ALFRED

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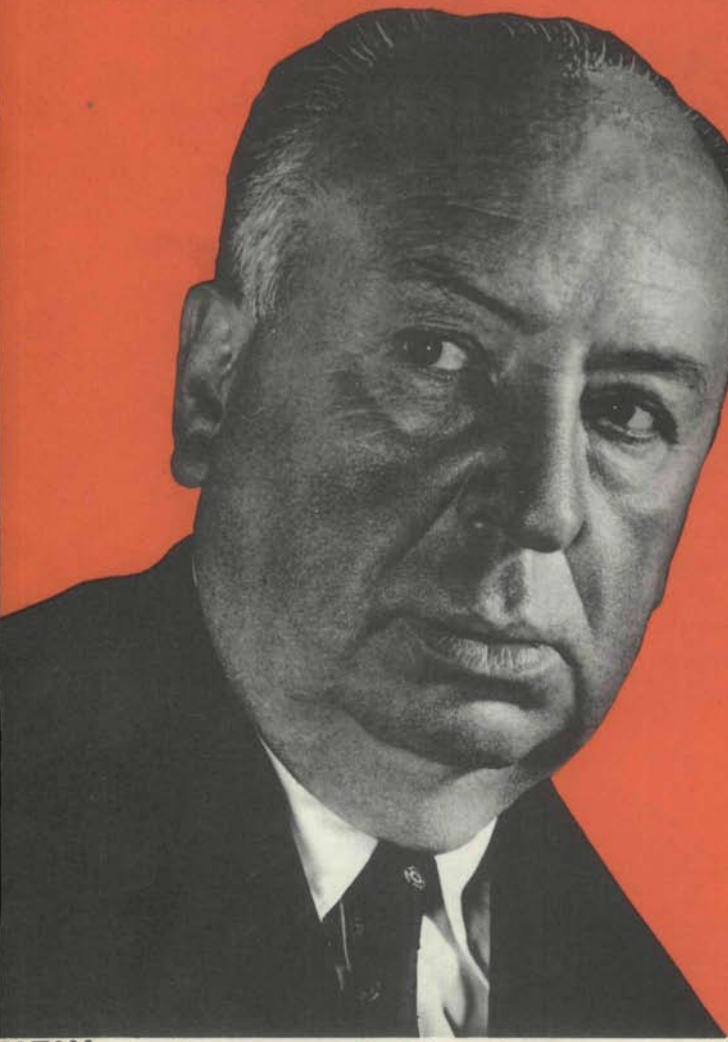
HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

October 1968

Dear Reader:

We are coming into the fall season, whose traditional colors I find most pleasing. Particularly red. Contrary to popular belief, however, I cannot take credit for advocating the tints of dying foliage for fall wearing apparel or any other adornment.

That red appears on the cover and elsewhere may not, of course, be a coincidence, for neither fall nor physiology would be the same without it—on this planet, at least.

Fall can be a most suspenseful time, depending upon one's viewpoint. I heard of one interesting gentleman, a researcher in sound amplification, who would set up his equipment beneath a fiery oak or a golden maple. There he would wait between his earphones for the tingle of excitement when a leaf exploded from its twig and crashed to earth.

If you are one who expects suspense in somewhat larger doses, you have come to the right place. Herein the hues are myriad. Yet you may express your appreciation tangibly, on Pages 142 or 160, with a common lead pencil.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 13, NO. 10 OCTOBER 1968

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

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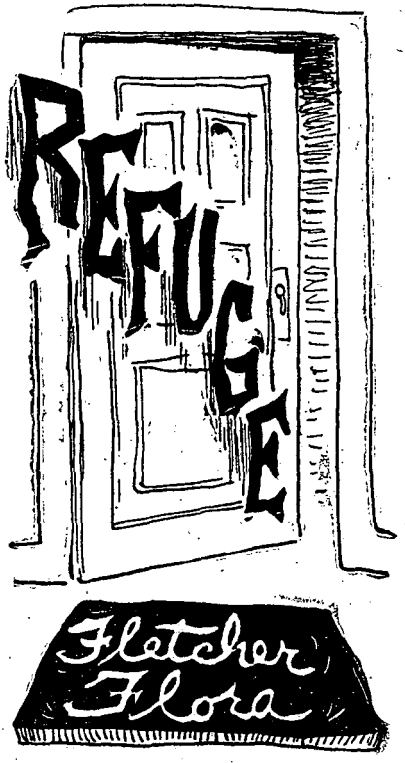
Refuge may be whatever comes to fulfill one's quest.



SHE HAD walked all the way to her father's house, three miles across the town, and now she had been sitting alone in her old room for more than an hour. She knew that it was more than an hour because the clock in the front hall had said almost a quarter to four when she arrived, and the five o'clock whistle had just sounded up north at the roundhouse in the railroad yards. At the first shrill blast of the whistle, she had raised her eyes and cocked her head in an attitude of listening, as if she were hearing something new and strange that only she in all the world could hear, but when the sound had diminished and died away she had lowered her eyes again and sat staring, as before, at her hands folded in her lap. In all the time she had been here, except for the brief interval when the whistle blew, she had hardly moved. She wondered if she should get up and go into the kitchen and begin preparing supper for her father, who would soon be getting home from his job in the yards. No matter. She had burned all her energy in the simple and exhausting ordeal of getting here. She had come, indeed, only because there was no place else to go. Now that she was here, there was nothing else to do.

She was an intruder in the little

room that she had known so intimately for so many years. She was not welcome here. The room wanted her to leave. She could feel the pervasive hostility in the still, stale air, the corrosive bitterness of the abandoned, the sad, sour lassitude of the lost. But this was just her imagination, of course. It was part of the encroaching terror she had

brought with her across town. The room was no different. The room was the same. There was the desk at which she had written daily in her diary, the fanciful log of hopeful days, and there above the desk was the framed copy of Gauguin's Yellow Christ, which she had admired and hung to appease some distorted hunger in her heart. There on the walls was the same pale blue paper, perhaps a little more faded and soiled, stained at one corner of the ceiling where the probing rain had seeped through from the attic below the low roof. And there against the wall between the room's two windows was the long mirror that had reflected her imperceptible growth from day to day and year to year, and had told her all the while that she was a pretty girl and would be a lovely woman. She wanted suddenly to run away from the walls and the mirror and the Yellow Christ, but she sat and stared at her folded hands. She wanted to scream, but she was mute. She sat fixed and mute in the terror she had brought with her. Having fled from the fear of death, she wished irrationally that she could die.

She heard her father's steps on the porch outside. She heard them in the hall, moving toward the rear of the house. For a while, after they were gone, she continued to sit quite still on the edge of her bed, her hands folded in her lap, and then she got up abruptly, as though prodded by sudden compulsion, and went out of the room and followed the footsteps into the kitchen. Her father, his back turned to her, was standing before the open door of the refrigerator. Hearing her behind him, he turned, holding a can of beer in one hand, pushing the refrigerator door closed with the other. He was a tall, lean man with stooped shoulders and long, lank hair grown shaggy over his ears and on the back of his neck. About him, like a miasma sensed but not seen, there was an air of stale accommodation to dismal years, the atmosphere of repeated frustrations. He peered at his daughter through the dim light of the kitchen.

"Ellen?" he said. "Is that you, Ellen?"

"You can see very well that it's me," she said.

He carried the can of beer to the kitchen table and sat down facing her. There was a metal opener on the table. He plugged the can and took a long drink of the beer.

"I was just surprised to see you here, that's all."

"Is it so surprising that I'd come to see my own father?"

"I didn't see your car outside. Where's your car?"

"I didn't drive today. I walked."

"All the way here?"

"All the way."

"You shouldn't have done that." His voice thinned, took on an angry, querulous tone. "You know I don't have a car. Now it will be late before you can get back."

"That's all right. I'm not going back."

"You'll have to call a taxi, that's what you'll have to do."

"Listen to me. I said I'm not going back."

He looked at her for a moment, now that he had listened and heard, as if he was unable to understand. He drank again from the beer can, wiping his lips afterward with the palm of his hand. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Somewhere. If I can't stay here, I'll go somewhere."

"You'll go back, that's where you'll go. You'll go right back where you belong."

"Do you think so? I don't."

"What's the matter with you? Are you out of your head?"

"Don't start that. I've heard enough of that."

He apparently received some kind of warning from her words, for his attitude changed suddenly. He smiled, nodding his head, but the smile was more an expression of slyness than of understanding or affection. "Well, something has upset you, that's plain. Come. Sit down and talk it over with your father. You'll feel better then. You'll see. Will you have a beer?"

Knowing him for what he was, recognizing from long experience another of his repeated efforts to deceive her, she sat down across the table from him, nevertheless, simply because she was tired and it was easier to sit than to stand. "No, thank you," she said. "I don't want a beer."

"Well, then, tell me what's wrong. You've had a foolish quarrel with Clay. Is that it?"

"Clay doesn't quarrel with me. Clay doesn't quarrel with anyone. He's far too cold and contained. He has other methods."

"Clay's rich. A successful man. They say at the yards that he's worth millions. The richest man in town. You can't expect a man like that to be like other men."

"He hates me. I can see it in his eyes. When we are alone, I can hear it in his voice."

"Oh, hell! That's crazy. He married you, didn't he? Just two years ago, he came and took you away and married you. He didn't have to do it, either. Don't try to tell me he did, because I know better. I was here. I remember how you were. No crazy talk about hate then. He could have had what-

ever he wanted from you, marriage or not, and he probably did."

"That's right. I sold myself. And you—because he was rich, you thought you were onto something big. You didn't care about anything else."

"You were lucky—lucky to be born with a face and body to rile a man's blood and make him lose his head. How many poor girls from this part of town get a chance to marry a rich and powerful man liked Clay Moran?"

"They're the lucky ones. The girls who don't get the chance."

"What kind of curse has been placed upon me? It's almost more than a man can bear, and that's the truth, I've never had any luck with my women. All those years I had your mother on my hands, and now I've got you."

"Don't start on Mother! Don't start!"

"She was my wife, and I'll say what I please. She was crazy—so crazy I had to put her away."

"She wasn't crazy. She had a nervous breakdown. Small wonder, being married to you."

"She died in an institution. The same place you'll die if you keep on."

"It would be better than dying before my time in the house of Clay Moran."

"What's that? What did you say? You really must be crazy!"

"He wants me to die. He plans to murder me."

His mouth hung open, his mind groping in darkness behind his eyes for some sense and sanity in her words. Then, stunned by the enormity of what she had clearly said, he pushed back from the table in his chair and stood up deliberately. "I knew it. I've been fearful of it. You're crazy like your mother. Do you know what you're saying?"

"I'll say it again. He wants me to die. He murdered his first wife, and he plans to murder me."

"His first wife drowned. It was an accident. What kind of hellish trouble are you trying to breed for yourself and for me? Clay Moran is a powerful man in this town. A rich and powerful man. What do you think he's going to do if he hears his wife has been going around making such insane accusations? I won't hear anymore. I won't listen to you."

"Don't. I knew you wouldn't. I should never have come here."

"Be reasonable. Try to be sane for a minute. Has he ever *tried* to murder you?"

"Not yet. You don't know Clay. He'll only need to try once."

"Has he ever *threatened* you?"

"He looks at me. He says sly things with double meanings. It's

not his way to threaten directly. He's incredibly cruel and clever."

"It's in your mind. Can't you understand that? You imagine these things."

"He plans to murder me, as he murdered his first wife, because he hates me, as he surely hated her. I think he must hate anyone who marries him. It's a kind of madness in him."

"Now look who's crazy! You ought to be right back where you came from, and that's where you're going. It's not right for you to bring this kind of trouble into my house."

He jerked his narrow shoulders, as if shaking off an intolerable burden, and started for the door. She could hear him in the hall, dialing the telephone. After a few seconds, she could hear his voice, angry and urgent.

"Is Mr. Moran at home? Let me speak with him, please. It's important."

She didn't hear anymore. She isolated herself in silence, hearing nothing, sitting still and mute. She had wasted her strength and will. Having fled this short way to no good end, she could flee no farther.

Sitting so, futile and spent, she thought of Roger. She had not thought of him for a long time, and now that she did, after all this while, she was filled with regret and fruitless pain.

She awoke with a start and was instantly attuned to the sounds of the day, perception hypersensitized by apprehension. She could hear the soft whirring sound of the electric current driving the delicate mechanism of the little ivory clock on her bedside table. She could hear the remote and measured drip of a lavatory tap in the bathroom between her room and the next. She heard the gimping footsteps of the upstairs maid, who had suffered as a child from poliomyelitis, pass by her door in the hall. She heard from a tree outside her window the clear, repeated call of a cardinal. She thought that she could hear, deep below her in the bowels of the house, the deadly, definitive closing of a door.

It was about eight o'clock. She could tell by the slant of the sun through a window in the east wall of the room. She could measure time by the distance the sunlight reached into the room. Not exactly, of course, not with the precision of the little ivory clock she could hear on her bedside table, for the distance was longer or shorter at any given time of the morning as the sun rose earlier or later in the course of the season, but she was, nevertheless, surpris-

ingly accurate in spite of having to make minute adjustments from time to time to the inflexible schedule of the universe. It was, like her keen perception of almost indiscernible sounds, a part of her hypersensitive attunement to everything around her. Her senses had been refined and directed by persisting danger.

She turned her head and looked at the other bed, the twin of her own, across an intervening aisle. It was empty. Neatly made. Clay had not slept in it last night. It gave her an exorbitant sense of relief, the empty bed, although she had known perfectly well, before turning her head, that no one was in it. If Clay had been there, she would have been aware without looking. She would have been aware in the instant of waking even if he had lain as still as stone and made no sound whatever. She would have known through the cold, instinctive shrinkage of her flesh. She would have smelled him, the aura of him, the sickening, sweet, pervasive scent of death.

He was in the other room, beyond the bath. She could not hear him. She sensed him through her infallible senses. He was standing in utter and deliberate silence, motionless, his head canted and his eyes watching her through double walls, waiting to detect through his own acute senses the slightest movement of her body, the merest whisper of her bated breathing. Slowly she closed her eyes in an effort to preserve the secret of her wakefulness. No use. He knew her secret. He was coming. She heard him in the bathroom. She heard him crossing the room to her bed. She heard his voice.

"Good morning, Ellen," he said. "How are you feeling?"

Knowing the futility of simulation, she opened her eyes and looked at him. He was, she had to admit, very deceptive. He did not look at all like a man, a devil, who had murdered his first wife and was planning to murder his second. His body was slender and supple, just under six feet, and his expensive and impeccable clothes hung upon it with an effect of casual elegance. His smooth blond hair fitted his round skull like a pale cap. His mouth was small, the lips full, prepared to part unpredictably, at the oddest times, in an expression of silent laughter. His eyes were azure blue, brimming with a kind of candid innocence, a childlike wonder, as if he were listening always to a private voice telling an interminable fairy tale. Oh, he was deceptive, all right. He was deceptive and deadly.

"I'm feeling quite well, thank you," she said.

"Improved from last night, I hope."

"Wasn't I feeling well last night? I can't remember that I wasn't."

"Well, never mind. A good sleep will sometimes work wonders. Did you sleep well?"

"I slept quite well, thank you."

"You see? It was the work of the sedative I gave you. You were a bad girl to try to avoid taking it. They have done some remarkable

things in drugs these days. It's absolutely amazing what can be done with them."

What did that mean? Why did he suddenly, when you least expected it, say such disturbing things? Why did his words, so overtly innocent, have so often under the surface a sinister second meaning?

"I don't like to take drugs," she said quietly. "I'm afraid of them."

"Well, one must be cautious with them, of course, but it's foolish to avoid them when they're needed. I was very careful not to give you too much. Did you imagine for an instant that I would be careless where you were concerned?"

There! There!" Did you hear that?

"They make you vulnerable," she said.

"Vulnerable? Nonsense. Vulnerable to what?"

"Who knows? Who knows what the effects may be?"

"My dear, you sound like a Christian Scientist. Or do you? I'm afraid I don't know just what Christian Scientists believe." He revealed his small white teeth in the unpredictable expression of silent laughter. "Anyhow, I assure you that you were sleeping like a baby when I looked in on you later last night. I didn't want to risk rousing you, so I slept in the next room. Did you miss me this morning?"

There he had stood. There he had stood in the dark and dangerous hours of the night, surrounded by the silent, waiting house, watching her and watching her as she slept a drugged sleep, and death had stood at his side.

"Your bed hadn't been slept in," she said. "I saw that when I awoke."

He sat down and took one of her cold hands and held it in both of his. "Tell me, Ellen," he said, "why did you run away yesterday?"

"I didn't run away. I went to see my father."

"Your father was disturbed about you. He said you didn't want to come home again."

"My father is a foolish man. He says foolish things."

He seemed to be concerned about your mother—or about you, rather, as your mother's daughter."

"What do you know about my mother?"

"I know that she died in a mental institution. I knew it when I married you. After all, it was no secret."

"There was nothing wrong with my mother that my father didn't cause."

"It's all right, Ellen. Everything will be all right. I was just wondering about something, that's all. Would it make you feel better to see a good doctor?"

"A psychiatrist, you mean?"

"If you wish."

"I don't wish. I don't wish at all."

"It might be the best thing for you. To tell the truth, I've been concerned about you myself the past year or so. I don't know what it is, exactly. You changed somehow. You seem to be more imaginative. Confused about things."

"I'm not confused." In a moment of defiance, she looked squarely into the wonder of his childlike eyes. "I see everything quite clearly."

"Well, I only want to help if I can. You know that, my dear." He leaned forward from his position on the side of the bed and brushed his lips across her forehead. "Now I must be off to the office. You had better stay in bed and rest. Would you like me to have your breakfast brought up?"

"No. I can't just lie here. I'll go down."

"As you wish. I suggest, however, that you stay in the house today."

"Is that an order?"

He had stood up and turned away, and now he turned back, his eyebrows rising in surprise. "Certainly not. Whatever made you say such a thing?"

"I thought perhaps I was being put under a kind of house arrest to keep me from running away again."

"Run away? Nonsense. You are my wife, not my prisoner. You are free to go whenever and wherever you please."

"Thank you."

He walked to the door and

turned to look back at her once more. Blue, candid eyes. The sudden unpredictable expression of silent laughter. "You are my wife, my dear. Remember that. Whatever your trouble is, if there is trouble at all, we will work it out together, you and I. There is a cure for everything, you know. One balm for many fevers."

He opened the door and went out, leaving his words hanging in italics in the breathless air of the room.

One balm for many fevers! Hadn't she heard that before? Had she read it somewhere? It meant death. Death was the balm. Death was the only cure for all ills and troubles.

Her thoughts acted on her like a catalyst. She got out of bed immediately and started for the bathroom, but on the way, between her bed and the bathroom door, she caught an oblique glimpse of herself in a full-length mirror on the wall. She halted abruptly, as if fixed and held static in the flow of action by cataleptic trance, turned her head slowly and looked at her reflection directly. Then, drawn magnetically by what she saw, she moved toward the mirror and stood in front of it. Slowly she turned this way and that, assuming positions as a model assumes them on display, and her slim body in her sheer nightgown was the body of a dryad rising in a cloud of cool blue mist from the floor of an ancient forest.

Oh, she was lovely! She was all gold and old rose and loveliness. She felt for her lovely body a fierce pride and an agony of tenderness. She enclosed herself in her own arms, in love and apprehension. It was incredible that the passing years would destroy her. It was a monstrous and unholy crime that anyone should want to do now what the years would surely do soon enough.

She must delay no longer in a narcissistic spell, entranced before her mirror by the vision of herself. She had made precipitately the decision to do what must be done, the last desperate measure she must take to save herself, and now was the time, now if ever, to do it.

Wrenching herself away from the mirror with a feeling of dreadful urgency, she went on, hurrying now, into the bathroom.

His name was Collins. He was an old man, tired. With a small treasure of petty graft which he had tucked away over the years, he had bought five acres in the country, and when he retired next year he was going to build a nice house on the acreage to die in. He had a coarse thatch of grizzled

hair growing low on the forehead of a worn leather face. The approach of retirement had made him cautious, inclined to act slowly if he acted at all, but at least he was the chief. That, anyhow, was hopeful. It was a special concession to her, of course, because she was the wife of Clay Moran. The wife of the richest and most powerful man in town, majority stockholder of its only steel plant and chairman of the board of directors of its most prosperous bank was entitled, after all, to every courtesy and consideration. If she had been someone other than who she was, she would surely have been forced to talk with a sergeant or someone like that.

The chief looked at her blankly, wondering if his hearing, like his sight, was becoming impaired.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Moran," he said. "I don't believe I heard you correctly. Would you mind repeating that?"

"My husband," she repeated deliberately, "intends to murder me."

Crazy, he thought. Crazy as all hell. Hadn't her mother had trouble that way? He seemed to remember that she had. Anyhow, what do you do with a crazy woman when she walks into your office and throws a bomb into your lap? Well, in the first place, you understand that the bomb is a dud. Don't get excited. In the second place, you humor her. You play along. In the third place, after you've got rid of her, you protect your pension by reporting to her husband. From there on, it's his baby, and welcome to it he is!

"That's a startling accusation, Mrs. Moran," he said.

"It's true."

"It seems incredible. Your husband is a very prominent man. One of the most respected citizens of this community."

"I know how he's regarded. I'm telling you what he *is*."

"No breath of scandal has ever touched his name."

"He's very clever."

"Well, let's look at this thing objectively. Without emotion."

"It is somewhat difficult to be unemotional about your own murder."

"Yes. I understand that. Tell me exactly what makes you think your husband plans to murder you."

"The way he looks at me. The things he says to me when we're alone."

"Oh, come, Mrs. Moran. That's tenuous evidence at best."

"You don't understand my husband. You don't know him. He's clever and cruel. It gives him pleasure to taunt me. He likes to terrify me and watch me suffer."

"Has he ever threatened directly to kill you?"

"He is much too devious and subtle for that."

"Even if he had, it wouldn't necessarily mean much. I've been married for forty years, Mrs. Moran. Hard to tell how many times I've threatened to brain my wife. Maybe, sometimes, I've even felt like doing it. But I never have, and I never will."

"That's different. You are not my husband. If something isn't done to save me, he will surely murder me."

"Has he ever made any *attempt* to murder you?"

"There will be no attempts. There will only be, if he is not prevented, the accomplished murder."

"Until he makes an attempt on your life, or at least commits a chargeable offense against your person, I don't see how the police can help you."

"It will be too late for help then. His first attempt will be successful."

"Surely you understand that we can take no action on so grave a charge as this when there is nothing to support it but questionable interpretations of words, gestures, looks. An assumption of intent without proof."

"I see. I see that you won't help me."

The dull despair in her voice, hopeless submission to what he was convinced was an imaginary danger, pricked his leathery heart for a moment and incited a rare flicker of genuine pity. She was hot, this one. She had smoke and flame coming out her ears. She needed help, all right, but not the kind of help the police could give.

"Look at it this way, Mrs. Moran," he said. "What *reason* could your husband possibly have for murdering you? You are a beautiful woman. I'm sure you are a faithful wife. You and your husband have been married for how long? Two years? The honeymoon is hardly over yet. There is no reason at all to believe that he has the slightest interest in another woman, is there? I thought not. If he did have, seeing you, I'd have to say he was nuts. You see what I mean? There's no *motive* for him to murder you."

"He wants to murder me because he hates me."

"Oh, please. Frankly, I find that

impossible to believe," he argued.

"He hates all women. Especially the women he marries. I can't explain it. It's something inside him, something sick, insane. You'll believe me when it's too late. He will murder me, just as he murdered his first wife."

"What? What's that?"

"His first wife. He murdered her."

"Stop it, Mrs. Moran! His first wife drowned. It was an accident. As an accident, it had to be investigated, of course. Your husband and his first wife were out on the lake west of town. They were in a motorboat, fishing. Your husband is a dedicated fisherman, as you must know. The first Mrs. Moran was not, although she apparently made an effort to share your husband's enthusiasm. It was late in the evening of this particular day, almost dark. According to testimony, they were about to come back to shore. Mrs. Moran was wearing her swimming suit, and she decided, before coming back, that she would take a dip in the lake. She went over the side of the boat. It was the end of a hot day, and the water there was deep and cold. She took a cramp and drowned. She was quite a distance from the boat. Your husband tried to save her, but he couldn't reach her in time. She drowned, that's all. She just accidentally drowned."

"Are you so sure?"

"I've just told you what happened."

"Did anyone see the accident?"

"No."

"You had to depend on my husband's version?"

"There was no reason to doubt it."

"On the other hand, there was no way to verify it."

"He was heartbroken. His grief was genuine. Anyone who saw him could tell."

"Clay is very clever."

"He had no *reason* to murder her, no more to murder her than to murder you. There was absolutely no *evidence* that he murdered her. All the evidence, circumstances and possible motivation and method, all considered together, pointed clearly to an accident."

"He killed her because he hated her, as he hates me." She stood up abruptly, clutching her purse with both hands in front of her. Her face in defeat was composed, touched by sadness and despair. "You will remember what I have told you when I'm dead."

The door had hardly closed behind her before he was reaching for the telephone on his desk.

Outside, she stood with her head bowed, crushed by the monstrous burden of her hopelessness. She

had neither the strength to run nor the cleverness to hide. In any event, even if she had the strength and cleverness, running and hiding were clearly impossible. Clay was too rich. His power reached too far. Wherever she went, he would find her. Whatever she did, he would kill her. No one would believe her. No one on earth would help her.

Then, for the second time on the second day after not thinking of him at all for a long while, she thought of Roger.

She listened to the ringing of the telephone at the other end of the line. In her ears, the ringing was converted by the wire into a series of angry, waspish sounds. She counted the sequence of sounds, one, two, three, four, five. After the fifth, she hung up the receiver and stepped out of the telephone booth in the drugstore where she had gone to call. She stood for a minute outside the booth with her head bowed, as if she was trying intensely to remember something that she had forgotten. She had now reached, in fact, the nadir of her despair. Roger was not at home. Even if he had been at home, she conceded dumbly, there was no good reason why he should want to talk with her or see her or lift a hand to help her. Even if he were willing to help her, which he probably would not be, there was surely nothing that he could do. There was nothing anyone could do, and there was nothing now to be done. Nothing to do and nowhere to go. Nothing and nowhere on earth.

Yet it was necessary, absolutely necessary, to go somewhere and do something. One simply could not, after all, stand forever motionless outside a phone booth in a drugstore. At the rear of the store, across from the booth, there was a lunch counter with a row of unoccupied stools in front of it and a girl in a starched white dress behind it. As a beginning, the lunch counter would be a place to go, and drinking a cup of coffee would be a thing to do. Having made this decision, or having had it thrust upon her by circumstances, she walked across to the counter, sat down on one of the stools and ordered the cup of coffee from the girl in the starched white dress.

What day was it? Was it Saturday or was it Friday? She thought about this question for a moment, frowning with concentrated effort into her cup of coffee, and finally she was certain, although previously she had somehow felt that it was Saturday, that the day was in fact Friday. She had, for some reason or other, the impression

that this was enormously important, making a vast difference to something significant, and she began now to try to think of whatever it was that was significant and different because it was Friday instead of Saturday. Then it came to her suddenly, accompanied by such an agony of relief and resurgent hope that she was forced to clutch her throat to choke back a burst of frantic laughter.

Friday was a school day, that was what was important, and Roger was a school teacher, and school teachers on school days are at school and not at home. If one wanted to call a school teacher, then, one could wait until school was out and the teacher was home, or one could, if the matter was urgent, call the office of the school and have the teacher summoned to the phone there, which was, she understood, a procedure generally frowned upon by the administration. Well, her need was urgent, desperately urgent, but she was reluctant, nevertheless, to resort to the emergency procedure of calling Roger at school. Having injured him cruelly already, she could not now impose upon him the slightest inconvenience. Besides, if she called him at school, it would be difficult for her to say what needed saying, and for him, in return, say what she wanted to hear.

What, precisely, did she want to hear him say? What, if anything, did she want him to do? Save her from Clay, somehow give her sanctuary from death, yes, but most of all, she realized with a searing flash of insight, whatever was said and if nothing was done at all, she wanted him to recognize the truth.

He must believe, she thought. *If only he believes!*

Looking at her watch, she saw that it was almost noon. Did school let out at three-thirty or four? She tried to remember from her own years there as a student, and she thought that it was four, but she wasn't positive, and schedules, besides, are sometimes changed. No matter. She would call Roger again at four-thirty, after he had had time to get home, and she would keep calling him at intervals, if necessary, until he answered. In this resolution she was supported at last by the blind, unreasoned faith that he was her last good hope.

There at this instant was the remote, shrill sound of the noon whistle in the railroad yards. There were four hours and a half that must be spent somewhere, and it was impossible to return to the house of Clay Moran. She could never, after today, go there again. Neither could she sit indefinitely at a lunch counter in a drugstore.

Wondering where to go and what to do, she remembered seeing her checkbook when digging in her purse for a dime for her coffee. She opened her purse again and looked in the checkbook and saw that her account showed a balance of slightly more than a thousand dollars. Well, there was one more place to go and one more thing to do, one place and one thing at a time and in turn.

She went to the bank and cashed a check for an even thousand dollars. After leaving the bank, she went to a restaurant and ordered lunch. She wasn't hungry and couldn't eat, but over food and coffee, growing cold, she was able to spend almost an interminable hour. Then, walking down the street from the restaurant, she saw the unlighted neon sign of a cocktail lounge and turned in, although it was something she would not ordinarily have done, and spent a second hour over two martinis, only the first of which she drank. It was then almost two o'clock. Spent piecemeal, a fragment here and a fragment there, time crept. It was an unconscionable drag from one hour to the next. She must somehow find a way to hurry the hour she wanted it to be, or to make less laggard the hours between then and now. Outside the cocktail lounge she saw, across the street and down a block, the marquee of a movie theater. She walked to the theater, hurrying as she wished time to hurry, bought a ticket and went in.

She never knew what the movie was. She did not read the posters outside, and inside she did not watch the screen. Sitting in cool and blessed darkness in the back row of seats, she closed her eyes and tried not to think, but this was impossible, she discovered, and so she began deliberately to think of the days and years before Clay, the tender time of sweet sadness when she had loved Roger and Roger had loved her. In the end she had rejected his enduring love with cruel contempt when Clay, much older and immensely richer, had seen her and wanted her. That was before the smell of death crept in. She had sold herself for wealth and security and enviable status. Good-bye, Roger. Forget me if you can. Here's stone for bread and vinegar for wine.

Time passed in darkness before the silver screen, and it was four-thirty. She read her watch and left the theater and walked down the street until she came to a sidewalk telephone booth. She deposited her dime and dialed Roger's number, but again there was no answer. She dialed three times more, waiting outside the booth

for ten minutes between each attempted call, and then, on the fourth attempt, he answered at last. His voice, speaking after two years with the sound of yesterday, brought into her throat a hard knot around which she forced her response with a sensation of physical pain.

"Hello, Roger," she said. "Do you know who this is?"

There was a silence so long that she had a bad moment of incipient panic, thinking that he had simply put down the phone and walked away, but then his voice came back, interrogative and listless, as if he were asking a question with an answer he did not really wish to hear.

"Ellen? Is it Ellen?"

"I've been trying and trying to call you, Roger."

"I was at school. I just got home."

"I know. I remembered. Listen to me, Roger. I want to see you again. Will you meet me somewhere?"

"I don't think so."

"Please, Roger. Please do."

"I don't think so."

"All right, then. There's no use. No one will help me, and there's nothing I can do."

"Are you in trouble?"

"If you don't help me, I'm going to die."

"What? What did you just say?"

"Nothing. It's no use. Good-bye, Roger."

"Wait a minute. Did you say you were doing to die? Is that what you said?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. What does it matter? No one else will help me, and neither will you."

"How can I help you?"

"I don't know. I only know there's no one else."

"I see. When there's no one else, ask Roger."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"Never mind. Where are you?"

"Downtown. In a phone booth."

"Do you have a car?"

"Yes. It's parked in a lot."

"Come out here. I'll wait for you."

"To your apartment?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure it would be wise. Maybe we had better meet somewhere else."

"Come or not. I'll wait here."

"You don't understand. It might be dangerous for you."

"Don't worry about me."

"All right. I'll come. Oh, Roger, it will be good to see you and talk with you again."

"Yes," he said, "it will be good."

She hung up. She had now, after

a long time of terror, a blessed feeling of security and peace. Roger would believe. Roger would help. He would be her refuge and her strength, and it was time, past time, for her to go to him. First, before going, she leaned her head against the telephone in the little booth and began silently to cry.

Roger had been sitting, when the phone rang, on the edge of his bed holding a revolver. It was an old revolver that he had acquired from his father at the time of his father's death. He did not like guns, and had never fired this one, although he longed to fire it, just once, and it gave him comfort sometimes to sit and hold it. He was holding it again now, having returned after the telephone call to his place on the bed.

It had been a bad day at school. He'd had discipline problems. He was not good at discipline, and he often had problems of that kind. The principal had talked with him seriously about the problems several times. It was unlikely that he would be rehired next year, but he didn't care. It was just another failure in his life. His life was full of failures. All his days were bad.

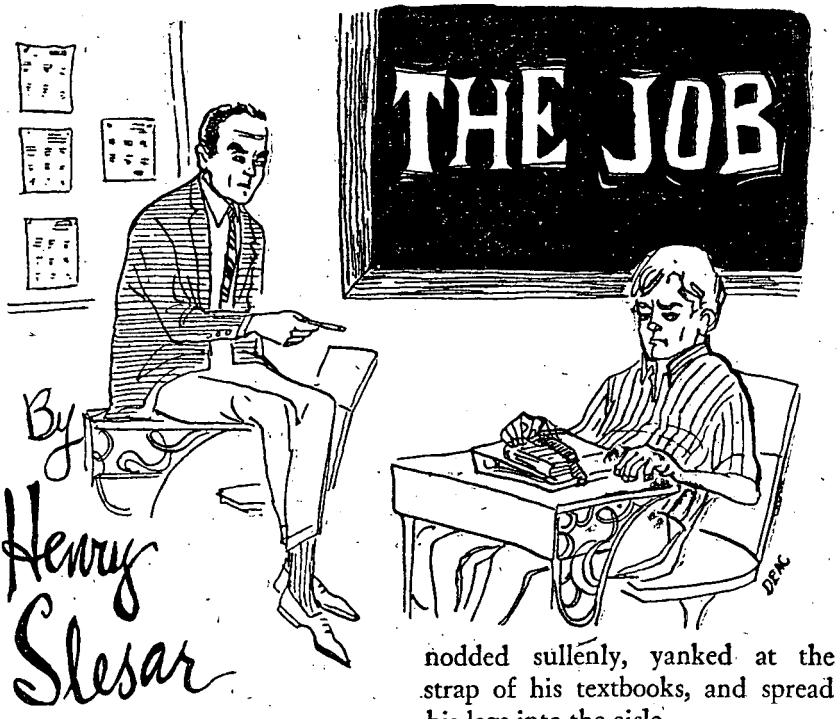
His headache was back. It always came back. In fact, it rarely left. There was a contracting steel band around his head, slowly crushing his skull.

Ellen was coming. Coming here. She would be here soon. Ellen had been the most beautiful thing in his life, and he had loved her, but in the end she had deserted him. Another failure for him. After Ellen, his life had been sick, and all his days were bad. It had been wrong of Ellen to make him sick with hate instead of love. Now she might die. She had said so herself.

He broke the revolver in his hand. Because of a kind of inherent petty meanness in his nature which would not permit him to provide for any effort in excess of what was needed to complete it, there was only one cartridge in the cylinder. One bullet for one death.

Carrying the revolver over to a chest of drawers where other cartridges were, he loaded a second chamber.

To interest others, a person must first know interest himself.



CHRIS knew it was coming; he could see the paternal gleam in Professor Dane's eyes. Sure enough, just when the bell tolled freedom for the rest of them, Dane waggled a pencil at him and said, "Oh, Chris, would you mind staying after class a minute?" Chris nodded sullenly, yanked at the strap of his textbooks, and spread his legs into the aisle.

Dane did some paper shuffling before he got down to business. Democratic, he left the front of the room and came down to Chris' level, sitting atop a nearby desk and crossing his ankles.

"Maybe you know the scoop already," he grinned. Dane was

young for an associate professor, but his attempts to talk Chris' eighteen-year-old lingo were painful to the boy.

"I suppose my old man called you," Chris said glumly. "Pop hates to give lectures; he figures that's your job."

"I won't lecture you, Chris, I'll save that for class. I just want to talk."

"Look, Professor, I got to meet some of the guys—"

"What guys, Chris?"

The boy blew air out of his mouth. "Okay," he said. "Nickie Cooke and his brother. Anything wrong with that?"

"You know what's wrong with that." Dane leaned toward him. "Chris, I'm worried about you, about what you do after classes, with those pals of yours. I know Nickie Cooke; I was on campus the day he slugged Professor Wald and got booted out of school. I know his brother Hal, too. He quit high school at fifteen, but he had an education, all right; at the state farm for delinquent boys. Is that the kind of company you like?"

"They're my friends."

Dane sighed. "What happened to you in the last year, Chris? When you were a freshman, there was nobody who showed more promise. Remember those talks we used to have? About teaching?"

"I remember," he said surlily.

"You thought it was the greatest job in the world, then. You were willing to work hard, go on to Teacher's College. You had the intelligence then, and you still do."

"But now I'm not interested, Professor. That's all there is to it."

"What changed your mind? Was it your old man?"

Chris snorted. "My *father* had nothing to do with it. My father doesn't know enough to change his socks."

"I mean about losing his job. It was just about then, when your mother started to work again, that you began running with Cooke. Is that what did it?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I just got sick and tired of sticking my nose in books. Maybe I wanted some kicks out of life." He had decided not to argue, but there was something boiling inside of him. "Look, Professor, don't give me that stuff about the glories of the profession. What's so glorious about a hundred and twenty bucks a week? You tell me that."

Dane pulled back, as if from a blow. "So that's it. Teaching doesn't pay enough for you."

"A hundred and twenty bucks," Chris said bitingly. "And how many years did you have to work to get it? Ten, fifteen? I've been getting smart, Professor, that's

what has been happening to me."

"Is that what you call it?" Dane interlaced his fingers, in an attitude almost of prayer. "Chris, listen to me. You're right about the money. You want to know the truth? It stinks. If I ever had any ideas about getting rich as a teacher, I wouldn't have bothered. You think your family is having a hard time? I have four kids, with big appetites, and a wife that hasn't had a new winter coat in six years. We're up to here in unpaid bills. I'm doing what I can, but it's not easy—"

"So you see?" Chris said. "You see what I mean?"

"No," Dane said flatly. "I don't see. If you want to teach, you'll teach. If the salaries are cut down to pork and beans, you'll teach, Chris, or else you're not worth facing a class. But there's something else—"

"What?"

"There's hope, buddy. People are thinking about the problem, worrying about it. They're forming committees, acting up in the legislatures. I might even get a raise next year. And by the time you're ready for a teaching job, who knows? You might even make more than a truckdriver."

"Maybe," Chris said. "And maybe not."

"Do you think Nickie Cooke can help you? Do you think running around with hoodlums solves anything?"

"Is that all you wanted to tell me, Professor?"

Dane stood up, put his hands behind his back, and said, "That's all, Chris."

Nickie and his brother Hal were horsing around at the curb when Chris showed up. Hal was bigger, beefier, but Nickie, wire-muscled, had one arm locked behind Hal's back and was reaching for the keys in his hand.

"Lemme have them," Nickie said. "Come on, you jerk, let's have those keys."

"Ah, you promised I could drive her," Hal whined. "You promised, Nickie." He looked up hopefully at Chris' arrival. "Hey, Chris, didn't he promise I could drive?"

Chris looked at the hoodless jalopy at the curb, and kicked one worn tire. "What's the difference?" he said, tossing his books onto the rear seat. "We don't have any gas."

"That's what you think," Nickie grinned. "The tank's full and I got this left over." He pulled a five from his pocket.

"Hey!" Hal said, wide-eyed. "Where'd you get it, man?"

"Give me the keys and I'll tell you."

Hal handed them over, and Nickie climbed into the driver's seat. Chris got in beside him, and

Hal went in back. The ignition sparked weakly, and the motor wheezed, coughed, but didn't respond.

"This baby's had it," Nick said, cursing. "I cleaned the points and everything, but it's no good."

"Drive her to the junk heap," Chris said. "Maybe you can get two bits for it."

"If we had fifty bucks," Hal said dreamily. "Man, if we had fifty bucks, there's a '49 Olds at Berry's joint. He says he'll unload it for fifty, and it's a nice heap."

"Yeah," Nick said. "If we had fifty. Know what I had to do for the five? I sold my old lady's sewing machine."

Chris tried to look bland. "You stole it from her?"

"I didn't steal it, I sold it, like she asked me. I got twenty-seven, but I only gave her twenty. Commission, you know?" He chortled as the cylinders turned. "Here we go, men!"

They had the five spent by eight o'clock. At a roadside diner, they stopped for double hamburgers and beer. Nickie put change into the jukebox, and they stood with their faces at the window, hoping some itinerant women would come by. When nobody showed up, they fed dimes into a miniature bowling game, hooting at every strike and jeering at every split. They left at eight-thirty, with Nickie driving.

"Let's cruise, man, let's cruise," he said. "Let's find ourselves some dames before it gets too late—"

"I got to be home early," Chris said uncomfortably. "I promised the old man."

"What's the matter, Teach?" Hal grinned mockingly. "You got studying to do?"

The jalopy's pistons emitted a couple of explosions and they came to a halt. Nickie cursed and climbed out of the car. He bent over the engine, burned his hand on the metal, and yelled in anger. Then he kicked the fender, loosening the bolts still further. "This rotten heap!" he cried. "We gotta get ourselves some real transportation."

They got it started again, but not before nine. It was too late for prowling, too late for almost everything in the quiet town. Their mood was black.

Then Nickie pulled the car to the side of the road and turned to face them. "Look," he said, tightly, "we talked about it last week, it's about time we had some action. What do you say we pull that job tonight?"

"Do what?" Chris said.

Hal smiled foolishly. "Hey, you forget already, man? You remember the job we talked about."

"I was drunk that night—"

"Well, we're all sober tonight," Nickie said bluntly, "and that's the time to do it. We could get us fifty bucks like *that.*" He snapped his fingers. "And maybe more."

"You're off your head," Chris said. "You can't stick up a joint without a gun."

Nickie looked at his brother, and Hal chuckled. Nickie said, "What makes you think we don't have equipment?" He nodded to Hal, who hopped out of the rear seat athletically.

He went to the trunk, and when he came back, there was a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Chris looked at it with surprise, and then at Nickie.

"Where'd you get that thing?"

"It's Pop's, only he don't hunt no more. So I sawed it down and made a real cannon out of it."

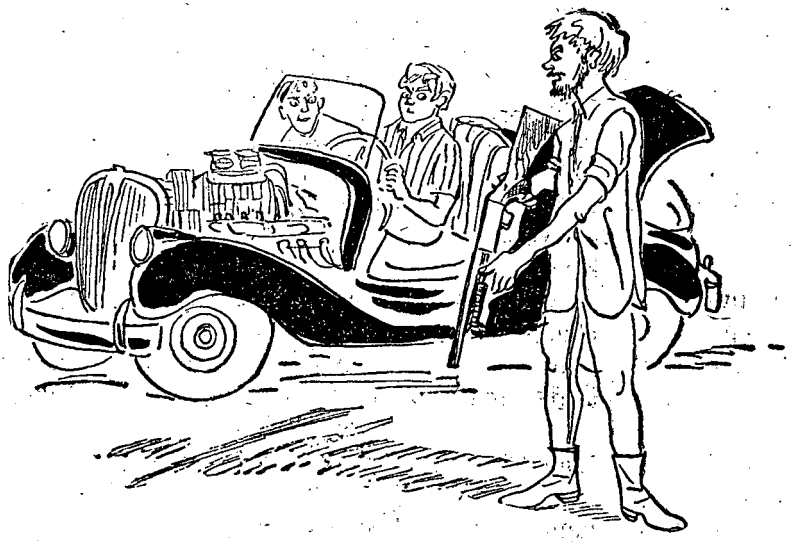
"Eh-eh-eh-eh," Hal said, wielding it like a machine gun. "Who we knockin' off, Nickie, huh? How about that pizza joint?"

"Too crowded," his brother said, watching Chris' face. "What's the matter, buddy, you don't look happy."

"I don't know if I want to get mixed up in this—"

"Aw, come on, Teach," Hal jeered. "It'll be a cinch. You can drive the getaway car." He laughed wildly, suddenly excited by the notion, hugging the weapon in his arms.

"We could buy that Olds tomorrow," Nickie said. "We can really start living. Come on, man, don't



be chicken. I know just the place—"

"Where?"

Nickie smiled. "Same place I filled the tank this morning. Marvie's Garage, right at the edge of town. They got only one guy at the pump at night, and there's three of us."

"And this," Hal said, patting the shotgun. "Don't forget this, Nickie."

"You with us, man?"

Chris set his jaw.

"Okay, let's go."

Marvie's Garage was an eyesore by day, a weather-scarred shanty falsely modernized with a phoney brick facade and a picture window. By night, with one dim light illuminating the inner office and pumps, it was almost handsome.

As they approached it from the intersection on Route 17, they could vaguely discern the lone figure of the attendant in his white uniform. Chris at the jalopy wheel, gritted his teeth and found that his foot was icy on the accelerator.

"Take it slow," Nickie cautioned.

Chris pulled the car up to the first pump. The tires clumped over the warning line on the concrete, and a bell rang inside the garage office.

"The guy's not coming out," Hal said.

"We'll go in for him," Nickie said. He looked at his brother, and Hal stashed the sawed-off shotgun under his leather jacket, pulling the zipper up tight. "You wait here," Nickie told Chris, "and keep that motor idling."

"What if she quits on me?" Chris said nervously. "I don't like this, Nickie—"

"You *are* chicken," Nickie said contemptuously. Then he slapped Hal's shoulder, and they climbed out of the jalopy and marched toward the office.

Chris heard the attendant's voice behind the door. "Be with you in a minute, fellas."

"No hurry," Nickie answered. "Want to use the rest room."

They went inside.

Chris was getting colder by the second; the wheel felt frozen in his fingers. He knew it was only nerves, but that didn't help; he shivered, and blew on his hands, and wished he were anyplace else. For some reason, he found himself thinking about college, and the warm, overheated classroom.

He tried to make out what was happening inside, but there was nobody in his line of vision. Then he saw Hal cross to the Coke machine. The attendant was stacking oil cans. Where was Nickie?

Then he saw him. He came out of a side door and walked up to Hal. They talked a minute at the

dispensing machine; Hal took a swig of soda, dropped the bottle into a box, then started reaching for his jacket zipper.

A crazy thing happened—Chris heard himself yell. He yelled loud, wordlessly, not even sure it was a cry of warning. He jumped out of the car and started running for the garage; he saw the attendant's start of surprise, saw him whirl just as Hal brought out the weapon. By the time Chris reached the door, the attendant was sinking to the ground, stunned by a blow from the gun butt, his face on the concrete.

"You *louse!*" Nickie shouted at him. "What's the big idea?"

"You killed him!" Chris said, looking at the prone figure. "You killed the guy—"

The attendant moaned, and his hand moved. Hal blubbered something, and Nickie punched his arm.

"The register! Get the register!"

Hal went to the register and punched it open. He scooped out coins before bills, greedily, using both beefy hands. His face fell with disappointment. "Gee, it's only twelve bucks, Nickie, only twelve—"

"Take it!" Nickie shouted. "Take it and let's get out of here! You, too," he said, pushing Chris ahead of him.

Chris looked back once at the attendant, who was trying to rise. Then they hurried out to the car. The motor kicked and complained when Nickie put it into gear, but then they were rolling.

"Twelve bucks," Hal muttered. "Twelve lousy bucks. We can't get that Olds for this, Nickie."

"It's better than nothing." He looked at Chris with contempt. "At least we know who our friends are, huh?"

"You shouldn't have hit the guy. It wasn't worth hittin' a guy—"

"You going to make trouble?"

Chris slumped in his seat. "I won't make trouble," he said sullenly.

Chris didn't have to make it; trouble was waiting for him. He was just coming out of the house the next morning, on his way to school, when the two men blocked his path. He knew their official status, without seeing badge or uniform, and he was glad that his father didn't see what was happening.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet," one of them said, "but we want to talk to you at the precinct. You and some others."

The others were Nickie and his brother. Hal was too scared to do anything but whimper, but Nickie was dry-eyed and tight-lipped.

They were kept waiting half an hour before a lieutenant named

Summers was ready to see them. He was a tall, white-haired man with an offhand manner.

"All right, boys," he said casually, "we know what you were up to last night, so let's hear the story."

"We didn't do nothing," Nickie said flatly. "We don't even know what you're talking about. Right, guys?"

Hal stuttered something meant to be affirmation, and Summers frowned.

"I thought we'd do this the easy way," he said. Then he pulled a pad from his pocket and began to read. "Around nine-forty-five, you drove up to Marvie's Garage on Route 17 in a '39 Plymouth, license number J50013. You," he said, pointing to Chris, "were behind the wheel when your pals went inside. There was one attendant on duty; you slugged him with the butt of a shotgun. Then you took twelve dollars and seventy cents from the station register, and left." He flipped the book shut. "And before you start denying, boys, I want to tell you this. We got positive identification on you."

"The attendant," Chris said carefully. "Is he okay?"

"He's okay," Summers nodded. "He's got a headache, but he's in good enough shape to stick you hoodlums where you belong." The lieutenant turned to a waiting officer. "Bring him out here, Slim. Let's let the boys meet their victim."

The officer wasn't gone long. The man he brought back had a tired look, and a criss-cross bandage on the back of his head.

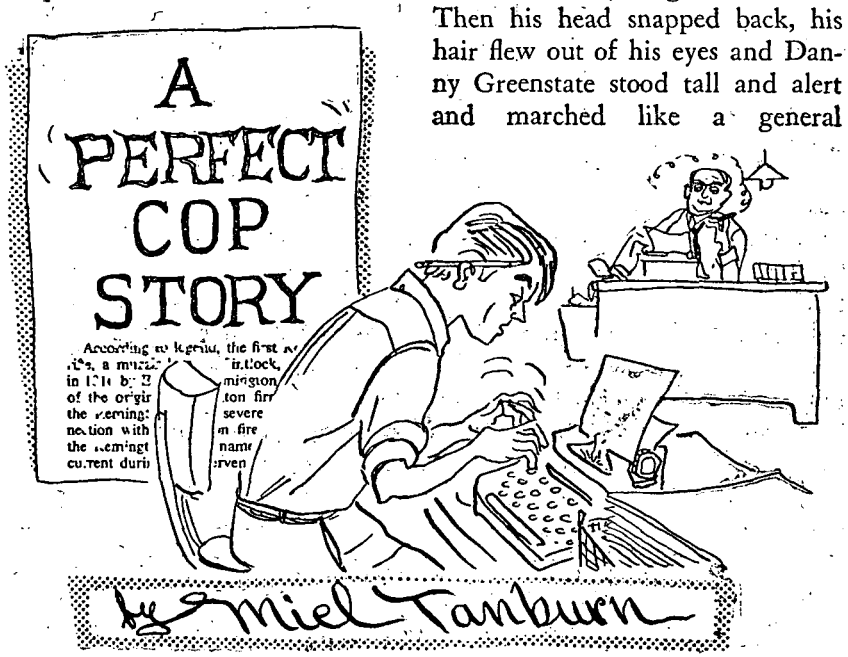
"He's the one I told you about," Professor Dane said, pointing to Chris. "He tried to stop them, Lieutenant, tried to warn me about what they were going to do."

"You sure about this, Professor?"

"I'm sure," Dane said, looking Chris squarely in his befuddled eyes. "I know the boy; he wouldn't do such a thing. He's going to be a teacher some day, I think." Dane touched his bandaged head and grinned. "Even if he has to take a night job, like filling gas tanks. Say, Lieutenant, you got an aspirin around this place?"

Many artists are not recognized in their lifetimes.

DANNY GREENSTATE could have become the best police reporter in the world. He was tender. His sad, brown eyes saw heartaches no one else seemed to see. His ears heard plaintive rhythms no one else seemed to hear. His long fingers, when they punched like a pianist's into the ancient typewriter in the small press room of the copshop, composed stories no one else could ever write. Danny Greenstate was a natural. He walked casually, almost nonchalantly, through the central precinct building—a thin, long-legged and wide-shouldered young man with a lock of dark hair falling over his eyes. At night, sometimes, when the lime-colored corridors were hushed and empty, his soft footfalls echoed quietly —until a story began to break. Then his head snapped back, his hair flew out of his eyes and Danny Greenstate stood tall and alert and marched like a general



through the labyrinthine hallways.

His lips would move as he began to form the first phrases of a news story. He would try words for fit, discarding some, choosing others, tasting the words as he prowled through the copshop following a story. When he finished writing, Danny had a yarn and it was a yarn no one else, given the same set of occurrences, could ever have spun. Danny wrote honestly. He wrote from the heart. He told the truth.

"Sure, I've only been on the beat thirty years," Boyle, his competitor, who worked for the other paper and who shared the cluttered press room with Danny, snarled into the telephone. He was talking to his city editor. Boyle shook his shaved head—which, with a furrowed brow, a fleshy, prominent nose, a small mouth and a tiny chin, resembled a large, pink, newborn bird's—and listened while the city editor's voice rasped through the telephone transmitter. "I've only been a cop reporter all my life," Boyle interrupted. "I only know everything that goes on in this dump, from where the chief hides his cigars to where the rat holes are in the jail—that's what I'm trying to tell you!" Boyle sighed, his heavy body slumped in a swivel chair as he looked at the waterstained, chipped ceiling of the small press room. "I'm just a reporter," he said, "but that kid's an *artist*. That's why we get beat." Boyle hung up.

Boyle liked Danny, even if he and the youth were competitors. It warmed Boyle's cop-frozen heart when he watched Danny at work. "Stick with it, kid," he told Danny. "You've got what it takes."

Everybody liked Danny. He was a likeable guy. The girls in the records division fluttered when Danny walked in. "How has a good-looking boy like you kept from getting married?" they asked. They ran thick, competent typists' and teletypists' fingers through his hair. They brought him home-baked cakes and cookies. They said, "I know *just* the girl for you, Danny. She's quiet, like you, and smart, high-class, a college girl, real wife material . . ."

The traffic cops liked Danny. They shared their secrets with him even when, getting off the first-night shift, they began to react nervously to their chronic, but hidden and never-admitted, fears. As they relaxed, their report-writing room gradually took on the loud but private boisterousness of a locker room after a football game. "You should have seen the pinch I made tonight, Danny," a booted and leatherjacketed motorcycle cop laughed, easing his head

out from beneath a white crash helmet. "I was so shook I stalled three times right in the intersection. Then when this guy opened his door he was so drunk he rolled out on the street . . ."

The detectives, who didn't like anybody, not even each other, liked Danny. "We got a stake-out going," the desk sergeant whispered. "If it comes off, it'll be the biggest pinch we've made in months. You didn't hear it from me, Danny," he said, scribbling an address on a scrap of paper, "but if you happened to be in this neighborhood, you might just come up with a story."

Even Danny's city editor, who, like most city editors, disliked mankind, was fond of Danny. "Two years in the copshop isn't necessarily a complete tour of duty," he said to his boss, the managing editor. "Danny can still profit from some more seasoning there. We've got some good writers in the city room, but that kid is the only one who might be *great* someday."

The managing editor, whose perch was lofty, agreed. "We've got our eyes on the young man, no doubt about it," he murmured.

Despite it all, Danny Greenstate was an unhappy young man. When he was working on a story, he lost himself in his job. When he finished, he was morose. The light went out of his eyes and he slumped, just as tiredly as Boyle, in his own swivel chair behind his own cluttered desk across the tiny press room from the veteran reporter. The police radios chattered, singing streetsongs of wrecks and drunks and thieves and hookers, and Danny sprawled wearily and thought of how he was unfulfilled. He breathed deep young breaths and gulped sadness. Danny was sad because, despite all his hard work, he had not yet seen, never mind written, a perfect cop story.

"There's no such thing," Boyle told him, for perhaps the one-hundredth time.

Danny cocked an eye at the cynical veteran, perched at his desk like a pink, prehistoric birdling. It was a quiet time of day. Taped to the wall above Boyle's desk was a yellowed chart of the police radio code, which the old man had memorized decades earlier. A file cabinet from a forgotten era stood next to him, almost blocking Boyle from Danny's view.

"There has to be," Danny said. "It's funny, ha! Up at the city room they think I'm longing to get off this beat. They think I'd like to cover the statehouse, where I could take payola and drink martinis for lunch and get bylines and rub elbows with big shots. They think I

want glory, like the rest of the reporters up there. But they're wrong. The other guys just want to cover their beats and go home at five o'clock. They couldn't care less about a good story—a perfect story. Boyle, there *is* a perfect cop story here. There has to be. It's just waiting to be written."

"There's no such thing," Boyle said. "Don't you think I've been here long enough to find out? If there was a perfect crime nobody would get pinched and there wouldn't be a story. If there *was* a pinch, that means the crime wasn't perfect. That's the wrinkle. There can't be a perfect cop story."

"That's not what I mean," Danny said. "I'm talking about love."

"You're off your rocker."

"A perfect cop story would be about love," Danny insisted. "But love unrequited. A one-way love affair, between a cop and his city. Virtue defeating the forces of evil, with no reward. Neanderthal man protecting his cave, without as much as a thank-you. You and I know cops are brutes, Boyle, but that doesn't mean they don't have feelings. They believe in old-fashioned morality and they see themselves as the good guys, constant and faithful. Who loves a city the way a cop does? No one, Boyle. You know that big street map hanging in the traffic room? Did you ever look at it? It's a mess. It has pencil marks and fingerprints all over it. You watch those cops sometimes when they have nothing to do—they go over to the map and touch it. They study it. They play with it. They trace routes on it. They caress it, Boyle. They love it. Say what you want about cops, they all have a big soft spot in their hearts. Maybe it sounds crazy, but they're in love with the city. That's why they work like they do. Love is the only reason they risk their necks. If you could write *that,* and if the paper would print it, then you'd have a perfect cop story."

"You can take what a cop knows about love," Boyle said, "and fit it inside a shot glass."

"You're wrong," Danny said. "Someday I'll show you."

The first glimpse Danny had of the new lady cop was a flash of blonde hair, a suntanned calf and a white, high-heeled shoe as the apparition floated by the door of the press room in the copshop.

"Who was *that*?" he asked, but Boyle was asleep in his swivel chair, a newspaper spread over his face. Danny walked to the door of the press room and looked down the hallway. The girl was twenty yards away and moving fast, like a trim catamaran in a brisk breeze.

She turned a corner and disappeared. Danny waited.

After a while the girl came back, a piece of paper in her hand. She was tall and suntanned, with long legs and graceful arms. She was studying the paper.

When she was next to Danny, still walking fast, he said, "Hi."

She looked up, surprised, and smiled uncertainly at Danny. The smile bounced him backwards. The girl kept walking. Danny reeled. "Her *color*," he said to Boyle. "You should have *seen* that girl." Her eyes were clear and white, with big, blue irises. Her nose was small and upturned. Her mouth, enthusiastically painted with pink, opened to white, friendly teeth. It was her coloring that really knocked Danny out. Her hair was light, sun-bleached at the tips, and her skin glowed golden. He walked back to his desk and sat down. "You couldn't use it in a feature story, Boyle," he said. "It would sound too corny. But she was like a sunrise—a golden sunrise over an island in the South Pacific—seen from a sailboat in a warm harbor."

Boyle stood in the doorway. "Let's go downstairs," he said. "Ninety-nine just came in."

Danny walked dreamily down the spiral staircase with Boyle to the bowels of the copshop. Ninety-nine, the paddy wagon, backed up to a heavy wire screen and discharged a load of passengers. They were mostly drunks—shabby, belligerent, ill—and they were prodded along a yellow line, painted on the floor, that led to the jail elevator.

"Nothing here for us," Boyle said.

The basement was dank and odorous, like a sewer. A siren growled from the parking area, far across the basement, and pitched to a scream. A manic drunk, orating and gesturing, was lifted by the armpits and hauled into the jail elevator. A large, heavy-set man, his eyes closed, hiccoughed and was sick.

The next day Danny discovered the girl was a lady cop, and new in town. She worked in the same building as Danny, upstairs from the press room. It occurred to Danny with euphoric certainty that he was going to marry her. He had fallen in love.

". . . and then I decided I didn't want to be a schoolteacher after all, and I came to the city. Next week I start training at the police academy. I like it. But what about you?" Linda smiled and sipped from the top of her second drink, and Danny, across the table from her in the soft, dark booth, drowned in her wide blue eyes

and gulped his seventh bourbon-and-water. He was as unaffected by it as he was by the first six. Since meeting Linda he had been drunk sober and sober drunk. He was in a soberdrunk world of his own. It was midnight and they were both off work, at the restaurant and cocktail lounge diagonally across the street from the cop-shop.

"You left the mountains?" Danny asked. "Where the wind makes your cheeks pink and you burn logs in the fireplace all winter? Where the snow covers everything and makes it beautiful? You left that to come here?" He swept

his arm around the room. Some off-duty cops in sport shirts were drinking beer. A bored traffic sergeant was sipping a cup of coffee at the bar. A bail bondsman chewed a cigar and talked into a wall telephone.

Linda laughed. "You make it sound romantic. Daddy was a forest ranger, that's all."

"And you walked through the forests," Danny marveled. "That's how you got legs like that."

Linda dipped her head to her drink, to hide the blush that rose from her neck . . .

. . . And she looked up from her coffee a week later and said, "What a delicious meal, Danny. I didn't know you could cook."

"I don't, usually. Most of the time I just use this place to sleep."

"It's a nice apartment. Comfortable."

"It's spartan," he said, standing up from the table. "It needs a woman's touch. Yours." Danny turned off the lights and pulled Linda by the hand over to his couch. He kissed her. Her fingertips went to the back of his neck. "Crazy perfume," he said.

"Mm."

"And tomorrow night what do we do?"

"Oh-oh," she said. "I have a date tomorrow night, Danny. I'm sorry."

"With whom, may I inquire?"

"I don't think you know him. Purdew. He's in the academy too."

"I don't want to know him."

"Don't mumble," Linda said, "and don't be silly. Cheer up. Smile."

Every day, Purdew—crewcut, bullnecked—and thirty other cops, plus a handful of green-uniformed sheriff's deputies and a scattering of police rookies from nearby towns, filled the coffee room in the copshop with noise and cigarette smoke during the two breaks between academy classes. The body heat from half a hundred cops, steaming like cattle, drove moisture from the air and pushed it against the windows. Cigarette smoke rolled in clouds up the panes and steam condensed and came down the windows in droplets.

"It's like the army," Danny complained to Boyle, downstairs in the press room. "They're getting brainwashed in those classes."

"It's the same every year," Boyle said. "Fifty rookies get together and they're like storm troops. You go up there for coffee, you can smell the hate coming off."

To Linda, when he got her alone next, Danny said, "Why don't you quit this police thing and find another job?"

"Don't be absurd."

"I'm serious. What do they teach you girls in there with those zombies—judo, karate, how to disarm a felon? That's no work for a beautiful blonde girl. And when you go on the job, you know, it won't all be feeding tragic urchin waifs with big sad eyes, and reuniting broken families on Sunday morning after church. You girls are fresh faces, unknown—they'll have you in with the vice and morals guys. They'll have you trapping pimps, buying dope—"

"Someone has to do it."

"Let someone else do it, Linda. Give up this work. Go back and teach school. Better yet, let me take care of you."

"Dan," she said, "Purdew asked me to marry him."

Danny felt a cold blade slip in just below his belt, like an icicle. In his mind, he saw his warm South Pacific island scene change from three dimensions to two and then roll up, flap-flap-flap, like a window shade. Behind it was the cops' traffic map, smudged and intricate, and it rolled up too and left the face on a tough, crewcut cop grinning in triumph.

"What did you tell him?" Danny asked.

"I didn't yet."

"The hell with him," Danny said. "Marry me. We'll live happily ever after."

"I'm sorry to hurt you," she said, without tears, "but I can't help you."

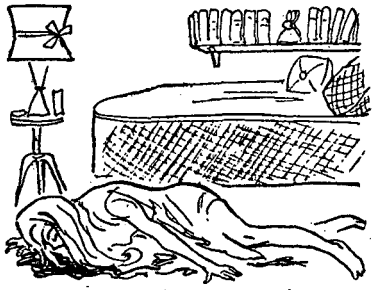
"The way I see it," Boyle told Danny, "the Mad Butcher is going to make a hell of a story when he gets caught."

"The hell with him," Danny said. He'd hardly left the press room in a month. When he wasn't sleeping on the press room's old couch-with-the-upholstery-coming-out, he was either lobbing darts into the battlescarred dartboard or uninterestedly filling in the squares in his paper's daily crossword puzzle. The copyboy who brought the first edition to Danny every day had given up trying to make conversation. The copyboy wanted to be a reporter some day, and he figured Danny was lost in concentration upon some big story—but Danny wasn't lost in concentration; he was just lost.

"Look," Boyle said excitedly, wetting his lips with his tongue and leaning in his swivel chair toward Danny. He held up a hand, fingers spread. "Four killings, as bloody as you could hope for. Each one on a Friday night. Each one a college chick killed in her own bedroom, shot first and then carved like stew meat. Picked up in a downtown bar by a guy no one can identify. This is a grade-

A nut we've got. I mean a real loony. Anyone who hits that often, on a pattern yet, is begging to get caught. So far the cops don't have zilch—no prints, no gun, no knife, no ID—but they're bound to make the guy and when they do, I figure he'll go down shooting. That's my theory. That's why I want to be on the spot. What a story!"

"Rapers belong in the zoo," Danny said. "They're animals."



"Yeah," Boyle said. "Maybe they ain't pretty, but they still have to be caught."

Danny slipped his shoes off, loosened his tie, then lay down on the couch, closing his eyes. *Yeah,* he thought, *they all have to be caught. One week it's a burglar and the next it's a paperhanger. This week it's a murder-rapist. Cops sure have fun jobs. They don't care about the victim because it's too late for that by the time they get into the act. And they don't care about helping people before they turn into criminals—that's not their problem. All cops do is arrest people and lock them up in cages. They get out the mug shots, the fingerprint files, the blood-type samples, the ballistic results . . . They put all the evidence together and when it finally adds up, they go pinch a guy and lock him up so they can start all over again with someone else. And if they can't get any clues, they give the guy a nickname like the Mad Butcher and wait until he makes a mistake. Then they go after him. Unless the community is up in arms,* Danny thought; *unless they've got a real maniac making headlines—then sometimes the cops don't wait, sometimes they take action.*

Danny opened his eyes and swiveled his head so he was looking at Boyle.

"What are they doing to catch this guy?" he asked.

"They're waiting," Boyle said. "I told you they have nothing to go on."

"They're not doing anything?"

"Pardon me," Boyle said, "but if you have any good ideas, don't feel you have to keep them a secret."

"I don't have any ideas," Danny said, and closed his eyes again. *None, that is, that I'm sure the cops don't already have, such as a four-letter word meaning decoy. Such as b-a-i-t. Such as a new lady*

cop with an innocent face. If she wasn't dressed up like a college girl, and if she didn't park herself inside a downtown bar, I'd be very surprised. That's just a theory, of course, but it's all we have to go on at the moment. Of course, Boyle, assuming you want a good news story, you won't spend next Friday night next to the cop radio. But then again, you're a happily married man and maybe you'd rather spend Friday night with the wife and kids. But if you were in love, and all it did was hurt you, and if you didn't know what to do about it, then you just might follow the lady cop anyway, just because you didn't have anything else to do. Not a damn thing. Nothing to do at all.

Danny drove an inconspicuous gray sedan equipped with a radio that picked up police calls. Friday night he parked the car downtown, entered a cocktail lounge and sat down at a booth, behind a post. He was hiding. Danny was wearing dark glasses but he lowered them long enough to take a look around the room. Linda was alone at the bar, wearing a light blue sweater and skirt, looking collegiate, and two detectives were seated at a booth not far from her, looking uninterested and maybe a little drunk. Danny knew Linda had just come in because he'd followed the car that dropped her off. He felt guilty, spying on her, but he'd done worse for the sake of a news story; why couldn't he spy for the sake of a broken heart? Danny would have felt like part of a foolish and futile endeavor—and so would Linda and the detectives, he knew—if a similar piece of bait weren't being put out in a dozen other bars in the neighborhood. The odds were against running into the Mad Butcher, but the odds would have been much worse if the cops weren't making any attempt at all.

Danny had a pretty good idea of what Linda's instructions were. She was there to get picked up, but she wasn't supposed to go home with a strange man. She was sitting at the bar to lure men, with the hope the detectives could identify one of them as a suspect but, if the detectives thought they had the right guy, they'd want something to hold him on besides merely approaching a girl in a bar. Danny wondered how far Linda would carry the charade—was she supposed to go outside with the guy? Into his car? It was a tricky business. And what if they got the wrong guy? What a joke that would be. Some lonely guy who thought he'd picked up a real dish ends up answering questions for the police. *You ought to be here,*

Boyle, he thought; *this is where cops do their work, out in the city.*

Danny nursed his bourbon-and-water, not wanting to get drunk, but it was an effort for him. Linda looked so appealing in her skirt and sweater. She'd worn those clothes on one of their dates. He remembered what her hand felt like in his, warm and full of unexpected little tremblings. When she walked, she always started out with her left foot, and she lengthened her stride to match his. But that was all over, Danny reminded himself. The whole thing was a big, stupid error. There was nothing he could do about it.

Linda was cool to the first two men who approached, and they left. They were young and very innocent-looking. A half-hour passed in which nothing happened. Then a dark, big man crawled onto the barstool next to Linda. He turned to face her, and the man looked familar to Danny. Danny wondered why that should be; he didn't know the stranger. Still, there was something about the guy—his eyes, maybe. Sure, his eyes. *You're damn right his eyes,* Danny thought. *That guy's been staring at me for the last half-hour.* Danny glanced at the detectives. He couldn't tell if they were interested in the suspicious newcomer. He looked back at Linda. She smiled at the big man. The stranger ordered a couple of drinks for them. Danny waited, trying to sort out the possibilities, wondering.

After a while, Linda and the big man stood up and began walking to the door. A moment later the detectives rose, nonchalantly. So did Danny. Outside, Danny glided to his car, removed his dark glasses and watched through his windshield. The big man had a Volkswagen parked half a block up the street, under a street light. The detectives, still apparently uninterested, drifted to their car. The big man opened the Volkswagen door for Linda and she got inside.

They're playing it pretty loose, Danny thought. *That's not smart.* He switched on his ignition, then his police radio. He noticed his palms were moist. The Volkswagen pulled away from the curb. The detectives followed by about half a block. Danny let them get a block ahead of him before he pulled out into the traffic. Over the police radio, he heard the detectives ask for a record check from the Volkswagen's license plate.

"Stand by," the radio replied.

It was a misty, overcast night, with no moon. The Volks led them away from downtown, through an industrial area where

the streets were narrow and crossed with railroad tracks. The radio came back on, telling them the car was clean and records was running a check on the registered owner. Danny stayed two blocks behind. The detectives were letting their tail lag, too. It was a dark, virtually deserted part of town. Danny heard a train rumbling heavily down the tracks, not far away.

The Volks made a sharp right turn. When Danny turned the corner, the other two cars were out of sight. He sped up, trying to spot taillights at the cross streets, with no luck. He circled back hurriedly without spotting the cars, then pulled over to a curb and killed his motor, listening. All he heard was the rumbling noise of the train, picking up speed. Danny waited, trying to decide what to do.

Then he heard the detectives back on the air. "Suspect vehicle heading east on Burnside, near the bridge approach. We've lost visual contact due to a train. Any patrol units in the area?"

The detective's voice was quick and tense, triggering instant apprehension in Danny. There was a particular sound to some radio calls to which his ears were attuned. Sitting in the copshop, reading or half asleep, he could ignore hour after hour of routine calls; then, suddenly, there would be a call with a different pitch or intensity, and Danny would become instantly attentive. Some calls sounded as clear as a siren. They had a warning note in them. This was one of them.

"Stand by, thirty-six," the radio voice said, echoing just a suggestion of the detective's urgency. In the control room, there could be no panic. The radio asked locations on two patrol cars. They answered immediately. They were in the area, but both more than a mile away. Radio told them to get to the Burnside Bridge.

The detective's voice came back on the air. "The train cleared the intersection. We're proceeding to the bridge."

"Ten-four, thirty-six," radio answered. "Attention, all units. Be on the lookout for a green Volkswagen, license Able Fox Able three-one-one. Last seen proceeding east toward Burnside Bridge. Driver is WMA. WFA passenger. Use caution. Driver is kidnap suspect and may be armed."

"Thirty-six," the detectives broke in. "We're across the bridge and no sign of suspect vehicle."

"Ten-four, thirty-six," radio answered. "Seventy-one and seventy-three are on their way." Then radio said abruptly, "Stand by."

They must have a record check

on the driver by now, Danny decided. He was still parked by the curb on the deserted street. *Those idiots,* he thought, *getting held up by a train! That guy could be anywhere with Linda by now.* Danny gripped his steering wheel nervously, not knowing what to do but listen to the radio as the police mobilized.

Radio came back on. "Thirty-six, we have your suspect. All units, copy. Registered owner of the vehicle is Vernon Webster, twenty-eight years, white male American, black hair, brown eyes. He's a big one. Six-feet-four, two hundred and forty pounds. He's got one arrest, for peeping. Home address is 2813 Southeast Reed Terrace."

The detectives came back on the air. "We're going to 2813 Southeast Reed Terrace. Alert county—he may run for it."

"County is alerted," radio said. "All units, this is a repeat. Be on the lookout for a 1965 green Volkswagen, license Able Fox Able three-one-one. Driver is WMA, twenty-eight years, black hair, brown eyes, six-feet-four, about two-forty. Be careful. He's got a woman officer as a passenger. Possible kidnap."

Danny struck his steering wheel with the palm of his hand. Radio was silent, except for units briefly reporting their locations in the east and southeast part of town. The car hadn't been seen since it beat the detectives across the railroad crossing.

Okay, Danny told himself, start deducing. You're a bright young man. The guy either knew he was being tailed or he didn't. If he knew it, he'd probably make like a jackrabbit, with or without Linda, and there's nothing I can do about that. But if he didn't know it, he'd proceed as planned. Which means—*if* Webster's the Mad Butcher—and if he's a peeping tom, he *might* be—and *if* he sticks with his M.O.—he's not heading east. He's heading west, to Linda's house.

Danny started his motor and drove west fast. He disregarded the traffic lights downtown. He realized that if Linda knew the tail was lost, she'd lead him through downtown; she must know they got his license number. But he couldn't count on that, because if she didn't know the tail was lost, she'd take him home as fast as possible, to get it over with.

Danny sped down the street, leaving downtown behind him. Linda lived in a small, rented bungalow on a quiet residential street. As Danny neared Linda's street, he heard a radio voice he recognized as Purdew's saying he

was proceeding with his partner to Linda's house. *You better hurry, pal,* Danny thought. He turned onto Linda's street.

The street was empty, except for a green Volkswagen parked in front of Linda's house. The license number was AFA 311.

Danny parked his car and leaped from it. Inside the house the curtains were drawn, but there was a light on in the livingroom. Danny considered running around to the back and trying to sneak inside, but decided not to; there might not be time.

He ran up the front steps and tried the door; it was locked. Danny pounded on the door with his fist. From inside, he heard Linda scream for help—a terrible scream. Danny heard a lamp crash to the floor. There was a puff of light and the house went dark.

Danny leaned back and kicked the door with the bottom of his shoe, near the doorknob. He felt something give.

"Stay out!" a man's voice yelled.

Danny kicked again; this time wood splintered. With the third kick, the door flew open. Danny leaped inside, trying to see in the dim light.

There was a flash of light; Danny aimed his body at it, still running. It seemed to him Linda ran past him, toward the door.

Then a blinding pain struck Danny's nose and flamed up between his eyes. He heard his own voice cry out in frustration. He was on the floor, a carpet taste in his mouth. He'd fallen flat on his nose. Danny, standing up, could see Webster now, a big brute of a man. Danny dove for him, his hands reaching for Webster's throat—but he tripped over his own left leg and fell down again. *There's something in my leg,* he thought. As he fell, he heard another gunshot and saw the flash close above his head. He rolled quickly to avoid the next shot, and reached for Webster's cuff. Danny felt a dull, hard, weakening pain in his stomach as he rose to his feet. His left leg seemed useless. Danny swung a fist at Webster's chin and smashed his knuckles into the top of a coffee table as he fell down again. He rolled into Webster's knees and then he was wobbly but on his feet again. He swung at Webster, trying to smash the big man in the face, and then it suddenly got dark and Danny Greenstate had the ecstatic feeling he was in the air, slowly doing a backward somersault. He was floating, higher and higher. There were more shots.

When Boyle arrived at Linda's house, not long afterward, the detectives and police photographers

were finishing up. They had a sheet over Danny's body where it lay in the livingroom. Cops were keeping the neighbors at a distance. Purdew was comforting Linda.

"It took six shots to stop that crazy guy," the crewcut cop said to Boyle. "We could have taken Webster alive if we knew his pistol was empty."

"Okay to use the phone?" Boyle asked.

"Sure."

Boyle dialed his newspaper. While the operator was putting him through to the city room, he put his hand over the mouthpiece and said to Linda, "What's your last name, kid?"

"Hanson."

"E-n or o-n?"

"O-n."

"Thanks. Yeah, this is Boyle," he said into the telephone. "I'm going to dictate a story." The reporter paused a moment, putting a cigarette into his mouth. "You ready? Okay, here we go." He looked up at the ceiling and began dictating, speaking slowly and without emotion. "Daniel Greenstate comma twenty-seven comma had a dream, period new paragraph. He always wanted to write a perfect cop story, period new paragraph. He said it would be about love . . ."

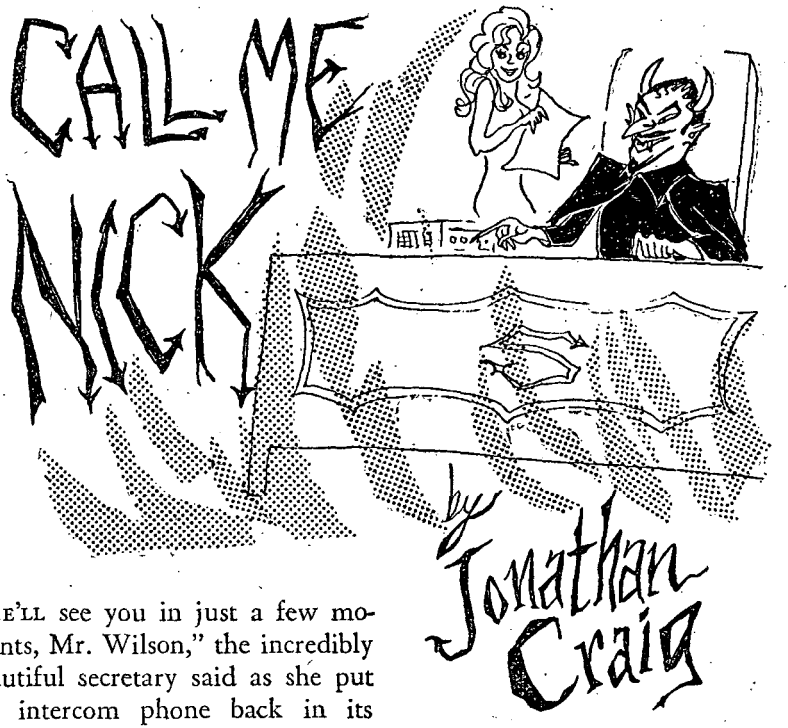
Boyle covered the mouthpiece again and whispered to one of the detectives, "Why don't you get on the radio and call the other paper. Tell 'em to get someone over here. But you didn't hear it from me, okay?"

The detective raised his eyebrows. "When did you turn into a Santa Claus?"

Boyle shrugged. "It's not exactly like I was the first reporter here," he said. He took his hand from the mouthpiece. "Tonight he wrote his dream story, period new paragraph. The hard way, period new paragraph . . ."

Boyle was still on the phone when the ambulance arrived. He had to hurry if they were going to get the story up in time for the city edition. He continued to dictate as they carried Danny's body away on a stretcher.

What a bonanza it would be—if one could view the future retrospectively!



HE'LL see you in just a few moments, Mr. Wilson," the incredibly beautiful secretary said as she put the intercom phone back in its cradle and smiled at him across the width of the anteroom.

"Thank you," Harry said, trying not to stare at her, and failing completely. She wore no clothing. No one here did, of course; but then, not everyone here was a curvaceous movie star who had been dead only a few years. He rubbed his eyes.

"It might help if you were to say something nice about his horns," the secretary said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"His horns," the secretary said. "He's an old dear, but he *is* a little

vain about his horns. It would please him if you were to compliment him on them."

"I'll do that," Harry said, still trying unsuccessfully not to stare at her. "Thanks for the tip."

The secretary smiled at him again and went back to her typing.

"Miss?"

"Yes?"

"Does he interview *all* the newcomers like this?"

"Oh, goodness no," she answered in the soft, enticing voice he remembered from the sound tracks of a dozen motion pictures. "He couldn't possibly. There are thousands of arrivals every day, you know. Tens of thousands, some days."

"Then I guess, whatever it is, it must be pretty serious."

"I wouldn't worry about it," the secretary said. "I'm sure everything will work out all right."

"I sure hope so," Harry said. "I've been here only four hours, but . . . . Well, they've been the happiest, the most wonderful hours of my life."

The secretary laughed. "Well, not of your *life*, exactly," she said. "But I know what you mean, Mr. Wilson. All the newcomers feel the same way."

The intercom buzzed softly. The secretary lifted the phone, listened for a moment, then nodded to Harry. "You may go in now, Mr. Wilson."

Harry rose, walked to the black door with the initial *S* inlaid at eye level in fuming brimstone, and reached for the doorknob.

"Don't forget, now," the secretary whispered. "Say something nice about his horns."

"Right," Harry said, and stepped into the inner office.

The being seated at the massive executive desk smiled, got to his feet quickly, and extended his hand.

"Nice of you to drop by, Harry, and *very* nice to meet you." He had a deep, melodious voice, powerful but controlled, like the controlled strength of the hand that clasped Harry's own.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said.

"Call me Nick," the being said, motioning Harry to a chair beside his desk. "We don't stand much on formality here, Harry. Sit down and let's chat a bit."

When they were seated, Nick leaned back in his chair, folded his hands behind his head, and regarded Harry warmly.

Harry was certain the friendliness was genuine, but he sensed that despite Nick's casual manner there was something troubling him, that he had something unpleasant to say and disliked having to say it.

"Well, Harry, now that you've

seen the place, what do you think of it?"

"It's wonderful. It's so terrific here I can hardly believe it."

"Scarcely what you'd been led to expect, eh?"

"That's putting it mildly," Harry replied. "But to tell the truth, sir, I—"

"Nick."

"Yes. To be honest, Nick, I never really believed there was such a place."

Nick laughed. "And what about the *other* place, Harry? You didn't believe in that, either?"

"Not really. I don't know . . . I just couldn't ever seem to make up my mind one way or the other."

"Well, it's up there, all right," Nick said. "You've been here about four hours, I think."

"Yes, and what a four hours! I never had so much fun. I never enjoyed myself as much in all the thirty years I was alive as I have in the few hours I've been dead."

"You approve of our ladies, do you, Harry?"

"Who wouldn't? I mean, with the kind of ladies you have here—and with no clothes on and all."

"Ah, yes," Nick said. "And the *gaming rooms?*"

"I never saw anything like them. Not even in the movies."

"And the various—to use an euphemism—spectacles?"

"Oh, fabulous!" Harry said. "Absolutely fabulous." Harry paused, remembering what the secretary had told him. "I hope you won't think I'm being too forward, Nick," he said, "but that's a mighty handsome set of horns you have there."

"Why, thank you, Harry," Nick said, obviously pleased. "Actually, though, most of the credit should go to my special horn wax." He nodded toward a small round tin he was using as a paperweight. "It's a formula I developed myself—through more millennia than I care to remember."

"Very effective, indeed."

Nick smiled. "Still, Harry," he said, "as pleasant as our little place down here is, it does have a few unfortunate features."

"I can't imagine what they could be. From all I've seen so far, everybody is having a ball."

"Yes, that's true," Nick said. "But wouldn't you say it's a trifle warm?"

"Not enough to matter," Harry said. "I'd hardly noticed."

"Atmosphere, you know," Nick continued. "After all, we do have a certain tradition to keep up. The brimstone, for instance—don't you find it annoying?"

"Not a bit," Harry said. "Oh, the fumes did bother my eyes a little, right at first. But I got used to it

in no time. I hardly think of it."

"Glad to hear it." Nick fell silent for a moment, then said, "Harry . . ."

"Yes, sir? I mean—yes, Nick?"

"Harry, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Harry swallowed. "Bad news?"

"Yes, Harry—very bad. You see, there's been a mistake. I'm not sure just where it occurred, but it did. We've only recently computerized the Personnel Section, you know, and so it may very well have been the fault of a machine. Or possibly someone in the Screening Section erred. And of course the Selection Committee isn't infallible, either. In any case, Harry, an almost unprecedented mistake has been made." He looked away, plainly ill at ease.

"Mistake?" Harry said.

Nick sighed. "Yes. There's no use in trying to tiptoe around it, I guess. The bald truth is that you don't qualify for admittance here."

Harry half rose from his chair. "What? I don't *qualify?*"

"I'm sorry, Harry. By rights, you should have gone up to the other place."

"But I'm already down here," Harry said. "I love it here. I just don't understand."

"You simply don't have the credentials, Harry," Nick said, reaching for a folder on his desk. "Here's your file. You weren't even a *naughty child*, for Pete's sake. In all your life, right up till you died a few hours ago, you never sinned at all. You never did anything wrong, Harry. You never even had an evil *thought.* I don't come across a life-history as spotless as yours once in a hundred years."

"But . . ." Harry began, and then compressed his lips and stared at the floor. It was all too true, he knew; he'd never sinned in his life.

"I hope you'll understand my position," Nick said. "I really have no choice in the matter."

"You're going to send me up there, you mean?"

Nick nodded sadly. "Much as I hate to do it, yes. You don't deserve to be here, Harry. You just haven't got what it takes. I'm sorry as can be, fella, but I'll have to send you upstairs."

Harry's shoulders slumped. "What's it like up there?" he asked dully.

"Oh, you'll like it fine," Nick said, trying to make his voice bright. "It's . . . well, very restful and all."

"Restful?"

"Yes, indeed," Nick said. "By the way, Harry, do you have an ear for music? A lovely instrument, the harp, and—"

"I couldn't carry a tune in a washtub," Harry said. "And besides, I've got ten thumbs. Do they

really play—uh, *harps* up there?"

"Yes," Nick said, "they really do."

"And what else do they do?"

Nick shrugged apologetically. "Not much, I'm afraid, Harry. Of course, you'll have wings, so you can always flap around a bit."

"I see," Harry said. "Play the harp, and flap around."

"I admit the place doesn't swing too much," Nick said.

"Listen," Harry said suddenly. "Once I won twenty dollars in an office pool and didn't report it on my income tax!"

Nick's smile was kind. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "It's so ironic," he said. "Edna *wants* to go up there. She expects to. She—"

"Edna?"

"My wife."

"Oh, yes," Nick said, opening Harry's file again. "I have a poor memory for names, I'm afraid."

"It's just that *she wants* to go up there. She says she can hardly wait. And me—I'm actually going up, when all *I* want to do is stay down here."

"Hmmm," Nick said, studying the file. "Your wife seems to be quite a woman, Harry."

"Oh, she is. She is that, Nick."

"Nothing personal, of course," Nick said, "but judging from the file, she would appear to have given you a pretty hard time. Eh?"

"She's very strong-willed," Harry admitted.

"Indeed she is," Nick said. "She wouldn't let you smoke your pipe in the house, Harry?"

"No."

"Or drink? Not even a beer on your birthday?"

"No."

"Or go bowling with the boys now and then?"

"No."

"And made you turn your paycheck over to her every week?"

"Yes."

"And gave you an allowance of a dollar and a half a day for lunch money and bus fare?"

"Yes."

"What happened to the rest of your pay?"

"She had rather expensive tastes."

"So it would seem. And did she really make you sleep on a cot in the kitchen?"

"Yes, she did."

"Yet it says here that you lived in a two-bedroom apartment."

"There's a phone between her bedroom and the kitchen. She liked to have me in there so that I'd be handy in case she wanted anything during the night—a glass of water or something."

Nick closed the file and sat drumming his manicured claws softly on the desktop, his eyes

thoughtful. "It's now 3:45 in your part of the country," he said at last. "You died in your sleep about four and a half hours ago."

"Yes," Harry said.

"Your wife would still be asleep, wouldn't she?"

"Yes."

"And no one up there knows you're dead?"

"No. But what—"

"Harry, you never did an evil thing in all the years of your life. If I were to let you go back topside for a few minutes, do you think you *could* do just one evil thing?"

"I—I could try," Harry said.

"Trying won't be good enough," Nick said. "*Could* you do just one evil thing, Harry? I'm asking you straight out. Yes or no?"

"I think I . . . Yes. Yes, I could, Nick. I know I could."

"Good," Nick said, smiling. "Because if you can, I'll be able to keep you with me."

"You really mean it?" Harry said excitedly. "Golly, Nick, that's wonderful!"

"Poor Harry," Nick said. "'*Golly*'! You never even learned to swear, did you?" He laughed. "But no matter. I suppose you've divined—if you'll pardon the expression—what you'll have to do?"

"Uh . . . Well, I . . ."

"No, I suppose, being *you*, you wouldn't have," Nick said. "Well, Harry, it will all be very fast and very simple. And after it's over, you'll be able to come back here, a resident in good standing for eternity."

"I'll be qualified?"

"Fully."

"What must I do?" Harry asked.

"You'll wake up in your bed—in your cot, rather—in the kitchen, very much alive. There are knives in every kitchen, Harry. You'll take one of the knives and—"

Harry gasped.

"You said your wife *wanted* to go to that place up there, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"So you'll be making her wish come true. You'll be doing a very good thing, Harry."

"In that sense, I suppose I would. But—"

"No buts, Harry; you would. At the same time, you'll be committing murder—and that's a very evil thing—but it'll qualify you for admittance here, which is where you want to be."

Harry felt excitement flooding through him. "By golly, Nick, you're right!" he said. "Edna and I—we'd both have exactly what we want."

"And I'd have what *I* want, too," Nick said. "I've taken quite a liking to you, Harry. I'd very much like to have you aboard."

"I just don't know how to thank you," Harry said.

Nick chuckled. "Please don't give it another thought. Shall we embark on our little mission at once, then?"

"Gosh, yes!" Harry said, jumping to his feet in his enthusiasm. "The sooner the better."

"Just one thing, Harry," Nick said as he reached toward his intercom. "Once you're topside, you'll have only five minutes. The regulations governing unusual procedures such as this are quite inflexible, I'm afraid. Five minutes, Harry. Not a second longer."

"That's more time than I'll need," Harry said. "Twice as much."

"Of course it is. I just wanted you to be informed." Nick depressed a key on the intercom. "Please arrange for Mr. Wilson's immediate return to his body," he directed his secretary. "And alert the Receiving Section to stand by for his readmission here."

"Yes, sir," the secretary's mellifluous voice said.

"Golly," Harry said, "this is almost too good to believe."

Nick stood up, shook Harry's hand, clapped him on the shoulder, and walked with him to the door.

"Good luck, Harry, old man," he said. "You'll be back with us before you know it. Don't worry."

When Harry returned to awareness, the luminous hands of the kitchen clock stood at exactly five minutes of four. There was snow on the windowsill, and a wintry moon shone through the window, cold and bleak and remote.

Harry rose from his cot swiftly, took a butcher knife from the cabinet by the sink, and walked noiselessly down the hall to his wife's bedroom.

Beside the bed, he paused for almost a full minute, waiting for his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness. His wife lay motionless, snoring softly, a huge, shapeless mass beneath the electric blanket.

Harry grasped the edge of the blanket and gently inched it down to his wife's waist. Then he raised the knife above his head, judged his stance and the distance carefully, tightened his grip on the knife until his wrist ached, balanced on the balls of his feet for the plunge of the blade, took a deep breath—and froze.

He just stood there, poised for the thrust he could not make. Then, very slowly, he lowered the knife.

His palms were wet with sweat, despite the cold room, and he dried them on the front of his pajama jacket. There was a pain in his

chest, and he realized he had been holding his breath. He sucked air into his lungs and braced his feet, trying to stop the trembling of his knees.

I've got to do it, he told himself. I've got to do this evil thing.

He raised the knife once again, and once again he set his mind and body for the single thrust that would qualify him for admittance to the place he so desperately longed to be. Again, it was like the first time. He stood as if paralyzed, the knife held high, while the seconds slipped away and the tremor in his knees spread throughout his body.

Down in the street a car went by, a broken cross link in a snow chain clanking against a fender well. From somewhere across the city a police siren keened suddenly, then was silent.

I can't do it, Harry thought. I simply can't do it.

Of course you can, a voice in another part of his mind said. *You must. Eternity's a long time, Harry. Do you want to spend it in a place where all you can do is play the harp and fly back and forth?*

No! Harry thought. No! I couldn't stand it—not after I've seen what the other place was like. I just couldn't stand it.

Then kill her, the voice said. *Look at the clock on the bedtable. Your time's running out, Harry. Don't you want to go back down there with Nick? Down where all the naked ladies and the fabulous spectacles and all the other wonderful fun-things are?*

Yes! Oh, yes!

Then do it, the voice said. *If you want to spend eternity there, you'll have to qualify. You've only a few seconds left, Harry. Just raise the knife again—yes, that's right—and . . .*

Harry did, and then did it again, and again.

I've done it! he thought exultantly as he withdrew the knife from his wife's body. I've qualified! I'm going to hell!

"Congratulations, Mr. Wilson," the shapely secretary said with a smile as Harry entered the anteroom of Nick's office. "You see? You succeeded in spite of yourself."

"I was beginning to think I wouldn't be able to do it," Harry said. "I don't know what got into me."

The secretary laughed. "I do," she said. "*He* got into you, Mr. Wilson. As a matter or fact, he gets into a *lot* of people."

"He does?"

"Oh, my yes," she said. "He's waiting for you, Mr. Wilson. You're to go right in."

"Thank you," and Harry opened the door to the inner office.

Nick was standing beside his desk, grinning broadly. "Nice going, Harry. Welcome back."

"It's great to *be* back, I can tell you," Harry said happily. "But for a while there, I didn't think I was going to make it."

"You were superb, Harry. Magnificent. A truly splendid performance in every way."

"It's all so wonderful," Harry said. "I've never been so happy. Is it okay if I go out and join in the fun now?"

"Well, no," Nick said. "All those happy sinners you saw gamboling about are merely awaiting final processing. They'll all soon be down in hell proper—where they belong."

"What?" Harry said. "They'll be where?"

"Down below," Nick said. "And in case you've wondered about my rather large clerical force, it's made up entirely of assistant Nicks, so to speak—beings very much like myself. The only exception is my pulchritudinous secretary, whom I keep around for reasons as excellent as they are obvious."

"I don't understand," Harry said.

Nick pressed a button on his desk. "Look behind you," he said.

Even as Harry turned, a large section of the floor suddenly slid back to reveal a yawning pit at his feet. He gasped, and cringed back, staring down at a scene of such unspeakable horror that he felt his legs begin to sag beneath him.

There, far below him, were the tortured souls in their multitudes, chained and naked, writhing in a churning sea of flame and molten rock. Blood-chilling shrieks of agony and terrible wails of despair rent the steaming air, and the sulphurous stench of brimstone mingled with the reek of burning flesh.

Harry whirled around, to find that Nick had come up behind him. The horned being was laughing so hard there were tears in his eyes.

"You tricked me!" Harry managed to say, his voice high-pitched with terror. "You were just playing a game with me all along!"

"Of course I was," Nick admitted.

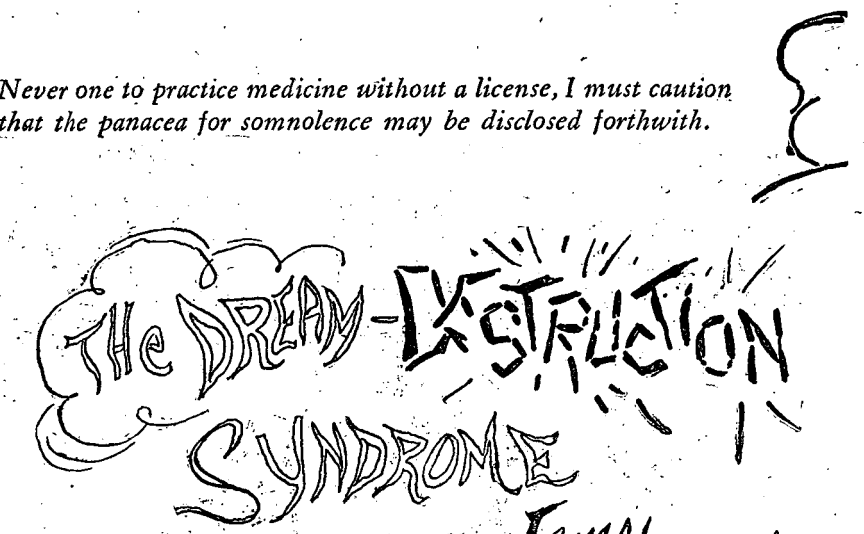
"But why?"

"Why?" Nick said, his slitted yellow eyes twinkling merrily. "Why, just for the pure hell of it, Harry. We've got to have a little fun around here, after all. You wouldn't begrudge us a few laughs, now and then, would you?"

"What a fiendish thing to do!" Harry cried.

"It really is, isn't it?" Nick said and, laughing, he shoved Harry backward into the pit.

Never one to practice medicine without a license, I must caution that the panacea for somnolence may be disclosed forthwith.



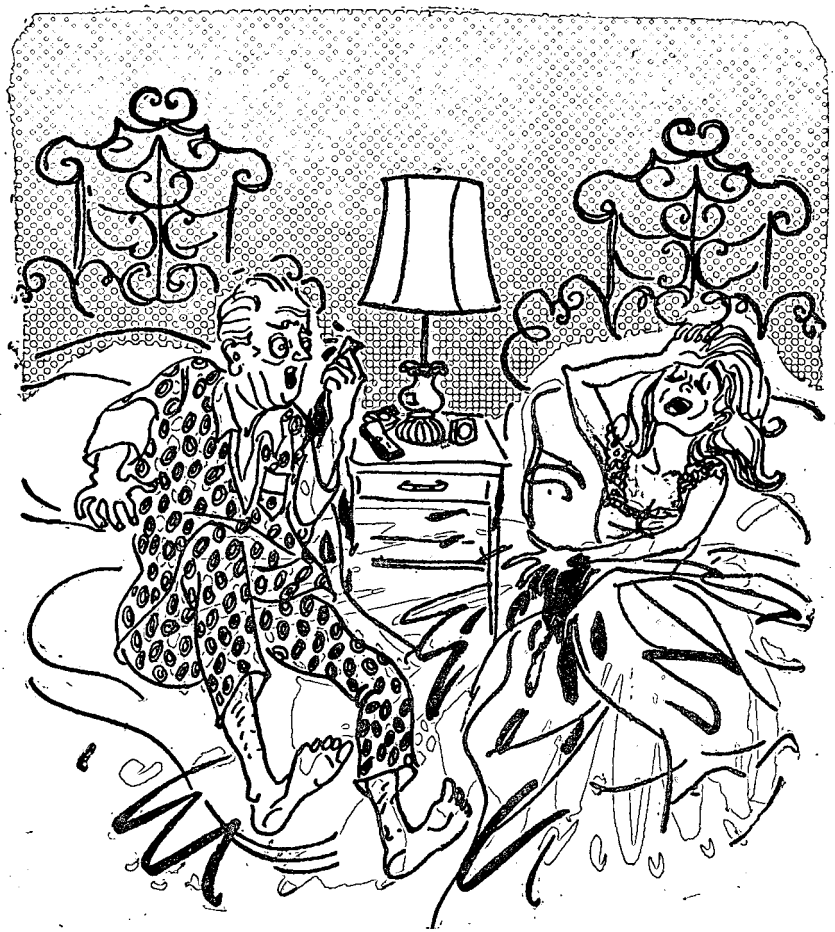
HE AWOKE with his wife's despairing cry in his ears and the blood from her slashed wrist spurting over him. The naked razor blade he held between thumb and fingers of his left hand was stained with the same crimson. He shook his head from side to side in the forlorn, desperate gesture of a man who realizes, suddenly and sickeningly, that he is mad—mad to the point of involuntary murder.

That overriding thought battered at him as he leaped out of bed, ripped a strip from his disordered sheet, and applied a tourniquet to Sandra's arm. "You're mad, God help you, you're a maniac, you'll have to be shut up!"

Sandra had fainted. He was deeply thankful for that small blessing. Poor Sandra, married to a madman who had tried to kill her in his sleep; incredible as it seemed, *in his sleep.*

He shuddered uncontrollably. Tears of horror and self-pity welled into his eyes. He retched dryly, time after time, his stomach convulsing in agonizing cramps, yet never for a moment did he relax his urgent preoccupation with the tourniquet until the deep cut on the inside of Sandra's left wrist ceased to jet bright blood. Then he dialed the doctor and the police.

A week later, he was informed at



the Psychiatric Hospital where he was under observation that Sandra had filed suit for divorce.

Who could blame her after what he had done to her? Attempted murder on top of an obviously unhappy marriage was a bit much. Not that *he* had been unhappy in their marriage. 'Uninspired' might be a better word to apply to the calm, comfortable, unexciting relationship that had developed between Ross Thomas and his second wife, Sandra. Their companionable life of leisurely, undemanding contentment had been exactly to his

taste; for Sandra, he could see now, it had been, in all likelihood, merely boring. He was twenty years her senior, for one thing, and neither of them, when they discussed marriage, had pretended to any overwhelming passion for the other. He was very rich and recently divorced; she was young and beautiful; it seemed at the time they might be good for each other.

Now, he thought wryly, lying in his hospital bed, she wants out, and with the very best reason in the world. He had tried to kill her. Silently he said good-bye and good luck to Sandra and determined to settle a princely sum upon her if a madman could legally make such disposals of his property. He wasn't sure about that.

Curiously enough, it was Lieutenant Randall from the Homicide Squad who brought him the news of Sandra's impending divorce action.

Randall came into his hospital room and sat down in a chair beside his bed without invitation. His odd yellow eyes, slightly triangular like the eyes of a cat or a cobra, regarded Thomas unblinkingly. "I'm Randall from Homicide," the lieutenant said, "the man who answered your call when you tried to kill your wife. Remember me?"

"Vaguely, yes. I was very disturbed at the time, as you know."

"Understandably," Randall said. Then he told Thomas about the divorce action.

Thomas said, "I can't blame her."

Randall coughed. "All the same, it's a kind of an interesting angle."

"How *is* my wife?" Thomas asked.

"Fine. Your first aid did the trick. A stitched and bandaged wrist is all she has to show for your . . . ah . . . attack."

"I'm glad." Thomas moved under his bedclothes. "What a ghastly experience for her!"

"No telling what a guy will do sometimes," said Randall neutrally.

"What a madman will do," amended Thomas.

"Yeah. Only you don't talk or act particularly crazy to me, Mr. Thomas."

"You should see me when I'm asleep," Thomas said bitterly. "That's when I'm the craziest."

"So Doctor Caldwell tells me." Randall was imperturbable. "He says you came to see him several times before your latest . . . ah . . . aberration."

"I did. Wouldn't you, if you were destroying things in your sleep without the slightest knowledge of what you were doing at the time, or any memory of it later?"

Randall shrugged. He said nothing.

Thomas asked, "Did Doctor Caldwell tell you about me?"

"Only a little bit, Mr. Thomas, and he was so clinical I couldn't follow him very well."

"There's no big mystery about what form my insanity takes, Lieutenant. Ever hear of a compulsive somnambulistic dreamer? That's me."

"You mean you walk in your sleep?"

"Apparently. And I'm a dreamer, too. I'm especially big at dreaming."

"Everybody dreams," said Randall.

"Not like me, though. This is how it goes with me, Lieutenant: I dream. I dream about something or somebody I like very much. Then, while I'm still dreaming, I get out of bed, walk around the house in my sleep till I find a knife or a razor blade or something, and try my darnedest to *destroy* the thing or person I'm dreaming about—in my sleep. How's that for a nice normal little mental quirk for a corporation board chairman to have?"

Randall's yellow eyes showed interest. "Is that why you tried to kill your wife with the razor blade? Because you were dreaming about her that night?"

"You catch on quick." Thomas spoke with weary sourness. "That's exactly right. I was, and still am, very fond of my wife. Yet I dreamed about her and immediately tried to destroy her in my sleep. Just the way I did my raincoat, my briefcase, and . . . " his voice trailed off to a horrified whisper, ". . . my cat."

"Well!" Randall said. "Dr. Caldwell didn't tell me about them."

"He wouldn't. But he knows about them. I came to see him each time I destroyed something in my sleep."

"You feel like telling me about it? As a cop, I've heard some pretty seamy stuff, but never anything like this. You mind completing my psychiatric chamber of horrors?"

"I don't care to discuss it."

"Put it this way, then. You're still charged with attempted homicide on our books, Mr. Thomas. A little cooperation from you might help, you never know."

Thomas squirmed uneasily. "Attempted homicide while temporarily insane, isn't it?"

Randall shrugged. "We haven't got a final opinion from the headshrinkers yet," he said brutally.

"Oh," Thomas said. "Well, the first time I thought it merely an odd occurrence without much significance. I woke up one morning, several months ago, after a vivid dream about a new raincoat I'd bought. When I was ready to leave

for my office, it was raining so I went to get my new raincoat out of the closet." Thomas paused and stared miserably at a corner of the ceiling. "My raincoat was there, all right, but somebody had cut it into shreds and tatters with a pair of shears I use for pruning my rose bushes."

"That would give anybody a start," Randall sympathized.

"It shocked me. I told myself anyone could have done it . . . perhaps one of my servants with an unknown grudge against me. The thing that shook me up, though, was the coincidence of *dreaming* about the raincoat just before it was destroyed."

"Probably *was* only a coincidence."

"That's what Dr. Caldwell thought. I didn't tell anyone about it; even Sandra, my wife. I smuggled the ruined raincoat out of the house and bought another the same day, after I'd seen Dr. Caldwell. He wouldn't go along with the dream stuff so I was very relieved, of course, and thought little more about it—until the night I dreamed about my briefcase and found it ripped to pieces with my own carving knife the next morning."

Randall kept quiet.

"You see? That was the second time. I casually asked my wife if she'd heard anything during the night, thinking of prowlers, I suppose. She said she'd heard nothing except me when I got up to go into the bathroom once, but I know I hadn't done it. Got up, I mean, and gone anywhere. As far as I knew, I'd been out like a light all night long, dreaming about my favorite briefcase with some irreplaceable documents in it being mislaid." Thomas hesitated. "Dr. Caldwell took a more serious view this time, with sleepwalking added to the mixture."

"No wonder," murmured Randall.

Thomas gave him a painful smile. "I was really in a state about the briefcase. I took it to show to Dr. Caldwell when I consulted him. Its condition implied such . . . such . . . vicious violence." Ross Thomas closed his eyes briefly. "And done while I was asleep! Do you have any conception of how horrible that seemed to me?"

Randall shook his head. "What about the cat?"

"I've always liked Siamese cats, Lieutenant. My current pet, Thai, is a beauty." He swallowed. "*Was* a beauty. I dreamed about Thai one night. Dreamed she climbed to the top of the library ladder and wouldn't come down; and when I woke up, Thai, who always slept in our bedroom with us, was lying beside her basket with her neck

broken." He winced, remembering.

"What did Dr. Caldwell make of that?" Lieutenant Randall asked. "And your wife? You couldn't hide that one from her, I assume."

"No, I told her the whole thing that morning. I had to. I was scared. I was afraid I'd dream about *her* some night. I begged her to move out of my room into another and bolt her door against me, for her own safety."

"She didn't do it?"

"No. She said my sleepwalking and dreams couldn't scare *her*, nor the fact that I happened to step on poor Thai's neck and crack it during one of my nocturnal rambles."

"What did she think about the raincoat and briefcase episodes?"

"They puzzled her. Finally she telephoned Dr. Rockwell and asked him if I were dangerous."

"What did he say?"

"Told her that a dream-destruction syndrome such as I thought I had was utterly unknown to medical science, although somnambulistic dreamers are a dime a dozen. Gave her a lot of claptrap about self-hypnotism and auto-suggestion. Ventured that perhaps I was the object of a petty campaign of harrassment by some person or persons unknown, out of spite, but as for my mental condition, I was no different from any other middle-aged dreamer who walks in his sleep. I was listening in on the conversation on an extension. The doctor kind of bore down heavy on the middle-aged bit."

"What's he think about you now?" Randall asked.

"He's torn two ways, I think. Either I'm a sane schemer or an insane dreamer. If sane, I've built this series of episodes up as an elaborate alibi for a seeming murder attempt on my wife—perhaps to force her to divorce me—but I chickened out of killing her at the last minute. Or else, if I'm insane, then I'm the first recorded case of a compulsive dreamer-sleepwalker-destroyer and, as such, could easily make him world-famous as the discoverer of this unique type of dementia."

After an interval of silence, Randall said, "Before you began to destroy the things you dreamed about—it only started a couple of months ago, you said—did you ever tell your dreams to your wife?"

"Never," Thomas said. Randall was surprised to see a flush spread over the wan face against the hospital pillow. "Or at least, very seldom. And not in any detail. It was more the other way round, really."

"Your wife told you about *her* dreams?"

"It's fairly common among married couples, isn't it?"

"Sure. I do it myself."

Thomas nodded. "Sandra fre-

quently told me about some dream she'd had and asked if I'd had any dreams that night, and what they were about. Those were the only times I ever mentioned my dreams to her."

The lieutenant gave him a sharp look. "Do you think it's possible that somebody else could have cut up your raincoat and briefcase, and killed your cat out of spite, as Dr. Caldwell suggested?"

"Don't be a fool," Thomas said. "How could anyone else know what I was dreaming about while I was still asleep? And besides, *I* tried to kill my wife, Lieutenant. Nobody else. That's quite plain." He closed his eyes. "Thank God her screams woke me up before I succeeded."

Randall looked out the window. His yellow eyes glowed gold in the reflected sunset light. "There's no chance that Dr. Caldwell's right about you being a deliberate schemer, is there? You weren't trying to force your wife to divorce you?"

Wearily, Thomas shook his head. "I'm very fond of my wife. You've got to understand that. I'd already gone through one divorce and certainly didn't want another."

Randall said nothing.

Thomas went on insistently. "If I'd really wanted to get *rid* of Sandra, I could have let her bleed to death and pretended she'd committed suicide, couldn't I, now?"

Randall stood up. "I guess you could, at that," he said. "So that leaves us with nothing but Dr. Caldwell's alternate diagnosis."

Thomas turned his face to the wall. "Yes," he said miserably. "There's no possible doubt. I'm mad."

Three days later, Lieutenant Randall came back to the hospital for another visit. He found Thomas in a more cheerful mood. There had been no recurrence of the dream-destruction syndrome since he had tried to kill his wife. Dr. Caldwell had allowed him to get up and dress, even though he was still confined to his own hospital room.

Randall grinned at him, taking the same chair he had occupied on his previous visit. Thomas was sitting in a big armchair near the window. "You look better," the lieutenant said.

"Thanks." Thomas eyed the policeman.

"If you're wondering what I want, I've got some good news for you."

"Oh?" Thomas' gaze sharpened. He put aside the newspaper he had been reading.

"Yes," Randall said. "You're not mad. Repeat, *not*."

Thomas stared at him. Then he said shortly, "It's not in the best of

taste to make jokes at the expense of . . . of people like me."

"I'm not joking."

"Then do you mind telling me how you reached this astounding conclusion?" A thin contempt edged his voice.

Randall said cheerfully, "I got to thinking about the way you flushed up the other day when I asked you about exchanging dreams with your wife. Remember that?"

Thomas nodded.

"I asked myself why a man in your kind of trouble would blush over a simple question like that. 'Did you tell your wife about your dreams?' was all I asked. And you said very seldom, only when she asked you, but you turned as red as a maraschino cherry. From embarrassment? And you used a curious phrase. 'Not in any detail,' you said." Randall lit a cigarette before he went on.

"I didn't figure you as a liar when lying was obviously purposeless, so I believed you about not relating your dreams to your wife. Yet there was something about that question of mine that disturbed you somehow, or anyway, made you flush. So you know what I did?"

"What?"

"I went to call on the first Mrs. Ross Thomas. Your divorced wife. The one before Sandra."

"What on earth got into you?"

"I figured she might know what made you blush when questioned about your dreaming. And she did."

Thomas smiled wryly. "I suppose she told you about mental cruelty as grounds for divorce?"

"Yes. What it meant in her case, anyway. It meant twenty years of listening to you, every morning of her life, tell her all about your dreams of the night before. In endless and boring detail, to use her words, Mr. Thomas. You nearly drove her out of *her* mind with your dreams. So when she stood it as long as she could, she divorced you, right?"

Thomas said, "I'm not proud of it, but I fail to see its significance."

"It explained why you blushed at my question. And why you never told your current wife anything about your dreams unless she asked. You weren't going to make the same mistake twice."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"It accounts for the fact that your current wife had to *ask* you about your dreams."

"You've lost me, I'm afraid."

"No wonder," said Randall. "I was lost myself until I asked your first wife a few more questions about your sleeping habits when she was married to you."

"Like what about my habits?"

"Like about your sleepwalking, for one thing. And that was funny. Your first wife said you didn't walk in your sleep while she was married to you."

"She took sleeping pills almost every night. She never happened to see me or hear me doing it, that's all."

"In twenty years of sleeping in the same room? Come on, now!" Randall grunted. "Why, *you* didn't even know yourself that you were a somnambulist until Sandra mentioned it in connection with your briefcase dream. She said she heard you going into the bathroom during the night when what you were actually doing, you decided, was walking in your sleep—going to get your carving knife and destroying your briefcase. Isn't that right?"

"Well?"

"Keep it in mind. It's very unusual for somnambulism to start in middle age, Mr. Thomas. Greater incidence of it in childhood, usually." Randall puffed smoke and tapped his cigarette ashes into an empty paper cup on Thomas' dresser. "The next question I asked your former wife kind of hit the jackpot."

A slight tic had begun to pulse visibly under Thomas' left eye.

The lieutenant said quietly, "I asked her if you ever *talked* in your sleep while she was married to you."

Thomas burst out defensively, "That's one thing I *don't* do!"

"How do you know?" Randall asked.

"Why . . ." Thomas floundered. "Surely either my first wife or Sandra would have told me . . ."

"Evidently not. Because your first wife stated categorically to me that while you didn't walk in your sleep, you did talk in it. How does that grab you, Mr. Thomas?"

Thomas gulped. "I don't understand."

"I don't blame you. I'm not telling this well, but that's the sequence in which I learned the facts."

"Can't you make it a little clearer?" Thomas pleaded hoarsely. "If you honestly have some rational explanation for what I did?"

"Oh, I do. That's the whole point. Listen. I asked your first wife if you talked very much in your sleep. She said not much, you followed an odd pattern of saying just a couple of words at a time, sometimes only a single intelligible word, and not every night, by any means. What *kind* of words did you say in your sleep, I asked her." He paused to put out his cigarette.

Ross Thomas crossed his legs. "And?"

"She said the words you spoke in your sleep invariably were associated with what you were dreaming about at the time. Identified the subject of your dream, you might say, like a title for a story. To use an example she gave me, if you woke her up in the middle of the night calling out the word 'train' in your sleep, the next morning you'd describe in endless and boring detail . . ." Randall winked one yellow eye, ". . . a long dream you'd had about being on a railroad train."

Thomas sat bolt upright in his armchair. His eyes, indifferent, skeptical, almost blank until now, suddenly came alive. "You mean that if I were dreaming about a raincoat or a briefcase or Thai, I might have said those words aloud while I was still dreaming about them?"

Randall nodded. "Exactly."

Thomas stood up and began to pace. "Then *Sandra* could have known!"

Randall interrupted him. "The possibility leaped to the eye, once she was convinced that the words you sometimes spoke in your sleep invariably described what you were dreaming about. Hence, her seemingly casual question about your dreams *after* she'd heard you speak certain words in your sleep. She wanted to be sure what you were dreaming about before she destroyed it. Do you see that?"

"Yes! Yes! When I said 'Thai' in my sleep, Sandra could have got up and killed Thai because she knew that I was dreaming about *my* cat. Is that what you mean?"

"Yep. So *now* how does it grab you?" Randall said.

Thomas was extremely agitated. "But . . . but . . ." he stammered, "Sandra wouldn't . . . wouldn't . . . cut her own wrist with a razor blade just to make me think I'd done it in my sleep!"

"Why not? Women'll do a lot of funny things if their reasons are strong enough."

"But she was bleeding like a— She fainted! She could have died quite easily! Surely you don't believe she'd take a chance on bleeding to death!"

"She made sure to wake you up before she fainted, didn't she?"

"But—"

"Matter of fact," Randall went on calmly, trying to give Thomas a little time to pull himself together, "your wife Sandra slashed the wrong wrist." He coughed. "She slept in the left-hand twin bed in your room, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"And you slept in the twin bed to her right. Okay. So she cut her left wrist. Probably because she's right-handed and could handle the

razor blade more surely that way. But you're right-handed, too. So it would have been more natural for you, even in your sleep, to hold the razor blade in *your* right hand, wouldn't it, and cut her nearest wrist with it? Yet the blade was in your left hand when you woke up. And her *farthest* wrist from you, as you lay in your beds, was the one you purportedly slashed. That was just a small discrepancy. I'd say Sandra was too anxious to get your fingerprints on that razor blade and wake you up before she bled to death to worry about such details.

Thomas said, "Sandra?" in a stunned way.

"Who is now suing you for divorce, don't forget."

"But Sandra isn't like that—inhuman, cruel, devious, hateful."

Randall said obliquely, "I got hold of the cut-up briefcase you brought to Dr. Caldwell as evidence of your dream-violence, Mr. Thomas. Your wife's fingerprints are all over the inner surfaces where she must have gripped the case to cut it, another small oversight on her part, I believe. Did she usually root around inside your briefcase?"

"She never touched it, to my knowledge. I kept it in the library, purely for business papers."

"Well, there you are. I bet she didn't like your cat, Thai, did she?"

"Thai's yowling annoyed her sometimes."

"Which no doubt helped to nerve her to snap Thai's neck the night you dreamed about her."

Thomas spoke with mounting desperation. "*Why* would Sandra do these horrible things to me? Try to make me think myself insane? I haven't harmed her, denied her anything, been unfaithful to her."

"You're asking the same question I asked myself," Lieutenant Randall said, "when I got my first inkling of the truth. I know the answer, now. She doesn't love you, doesn't respect you, doesn't even like you. She never *has*, what's more, not since the day you married her a year ago."

Thomas said stiffly, "There *was* mutual liking and respect and . . . and affection between us, Lieutenant. I'm sure of that."

Randall shook his head. "Huh-uh," he said inelegantly. "Not on her part. She married you for your money. She was after a bankroll, not a husband." He avoided looking at Thomas. "We've uncovered some facts in the past two days which bear that out."

"What facts?"

"Mainly that your wife was carrying on with another man when she married you, and the affair has

continued ever since. He's a rather unsavory type. Has, in fact, a police record of sorts. Nothing major; petty confidence rackets mostly."

"I see," said Thomas. For the first time, his lips thinned out and his eyes showed a subdued blaze of indignation. "What do you deduce from that fact, Lieutenant?"

"The same thing you do. That they planned to have her marry you, live with you for a while, then find a convenient pretext for divorcing you. On charges that would win her a generous settlement, of course. Your attempt on her life while asleep was to have been her pretext, I'd say."

"And a damn good pretext, too," Thomas said. He drew a deep breath. "I'd have given her anything she asked for. Gladly."

"And she and her boyfriend would have lived happily ever after on your money."

"While I languished in an institution for the violently insane?"

"Something like that, if they were lucky."

Thomas was quiet for several minutes. When at length he spoke, it was to say quite calmly, "I don't suppose we can do anything to them?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Lots of wives, I daresay, have ruined their husband's raincoats and briefcases, even killed their cats, all in a spirit of good clean marital fun. And she didn't slash *your* wrist, only her own." Randall grinned suddenly. "I *do* have the name and address of your wife's lover, however, and several reliable witnesses who will testify to his relationship with her. Do you want them?"

"No." Thomas managed a faint smile. "But my attorneys will, no doubt. Does Dr. Caldwell know about this?"

Randall stood up. "I briefed him on the way in. You can go home anytime you want."

Thomas said, "Lieutenant, it isn't every day a man finds out he isn't insane. I'm enormously grateful to you for your . . . investigation. What can I do to show my appreciation?"

"Just make sure you don't dream about *me*!" Randall said. He shook hands with Thomas and left.

Where the months and years have failed to provide insight, a split second may prove time enough.

A LOT ON HIS MIND

By Bill Pronzini

ARBAGAST was drunk in bed when the police came. They told the old lady who had let them in to make some coffee, and then they took Arbagast into the bathroom and put him under a cold shower. They kept him there until he started to come out of it, and by that time the coffee was ready. They fed him cup after cup, hot and black, holding him upright on a straight-backed chair.

When they were certain he was sober enough to understand, they told him they had caught the man who had run down and killed his wife four months before.

Arbagast did not say anything for a long while. When he finally spoke, the sound of his voice made one of the policemen shudder involuntarily. "Who was it?"

"A man named Phillip Colineaux," said the policeman who had shuddered. "He was involved in another hit-and-run tonight, and this time we got him."

"Someone else was killed?"

"No. He sideswiped a car at an

intersection and kept going. There was a patrol car in the vicinity, and they chased him a couple of blocks and flagged him over."

"Was he drinking?"

"Not this time, anyway," the other policeman said. "They took him down for the test, and he passed that all right, but he was pretty shook up. He made a few slips, and that's how we found out about the other time."

"Did he confess to it?"

"Yes," the first policeman said. "He told us he didn't see her. He's a stockbroker and had a lot on his mind. Preoccupied, he called it."

"Speeding?"

"He says no. But he was punching near forty when he hit that car tonight. You can bet he wasn't crawling the other time either."

"Have you got him in jail now?"

The first policeman shook his head, watching Arbagast. There was something about the way he was sitting there, rigid, his eyes flat and unblinking, showing nothing, that made the policeman feel cold. He said, "His lawyer came down and got him out on bail."

"All right," Arbagast said. "Thank you for coming by to tell me."

The two policemen looked at one another, hesitant to leave. The first one said, "Mr. Arbagast, we know you've had a terrible loss. You're taking it pretty hard, and that's understandable. But, well . . ."

He faltered, groping for words. Arbagast looked at him steadily, his face impassive.

"What I'm trying to say, Mr. Arbagast," the policeman went on finally, "the law's going to take care of this one good and proper. We've got him on a manslaughter now, and he had the damage to his car fixed by some friend without reporting it. That's compounding a felony."

"Yes?" Arbagast said.

"So if I were you, I'd just try to forget about the whole thing. It took some time, but we got him and that's the end of it. Sure, it won't bring your wife back, and it's not much consolation, but he's going to be punished for what he did. You can rest assured of that."

The policeman paused, trying to read Arbagast's eyes, but they were inscrutable. He seemed about to go on, and then changed his mind. He said only, "I guess that's about it."

"Thank you again for stopping by," Arbagast said.

The two policemen went to the door. "Well, good night," the first one said.

"Yes," Arbagast said. "Good night."

When they had gone, Arbagast

lay down on the bed, his hands clasped beneath his head, and stared up at the darkened ceiling. There was a bottle of whiskey on the nightstand, but he did not touch that. He only lay thinking, staring up at the ceiling, until the first gray light of dawn began to filter through the single window.

Arbagast got up then and went to the closet and took the city telephone directory from a shelf there. Then he dressed slowly and shaved and went downstairs to his car. He drove across town to the address he had found in the telephone book and parked across the street. He sat there, looking over at the white frame house where Phillip Colineaux lived.

It was a nice house, well-kept, freshly-painted. A flagstone walk led through a garden alive in color, and there was a high green hedge bordering the right side of the property, near the garage.

Arbagast sat staring across the street. Eight o'clock came, and then nine. No one ventured out. Colineaux wasn't going to work today. Not today.

Arbagast returned to the small furnished room. He made some coffee and fried two eggs, and then he took the gun from the closet and broke it down and oiled and cleaned it. He put shells in the chambers, spinning the cylinder, and when he was satisfied put on the safety and slipped it into the pocket of his overcoat.

That night, just after dark, he drove to Phillip Colineaux's house and parked across the street, as he had done that morning. He sat there in the darkness until ten o'clock. There were lights in the front room, but the windows were curtained and he could not see inside. No one came out.

The following morning, Arbagast was there again at dawn. He waited until almost noon. There was no sign of activity from inside the house.

At dusk he set up his vigil once more. Shortly past nine, the porch light came on above the door. Arbagast sat up in the seat, his hand touching the gun in his coat pocket.

A man came out onto the porch, standing in the light. There was a woman behind him, in the doorway. *Going out to get some air,* Arbagast thought. *He's been in there two days. But he won't drive.*

The woman shut the door after a moment, and the man stood alone on the porch. He was short, past forty, dressed in slacks and a light windbreaker; hatless. Even at the distance across the street, Arbagast could see that his features were nondescript; it was not the face you would expect to see on a killer.

The man came down the steps and began to walk along the flagstone walk toward the street. Arbagast got out of the car, his fingers clenching on the gun in his pocket, and walked quickly across the deserted street. The man stopped in the shadows of the green hedge as he approached, frowning slightly.

Arbagast said, "Colineaux? Phillip Colineaux?"

"Yes?" the man said.

Arbagast stared into his eyes. "My name is Walter Arbagast."

The name did not immediately mean anything to Colineaux. "Yes?" he said again.

Arbagast took the gun from his pocket. Colineaux made a half-step backward, his eyes bulging. "What do you—?"

"Come with me, please," Arbagast said.

"With you?" Colineaux said blankly.

"That's my car across the street."

Colineaux shook his head, not comprehending. "Who are you?" he said. "What is it you want?"

"My name is Walter Arbagast. Surely you remember the name, Colineaux."

"No, I . . ."

"Rosa Arbagast was my wife."

Understanding, complete and instant, flooded Colineaux's eyes. His mouth opened as if to speak, but no words came forth. Spittle flecked his lips. His face paled.

"Yes," Arbagast said. "That's right. The woman you murdered."

"Murdered?" Colineaux said. "No! No, listen, it was an accident! It was dark. She was wearing dark clothes. I was thinking about something else, and I didn't see her. She came out of nowhere. It was an accident!"

"You ran her down," Arbagast said. "You ran her down and then left her to die in the street."

The right side of Colineaux's face began to spasm convulsively. His eyes were great wide holes, black, terrified. "I was scared!" he moaned. "I panicked! Can't you understand how that is?"

"I understand you murdered my wife," Arbagast said without rancor, without emotion.

"What . . . what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill you," Arbagast said simply. "I'm going to run you down with my car. The same way you ran my wife down."

"You're mad! You're insane!"

"Yes," Arbagast said. "Perhaps I am."

Colineaux began to sag. It was as if the bones in his body had suddenly liquefied. His mouth opened and a soundless scream bubbled from his throat.

Arbagast pressed his gun against his stomach. "Don't make a sound,"

he said. "If you do, I'll kill you right here in front of your house, where you stand."

Colineaux seemed about to crumble. Arbagast took his arm and led him across the street. He opened the rear door of the car. "Get inside and lie flat on the seat. Put your hands behind you."

Colineaux was like a child in his fear. Mutely, he obeyed. Arbagast shut the door and got into the front seat. He took the roll of adhesive tape from the glove compartment and began to tape Colineaux's hands and ankles. When he had finished, he put a strip of tape across his mouth.

"If you raise up in the seat," Arbagast said, "I'll stop the car and shoot you in the back of the head. Do you understand?"

There was a strangled whimper from the man in the back seat. Arbagast nodded. He started the car and drove away.

"We're going out to the Western Avenue Extension," he said aloud, so Colineaux could hear. "There's a side road there, leading up to the reservoir. Nobody uses it much anymore."

The quiet suburban street sang beneath the wheels of the car, and that was the only reply.

"Do you know the stretch just before you reach the reservoir?" Arbagast asked. "It's walled by bluffs on two sides. There's no way you can get off the road there."

The night was deep and black and still.

"I'm going to untie you and let you out there," Arbagast said. "I'm going to give you a chance, Colineaux. You can run for your life. That's more of a chance than you gave Rosa."

The street sang faster, faster . . .

Arbagast turned his head slightly, looking into the rear seat. "Do you hear me, Colineaux? Do you—?"

He did not see the woman until very nearly the last split second.

The street had been empty, dark. Then, as if by some strange necromancy, she was there, directly in front of him, a shadowy blur with a grotesque white face that seemed to rush at him, hurtling through the night as he stood still, an empyreal vision captured in the yellow glare of his headlights.

Arbagast swung the wheel in terror, his foot crashing down on the brake, just as that monstrous white face seemed about to strike him head-on. The car went into a vicious skid, the quiet, still night exploding into the tortured scream of rubber against pavement. One of the wheels went up over the curb, and the rear end scraped the base of a giant eucalyptus tree that grew there, and then the car set-

tled, and died, on the street. The black night was once again silent.

Arbagast threw open the door, leaning out. The woman stood in the middle of the street behind him, an obscure statue. Then she began to walk, moving unsteadily, coming up the street toward him, and he could see her clearly, see her white face shining in the darkness.

It was Rosa's face.

A strangled cry tore from Arbagast's throat. He slammed the door, his hand twisting the ignition key. The starter whirred, whirred, and then caught, and he fought the lever into gear, his hands trembling violently on the wheel, his heart plunging in his chest. He got the car turned, straightened, and then he was pulling away, and the woman, the apparition, grew smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror until she became a speck that was swallowed, digested, by the night.

Oh, my dear God! Arbabast thought. *Oh, my dear God in Heaven!*

He drove three blocks and turned to the right, pulling in at the curb on a poorly-lighted street. He shut off the engine, the headlights.

Turning on the seat, he reached into the back and pulled Colineaux to a sitting position. His trembling hands tore the tape from Colineaux's mouth.

"What happened back there?" Colineaux gasped, his voice mirroring the wet, living fear that shone naked on his face. "What happened?"

Arbagast was unable to answer. He reached down and unwound the tape from Colineaux's legs, from his hands. He forced words to come then. "Get out," he said. "Get out now."

Colineaux sat there, immobile. He did not understand. He could not believe.

"Get out," Arbagast said again, and wrenched open the rear door.

Colineaux moved. His body came alive, and he scuttled across the seat, hands clawing, pushing himself outside. He hesitated there for only the barest fraction of a second, looking back at Arbagast, and then he began to run.

Arbagast watched him running off, spindle-legged, down the darkened street. After a long moment, he started the car again and drove away in the opposite direction.

Slowly, carefully, keeping well within the legal speed limit, his eyes fixed on the concrete no longer singing beneath his headlights, he drove directly back to his small, furnished room.

He was drunk in bed when the police came.

The world is replete with experts, but occasionally the earth receives another.

By Michael Brett

CHARLTON MCARDIE took his first step toward becoming a millionaire as the result of a woman who dialed a wrong telephone number.

The way it happened, Charlton and myself, I'm James Hamilton, were trying to muster strength to leave the office and go home—not that we'd done anything to make us tired, but you can get tired doing nothing. We were the eastern sales representatives for Cool-Cool, a new midwestern air-conditioning firm, and it was the coldest, dampest summer in twenty years. Most of the few shoppers purchased name brands. Those who had bought Cool-Cool called back to

complain about breakdowns, excessive noise, overheating, short circuiting and exploding sets. A fan blowing across a chunk of ice would have been more efficient than a Cool-Cool air-conditioner.

Charlton and I had already decided to sever connections with the firm when our contracts terminated at the end of the month. However, since we were on straight salary we came to the office every day and put in our time.

Frankly, the prospect of being without a job worried me more than it did Charlton. I've got a wife and a small house. Charlton, on the other hand, is single and lives in a fleabag hotel over on Forty-third Street. He keeps talking about how he's going to get a duplex apartment and a fancy girlfriend someday.

Charlton does a lot of daydreaming.

He also spends his time doing newspaper crossword puzzles and commenting disparagingly on the columnists who give advice to the lovelorn, on health, on finance, on not getting old—on just about everything.

His attacks were usually preceded by an explosive horse-laugh which shattered the silence in the office. Then he'd say, "Now look at this. You'd never believe that people can be so naive. Here's a college girl, writes to this Miss Common Sense. She's a college girl who believes in free love. Sex is an important part of marriage and she wants to be the perfect wife when the time comes. So Miss Common Sense tells her, 'Insofar as sex is concerned, practice does not necessarily make perfect.' That's just common sense. Now she didn't need Miss Common Sense to tell her that. Isn't that so?"

So I said, "Sure."

"And take this one here, for instance," said Charlton. "Here's a gal who writes that her husband is overweight and how can she make him lose weight. So Miss Common Sense gives her a diet to follow and tells her to broil his food instead of frying it. Then she says, 'Send for my booklet, How To Keep Hubby From Becoming Tubby.'

"Here's another one. Somebody writes in and wants to know if it's all right to neck. So Miss Common Sense says, 'I will be glad to help you with your problem. Send fifty cents in coin and a self-addressed envelope for my booklet, How to Cool It.' Did you ever hear anything as silly as all this business about people writing in and asking for advice?"

He walked over to the window. "Now look down there. There's

thousands of people and the one thing you can be sure of, each and every one of them needs advice. Don't you think so, Hamilton?"

I was a little tired of the way he kept attacking the newspaper columnists, so I said, "You're probably right, Charlton. Why don't you go into the advice business? With your attitude, you'd probably make a fortune."

"You're telling me," said Charl-

ton, and he gave out a loud guffaw.

Of course I had no idea that he was going to take me seriously when the telephone rang just then, or I might not have said it.

Charlton got it and said, "Hello." Then he listened for a minute and said, "One moment, Mrs. Abernathy." He covered the mouthpiece and said, "You know what? This is a wrong number. I'm talking to some dame who thinks she's talking to her psychiatrist, a guy named Doctor Kazoola." He winked. "You told me to go into the advice business. Okay, I'm going to give her some." He uncovered the mouthpiece.

"Mrs. Abernathy, now what can we do for you, dear?" He listened, nodding sympathetically and repeating bits of what she was saying so I could follow the conversation. "I see, the pills haven't worked. You still haven't been able to sleep . . . Well, that's bad . . . Ummm . . . Your life is confused . . . I do understand . . . I want you to remember one thing. There is absolutely everything in life but a clear answer . . . Yes, of course I sympathize with you over your husband's peculiar behavior, but many men think they're Hollywood idols. People are people, Mrs. Abernathy. When it comes to people there aren't any cut and dried answers . . . I agree, the situation with your husband is deplorable."

I laughed and said, "Cut it out, Charlton."

He ignored me and went on. "What I want you to do, Mrs. Abernathy, is place yourself completely in my hands. You may not approve or agree with what I'm about to say, but that's beside the point. Remember, it's for your good, no matter how unorthodox

it may sound to you. Actually, what it is is a famous Far East method which is based upon the theory of taking strength from within. A form of mysticism. To make it work, you have to accept the treatment without question. Through it you'll be able to gain insight into your own character. The first act of insight is to completely throw away all of the accepted methods of psychiatric treatment. Now, Mrs. Abernathy, when I say go, I want you to take the telephone receiver and move it in a circle around your head, all the while chanting, *ah-zo, ah-zo.*" He coughed. "I know it must sound ridiculous, but please believe me, it has a definite function. Now *go!*"

Then he covered the mouthpiece again, looked at me and said, "Hamilton, she's doing it. She's waving the telephone around in the air."

I said, "What's with you, Charlton? You nuts, or something?"

"Not me. She's the one, waving that telephone around and chanting. All I'm doing is proving something. You told me to give advice, right?"

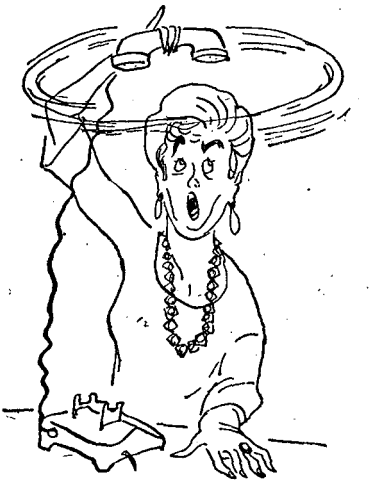
"Charlton, you're crazy. I was kidding."

"You think *I'm* crazy? *She's* waving a telephone."

"She's crazy too."

He glanced at his watch. "The way I figure it, in about three minutes her arm is going to get tired and then I'm going to give her another routine. The point I'm trying to make is that people will listen and believe almost anything as long as they think the advice they're getting is from a competent source."

He moved his hand off the mouthpiece and spoke to Mrs. Abernathy again. "All right, Mrs.



Abernathy, you can stop the ah-zo. Now what I want you to do is walk around the block in sneakers." He paused, listening. "Yes, house slippers will do. When you've done that, I want you to take a hot bath, then I want you to drink eight ounces of Scotch and go right to bed. I guarantee that you'll sleep." A pause. "All right, since you don't drink, you can

make it four ounces. You'll sleep wonderfully . . . Yes, tomorrow I want you to call me. Thank you very much, Mrs. Abernathy."

He hung up and looked at me thoughtfully.

"Do you know the last thing she said? She said, "Thank you, Doctor. I'll send you a check.' How do you like that?"

I had to laugh. "Wonderful. She's going to send this Doctor Kazoola, whoever he is, a check for nothing, and tonight the poor woman is going to run around the block and fall into bed potted. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Charlton."

"Ashamed nothing." He crossed the room mumbling to himself and came back again. "Mrs. Abernathy gave me an idea. How to get *rich*. We can both get rich. Think of what happened. I gave a woman advice over the telephone and she's going to send her doctor a check. Now what does this mean? Do you have any ideas?"

"It means she's paying for services rendered. So what?"

"That's true, but what's important is that she's sending him a check for advice."

"Listen, Charlton, I'm beginning to get a headache. What are you driving at?"

"I'm going into the business of giving advice. I've given it lots of thought and the potential is great."

"That's good. In what field do you intend to specialize, law, medicine, finance? What?"

He sat down behind his desk and closed his eyes. With his eyes closed he said, "Medicine and law are out. The Bar Association and the Medical Association would crack down on me. Finance would be okay, though. I'll be a *stock market analyst.*"

I thought he was losing his mind. "Charlton, we've been here for too long, business has been bad for too long."

He opened his eyes. "That's right. Time for a change. I'm tired of not doing business, of being in hock, of worrying where next month's rent is coming from, of not being able to buy a new car. I'm going to give people advice and they're going to pay me for it."

"Yeah, I'd like to see it. Tell me something, what qualifies you as a stock analyst?"

"Your trouble is that you're negative. I'm a financial expert because I say I am. I've been reading about some guy, the leading exponent of transcendental meditation. It's a theory which says that people can do anything if they really think about it and tell themselves they can. It's like self-hypnosis. Okay, I tell myself that I'm a stock expert

and I am. It's as simple as that."

"That's fine. Why don't you announce that you're a brain surgeon —are you something merely because you say you are? Be sensible."

"I didn't say anything about being a brain surgeon, did I? All I want to do is give people financial advice. Think of the possibilities. Do you know anyone who doesn't need advice on one matter or another? Everybody wants advice. There are people who don't make a move without consulting their horoscopes, and if the signs aren't favorable they won't get out of bed, much less leave their homes. What does it mean? They're following advice. And what about the millions of dollars spent with public relations firms, promotional attorneys, financial advisors, crystal ball gazers, mediums, psychics, goonies and loonies? Name it and you've got it—there's somebody to give advice."

I could see that I wasn't getting anywhere. "Granted, but why should people come to you? Who knows you? What makes you qualified?"

"Nothing. I have no qualifications, but the one thing I can do is give advice, and the way I'm going to advertise it we'll make a million dollars. The advice I give will be free."

I thought he was demented. "Free advice, you'll go broke."

"Wrong. We'll clean up. They'll just think the advice is free. Let me explain my plan. Let's assume a man buys a certain stock. Okay, then what happens?"

"It goes up or it goes down. He makes or he loses money."

"Very good. You're getting the idea. There are two things that can happen, and right off the bat as far as you're concerned, the odds you're working with are fifty-fifty. Now suppose you predict a winner. The guy who's got it is going to send you a small donation for putting him onto a good thing. Or suppose you tell a stockholder to sell off or to purchase additional stock. Without knowing anything about the stock, you're bound to come up with the right advice merely through the laws of chance and probability."

"That's all fine and good. Now what about the guy who follows your advice and comes up a loser?"

"You can't worry about him. There's a hundred guys selling books on how to beat the market. More guys go broke following the tips in those books than you can count. Let's face it. If the guys who were writing those books really had a surefire way of predicting the market, they wouldn't be writ-

ing books in the first place. They'd be wheeler-dealer speculators."

"What about collections? What makes you think that a guy, even if he makes money on your advice, is going to send you money?"

"The honor system," he said.

"That isn't business."

"Exactly. But if I were going to follow the rules of business, this gimmick wouldn't work." He looked at me. "Hamilton, all it costs us is the price of an advertisement and we're in business. What do you say?"

I doubted that anything would come of it, but I said yes anyway. We went to work on the ad immediately. He took it to a newspaper and I went home. I didn't say anything to my wife about it.

We'd taken a good sized ad, a square, heavily outlined. FREE ADVICE, INCORPORATED. STOCK ANALYSTS; a phone number and address. I kept thinking that I'd simply thrown away my share of the advertisement's cost. I also thought about the idea catching on. The prospect was bewildering. I couldn't sleep.

After breakfast, I rushed off to the office. Charlton was already there. "Any calls?" I said.

He whooped with laugher. "It's eight o'clock. Give people time to read it."

At nine the phone rang. It was a man threatening to sue unless we took back a Cool-Cool air-conditioner he had purchased a month ago.

At eleven, when I was beginning to think that the advertisement was a washout, the phone rang. It was the first reply to our ad. Charlton took it and said, "Free Advice, Incorporated. Yes, ma'am, there's no charge for this. This is a public service function. We need your name and phone number for our files. We'll give you a reference number. We are not responsible for any information that we dispense. This is a non-profit organization. However, if you feel that our advice has benefited you in any way, your donation allowing us to continue will be appreciated."

He wrote down the information and then said, "All right, ma'am, what can we do for you?" He listened, interrupting from time to time. I could follow the drift of the conversation. "All right, you've got a thousand shares of Santa Maria Railroad stock. It's gone up five points during the past month and you want to know whether to sell. My advice to you is, sell and take your profits . . . No ma'am, it's against our policy to reveal the information we use. However, I will say this, Santa Maria is negotiating two hundred million dollars in new loans from banks and insurance

companies to refinance millions of dollars in outstanding debts. My advice is to sell. Your number, incidentally, is B 28." He hung up.

I was stunned. "Is that true about Santa Maria Railroad?"

"How do I know?" he said. "It could be. Railroads are always negotiating loans. It really doesn't matter. The main thing is that I've told her something." He wrote B 28 next to her name and the advice he had given her.

I took the next call. It was from a man named Summerfield. After I'd taken down the necessary information and had assigned him a number and had gone through the policy spiel, he told me that he had five hundred shares of Northern Tractor, which he planned to sell, and then he was going to invest the money in a Florida land development company.

"What's the name of the company, Mr. Summerfield?" I asked.

"Flamingo Land Development Company."

"Flamingo Land Development Company?" I shouted. "Forget it. Stay away from Flamingo Land Development Company."

"What is it?" he asked excitedly. "Do you know something?"

"Sell off the Northern Tractor, deposit the money in a bank and then call me at the end of the month. Ask for Mr. Hamilton," I said, and ended our conversation.

Charlton looked at me incredulously. "What do you know about the Flamingo Land Development Company?"

"About as much as you know about Santa Maria. Railroad," I said. "That isn't important, though. What counts is that Mr. Summerfield thinks I know something about it. That land could be under water."

"It certainly could," said Charlton. "It probably is."

There were fifty-four calls the first day. The second day brought an even heavier response to the ad. We became more scientific. In giving advice on a specific stock, we advised fifty percent of those who called to sell and the other half to buy additional stock. We kept records. We watched the progress of our stock tips for a month. In that period the last number we assigned was B 5028. We had advised five thousand people. Charlton was right. Money began to roll in from the winners who were eagerly seeking new ways to make additional monies. We had a good thing going. Those who had followed our advice and made big money were generous in their donations. To them we were heroes. We forgot completely about the others who had followed our advice and lost. To them we were bums.

Some good had come from our advice. We had advised prospective purchasers of an oil company stock to buy as much as they could. Drilling for oil, the company had inadvertently hit a vast underground source of natural gas and the stock had skyrocketed. The stockholders had become wealthy.

The woman Charlton had advised to sell off her Santa Maria stock called, angrily. The stock had gone up ten points.

"Don't worry about it," Charlton told her. "I have inside information that the bottom is going to fall out."

The man I'd warned about Flamingo Land Development Company called. I'd saved his life's savings. It was an out and out land swindle. "I'm sending you a hundred dollars, so you can continue with your good work," he said.

At the end of two months we were making big money. Charlton moved out of his room into a six-room duplex, got a fancy girlfriend and bought her minks and diamonds. And all around us people were becoming wealthy. We began to study the market and the more we studied it the less we knew.

Charlton kept going through the records, talking to himself. "Look at this B 336. Here's a guy I made into a millionaire. He didn't know what to do and I was the guy who tipped him off. It's absurd, Hamilton. We're making people into millionaires and not doing it for ourselves. I knew this stock was going to rise. The trouble with us is that we're not smart enough to follow our own advice."

"What about people who listened to us and lost their shirts?"

"What about them?" Charlton shouted. "You're being negative again. Try to look at the good we've done for the rest."

I could already see what he had in mind.

At the end of the week he told me that he knew of a stock selling at four and a half dollars that was going to go to fifty.

"How do you know?" I said.

"How do I know? I know, that's all."

I really believed he did, but I didn't want any part of it anyway. "What do we need it for, Charlton?" I said. "We're doing all right, the way things are going."

"I'm going into it with every cent I have," Charlton said. "It's going to hit and it's going to make me a millionaire."

"I'll sit back and watch," I said.

"Suit yourself, but I want to tell you something. This is something that happens once in a lifetime." He laughed. "The difference between us, Hamilton, is that a guy

like you doesn't really have imagination. Two years from now you'll be back selling air-conditioners."

I went home and thought about it. I didn't sleep all night. Six months ago I had nothing, and today I had fifty thousand dollars in the bank. One thing was sure, no matter how scatter brained his schemes had sounded I hadn't lost anything by listening to him.

In the morning I withdrew my money from the bank without telling my wife, and Charlton and I bought fifty thousand dollars worth of the new issue apiece.

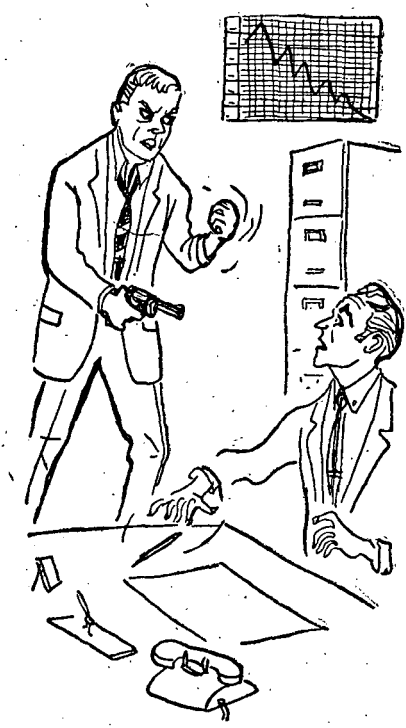
That was on Monday. By Friday my investment was worth ten thousand and by the following Monday the stock had gone off the board. It had all been a swindle.

Charlton was going to ask his girlfriend to return the mink coat and some of the diamonds he'd bought her, but she'd heard about what had happened and had gone somewhere.

My wife left me.

Charlton went slightly mad. He came in on Wednesday and pointed a gun at me and said it was all my fault. If I hadn't invested with him he never would have gone in all by himself. "Look what you made me do," he said. "I'm going to kill you."

"Let's talk it over," I said. "Now put the gun down. Look, let's not



lose our heads. We still have a good thing going for us. We made money. We can do it again."

"I don't know how," Charlton said doubtfully.

"Think positive, Charlton. We can do it."

He burst into unexpected laughter and put the gun down. "I must be losing my mind. What was I thinking of? Sure we can do it again."

We were both laughing so hard by then that we didn't see the little man who stepped into the office.

"Are you Free Advice, Incorporated?" he asked.

"That's us," said Charlton exuberantly.

"You told me to sell off my oil shares. I had three thousand shares at a dollar. Do you know what the price is now? Ninety-four dollars. You ruined me."

When he drew a gun and started firing, I took cover behind a desk. I could hear Charlton fall, and the gunman running away.

I got up, walked over to where Charlton lay dead, and unthinkingly picked up the gun that his murderer had used.

When people came running, that was the way they found me, with the gun in my hand.

Explaining it to the police was very difficult. They didn't believe there was a little man with a gun. They found Charlton's gun on the desk and they came up with the theory that Charlton and I had an argument and that I'd killed him.

When I asked permission to check through my records—we were up to B 7800—on the chance that I might learn the identity of the man we'd misadvised, they sent me to a police psychiatrist, who had an overbearing manner until I described the scheme Charlton and I had used to found Free Advice, Inc. He thought I was crazy.

I believe he would have committed me to a mental institution if Charlton's killer hadn't come forward then and surrendered to the police.

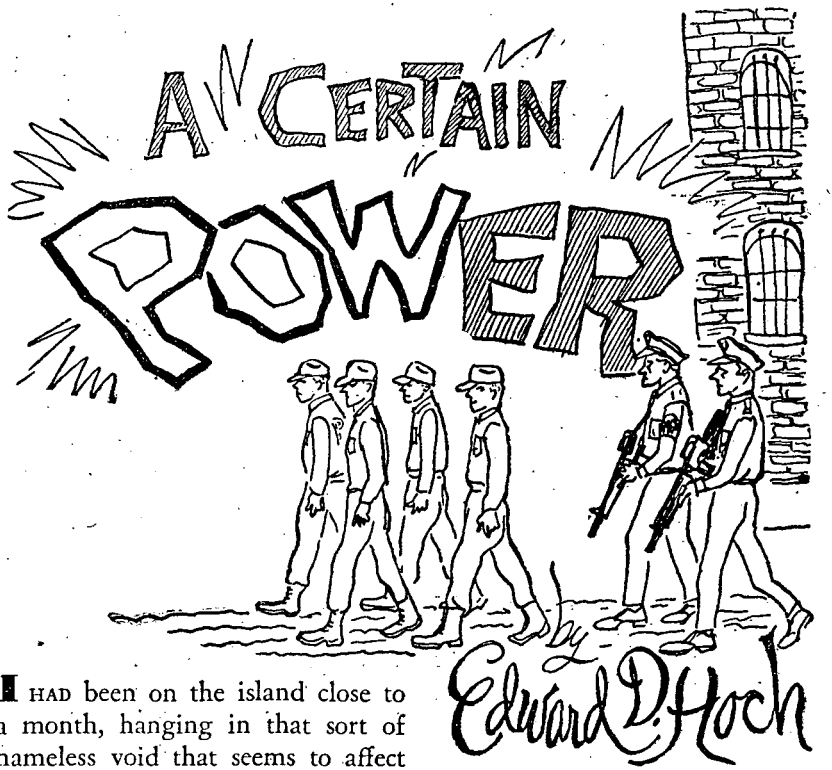
I was released. As I was leaving the psychiatrist's office, he said, "I'm lucky. If I had known about Free Advice, Incorporated, I might have been tempted to call you. I own three hundred shares of something called Western Pump. What do you know about Western Pump?"

I'd never heard of Western Pump, but, I thought, why should I tell him that? "Buy as much as you can get," I said. "That one is going to go to the moon. It has great potential."

He leaned forward eagerly. "Do you really think so?"

I nodded and went out, wisely.

For the meticulous reader: Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.—Lord Acton



I HAD been on the island close to a month, hanging in that sort of nameless void that seems to affect all stateside soldiers in wartime. My duties, within sight of the slender television mast that topped the Empire State Building, were both light and routine, and sometimes whole days would pass without a thought of that steaming jungle halfway around the world where men were dying in the same uniform that I wore.

Duty on Bankers' Island was good duty. We were a Headquarters Unit, which meant lots of typewriters and mimeograph machines, and even pretty young

secretaries taking the morning ferry from the mainland. I worked in the office of the Provost Marshal, handling routine clerk's duties, overseeing the two civilian girls who did most of the typing. On weekends I took the ferry to shore and then the bus to the train station for the half-hour ride into Manhattan. Sometimes I dated the girls in the office.

The first month was good like that, with very little extra duty and lots of free time. Often on my lunch hour I'd wander about the island's hundred-odd acres, studying the shore birds that perched on the breakwater, examining the great old homes that once had catered to Long Island's yachting society and now served as officers' quarters. At other times I'd wander up to the north end of the island, where the Castle stood.

The Castle was a gloomy fortress of a place, with walls of brick and mortar more than a foot thick in spots. Some said it had been built originally as a bastion against pirate ships sailing up Long Island Sound, but in truth it had been constructed just after the Civil War for exactly the purpose it was now used—as a military prison.

Some two hundred soldiers were serving their time behind the solid walls of the Castle, adjudged guilty of offenses ranging from drunken driving and insubordination to desertion and manslaughter. Some would serve their entire sentence on the island, others were merely awaiting transfer to a federal penitentiary.

I'd see them occasionally on work details around the island, always accompanied by one or two "chasers"—military policemen or prison guards or just plain soldiers, always carrying the M-2 carbines that were standard issue for such a detail. The prisoners in the pale green fatigues were a sorry lot, policing the area for dampened cigarette butts, raking up the few September leaves which were already beginning to drift from the trees. I noticed almost immediately that they never seemed to smile. Even on occasions when they attempted a joke with their guards, there was a false ring to it. They never forgot that they were the prisoners.

I thought about them a lot during that first month, and especially about one young blond fellow in particular. I'd first noticed him in a work detail down by the ferry dock, smiling and chatting as he helped hoist rotting driftwood from the water. He seemed to have a particularly easy-going manner for a prisoner, unlike that blank grimness of the others. I

wondered what he had to be so cheerful about.

The war dragged on seeming, by turns, very close and then quite far away. Autumn was in the air, and already some of the fellows were dating the civilian girls, taking them into town for college football games on a Saturday afternoon, or the pro games on Sunday. Though I didn't have a girl yet from among the local crop, I'd been debating making the trip alone.

It was on a Friday afternoon the captain ruined whatever vague plans I had for the weekend. "You are on duty tomorrow, Kenton," he said. "We're short of guards for the work details."

"You mean guarding prisoners, sir?" I'd never done it before, and somehow never imagined I could do it.

"Can't spend all your time behind a desk, Kenton." He lit one of his customary cigars and looked through the papers on his desk. "Nothing to worry about. If they try to escape, you just shoot 'em."

"And then what happens to me?"

The captain shrugged. "I think it's customary around here to give you a carton of cigarettes and a transfer to another post. But it doesn't happen very often. Nobody tries to escape when he's on an island like this. Don't you worry."

So that was it. I turned out at eight o'clock Saturday morning, waving to a few of the fellows who were already on their way to the ferry dock. It was my first visit inside the thick stone walls of the Castle, but I was to see nothing but the courtyard where we assembled.

There were four of us assigned to guard prisoners that morning, and I was teamed with a military policeman named Craig. He was tall and tough looking, just back from the war, where he claimed to have acquired the slight limp that was more noticeable when he'd been drinking. His conversation was sprinkled with the more obvious obscenities, and I had made a point of avoiding him whenever possible during my month on the island.

"Pick up your carbines at the supply room," the sergeant of the guard instructed us. "And don't be afraid to use them, if necessary. You'll be taking two crews out to work on cleaning and painting officers' quarters for some new occupants. At no time should any prisoner be out of sight of a guard."

We marched them ahead of us, with one guard assigned to each pair of prisoners. I had two who were familiar to me; a stocky

balding career soldier who'd been a cook in the mess hall the first week I arrived, and the blond fellow I'd noticed before on work details. Each of them had a large white "P" on the back of his fatigues, the only obvious symbol of status.

"All right," Craig told our four-man detail as we reached the big empty house at the far end of the island. "Fall out here!"

We put them to work at the tasks assigned, but it soon became obvious that orders could not be followed to the letter. Three prisoners had to work outside the house, painting, raking leaves, and generally policing the area, while one, the blond fellow, was assigned to indoor work.

"You can't watch both your prisoners," Craig decided finally. "Go inside with that one and I'll keep these three under control." He fingered the trigger of the carbine as he spoke, and I had the distinct impression he was itching for a chance to use it. Perhaps for him it was like the war all over again, and these were the enemy.

I could do nothing but agree, and so I motioned my single prisoner into the house. It was a big old place with a beamed ceiling in the livingroom and a built-in bar in a corner of the den—a colonel's quarters at the very least.

"Okay," I told him, "get to it. The floor needs scrubbing first."

He got down on his knees to scrape away some gummy deposit, then looked up at me, smiling, from that position. "What's your name, soldier? Mine's Royce. Tommy Royce."

I shifted uneasily. "Kenton," I replied, not bothering with the first name. There was no point in getting friendly.

"I haven't had you for a guard before," he said.

I thought I wanted a cigarette, anything to keep from the necessity for conversation, but I didn't know how I'd light it without showing a degree of awkwardness with the carbine. I decided against it and answered him instead. "I have a desk job. They were short for the weekend."

He rose from his knees and went to the kitchen for a bucket of water. I followed close behind, the carbine ready. "You don't have to be so nervous," he said, returning to the livingroom with a bucket of water. "I won't bite you. Go ahead and smoke or something." He was starting to wash down the walls.

"I don't smoke," I lied, then wondered why I'd felt it was necessary.

"Been overseas?"

"No."

"I have. Got shot at once. Bullet nicked the heel of my combat boot. Damn! Never thought I'd come back to something like this—washing down the walls of an officer's quarters."

I grunted and tried to keep from answering him, but I felt almost drawn into conversation against my will, forced into an odd semi-intimacy with this man I guarded. I wanted to know more about him, to know, perhaps, why he always seemed to smile. "What are you in for?" I asked, and the step was taken.

"That's a long story," he said, still smiling. "It would take me all day to tell you."

"I guess we've got all day, at least till you finish this work."

His eyes shifted down to the gun, just for a moment and then rose again to meet mine. "I clipped a sergeant with a shovel," he said casually. "Damn near killed him. Why I did it is the long story."

"How long you in for?"

"Six months hard labor, though this isn't very hard. Maybe they'll find a rock pile for me somewhere."

"You're lucky you didn't get five years."

"I had a good lawyer." He paused in his task and eyed the gun once more. "Would you shoot me if I tried to escape?"

"Probably." I felt uneasy at his question, and wondered why he'd asked it. "They say a guard who lets a prisoner escape has to finish serving his term."

"That's just talk."

"I guess it happens sometimes." I was beginning to wish that Craig would come inside with the others, but he showed no sign of it. I could see him through the front windows, lounging against a tree with a cigarette he'd somehow managed to light, probably by the simple act of leaning his carbine against the tree or cradling it in

his arm for a very risky moment.

"That gives you a lot of power, doesn't it?" Royce asked.

"What? The gun?"

"Didn't they ever chew you out for calling it a gun? Rifle, carbine—but never gun!"

I felt myself flush at his correction. "It doesn't give me power," I retorted. "Actually, I don't like the thing."

"But you'd use it against me."

"If I had to."

"You like the army?" he asked after a moment.

"I'm in it. I'm making the best of it."

"What do you think about the colonel who's moving in here? You think he likes it?"

"I suppose so, if he's a colonel."

He'd completely stopped working now, and was facing me from across the room. "Maybe they feel a certain power too, like you when you're holding that carbine. Maybe if the button is just beneath your thumb, there's always a great desire to press it."

"Maybe," I agreed dryly. I wasn't in the mood for philosophy on a Saturday morning.

"This sergeant I hit, I suppose he was like that. Power can be a terrible thing. Somebody said it, 'All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'"

"Lord Acton," I said.

"What?" he said. "Who was it?"

"Lord Acton said it, but not exactly like that."

"You know a lot, don't you?"

"Not really."

"The power of life and death, that's a pretty absolute power. You could pull that trigger right now, put a half-dozen bullets into me in a couple of seconds. You'd just say I was trying to escape, and nobody'd question it."

I motioned with the carbine. "You'd better cut the talk and get back to work."

"If I don't?"

I was beginning to feel the sweat forming up around my hairline. It was as if he were deliberately goading me. "What do you want, Royce? Do you want trouble?"

He smiled that same smile I'd noticed the first time I saw him, and now it was almost as if I knew the reason for it. He held the power, not me. His words were somehow more powerful than the carbine in my hands.

"You're shaking, Kenton," he said slowly.

"I'm going to get the other guard."

"Can't handle it yourself?"

"*What*? Handle *what*?"

"Me."

I realized in that instant how much he hated me. I don't know

why it was me, maybe just because I was guarding him this day, but the hate was true and real and so strong I could almost feel it with my fingers. Perhaps I was the sergeant to him all over again.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. "Why did you do it to him?"

"With the shovel, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I guess it was just that the shovel gave me a sense of power, like that carbine gives you."

"But he didn't do anything to you?"

"He talked to me," Royce answered. "He was talking to me just the way I've been talking to you, and I wanted to kill him for it. I had the power, and I used it."

I knew then that he'd probably talked to all the guards like this, taunting them, goading them as he'd been goaded, to the point of murder. "I'm not like you," I said, but my mouth was too dry.

"Sure you are. Don't you see, somebody has to be. I suppose I'd go mad if I thought only I could be goaded into murder. I've tried the others. You're the last one." He stretched his arms wide and started walking toward me.

"I'm not the last of anything."

"Sure you are. You have the power. The power."

He was still walking toward me when I flipped off the safety and fired a quick burst of the carbine into his stomach and chest. He didn't even look surprised.

The sergeant of the guard stared unhappily at the blood that had streamed and splattered about the walls. "Damn! We'll have to work all night to get this place cleaned up!"

"He tried to escape," I mumbled. "I had to kill him."

"Yeah."

"I suppose that means a transfer."

The sergeant stared bleakly at the covered body as it went by on the stretcher. "Afraid it means more than that, Kenton. We'll have to call a full investigation. Tommy Royce wouldn't have tried to escape, because he was due to be released tomorrow."

A cent by itself is only a copper penny—but a collection has a different hue.

FIFTY-NINE CENTS

By Breck Rutter

IT WAS Monday, September 14th, a beautiful 'fall' day outside, and quiet in Precinct 41. Captain Peterson had just finished a cup of coffee. A typewriter tapped gently in the next room. Warm sunlight streamed across his desk. More and more, lately, he was coming to enjoy a quiet moment like this. When the phone rang sharply, he picked it up slowly, unprepared for the excitement in Patrolman Gates' young voice.

"Captain! Can you come right away? We have a homicide here."

"Where are you, Gates?" He pulled himself to attention sharply.

"At 906 Prospect. It's old Mrs. Stevens. It's a bloody mess, sir."

"Who's with you?"

"Jeffrey, sir."

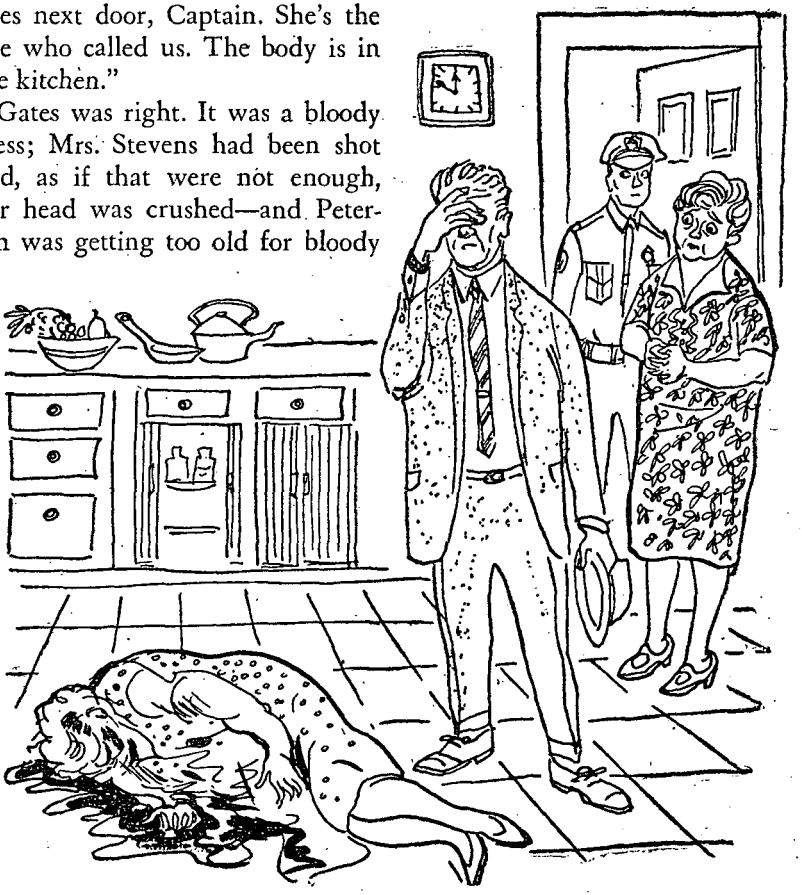
"Hold everything. I'll be right over."

Prospect Street? It was nearby; a neighborhood street; a nice quiet street with trees, lawns, residences; not fancy or very modern, but nice. As Captain Peterson turned into it he was thinking about old Mrs. Stevens. Nice old ladies didn't get murdered on a street like this on a sunny September day. Or did they?

The small knot of hushed and curious neighbors on the sidewalk parted to let him through to Gates, who was standing on the porch of the small white house that stood well back on the lawn. In the livingroom Patrolman Jeffrey was talking to a small woman with white hair.

"This is Mrs. Mary Marsh, who lives next door, Captain. She's the one who called us. The body is in the kitchen."

Gates was right. It was a bloody mess; Mrs. Stevens had been shot and, as if that were not enough, her head was crushed—and Peterson was getting too old for bloody messes. For just a moment he wondered if he were, at last, going to be sick at the sight of a human body with the life crushed out of it. He took a deep breath; it would pass, and he would tackle the business at hand as usual.



"Send for the coroner and the lab men, Dick," he told Patrolman Gates. "And find a sheet. There must be a linen closet somewhere."

"I'll find you one, officer," Mary Marsh said quietly.

The captain looked at her. She was a small, neat old lady with well-kept hair. She must have been very pretty once, when she was young. Like Mrs. Stevens lying there! The thought twisted in his mind—a bloody mess—and he thrust it away.

"What do you think could have happened here, Mrs. Marsh?" His voice was matter of fact but gentle.

"Oh, I don't know, Captain! I don't know! There was no one . . . this is a quiet neighborhood . . . just people we know. And we didn't know anyone who would do a thing like this!"

"Yes, I know. It was this morning?"

She nodded. "I was doing my washing. I have to watch my washing machine; it isn't new any more, you see. Then I called to see if she'd come over for a cup of tea and she didn't answer. So I came over the back way. The door was open—I just couldn't believe this . . ."

She looked up at him. The skin of her cheeks appeared delicate and wrinkled—like tissue paper that had been rolled into a ball and then smoothed out—crumpled, somehow; her eyes were very blue and full of the most abject terror. But she was quiet and still, ladylike. The word echoed in his mind.

"I am so frightened, Captain Peterson." She clasped her hands with a tight desperation. "I've never been so frightened. It's so awful! If it could happen to her . . ." The words hung in the air between them.

This was one of those cases that wasn't going to get much notice in the newspapers. No one had been seen at the scene of the crime. Nothing had been touched. There was no motive. Old women died every day. Did it make so much difference how?

A sort of dull rage began to burn in Peterson's brain. He had seen them often in the shopping center near the precinct, out on a sunny day, neat in summer dresses that looked a little old-fashioned against the new styles, hair tinted a nice blue-gray, powder and a bit of rouge and a little lipstick; once in a while a little too much color, but not often. They window shopped. They had a bit of lunch at the tea shop. They bought groceries, a bit of meat. They went home to their little apartments, their small houses; or maybe to a big house they couldn't bear to leave because children had grown up there. He had

wondered about them. Did they relish their independence, or were they lonely?

Now, if Mrs. Stevens had been in one of those high-toned residences for old folks, this wouldn't have happened to her. She would have been safe, but his niece Maggie, with whom he lived, said those places were deadly; a lot of old people shut up together, trying to amuse themselves with projects and handicrafts, like kindergarten children, while they waited to die.

Captain Peterson ground his teeth helplessly. Old folks were a problem, no matter how you looked at it. The trouble was they don't feel as old as they look, as old as they really are. He knew. He was getting on himself. After the holidays he would be up for retirement and, except for a moment now and then when the sun was warm and he was tired, he knew he was stronger and more resourceful than any of the younger men on the force. Perhaps they all felt that way, the old ones.

He knew, suddenly, that he was not going to let this case drop. There was one last thing he was going to do before he stepped aside. He was going to find out who had murdered Mrs. Stevens in this brutal way and frightened Mary Marsh for the rest of her life.

Mrs. Stevens' son came from San Francisco. George Stevens was a good upstanding fellow, a credit to his mother's raising. "When I was moved to San Francisco, we wanted her to come and live with us, but she wasn't ready. She said she'd feel strange in another city, that this was home to her and her friends were here. She was perfectly well, and she liked being independent—but we should have insisted. My wife is heart-broken." No ungrateful son here, no spiteful daughter-in-law!

Gertrude Stevens was taken away to be buried by the ones who loved her. That was as it should be, too. If she had been living in one of those big dormitories, her place would have been filled before the day was out; but this way, her house would stand empty for a while till her son could decide the fitting thing to do. People would remember her for a little while. They would pass by and say, "Mrs. Stevens used to live there." They would remember what had happened to her, and they would be curious or sad or terrified.

Captain Peterson knew there had to be a reason somewhere, and a few days later he went to see Mrs. Mary Marsh. It was his day off so he drove his own car. An official car and uniform were too noticeable in that sort of neighborhood.

Mary Marsh gave him a very good cup of tea and some cookies she had made. She seemed glad to see him. When he asked how she was, she said, "I have a nephew living with me now. He is at the University. It's nice to have him in the house."

"Good," said Captain Peterson. "Best thing in the world, till we find out . . ." He stopped because the frightened look he remembered had come back. He didn't like that because he had to ask questions. Perhaps if he told her how he felt . . .

"Mrs. Marsh, you must help me." She looked at him, her eyes as blue as ever, and frightened, but steady, and he remembered how she had quietly brought a sheet to cover Mrs. Stevens. "There is something I must do, and I need your help. I want to break this case; I want to find the one who did this. I'm getting to be an old man and have to retire from the force soon. I want to do this one thing before I have to quit. Do you know how I feel?"

"I think I do, Captain Peterson."

"It may be hard to talk about it at first, but you'll feel better when we know, I can promise you that."

Mrs. Marsh nodded.

"You see, you knew Mrs. Stevens intimately, and I have to know about her; I have no one else to ask. I have to find something, perhaps only a very small something, that will point my way, give me a hunch."

"Are you good at hunches?" Mary Marsh smiled a little.

"I've been known to have a few good ones in my time, and things have a way of leading from one to another."

"We were just real good friends, Captain Peterson. We liked each other. I didn't know her as a girl or anything like that, but we have a little group, a few friends our own age. We all miss her dreadfully. We don't care too much for those big groups, Grandmothers' Clubs and Evergreen Clubs and things like that, and at our age you don't make friends so easily any more. We like to play canasta, and go to a movie once in a while when something good comes out to our district. Some of us really can't afford the prices they ask downtown."

"Did Mrs. Stevens have money?"

"Money?"

"Well, enough to attract attention from the outside, let us say." *Enough to be murdered for,* he thought.

Mary Marsh shook her head. "No. She had just her Social Security and a pension that her husband left for her. She owned her house, of course. And George, her son, was very good to her, but he

is just starting out in life and he has a young family."

"He seemed a good chap."

"Oh, he is, and he has a nice wife. Gertrude loved to visit them —a week or two, every now and then, you know—but she was always glad to get back home. 'There's nothing like your own bed for comfort,' she used to say." Mrs. Marsh's delicate old face flushed faintly, but she smiled. "As you get older, comfort is very important, don't you think?"

Captain Peterson nodded.

"It wasn't a case of their doing things for her. She loved to do things for them, all sorts of little things. And she meant her penny collection to go to her grandson, Jimmy, to help pay for his college education."

"Her penny collection?"

"She had a set of Lincoln pennies, one for every year since they began to mint them. That was in 1909, so there were fifty-nine of them. She had them mounted on a board under cellophane. They're real pretty."

"Who knew about this collection?"

"Why, we all knew; all her friends, that is."

"Did George know about his mother's hobby?"

Mrs. Marsh looked at him doubtfully. "Why, I really don't know, now that you ask me. She meant to surprise Jimmy when the time came, I think. She used to say she didn't have much to leave when she was gone, but Jimmy would have that much from his grandma. I didn't say anything about it to George when he was here. I really didn't think of it. Then, after he was gone, I wondered what happened to them."

"George didn't take them back with him."

"They are quite valuable, you know. Gertrude was having them appraised and she was excited about it. Captain, you don't mean—"

"I don't mean anything yet, Mrs. Marsh. But a collection like that would be pretty valuable. I don't know much about those things, but I mean to find out. Where did she keep them? At her bank? In a deposit box?"

"Oh, no. She had a special place. Under the mat in the silver drawer."

He groaned. "The first place a thief would look! You can bet they're not there now."

"Oh dear, do you think so? Shall we go over and see, Captain? I have a key to the house."

She was an amazing woman! Frightened to death of the whole thing, but calm as a cucumber in a pinch.

Of course the penny collection wasn't there. He hadn't expected to find it, but he was interested in the neat and undisturbed aspect of the silver drawer. Perhaps he should send for the fingerprint men again, but they hadn't found anything before and he knew in his heart they wouldn't find anything now. No, he didn't need fingerprints.

"You won't discuss this with any of your friends yet, please, Mrs. Marsh."

"Not if you don't want me to, Captain."

"And you have helped me a great deal, you know."

"You think—"

"Let's not think anything yet, Mrs. Marsh."

"But you'll let me know?"

"Yes. I'll let you know."

He had a "thing" now—and one thing leads to another, he had told Mrs. Marsh. He slept restlessly that night, dreaming disconnectedly of coins, big and little. They were stacked sometimes like a miser's hoard, or they made geometric patterns, or they rolled away from him down a long alley, like bowling balls.

After breakfast he spread out the yellow pages of the telephone book. Maggie looked over his shoulder. "Antiques! Coins! You going to start collecting, Unc?"

He shook his head. "Too expensive for an old guy like me, I'm afraid. I was just interested in a penny collection I heard about. Complete set of Lincolns since 1909. Might be worth some dough."

"Fancy that," said Maggie.

It would have been simple to send Dick Gates or Jeffrey on a rundown of the shops, but reports were too impersonal. Some things you had to see for yourself. Anyway, there was a rumble over at the University. School was opening and a flock of hippies were rumored to be collecting. Somebody had to watch that. Let the young fellows put on their crash helmets and police the district with tear gas. They'd enjoy looking for a riot, maybe, instead of the dull stuff of routine investigation. He'd do the shops himself. He wanted to move carefully on this one; no uniform, no police car, just an old duffer shopping for old coins.

He had been a policeman in this town for a long time and some of these guys could smell a cop, or thought they could, a mile away, but two things favored him: the case had attracted little notice; and no one knew about the coins. If he moved carefully, if he put on sort of an act . . .

There were two shops in town that dealt exclusively in old coins. One was downtown in a cigar store

where he knew they played cards in back. He had a feeling Mrs. Stevens would not have gone there. The other was a small shop, *Lewin's—Coins,* a highly reputable concern where he even dared to ask if anyone had consulted them about the value of a set of Lincoln pennies. No one had, but he was assured that Lewin's would have been very much interested if such a query had been made, that such a collection was indeed valuable, but just how valuable the deferential clerk was unwilling to say.

"A great deal depends on the buyer, you understand."

That left the other shops: pawn, secondhand, and antique. They made quite a list which Peterson studied carefully, then spent a morning cruising around, spotting them. Some he knew well enough to cross off the list—no coins. Then he considered the pawnshops, but he couldn't see Mrs. Stevens going into a pawnshop. Not her style at all.

Funny how long it took to do a shop call, trying to be casual, just an old fellow browsing. At one place he picked up a book on coin collecting and after a long, rambling talk with the proprietor he began to see with what he was working.

The secondhand places were easier. Most of them handled only furniture and dishes. One or two had books, mostly trash, but he found a couple he remembered; romantic stuff illustrated by James Montgomery Flagg and Harrison Fisher. What it would cost to publish color plates like that today! He took them home to Maggie.

The antique shops were more complicated. Such a lot of stuff, and much of it expensive; this was a trade, or a profession, or something one had to know. They must have thought him a duffer.

He had been at it three days when he came to the small place where a youngster stood drooling over a glass-covered case near the window that held a quite respectable collection of foreign coins. Peterson took in the collection with a seemingly indifferent glance, but the boy didn't stir from his rapt absorption.

The captain felt his pulse quicken. She could have come here. It was her part of town, near the shopping center. It was a nice little shop, not too expensive-looking. He had thought of coming here first because of its location. Now he was glad he hadn't, because he had left a good workmanlike trail of investigation behind him. If this should prove to be anything, he was free to follow it.

"Quite a collection you've got there," Captain Peterson nodded,

indicating the coin table nearby.

The proprietor was a pleasant, insignificant middle age, like his shop. He smiled, showing a good set of store teeth. "The youngsters like it. Oldsters, too, for that matter. It's like the stamps. They get a kick out of strange money."

"It doesn't have to be strange money," laughed Captain Peterson. "Nor even old, nowadays. Look at those Kennedy half-dollars. You hardly ever get one any more. How many people do you suppose have got a few tucked away, thinking they'll be worth more someday?"

"You know coins?"

"Not really. Haven't got the money for it," the captain said conversationally, "but it is interesting. I wish I had started long ago to collect some of the small stuff. Just the other day I heard about a woman who has a complete set of Lincoln pennies."

"That must have been the same one who was in here a while back. I didn't see the collection, but she claimed she had them, wanted to know how much they were worth. Well, I'm not that much of an expert—I know glass and porcelain better—but I know it would be a lot if they were in good condition. We told her so. We told her where to write to find out."

"I suppose it would depend on a buyer. Some might pay more than others." He had to be careful of his voice. Casual, that was it. Who was "we"?

"In this business more than others," said the dealer with a knowing wink. "It would depend on who wanted it. Or on who handled it."

"I suppose so. Mind if I browse?"

He wandered around for half an hour. The youngster had gone, and the proprietor was busy dusting glass. Peterson looked at this and that, without seeing anything. Mrs. Stevens (he didn't doubt for a moment that it had been Mrs. Stevens) had come here. They knew about her collection; who were "they"? Don't be too eager . . . He picked out a plate painted with blue forget-me-nots. It reminded him of one they'd had at home when he was a boy. Maggie would like it. He'd ask about it—the man said he knew glass and porcelain. They could talk—about porcelain.

His name was Sabastian. He had been in this business all his life, fifteen years in this spot. Yes, there was money in it, sometimes. That's what made it interesting, even exciting, sometimes. Enough to murder for? Peterson wondered, watching Mr. Sabastian wrap the blue plate.

The door of the shop opened and a tall Ichabod Craneish sort

of boy, with a strange mixture of insolence and fear on his face, entered.

"Well, I didn't think you were coming to work at all today!" his boss said crossly. "There's that crate to unpack, you know. And mind you handle it carefully!"

The boy went past them, eyes down, mumbling something. Captain Peterson had an instant of recognition. He had seen this boy before.

"Awful hard to get good help," Sabastian said. "I put up with him because he seems to have a feel for this business."

Was this "we"?

There were two shops left on the captain's list. He was excited and tempted to skip them, but because he was a good investigator and habit was strong and he didn't want a hunch to run away with him, he checked them carefully. He was inordinately pleased to find no trace of coins in either one. Tomorrow he would send Dick Gates to check on that boy. Dick was good at that sort of thing. No

one would be alerted prematurely.

Later, Gates looked at him speculatively. "You on to something?"

"I think we've had him in for something. He looked familiar but I didn't want him to recognize me. I want to know all about him."

All evening as he watched TV, he brooded on his hunch. He believed in it but that wasn't enough. He had to have proof.

Next day, Gates reported, "His name is Carl Singer and he has a record downtown of suspicion of petty theft. He lives in a rooming house over on Linden. Comes and goes quietly. No family. No girlfriends, probably because he is odd looking. Also has a reputation for arrogance and temper; mean when drinking. I saw him in that gang of hippies over near the campus the other day."

"How do you know?" Peterson asked.

"I know because I waited near the shop and watched him go to work today. He's the kind of a guy you'd know again if you ever saw him. That's why he looked familiar to you, probably. He's sort of a weirdo."

"Weirder than the rest of them?" Captain Peterson grinned wryly.

"Ain't it the truth!" Gates said feelingly. He was to Peterson a young man who took pride in his appearance.

All right. So you had a hunch and it seemed to be working, but there were fifty-nine pennies somewhere that had to be found. Evidence. . .

He hoped they were intact, wherever they were, because Gertrude Stevens' grandson was going to college on them. After all, a cent by itself was only a copper penny and good for nothing in this day and age. He'd just have to trust to weirdo's cupidity not to spoil the set.

Did the killer know how much they were worth? Of course he did, especially if he worked in an antique shop that dealt in such things. So did Gertrude Stevens. Why else was she bashed to death in her own kitchen?

All right. What would Carl Singer do with a neatly mounted sheet of fifty-nine pennies? Slip them between a pile of old magazines in his room? Under his shirts in the bureau drawer? Or would that be too much like the silver drawer where he had found them . . . He wouldn't have disposed of them because he didn't know whether their loss had been discovered or not. The papers had said nothing. There had been nothing to alarm him; he must be feeling very safe, very superior.

Peterson drove past the boarding house on Linden Avenue. It was a

respectable neighborhood and a nice looking old house.

A week passed. The weather held fine, too good for felonies and violence. The hippies had a happening on Sunday in Freeway Park and Gates reported that Carl Singer was there. Captain Peterson kept to his desk; he looked deceptively peaceful, but excitement churned in his mind.

Then Gates told him, "The hippies seem to be breaking up. The rumor is, most of them are leaving town before the rains come. They need socks when it gets cold." He grinned.

Captain Peterson, sixty-five, ready to retire, felt a stirring of pity for the young. He brushed it aside. He'd feel sorry for the hippies later. He didn't figure this boy Carl as a flower child. He was just a plain killer.

"He's sitting tight," he told Gates. "I want him to feel real safe and comfortable. Anyway he's got a job; he can afford socks."

He couldn't confess to Gates how anxious he was, but he couldn't play this cat and mouse game much longer. Yet he had nothing tangible.

The next day Peterson went down to Green's Cigar Store again to see if anyone had inquired about the value of a penny collection, and left orders in no uncertain terms and in words they understood, that he wanted to know on the double if anyone did. Likewise, in more suitable language, he left his message at *Lewin's-Coins*. On his way back he passed the antique shop. There was a sign in the window: BOY WANTED.

For a moment, there in the bright afternoon, he felt cold; cold and numb all over. He had waited too long; he had let the fellow slip away. He shouldn't have tried to do this by himself. Maybe he wasn't so smart after all—just an old policeman who had wanted to go out in a burst of glory—and he had muffed it.

An old policeman . . . He turned his car toward the boarding house on Linden. The street was empty and quiet. There was no car in front of the house. Numbly, he refused to accept what that might mean. He walked stolidly up the walk and pressed the bell once. He should have been here before. If no one came, he meant to force his way in. He didn't have to. A soft-voiced woman answered the door.

"Yes?" Her eyes were wide with inquiry.

"Is Carl Singer here?"

"Yes, he is."

His relief was so intense that for a moment he could not say a thing. His throat seemed paralyzed.

"Is anything wrong? He's packing, I think. He's getting ready to go to California. Shall I call him?"

"No thanks. I'll just go up if I may." He reached for his identification card and held it out for her to see.

"Certainly, officer. His room is on the right as you go down the hall."

Carl Singer stood with his back to the open door, his long, thin body stooped over a big suitcase open on the bed. He was packing hurriedly but neatly; he was almost through. He picked up a gun that lay on the bed and slipped it between the packed clothes. Then he straightened, went to the dresser, picked up a piggy-bank that stood there and fondled it for a moment. The expression on his face reflected in the mirror was one of smug satisfaction. He was so pleased with himself, so sure of himself.

Catching his eye in the mirror, the captain said, "Going somewhere?" and from the change in that expression, he knew that his hunch was indeed going to pay off. The boy whirled and made a dash for the bed—but the captain was there first.

"I wouldn't, if I were you. I don't think you have a permit for it—and I'll take that!" Peterson grabbed the piggy-bank and tossed it onto the bed, where fifty-nine pennies made a pleasant clinking sound. "Just for safety," he said, slipping handcuffs on the boy's wrists.

It happened neatly. After all, wasn't he an old pro?

Dick Gates, standing in the doorway, was grinning approval though he held his gun at the ready. "I saw your car, sir, and thought I'd see what was going on."

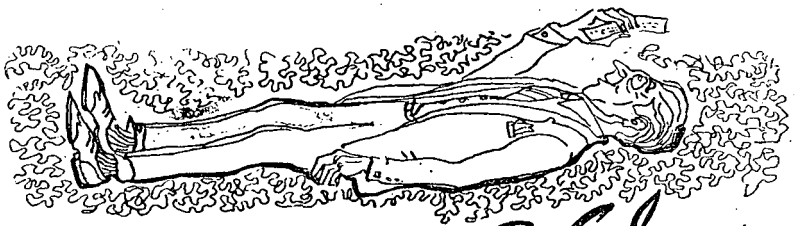
"Watch him, while I find the board those things were mounted on."

The stifled, hopeless howl that came from Carl Singer, told him it was there.

He would find it—and Jimmy Stevens would have fifty-nine Lincoln pennies, neatly remounted, just as his grandmother had intended.

A dictionary is not wittingly humorous, yet Webster's IN THE PROPER ORDER *of course, does define 'solution' as "bringing into a state of discontinuity."*

IN THE PROPER ORDER



By Ed Dumonte

THERE was no doubt that Simon Hartford needed murdering. He had, in fact, well earned and richly deserved just such a fate, and now his long, lean body lay on the carpeted floor behind his desk, his pale blue eyes staring intently at something no one this side of eternity sees. A single thin thread of blood tinted the gray hair at his right temple.

Walter Pettigrew stood over the body, still clutching the heavy metal figurine that was the symbol of Titan Corporation and that had just recently been instrumental in vacating the presidency of that organization.

It had all happened so quickly.

Walter had returned to the office late that night and found on his desk the financial prospectus that had cost him a month of late nights and weekends. Clipped to the prospectus was a curt note in Hartford's crabbed handwriting: *Unsatisfactory. Do it again and do it right.*

The arbitrary and boorish note was typical not only of Hartford's

dealings with the executives of the corporation but with the rest of the world as well. Walter had been comptroller of Titan long enough to know what to expect of Hartford, but the prospectus had been a particular project of his and its summary rejection kindled flames of outrage.

The second blow came when he opened his pay envelope. Because Walter was out of the office, his check had been left in a drawer of his desk. He tore open the envelope, removed the check and found an oblong slip of pink paper attached to it. The gist of the message of the printed form was: *Your services are no longer required.* Something snapped in Walter's mind.

He had stormed into Hartford's office intending to demand an explanation, but one look at those unblinking pale blue eyes, staring through him as though he didn't exist, and the sardonic smirk on those lips had touched some depth of animal rage in Walter. With an incoherent snarl, he had snatched the figurine from the desk and struck out blindly.

Now Hartford, his eyes still unblinking, the smirk still on his lips, lay dead on the floor and Walter was faced with a rather serious problem.

"But problems are my business," said Walter, who was unaware that talking to oneself is an occupational hazard for bookkeepers of every rank. "Problems of statistics and analysis. Why should this one be any different? Gather the elements of a problem, analyze their significance, add them together in the proper order and the solution is almost automatic. Almost.

"Very well, then. Just what is the problem?"

The problem was lying on the floor staring blindly at the ceiling, right where Walter had left it. After a moment's hesitation, he grabbed Hartford by the lapels of his coat and wrestled him back into the chair behind the desk. Sitting in the chair, the cold blue eyes still staring, the evil twist still on its lips, Walter could almost believe the thing was still alive.

"The trouble with being an amateur murderer," he sighed reflectively, "is that I don't know how to evaluate the different elements involved. What degree of motive plus what degree of opportunity equals murder? If I had more motive would I need less opportunity? How much opportunity would I need to require no motive at all?"

Walter pondered these things as he paced back and forth before Hartford's staring blue eyes, mumgling to himself and running his fingers through his thinning hair.

"On the other hand," he announced firmly, "I have two great advantages. First, I am accustomed to working with problems involving multiple indeterminate interacting variables. Second, I have the use of the company computer to help me."

Thus decided, Walter returned to his own office and got out his slide rule, scratch pads and pencils, and began to devise a formula to program into the computer.

Since it would be beyond the capacity of even the most sophisticated computer to handle data on the number of persons who would be happy to see Hartford dead, Walter tried to keep the list down to the half hundred or so 'most-likely'. This included Hartford's family, his social acquaintances and his business associates.

Using a scale from one to ten, he assigned a numerical value for both motive and opportunity to each name on the list. The daughter who had been disinherited for marrying a piano player, for instance, scored high in the 'motive' category; but since she was now living in California, she scored low in 'opportunity'.

Walter then subdivided the categories. Motive was broken down into 'profit' and 'revenge'. Would the individual materially benefit from Hartford's death, or was he merely avenging one of Hartford's multitudinous sins?

Because so many of his evaluations were guesswork, Walter figured a plus-or-minus factor into his calculations and decided he was ready to feed the problem into the computer. The machine would make the many thousands of calculations the different variables required and print out a percentage-of-probability list.

He would direct the machine to print a list for each of three premises: A) That the body was left where it was to be found in the morning; B) That the body were moved and disposed of, to be found much later or not at all; C) The death were made to appear accidental. Whichever probability list made Walter least conspicuous would indicate the course of action for him to take.

He was ready to start down to the data processing room to code the tape for the computer when he remembered something no experienced murderer would have overlooked. He had forgotten to wipe his fingerprints off the murder weapon.

Returning to the scene of the crime, Walter found Hartford's long, lean body lying on the floor behind his desk, staring at the ceiling, a single thin thread of blood tinting the gray hair at his left

temple. Miss Grimshaw stood over the body, still clutching the Titan Corporation figurine.

"I don't know what came over me," she said when she realized Walter had come into the room. "I couldn't control myself. I must have gone crazy."

Walter took the statuette from the woman's hand and sent her to his office to wait for him. He wrestled Hartford's body back into the chair and went through the dead man's pockets for the key to the liquor cabinet.

"I suppose he's dead," Miss Grimshaw said tonelessly as Walter walked into the room carrying a bottle of brandy and two glasses.

"He's had every opportunity," he told her.

"For over fifteen years I was that man's secretary. I've put up with his rudeness, his outrageous demands, his tyranny, his maniacal rages.

"Just yesterday he gave me a list of figures he wanted put into the computer for the weekly payroll; a new wage rate he was experimenting with. When I checked the figures, I found they weren't correct, that the machine wouldn't accept them. I told Mr. Hartford that, and he screamed at me and ranted and raved and nearly had a fit.

"Today I got this with my paycheck." She rummaged through her purse and came out with a folded slip of pink paper. "*Your services are no longer required.* No word of explanation, just that. A scrap of paper to tell me that a third of my life has gone for nothing.

"I came here tonight to talk to him about it, but when I got into his office and those blank eyes stared through me as though I didn't even exist, and I saw that evil smirk . . . Something exploded inside me. I don't even remember hitting him."

Walter poured them each a stiff drink, waited until Miss Grimshaw had gulped hers down and filled her glass again. His own drink he sipped slowly, debating with himself. Theoretically, he was off the hook. Miss Grimshaw was a murderer in intent, if somewhat tardy in performance.

Walter couldn't bring himself to do it. In time he could come to live with the fact that he had murdered Hartford, perhaps even revel in it, but to lie about it in order to implicate another would be a dishonorable act he could never accept.

"Miss Grimshaw—Abigail, if I may—we've worked together, as you pointed out, for more than fifteen years beneath the heel of that tyrant in the other room. In that time I have come to value

your knowledge and opinions concerning our work and to respect you as a person. I hope that you might feel the same about me."

"Oh I do, Mr. Pettigrew, I do."

"That's fine," Walter said and refilled their glasses, "because what I am going to tell you requires that we have the highest mutual regard for and trust in each other."

The excellent quality of the brandy was making itself felt.

Walter filled their glasses again and began a careful and detailed exposition of his adventures with the late Simon Hartford that evening. When he was sure she understood—there were parts he had to repeat two and three times—he poured another drink and explained the part the computer was to play in his plan. Magnanimously, he offered to revise the figures he had for Miss Grimshaw in light of recent events so that she too might take advantage of the machine's calculations.

"That's most kind of you, Mr. Pettigrew," she told him. "But then I've always known you were that sort of man." She took another swallow of her drink, gave a small gasp—or hiccup—and put her hand to her mouth. "Oh dear, Mr. Pettigrew, I forgot to wipe my fingerprints off the statuette! I'm afraid I'll never be able to commit an acceptable murder!"

He reassured her briefly, finished his revision of the figures and was once again ready to go down to the computer room. First, they returned to Hartford's office to wipe Miss Grimshaw's fingerprints off the figurine.

They opened the door and found Hartford's long, lean body lying on the floor staring at the ceiling, a single thin thread of blood tinting the gray hair at his forehead. Arnold Weatherby stood over the body, still clutching the Titan Corporation figurine. He turned when he became aware of the others.

"Well, I finally did it," he announced matter of factly. "I finally murdered the old devil. Lord knows how long I've wanted to do it."

"It's amazing how complicated and involved one simple little murder can become," Walter sighed.

"Nothing complicated or involved about this one," Weatherby told him. "The seed was planted last Wednesday. A brand-new valve on one of the pipe lines failed. It spoiled a thousand gallon batch of the product we were making, and by the time we finished making repairs and cleaning up we were a week behind schedule. It was tough luck, but nobody's fault.

"I came up here to report to him and he threw one of those insane tantrums of his and chewed me up

one side and down the other. The pale little rat turned red and looked like a thermometer about to burst. It's a good thing his doctor was here giving him a checkup at the time or he would've blown a valve himself. The doc gave him a shot of something and a lecture about the condition of his blood pressure, heart and arteries.

"Well, I've been here long enough to have gone through that routine with him dozens of times. You never like it, but you learn to live with it. Then with my paycheck today I got this."

Weatherby pulled a crumpled slip of pink paper out of his pocket and waved it about.

"*Your services are no longer required.* I came up here with a few words to say, figuring if I was going to be fired I'd at least give the old goat a piece of my mind. But when I walked in and he just sat there and stared at me out of those watery eyes, with that vicious grin on his face, something snapped. I grabbed whatever was closest and let him have it.

"Damned if I don't feel better than I have in years."

"Something about that story sounds horribly familiar," Walter said. He sent Miss Grimshaw to retrieve the bottle of brandy and started to fill Weatherby in on the multiple murders of Simon Hartford—and the multiple murderers.

"So it seems," he concluded, "that except for the accident of timing we are all equally guilty of Hartford's murder."

"Well, I couldn't get away any earlier," Weatherby complained.

Walter went on to describe the assistance he and Miss Grimshaw expected to receive from the computer and Weatherby, being the junior member of the association, agreed to abide by the machine's recommendation.

Miss Grimshaw wiped the fingerprints off the Titan Corporation statuette and returned the nearly empty brandy bottle to the liquor cabinet. Weatherby returned Hartford to his chair and Walter made some hasty adjustments to the figures he was going to feed the computer.

"Just a moment," Walter called, making a final survey of the room as they were ready to leave. "Weatherby, you left your pink slip on Hartford's desk."

"Not me," Weatherby said, "I have it right here in my pocket."

"And mine," Miss Grimshaw said, checking, "is here in my purse."

Walter went through his pockets, found he still had his own dismissal notice and looked again at the one on the desk. It was the same printed form they had all

received in their pay envelopes.

"Then who does this—"

"The old coot finally got so ugly he fired himself," Weatherby said.

"I wonder," Walter mused. "I wonder how many other people got pink slips with their paychecks today."

It was easy enough to check. They went down to the computer room and Walter got out the coded tape that held the figures for the weekly payroll. He threaded it into the machine and read the symbols it immediately began to print out.

"Just as I thought," he told the others. "The machine fired everybody in the company."

"But why?" Miss Grimshaw asked.

"It must have been those doctored wage rate figures Hartford had programmed into the machine," Walter said. "Ordinarily, if a simple clerical error is made, the machine will catch it and refuse to print it, letting the operator know there is a mistake somewhere. But Hartford deliberately gave the computer erroneous figures and ordered the correction circuits to be overridden. So the machine printed the erroneous figures and then, trying to correct itself, fired everybody."

"And when Hartford got his pink slip," Weatherby said, "it was like having another one of his stooges buck him. He flew into one of his crazy temper tantrums and died of apoplexy.

"The old buzzard finally found something he couldn't cheat, threaten or push around, and it killed him."

"It's poetic justice," Miss Grimshaw, who had a romantic turn of mind, said blissfully.

The three went back upstairs, carried Hartford's body into his private washroom and smeared blood on various porcelain surfaces and floor to explain the dents in his skull. They killed the rest of the brandy toasting their silent partner and, as a final gesture, Walter took the pink slip from the desk and placed it between Hartford's fingers, where his staring blue eyes could gaze upon his epitaph: *Your services are no longer required.*

Easily, man can alter his appearance; rarely, his reputation.

THE EXPLOSION that obliterated the *Nancy B* shook Charlotte Amalie out of its midday torpor with a wallop that rattled teeth for a mile down the beach. Within minutes a half-dozen catboats and skiffs were gathered at the spot where two gallons of vaporized gasoline had ignited to reduce the former luxury cruiser to a flotsam-studded oil slick. While one native poked aimlessly at a piece of wreckage with his oar, the others dutifully removed their straw hats and made the sign of the cross.

By the end of the week the insurance agents had questioned and re-questioned everybody who had seen the *Nancy B* in those fateful moments before she swung out of port and headed for the open sea. Wally Bird, co-owner of the boat, and beneficiary named in his partner's insurance policy, was checked from every angle in the book; finally, he got fifty thousand dollars for the loss of the *Nancy B*, and an additional ten thousand for the untimely demise of his best friend, and co-owner of the boat, Lee McGarry, alias Chris Black.

I'm Lee McGarry.

I won't pretend that giving the deep-six to the *Nancy B* was a stroke of genius, even though it was a masterful bit of chicanery. Actually the caper was born of dire necessity—or desperation.

It all began on the wharf at San

Juan as I was ending an epic binge. My rum and sugar hauling schooner was on her beam's end, rammed into the derelict class by a long gone tanker, and Fat Louie, the local gambling and vice boss, was waving ten thousand dollars worth of my IOUs under my nose. He looked like a sun-darkened toad as he smiled at me, his teeth a white

slash in his swarthy face, but the smile held no humor. The fat man wanted his dough, but quick, and he had the reputation of being an exceedingly forceful collector whenever the need arose. So, being flat broke and without a ship, I had exactly one choice: run for cover.

I found Wally Bird, my gangling, crooked-nosed partner of many years, and we departed San Juan after dark on a greasy, foul-smelling ketch run by a drunken native. A week later we landed on Barbados and took up residence in an abandoned shack a couple miles down the beach from Bridgetown, strictly on the sly, of course. I needed time to figure an angle for raising some fast money, and I didn't want any of the goons Fat Louie had, scattered from San Juan to Trinidad, breathing down my collar while I did it.

If we'd had a boat it wouldn't have been especially difficult to raise the money. Wally and I have indulged in various illicit activities from time to time when the long green was running short, but we always had a boat. The authorities hadn't appreciated our capers, but they'd never been able to pin anything on us either. Without a boat we were dead.

Wally hiked from the shack into Bridgetown every other day or so and bought a few groceries and a copy of the local paper with his rapidly dwindling bankroll. A small item on the back page of the paper geared the machinery into motion: A Professor J. J. Tipton and company, on board the *Lady Bedford,* were departing from Bridgetown for St. Lucia where they would be engaged in a botanical research project for six weeks.

I remembered the last trip made by the *Lady Bedford* three years earlier, and how the whole crew would leave the ship for days at a time while they trekked inland in search of tropical plants. Now, the first flicker of a larcenous flame illuminated the interior of my cranium, and a week later Wally and I were on the beach on St. Lucia.

The trip had wiped out the last of Wally's bankroll so our only chance of finding the *Lady Bedford* was to start walking around the island. We found her on the afternoon of the second day, anchored in one of those technicolored lagoons pictured by all travel agencies. A skiff was dragged well up on the beach, indicating the last trip had been made away from the boat and that nobody was on board. Such a setup is like the one left by the joker who goes on vacation without canceling his newspaper and milk deliveries, adver-

tising the fact that nobody is home.

I yelled once, just to make sure. When nobody answered I hit the water in a shallow dive. Wally was right behind me. The ship was deserted, all right. While Wally invaded the galley, I checked her out from bow to stern. Satisfied she was definitely worth stealing, I dived over the side and pulled myself, hand over hand, down the anchor rope, clear to the bottom. On the next dive I found what I was hoping for, a coral upheaval about two hundred feet from where the anchor lay. I surfaced and crawled up the Jacob's ladder. "Weigh anchor," I called to Wally. While he went forward, mumbling and grumbling around a mouthful of crackers and cheese, I cross-wired the ignition and started the engines.

Wally and I have spent the better part of the last fifteen years on tubs. I mean real tubs; the kind the television and Hollywood boys present to an unsuspecting public as romantic and picturesque. The *Lady Bedford* was not a tub, not in any sense of the word. At fifty foot, costing at least two grand per foot, her teak and mahogany interior held just about every modern seafaring convenience imaginable.

When Wally had the anchor hoisted I let the engines idle and hurried forward. Measuring off an appropriate length of the anchor line, I pulled out my knife and began scraping at it. Not cutting, you understand, but scraping. It took a while, wet nylon being a bit tough, but when the line parted it looked exactly as if it had been dragged across a coral reef and had been worn in two by the rocking motion of the boat. Easing the ship in close to the reef, I yelled at Wally to drop the anchor and the short length of nylon over the side. Then I opened the throttles and shot the *Lady Bedford* out of the lagoon and into the roaring breakers; my destination, an almost undetectable cove on Barbados.

A month later the *Lady Bedford* was no longer a lady. Her gleaming brass deck rail and corresponding fixtures had been replaced with rusty steel. We had lowered the wheelhouse roof and shoved the antennae aft a few feet, which altered her silhouette radically. The pretty white paint job had given way to a coat of dirty green with patches of black showing through. Inside, she was still very much Pensacola Yacht Club, but on the outside she looked like a battered slut. I wasn't much prettier. My new name matched my beard; I was now Christopher Black.

We tried a few charter runs just to get the feel of things, taking a few fishermen and an occasional

group of tourists out for a fling under the tropical moon. What money we made went to the shifty-eyed little creep who had helped us alter the numbers on the hull and the engines, and who had supplied us with false papers of ownership. I had never really trusted the slob, but when one is broke and hiding out from his creditors one does not demand references from his accomplices. On one cruise we picked up ten insurance-type executives and their wives and took them island hopping for four days and nights. When they discovered I didn't have any insurance it turned into an all-out contest to see which one of them would sell me. I finally bought a whopping policy from the guy who was picking up the tab for the party. I really didn't want the policy but the guy was already paying three prices for the cruise and I didn't want to offend him.

After two months of the tourist trade I decided it was safe to head the *Nancy B* north toward Cuba and a piece of the alien smuggling action. I'm not overly fond of carving holes in the immigration laws, but I couldn't think of any other way to raise the money I owed Fat Louie. Wally had trouble, as usual. He couldn't remember all the things that should be done, but he willingly did whatever I suggested, every step of the way.

You see, back during the waning days of the big fracas, the one the historians refer to tersely as WWII, Wally and I were in a demolition squad in the Pacific. Everything went fine until the day I blew the bunker full of land mines and bottles of chemicals. What I didn't know when I hit the detonator handle was that Wally had entered another tunnel and had crawled into a second bunker only eight or ten feet from the one I was blasting. When we finally found him and dragged him into the open I thought he was dead. His face was a dirty grey and his eyes were rolled back in his head with just the white part showing. Mostly he was all right, but some of the chemicals had run together to form a gas and it had gotten to him. Ever since then he has had these spells when he can't always remember things. It isn't amnesia or anything like that. It's just that every once in a while he goes to do something and he completely forgets what it was.

We had banged around the States on a dozen different jobs, oil fields, logging camps and fishing boats and the likes, before we headed for the Caribbean and what we hoped was a life of ease. We hadn't gotten rich but we had paid for the schooner and were man-

aging to stay reasonably drunk most of the time. Then I went on the binge for a ten-day run and ended up nose to nose with Fat Louie. Sober and halfway in command of my faculties, I wouldn't have touched him with a harpoon. Louie had pull. In fact he had corrupted every official he had come in contact with. Everyone, that is, but Constable Leone.

I had first met the constable while perfecting one of my own unsavory schemes, and I was fully aware he was no pidgin-spouting native clown. His attempt to go to the States and take a training course from the FBI, had been stymied for a while by Louie's political friends. They had given him the necessary time off, and then informed him no money was available for his trip. Leone had shrugged it off, made the trip at his own expense, and now he was back in the islands. Rumor had it that Fat Louie's days were numbered but, so far, the constable had batted a big fat zero.

Both Wally and I were wearing two month old beards when we got to St. Thomas and went ashore for water and fuel, before moving on up the islands to Cuba. We had been there a dozen times on the schooner but now not a soul paid any attention to us. Life is that way in the islands. You can deal with people for years, and six months later all they can remember about you is that you sailed a yawl or a schooner or a ketch. Since nobody had seen the *Nancy B* before, we were completely ignored.

I made arrangements for fresh water and was ambling along the wharf toward the fuel dock when a familiar figure slithered from behind a stack of crates and into a phone booth. I kept walking and scratching my head. Then it clicked. The character in the phone booth was the guy who had helped us change the *Lady Bedford* into the *Nancy B* down on Barbados. His sneakiness intrigued me so I eased back to the booth and cocked an ear to the wind. My slimy friend was babbling excitedly in a mixture of Dutch, French, and the native patois. I didn't understand all of the conversation but I picked up enough to realize he had just relayed a message to a certain fat man in San Juan.

Fat Louie usually kept a whole squad of men available on St. Thomas, so I retreated along the wharf at a trot. We didn't have the fuel for a long run but luckily nobody knew that. Otherwise, we would have lasted all of six hours. I managed to find an inlet on the far side of the island and drove the *Nancy B* into the mud, clear to her beam. Even then, the only

thing that saved us from the low-flying plane and snooping cruiser was the layer of fresh vegetation we spread over the ship every day. It was during this frustrating exile that I remembered the insurance policy. I hate to see a ship go to the bottom, but I couldn't think of another way to raise the money I owed Fat Louie before his goons ran me down and rearranged my features.

The next day I brazenly eased the *Nancy B* up to the wharf in Charlotte Amalie. Wally secured the lines, then cruised the length of the wharf, making sure he was noticed. When he came back and cast off the lines, I headed the ship toward the open sea. We had already splashed the gasoline around the interior of the ship so all I had to do was rig the timing device for five minutes, set the old girl on remote control, and ease over the side with my scuba gear. Wally was waiting for me when I panted my way onto the beach.

When the check came from the insurance company I immediately forwarded ten thousand to Fat Louie in San Juan. The rest of the money was banked for safekeeping. By then I had shaved off the beard, gotten a haircut and some new threads. I was Lee McGarry again; only Chris Black was dead.

A celebration was definitely in order so Wally and I began a round of the bars. We had been guzzling steadily for four hours when I felt myself beginning to slip. I could have sworn Fat Louie was there buying us drinks and slapping us on the back. The next scene was even more fantastic: Louie was taking us aboard his yacht.

When I came out of the fog I was flat on my back on the dirt floor of a shack. I couldn't remember what we had been drinking but my head felt as big as a watermelon. Wally was sitting disconsolately in the corner. When my eyes stopped burning and throbbing, I could see Fat Louie seated at a table, with a half-dozen of his flunkies in the background.

Louie inclined his head toward a row of bottles on a shelf along the wall. "Help yourself." He waited while Wally and I both downed a good two fingers of Scotch, then said, "Now we gat down to beezness."

I couldn't imagine why Louie had had us brought to this mosquito haven but, knowing him as I did, I knew it wouldn't be good. "Beezness?" I growled, the warmth of the liquor beginning to flow through me. "What are you talking about? We've got no business with you. I owed you and I paid you and that's that. So go fly a kite."

The fat man nodded agreeably. "You paid hokay. Bot you hide from Louie for long time, no? And you no pay eenterest on monee. I no like. Bot I haff beeg heart. Efferbody tell you thees."

I thought of the broken arms and cracked skulls Louie had left in his wake over the past few years. He had a big heart, all right; about as big as a diamond chip and not quite as soft. "What's this about interest?" I growled. The fat man was angling for something . . . but what?

"You blow your sheep op for moch monee," Louie said knowingly. "Now you do same to my sheep and we forgat eenterest."

So that was it. The big slob didn't trust his own men to blow the bottom out of his ship so he was trying to pressure Wally and me into doing it. And for free, yet!

I'd heard that Constable Leone was leaning on the fat man real heavy, but I hadn't paid much attention. Now I knew. Louie was in trouble, real trouble. Nothing less than total disaster could have induced him to sacrifice the floating palace. Man, he *must* have taken a shellacking!

Louie spelled it out for me. His yacht was anchored off shore, a good breeze holding it out over one hundred fathoms of water, too deep for divers to go down and check, once she was on the bottom. Our job was to make sure she went to the bottom fast. The deal looked real simple, and it was—until Fat Louie threw his punch line. "Your fren' can do thees job," he purred silkily. "You stay weeth me. I don't trost cute keed lak you."

"Are you nuts?" I bellowed. "Wally doesn't always do things right. He forgets. I should be there to check on him." I could see Wally forgetting himself and lighting a cigarette in the volatile intestines of the ship after he had soused it with gasoline.

Fat Louie grinned smugly. "Fonny theeng. I know you both long time. I never hear about thees forgetting. You smart keed hokay. Not many men hide from Louie for so long. Now Louie leetle beet smarter, no? You stay, he go."

And that was that.

Louie did let me rig the apparatus Wally would use. I made it as simple as I could; two bared wires hooked to the hands of a clock with rubber bands. The other ends of the wires were to be hooked to the ship's electrical system. Properly set, the minute hand would make one trip around the clock's face and drag its bare wire across the one hooked to the hour hand. That would create a beautiful spark; the fumes from the gasoline would do the rest.

I relieved Wally of his cigarettes and matches as Louie's goons began hustling him down to the beach for the ride out to the yacht. "Just don't let the clock ends of those wires touch each other," I warned him for the fourth time.

It seemed like a week later when Fat Louie's eyes bored into me, although it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. "Eef sheep do not seenk you are in moch trobble, I theenk."

Neither of us suspected it at the time, but we were all "een moch trobble."

Wally and Louie's men were dragging the skiff up on the beach when the place literally exploded with police. They seemed to be crawling out of the woodwork, and in the doorway of the shack stood the constable, Leone the Incorruptible.

"What for you bother me?" Fat Louie squawked, blowing his cool completely. "I have do notheeng wrong. I am reeform."

Leone, looking for all the world like a Hollywood-type thug (short, pockmarked and bowlegged), nodded deferentially. "It is my duty to inform you that anything you say will be taken into evidence and may be used against you in a court of law."

Fat Louie shut his blabbering yap, but quick. I never opened mine. We sat sweltering in the shack, with two of Leone's men watching us, while the constable and the rest of his force searched the surrounding area thoroughly.

After a while the constable reentered the shack and straddled a stool facing Fat Louie. "Nothing

seems to be amiss," he confessed slowly. "However, when an unsavory character such as yourself consorts with two persons as questionable as Mr. McGarry and Mr. Bird, it behooves the authorities to scrutinize the matter very closely."

"What about me and Mr. Bird?" I inquired haughtily.

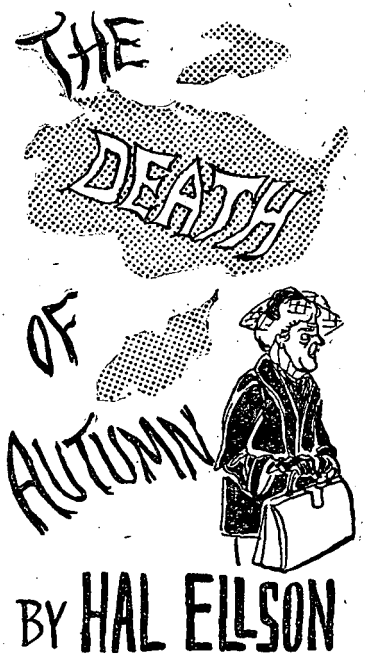
Constable Leone smiled for the first time, patronizingly, as if he were addressing a moron. "The *Lady Bedford* . . . the *Nancy B* . . . a questionable explosion . . . a suddenly fat bank account." My jaw dropped stupidly, but the constable kept right on talking. "We did a thorough job of investigating you, Mr. McGarry, but in order to bring you to trial we needed either the *Nancy B* or the testimony of the person who supplied you with the false papers of ownership, preferably both. It would seem that the *Nancy B* has gone to the bottom, and your accomplice, who sold you the papers, overtaxed himself while eluding my men and succumbed to a coronary—means there is no case against you."

Leone turned to Fat Louie. "You, too. I have no reason to hold you."

Louie grinned broadly. I almost laughed out loud. Between us, we had pulled just about every shady caper in the book and neither of us had ever been caught. Now, to add insult to injury, the constable was about to witness the destruction of Louie's yacht, which would make him the key figure in a half-million dollar fraud. At the inevitable inquiry he would be forced to admit that nobody had been on or near the yacht in the hour preceding the explosion—and *nobody* was going to doubt his integrity. Witness-wise, he was made to order.

That was before the constable figured out that Fat Louie's entire crew was with him on the beach, and that an awful lot of fancy air conditioning was going to waste while we baked on the beach and swatted mosquitos for no good reason. That was before he rowed out to the ship and found the gasoline-drenched interior and the wires leading from the ship's electrical system to the hands of the clock that Wally had dutifully set . . . and forgot to wind.

Then, too, there's the Nursery Rhyme:
Put on the pot,
Says Greedy-gut,
We'll sup before we go.



BY HAL ELLSON

THE LETTER lay on the desk. Miss Fairfax didn't open it, didn't have to. The bad news inside had long been expected. The bank was readying to take the house, but Miss Fairfax was of another mind about that. It was her house and would remain hers. Not that she had the cash, but there were the jewels; her beautiful precious heirlooms would save the house.

From an intricately carved chest she took the jewels, admired them, then carefully placed them in a little black bag and closed it—fifty-thousand dollars in jewelry. "Now let them try to take my house," she whispered, and looked out the window.

Leaves swirled and thrashed below on the lawn, a bird skipped across the hedges, and now a single leaf fell from an almost naked tree. A brown and faded leaf, touched with the death of autumn, but Miss Fairfax failed to see it. She was listening to the big clock, counting its strokes. Finally they stopped.

Time to leave. Sighing, she rose and moved quietly to the door. She closed it behind her, descended the stairs.

Below, the hall was shadowed and filled with the odor of musk. She paused before the coat-rack, slipped on a simple black coat, long black gloves, set a tiny wisp of a hat on her head and observed herself in the mirror.

Like a dark pool, the shadowed

glass gave back the startling image of a younger self. Long, long ago when the ivy, which now covered every inch of the house, had barely scaled the first-floor window ledges, she'd looked like this.

Oh, dear, how beautiful I was, the old woman thought, and the mirror apparition vanished. Quickly she turned away and entered a room off the great hall. In her absence, silence accumulated, threatening, weighed. Miss Fairfax stood listening in the room off the hall and at last heard the big clock. It stood at attention, its bland face lost in shadow, but time—softly and cruelly the heavy pendulum marked the relentless passage of each second.

Miss Fairfax bestirred herself, entered the hall again, gripping the black leather bag. Gently she set it down when she stepped out to the porch. She locked the door, went down the steps. Whirlpools of leaves swirled on the lawn.

A taxi waited at the curb. The driver met her at the gate and reached for the bag.

"Never mind, young man," she said curtly and did not give it up. Her two thin hands gripped it tightly as she moved toward the taxi.

The driver sprang forward, opened the door, closed it behind her, climbed behind the wheel and drove to the railway station. Once more he opened the door, helped the old woman alight, but didn't dare touch the bag which she gripped so tightly. Must be a million bucks in it, he muttered to himself after accepting his fee and a tip.

A minute later a train huffed into the station. Refusing to relinquish the bag to the conductor, Miss Fairfax climbed aboard, found a seat and placed the bag on her lap, gripping it tightly. This, of course, attracted her fellow passengers; they smiled in amusement, but there was one who didn't. A young man had boarded the train behind Miss Fairfax and he, too, was aware of the little black bag. As the train moved out of the station he left his seat and sat down beside Miss Fairfax.

The old woman turned, and the young man smiled. He was well-dressed, clean-cut. Miss Fairfax returned his smile, then, by way of conversation, mentioned the pleasantness of the weather, the lack of rain.

"There's nothing like autumn. You can't beat it," the young man replied.

"A beautiful season," Miss Fairfax went on. "A little sad, but then it wouldn't be autumn if it weren't."

The young man nodded agree-

ment and the train moved on through the countryside. Dusk fell, gathering the shimmering landscape into its sombre cloak. Dark clumps of trees and blue hills fled past. The train rocked gently now. Up ahead the engine wailed softly.

A lulling sound, and Miss Fairfax began to nod; her small waxen hands relaxed their grip on the bag, but not for long. Suddenly she came alert. "Goodness, I almost fell asleep," she exclaimed. "But that was refreshing. Isn't it strange how a moment seems so long and helps so much when you close your eyes?"

The young man arched his brows. "If you're tired, why not sleep a bit?" he suggested.

"Oh, no. We were talking and it was rude of me to close my eyes."

"Not at all. In fact, I didn't notice."

A white lie; Miss Fairfax smiled, looked out the window. Night had fallen; lights flashed briefly and the dark devoured them. She turned back to the young man, her voice rising: "Are you going far? I'm getting off at Rockport. Do you know the town?"

"My station."

"Ah, then, you do know it?"

"Yes, I've old friends there."

"Really? Then perhaps you know the Hamiltons?"

"No, but my friends have often mentioned them. Lovely people."

"They are old, old friends of mine."

"You're visiting with them?"

"Well, no." Miss Fairfax' hands tightened on the bag. "I've some

business to tend to," she said and the thread of conversation broke.

"Rockport!" the conductor called out, moving up the aisle.

As the engine hissed to a stop, passengers arose and the young man turned to Miss Fairfax. "May I help you with your bag?"

The old woman hesitated a moment, then handed it over with a, "Thank you, you're a gentleman." Then, somehow it happened. Too small and frail to make her way

against the younger passengers who were anxious to get off the train, she was left behind and the last of all to dismount from the high steps. Now she looked around for the helpful young man and saw no sign of him. Bewildered, she watched the others moving away, the crowd thinning out, and suddenly her hand flew to her mouth.

Her scream startled those who were still on the platform. A man moved toward her, then another. The first took her arm and gently asked what was wrong. She was weeping now and her reply made no sense at all. The man waited patiently, tried again. By this time she had got control of herself. "My jewels. Fifty-thousand dollars worth. Oh, my!" she cried. "They're gone. I let that young man carry my bag and he ran off with it."

So he had; a matter for the police. Five minutes later Rockport's chief of police entered the railway waiting room and questioned Miss Fairfax. No, she wasn't acquainted with the young man who'd stolen her bag, nor could she describe him in particular. He was young, fair, and had a very nice smile. That was all the frustrated chief could get from her.

He shook his head. "We'll do our best, Miss Fairfax, but we haven't so much information to go on."

"Yes, I know. I know."

"All that jewelry. You shouldn't have been carrying it about. That was foolish. Why—"

"Oh, but I had to. I was going to sell it all. You see, the bank wants to take my house."

The police chief shook his head and patted her hand. "I'm sorry about that. We'll catch the thief and give him what he deserves."

Words, mere words; the jewels were gone, the house lost. Miss Fairfax shook her head. "He was such a nice-looking young man," she said and began to weep again.

The police chief patted her hand once more. "Train for Bellville's arriving. Better go home. We'll be in touch."

Miss Fairfax nodded and arose. The train thundered into the station. The chief took the old woman's arm, led her out to the platform and helped her aboard the train.

Leaves rustled on the lawn, stirred by the night wind. The big house stood dark and silent. Miss Fairfax mounted the steps, let herself in, closed the door. The big clock in the hall was tocking away, delivering its fatal message. "Doom. Doom. Doom," it relentlessly intoned.

The old woman removed hat,

coat, gloves, stepped into the living-room, reached for the light switch and stopped her hand. A tall table lamp sprang to life. Dark, rich furniture glowed in the room. In the chair next to the lamp the handsome young man who had relieved Miss Fairfax of her bag nodded and grinned at her.

"Goodness, you're here already, Roger," she said.

"A fast car's quicker than a train," Roger replied. "How did it go at Rockport?"

"Oh, marvelous. Everything went off just as we planned. The chief of police was so sympathetic. He put me on the train and promised to do his best to catch you."

"And never will," Roger laughed.

"Not with the description I gave him," the old woman said. "Oh, it was so easy, so very, very easy."

"Naturally. A poor innocent old woman like you, anyone would be taken in."

"And everyone was. It was just like acting in a play and so exciting." The old woman smiled triumphantly, then crossed the room and picked up the little black bag from the table where her nephew had placed it. "All my beautiful jewelry," she exclaimed. "Now I can keep it, and the insurance . . ."

"Fifty thousand dollars," said Roger. "A lot of money."

"More than enough to pay off the bank, but the insurance people, do you think they'll be suspicious?"

"They always are, but there won't be any difficulty with them," Roger said easily. "They'll pay through the nose and like it."

"Yes, yes, they'll pay." The old woman smiled and opened the bag. One by one she laid out her jewels. "Oh, my. Oh, my, how beautiful they are!" she exclaimed.

"Very," Roger said quietly. "But, personally, I prefer sports cars."

"Yes, I know, and to each his own. But look at this." The old woman held up a magnificent brooch.

"Sports cars and cold cash," Roger went on, his voice oddly impersonal now.

"You have your sports car," the old woman reminded him. "As for the cash, that'll come, but you'll have to wait. I've a few years in me yet, you know."

"A few years?" Roger shook his head. "I can't wait that long. After all, stealing your heirlooms and collecting the insurance was my idea, dear Auntie. If not for me . . ."

"Yes, if not for you and your cars and your gambling debts, I wouldn't have done what I did,"

the old woman snapped. "Ah, you're greedy and ungrateful."

"Greedy," Roger admitted. "And sly," he added with a grin. "Now I wonder how I acquired those characteristics?"

The old woman placed the brooch in the bag, the other pieces followed. Then she turned to her nephew and said, "How much do you want?"

"I won't be greedy. Half the insurance money will do."

"And the rest when I die, not to mention my jewels and the house. Hmph! Well, at least I hope you can wait till the claim is paid."

"I'll try to be patient," Roger grinned.

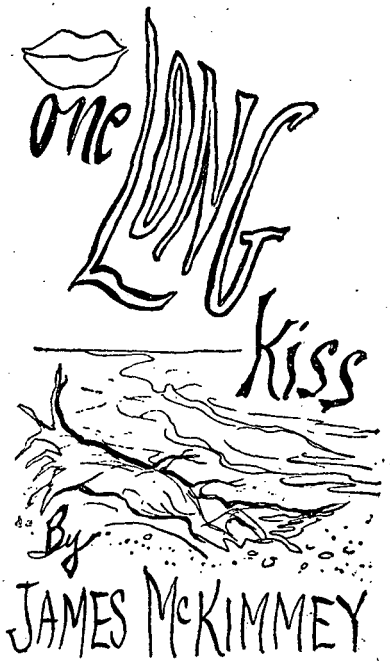
She left him to put away her heirlooms, mumbling angrily to herself, "Greedy and sly, greedy and sly."

A half-hour later she called him to the kitchen where she had put out a cold supper. She herself didn't eat. Tea sufficed her. "Still angry?" asked Roger with a grin. "Come on, Auntie, the liverwurst is tasty tonight."

"I've no appetite," she answered and watched him hungrily consume his sandwich. *Greedy and sly; much too greedy, and not sly enough,* she thought, and turned her head.

The big clock in the hall was scoring the time. "Doom! Doom! Doom!" it chanted in faultless rhythm. The old woman smiled to herself and listened to the unhurried notes, while her nephew heard nothing, for he was too busy eating a liverwurst sandwich laced with a relish of sweet pepper—and poison.

The achievement of understanding may result in a particular, lasting adjustment of differences.



MERRY WALKER was lying on a chaise longue in the patio when she heard the telephone ring inside the house. Her eyes opened suddenly, and she looked up into a late-summer sky that had finally cleared. Somehow, she knew who it was, and felt herself beginning to tremble.

The ringing was insistent; and she stood up, a beautiful young woman, tall and supple, with the easy grace of an athlete. She wore her hair, the color of a lion's mane, straight and pulled back at the nape of her neck. She touched it now, smoothing a palm along its softness, remembering she'd come out here to work in the small garden but, feeling weary and useless, had simply lain down.

She walked into the kitchen and picked up the telephone. "Hello?"

"Ah, Merry! There you are! I was *so* afraid you might have gone somewhere. I had to talk to someone. Since Ken . . . well, you know how I always counted on Ken, Merry?"

She closed her eyes, listening to the high, rasping voice of Jeremy Walker, brother of Ken, who had been her husband. She pictured Jeremy in that yellow frame cottage built above the beach down the coast. His father had willed it to him, along with a trust fund, modest, but sufficient to keep him from having to seek employment. A tall, very slight man of thirty, he would

undoubtedly be wearing a sweatshirt and jeans and holding a drink. She was trembling again, and she willed herself to regain control.

"Yes, Jeremy," she said. "I know how much you always counted on Ken. Both of us did, didn't we?"

"We have to meet it, Merry. I know that! But whatever was the matter, Ken would know what to *do*!"

"What's the matter now, Jeremy?" She looked through the neat kitchen, over a breakfast counter, to a handsome livingroom. Unlike Jeremy, who'd been willed his way of life, Ken had earned his. A large, strong man, with a handsome boyish face and quick smile, Ken had done well in insurance. Just a year ago he'd bought this large and comfortable house, and they'd planned to raise a family in it.

"Have I said something wrong, dear?" Jeremy said worriedly. "You sound so, well . . ."

"I'm sorry, Jeremy. I didn't mean to sound any way but interested. Please tell me what's happened."

"Well—it's these terrible youngsters. Their father's a carpenter, and he's built this horrible little house down the beach and moved in. Do you remember, Merry? I've practically owned this beach, ever since I can remember. Well, not *owned* it. But there was nobody else to interfere and bother and hound, was there? I tell you, these creatures are tiny monsters!"

"What have they been doing?"

"*Staring* at me!"

A faint pulse of anger was visibly beating at her temples now. Jeremy's life had been a succession of small, hopeless conflicts, brought about principally, she was convinced, by his inability to face any sort of challenge realistically. Ken, who'd been adopted from an orphanage by Jeremy's parents when he was eight, had learned early how to face any sort of challenge. It was undoubtedly why nothing had been left to him after those parents had been killed in a plane crash—because he was so self-sufficient. He had never felt that it was remotely unfair, she'd known. He'd always been grateful for having been taken into the family, and he'd promised never to let Jeremy down if he could possibly help it.

Oh, Ken, she thought, eyes misting.

"Why do they stare at me, Merry?" Jeremy asked in a whine. "I was walking along the beach an hour ago and there they were, behind that uprooted tree trunk. *Staring* at me! 'Away!' I told them. 'Away!' "

"Perhaps they're just curious about you, Jeremy," she said. "Maybe you look . . . well, interest-

ing to them. That's how kids are."

"They've got something on their minds! Something insidious! I've never trusted children, never!"

She closed her eyes again, thinking that in all the years Jeremy had lived in that cottage he had done nothing but eat, read books and drink liquor. Others, even though they might not have found employment, might have painted a picture, or written a book, or saved stamps—*anything*. But not Jeremy.

She had pointed this out to Ken one day, and she could still hear his rich voice saying, "Merry, look. You're one of those people who walk right into the teeth of life, and you're not afraid. I'm not either. But we're lucky. Jeremy can't do it like that. He doesn't *do* anything because he's afraid he'll fail if he tries. So he reads, because you can't fail at that. And he walks the beach. And he swims now and then. He eats what pleases him. Mostly he drinks too much. But you've got to understand Jeremy. Then you'll know how to handle him."

"Merry?" Jeremy asked.

"Jeremy, if they're truly bothering you, why don't you talk to their father about it? Tell him not to let them come around your place anymore."

"Haven't you seen him?" he asked, incredulously. "He'd knock me to the ground if I said something like that! What am I going to *do*?"

What he wanted, she knew, was her sympathy, as he'd gotten it from Ken. The complaint seemed trivial. Yet it was a means for him to call and ask her to listen and then receive her comfort. *"Oh, yes?"* said a small, evil voice deep inside her. She shuddered, deafening herself to it. *Understand him,* Ken had said. Well, she was trying . . .

"Merry?"

"Jeremy, listen. Don't let yourself get excited. The best thing you can do is simply ignore them. They'll get bored with you then and leave you alone."

"Do you truly think so?"

"I do."

"Merry, you're marvelous!"

She had been certain, from the day she married Ken, that Jeremy had been jealous. She'd also been certain of the meaning behind the way Jeremy often looked at her. But when she'd edged close to it with Ken, he'd laughed, telling her that any man would be jealous, any man would have to look at her in a certain way. A large playful bear of a man, Ken had never mistrusted anyone in his life.

"Merry," Jeremy said imploringly, "why don't you drive down this afternoon? You haven't, since Ken

left us. It would be so good for you to get out of that house. We can walk on the beach, or swim, have a few drinks, broil a steak or two . . ."

"Thank you, Jeremy—but not just yet. And please don't let those little boys upset you. We'll talk again soon."

"All right, Merry. Thank you. I feel so much better now, honestly."

She went to their bedroom, undressed and then showered. She dried herself with a thick towel, examining her good body in a misted mirror. Its purpose, she had understood, was to give pleasure to Ken and to bear his babies. Now . . .

Willing herself into activity, she got into a swim suit, then put on slacks, a light turtleneck and sandals. She went out to the garage and got into a small sports car Ken had bought for her earlier in the year.

The small, pretty coastal town could be shrouded with heavy fog anytime during this part of the summer, but today the air was clear and bright with warm sunshine. She drove south, intending to find a beach and swim long and hard as she did every day, to wear herself out for the night. Yet she knew that today she would again stop at that precise spot where it had happened. It seemed to attract her.

The coastal road was cut against the sea cliffs. It wound tightly, sheering away on the sides, to water, sand and rocks far below. The sea was blue today, the sun was very bright, and the corners of her green eyes tensed as she drove.

She saw it and stopped at a turnout just short. She got out and walked along the edge of the road. Waves came rolling in hard down there, smashing against the rocks in a churning white froth. She stared down, paling under her tan.

She saw a piece of chrome shining like a small white fire. They'd pulled the wreckage up with a winch, but that chrome must have flown off the car when it hit and remained down there.

"Ken . . . ?" she whispered.

She slumped to her knees, weakly, remembering exactly how it had happened.

They had awakened together that night and love had come to them. Then in the sweet and drowsy aftermath, that damned telephone had started ringing.

Ken grumbled good-naturedly, "Well, if someone wants insurance even at this hour, I'll accommodate him."

But no, it was Jeremy, drunk. She listened to Ken talking to him, quietly, reassuringly, trying to calm him. Then Ken finally hung up

and swung his legs out of the bed.

"I'd better drive down, Merry. He's feeling pretty bad about things."

"*What* things, Ken?"

"Well, you know. He gets depressed when he's drinking. Says he's going to swim into the sea and never come out."

"Ken, you know he won't! He just wants you to come down and hold his hand!" She looked out a window. "You can't drive in fog like this anyway!"

"Honey, I know that road like my own hand. Don't worry. I'll just put him to bed and be right back."

But he hadn't come right back. When, finally, she'd phoned Jeremy's number and gotten no answer, she dressed and took her own car, feeling panic. Driving nearly blindly, she went slowly down the coast. She found Jeremy's cottage in the murk of heavy fog, parked and knocked at the door. Getting no response, she tried the handle and found the door unlocked. Jeremy had passed out on his bed, and she couldn't get him awake. There was no sign that Ken had gotten there.

She drove inchingly back up the coast. When she got home, she telephoned both the sheriff's substation and the highway patrol. They had nothing. Badly frightened, she waited out the long night alone.

The fog was burned away by an early morning sun. The highway patrol had found him then, broken and bloody, in the wreckage of his car, down there, below where she was kneeling now.

She took a long, quivering breath. Then she stood up, eyes glacial, remembering how, when they'd got Ken's body up and put him in the ambulance, she had gone home and telephoned Jeremy to tell him that Ken was dead. Jeremy, at last coming back to reality, disbelief in his voice, still hazy from liquor, said, "But it can't be true, Merry! Ken? Why would he drive into fog in the middle of the night like that? *Why?*"

She'd known then that he didn't remember calling Ken. He simply had hung up afterward and passed out on his bed. Ken, trying to help, had lost his life.

Merry returned to her car to drive south again.

She passed several beaches, her eyes shadowed now, holding the steering wheel with white-knuckled pressure. That small voice was working at her again, saying the hating things, the dreadful things, about Jeremy. Even though a month had passed since it had happened, she hadn't yet told him that it was his call that had sent Ken plunging down that cliff.

She drove until she saw the small road that led down to Jeremy's yellow cottage, which was built on a slope of land running down to the beach below.

She looked at that stilted house, with its wooden stairway leading from Jeremy's kitchen to the white sand. Waves were running in with vivid whitecaps. There were boulders scattered on the beach, large and craggy, as well as an uprooted tree trunk bleached white by salt and sun.

She parked behind Jeremy's car in its port and strode to the door, where she knocked softly.

"Yes?" she heard him call.

"It's Merry, Jeremy. I decided to come, after all. Have I surprised you?"

He opened the door quickly, his thin face looking pleased. He smiled widely. "How delightful, Merry! Please come in. I *so* needed someone just now. You've come like a prayer answered."

She felt his hand closing around her forearm as he led her inside. She wanted to shudder, but she didn't.

Three walls of his livingroom were shelved and contained his books. The fourth was glass and overlooked the sea. There was a hole in the center of that window now, she saw. He had been sweeping up shards of glass from the rug. He let go of her arm and finished that, then jabbed a finger at the hole. "Do you see? It happened just ten minutes ago."

"*What* happened, Jeremy?"

He hurried with the dust pan and broom to the kitchen, then called, "Would you like a drink, Merry?"

"No, thanks, Jeremy."

"Well, I certainly need one!" He returned with a glass in his hand, motioning her to be seated. He drank, then picked up a piece of paper from a coffee table. He gave it to her and sat down, shaking his head.

She read in a clumsy scrawl: "JEREMY WALKER GO TO HELL."

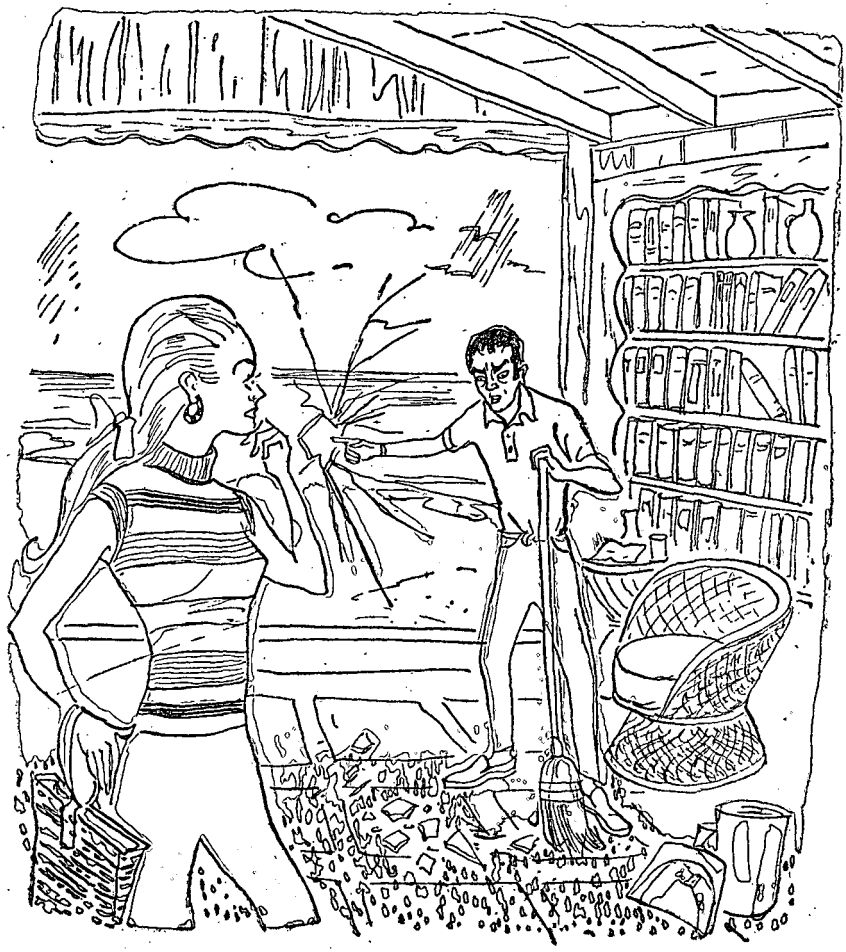
"Those kids!" he said loudly. "They wrapped it around a stone with a rubber band and threw it through the window! Now I'll have to have a whole new glass put in!"

"Did you see them do it, Jeremy?"

"No! But who else would do a thing like that!"

"I really do think you should take it up with their father, Jeremy." She sat there, studying him. Somehow she knew why the boys had wanted to do it.

"And get knocked to the ground?" he said, finishing the drink swiftly. "What'll they try



next?" He returned to the kitchen to make another drink, calling, "I do so miss Ken. Terribly at times. *Why,* Merry? Where was he *go*ing?"

She sat silently, resting her hands lightly on her knees, staring at them, mouth curving faintly at the corners, hearing that evil, hating voice circulating within her again.

"But that doesn't matter now, does it?" Jeremy said, returning and sitting down. He sounded mournful, sorry for himself. "It won't bring him back, will it? But Ken would have known what to do about those rotten children!"

"Perhaps you should report it,

Jeremy," she said softly. "To the substation, up the highway."

"Well, it wasn't too long ago that there was a prowler poking around this house. So I telephoned. They took twenty-five minutes to get a patrol car down here and never found a thing. I took it up with the sheriff himself, and Jenkins, or Spencer, or whatever his name is—the lieutenant in charge of the substation—got in some pretty hot water because of it. So I don't think . . . well, you know. He might not want to do much about anything, all things considered." He tipped his glass up and then said, "I just wish *so* that Ken were here. I *always* counted on him, when things were difficult. Why did we lose him, Merry?"

Again she heard Ken saying, "You've got to understand Jeremy. Then you'll know how to handle him . . ."

"Little devils," Jeremy complained.

"You're just getting upset, Jeremy," she said smoothly. "There's no reason, really. I can drive over to their house when I leave here and have a talk with their mother. I'm sure that'll be the end of it. Relax, Jeremy. Everything's going to be fine."

She saw relief in his eyes. Then he was looking at her in that way he had so many times before. Her skin felt tight. "You're truly marvelous, Merry," he said gratefully. "Ken was awfully lucky to have gotten you. I only hope he knew that."

Her eyes were shadowed again. Forcing brightness into her voice, she said, "But it's just you and I now, isn't it, Jeremy?"

"Yes," he said, looking at her with shining eyes, "just you and I now. And let's not be upset or sad, or anything but happy, shall we? I have two beautiful steaks in the refrigerator. Would you like a swim to build up an appetite? Then some drinks? We can have a lovely dinner, a lovely *time*. This is so wonderful. What I've always dreamed about! Just . . ." He stopped, self-consciously. "But you know what I mean, Merry."

"It sounds perfect," she said softly, smiling, eyes full of hate.

"Do you want to change into your suit then? Is it in the car?"

"I've already got it on, Jeremy. You go ahead."

He hurried eagerly to his bedroom. She sat there, feeling herself turning cold, remembering that moment when they'd got Ken's body up and she'd identified it.

She took off her slacks and turtleneck. When he came out of the bedroom in his swimsuit, he stared at her, mouth opening a little, as it always did when he saw her dressed

this way. His skin had almost a translucent quality, very white, very delicate-looking. His entire look was one of ultimate fragility.

"You look ravishing, my dear," he said. "You should wear bikinis, you know, with a body like that."

He caught her hand, smiling. She wanted to jerk away from him, but she resisted and allowed him to lead her down the wooden stairway to the beach. He kept squeezing her hand. Then, finally, she did break away, saying, "Race?"

She ran toward the sea and knew that he was following, laughing foolishly. She scampered through the shallow water, then knifed expertly into a large wave sweeping toward shore. Moments later she was swimming out with a strong, distance-eating free style. She was in perfect shape because of those fatigue-inducing swims every day. When, finally, she stopped and began to tread water, she was far ahead of him and breathing easily.

Fatigue was already breaking his rhythm so that he took in water and had to stop, sputtering. He got control and resumed swimming toward her. When he reached her, he was breathing hard from the exertion. He smiled, eyes looking hot. "Merry! So glistening and smooth, so curving and soft . . ." He put his hands on her. She twisted away swiftly.

"Merry?" he said, reaching for her.

Revulsion sweeping through her, she began swimming away from him again.

"You've always known, haven't you, Merry?" he called, moving after her. "How I felt about you?" He churned through the water, wanting her badly, she knew. "And I've always known how you felt about me, too, no matter how you tried to hide it from Ken!"

Revulsion became black hate. She continued to swim just beyond his reach, leading him out farther and farther.

"Merry . . . !"

"You killed him," she said, stopping just ahead of him.

He stopped, too, wagging his head, staring at her in surprise. "I what?" he said dimly.

"You phoned Ken the night he died! You were drunk, so you don't remember. You threatened to swim into the sea and never come out if he didn't come and comfort you!" Her face was stiff, her eyes icy. "He tried, Jeremy. He died doing it."

"But Merry . . . !" he said plaintively.

"All right," she said. "Today you swam into the sea. Let's see if you can get out."

She flashed past him underwater in the direction of the shore. When

she surfaced, she heard him call again, *"Merry?"* There was panic in his voice now, as he realized how far out they'd come.

Using her strength and conditioning, she reached the beach easily and walked up the sand. She turned around to see that he was less than halfway back, swimming with a desperate thrashing action. Then he stopped that, as though suddenly understanding that he would never make it that way.

She stood motionless, watching as he resumed swimming, now with a slow, tired stroke. A large wave formed just behind him, caught him and spun him. He surfaced behind it, coughing and sputtering.

"You've got to understand Jeremy," Ken's voice told her again.

Jeremy pressed on, gasping, wearily moving heavy arms and legs. Finally, looking badly frightened, he touched sand. A wave exploded and whirled him, skin tearing against pebbles, as water cascaded over him. Then he was just lying in the shallow water, trying to keep his head up.

She remained where she was. Then she saw, out of the corner of an eye, something moving across the sand from a boulder to that bleached tree trunk, down the beach. She knew then what she had to do.

She walked out to him to do it.

"Merry?" he managed, looking dimly at her through salt-burned eyes.

He was only semi-conscious, she knew. She put her hands under his arms to pull him through the water onto dry sand.

"Merry?" he whispered, lips barely moving.

She kneeled beside him, touching him with her hands, and put her mouth over his.

She pressed her cheekbone tightly against his nose, cutting off his breathing. When he tried to breathe through his mouth, hers stopped it. *I understand you perfectly now, Jeremy,* she thought, suffocating him.

Some time later she stood up as he lay perfectly still on the sand. She looked across at the two small boys staring from behind that uprooted tree trunk. With caution, they came closer, looking at Jeremy Walker lying on the sand.

One of them said, "You tried resus . . ." His tongue scrambled with the word without success. "You tried to make him breathe again, didn't you? But you couldn't. We saw it."

She looked at them with those icy green eyes. Then she turned and walked gracefully in the direction of the yellow house on the rise of land above the white beach.

Instruction is not peculiar to the teaching profession, nor is a lesson to a student.

TEACH A GIRL A LESSON

by Carroll Mayers

MAYBE Vince and I didn't play it too smart, considering it was our first personal assignment from the boss. We should have remembered how fired up he'd been.

"I want that money back," Big John Jeffers had told us icily. "You find that chiseling dame—and find her fast!"

Yet when you're enjoying posh hotels and motels in a half-dozen states on a free, no-limit tab, you sort of hate to end it. So we padded it out, keeping the boss posted but not exactly putting in overtime.

One night we checked into a swanky motel called the Snug Haven, and Vince began one of his 'not yet, but' reports.

"We got a lead she was here, Boss," he said after the girl at the switchboard had put through the call and he'd cited our location, "but so far, no dice. The lead sounded promising, though—"

The receiver squawked hard.

Vince broke off, biting his lip. "Y-yes, sir," he said.

More squawks. Vince's thin features began to flush. His gaze cut briefly to me, then concentrated on the carpeting. "Yes, sir," he repeated. Another moment, wincing, he took the receiver from his ear, hung up. "Such language!"

I drew a breath; apparently, the moment of truth had arrived. "No more stalling?"

"It's a little more than that."

"Eh?"

"He didn't actually claim we've been dogging it—but we've got just one more week."

"And then?"

"Then we report back and he assigns somebody else." Vince's expression was grim. "*And* takes care of us."

I was equally glum. Being "taken care of" by Big John Jeffers didn't necessarily mean a coffin cortege, but it could connote a lacerated lip, a nobby noggin, and sundry fractures and contusions not too joyous to contemplate.

Vince interrupted my sober reflection. "We've been pretty stupid, Joe."

There was no rebuttal for that. "So now what? That filching filly's danced ahead of us for three weeks. We're hardly likely to run her down in seven more days—"

A discreet knock sounded on our door. Vince answered; the girl from the motel desk regarded us with smoky gray eyes. "Busy?" she asked pertly.

Vince blinked at her. "No . . ."

"I'm not either," she went on. "This time of night, the switchboard's usually quiet." Then she stepped into the room, selected a chair and casually crossed her legs. Her bright smile included both of us.

Vince started to recover. "Look, Miss—"

"Virginia Vaux," she said. "I prefer Ginger."

I'd been taken aback myself, but now I studied the girl closely, a most pleasant diversion considering the prominent details. Along with those lovely crossed limbs, Ginger Vaux had lush curves in all the right places, a smooth complexion and coppery hair with a lustrous sheen.

Then a modicum of intuition washed over me. "You listened in on that call we just made," I said.

The accusation didn't faze her. "That's right," she said calmly.

Vince swore. "Why?" he demanded.

She shrugged, a most delightful action in itself. "I often do, particularly when I get a hunch," she said. "You boys didn't strike me as fresh from the Morality League."

There was, of course, more to it

than that. Listening in on a titillating phone conversation was one thing; approaching the originators immediately afterward with a candid admission was something else.

"Suppose we get a little more specific," Vince suggested thinly.

Again, Ginger wasn't abashed. "As I gather, you fellows are in a bind with your chief," she answered. "Some—shall we say, playmate—skipped with a bundle of his cash and you've been giving him a fast shuffle in running her down. Right?"

Vince was eyeing her sharply. "Could be," he rejoined bluntly. "So?"

Her bright smile came back. "So maybe I can help."

"How?"

Ginger shook her coppery head. "Just so we'll understand each other," she said, "tell me the whole bit."

Vince hesitated, shot me a questioning look. I more or less discounted his misgiving; the gal obviously had an angle we didn't yet know, but she just as clearly was a sharp little cookie, and we sure needed all the "help" we could get.

"What have we got to lose?" I asked Vince.

He gave Ginger a direct look. "All right," he said. "We work for Big John Jeffers, who heads the combine's Eastern Division. Six weeks ago he started playing house with this blonde—"

"What's her name?"

"That doesn't matter; she's probably changed it a dozen times already. She's a sexy dish, the type the boss goes for. He thought the fire was mutual, but she was only playing with matches. After a couple of weeks, she skipped with ten thousand of Big John's money. The amount's peanuts, but he wants it back as a matter of principle. That's our assignment: recover the cash and rough up the girl as a reminder." Abruptly aware his last phrase didn't sound too well, Vince amended virtuously, "Sort of teach her a lesson in ethics."

Ginger considered the summary. "And your assignment's due for an unhappy cancellation?"

"Like you heard. The girl's working her way to the coast—that much we suspect. But right now we have no true lead on her. We haven't really tried." Vince stopped, chewing his lip.

Ginger smiled once more. "Cheer up," she said.

Her light mien approximated jazz at a funeral. Vince muttered, "Look, doll—"

She stood up. "I said I thought I could help," she reminded us. "And maybe you can help me."

Yes, she was thinking all right. I picked up her intimation. "Help

you? What do you mean by that?"

"You boys probably think this's a swanky layout," Ginger retorted, "and it likely is. But to me, behind that desk and switchboard, it's a monotonous drag. I want to get away and grab some big-town glamor so badly I can taste it." She paused. "All I need is a stake."

I was still in left field, but the scoreboard was lighting up a bit. Vince, too, was getting some illumination. "And we supply that stake?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"How?"

"This spot's over the city line," Ginger explained, "beyond municipal jurisdiction. With certain things such as gambling, the county's more lenient. Once a month, there's a high-stake poker game in one of the units. Upper-bracket business and professional men sit in. Invariably, there's well over ten thousand at the table."

She paused again, those smoky eyes gauging our reaction. "This month's session is tomorrow night."

The scoreboard was blazing now; I goggled at her. "Down, girl!"

Vince was more exact. "You're suggesting we knock over that game?"

"Why not?" Ginger countered. "You'll easily pick up ten thousand, and that's the amount your boss is essentially interested in recovering. It will get you off the hook—and you can make up any story you want about how you finally ran down that blonde and taught her her lesson."

Wild? True. But shrewd too; this chick had a mind like a high-speed computer. Also, six, two and even she'd been thinking about the caper for some time, waiting for the right partners. The happenstance of our own hang-up had told her now was the time. Her cut would be all she could wangle . . .

Vince, though, promptly threw water on the fire. "Nuh uh, doll," he told Ginger, "we're utility muscle boys, not heisters. We don't even have a gun between us."

"I do," she said. "A revolver. Under the counter, by the register."

That bit of info clearly intrigued Vince, but he shook his head. "It's no good," he insisted. "even if we made out with the artillery, collected a bundle, we'd still have to get clear. That heap we've rented might hit ninety with a tailwind, but if those poker buffs are the big wheels you claim, they'll throw their weight around, demand action fast. We'd be bucking a three-state APB twenty minutes after we skipped."

Ginger wasn't dissuaded. "But you don't skip. You wear stocking masks. Nobody sees your faces.

Afterward, you come back to this room and sit tight. The state police can flash bulletins like crazy; they'll be chasing themselves. In the morning, when all the fuss dies, you can leave normally."

As I said, this babe had been planning ahead. I said, "What's your cut?"

"I'll settle for anything over the ten thousand you need," she replied. "I come off with that stake."

The caper had possibilities, all right. I eyed Vince. "What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"We just might pull it off."

"We just might get our neck in a sling, too."

I sighed. "We'll sleep on it," I told Ginger. "Come back in the morning."

In sober truth, we didn't strain the brain cells with nocturnal mulling. The proposition was almost tailor-made for our own personal bind. Risky, yes, but a chance we simply couldn't afford to pass up. Also, there was one final, tacit consideration that swayed us.

In the morning, when Ginger showed with a pair of hose, we informed her she'd made a deal and to fetch that roscoe she'd mentioned.

The rest of the day could have hung heavy, but we relaxed, reading the papers, watching TV and fashioning a couple of face masks. We had a late supper at the grill adjoining the motel and were back in our unit, masks adjusted and ready to go, at nine.

Ginger had told us the poker session would begin at nine-thirty. The players were right on schedule; the first two cars drove up at nine-twenty.

Peering through the blind of our darkened room, Vince and I sized up our pigeons. Per Ginger's evaluation, they appeared typical upper-class citizens, well-groomed, prosperous looking, with big cars and —we hoped—even bigger wallets.

There were six of them. We waited until a half hour after they'd assembled in one of the Snug Haven's larger units, when the game would be well under way, and then we embarked on Operation Heist.

Outside the game room, we halted briefly, setting ourselves, Vince with Ginger's gun, me with a pillow slip for the loot. Then we burst in the door.

You've probably seen a similar movie enactment. Our little real-life drama went even smoother. One pudgy character yelped, "What is this—!" even as a fellow gambler blurted, "Bandits!" but that was about the extent of the vocalizing. Vince flashed the revolver with convincing menace, ordered, "Down on the floor! Everybody!"

and they fell over one another in nuzzling the carpeting.

After that, it was simplicity-plus. I stripped off each man's belt and tie, bound hands behind backs, next feet. Then as I cleared the playing table of cash, Vince pawed each victim for his wallet. The resultant rifling, equally heartening, also went into the pillow slip.

"Just lay there quiet—for ten minutes!" Vince commanded as we made our exit.

They didn't, of course. We'd barely regained our own quarters when we heard the first reaction: muted calls which became increasingly louder as uncertainty over our actual flight dissipated. Then harsh yells, curses, pounding feet.

The motel roused; other guests, disturbed and curious, appeared at their doors. Masks discarded, we innocently emulated them. When first one, then another of our furious victims emerged, we exchanged dubious queries with our neighbors. What was going on? A holdup? Terrible!

As Ginger had shrewdly foreseen, the plucked pigeons demanded instant action. They got it; Ginger herself phoned the state police.

After an interval, Vince and I discreetly withdrew and returned to our room. We'd earned a blissful night's sleep and we delayed only long enough to total the contents of the pillow slip. Said total was a dream in itself: fifteen thousand, two hundred lovely dollars . . .

"How much did we get?" That was Ginger's first breathless question when she slipped into our room the following morning.

Vince and I traded a covert glance. This was where that final tacit consideration which had persuaded us to go along with the caper came into definite focus.

"Twelve thousand, two hundred," Vince told Ginger with an expansive smile. "You had it figured, all right."

Her own smile was equally bright; it appeared she hadn't considered the possibility of our holding out a few odd thousand as personal "profit" for our services. Of course, we could have kited that profit even more, but she *had* set it up for us.

"That makes twenty-two hundred for me!" Ginger exclaimed.

Vince nodded. "Sorry it wasn't more," he said, "but that was our agreement."

"It's enough to get me away from here," she told us. Then she laughed aloud. "According to the radio, those two heisters eluded all the roadblocks last night. You fellows can leave any time—and good luck with your boss!"

Vince grinned. "Thanks, doll. Funny how we finally caught up

with that chiseling blonde, eh?"

So that was that; we got rolling after breakfast. There was, though, one last detail. It might have struck the boss as somewhat curious we'd "caught up with" his erstwhile playmate immediately following his dire ultimatum to us, might have triggered his wondering about our prior diligence, so we played it cool and didn't actually return for three more days.

Big John was happy to see us. He waved us to chairs after Vince deposited the ten grand on his horseshoe desk.

"It's all there, Boss," Vince assured him. "Every dollar."

Big John grunted with satisfaction. "Nice work." He flashed a gold-toothed smile. "You take care of that dame like I told you?"

Vince polished his nails on his sleeve. "She . . . got the message."

Jeffers transferred his gaze to me. "That right, Joe?"

"Right, Boss."

"You worked her over good, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

Big John's smile widened. "You're lousy liars, both of you," he said pleasantly.

For a second, I didn't tumble. Then I did, because there was one thing wrong with Jeffers' smile: his eyes weren't part of it.

Abruptly, Big John flipped a switch on his desk intercom. "Come on in, baby," he ordered.

My heart jumped. "Baby" was Ginger Vaux. She advanced with fluid undulation, perched on Big John's lap and ran her fingers through his thinning locks.

"Hello, fellows," Ginger innocently cooed at us.

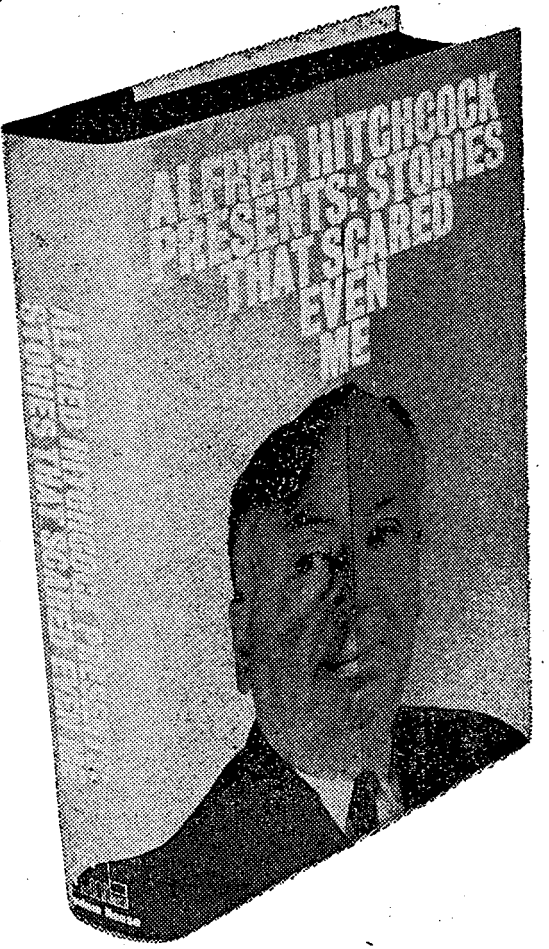
I understood then, and I saw Vince did too. We hadn't second-dealt shrewd Ginger at all. Instead, we'd taught *her* a lesson—along the line of do unto others, an eye for an eye, and revenge is sweet. She'd suspected we'd held out on her, and that radio report may well have mentioned the true amount we'd heisted and verified her suspicion. So she'd decided to retaliate and also boost her chances with the bright-lights bit by going directly to the man responsible for the assignment we'd hanky-pankied.

For his part, Big John had reacted characteristically. Once he'd glimpsed luscious Ginger, then understood he was going to get ten thousand replacement dollars, he couldn't have cared less about the original bundle or the tricky blonde who'd decamped with it.

Jeffers was smiling again under Ginger's soothing touch. "Considering everything, I'll be lenient with you two," he told Vince and me. Then he flipped another switch. "All right, boys . . ."

BIG BIG BIG

Money Saving Offer



For details please see other side

One fire burns out another's burning,
One pain is lessen'd by another's anguish.
—Shakespeare.

A Novelette
by Edward L. Breese

TONY ALLO was my friend. When two people share a single blanket and a mess kit for eleven freezing nights and days in Korea, you get to be real good friends. If it's during the big retreat in 1950, you grow up together. Either you grow up very fast or you die even faster.

Tony was the very junior lieutenant in command of a rifle platoon of marines. I was an army sergeant in temporary command of a dozen assorted stragglers. Somehow we fought our way out together.

I didn't see him again for five years, and then it was in a stinking banana port on the rim of the Caribbean. I was long out of the army and sailing second mate on the old Sarah P. Dowdy to the islands. The Sarah P. had come a

long way since she'd been christened for her first owner's wife in the 1870s. She'd started as a banker in the old Down East cod fishery. Built in the days of the sharp-nosed, shallow run, clipper schooners, she still had speed and the light draft to get over mud banks and into the lost little harbors. Somebody had rerigged her as a topsail schooner and added an asthmatic auxiliary kicker and a power winch. Captain Joe St. Hubert had command, though the real owner was supposed to be a wealthy Miami banker. Nobody knew for sure. Anyway, the old girl was making a fortune in the gun running trade for whoever really did own her. I was doing all right myself on wages and shares. I ate well and felt good.

That is, I did till Tony Allo came over the rail at Porto B., and asked for me. "You old son of a she-camel," he said. "I was watching your ship from the hotel window, and I thought I knew that walk. Had to come down and see. Come on, let's celebrate."

He didn't say what he was doing, and neither did I. He was wearing a white silk suit and a $100 hand-woven Panama hat and a diamond on his right hand, third finger. We ate and drank and talked about old times.

I'm sure now that he'd set it up with the big hombre at the bar to pick the fight with me. I think, too, that the bartender had put something in my drink; not a real, full-sized mickey, understand, but something to scramble my brains a bit and foul up my reflexes when the fists and feet began flying. It was all too pat to be anything but a frame.

I came to after midnight in a jail that had been built in 1589 and never cleaned since. I had a mouthful of fur, bruised knuckles, and a signal drum for a head.

The Sarah P. had sailed. I found out afterward that old St. Hubert had tried to buy me out and been refused bail. They told him my opponent might die. Three hours out of port one of the local gunboats came in from the sea and ordered him to heave to, but St. Hubert made a run for it. He might have made it into one of the mangrove creeks along the coast, but the wind failed near shore and the kicker coughed and quit, as usual. They boarded and took him, with two thousand old Mausers and a million rounds of ammo in the after hold. The crew were sent to the capital for trial, God help them, and the Sarah P. was sold at auction to a Syrian merchant from Belize. The '57 hurricane broke her back on Swan Island.

In the morning Tony came by

and got me out. I wondered a little at how easy it was for him. Then my adversary of the night before drove us to the hotel in an ancient American car. I was happy to see he wore a split lip and assorted bruises.

Now I'm sure Tony was working for the Government. It's a hundred to nothing he'd put the finger on the Sarah P. and arranged for the gunboat to intercept her. Somehow he'd learned I was aboard and set it up to get me out of the picture before the action began. St. Hubert and the First were shot after six months, so, when I had things figured out, I gave Tony a big gold star for life-saving.

For the next ten years we went our separate ways. You know how it is. My business took me here and there, but our paths never crossed.

I'm Johnny Hawk, and my business is your business whenever it gets too tough for you to handle alone. I've been called a soldier of fortune. I do the things for people that they can't or won't do for themselves. When I work, my rates are high enough to let me live the way I want the rest of the time.

In June of this year I had an apartment on the shore of Biscayne Bay. It was six months since I'd worked, and I felt the need of a more inspiring view, so I decided to use The System again to get a stake. The System was a way to beat the House at twenty-one. It was invented by a physics prof at M.I.T. who'd made the mistake of going out west and winning himself $65,000 in three days. The Boys took him to the edge of town and showed him a brand new Cadillac and a loaded .45. They told him he could have whichever one he chose, but he wasn't going to play twenty-one again. He took the key to the car, of course, and drove himself back to Boston. His name and picture were sent to every syndicate house in the country.

I got The System from him in return for a little job I did. Nobody knew I had it, of course. I didn't make the same mistake he did. I never used it for more than one night, and never twice in the same House. I made a point to quit while it still could have been luck, and to lose a little at the same House later on. So far my luck had held.

On this night I'd picked the old Ninety-Five Club. They knew me there, so there'd be no trouble at the door, and the action was fast enough so my winnings wouldn't attract too much attention.

I was lucky. At my table was a big Texan—white suit, white hat and all—who was out to bust the bank. While he was loudly dropping his roll I managed to pick up over four thousand dollars in me-

dium-large bets. Then I switched to another dealer and took three thousand more. Figuring it was time to lose a little, I elbowed over to the roulette table and began dropping chips on the board at random.

Three times in a row I won. Then "luck" turned and the wheel began to take the money back the way I wanted. After dropping about five hundred dollars I decided it would be safe to leave. I couldn't have been more wrong.

The punk must have been watching me long enough to know my pockets were still full of Government lettuce. When I left, there was a gaggle of other people going in and out the door, so I failed to notice he was tailing me. He caught up when I was unlocking my car in the parking lot and nudged my kidney with the barrel of an old nickel-plated .32.

"I dig you, big winner," a voice said. "I dig you good. Don't try no fool moves now."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be good. No need to get rough." From the sound of his voice he was young and nervous enough to be mean. The position of his gun told me he was short, and that probably meant skinny, too. If I could figure a way to get my hands on him . . . On the other hand, it was only money. I could get more.

"Don't lose your cool, daddy," he said. "I know it's in your breast pocket in an envelope. I watched you put it there. Just reach in slow-like with your left hand and—"

There was a muted "thunk" like tapping a ripe coconut, and the voice cut off. I spun on my heel and snatched for the gun even before his body hit the parking lot gravel. I could have saved my energy.

A cheerful voice greeted me. "Whoa, Johnny, whoa. The little boy's taking a nice nap. I just laid the barrel of a .38 back of his ear. So what else is new?"

I knew that voice in spite of the years—Tony Allo. All I said was, "Hello." He wasn't alone. I couldn't be sure what name he was using. He settled that for me.

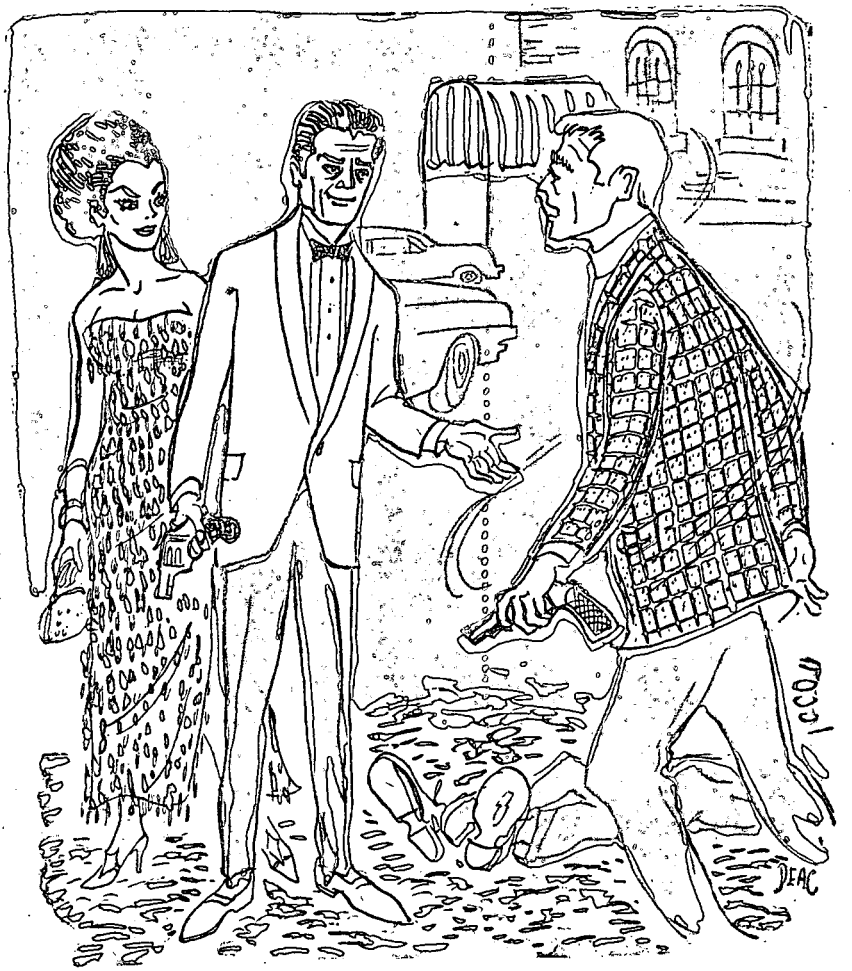
"It's me, Tony," he said. "All the way from Panmunjom. Come on and have a drink with us."

"On me," I said. "This time it's on me, Tony."

"Yes," he said. "I guess it is, Johnny. I do, indeed."

He was immaculate as ever and apparently not a day older. He wore a black tie and white dinner jacket. His tan was dark, and his eyes laughed at me as they always had. Just seeing him gave me a good, warm feeling.

The woman with him radiated a different kind of warmth. Oh, lord, how do I say it? She was brandy



and cream and the fire in the heart of a blue white diamond. She was thirty-six houris of paradise rolled into one and refined. She was passion incarnate with smoldering black velvet eyes and a coil of raven hair. She was curve of hip and upthrust breast and a wild and reckless smile. When she spoke, her voice was lure and caress in one. "I know you," she said. "Everybody who *knows* knows Johnny Hawk. Come have a drink with us, Johnny. Have a dozen."

"Sorry, Laina," Tony said. "Johnny, this is Laina—Elena Car-

valho. At the moment, her father's my boss."

"At least you hope he is," she laughed at him.

"That's right, I hope. He'd better hope, too. I can make him a lot of money as soon as he makes up his mind."

The picture began to come clear in my mind. Everybody in Miami knew who big Manuel Carvalho was—local syndicate manager for all the sports-betting activity. The football and baseball pools were his province, and the two dollar bets on prizefights. Everything but the horse bookings went through his hands. He was even supposed to have one of the numbers pools and a slice of two or three clubs, including the Ninety-Five. He'd come up from Brazil a couple of years before with syndicate backing.

"I know your father," I told her. "I didn't know he had a daughter. I do now. Oh, I purely do."

"You'd better." She gave me a wild and flashing smile. "Avant, mes braves. I thirst."

"And so do I," Tony said. "Let's go."

We took Elena's big sports car and bar hopped till almost dawn. She was Tony's girl, but when she danced with me she danced close and warm. I liked it, but I tried not to like it too much. At long last they dropped me by my car and went away together.

Tony phoned me in the afternoon. "Come and see me," he said, and gave an address on the Beach. "I want to talk. If you've got a girl, tell her you'll be by later and we'll all go to dinner. Right?"

"Right." I was curious myself. I phoned Terry Cobarelli, who was currently the love of my life. She's another brunette, but smaller and a great deal more serene than Elena could ever be; still waters, warm and deep running. She agreed at once.

Tony had a suite at one of the biggest North Beach hotels, with white carpets wall-to-wall and Cézanne originals on the walls. The windows looked down twenty stories to a line of whipped-cream foam.

"Thanks for last night," I said. "It's the second time I owe you for."

"I don't know what you mean," he said. "That punk wasn't dangerous. You'd have had him easy. Besides, there's always that big gook you took off my back in Korea."

That got the amenities out of the way. I could see he wanted to talk, so I let him give me his story. I knew it might or might not be the truth. It was what he wanted me to hear. From Tony Allo that was enough.

He had, Tony told me, a scheme for expanding the coverage of the sports pools so that bets could be placed on practically any event anyplace in the world. He also had an idea for what he called a "safe" way to expand the distribution setup that would reach more customers with less risk of arrest for the men and women booking the bets. He wouldn't give me any details of this and I didn't press him. He was trying to sell Big Manuel on trying out his ideas. So far he hadn't bought it. He had bought Tony to the extent of giving him a general "executive" slot with the local organization.

"It's good money," Tony said, "but only peanuts to what happens if he buys my plans. I think he's going to. I think he's getting real hot on it. The next couple of weeks should tell the story."

Actually the whole thing smelled to me. The Tony Allo I knew just wasn't the type for this sort of thing. He fitted better in the Government secret agent role where I'd put him after the affair of the Sarah P. Dowdy. Still and all, it was none of *my* business. Tony was a big boy, perfectly capable of making his own plans without any help from me. Yet I couldn't help saying, "Look, boy, you know you're in real fast company, don't you? Where old Carvalho comes from he can buy a life for three dollars."

He looked serious for a moment. "I know it, Johnny, but I'm not fighting him. I'm trying to join him. Even if he doesn't buy, there's no reason to get rough. He can simply turn me down."

"It's your play," I said. "I'm only trying to tell you this isn't a local boy. The syndicate is almost civilized these days. This one is straight in from the big swamp. I've heard he doesn't need a reason to kill. He enjoys it. Don't ever cross him."

"Okay, okay." He changed the subject. I let it go at that. I'd already stuck my neck out farther than I usually do.

We drove up to Fort Lauderdale for dinner-on-the-roof by a chef whose sauces even Paris envied. Afterward we hit the newest and shiniest night club in the area. I noticed that Tony paced his drinks as widely as I did. That wasn't like his old style. I'd always been the one to mistrust alcohol.

Elena drank enough for both of them. She must have put away better than half a bottle of good brandy. Except for the eyes, it never showed on her. It softened them from jet to velvet. By midnight those eyes were talking to me across the table, and the things they said could have driven me wild. I was glad that Terry was

along. She kept my head level for me.

For the next ten days the four of us went everywhere together. At least the three of us did. Most of the time Terry was busy being a widowed stepmother. Then she had to go up to New York to talk money matters with her bankers there, but planned to be back in a couple of weeks. I drove her out to the airport on a sunny afternoon and waved the plane away.

When I got back to my place the phone was ringing. It was Tony. "Sorry," he said. "We'll have to call things off for tonight. Laina just called. This is the night I get to talk to her old man again. I've got a hunch he's going to buy. Don't ask me why. I just feel it in my bones."

"Okay, boy," I told him. "Keep your nose dry and watch your step." It was better advice than I knew.

I slept late the next morning, and then fixed myself bacon and eggs before I looked at the paper. What I saw brought me up short. "BODY IN BAY THOUGHT GANG KILLING" the headlines said. I read on.

It was Tony all right. He was described as both a playboy and a mystery man. Somebody had almost beaten his head off with a length of lead pipe. Half his brains were gone. To top it off, his throat was cut. Identification was from fingerprints. It wasn't robbery—he still had his wallet. The current brought the body ashore at 36th Street.

I gleaned a few more details. The coroner said death had probably occurred about midnight. Condition of the hands showed the victim had put up quite a fight for his life.

Goodbye, Tony, I thought. *Goodbye, soldier, laughing boy, fighter, friend. Goodbye, another piece of myself.* With each friend's death I am diminished by so much. I tried to warn him, I told myself. Why did I let it drop? Could I have made the warning stick? Why did I ever let him walk wide-eyed to death?

It would have to be Carvalho. That's where Tony was last night. I was sure he hadn't been lying when he told me that. Elena, his Laina, had marched him over and stood him on the cross mark, all ready for the knacker's knife. Had she known in advance? She must have. My viscera knotted in hatred at the thought.

The only thing I didn't have was a motive. Like Tony had said, he wasn't trying to fight Carvalho. He was already working for him, and just trying to sell him a new scheme. I knew Tony well enough

to figure it would have been a plausible and a practical scheme. So why kill? Why?

I couldn't answer that one right then, but I knew well enough why I was going to kill Manuel Carvalho and his black-eyed, passionate daughter. An eye for an eye, The Book says. Even the law, preoccupied as it is with property rights, says a life for a life. When a Viking chief died berserk they burned him with the bodies of his slaves and his dead enemies on the pyre. Just say I was going to burn a couple of slaves to wait on Tony, wherever he was.

I hadn't learned then that revenge is bitter and dry; almond and ash on the tongue. I was angry, and hatred coiled in me.

When the phone rang I wasn't surprised. I recognized Elena's vibrant, throaty tones. "Have you heard?"

"Heard what?" I didn't know how much she knew I knew. It was worth playing dumb to find out.

"I'll give it to you straight." Her voice positively throbbed with sincerity and an undertone of misery. "Tony's dead. Yes, I said dead. It's all over the papers this morning. I wanted to call and tell you so you wouldn't find out that way, like I did."

"How?" I said. "What happened? How could it happen?"

"What happened is, somebody killed him. It must have been not long after he left me last night. I made him take me home early—a splitting headache. At least it was early for us. Oh, Johnny, he wanted the three of us to go to the races today."

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know who. I don't know why. Johnny, I keep asking myself if it could possibly be my fault. Tony worked for my father, you know. Father has enemies. In his business you do. One of them must have done it."

"How does that make it your fault? Do you have enemies too?" In spite of myself I let my voice get bitter.

"Don't get so cynical, darling. If I didn't know myself what a shock this is, I'd resent that. No, what I meant, Johnny, was I got him the job. At least I met him first and introduced him to father. I even asked him to hire Tony. So—if it hadn't been for me . . ."

"That doesn't make you a killer," I said. "Tony Allo is—was—a big boy, all grown up. I don't know exactly what he did for you or why he did it, but I'm sure he knew. Whatever it was, he'd take his chances with his eyes open."

"Oh." She sounded relieved. "I hadn't thought of it just that way.

I'm glad I called you. I've been blaming myself, but if you don't—and such a good friend of his—maybe I ought to stop."

I cut her off. "Yeah, stop. But tell me—what does your father say? Who does he think might have done it?"

"He doesn't know. Honestly he doesn't. Believe me, he's mad. For one thing, he's supposed to be able to protect his own men. You know how it is. Unless he gets the killer, he'll lose face."

Okay, Daddy'll lose face! I remembered the news story. They'd had to identify Tony by his fingerprints. He'd lost face in a big way—had it beaten to an unrecognizable pulp. Maybe I could arrange that sort of loss for father too. I bit my tongue to keep from saying it.

"Johnny," she said, "are you still there? Don't worry. Father's men will find out who did it. When he does, I'll see that you know about it. I promise."

"Maybe I can help." I couldn't keep myself from saying it.

"Johnny, no!" She sounded very earnest. "Oh, I know who Johnny Hawk is. I've heard about some of the things you've done. But this is different, darling. This could be a business rival. It could even be someone from back home (Brazil, she meant). Whoever it was, it's no one-man job. Father has the syndicate behind him. Don't you understand?"

"Maybe I do," I said, "but I don't have to like it."

"That's better, Johnny. Listen, why don't you take me to dinner tonight? We'll both be blue enough as it is. We could talk it all over then and see what we come up with."

"Sure, run Tony's shroud up the flagpole and see who salutes. No, I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"I'll come by for you about eight, Johnny."

"No, I'll come by for you. I'll be too keyed up to let anyone else drive. At your apartment . . ."

She hung up the phone then, and I went and got myself a drink. It was only a small one. Of all the times, this was one *not* to get drunk. I just needed the whiskey to burn the taste of her honeyed voice out of my throat, and a toast to Tony.

I didn't even begin to buy her story, of course. For one thing, Tony wasn't big enough for a rival mob to go after. Syndicate-wise, he was still a very small fish indeed. Barring a major gang war, the little fish aren't killed; not worth the trouble.

Besides, last night was supposed to have been his big night. She hadn't said a word about taking him

to her old man, but let me go on thinking it was just a routine evening date for them. On the other hand—if I already knew—she hadn't actually denied anything either. Probably she'd pump me more later to see what I really did know. Dinner together and a nice long talk—I wondered who'd really tell what to whom.

I wasn't kidding myself about not being in very real danger. The Carvalho types don't like to leave any loose ends hanging. Any close friend of Tony's at this point was definitely a loose end. I could be rubbed out just on the off chance I might know something. If they ever smelled what I was thinking, I'd be lucky to survive for twenty-four hours.

At least I figured Elena's call meant I wasn't just going to be killed out of hand. Maybe they thought I was dumb. Maybe they wanted information from me. Maybe Elena even liked me enough not to want me dead. It was possible. She'd been giving me the hot eye and pressing her thigh to mine in car seats from the first night.

Maybe she knew all along that Tony had to go and just wanted a replacement ready when the time came. All the time she was making passes at me, she was ready to finger him for her old man. She must have known what was coming. Elena's body was in the twenties, but her mind was ten thousand years old. Whatever the score was, she'd have known.

I began to get ready for the evening's fun and frolic. That meant a money belt in case I had to run for it, and a derringer snapped to the money belt under my shirt. Johnny Hawk doesn't expect miracles. I don't need them, because I already have an edge—the killer's edge. When I pull a gun I mean to kill—and I do. I don't threaten or bluff or say anything. I kill my man while he's trying to make up his mind what to do. That's the edge. It's the determination and the *willingness* to kill. The punk doesn't have it. I do. I'm still alive.

I didn't know how I'd get close enough to old man Carvalho to go to work on him. I'd just have to play it off the cuff and get her to take me to him. I wanted him first, because if I didn't get him first I'd never get him at all. I wanted her *most*. It was she who'd lain in Tony's arms and planned his death.

As it turned out I could have saved my trouble. About 3:30 in the afternoon there was a firm knock on my door. I put on a jacket and cracked the door to find myself face to face with Captain Ryan of Miami Homicide Division.

"Peace," he said, showing empty

hands. "Relax, Hawk. Relax. All I want is to talk. And you can take your jacket off. Right now I don't care if you're wearing a French .75."

I could see that he meant it, so I let him in and set out the whiskey and a glass. He poured himself a drink.

I'd always admired Ryan. For one thing, he was an honest cop. That's not nearly so rare as people think. On top of that, he was smart and likeable. That combination is rare. Most honest cops get pretty dour. It's an occupational disease.

He stretched his six-foot-three frame in my best chair and looked as guileless as he could. "I suppose," he offered, "that whatever gun you're wearing is for whoever put Tony Allo in the Bay."

I said nothing at all.

"Oh, come off it, Johnny Hawk. We know what close friends you two were."

"Who's we?" I asked. It did surprise me some.

He laughed. "A couple of us down here. And Tony's real bosses. You knew he wasn't really the Carvalho type, didn't you?"

"I may have guessed. But it was his business."

"He told us that's what you'd say. He worked for the Government, Hawk. The Man—the Big G. Never mind what branch. He was a good one. They're going to miss him. He told us if anything happened you might miss him too. That's why I'm here."

"You know so much," I said, "maybe you know who did it."

"We know," he said. He surprised me.

"Just tell me where I find him then."

"You know that, Hawk, as well as we do. You're not supposed to be stupid. The Man wants Manuel Carvalho—for lots of things. Among them, stealing classified information and selling it. Tony was one of the men assigned to take him. Somehow, Carvalho must have found out. Probably a leak somewhere. Information is always for sale."

"I had everything but the motive," I said. "You just gave me that. I'm grateful."

"I hoped you would be. In fact I told Tony's boss you would be. We're counting on it."

I thought I saw the point. "What you mean is you still want Manuel, but you haven't the evidence to crucify him at law. So if he just happened to get lead poisoning—if somebody did it for you—sort of off the cuff—you wouldn't mind that."

He gave me a long, level look and spoke in dead serious tones. "That's the whole point, Hawk.

That's why I'm here at all—why Tony told me to come if this happened. He said you'd get some crazy notion."

"*He* would have for *me*."

"Forget that. Forget it. We can't have you coming into this. Tony wasn't the only man after Manuel. We'll have him soon, one way or another. Our way. We'll have him and his contacts here and abroad. That's what we want. You kill him and all we've got is one dead hood. What good is that to us?"

I began to get angry. "Would you like to insure him, Captain? Would you like to make a date to see him a week from now?"

He slapped the flat of his hand on the coffee table so the ash tray jumped. "All right, you fool, I'll say

it this way. If you knock over Carvalho, you'll burn for it. We'll prove it whether you leave tracks or not. I promise you, Hawk. I promise you personally. You know I can make it stick."

We locked glances, but I dropped mine first. I knew he could make it stick, with The Man behind him. And with his men tailing me, I had almost no chance of getting to Carvalho anyway. I tried again. "How about the girl, Captain? She set him up, you know. You going to protect Tony's little Laina?"

He relaxed only a little. "Only till we nail Manuel. If she's still around after that, who cares? If she was shot now, he'd connect it. He'd know somebody would take him next."

"I can hardly wait," I said. "You know she's as guilty as her father. Worse, to my mind. The old man didn't fake love."

Ryan was more relaxed. "I don't think she did either. She liked Tony, all right. A strange one. I don't envy her. There's a rumor, by the way, that she's really Carvalho's wife, not daughter. One way or another she's been lover to a lot of men. Some for him and some for herself, I think. Like I said, I don't envy her."

"You're a philosopher, Ryan," I said. "Or maybe a psychologist. Whatever she is, she killed my friend, just as sure as if she cut his throat herself."

"Maybe she *did*," he said. "Ever consider that? Anyway, go ahead and keep your date tonight. If you find out anything, we'd be inter-

ested in hearing all about it."

"I'll bet you would. What date?"

"The one she made with you a while ago. Remember, Hawk, till *we* take Manuel we'll be interested in you." That meant somebody's phone was bugged.

He finished his drink and after a while he went away. I was glad of that. I had some thinking to do. It wasn't fun.

I wanted Carvalho. I wanted Elena. I wanted to take care of both of them myself, Johnny Hawk in person. Yet I knew I couldn't do it. Ryan would keep his word. If I spoiled the bigger game, he'd see that I burned for it. I can be clever and hard, but there's a limit to Johnny Hawk like there is to anyone. I had a problem.

I thought for a while of canceling the date with Elena, or just not showing up. If I couldn't kill her, why see her? Then I figured I might as well go through with it. If nothing else, I could keep in touch. I might even do something or learn something to hurry the Big Day. Or maybe I just felt like rubbing salt in the wound. I was hurt, you know, as well as mad. Nobody's quite an island or a machine.

I picked her up at her apartment. She had sense enough to name a restaurant we'd never gone to before, not one that knew us as a threesome. That was bright of her.

She wore black linen—very smart and cut just low enough to be exciting without looking low cut. Her shoulder-length black hair curled soft and thick and alive. Her dark eyes smoldered under heavy lids. She didn't touch me in the car, but her eyes kept touching me as we ate.

We sat at a table on a glass-enclosed terrace facing the sea. Long, heavy waves came up and stroked the beach with foam and slipped back into the infinite night. The food was excellent and the wine heady. She did most of the talking at first. "We both loved him, Johnny. I know I did." I swear I believed her. I don't understand it myself, but I believed her. "I can't talk of lost love, Johnny. It won't bring him back, if I do. Tony is yesterday. Oh, a lovely golden yesterday —but now is today."

"I can't live anytime but now." In spite of myself I said it. I was beginning to realize how dangerous she was. I wished that Terry was back in town to help keep me sane.

Mostly Elena pumped me. She did it easily, smoothly. It was friendly interest and not prying. Still I was hard put not to open up my heart. I guess I was overly vulnerable that night.

Somehow I managed to tell her

very little. I hadn't seen Tony for ten years till the other night. I told her all about Korea and the time we fought our way out of the Chinese trap. I brushed over the business of the Sarah P. I made no guesses about what Tony had been doing. Mostly I talked about myself. For her own reasons she was interested. For lots of reasons.

After a time her manner changed very subtly. I knew she was relieved. She began to be sure that I was what I seemed to be, that I wasn't working with Tony's people. If she'd decided the other way, I knew I'd have been marked for the Bay myself. I let her see me as I was—up to a point where she had nothing to be afraid of. She could go back and make the right report to Manuel.

We danced together a couple of times. It was an experience. It was almost more than I could take just then. I found my arm tightening about her. Her cheek on mine pulsed volumes. I don't even know how she did it, and Johnny Hawk is no college boy. Some women have the gift. Elena had it.

I had every intention of killing the woman. I hated her with a cold and steady hate. At the same moment I wanted her in my arms. I wanted her wanting me. I began to wonder how crazy a man can be.

After a while it got to be more than I could stand and I took her home. She knew I was all shaken up, and of course it didn't surprise her a bit. She just didn't know all the reasons. If she had, she might not even have cared. That's the kind she was.

At the door of the apartment I let her kiss me once. That was enough; fire in the blood and a reeling head. "This is now, Johnny," she said. "Tomorrow will be now, too. Call me."

I got out of there in a hurry. If she'd wanted to keep me, she probably could have. I'd have hated myself later, but what good would that have been? She didn't try. I guess she needed to report to Manuel.

I despised myself in the morning as it was. What possible excuse did I have? I knew what she was and I hated her for it. At the same time I wanted her. I wanted her till I burned. It wasn't a happy day for me.

I knew what she'd think, of course. If she knew how much I really knew about her, she'd give that throaty laugh of hers. With her, yesterday would be gone already and tomorrow a long way off. If we wanted each other now, that's all she'd care about. Maybe she'd felt the same way about Tony, or maybe that was all business. Anyway, she'd managed to turn it off fast enough as soon as

they found out what he was really up to.

That night and the next I didn't call her. I didn't answer the phone either. I started drinking in out-of-the-way places and avoiding the spots where she might be. My phone kept ringing, and a couple of telegrams came. Just her phone number in each. I wanted to call her. In a way I was a fool not to. She might guess why not.

What was the use, really? I couldn't kill the old man like I wanted. I wasn't even allowed to kill her—if I could still have brought myself to pull the trigger. I desperately needed action, but I had to hold still. This was a new one for Johnny Hawk.

The third night I almost cut and ran. I actually started to leave town. I got twenty miles out into the Glades on the Tamiami Trail with a vague notion I might just keep on going. The lights of a scrubby roadside tourist trap flagged me down there, and I went in for a drink. I didn't pay much attention to the man who came in a couple of minutes later and used the phone. I just sat there and had a couple of drinks and thought things over.

It came to me gradually that running wasn't going to prove a thing. Someway, somehow I had to stay for the end of this picture. I'd been letting my emotions take charge. That was it. A man like me can't afford too much hate—or too much love. I had to start using my head again, whether I liked it or not.

I was thinking so hard, I didn't notice her come in. The first I knew she'd had me followed, she was on the next bar stool and her leg was touching mine and that perfume was all around me. The frowzy bartender's eyes were popping, and I didn't blame him. She wore black slacks and a clinging gold-thread blouse and matched pearls round that flawless throat.

"Johnny," she said. "Don't fight it. You can't run away."

"I was just thinking that," I said stupidly enough.

"I'm glad. It's now, Johnny, now. What was is over. It can't be erased, but it mustn't change now either. We talk to each other every way there is, Johnny. We're two of a kind."

"That's what I hate the most," I said. "We are indeed."

She laughed at me. "Don't fight it, Johnny. I don't. I don't like myself either, but it doesn't help to fight it. The time is *now* and that's all the time we can live."

I looked in her eyes and felt myself lost, but somehow happy. For the first time I think I understood her a little—her and myself. "Your place or mine?" I asked.

"Mine," she said. "Carvalho won't

like it either way. But mine tonight." I noticed this time she didn't call him "father," and the first shred of sanity came back.

We took both cars—hers and mine. "I'll race you," she said.

She drove a sleek, powerful sports car and drove it well. I had a stock, souped for speed. At this late hour the Trail was a near-empty fog-covered causeway in the silent, snake haunted swamp. We slammed the pedals down and let the fast cars roll.

She was good, but I was just as good. The cars stayed close as if bolted together. We slashed the fog and screamed the curves. I drove by instinct, in a nightmare. The miles slipped by under the wheels. "I hate her," I thought, "I love her," like pulling daisy petals in the mind. I didn't know which petal would be last.

When we came into town she wove in and out of the thickening traffic. I almost let her shake me then. That would have been the easy way, and I couldn't do it.

At Grapeland Boulevard we caught the red light side by side. It's an arterial road and the cross traffic was heavy there. I watched her as I waited out the light. Her eyes were shining, and her black hair all wind-tossed.

"You're a doll," I said to myself. "A living doll."

Then I did it. In one instant I saw what had to be done and did it, almost without thought. I shifted my own car into neutral and drove the pedal to the floor. The engine smoked and roared, and the car went nowhere.

Instinct took her then and killed her passionate wild heart. She drove down the accelerator of the powerful sports convertible, and the car jumped into the cross traffic. A southbound truck and a northbound sedan took her front and rear, and the three spun into a single tangle of twisted metal and flaming gas. She never even had time to scream.

"For Tony," I said. My shoulders were shaking, but a man can't weep, not even for *now*.

The light changed to green. As the intersection filled with shouts and running people, I turned the corner and went on.

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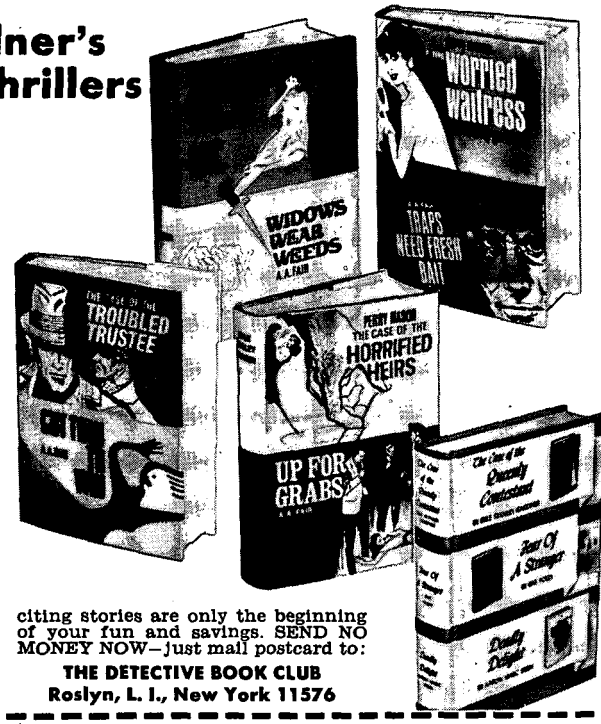

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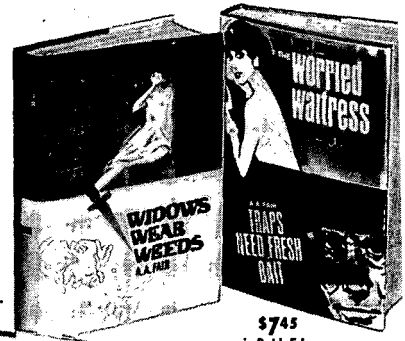

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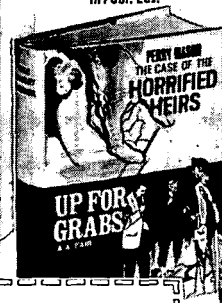

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