind of a kook—"

"Ill," the lieutenant interrupted. "This boy is ill."

Ill? Michael smiled at the lieutenant and the sergeant. He had never been ill a day in his life.

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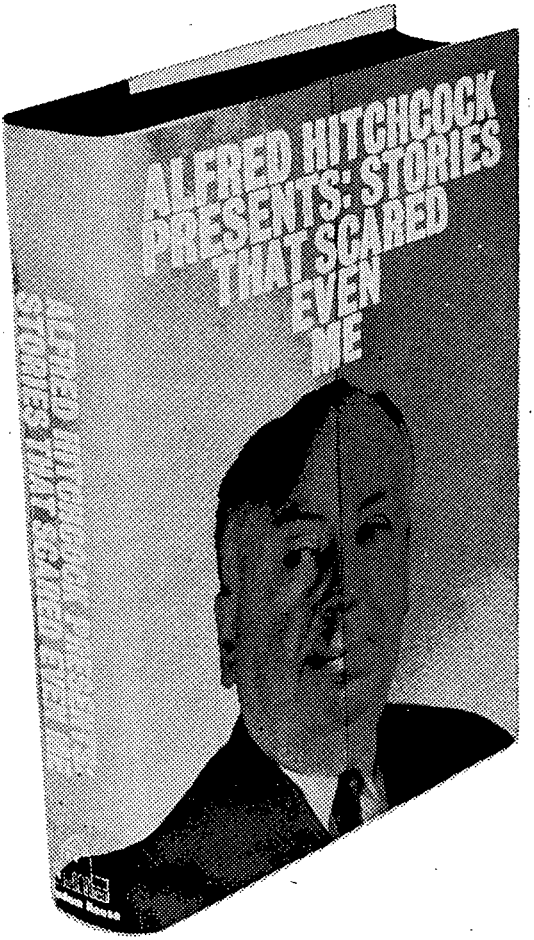

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