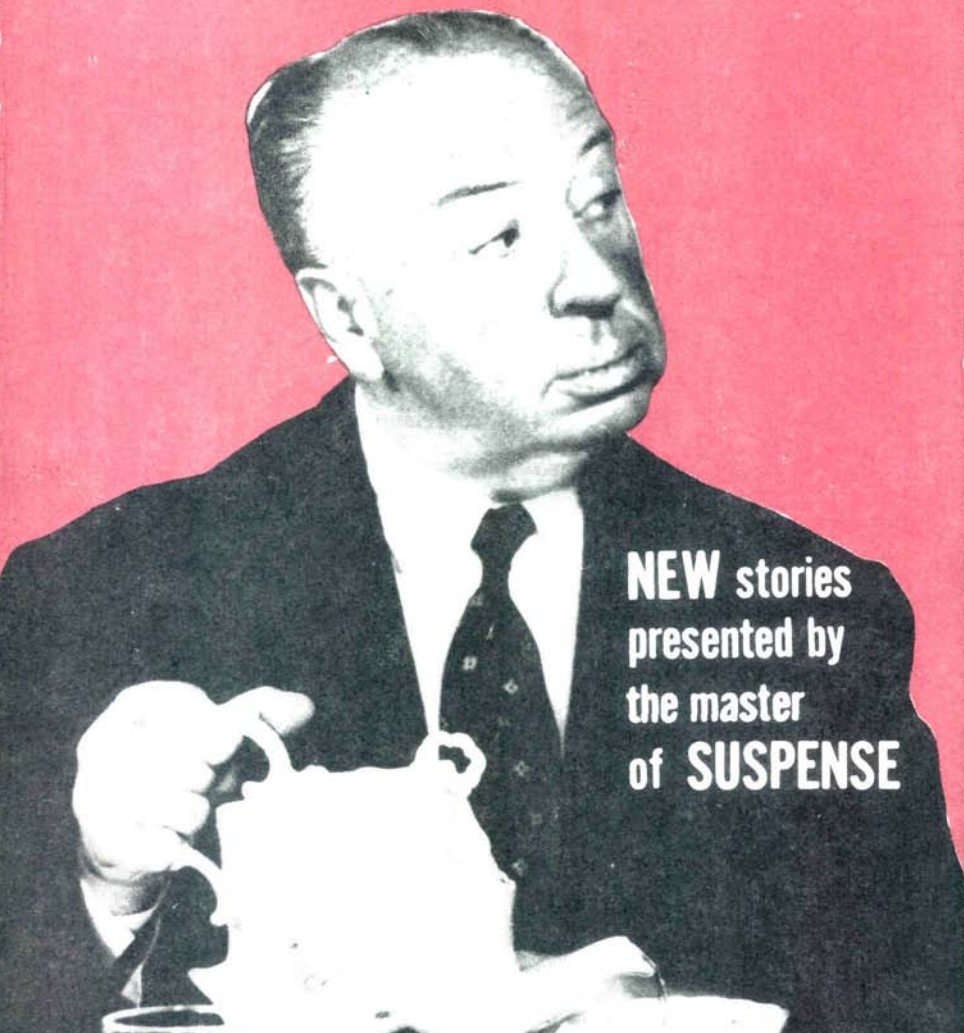
ALFRED

DECEMBER 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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

December 1968

Dear Reader:

Allow me to pour: strong mystery, robust suspense, heady crime, sweetened with humor and brought to full flavor herein by the minds and craft of some of the best writers of the macabre, both experienced professional and talented newcomer; the right cup, in this Thanksgiving season, for everyone.

I have been doing other "poring" of late, also, such as that done over Christmas gift catalogs. After realizing I came dangerously close to ordering an umbrella for a skindiver and swim fins for a nice old lady, I have decided to take my own advice as set forth on Page 121.

As a service to mankind, I recommend gift subscriptions to this magazine for your doctor and your dentist, as well, so that all their other patients, too, may see how fortunate they really are in being able to keep the appointment. Those of the scalpel and the drill likely will notice a change in outlook; some patients may even smile in retrospect.

I shall not keep you further, except in suspense. Please assume a comfortable pose, and savor this month's tales of fascinating people in the most critical times of their lives.

Alfred Hitchcock

Richard E. Decker, Publisher
Gladys Foster Decker, Editorial Director
Ernest M. Hutter, Editor

Patricia Hitchcock — Associate Editor
Marguerite Blair Deacon — Art Director

VOLUME 13, NO. 12 DECEMBER 1968

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

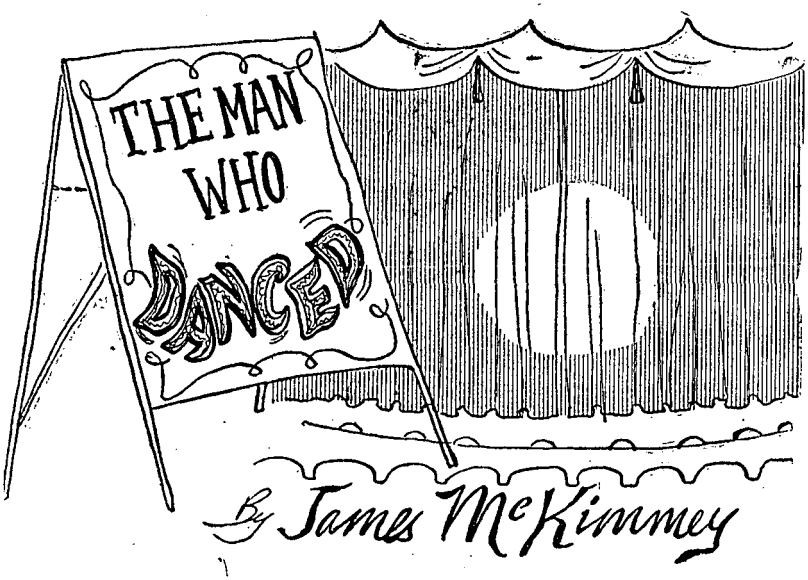
CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

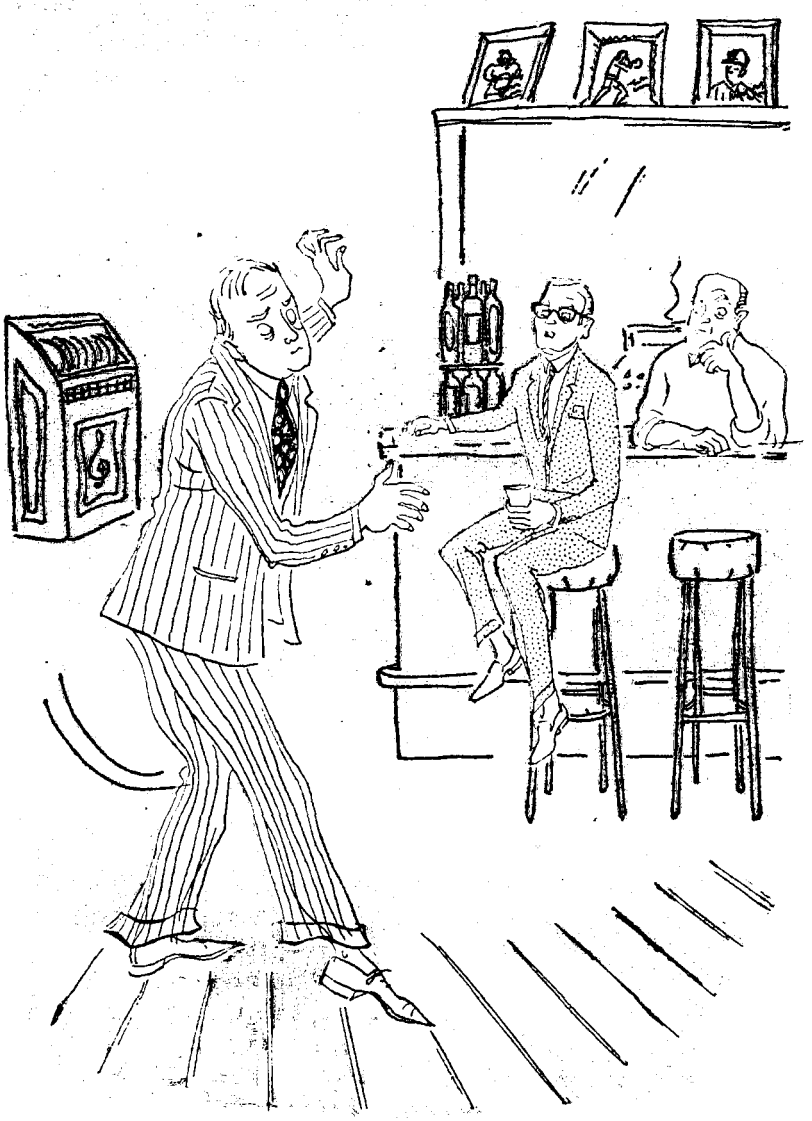
SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 13, No. 12, December 1968. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions $6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $7.00 (In U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of addresses should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Printed in the U.S.A.

"One's home is the safest refuge," the ancients decreed, but skeptics abound.



SOME might have thought it puzzling that Bernie McFarlane would choose the Dixon Bar on West 43rd Street for his going-home drink, but to Bernie the selection was based on sound judgment. It was one of those places that consisted of a long narrow interior and an aproned bartender who presided behind a dark-wooded bar. Most of Bernie's clients would have been appalled at the general run of customers the Dixon attracted: laborers, low-paid clerks, the retired bums; but to Bernie, at least before he witnessed Frank Greevy go into his dance, the Dixon represented a reliable certainty, a place of estimable reclusion from the world of his responsibility. Too, it served an absolutely honest drink at an aston-



ishingly low price, a rarity today.

On that April evening when Bernie was in his office on 42nd Street, tidying up his desk, he had not even known Frank Greevy's name. The man was simply one of those figures he had so often seen sitting at the long bar in the Dixon; sheer familiarity had obscured any particular identity about the man. It was simply that Mondays through Fridays, when Bernie quit working in the early evening, he expected to walk over to the Dixon and find Frank Greevy on the tenth stool, in the midst of the other regulars. Frank Greevy, then, was nothing more than an accouterment of the Dixon Bar, like the bottles and the television set and the jukebox and the malty smell of beer.

An essentially neat man, Bernie rose from his cleared desk, feeling a pronounced sense of well-being and achievement. In his middle forties, he had never cut a dashing figure. He was small and his face was round as a pumpkin, a fact particularly emphasized now that he had lost most of his graying hair. Glasses over his large eyes gave him a somewhat startled look, yet the success of recent years had placed a certain surety in his manner. If you looked carefully past the lenses of those glasses you would look into the eyes of a man who had made his way nicely and who expected to go a touch farther.

Bernie took his jacket from a rack and surveyed the room with pride. Long ago, when he lived in Lafayette, Indiana and was attending Jefferson High, he'd had a great desire to demonstrate a show-business flair but he had created no more pyrotechnics than a gray mouse darting among shadows. Still, he had studied with zeal and on graduation day he had surprised everyone by being named valedictorian. One of Bernie's great strengths was tenacity.

He'd used that stength, after the war, to get through law school at Indiana University in a minimum of time. That done, he'd packed his bag and come to New York to seek fortune. He hadn't found it immediately, but he had found Margery, a Bronx girl. He had then gradually become a successful attorney specializing in theatrical contracts and the financial problems of the theatre's participants.

It was true that he still had not found immense fortune, but an average of forty thousand a year wasn't bad for someone from the east side of Lafayette. Now, he and Margery, with three exceptionally bright children, had escaped the split level in Long Island to live in a co-op on East 69th Street. The walls of his office, covered with

posters announcing the various shows for which he had handled the legal problems, were a constant reassurance that he had moved into the big league and he was now close enough to the glamour of the New York theatre that the early desire for show-business flash had been satisfied.

Bernie's telephone began ringing as he put on his hat and topcoat. He answered and heard Margery say, "Bernie, it's Amanda. Rod's drinking again."

"Oh, damn!" he said, picturing his wife holding the telephone. She was a tiny, pretty girl who shared his ambitions but believed that he ought to be tougher than he was.

Rod Vanderhorn, as everyone in the world knew, was a venerable star of stage and screen who had only recently begun to slip from position. Amanda Lee, as everyone in the world knew, was also a venerable star, who still managed to look twenty years younger than she was and now appeared frequently on television game shows. What almost no one knew was that, after five marriages apiece, they had, for reasons unaccountable to Bernie, elected to live with each other.

"It doesn't mean you have to baby-sit his drunks just because you handle his money," Margery said sharply.

"I know," he said, feeling depressed now as he faced the possibility of spending what was left of the night with Rod Vanderhorn.

"Amanda's *using* you, Bernie," Margery said. "If she's going to sleep with him, why can't she handle him instead of calling you?"

"Well," Bernie said, remembering his last time with Rod, "if she calls later and wants me, I'll simply tell her I can no longer assist in that particular difficulty."

"You know you won't. Are you coming home now?"

"Just a drink somewhere to soothe the nerves. Then straight home. I won't be over a half hour."

"Do you know where you're going to have the drink?"

"I like to surprise myself." He had never told her about the Dixon, and he never would.

"If I didn't know you so well I'd think you were having an affair with someone."

"Well," Bernie said, smiling, "maybe it's true."

Walking through the crisp air toward the Dixon, Bernie felt better. This was a time when he particularly realized that he indeed lived in New York City. One had to be a convert to realize fully any new status, he knew, and this city, with the gray concrete rising all around him, was his new status.

He turned on 44th and walked

past the Algonquin. He could go in there and sit at the small front bar where he might take up a fairly civilized conversation with the bartender, or he could select a round table in the lobby near the old grandfather's clock and demonstrate a show of authority by banging the hand bell for service, but it would not be the same thing as the Dixon, not at all. He turned again, on the next block, and minutes later he was there.

The hour that Bernie left his office—usually shortly after eight o'clock, matching the hours kept by most of the people with whom he dealt—was not a crowded hour in the Dixon. He counted seven other customers, including Frank Greevy, at the other end of the bar. Pete, the muscular bartender with a broken nose, came over and lifted a bottle of Scotch, poured generously over ice, then put the drink in front of Bernie. There was something pleasurable walking into a bar like the Dixon and drinking one of the world's best Scotches for forty-five cents.

"Cold out?" Pete asked in his husky voice.

"Not bad," Bernie said, paying.

Pete put the money in the register and ambled back to stand midway along the bar, one foot propped up on a shelf, silent, impassive, waiting for the next signal. Bernie lifted his glass, sighed, and sipped carefully. A gray figure, wearing a gray suit and stained gray hat and shoes gray with dust, got up and moved back to the jukebox to examine the selections studiously. Bernie had no worry about it. The man always chose standards that Bernie liked. There wasn't a rock number in that machine.

Stardust, reliable and comfortable, began playing, and Bernie found himself relaxing totally. The television would not be turned on until later. If a stranger came in and asked for it sooner, he would be ignored.

Bernie felt entirely detached from all other things as the night traffic flashed by outside. He could not entirely explain to himself why he so enjoyed being here with these other men who were so different from himself. Perhaps it was because they reminded him of where he had come from and so where he had gone. If he should mention to any of them that he knew such luminaries as Rod Vanderhorn or Amanda Lee, they would undoubtedly stare at him with disbelief, but of course he told them no such thing. He told them nothing, and they told him nothing. Still, there was a feeling of communal security here, undisturbed, serene, restful, predictable.

Stardust finished, and a hotel-styled orchestra began playing *Tea For Two*. Bernie could not remember ever hearing it before in the Dixon but he'd always liked it. Suddenly the man Bernie would later come to know as Frank Greevy got up from his stool, turned in a sharp about-face, then walked to the center of the room and began to dance with an invisible partner. Bernie turned on his stool and stared in the astonished fashion of the others.

Greevy, a tall man who appeared to be near Bernie's age, was lean, his face long and sad-looking. He always wore the same suit, a pin-striped gray flannel with broad lapels and trousers so large that they flapped as he moved, a high-collared white shirt, and a tie which had come back into style because it was so wide.

Greevy's face did not change expression as he danced. His eyes were lost in concentration. He turned, very gracefully, and moved toward the front of the room. Then he came back, walking straight ahead as though holding the girl to one side. He took his invisible companion in his arms again, pivoted, did a fancy series of little steps, then finally dipped low as the record finished, the front edge of his long jacket touching the floor.

He returned to his stool and sat down, looking just as he had before the record began. Someone coughed self-consciously. A third record began playing.

Bernie McFarlane swiveled back to the bar, feeling as though something had gone terribly wrong in the Dixon.

Pete the bartender put his foot down and walked over to Bernie. "What the hell do you think?"

"Is he trying to tie one on?"

"He's had one beer, like always." Pete drummed his fingers rapidly against the bar, then returned to his previous position.

There was usually a faint hum of voices from the regulars as they conversed, but when the third record ended there was absolute silence in the room. Bernie had not finished half of his drink, yet he felt as though he should leave. Pete stood frowning at the middle of the bar, then he hit the no-sale button on the cash register, took out a coin and walked around to the jukebox. He punched the selection and returned to his place.

Tea For Two began again. Everyone looked at Frank Greevy, who got up and repeated his performance. Bernie finished the rest of his drink and left.

When he walked into his building, both the doorman and the elevator man seemed unusually

cheerful. The children didn't demand as much attention as usual. Margery had found high spirits since she'd spoken to him on the telephone. Amanda Lee telephoned later to say that Rod Vanderhorn had passed out peacefully and there was nothing to worry about. The evening was quite successful. Yet, as he went to sleep that night, Bernie was remembering that sad-faced figure moving through the motions of his dance. It was simply, he thought, that he'd never expected anything but what he'd wanted from the Dixon Bar. Tonight it had let him down.

Even so, the following evening Bernie found himself unusually eager to finish his work in order to get over to the Dixon and see what was happening. As he walked in, the jukebox began playing *Tea For Two*. Frank Greevy was at it again.

"How long has it been going on?" Bernie asked as Pete poured his drink.

Pete shrugged his fighter's shoulders. "Hour, give or take."

Bernie knew, of course, that the Dixon was definitely not the place it had been two days ago. "Don't you think it ought to be stopped?"

"I asked him two or three times why he did it," Pete said. "He'd just say, 'Did what?' They'll play that thing all night to see him do it, acting like a bunch of kids."

Greevy performed his low dip, and Bernie said, "Why don't you incapacitate the machine?"

"We'll lose money. But maybe you're right. If I hear that tune again I'll go nuts."

Pete pulled the juke's plug and placed an out-of-order sign on it. There were some grumblings down the bar. Bernie finished his drink and walked out, feeling that it was never going to be the same in the Dixon again.

As he stood beside the curb looking for a cab, he realized that the tall man who danced had also come outside. The man smiled at Bernie and said, "Good evening, Mr. McFarlane."

That night Bernie and Margery saw a play at the New Theatre, but Bernie could not keep his mind on it. He kept remembering that man stating his name in a reedy voice tinged with an accent of the South. He had not remotely believed that anyone in the Dixon, customer or bartender, knew who he was. Feeling that he was totally inconspicuous and anonymous had been a part of the charm. Obviously he had deceived himself.

The weekend, which included cycling with the kids in Central Park, helped lessen the feeling that the Dixon Bar was destroyed for him. When quitting time ar-

rived the next Monday evening, Bernie had almost convinced himself—though underneath he knew that it was wishful thinking—that the place could be everything it had been in the past.

The moment he stepped in, he saw that the man who danced was not at his stool. As Pete poured his drink, Bernie asked, "What happened to him?"

Pete shrugged. "Don't know."

Bernie looked down at the regulars so familiar to him now, but the absence of that man very definitely made the room seem strange. "I don't remember him ever not being here."

"Neither do I."

"What's his name, anyway?"

"Frank Greevy. Desk clerk over at the Bell Hotel." Pete returned to the center of the bar, frowning.

Bernie sat looking into the contents of his glass, wondering what had gone wrong with the man. Slow mental deterioration? Something the result of a recent shock? Brain damage? Or was it possibly a hereditary condition? He could go find the hotel where the man was employed and inquire about him. That, of course, was ridiculous. This was New York, after all. Not even Pete would do anything like that. He must merely accept the fact that nothing remained the same, ever. Leaving his drink half-finished, he felt that very possibly he was done with the Dixon.

The next morning, when Bernie saw in his newspaper that Frank Greevy had been arrested for murder and grand theft, he was thoroughly startled. He came across the story on the second page during breakfast, and covered the facts swiftly.

Frank Greevy, aged 44, a native of Meridian, Mississippi, had been employed at the Bell Hotel on West 43rd Street as a day clerk for the past twenty-two years.

Discovery of the murder of the hotel's resident manager, Colin Avery, aged 56, had been made by a maid, Ruby Higgins, shortly after she'd observed Greevy walking from the manager's office to a closet at the end of the lobby while carrying an iron replica of a field howitzer of the sort under Avery's command during World War II.

Avery lay dead of a head wound, on the floor beside his desk. He had been struck by a heavily weighted instrument. The howitzer replica, which normally rested upon Avery's desk, was found in the closet, blood-stained.

The drawer of Avery's desk had been unlocked by keys found on the rug; money kept there had been removed. The owner of the hotel, Morton Granich, had stated

that at least four thousand dollars had been stolen.

Frank Greevy denied his guilt.

Bernie McFarlane did not tell Margery about it. She would not have understood, he was certain. She was a Bronx girl, after all, and such girls simply would not understand why Bernie felt so sad.

It was with some relief that he stepped into his office and said hello to the cheery face of his young secretary, Donna. He sat down at his desk, trying to forget the tragedy of Mr. Frank Greevy by concentrating on his work, but only moments later his secretary said, "Someone wishes to speak to you, Mr. McFarlane. A Mr. Frank Greevy? Will you take it?"

He was not so much just startled as shocked. "Well—yes. Of course. I . . ."

"Mr. McFarlane?" drawled the reedy voice.

"Mr. Greevy, is it?"

"Greevy, all right. I would've called sooner only I couldn't find your home number in the book."

"Well, it isn't listed, you see. And—I don't know what to say, Mr. Greevy. I read about it, of course . . ." He cleared his throat, feeling warm. The man had come unhinged and committed murder and theft, but why was he phoning Bernie McFarlane?

"It's just that I want you to represent me. Could you come over and talk about it, Mr. McFarlane?"

Mr. Frank Greevy didn't give Bernie a chance to argue the point, because he hung up.

After interviewing the man, Bernie had Donna cancel the rest of his appointments and went home. Margery, dressed in shirt and slacks and with a turban over her hair, looked at him in surprise. Bernie sighed, knowing she would fail to understand, but there was no avoiding the fact that he would have to tell her now. He put his hat and coat in a closet and looked at the large livingroom which Margery had decorated superbly. Bernie was not always comfortable in this room, but he was honestly proud of it, and he liked to entertain people in it.

"Are you ill, Bernie?" Margery asked.

"I'm never ill."

"But you're upset and excited. And don't tell me you're never upset and excited."

"A cup of coffee might help, if you'd care to join me."

"I happen to have brewed a pot. You'd better sit down. You even look frightened."

He sat down on one of the suede chairs, and she brought in the coffee tray and seated herself on the other side of the coffee table. "Now."

He told her the essential details.

She stared accusingly at him with her dark eyes. "You don't even *know* him."

"Not really."

"Not *any* way. Where is this bar, anyway?"

"A hop and a skip from the office. That's not the point. The point is that he wants me to represent him."

He kept thinking of the man in that chilly police room with its smell of disinfectant and guilt. Frank Greevy had looked at him with trusting, possibly worshipful, eyes, saying, "I knew from the minute I first saw you come into the Dixon that there was a man with class. We talked about it, Pete included. It didn't take any time at all to find out you were a lawyer, with people coming in and out of your office nobody would hardly believe." Bernie had been astonished, then he'd felt embarrassed, thinking of all those evenings when he'd sat there thinking he was not at all out of place.

"Sometimes," Margery said, "I think you're going to be a blockheaded Hoosier the rest of your life. You haven't tried a criminal case since you were at dear old I.U. And that was fake. You've *never* tried a real one, let alone a murder case!"

"I was thinking of getting Arthur Gunchrist to plead for him."

"How in the world would he pay for Arthur *Gun*christ?"

"Artie's been mad for Amanda Lee ever since he saw her in pictures when he was a child. Older women excite him, he told me. When he found out I knew Amanda personally, he said he'd do anything for an introduction. So I thought of a small dinner, without Rod. They're not for each other anyway. That way—Well, it's not working out. Greevy made it clear. It has to be me and only me."

"You're proud of that, aren't you?"

"Shouldn't I be?" he asked defiantly.

"All right!" she said. "Represent the nut. Get soft and charge him a five-dollar fee and let him drown and make a fool of yourself. Do you realize that before yesterday you didn't even know his *name*?"

There was no doubt about it, Bernie decided later; she was definitely a girl from the Bronx.

The day the trial began in earnest, Bernie sat in place in the large gray court building, his notes, taken scrupulously over the preceding weeks, collected neatly before him. Frank Greevy sat beside him, looking rural despite his years in the city, awed and entirely naive. Bernie had gotten quite used to Frank Greevy by now.

He'd developed a great protective feeling toward the man. To Bernie, wrong had always been wrong, and right had always been right. He'd never cheated or wronged anyone in his life, and he did not intend to. Now, he knew that Frank Greevy was not guilty of the crimes for which he was accused. Therefore Frank Greevy had been wronged. He had succeeded in freeing the man on bail, and now that the trial had finally arrived, it was Bernie's job to vindicate the man's honor entirely.

The jury had been chosen. The preliminaries were out of the way. Now the prosecutor, a thin young man who had developed a cocky, patronizing manner when he'd learned that Bernie had never tried a criminal case in his life, began presenting his case. He was showing off, Bernie knew, because seated on the broad mahogany seats were several of Bernie's more illustrious show-business acquaintances, including Amanda Lee and Rod Vanderhorn. Also there, but hardly inviting the attention of the prosecutor, was the Dixon crowd, including Pete the bartender.

The prosecution quickly traversed the path that Bernie knew it would, including introducing sanity reports on Frank Greevy, as well as the fact that only Frank Greevy's fingerprints had been found on the instrument responsible for the hotel manager's death. Bernie remained steadily silent. All of his friends, clients and drinking associates, as well as Margery, kept looking at him worriedly. The prosecution was speedily producing a firm case, but not once, Bernie noted carefully, was any mention made of the fact that the accused man invariably danced to *Tea For Two.*

Before adjournment that day, the prosecutor called on a maid, Ruby Higgins, who had discovered Frank Greevy leaving the manager's office with the bloody howitzer replica in his hand. A slight girl with a tired face and nervous eyes, she kept plunging a hand through stringy hair, but she told her story evenly and without hesitation.

"They never did like each other," she said. "Mr. Avery and Mr. Greevy, I mean." She looked at Greevy, and Bernie knew, of course, that the girl disliked him intensely—Greevy had readily admitted that. "They argued all the time," she went on. "I guess Mr. Greevy thought he could knock him on the head, steal the money and make it look like somebody else—"

"Objection," Bernie said quietly.

"Sustained," said the magistrate.

It was the first word that Bernie had uttered since the prosecution had begun its presentation. Margery, the theatrical group and the Dixon gang looked at him with faint hope.

"Go ahead, please," said the prosecutor in his high, thin voice. "Restrict your testimony to fact, not what you guess."

She continued: "I was up to the fourth floor just about eleven that morning. I had my cleaning basket and fresh towels on the elevator, so I left the door open to hold it on that floor while I unloaded, like I always do. I rolled the basket down the hall, but I saw I didn't have any cleanser so I went back to the elevator and rode down to the first floor. When I was getting off, Mr. Greevy came walking out of Mr. Avery's office with that bloody thing in his hand. I saw Mr. Avery was slumped over his desk with his head bashed in, so I screamed and ran outside and told a cabbie to get the cops. He did."

The prosecutor smiled. "So the elevator was continually on the fourth floor during the time you unloaded your cleaning basket and the towels. Then you used it to return to the first floor, which means that no one else used it during that span of time—perhaps ten or fifteen minutes?"

"Anyway that, on account I took time out to smoke a cigarette, too."

"Did Mr. Greevy expect you to be on the fourth floor at that time?"

"Like always. I work like a clock."

"As previous testimony has indicated, the first-floor window leading to the fire-escape ladder in back was locked from the inside?"

"Always," she nodded.

"And Frank Greevy and the victim, Mr. Avery, were the only people on the first floor at that time?"

"That's right."

"Your witness," the prosecutor said to Bernie.

Bernie said to the maid, "You stated that you saw the deceased slumped on the desk with his head bashed in, as you put it. But did you actually step all the way into Mr. Avery's office?"

"No!"

"Did you possibly notice on what floor the elevator was after you'd asked the cabbie to call the police? After you'd gone back inside?"

"I never did go back in there again, with people getting killed that way! I quit on the spot!"

"Thank you," Bernie said, sitting down.

The prosecutor called a squat man with a gnarled, dark face and said, his voice becoming a shade

more dramatic, "You drive a cab by profession?"

"I do."

"You were parked near the entrance to the Bell Hotel the day Mr. Avery was murdered in his office?"

"Waiting for business, yeah."

"Do you remember how long you were parked there?"

"From ten-thirty in the morning to five of eleven. Time's money, in my racket. I know how long I don't do business."

"And did you see anyone enter or leave the Bell Hotel during that time you were parked there?"

"Not a soul."

"Your witness."

Bernie shook his head.

That late afternoon, when Bernie stepped out into the dark corridor, no one waited for him but Margery. She said grimly, "Avery and Greevy were the only ones on the first floor when Avery was killed. Greevy's a goner, isn't he?"

"Not necessarily."

"Couldn't you have done something more than speak up exactly twice all day?"

"Never mind," he said.

"I won't," she said, lifting her chin.

The next day, the illustriousness of certain of Bernie's followers drew the press. Cameras flashed as he stepped into the court building carrying a briefcase and a tape recorder. Margery said, "Now the whole world can read about the slaughter."

"That's right," Bernie said. "Slaughter of Mr. Prosecutor."

The prosecution completed its presentation early that morning.

Bernie began his by offering a typed report as evidence. He summarized it vocally, moving about in quick, confident steps as he talked:

"Let it be noted that on April twenty-third a man named Maxwell Starling was found at Martha's Vineyard with his head crushed. The contents of the victim's wallet had been removed. Possible motive for the killing: robbery. Identity of the killer remains unknown."

"Objection," said the prosecutor. "There is no relationship between that and this case."

"There is," Bernie stated. "I shall prove it."

"Go ahead then," the judge said with the weary indifference of a man who already knew how the case would go.

Bernie remembered the turn of luck when Frank Greevy—out on bail and seated in his small hotel room—had pointed to a small newspaper item relating the murder of Maxwell Starling. "The

Great Starling, he called himself. I guess he tricked around with me pretty good. I didn't mind. Just never knew what fool thing he might have had me do. He liked to keep in practice, he said."

"I don't understand," Bernie had replied.

"A hypnotist. He put on an act. Little clubs around town and the borsch circuit. He was staying in the hotel a few days ago. Now he gets himself murdered. This place must be bad luck all around."

Bernie's brain began moving quickly. "Was he staying here on the day Colin Avery was killed?"

Greevy had nodded. "Number three-twenty-three."

Now, Bernie paced toward the jury, looking at them with bright eyes, enjoying himself. "I would like to call as my first and only witness the accused, Mr. Frank Greevy."

Whispers crossed the room. The prosecutor looked at Bernie with surprise. Frank Greevy stood and walked to the stand, was sworn, then sat down.

"Mr. Greevy," Bernie said, leaning toward the witness chair, "do you recall walking into your manager's office and striking him on the head with a howitzer replica and taking money from his desk drawer and walking out to deposit the howitzer in the closet at the far end of the lobby? Do you, sir?"

"No, sir."

Bernie turned as though he'd accomplished something astonishing. He smiled at spectators, jury and judge. He walked back to his table where he snapped a switch on the tape recorder. The room filled with an orchestral rendition of *Tea For Two.*

Frank Greevy stepped down and began dancing with his invisible partner.

The judge stared incredulously. Whispers turned into talking. Somebody laughed. The judge banged his gavel. Bernie shut off the recorder. Frank Greevy returned to his seat.

Bernie again leaned toward Greevy. "Do you always dance like that when you hear *Tea For Two*?"

"I don't understand," Greevy said.

"You're not aware that you just got up and performed a dance?"

"You must be joshing."

Bernie began his quick-stepping walk again. "Your honor, the prosecution has attempted to indicate that the defendant and deceased were the only persons on the first floor of the Bell Hotel when the deceased became so. He has attempted to indicate that the defendant deliberately and with wholly sane intent stepped into the

office of Mr. Colin Avery, his immediate supervisor, clubbed him on the head with the model howitzer now resting on that exhibit table over there, removed the money from Mr. Avery's desk drawer, and then walked out of the office to the closet where he deposited the howitzer, after which, presumably, he hid the money in some fashion. Now I ask you, are these the actions of a man in command of his own mind? A murder and robbery so obvious as that?"

"If counsel had desired to enter a plea of insanity—"

Bernie held up his hand. "Just please let me proceed, your honor."

"Go ahead then."

"Let us assume that there were *more* than two people on the first floor."

"Objection, your honor," the prosecutor said loudly, standing.

Bernie whirled. "On what grounds! I am simply defending my client!"

"Objection overruled," said the judge.

Bernie's head bobbed. "Let us assume, your honor, that a third party was inside that office. It is a matter of record that Miss Higgins did not step all the way in there, is it not? Let us assume that this person had already struck the deceased and wiped the howitzer clean of his fingerprints and robbed the drawer of its currency, and then induced the defendant to pick up the howitzer and carry it through the lobby to the closet, as observed by Miss Higgins. Assume—"

"Objection!"

"Overruled!"

"Assume," Bernie continued, "that the can of cleanser Miss Higgins found missing had been removed from her basket by someone who wished her to return downstairs and act as a witness to the defendant depositing the murder weapon in that closet. Assume this person to be entirely familiar with the routine of the hotel's personnel. Assume—"

"Assumptions, assumptions!" the prosecutor cried.

"Assume," Bernie went on, unbothered, "that this person was a professional entertainer who had frequently practiced his art of hypnosis on the defendant!"

The prosecutor stood up, sat down, then began blinking rapidly.

"Assume," Bernie said, snapping a hand in the direction of Frank Greevy, "that the defendant had been quite willing to be hypnotized and found no reluctance to perform such harmless acts as dancing to the strains of *Tea For Two* —*or* walking into his manager's office and picking up that model

howitzer and carrying it to the closet. But *murder*? Against his *will*? Hardly!"

"Objection!" the prosecutor shouted.

"Overruled!"

Bernie smiled again, in firm control. "Assume that the third person, the hypnotist, was named Maxwell Starling—The Great Starling—as he was known professionally. This is the same gentleman I previously described as having been murdered and robbed at Martha's Vineyard on April twenty-third. But on the day that Mr. Colin Avery was slain in his office, Maxwell Starling was alive and registered in the Bell Hotel where he always stayed when he was in New York City. Assume that Mr. *Starling* smashed Mr. Avery's head with that model howitzer, wiped it clean, took the money from the drawer, and then, in some fashion, triggered the defendant into leaving his post at the front desk to walk into Mr. Avery's office, pick up the howitzer and carry it to the closet as witnessed by Miss Higgins. Mr. Starling might have employed the aid of music, using a small tape recorder, or possibly a tape player of some sort—"

"Objection!" the prosecutor called wildly. "Pure speculation about what was used, *if* it was!"

"Sustained," the judge declared.

Bernie smiled calmly. "However it was done, then. But done. I say that Maxwell Starling committed that murder, after planning it carefully and expertly. Once it was done, while Miss Higgins was running outside and Mr. Greevy was still in his trance, Starling simply shut off his music, got on the elevator and returned to his room. Days later someone apparently discovered that he was carrying a large sum of money, and, in turn, killed him for it. That speculation—"

"That's all the hell it is!" the prosecutor called. "Speculation! I object!"

"Sustained," said the judge. "And watch your language!"

"Determination of the motive behind the death of Maxwell Starling," Bernie said, "is for the authorities. I agree. I simply wish to prove that my client did not do what he has been accused of doing."

"I submit—" the prosecutor began.

"I am not finished," Bernie said, stepping over to the exhibit table. He picked up the howitzer replica. He swung it through the air as though striking a man on the head. The spectators and jury gasped. Bernie's eyes had become even brighter. "Precisely how the de-

ceased was slain. Could you have done that, Mr. Greevy?"

Frank Greevy wagged his head solemnly. "Never."

Bernie put the howitzer down and walked over to his table, remembering that it had taken less tries than he'd thought it would to find the right trigger. "I would ask the court's permission that regardless of what the defendant might do in the next moments that he be allowed to do it until I say otherwise."

"All right," said the judge.

Bernie turned a switch. This time there came the melody of *In The Good Old Summer Time.*

Frank Greevy stood up and walked to the table holding the model howitzer. He picked it up and marched toward a swinging door leading to the corridor. At the door, he said something to the officer there, paused for an answer, then disappeared into the corridor. Bernie switched the recorder off and said, "You may get him now, Officer."

When the two reappeared, Greevy appeared faintly bewildered. He replaced the howitzer and hurried back to his witness seat.

"What did he say to you, Officer?" Bernie said.

"He asked where was the closet?"

On the following day, when the prosecutor made a pathetic attempt to glean testimony from a medical doctor of advanced years who did not believe in hypnotism, Bernie simply began whistling *Tea For Two* and Frank Greevy went into his dance. Bernie was reproved by the judge, but the effect on the jury, he knew, was considerable. When, finally, he summarized his case, he knew that he'd never given a finer performance.

The jury deliberated less than five minutes and brought back the verdict that Bernie had expected. He was swarmed by the Dixon crowd as well as his own personal acquaintances, including Margery, who hugged him proudly and joyfully.

The following Friday evening, just before time for Bernie to close up his office, the telephone rang. It had been a very busy week following the trial. He had been besieged by so many requests to defend in criminal court that he was seriously thinking of giving up the theatrical world, with its taxation problems and contractural complexities, for the career of a trial lawyer. He lifted the phone, saying briskly, "Yes?"

"Frank Greevy, Mr. McFarlane. I was thinking I'd be real proud if you was to come over to my room here and have a drink with me.

I've got a nice surprise to tell you about."

Bernie had not been able to get to the Dixon all week. He'd wanted to, despite the fact that everything about the place would be changed for him. He would have preferred it to Frank Greevy's dingy room, but he had developed a firm compassion for the man and felt that he couldn't refuse.

"Certainly, Mr. Greevy," he said. "I'll be honored."

Frank Greevy's room was on the second floor of the hotel. The furnishings consisted of a bed, easy chair, bureau and hot plate. A single window looked out on a dirty light shaft. The room, with its mildewed odor, made Bernie feel mildly depressed for the first time since the trial but he attempted to hide the fact.

Greevy absently turned on a small radio, saying, "Just sit down right there on the bed, Mr. McFarlane." He grinned and opened a drawer to lift out a bottle of Scotch. "Noticed it was your poison."

"That's a nice surprise, Mr. Greevy," Bernie said. "Very thoughtful of you."

Greevy poured a small amount into a water glass and gave it to Bernie. Then he poured himself twice as much and sat down in the easy chair, still smiling. "I just don't think I've been able to do enough for you. Fifty dollars ain't much to have your life saved. Was all I had to my name, Mr. McFarlane."

"Let's not talk about that anymore," Bernie said. He found himself annoyed over the difference in the size of drinks. He'd also noticed that Greevy had returned the bottle to the drawer, as though that was going to be all of the offering. Still—he didn't really want to stay any longer than was necessary as Margery had spent all week arranging a dinner party with their friends to celebrate his victory. "Law is not just money, Mr. Greevy. Law is honor as well. And it was certainly my honor to have represented you."

"You did it one hell of a way, I'll tell you that. I'm here in my own room, free and clear, and that's not all. Mr. Granich, who owns the hotel, come in earlier and told me I'm the new resident manager."

"By golly!" Bernie said with enthusiasm. "That's wonderful. That's marvelous!"

Greevy smiled again, tasted his Scotch, then fell silent, seemingly pleased with himself. Bernie sat with the glass in his hand, aware of the radio now, realizing that a disc jockey, who had read a newspaper story of the trial, was

dedicating the next number to Frank Greevy.

"Do you hear that, Mr. Greevy?" he said. "You're famous now."

"How about that?" Greevy grinned widely and reached to turn up the volume.

The familiar melody of *Tea For Two* began. Greevy began swinging his glass in time with the music, eyes closed.

Bernie stared at the man, feeling his face turning hot. "Mr. Greevy!" he exploded.

Greevy opened his eyes. "How's that?"

"Why aren't you dancing?"

Greevy pursed his lips, let his breath out and then took another sip of Scotch. "Well, it just didn't enter my mind. Guess I knew they couldn't take me to trial again. Just didn't think about having to do it anymore."

Bernie stood up, rage flaring through him. "You planned it, didn't you? Then faked all that business of being hypnotized!"

"He had it coming. Company commander in World War Two! I heard about it for twenty-two years! Ran this place like he still was. Kept talking about commanding them guns. I couldn't stand it anymore. I gave it to him in the head with the one on his desk!"

"And stole the money!"

"It was there, wasn't it? I gummed it up under the front desk and picked it up later—"

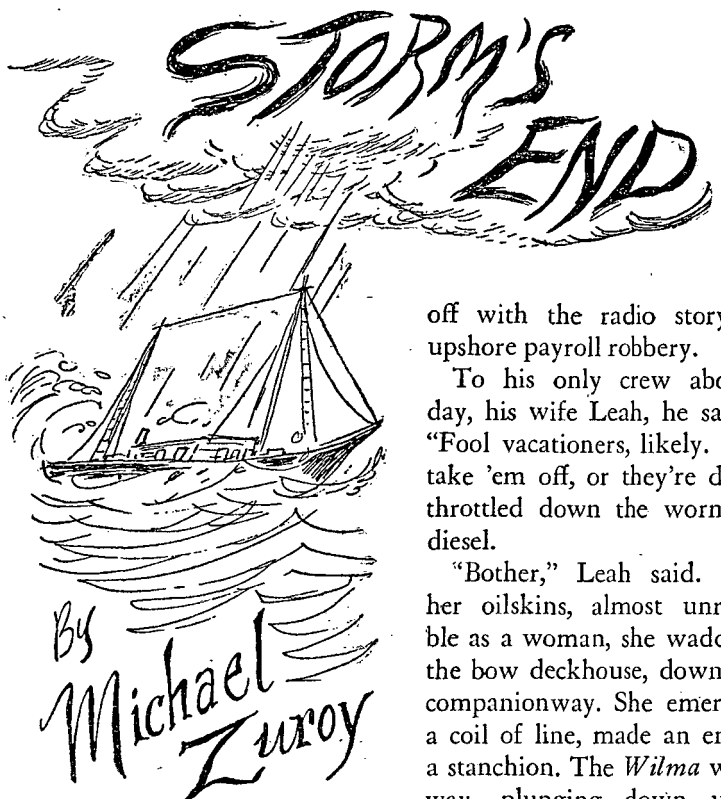
"After I got you out on bail, you sneaked up to Martha's Vineyard and killed Maxwell Starling to protect yourself! Admit it!"

"A man's got to do what he's got to do, don't he? I can't figure out why you're getting all excited like that, Mr. McFarlane. Was a compliment to you, wasn't it? I put an awful lot of it on you. It might not have worked with someone else handling it—but you done it perfect. I had *faith* in you, Mr. McFarlane!"

Bernie felt himself trembling. He put on his hat and went down in the wobbling elevator, then strode out of the lobby, eyes stinging. In the chill of the outside, he looked down the street and saw the sign of the Dixon Bar. It seemed blurred for a few moments, then it became very clear. He turned and walked rapidly in the other direction.

Then he began running.

Allegedly, a man can lose neither the past nor the future; for how can one take from him that which is not his?



IN A rising sea south of Gloucester, the trawler *Wilma* came upon a small cruiser, pitching, helpless with power gone. Old Cap'n Giles Barlow made out three on board; no reason to connect them right off with the radio story on the upshore payroll robbery.

To his only crew aboard that day, his wife Leah, he said testily, "Fool vacationers, likely. Bound to take 'em off, or they're done." He throttled down the worn, rattling diesel.

"Bother," Leah said. Squat in her oilskins, almost unrecognizable as a woman, she waddled from the bow deckhouse, down the steel companionway. She emerged with a coil of line, made an end fast to a stanchion. The *Wilma* was losing way, plunging down upon the cruiser. Leah braced against the wind and, with a painful effort that seemed to drain her body, tossed the line.

A man seized the line and all hauled. The cruiser came, welter-

ing, pounding against the *Wilma's* hull. Clumsily, the three men scrambled aboard, letting their boat fall away.

Their city raincoats were soaked, small protection against sea weather. Two held tightly to briefcases and Cap'n Giles eyed them suspiciously as they floundered along the deck to the deckhouse.

One, tall and lanky, said sourly, "Thanks." Then realizing that Leah was a woman, he added, "Thanks, ma'am."

Another said, "We could've drowned."

His tone made Cap'n Giles turn his stooped frame from the wheel to peer. Cap'n Giles' face was lined and sagging, but his eyes were sharp blue and he saw the terror of the sea on this husky man. Why would such a man challenge the sea this angry day? He said, "Sorry we couldn't secure your boat in this blow."

"Where's the rest of your crew?" asked the last man. His face was pale, fine-boned.

"Me and the missus is enough today. We ain't trawling."

"Just you two," the man said thoughtfully.

"Makes things simpler, Boyd," the lanky man said.

"That is so right, Andy. It makes me feel good when I see things simple like this."

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny boy," Leah said suddenly, staring at Boyd intently. "You're back from the sea. Oh, my boy, my boy."

Boyd's head twitched and he stepped back, watching her dubiously. "What's with you?"

"That ain't Johnny, pet," Cap'n Giles said, sighing. "Johnny's gone, remember? He ain't comin' back, never. This ain't him."

"Looks like him," the squat woman in oilskins said, her eyes never leaving Boyd. "Looks like Johnny would look, grown up older."

"There's always somebody looks like Johnny. You always think you're seein' Johnny again, but you ain't. Johnny's gone."

"Gone," Leah said. Her face cleared. "Course this ain't him. I know Johnny's gone. Sure looks like him, though."

"What's this?" Boyd asked.

"Lost our boy, many years ago," Cap'n Giles explained. "She took it awful hard, never got over it. Gets a spell now and then."

"I ought to be a grandmother," Leah said. "I ought to be playing with Johnny's children right now, 'stead of sailing out here on the lonely sea. I got a right to be a grandmother."

"Look, Cap," Boyd said sharply, "where you bound for?"

"A ways south'ard."

"Well, we were headed to a spot down the coast, about three hundred miles. Take us there, will you?"

"Can't."

"We'd pay well."

"Best I can do is put you off along the Cape."

"That's no good to us, old man."

Cap'n Giles said testily, "Ain't my lookout."

Casually, Boyd slid out an automatic pistol. His lips eased away from his teeth. "Now, okay?"

Cap'n Giles' eyes fixed upon the three. Three city men with briefcases who didn't belong upon the sea . . . The radio report, Harrington Machinery Company's payroll looted from an armored car by three men; over sixty thousand dollars stolen, a guard shot and

killed . . . It was almost certainty Cap'n Giles now felt about these three. He said, "Leave us be. You don't belong with us."

"Sure we don't, old man. Help us, you'll be rid of us. Give us trouble, we'll blast you both and dump you over. We'll try running this tub ourselves if we have to, but it'd be nicest for all if you help."

Either way, they mean to murder us, Cap'n Giles decided, except they'll wait longer if we help. They'd already murdered; wouldn't stop to leave a couple of old folks to point out their trail. He said, "Radio claims you got better than sixty thousand."

The three glanced quickly at one another; then Boyd grinned. "We did all right. Foxed them, too. No roadblocks out here; they never figured we'd take an ocean cruise. Only trouble, the damn boat broke down."

"Maybe it's just as well," the husky one of the three said, the one who had seemed afraid. "It's getting wild out here. At least we got a bigger boat now." He gave a small shudder, blinking out the deckhouse window at the spray exploding against the glass. Rain was beating down from a darkened sky and the gale's sad howling was rising. He shuddered again. "Look at all that lousy water waiting for us out there."

"Now, Herman, why don't you just make believe all that stuff is beer?" Andy said. "Wouldn't mind it then, hey? A tough hood like you, what are you scared of?"

"Well, old man?" Boyd said.

Yes, these were the ones, Cap'n Giles told himself. They would murder him and Leah, sure; the free way they were admitting who they were proved that. He said, "All right, I'll run you where you say. Got no choice."

"Smart," Boyd smiled. "Don't try any tricks. I'm no real sailor, but I can still read that compass. Now, you got any java? Any chow?"

"Oh, Johnny, boy, you're hungry," Leah said eagerly. "Just wait, mother'll take care of you."

"'Tain't Johnny," Cap'n Giles said patiently.

"Looks like Johnny."

"Johnny's dead."

"Yes, so he is. Looks like Johnny, though. Nice looking man."

"Shut up about Johnny, will you?" Boyd's voice was irritated.

Suddenly, a monster wave rose before them. Herman's mouth dropped open, his eyes bulged. Stricken and paralyzed, he watched it rushing down. The bulk of it curled over the bow, hovered over their heads. Down it slammed. The world outside the

windows disappeared in a roaring chaos of foam and spray, in a tilted, sliding mass of water. Forcing in through cracks, water slid across the floor of the deckhouse, sloshed at their feet. The *Wilma* lurched and dropped. When the window cleared, they saw that the deck was buried under water. For a moment, the boat refused to rise, seemed to be sinking deeper; then weakly, weakly, it floated back up, spilling dark green water. Cap'n Giles held on to the wheel with clawed, knowing hands.

An incoherent sound came from Herman. He was spread-eagled against the rear wall of the deckhouse. Boyd and Andy had stood their ground, but both looked wan and shaken.

Under Cap'n Giles' fixed eye, Herman slowly straightened, shamefaced. "Damn ocean," he muttered.

Cap'n Giles began to chuckle; a low chuckle, thin with age, but persistent.

"Shut up," snarled Herman.

Giles went on chuckling.

Herman's hand went to his breast pocket. "I'll plug you. Old wreck, I'll knock off what's left of your moldy carcass."

Cap'n Giles' voice deepened. "Aye, old wreck I am, but I ain't feared of the sea." He chuckled again. "Aye, it crashes, it thunders, it heaves, it don't fool me!" His chuckling changed to a wild, cackling mirth. "Hee, hee, hee!" he laughed, in the teeth of the gale. "Don't fool me a bit."

"He's got rocks in his head too," said Andy hoarsely.

Cap'n Giles voice deepened again, "That rage, that's a rage of love, a testing, a calling on our strength. Love, aye; can't you feel the love of the sea when it's whispering kindly and brightening and sparkling and cradling all so gentle? Lonely is the sea, wanting us, and could you understand the roaring and murmuring and foamy tears you would know the pity and haven of it. Fount of life, the sea, calling all back. Have you never heard the call? Even from ashore, is there one who has not heard the call of the sea? Close your ears if you will, the sea calls you, it wants you, for peace, for sanctuary."

"Don't tell me the sea wants *me,*" Herman said. "I'll plug you."

"Patience," Boyd said.

"I ain't putting up with that creepy talk. I'll plug him."

"That's your big trouble, Herman," Boyd said. "You're short on patience. Maybe you'd like to handle the boat in this storm? Maybe you understand this boat better than the Cap'n? Maybe you'd like to go back to doing our

own navigating? Please, a little patience, Herman."

"Oh, Johnny, you're back," Leah said.

Boyd quivered.

"'Tain't Johnny," Cap'n Giles said. "Johnny's dead."

"Yes, he is, isn't he?"

"What a creepy pair," Andy said sourly.

"All right, all right," Boyd said. "Let's settle down the best we can. We got a long way to go. How about that java and chow, old lady?"

They dispersed themselves about the cramped deckhouse, trying painfully to relax, stowing the briefcases carefully on a wall shelf. When Leah brought coffee and sandwiches from below, Andy and Boyd wolfed the food hungrily; Herman did not seem to have much of an appetite, flinching at every watery blow the old craft took, turning paler as they pitched and tossed.

They drove on, into the afternoon. The *Wilma* plunged, strained and creaked. The sea was dark as night, under the black, scudding clouds. After some hours, though, there appeared in the distance an edge of light, startlingly bright in the gloom. It moved toward them steadily; then holes appeared in the thick clouds, letting long tunnels of radiance drop from sky to sea. Through an opening, they caught the first sight of the sun, starkly bright and cheerful. The sea was settling into long swells; blue patches were appearing above as the clouds separated.

"Storm over?" Andy asked Cap'n Giles.

"Blown out."

"Good," Herman grunted weakly.

They drove on. Toward the end of the afternoon another vessel was sighted, approaching on an intercepting course.

It was Boyd who presently said in a tight voice, "Coast Guard? Keep down, out of sight, boys. Is it Coast Guard, old man?"

"Aye."

"They mean to stop us?"

"Speak us, likely."

"Then understand this. Give us away and you die, you and the wife. Understand?"

"I understand."

Boyd said, "We mean this. We're already wanted for murder, a couple more won't hurt us. If they get us, we'll shoot you down first. You better believe that. Do you believe it, old man?"

"Aye."

"No tricks. Try to fool us, we'll get you in the end."

The woman said, "No tricks, Giles. You listen to the man. We don't want to be shot."

"No tricks," Cap'n Giles said.

"Watch your tone of voice," Boyd said. "Talk natural. Just your voice gives us away, you die."

"Watch your voice, Giles," the woman said.

"Aye."

The Coast Guarder came up, sleek and powerful, life-size as it neared and turned parallel. Men could be made out on deck. Within the deckhouse of the *Wilma,* the three intruders crouched below window level.

"Ahoy, Wilma!" bellowed a figure on the Coast Guarder bridge. "Squall bother you?"

Leah took the wheel. Cap'n Giles leaned out an open window and trumpeted back, "Made out."

"No damage?"

"Thank you, we're all right."

"Seen a capsized cabin cruiser?"

"No, sir. Who would that be?"

"Don't know. Helicopter reported it. We're headin' for its position. Might have been three gunmen."

"How's that?"

"Payroll robbery. Boy sighted three men answering gunmen's description putting out from isolated area in cruiser. This might not be theirs, though. There's a search on. Keep your eyes open, will you."

"Yes, sir."

"Or we can put a man aboard you to help the search."

"No, sir. This is a fishin' vessel; ain't a police boat."

The reply came with some asperity, "Suit yourself." The Coast Guarder forged past with a snarl of engines and a welter of foam, drew rapidly away.

"Hear that?" Herman whispered. "We would've drowned. Lucky we got on this tub."

"Yes, lucky," Boyd said. "Now, let 'em search. Lucky for you too, Daddy, that you played it cool."

"Aye," said Cap'n Giles.

"I knew you wouldn't squeal. You old ones, you're the most scared to die, you want to hold on to the little living you got left. I've seen it before."

"Aye," said Cap'n Giles.

The Coast Guard vessel had disappeared in the murk, and the men rose.

The *Wilma* drove on. The night came on full, dark and cool; the sea rolled gently now, the stars were swarms of bright glitters in velvet. On drove the *Wilma,* bow swishing, taking the slap-slap of the sea, running lights softly shining green and red.

The silence was at last broken by Cap'n Giles. "Sixty thousand dollars," he said, with a kind of wonder. "A sum most men can't save in a lifetime of work, and you took it in a few minutes. A bad thing, but special, I'm bound to

admit, and you must be special men."

Boyd looked at him sharply. "So you see that, old man, do you? You're right; it took more brains and guts than most guys can get up. Oh, we planned it, we scheduled it, we blueprinted it."

"Ah," Cap'n Giles said.

"Timing," Boyd went on, pride creeping into his voice, "It took beautiful timing. We staked it out, we practiced it for weeks. We got this little beat-up old pickup truck, see, kind of heap people don't see even when they're looking at it. We cased the job good. We found the armored car stopped at the office entrance between 9:30 and 10, Thursdays, with three guards moving the payroll and more in the locked car, covering."

"Yeah," Herman said. "A tough setup."

"As the money car stops, we come alongside in the pickup as the door swings open, perfect timing. I leap into the armored car, cover the guards; Herman's right with me. One guard's already holding the two canvas bags with the boodle. I order him to throw it out."

"Then I jump from the truck, scoop it up, see," Andy said. "Then back in the driver's seat, quick like a bunny."

"Meanwhile, I'm in the wagon, picking up the guards' rods," Herman said, "so they won't be shooting after us."

"I see it coming in this joker's eyes before he even makes his try," Boyd said. "This one guard's got to play it noble. He goes for a gun, and I let him have it twice."

"Now, wait a minute," Herman said. "I plugged him, too. In fact, I'd say I got him first."

"Maybe," Boyd said.

"I plugged him first," Herman said stubbornly. "Didn't you see him jump?"

"I don't care to argue about it," Boyd said.

"Didn't it bother you, taking life?" Cap'n Giles asked.

They examined him blankly. "Cap," Boyd said, "if a steel worker kills himself falling off a building, that's the risk that goes with the job, isn't it? Same with a guard; got to expect shooting."

"The man may have had a family."

"Anybody's got a family," Herman growled. "Knocked off family men before."

Boyd was watching Cap'n Giles with an odd expression. "The law's made to protect the fat ones, understand, Cap? The law's phony, the rules are phony. How much stealing and killing are covered up, do you think? Grab what you can, don't worry about the

other guy, that's the only rule the smart ones follow."

"What, then?" Cap'n Giles asked.

"We gunned the truck, headed down for the shore to this old deserted dock. We dumped the truck off a cliff into about fifty feet of water; might be they'll never find it. Then we changed our clothes, switched the money, took off in the cruiser; a clean getaway to another part of the country, no road blocks. Can't figure luck though—who'd know some kid would come wandering along the shore and spot us just then, or that a storm would come up?"

"I won't complain about luck, Boyd," Andy said. "We're on our way, and our tracks covered."

"Yeah, we were lucky, in the end," Herman said.

"That's right, we're lucky," Boyd said.

"Aye?" said Cap'n Giles.

The *Wilma* was driving on, forging steadily through the sea. Cap'n Giles and Leah were now peering through the window. "Oh, Johnny," Leah said.

"Told you, shut up about Johnny," Boyd snapped.

"Ain't you she's talking to now," Cap'n Giles said. "We're about here, pet."

"What's that?" Boyd said.

"She's talking to Johnny," Cap'n Giles said. "We're old and sick, and the sea's been calling us to come rest with Johnny. Here it was, the sea took him—yon's the breakers. On that reef we foundered, years ago. We survived, Johnny didn't."

"No!" Boyd yelled, making a lunge for the wheel.

Cap'n Giles let it go. "Nothing can change it now. Sorry you insisted on coming along. It must be that the sea's been calling you, too."

With a shock, the *Wilma* struck, began to break and fill.

"But the money!" Andy yelled.

"All our planning!" Boyd said, frenzied.

"No, please, please, no, I'm scared of the sea!" sobbed Herman.

"Now," Leah said serenely, "we're ready to die. Coming, Johnny."

For the skeptics, it is suggested that one simply does not discredit OLD FARMER'S ALMANAC nor THE BOSTON GLOBE.

THAT December afternoon Patience Cotten had just hung the willow broom by its leather thong beside the hearth when she heard them coming up the road. Marching in the snow, they were singing Old Hundred—"from Whom all blessings flow." The words seemed not fitting for what they had decided to do. Last summer God had withheld his blessings. Everyone in Marlboro knew there wasn't enough food to keep fifteen mouths through the Vermont winter.

Through the frost-rimed window Patience saw Gamaliel come out of the barn where he had been feeding oat straw and wild thistle to the oxen. They would need strong oxen the next day to pull the cart, after the four bodies were ready.

Her husband was watching the approaching party the way he had watched the British march down from Quebec during the War. Maybe it would have been better if the British had captured the fort, ending the War at once, letting the men go back to their farms. That way there would have been some reserve each year, enough salt pork to tide them over, in spite of this year's drought and early frost.

Beyond the black branches of the sugar maples, outlined in the drifting snow, Patience made out the lean shoulders of Deacon Whitcomb, at the head of the column.

Behind him, her hands clasped in front of her white apron, walked this girl, Charity Smith.

The Deacon had found her last February, unconscious, almost frozen, in a stalled sleigh this side of the gorge. The mare the young teacher had been driving to Stowe lay dead in the shafts.

Deacon Whitcomb had carried Charity's stiff body to his cabin, much as he would have carried a stray fawn. Now she followed him trustingly, not knowing what had been planned last night after prayer meeting. Ellen Martin would have to engage another teacher for her Hope.

Behind Charity hobbled old Obadiah Stone, limping along on his cane, a coonskin cap drawn over his bald skull. He still wore his leather cobbler apron. The committee had agreed that the village had enough shoes to see them through the winter. They could get along without Obadiah.

A giant of a man was pushing a wheelbarrow through the snow. It was Guy Henderson, the miller, bringing Jane's mother, Grandma Thompson. She sat enthroned on the straw, her thin legs dangling over the panel, as if this were a Christmas party. Behind her walked Nancy Herrick, the wife of the carpenter who would build the rack. Nancy was carrying a basket in which she had secreted the labdanum powder.

The Deacon pounded snow from his boots on the iron scraper. Patience opened the batten door of the cabin, stood aside to let the party file in. Obadiah, the cobbler, hobbled to the chimney corner, pulling off his red mittens, rubbing his gnarled hands. Guy Henderson picked up the light body of Jane's mother from the wheelbarrow and lowered her into the rocking chair opposite Obadiah. The little old lady in her fascinator looked like a bluejay, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Grandma Thompson, can I fix you a cup of sassafras tea?" Charity Smith asked. "I see Mrs. Cotten has a jar of bark on the mantel."

"That school teacher sure knows how to make herself at home in other folks' cabins," Patience whispered to Ellen Martin. Ellen had brought a bundle of blankets her husband had woven on their loom.

"Living with the young deacon," Ellen said loud enough for everyone to hear, "just like they were married!"

"You men, lend me a hand with the rack," Peter Herrick called in through the door. "You got any more elm planking up in the shed, Captain?"

Patience's husband nodded. That was the trouble with him. He'd

give away anything. Why, he'd even given away a linsey-woolsey shirt Patience had made him in November to a ragged tinker who had come through Marlboro mending tinware.

Guy Henderson, the miller, and Jacob Van Fleet, the fur trader, filed out after Herrick. Soon came the sound of sawing and hammering as the men built the rack, high enough to be out of reach of Canadian wolves which last winter had taken five of Peter's merinos; but mainly, the platform had to be well up in the air to allow the north wind to freeze its burden solid, once the temperature dropped below zero.

"I brought ticking for the shrouds," Ellen Martin said, laying the unbleached roll on the trencher table. "Tom said one roll should be enough."

"Let's get them ready," Jane Henderson said. "May I borrow your shears, Patience?"

The kettle was steaming on the crane. Charity broke sassafras bark into one of Patience's best ironstone cups and poured hot water over it. Grandma Thompson cooled her drink in the saucer, sipped it noisily.

"I could do with a cup of something hot myself," the old cobbler said from the other chimney corner.

"Later, Obadiah," Patience said. "You're to have mulled cider."

"That will do just right smart," he agreed, chuckling and tilting the rush chair against the fireplace. "Besides, sassafras tea is only for old grannies. Physics me worse'n calomel. Used to have afternoon tea when Molly was still alive. She would bring it to my bench, real English tea, until we couldn't afford it any more. But nothing spiritous. Molly would never hear to that."

"Why don't you shut up?" Grandma Thompson said, holding out one lean yellow finger from the side of her cup. "To listen to you a body would think your Molly was the only one with Boston breeding. I'll have you know my folks came from one of the first families on Beacon Hill. We had hand stenciled wallpaper in our hallway. My mother was a Wentworth, kin of Governor Bradford."

Looking around for approval, she added, "You should have seen our English pewter set. But it all went, melted down into bullets for Ethan Allen's men."

"How those two go on," Ellen Martin said to the women as they cut up the ticking. Holding up a length, she asked Patience, "Is this long enough for her?" She nodded toward Grandma Thompson.

"Too long," Jane Henderson

said, looking up from her sewing. "Tear it in half. Then it will do for little Amos too."

The women exchanged glances. At the meeting most of them had agreed with Patience about Amos not eating much, but the deacon had insisted, once they decided on Charity being put away.

"He'll never be any different," Deacon Whitcomb had said the first week he had come to Marlboro fresh from divinity school in Cambridge. The deacon had a fancy name for what was wrong with Patience's little son, but somehow it was a curse on her and the captain, Amos being feebleminded that way. There hadn't been time for them to be married that last night Gamaliel was home, before he set off in his leather jacket and breeches to join the Green Mountain boys. He had been so persuasive then, not like he was now, giving away even the shirt off his back to some worthless tinker.

Once she had made the sassafras tea for Grandma Thompson, Charity laid the blankets along the back wall, pallets for the women. "If we're all to sleep here tonight I might as well fix places," she said as if talking to herself.

Little does she know where she'll be sleeping, Patience thought, and for a moment she was sorry for the young girl who had been teaching Ellen's seven year old Hope her ABC's.

Evidently the deacon had told Charity that they were attending some sort of December barn raising. Patience hadn't expected him to bring himself to tell her. That was the way with these young preachers, wilting like the green cornstalks that sagged in the fields last summer.

One thing Patience hated in a man was having no spine. The deacon could have argued them out of taking Charity if he had any spunk. Seeing Charity laying the blankets, Patience suddenly felt sorry for this lonely schoolteacher, even if she had been living with the deacon just as though they were properly married. Patience felt if these two loved each other, what difference did it make; but to Nancy Herrick, the wife of the carpenter, it was nothing short of scandalous and they ought to write to Bishop White in Boston.

Young Katie Van Fleet, third wife of Jacob the trapper, hadn't said a word since she arrived. With her red, puffed cheeks she looked like a china doll standing by the door and staring around the room, her hands on her broad hips. It was plain she had never seen a place so large among her Dutch relatives in Tarrytown. Life in these Vermont hills was proving

pretty trying for Katie, with Jacob away on his trap lines weeks at a time. Sometimes friendly Penobscots came to their cabin to trade for pelts and when Jacob wasn't there, the Indians scared Katie out of her wits, taking the beads, hatchets or tobacco they considered fair and leaving her too frightened even to open her mouth.

"You can sew, can't you?" Patience asked, handing Katie a sheet.

"Ach. Ja," Katie said. "What should I sew once?"

"Like this." Jane Henderson held up the shroud she had finished for Amos.

"For your boy, maybe?" Katie looked at Patience, then turned to where Amos sat on the dough tray watching Charity help Hope with her hornbook. Somehow, by her reticence, this Dutch hausfrau seemed to be saying that what they were doing was selfish, thinking only of their own stomachs.

Yet, like time, the plans were rolling on, the hammering and sawing, the cutting and stitching, even the roosters and dough dumplings cooking in the iron pot on the crane, filling the room with the tantalizing smell of food.

Gamaliel had killed their last three Plymouth Rocks and Patience had plucked the scrawny birds that morning before she had fed Amos his bowl of mush. The activities seemed like the crazy happenings of a dream. At any moment she might awaken, hear Amos mumbling in his trundle bed or Gamaliel's heavy boots on the planking as he stirred the fire logs to heat the morning mush.

The hammering stopped. The men surged back into the low ceilinged room, flapping their arms across their chests, kicking the snow from their boots. Through the window Patience could see the completed rack, a platform standing higher than a man in the driving snow. This nor'easter battering on the windowpanes would soon drop the temperature below zero.

Gamaliel slipped out of his jacket, motioned to the men to share Patience's chicken dumplings. They jabbed forks into the stew and sucked the meat greedily from the bones. Then they pulled chairs around the table, under the whale oil lamp, to watch Peter Herrick beat Guy Henderson at backgammon. Peter won every game.

Jane Henderson had set a pot of cold beans on one end of the table and from time to time the men helped themselves, passing a large spoon from hand to hand. They would soon need their strength, once it was cold enough outside.

The women ladled the chicken

broth into bowls, sopped up the juice with thin slices of Ellen Martin's brown bread, and drank many cups of Patience's sassafras tea. Then, drawing chairs near the fire, they talked about the deacon. Outside, the wind whistled, sifting fine snow around the edge of the door.

At nine, Gamaliel put on his jacket and knitted cap and went outside. The players scooped the thirty backgammon pieces into the cardboard box and put on the lid.

When Gamaliel came in, his eyebrows were white with frost. He nodded to Guy Henderson, the miller, who rose to take charge.

"Make them ready," he ordered. "It's almost cold enough."

Amos was still sitting on top of the dough tray, his feet drawn up under him. He was shelling an ear of popcorn, letting the grains dribble through his fingers into his lap. Patience took him in her arms, carried him like a baby to his high chair in front of the fire. Taken away from his play, he began to whimper, until Patience tied the bib around his neck. He was always hungry.

"Are the toddies ready?" she asked. Ellen Martin nodded and Guy Henderson plunged a hot poker into each of the four mugs. The heat made the hard cider gurgle. This took the bitterness off the labdanum powder Nancy Herrick had sifted into the bottom of each mug before Peter poured in the cider. Amos tasted from the mug Patience held to his lips, clicked his tongue and then drank eagerly, half choking at each gulp.

"Why does he drink so funny?" Hope, Ellen's little girl, asked. She was still holding the hornbook Charity had brought her.

"Amos lives in a different world, darling," Charity explained. "Let's go back to our lesson, shall we?"

Nancy Herrick passed a mug to old Obadiah. Guy Henderson handed the third mug to his mother-in-law, Grandma Thompson. The fourth mug sat untouched on the hearth. Guy nodded to the deacon.

"That one's your job, Reverend," he said, pointing to the mug.

At first Deacon Whitcomb seemed not to have heard. Then, stooping quickly, he snatched up the drink and thrust it toward Charity.

The girl stared at him, unable to believe the only one of them who had taken her into his life had suddenly betrayed her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Charity asked slowly, her eyes accusing the deacon. For a moment Patience thought he would weaken, insist what Charity ate wouldn't make any difference. Instead he turned

away, hurried through the door into the night.

Charity stood holding the mug and then facing them all, deliberately downed the drink without pausing, carefully set the empty mug on the table. Then, taking Hope by the hand, she led her back to the corner to continue the lesson.

Obadiah Stone was the first to close his eyes. He sagged in the rush chair, his jaw hung open. and Peter moved in quickly, laying his limp body on the trencher table. Tom Martin unbuttoned the cobbler's shirt, untied the leather

apron, stripped off the red underwear. Patience helped Nancy Herrick slip on the shroud.

"It's below zero." It was the deacon, rubbing the frost from his hands as if he were pronouncing some sacred truth from the pulpit.

Guy grabbed the shoulders of the old cobbler and Tom lifted his thin legs. Through the window Patience watched them toss the old cobbler's shrouded body high onto the rack, like a sack of wheat Guy would throw into the hopper of his mill.

Next Grandma Thompson was slipped into her shroud, once Jane had undressed her aged mother, revealing her pathetic flabby breasts. Again the men moved through the door and the women walked toward Charity. She had slumped in the corner beside little Hope, but Ellen Martin led her daughter away and bedded her on the blankets. Gathering around the body of the schoolteacher, the women undressed her, masking her from the prying eyes of the men. The deacon hadn't even glanced toward her since he came back into the room. Instead he moved directly to the fireplace, stood with his hands outstretched, staring into the flames.

While Guy and Peter carried Charity out to the rack, Patience undressed her own son and slipped on his little shroud. Gamaliel lifted the slight body in his arms. Through the window Patience watched her husband toss up the white bundle. The wind whipped the shroud from Amos' pipe-stem legs, billowing out his form. In that instant he grew into a fat man. It reminded her of a toy she had brought him from the fair in Boston. He had tried to swallow it.

Watching the flapping shroud, she realized what they had done to preserve their own miserable lives. Her breasts that had suckled Amos filled with needles of ice. She reached for the table edge to keep from falling.

"You're white as a ghost," Ellen Martin said, grabbing Patience's elbow, steadying her. "Here, sit by the fire while I make you a cup of hot milk."

"There is no milk," Patience said. "Let me rest here."

She sagged into the rocker where Grandma Thompson had fallen asleep. Patience could still feel the warmth of the old lady's body in the cushions. The other women gathered around her, solicitous, apparently unmoved by what was happening on the rack outside. All feeling was going from her legs, her arms were numb. Even the rocker seemed to turn into a cold wooden rack on which she was freezing.

"Here, take a swig of this," Gamaliel said and handed her the saddle bottle he always carried on his hip, the vial he kept filled from his still.

Patience gagged but swallowed a mouthful. His whiskey had never before passed her lips. Now she felt this sudden heat miraculously pass from her body into the heart of her son, sustaining him through his long winter sleep, the way a bear or hedgehog keeps alive on its fat.

Over the hushed voices, far off someone was sobbing. Then she saw Nancy Herrick trying to get her baby to drink from Amos' silver cup. Awakening in the blanket cocoon where it had been sleeping, the baby was probably frightened by seeing strangers. Katie Van Fleet, whose baby had died of cholera infantum in November, moved over quickly, took the crying child and opened her bodice. The baby suckled, its cries subsiding into a gurgle of satisfaction.

Watching this act of nature, Patience forgot her own terror. Her body took on the warmth of the milk of the little Dutch hausfrau. Maybe, after all, the men were right, her son would sleep through the winter, awaken in the spring.

Long before dawn, the men, with their legs stretched out before the burning logs, began to cough, get up, stretch and pace around the room. Then one by one they followed Gamaliel by the light of the tin lantern to the barn. Patience knew before they returned each would stop in the still shed for a swig from one of her husband's jugs.

Once the men were gone, the women fanned up the fire with corncobs and a section of dried fence rail. Patience hung a pot of mush on the crane, swung it over the flames. Nancy Herrick filled the kettle with water from the keg. One by one the women asked her the same question, then wrapped tightly in their shawls, scurried through the back door to the privy.

When the men came back from the barn their steaming breath was heavy with Gamaliel's whiskey. The women handed them bowls of mush on which was sprinkled brown maple sugar. Once they had eaten, Gamaliel and Peter Herrick went out to yoke the oxen.

By the time the cart was at the door, the women had wound carpet rags around their shoes. Jacob swept the light blanket of snow from the shrouded bodies on the rack, and Patience and Jane lined the bottom of the cart with straw from the barn.

Guy Henderson crawled up on the rack, handed down the light body of his son Amos to Gamaliel.

He laid the still body tenderly in the cart and Jacob Van Fleet sifted straw over the shrouded form. Next Guy passed the body of Grandma Thompson to Peter Herrick. Tom Martin carried his neighbor, the old cobbler, and laid him beside Amos. The last body Gamaliel passed down was that of Charity, the young schoolteacher who everyone knew had lived in sin with the deacon without being his wife. Patience felt that even through her closed eyes, through the shroud, the girl was still looking up into the deacon's face trustingly, as he carried her to the cart.

Ellen Martin passed a red blanket to Jacob Van Fleet. He stood on one wheel, wedging the edges of the cover around the stiff forms, much as he packed pelts into his wagon when he set off once a month for Boston.

Patience watched the loading from the window. She felt weak from loss of sleep. Now she crawled into the greatcoat Gamaliel had brought her from Quebec when he attended the signing of peace with Canada. Wrapping a yellow fascinator around her head, she slipped on her black mittens.

The party had already set off for the pine woods beyond the mill pond and this side of the gorge, with Gamaliel walking ahead to break a path for the lead ox. Tom Martin paced the offside ox, prodding it with an oak stave. Behind the creaking cart walked Deacon Whitcomb, as was fitting. Behind him, plodding through the knee-high snow, the other men carried shovels and willow brooms over their shoulders like guns.

At the edge of the Herricks' field brown leaves of cornstalks flapped forlornly in the wind, as if waving farewell to the four bodies on the cart. Patience remembered how Amos liked to play among the young corn when the first pale tassels peeped out—but last summer the corn had not matured, killed by the early August frost, the nubbins dotted with hollow grains.

Patience had never known such a summer, not since Gamaliel had first brought her and their baby here from Rhode Island, to take up a land grant for his service, first with Ethan Allen, and then as a captain of infantry under Colonel Seth Allen. Back from commanding rough frontiersmen, Gamaliel never put his heart into farming. The second year he rigged up a still. In a shed behind the barn he made mash of the cornmeal Guy Henderson ground and from this he distilled white alcohol, tinting it with charred maple sugar. This whiskey he sold to

tavern keepers in Bennington. Patience had to agree his whiskey was the best medium of exchange, better even than Jacob Van Fleet's furs, but this fall there had been no corn for mash. July, when the stalks should have been knee high, it wasn't over a chicken's head. The usual April showers had never come this year. Beans that should have climbed high on the poles wilted halfway, and the tops never set on turnips, beets and onions. The potato vines yellowed, then blighted and died. August fifth came the first killing frost. There was not enough food in the village to see all of them through the long winter, and not enough whiskey left to buy grain from the Dutchmen in Pennsylvania where the drought had not struck.

The deacon was singing an old Moravian song, the verses of James Allen:

Here we find our hope of heaven,
While upon the lamb we gaze.
Loving much and much forgiven
Let our hearts o'erflow with praise.

Nancy, Jane and Ellen had joined in with the hymn. Patience couldn't move her lips. What was there to praise—the drought, the early frost, the lack of food, and now this grim decision?

At the gorge the snow had drifted deep enough to bury an ox. Here snow always lay unmelted until the last of May. The procession halted. Guy Henderson was the first to drive his shovel into the drift, to make the crypt. Jacob Van Fleet lent a hand with his shovel, deepening the hole into a cave. Gamaliel slipped the yokes off the oxen, while Tom Martin steadied the tongue of the cart. When the cave was deep enough, Tom released the tongue. The cart tipped back and the four bodies slid off into the road.

Still singing, the women broke branches from the spruce and made a cradle of boughs on the floor of the cave.

"Let us pray," the deacon ordered, kneeling in the snow by the bodies, one arm extended in blessing.

"In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

The words tightened like a bony hand around Patience's heart. This was the service of burial, not the promise to resurrection. What of the life they had talked about after the prayer meeting the evening the four had been selected? Then Guy Henderson had said that in the spring they would come and thaw all of their dear ones back to life, after their long winter's nap. These four would be the lucky ones who suffered no hunger, knew no cold,

sleeping like bears through the long winter. The deacon's words droned on and now he confirmed the promise:

"And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am ye shall be also."

To Patience it seemed he was making this promise not to all of the four, not to her son, but only to the schoolteacher, Charity, the one who had never taken her eyes from his face once she realized she too was to be put away.

The deacon rose, awkwardly putting his floppy black hat back on his head, covering the priestlike bald patch on his crown. Bending, he lifted the body of Charity Smith in his arms, much as he had carried her, half frozen, from the sleigh last February. Stooping at the mouth of the cave, he moved in and laid her body on the spruce boughs. When he reappeared, his eyes were red as if in this moment he disbelieved the promise he had just made.

Then each man carried in the body of his nearest kin. Guy carried his mother-in-law, Grandma Thompson; Tom Martin, his nearest neighbor, old Obadiah the cobbler. When Gamaliel bent over to pick up the last small body, Patience rushed forward.

"No, no, let me."

Kneeling in the snow, she pulled back the edge of the shroud for a last look at her son's face. Amos' lips were smiling as if he had discovered something new in life. It was the same look of wonder and happiness she had seen so often when, playing in the garden, he would break open the pod of a green pea and cry in amazement at the little seeds inside. For a moment she hugged his face against her bosom, rocking him in his sleep, the way she had done when first she knew the truth about him, that he would always keep the carefree mind of a child.

Gamaliel touched her shoulder, then he lifted the frail form from her arms. Walking as if the burden were too great for him to bear, he moved into the cave of snow.

Now that the bodies were all inside, Ellen Martin and Katie Van Fleet placed a covering of boughs. Finally, Peter Herrick took an oak stake from the cart body and drove it in front of the opening. Guy Henderson threw on the first shovelful of snow. To Patience it was the first shovelful of earth tossed into a grave.

Soon the mouth of the cave was covered, the opening stacked high, as if the snow had drifted that way in the night. Not a trace remained of the cave in which the four would sleep through the winter,

leaving food enough in the farmhouses to keep the rest of them alive.

Patience drew a deep breath of resignation. There was the promise. She must cling to that, hold it tight against her heart the way she had clutched Amos to her breast, the essence of things hoped for, the promise of resurrection.

Somehow, with mush, little blighted potatoes, and the ram Peter Herrick slaughtered and shared in February, entrails and all, the fifteen of them contrived to survive. Before the shipment of Pennsylvania wheat finally came on the Bennington road, they lived on nothing but boiled tree bark for one dreadful week.

At a prayer meeting of thanksgiving for the grain, it became plain everyone looked forward to having the four back in Marlboro.

"My trapping boots need new soles," Jacob Van Fleet said. "I miss having old Obadiah next door behind his cobbler stand."

"You don't ever bake me oatmeal cookies, the kind your mother made," Guy Henderson said to Jane, remembering Grandma Thompson's goodies.

"I miss Charity's meals, her mending my socks, the little things she was always doing for me," admitted the deacon. "It sure will be more like living when she gets back."

"It will be helpful to have her to teach my Hope," Ellen Martin said.

Gamaliel turned to Patience, said, "Our cabin has been mighty lonesome without Amos."

She had wondered when her husband would say that. Evenings as he read his Bible, she would see him looking up toward the trundle bed. During the day he had his work to do in the barn, and now again in the shed, but Patience missed her son every waking hour, his laughter, his eyes following her as she pared the apples and strung the slices on a string to dry them over the hearth, or when she sat knitting Gamaliel's socks.

"Maybe we should have another son," he had said that night when they came home.

By the fifteenth of April, snow melted from the eaves with a meaningful drip. A lone robin hopped around the yard, scratching at a bare spot under the plum tree. Gamaliel rang the town bell, the signal they had agreed on. Guy Henderson and Tom Martin had set up soap kettles in the yard, and Peter Herrick was carrying water in sap buckets from the barn troughs.

Patience directed the women in building wood fires under the ket-

tles. The bodies would first be soaked in the troughs in cold water, then hotter and hotter water added until signs of life began to show and their blood started to circulate again. That would be the skittish period, with opodeldoc rubbed on their chests until their hearts were warm enough to beat normally.

Old Obadiah had first told them how he had seen it done, when he was a mere lad up in Montpelier. That winter there had been the same problem, not enough food to carry everyone through the winter. Obadiah's grandfather, half Penobscot Indian, was one of seven put to sleep under the snow. Then, come spring, the villagers had thawed them out, first in cold, then hotter and hotter water, all but one French Canadian trapper who would have coughed himself to death anyway. Obadiah claimed his grandfather had lived twenty years after that, so that at the last Obadiah's pa had considered shooting the old man so he wouldn't eat them out of house and home.

Once the fires were going and wisps of steam appeared on the surface of the soap kettles, Gamaliel and Tom Martin yoked the oxen and the party set off for the gorge. Again Deacon Whitcomb walked behind the cart, as was fitting. This time he led off with the verses of a lovely Eighth Century Hymn:

Neither might the gates of death
Nor the tomb's dark portal,
Nor the watchers, nor the seal
Hold thee as a mortal;
But today amidst thine own
Thou dids't stand, bestowing
That thy peace which evermore
Passeth human knowing.

The promise must hold. Patience joined in the hymn but kept her hands tightly clutched to her breast. She had noticed Saturday night when taking her tub bath that the nipples of her breasts were pink.

Near the foot of the ledge, one ox tumbled into the snow, kicking free of its wooden yoke. Tom Martin brought his stick down on its rump. The weak animal struggled to rise, fell back, bellowed once and then lay still. The lead ox couldn't drag the cart alone. Jacob motioned Guy to lend his big shoulder to push the cart. With Gamaliel guiding the one ox and the men pushing, they reached the edge of the drift.

The men took their shovels from the cart and started toward the drift. Suddenly they stopped as if frozen in time. Then Patience too saw the black hole burrowed into the drift. Peter Herrick rushed in, chopping the blade of his shovel through the icy crust.

"Good Lord, it cannot be." The

deacon dropped on his knees to pray.

Jane Henderson was wringing her hands, crying softly, "Mother, Mother."

Jacob Van Fleet cursed as he flailed his shovel into the drift. "Damn you, wolves, damn you!" he cried. "You're always robbing my traps." His shovel rattled on bones, and the crushing sound bounced off Patience's heart.

Without looking at her husband, she turned back toward the cabin. The voice of her son called to her from the soft breeze gently lifting the long branches of the spruce.

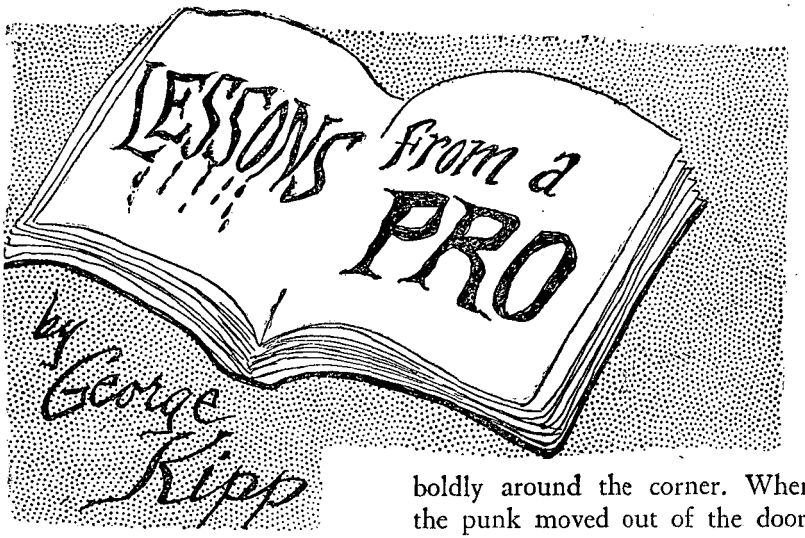
Patience came to where the ox lay by the side of the road. Its tongue lolled in the snow. She stopped to look at it, resting on its side, at peace in its white bed, the struggle to exist over. Tomorrow it would be fresh meat for all of them, and later, leather for Jacob Van Fleet to tan, soles for their boots, new uppers for shoes made up by some other cobbler who would replace Obadiah. Finally, Guy Henderson would burn the bones and sift the ashes back into the soil. There was nothing like bone meal for vegetable gardens.

It all came clear, everything, everyone was here for a purpose. Once that goal was served, there followed this passing. However brutal life was, it always contained inside its eternally hard shell a living cell of thankful memories. These endured. Obadiah had made shoes for them for six years. Grandma Thompson had baked cookies for Guy, shared her happiness and her heartaches with the Hendersons. Charity had helped the deacon find love, deepening his tolerance, something he had not learned in a Cambridge divinity college. Plodding along his trap lines, Jacob Van Fleet would think more kindly of Obadiah for double sewing moosehide soles on his boots. It was all spelled out in time, the interval, the little contributions bound together into eternity.

Behind her Patience could hear the rumble of wheels as the men pushed the empty cart up the hill. At the garden fence, the pussy willow she had brought as a seedling from Rhode Island six years before was throwing out its soft buds. Last spring Amos had laughed when she had broken a sprig and stroked the soft fuzz against his cheek. Now the buds were showing pink, the way she had noticed the nipples on her breasts.

From the door of the cabin, Ellen's little girl Hope ran out to meet her. Until Marlboro could afford a new teacher, Patience would instruct her from the hornbook. Hope would remember that.

For those who would learn, example is said to be the best precept.



I KNEW the punk would be waiting for me around the darkened corner from Rene's nightclub and, unless I was very much mistaken, he would be nervous and jittery and very apt to pull the trigger. Such are the risks one must run in my business. I pulled my coat collar up and my hat brim down. The night wind wasn't that cold; I just wanted it to look as though I were walking blind.

I moved along the deserted street, head down, and stepped boldly around the corner. When the punk moved out of the doorway I stepped in close to him real quick, grabbed his right hand with my left before he could get his gun leveled, and rammed the barrel of my hammerless thirty-eight brutally into his stomach. He grunted painfully, his eyes widened with fear.

"Drop the gun," I hissed nastily. "Real slow."

When he had complied I kicked his weapon into a dark corner, then backhanded him across the face with my own gun. He whimpered and slumped against the

wall, forgot about any holdup.

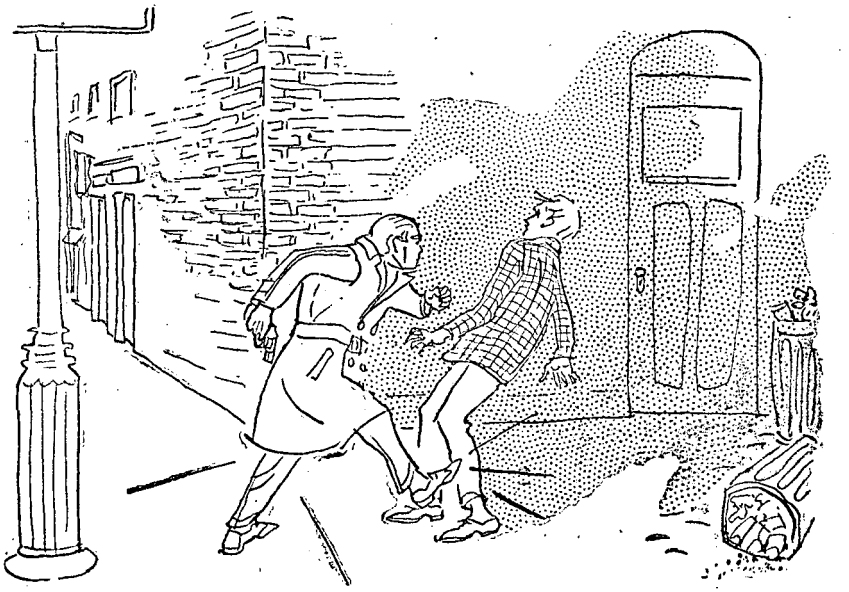
"I knew you'd be trying for me," I snapped. "For the last five nights you've tailed me when I left Rene's, and tonight, when I was getting my coat from the girl in the checkroom, you hurried out the door ahead of me. Punks like you make me sick."

He had watched me, too, as I peeled off the twenties and fifties and hundreds and lived the good life, while he nursed draft beer and munched peanuts. Tonight he had got his nerve up, or hunger had dulled his judgment. Whatever the reason, he had tried his luck and lost. I dented his shins crisply with one of my hundred dollar oxfords, and slammed him against the wall.

"I make my living with a gun, Punk," I snarled. "I've been doing it for years. Where else does a character like me get a fat bankroll?"

The fear was beginning to seep out of him. "You—you aren't going to call the cops?"

"I give the cops nothing," I growled. "Not even a wet-behind-the-ears plow jockey like you. That's just one of the things that separates the professionals from the amateurs. Somebody forgot to tell you that even in this business you have to learn the trade first. Back in Hicksville you were probably a holy terror, but here in the big



city jungle you're just a baby. Now you get lost, sonny, and if you ever try leaning on me again I'm going to scatter you over three square blocks."

I cuffed him across the face with my open hand, then stepped back and watched him fade into the night.

A week later I was back in Rene's when the punk came through the door. He still had the scab on his right cheekbone where I had clobbered him with my thirty-eight. I pretended I didn't see him and devoted my full time to the curvaceous blonde beside me. It was easy to see from the punk's expression that he hadn't had any recent female companionship. I waved the waiter down and ordered another magnum of the pink bubbly, then tickled the blonde till she giggled loudly. When she grabbed her purse and headed for the powder room, the punk left the bar and came directly across the dining room to my table.

I threw up my hands in mock terror. "Good heavens, a real, honest-to-goodness holdup man."

The punk—his name turned out to be Willie—crimsoned. "Aw, cut it out," he pleaded. He eased into the chair across from me. "I've been thinking about what you said the other night and it makes sense. A guy really ought to learn a business before he tries to make a living at it. I must have looked pretty stupid trying to heist an old hand like you."

I did my best to look bored. "Most amateurs look stupid. Like you, they bum around until they run out of money and then they get desperate and hungry and try to lean on somebody. Did you have the faintest idea of how much money I had on me when you set out to heist me?"

Willie nibbled nervously at his lower lip and shook his head. "You had plenty in here."

"But for all you knew I could have spent the whole roll before I left. That was another thing that marked you as a rank greenhorn. Lesson one: *Always* make sure the mark has enough dough to justify the risk before you go after him. When the boys in blue nail you for armed robbery, the result is twenty years whether the take is two bucks or two hundred thousand."

Willie didn't want to leave, but he had run out of things to say and I wasn't encouraging him to hang around. When he saw the blonde coming back, he swallowed hard. "You . . . You don't suppose you could . . . I mean, you and me—"

I almost dropped my champagne.

"*You* and *me!* Not a chance! I like my women dumb and green, not my partners." Realizing the kid *was* desperate, and there was no telling what he might do if I kicked him in the teeth, I slipped him a fifty. "Meet me here Friday, same time. In the meantime I'll look around and see what I can come up with."

He snatched the fifty and was gone almost before I was through talking.

When I walked into the club on Friday he was already there. He slid off the stool and headed directly toward me but I caught his eye and gave him a quick frown. He got the message and went past me, to the cigarette machine. I looked the place over. It was clean. I motioned Willie with a tilt of my head and moved out the door. He was right behind me all the way.

I eased the car away from the curb and into the flow of traffic. "First," I said, "there will be two or three small jobs. Nothing fancy, you understand. I just want to see how you operate. I've cased the places and figured all the angles and risks. A ten year old kid could knock off the first one, but then most ten year old kids aren't apt to be all nerves and jitters."

Willie bristled. "So I'm not an expert. You just explain how I'm supposed to go about it and I'll get the job done all right. And don't worry about my nerves."

A few minutes later I drove slowly past the pawnshop.

"You sure this joint has money?" Willie grunted. "Most of them are like service stations; not enough money to pay for your gas."

I gave him my haughtiest sneer. "You giving the lessons, or am I?" He shut up like I'd slapped him. "It just so happens," I said, "that the old boy in there skims off a nice-sized bundle each month, and sends it away by special messenger. Where it goes I don't know, but the messenger is due tomorrow, so the bundle must be ready. As near as I can figure it, the job will net a thousand. And the nice part of it is the old man. He's scared to death of guns. Go in when the place is empty and herd him into the back room. But remember, no violence, no shooting, unless you have to. Just demand the dough, grab it and scoot. I'll be right around the corner in the car, waiting for you."

The caper didn't come up to Willie's expectations. "Only a thousand? That's only five hundred apiece after we split."

"No split," I snapped impatiently. "We aren't partners yet, so this caper is all yours. I set it up just to see how good an operator you are."

"But me takin' it all don't seem right either," Willie protested.

"You need it. I don't," I said. I pointed to the pawnshop. "He's all alone. Get moving."

For a minute I thought he was going to chicken out, but he swallowed hard, shoved the car door open and headed for the shop. He was back in three minutes, a green canvas bag inside his coat. As soon as he stepped into the car I headed for the freeway and the heavy traffic.

"There—there wasn't anything to it," he said, amazed. "I just shoved the gun in his stomach and told him I knew he had the money. He didn't say a word. He just pulled up one of the boards in the floor and handed it over."

"They won't all be that easy," I cautioned him, "so don't let this one go to your head. Some guys will put up an argument for a quarter. And remember, you're still an apprentice."

A few nights later I drove Willie out on a quiet, tree-lined avenue and pointed to a large building holding up a small neon sign. "There's your mark."

"Are you nuts?" he almost shouted. "A funeral parlor. You expect *me* to knock off a funeral parlor?"

I backhanded him along the jaw, almost snapping his head off. "I'm setting up the jobs, amateur, and we do everything like professionals or we don't do the job at all. For your information, a funeral costs from a thousand on up these days, and this outfit slipped five stiffs under the sod today. Most of the money will be in checks, of course. Ignore them and get the cash. There should be a thousand, maybe more. One man will be in the business office where they have the safe. Go in the side door, down the hall to the first door on your right, and you're there."

Willie still didn't like the idea, but he eased out of the car, rubbing his jaw where I'd belted him, and headed for the side door. He was gone a bit longer than at the pawnshop, but when he got back to the car he had the money bag inside his coat. "It really wasn't so bad," he confessed ashamedly. "I guess it was just the idea."

I nodded understandingly. "You might become a real pro yet, Willie." My words cheered him considerably.

A few nights later I picked him up well after dark and headed for a shopping center on the edge of town. "One thing I want to make clear," I told him. "If these big city cops ever get a make on you, you've had it. They can splatter your prints or your mug shot from coast to coast in a matter of min-

utes. If that happens, your only chance is to head for the hills and make sure they never see you again." When he had squirmed for a bit I took some of the edge off my voice. "Not that I'm expecting trouble or anything. It's just that, as a coming professional, there are certain things you should know." He breathed a bit easier after that.

I pointed out a supermarket. It was almost closing time and only a few customers were in the place. "Just walk in casual like," I said, "like you were going to do some shopping. Be sure to take a shopping cart and throw some things into it to make it look good. The manager's office is way in the back, so watch your chance and when nobody is looking move in on him. The whole job shouldn't take over five minutes at the outside. I'll be at the end of that side street between the supermarket and the garage, waiting for you."

"The money's in the office?" Willie asked skeptically.

I pointed to the supermarket. "See for yourself. Eight checkstands and only one in operation. The others have all closed for the night and sent their money to the office."

"This caper should be worth more than any thousand," Willie said. He was learning fast.

"You better believe it," I replied cockily. "And not only is it all yours if you pull it off, it is also your last solo job. Do this one right and we team up on the next one, for some real money."

Willie was fit to bust the buttons off his mail order suit. "One more thing," I cautioned him. "This manager strikes me as being the stupid type. So when you're pushing the shopping cart around, pick up a piece of clothesline to tie him, and something for a gag. It wouldn't do to have him screaming his head off before we get away. And don't try to lam out the back way. Those rear doors have all been locked up tight since the last delivery at six o'clock."

I let him out, then eased the car around back and turned off the lights.

I was right about the job taking five minutes. When Willie stepped around the corner he was carrying a sack too big to go under his coat, and he was moving fast enough to attract attention. He was halfway along the street to where I was waiting when the headlights of another car stabbed out of the blackness of the garage doors and a flashbulb popped almost in his face. Even from where I was sitting, I could see the terror in his eyes as a uniformed policeman emerged from behind the headlights, his gun ready. Before Willie

could fully comprehend what was going on, he had been relieved of the sack. Then he was spraddle-legged, his hands against the garage, and the cop had his gun. The cop gave him a shove, pointing the way with his own gun, and they started back toward the supermarket. They were almost to the street when the cop caught his foot in some discarded wires in a trash heap and fell headlong into a pile of garbage cans. He had lost his gun but he was pawing for it frantically.

This gave Willie only a couple of seconds, but it was all he needed to cut out. He sped out of the side street and across the freeway, causing a sudden cacophony of squealing tires and blaring horns, and on into the darkness of the railroad yards like the hounds of hell were at his heels.

I was back at my pad when Lee, my partner, came through the door and threw the sack of money from the supermarket on the table. He had discarded the rented police uniform and was wearing his street clothes.

"Did he make the freight train all right?" I asked.

Lee nodded. "When it slowed down going over the hump, I thought he was going to get out and push. He won't be back, ever."

I looked in the sack. "Did you count it yet?"

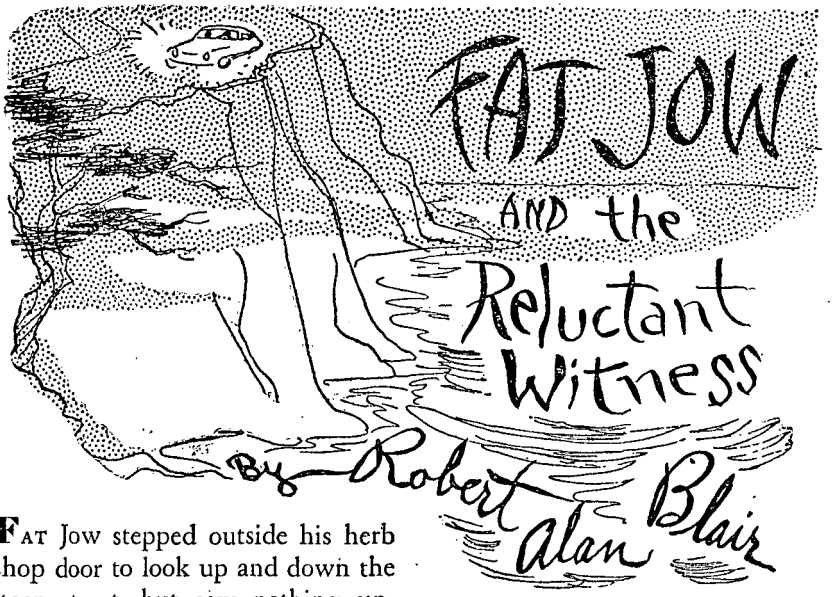
"A touch over twenty-five thousand," Lee said happily. "Deducting what we owe Libbutz at the pawnshop, and Jonesy at the funeral parlor, we still have about twenty-two thousand to cut up. Not bad for two weeks' work."

I poured myself a drink and stared out the penthouse window at the stars. I wasn't feeling so good. "I hated to do it to Willie," I said. "He was a good kid. He had a lot of promise."

Lee was busily sorting the money. "You'll get over it. You were the same way about one of the others, the kid who knocked off the loan company for forty grand, remember?"

I remembered. I had two more drinks and started laughing. I can't afford to get sentimental. After all, I'm a professional.

The yield from "a fair night's work" may exceed one's hopes while meeting his fears.



FAT JOW stepped outside his herb shop door to look up and down the steep street, but saw nothing unusual in the late-afternoon Chinatown traffic. He locked the door, drew the "Closed" shade, turned back to the worried young man at the wall-telephone behind the counter. As the regular whirring of the ring repeated and repeated, Low Kan's agitation increased. He had just arrived in a cab, but he was breathing heavily.

"She ought to be home!" Low Kan muttered, and broke the connection to dial his number again.

"Perhaps the apartment manager?" said Fat Jow.

Low Kan tried another number, with success. "Mrs. Collins?" he fairly shouted. "I can't raise Sallie . . . No, I'm okay." His head snapped back as though dodging a blow. "When? . . . Did you ever see him before? . . . No, don't call the police—yet. We don't know anything for sure. Thanks." Slowly

he hung up, looked at Fat Jow, his face haunted. "They've got Sallie. Somebody came and said I'd been hurt, and she went off with him."

He strode toward the door, but Fat Jow stood in his way. "Wait. Give your next move some thought. You dashed in here as one running away. What will you do now?"

Low Kan said helplessly, "I—I don't know."

"Why not the police?"

"They'd just make things worse, by putting me in protective custody. If I want to keep Sallie alive, I can't go near them."

"Alive? Do you not dramatize?"

Low Kan mastered the unsteadiness of his voice. "Didn't you ever hear of Cliff Sarazin?"

"Oh," said Fat Jow, hushed. Sarazin was nominally and flamboyantly an attorney, but a prominent figure in many circles, exerting indirect control over interlocking activities, with access to important people and their assets. There were rumors, whose confirmation Sarazin was able to prevent, that some of his connections went underground. "How are you involved with him?"

"One guess—he's an officer in Low Electronics."

"But yours is a modest firm. Why does he trouble himself?"

"Modest in front. In the back room, he's raking in several thousand a day with an electronic horsebook. And he doesn't want me to blow it sky-high."

Fat Jow blinked. "You will help me understand." He gestured toward the rear stairs to the shop loft, which was both office and retreat. "Over tea you will better compose your thoughts, and so begin at the beginning."

"Tea? Now?"

"You were about to blunder frantically into peril. Which is better?"

Low Kan preceded Fat Jow up the stairs.

At the old teakwood table beside the loft rail, they shared tea without conversation, while Fat Jow allowed his guest to choose his time to speak. Call no man friend until one may relax in his silent presence. He had known Low Kan better as a child, gathered with his playmates round a park bench to hear Uncle Jow, the storyteller of St. Mary's Square. As Charles Low, his was a rising name in electronic technology, and his small plant on Howard Street produced communications and computer components.

Low Kan folded his hands about the little porcelain tea-bowl, studied the tracery of leaves. "You may remember when I designed that

electronic brain to compute parimutuel odds at one of the racetracks?"

"We who knew you were most proud," said Fat Jow.

"The publicity reached Cliff Sarazin, and he came to see me. He called me the young wizard, and I was flattered. He had a deal to bring business my way. Before I knew it, he was my partner, and I was under contract to install a larger model of the brain in my back room for him. Bit by bit, I knew what he'd sucked me into. He dropped hints of what might happen to my key men and their families if I got stubborn. Ask First Son, sometime. He knows the setup."

Fat Jow became alarmed. "First Son has been threatened?" The son of his predecessor Moon Kai was as dear to him as if his own. Fat Jow had received the herb shop from his hands, as reward for his part in bringing to justice the killer of Moon Kai.

"Cliff's not that crude. He made sure we learned what had happened to some others: the yacht-club manager who blew up at sea with his cabin-cruiser; the accountant who drove off a seacliff; the bookie who 'committed suicide' in his closed garage." He looked up. "I've even thought of suicide myself. Or disappearing with Sallie, to a new life somewhere. But he'd follow. He'd follow."

"Is Sarazin more of a menace now than he was before?"

Low Kan laid upon the table a document. "A subpoena to testify before the state crime commission next week. Cliff has spies all through the plant. It wasn't an hour after I got this that he phoned. Special conference; he was sending his car for me. I know that car. We put the radio equipment in it. A cute back seat, with glass all around, that locks and seals airtight from a switch on the dash. And a tube from the exhaust manifold. I bolted, didn't even dare get my car out of the parking lot, but ran down Howard till I spotted a cab. You were the first one I thought of." He stood up, leaned heavily upon the loft rail, looked down into the shop. "I'm about ready to go to Cliff, if he'll let Sallie go."

Fat Jow stroked his chin. "No. Sallie's safety—and yours—rest upon his not knowing where you are, so he cannot communicate his terms. No matter what you do, he is not likely to release her without persuasion. We must devise a method of pulling the fangs of Mr. Sarazin."

"You don't know him," moaned Low Kan. "He hires toughs to do his heavy work, so he won't get

his hands dirty. Cliff is clean."

"You have already suggested two latent weaknesses in his various strengths: gadgetry and delegated responsibility. His very dependence upon trivia makes him the more vulnerable when they are absent—or turned against him." Fat Jow pushed back his chair, moved to his great rolltop desk, stretched up to grasp the chain suspending the single bulb which was the loft's only illumination. An entire ceiling-panel tilted down from a black hatchway, revealing on its upper surface a built-in ladder. "The small room above saw much use during the tong wars. One who had completed an assassination would wait there, while the members of the offended tong sought him. Tonight, after dark, First Son will drive you to the Delta, where I have friends."

Low Kan said, "I won't leave town till Sallie's safe."

Fat Jow placed an understanding hand upon his shoulder. "I could expect no less of you. But will you not trust me?"

"Crawling away to hide. Some hero."

"Against such a one as Sarazin, heroics are wasted. He requires different tactics. Go up now, and come down only when you know the shop is empty, or when you hear my voice addressing you directly. He undoubtedly knows of our acquaintance, and we must be prepared for him."

Low Kan climbed into the blackness, and Fat Jow raised the counterbalanced panel into place. Its decorative molding covered the seams, restoring uniformity to the discolored ceiling.

He settled himself at the desk; the silence was broken only by the ticking of the old wall-clock, and by the detached murmur of the city outside.

At 4:50 he telephoned Low Electronics, spoke only the name of First Son, without identifying himself. When First Son answered, Fat Jow said rapidly, "If you are not otherwise engaged this evening, please come to the house."

First Son reflected no surprise, although such invitations were infrequent. "Nothing planned, old man. I'll drop by."

Fat Jow hung up at once. "Low Kan," he called, rising.

From above, "Yes?"

"My usual closing-time approaches, and I shall not vary my routine. Listen for me later tonight—and if you have cause, telephone."

"Check. You're not forgetting Sallie?"

"I'm not forgetting Sallie. One thing at a time." He snapped off the light and descended the stairs.

As he puffed up the steep grade across Nob Hill, the booming of foghorns dominated the rumble of traffic. The afternoon had turned leaden and dank, with a heavy fog sliding over the hills from the sea, dissolving the tops of taller buildings.

Past Van Ness, he noticed a large black car cruising slowly toward him. It picked up speed, swung round the corner into Van Ness. The driver was watching him, the single passenger speaking into a hand-microphone. The knot of uneasiness expanding within him, Fat Jow hurried his steps.

Adah Baxter, his landlady, black gown and high coiffure reminiscent of the departed century of the Baxter mansion itself, met him in the cavernous foyer. "Did you see that car?" she demanded. "This is the third time it's been by here this afternoon."

He crossed the parquet floor to the door of his apartment. "Perhaps an unmarked police car," he said, unlocking the door. He turned. "Do you have any lawbreakers among your tenants?"

"Not live ones," she said quietly. A select group of former tenants reposed beneath the cellar floor, victims of their own avarice, and of a singular tea brewed by Adah Baxter. "You can't tell me that's a police car. Those two were faces you'd see on a post-office bulletin. Are you in some kind of trouble? If you are, I ought to know. I'll do anything I can to help. You know that."

"Thank you," he said without enthusiasm. The thought of help from Adah Baxter was somewhat unnerving. Only affection, and the knowlege that this living relic of old San Francisco had few years left, allowed him to preserve her secret in conscience. "Be watchful —and go to the police, if it appears necessary." He bowed, closed the door.

He was pulling on his loungingrobe of lined silk, for his customary evening interlude with his *Chinese World* newspaper, when his telephone rang. He was prepared to hear Low Kan, hoarse with repressed excitement: "They've been here . . . just left. They went all through the place. Two of them."

"As I thought, they are alert to my participation, and we must revise plans. However, their attention is now diverted from the herb shop."

"They may come to you. I could hear a few things they said."

"The possibility has crossed my mind. They have been watching the house."

"I can't get you into this any deeper, Uncle Jow. Maybe if I went to Cliff . . ."

"Remain where you are," ordered Fat Jow. "No noble gesture of sacrifice will benefit Sallie, in any way." He hung up.

The doorbell interrupted his reading. On his way to the door he glanced out the window, saw in the dusk and thickening fog that the black car had stopped before the house. As he crossed the foyer, Adah Baxter's apartment door on the other side opened a crack. She was being watchful.

One of the two men under the dim yellow porch-light was the driver seen earlier, and the other was Clifford Sarazin, deliberately conspicuous in bowler, tweed jacket, cravat, checked waistcoat, watch-chain slung across.

Fat Jow heard Adah Baxter's door click shut behind him. He wished she had a telephone in her apartment.

Sarazin removed his bowler and proffered his card. "Good evening, sir. I've been wanting to meet you. My associate, Mr. Haskins." And in an undertone: "Your hat, George."

George took off his hat. "Hi-ya."

Fat Jow bowed. "How do I merit your attention?"

"I have a business proposition that may interest you. May we come in?"

Curiosity mingling with apprehension, Fat Jow ushered them into his apartment. George posted himself near the door, but Sarazin accepted Fat Jow's invitation to sit on the sofa. He crossed his legs, carefully plucked his trouser creases out of harm's way, and looked about him at the former ballroom, at the mirrored walls and crystal chandelier. "Every time the wrecking-crew moves into one of these charming old places, a little goes out of San Francisco. I can envy you, living here." From an inner pocket he took a small spiral notebook, flipped several pages, said without looking up, "You might say I've had my eye on you ever since the Lindner affair."

Leo Lindner, serving a life sentence for the murder of Moon Kai, had peddled protection to Chinatown merchants engaged in extra-legal but strongly traditional gambling. Coldly and with resignation, Fat Jow said, "Mr. Lindner was a growing threat which had to be removed. I met it as best I could."

Sarazin put the notebook away. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not settling Leo's debts. He was just a small operator. You met the threat admirably. I can respect that. What motivates you? Certainly not money?"

"The personal reward of a task accomplished well. That is all."

"You and I have much in common." Sarazin pursed his lips,

weighing a decision. "I'm prepared to make an opening for you, sir."

Fat Jow said without emphasis, "A grave is an opening."

Sarazin smiled appreciatively. "I was speaking professionally. I've needed a Chinatown representative for a long time. You'll enjoy the association."

Fat Jow drew a deep breath. "I tire of this cat-and-mouse game. It is no choice that you offer."

"Whatever are you talking about?" The smile was fainter.

"You would not have come personally, unless you were confident of obtaining what you wished—and unless your survival were at stake."

Sarazin made no immediate reply, and the smile had quite gone. He stretched lazily. "I've just told you what I came for."

"You have not."

"Suppose you tell me, then."

"We possess a mutual skill in dodging an issue."

The smile came back. "I do like the way your mind works! It'll be a pleasure doing business with you."

"Doing business implies a commodity to be bargained for."

"Well now! I can afford to be more explicit. I'm worried. My partner has disappeared, and I'm afraid something may have happened to him. Since he's known to you, we thought you might help us."

"A trifling detail: this missing person is Chinese?"

Sarazin snapped his fingers. "Didn't I say? I'm that upset over this. You do know Charles Low?"

"I have known Low Kan for many years."

"Did you see him today?"

Fat Jow said without hesitation, "He had tea with me today, then we went our separate ways, and he did not confide his plans to me."

Sarazin partially closed his eyes. "What did you talk about?"

"When the acquaintance exceeds twenty years, there are many topics for discussion. But you wander from the subject—a commodity purveyed has a purchase price."

"Then you have your price?" mocked Sarazin.

"An insignificant price," said Fat Jow casually; "the whereabouts of Sallie Low."

Sarazin made his face a mask. "They have a pleasant apartment on Pacific Heights. Marvelous view of the Gate and the Marin hills."

"She is not there."

A polite arch of the brows. "Well . . . women go shopping, now and then."

Fat Jow placed his fingertips together before his lips. "It would seem that neither of us has the

merchandise desired by the other."

A moment's irritation, then Sarazin resumed his easy affability. "Need I remind you, you're not in a bargaining position." He looked aside at George. "I thought you required finesse which my associates lack, but it may be running its course. Don't pain me by calling for more direct means. A man of your ability—"

A light tap at the door, and George said quickly, "Should I get it?"

Sarazin asked Fat Jow, "Are you expecting callers?"

Mentally berating First Son for coming early, Fat Jow said, "A young friend occasionally visits for the evening."

Sarazin nodded. "The young man whom you called at the plant. An odd coincidence that he drives a car and you don't, and that you invite him for the evening on the same day Charles drops from sight. Go let him in. He knows our car, so he can join the party."

As Fat Jow crossed reluctantly toward the door, George stepped close against the wall next to the knob, his right hand hovering ready above his lapel. "And don't try to tip him off. I'll be right here."

But it was Adah Baxter who confronted him, with a tea cart bearing an exquisite service of fragile hand-painted china, which he had seen only behind glass in her parlor—never used. "I saw you had guests," she said brightly, "and I thought you gentlemen might like some hot tea. It's such a raw night out."

He went numb, eyes on the little flowered globe of the teapot. From somewhere far came his voice: "We are very busy, Miss Baxter. Perhaps later, if there is something you must do . . ." While his mind cried, get the police!

Sarazin was beside him, pulling the door wide. "Nonsense! Is that any way to accept hospitality? A spot of tea would go very well, Madam, and it was thoughtful of you to make the effort for complete strangers. Do come in."

Not trusting himself to meet the eyes of Adah Baxter, Fat Jow dazedly returned to his rocker.

She wheeled the cart to the center of the room, poured first for George, then for Sarazin, prattling about the weather and the cost of living.

"Beautiful china," said Sarazin, raising the translucent cup. "Imported?"

"Oh yes," she replied, pleased. "My grandfather brought many things back from Asia. He was a clipper captain, you know."

"The name of Jedediah Baxter isn't unknown to me," said Sa-

razin. "I'm a bit of a student of local history."

"Aren't you nice!" she beamed, peering closely into his face. "Have we met?"

"Have we?" he parried delicately as he sipped his tea. "Don't you remember?"

"Can't say I do, sonny," she said blankly, turning away to serve Fat Jow last. "I've met lots of people in my time, but I haven't paid

much attention to them, the past thirty-forty years. My eyes and memory aren't so good any more." She did not look at Fat Jow, and conveyed no message by her manner. She returned the teapot to the cart, bustled to the door with a swish of skirts. "I'll leave it here, if you should want more. Now I know you men have things to talk over, so I won't stay."

Sarazin gave a slight wave of dismissal, as much for George as for Adah Baxter. "Thank you, dear lady. I should like the opportunity of chatting with you at leisure, sometime."

After she had gone, George listened with his ear to the panel. "You must be slipping, Chief. I don't think she knows you at all."

"It's just as well," said Sarazin; "I'd hate to involve her in our problems here. Drink up, George. Don't look so sour. I know tea isn't your speed, but you never can tell—you might like it." He looked at Fat Jow, who still held cup and saucer with both hands at the level of his chin, contemplating the tea. "Something wrong?" asked Sarazin.

Fat Jow knew he could not delay drinking longer without arousing Sarazin's suspicion against Adah Baxter. "We orientals prefer making a ceremony of tea," he said, wafting the cup beneath his nostrils. "The perfume is half the delight."

She had made no distinction between Fat Jow and his visitors; the tea had issued from the same container into three clean cups. He closed his eyes and took his first sip, for the fluid-level must be seen to go down. He detected no added ingredients, but too vivid in memory were the cement patches in the cellar floor. His will would not permit him to swallow. While still he supported cup and saucer atop the angle formed by his forearms, he let the tea dribble from his mouth down his wrist and inside the voluminous sleeve of his robe. The discomfort of dampness was minor by comparison with others which came to mind.

He was thus able to dispose of three sips before lowering the cup. "Miss Baxter has a rare gift for tea," he said. "I am not ashamed to confess that mine cannot match it." He kept his eyes on Sarazin.

"I miss stimulating company and conversation," Sarazin said wistfully. "I should relax more. I'd like to spend a lot of time here. There's a mood about the place. If you'd give us half a chance, you and I could be great friends."

"Friendship must be mutual," said Fat Jow. "I do not take kindly to anyone who seeks to guide my steps or alter my values."

"Nor do I—nor do I. But you can understand that business pressures call for a little leaning on this one and that one. It's better to be the leaner than the leaned-on."

Fat Jow let his voice sink into a low, hopefully sedative, monotone: "An unfortunate preponderance of small minds in positions of power dominate the world. Rather than aspire to greatness themselves, they demean or destroy what is not as small as they. The very essence of their being is smallness, and they are resentful of anything more."

Sarazin yawned, drained his teacup, set it aside. "Not so damn' small, friend." His words were slurred, as though he were mildly drunk. "A lot of people—big people—jump when I press the button."

Fat Jow droned on. "You cannot equate power with greatness. Power is petty and transitory, but the effects of greatness are felt forever. The truly great men of history are those whose minds, not deeds, shine as beacons to the rest of a humanity struggling toward the civilized and rational state. The immortals elevate the art of reason to its proper stature. Therefore they live, wherever men hold discourse."

Sarazin had slid down in the sofa, legs extended before him. "You're being wasted, you know that? That two-bit, hole-in-the-wall shop. What're you getting out of life, anyway? You'll thank me for coming. Your style can take you right to the top—to the top, and no stops on the way."

George sauntered unsteadily forward with his empty cup, poured himself another. "It ain't gin," he said happily, "but it sure goes down easy." He dropped into a convenient chair.

Sarazin frowned; not angrily, but rather puzzled. He spoke with grave deliberation: "Say, does she spike her tea?"

Fat Jow clucked. "Such an old-fashioned individual?"

Sarazin nodded. "Course not. Course not." He giggled. "Ridiculous. Isn't it, George? George . . . ?" But George, second cup poised, was not answering. From a trance-like immobility he slowly relaxed, spilling the tea into his lap.

"There was something in that tea!" Sarazin lurched to his feet, swayed dizzily, put a hand to his eyes. "George, you idiot, wake up!" With grim concentration of will he plodded to George, fumbled inside his lapel, came around heavily with a .32 automatic wobbling in his hand. "Now," he gurgled deep in his throat, glancing down in fuzzy surprise as his uncoordinated fingers let the gun fall. He bent after

it, and eased into a stupor on the rich carpet.

Fat Jow rescued the china from George's still fingers and replaced it on the tea-cart. "Miss Baxter!" he called.

She came in at once. "Good," she said; "you didn't drink any. I had to leave that up to you. In any case, I was ready." She showed him a coil of sturdy rope. "This'll hold them till they come to. Now the police?"

"At the moment," said Fat Jow, kneeling to search Sarazin's pockets, "you and I are the transgressors, for our shameful treatment of these innocents."

Adah Baxter sniffed. "Innocents! I know who this is. He should've been behind bars twenty years ago."

"Many people know that, but as yet Mr. Sarazin has been able to manipulate the technicalities of law to his own advantage." He looked through Sarazin's notebook: names, addresses, license numbers, bank accounts. It would prove valuable reading for the authorities.

Sarazin was unarmed, but George carried, besides the shoulder-holster, an eight-inch clasp-knife, brass knuckles, and a flexible lead-filled blackjack. "This arsenal alone," observed Fat Jow, "will enable the police to hold this one. How long will they sleep?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I've never made it so mild before."

He felt a chill. "You do not know whether it is a lethal dose?"

"Oh, I'm sure it isn't. See? They aren't turning blue, like all the others. But maybe, if one drank more than the other . . ." A sudden thought: "that would simplify everything. Maybe if I go and mix up something stronger—"

"Stop," Fat Jow said crisply. "Occupy yourself instead with the ropes."

Soon Sarazin and George were twin hempen cocoons, lying peacefully side by side beneath the crystal chandelier.

Fat Jow stood and brushed off his hands. "Mr. Haskins will remain here, but Mr. Sarazin and I have further business elsewhere." He stepped to the window. The fog had closed until the car was but a dim suggestion of darker gray, the street-light a diffused aura that impaired rather than aided visibility. "When Mr. Haskins stirs, you may use my telephone to call the police."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then—follow your best instincts. The police may confirm the kidnapping of Mrs. Charles Low by interviewing Mrs. Collins, the apartment manager. I hope to have more information for them later."

First Son arrived, and Fat Jow directed him to drive Sarazin's car up to the side door. First Son asked no questions; he knew both his old friend and Clifford Sarazin. It was enough that they acted for Low Kan. Between them they carried Sarazin to the car, propped him in a corner of the rear seat, and locked him in.

Driving was slow, as they could see no more than a dozen feet ahead. The fading rows of streetlights were their only reference points. Despite the relative youth of the evening, the streets were deserted. Foghorns shook the deadened world.

The Central California coast presents to the sea a thousand-foot barrier of dark hills whose roots are scoured by water and wind into naked cliffs rising from tumbled rocks and narrow crescent beaches. State Highway One, sightseer's dream and acrophobe's nightmare, follows these rugged contours well above cliffs and crashing surf, descending only rarely to sea-level. When visibility is limited, whether by fog or darkness or both, this road becomes as remote as deep wilderness, although but a few miles from the centers of population. Its more precipitous stretches, those closed most frequently by slides, are by habit largely unused, because of a lingering aversion of the driving public to being swept into the sea with a fragment of the landscape.

As they rounded a tight curve skirting a rock buttress, Fat Jow said suddenly, "Stop here." The headlights revealed a strip of earth-and-gravel shoulder, a dusty fringe of weeds along the broken rocky edge and, beyond, the blank fog curtain throwing back the glare. "Pull off the pavement."

"On the outside?" First Son asked nervously, squinting ahead past the flopping windshield wipers.

"Where else?" For the buttress rose almost sheer from the inner side of the curve.

"It's a downgrade."

"Yes," said Fat Jow.

With slow caution, First Son edged over as far right as he dared, set the hand-brake firmly.

"Lights off," said Fat Jow; "engine off."

Darkness closed in, slowly softened as their eyes adjusted, and they became aware of the restless soughing of the unseen surf below. They were beyond the foghorns' range.

From behind the glass screening the rear compartment came a bored drawl. "Would you mind filling me in on the plot of this farce?"

Fat Jow turned. "Ah, welcome

back, Mr. Sarazin. Rather melodrama than farce."

"Melodrama is out-of-date," said Sarazin.

"My entire existence rests upon out-of-date standards." Fat Jow waved First Son out of the car, climbed out after him. The opening of the door snapped on the dome light, and a small fuzzy globe of gray light permeated the fog beside the car. He said to First Son, "I presume that you are familiar with that adjustment of the hand-brake which holds the car unless slight motion causes slippage?"

First Son displayed his first resistance. "I can't be a party to this," he declared.

"Let us walk aside and talk," said Fat Jow, taking his arm. They withdrew into the fog until the gray glow was almost swallowed up behind them, Fat Jow speaking softly and earnestly, not to persuade but to explain.

First Son left him and stalked alone down the shoulder of the road.

Fat Jow returned to the car. "He is a sensitive person—which is good. He has gone off to wrestle his conscience."

Sarazin was testing the ropes, but Adah Baxter had wrapped well. "Assuming that you plan to see this through, just how will you explain it away for the police?"

"Who but one with imagination of sheerest fantasy could consider this decrepit oriental a threat to Clifford Sarazin? The facts will be evident to establish the 'accident': a dangerous road, a heavy fog, a sharp curve."

"And these ropes?"

Fat Jow shrugged. "Rope is combustible. We shall let the engine idle, and increase the probability of fire."

Sarazin managed a harsh laugh. "You're a cool one . . . but I don't think you have the nerve."

"I wield no weapon, administer no blow. I but set the stage, but you are chief performer. While you sit relaxed, the car will stand. But no one can remain motionless indefinitely. A single answer will suffice to set the hand-brake again."

First Son, hands in pockets, feet scuffing the dirt, came slowly out of the fog ahead. "I think I'm ready."

Sarazin blazed, "Aren't you going to show more sense than this old fool?"

First Son gave him a long look. "Nope."

Fat Jow said, "We are not constituted precisely as is your average law-abiding citizen. By ancient custom, friendship and loyalty are strong influences, superseding our habitual restraints. If one is not a

person of violence, he must improvise, with the first instruments to come to hand."

Sarazin surged forward, fell back. "Suppose I don't know a thing about Sallie Low?"

Fat Jow bowed. "Then I now offer my apology, for what will have been my regrettable error." He directed First Son to enter the car. "Please start the engine." The powerful engine throbbed into life. "Now the hand-brake—gently."

First Son eased forward the lever notch by notch, until the heavy car stirred with a groan that reverberated through the frame. He pulled back, and the groaning stopped. A notch forward . . . another . . . they waited.

"Get out," said Fat Jow. Tentatively he rocked the car with one hand. The brakes slipped a little, caught again. "Excellent. We may now leave Mr. Sarazin to his meditation." He moved away, beckoning First Son to follow.

Sarazin neither moved nor spoke. At a little distance they squatted down, prepared to wait with the infinite patience of their people. The surf roared, shattering upon the rocks below, transmitting its strength in a mild trembling of the ground.

They did not measure time, for time measured is slow to move. They only waited, without words. A groan came from the brake drums, amplified through the open door of the car. After another wait, the next slippage endured longer, and ticked on slowly, undecided when to stop. A last tick . . . and the brakes held again.

Well into the following silence came Sarazin's low call, tense, controlled: "You there?"

Fat Jow did not move. "Yes, Mr. Sarazin."

"Say it occurred to me where she might be."

"We would know not where she might be," said Fat Jow stolidly, "but where she is."

A spark of anger: "Okay! Say she is, then!" Sarazin's vehemence started a small slippage, and his voice became very low, very quiet. "Come here and set this brake, and we'll talk about it."

"First," said Fat Jow, rising, "we shall talk—and then decide whether to set the brake."

Sarazin seemed to have shrunk into himself. He was huddled into the corner, staring at the floor. He said in a rush, "There's an abandoned ranch-house down below Half-Moon Bay—rustic brushwood arch over the gate. The sheriff will know it."

"She is there?" persisted Fat Jow.

"Yeah!" snapped Sarazin. "Now get that lousy brake."

First Son would have reached into the car, but Fat Jow held him back. "She is guarded?"

"One man, and he's not expecting trouble, so he won't raise a fuss. He's got orders—no rough stuff." Sarazin grimaced. "Please?" An unaccustomed word for Clifford Sarazin.

First Son jerked back firmly upon the hand-brake, cut the engine.

Sarazin was limp, his voice weak. "You drive a hard bargain. Now how about these ropes?"

Fat Jow climbed into the front seat. "Until we have confirmed your information, the stage remains set. First Son—the radio, please. Can you reach the city police for me?"

"Sure." First Son switched on the set. "They can zero in on our location once we're on the air."

"Then we shall not remain long on the air. For the present."

First Son did not ask for Detective-Lieutenant Cogswell, but the name of Fat Jow brought the lieutenant on immediately. "I might've known you'd be in on the Low case somewhere," said Cogswell. "Where are you? Half the Department's out hunting you. Where's Sarazin? Are you okay?"

Fat Jow took the microphone. "None of this is important. Your first concern is to fetch Sallie Low from the place where she is held."

"You know where she is?"

"Mr. Sarazin has proved most informative."

"Cliff?" A growing note of exultation: "But—this ties him in with the whole business!"

"I am sure Mr. Sarazin is well aware of that."

Cogswell sounded worried. "What'd you *do* to him? No, don't tell me. Where's the girl?"

Fat Jow repeated Sarazin's directions, heard Cogswell relay them to someone. Cogswell was in mid-sentence when Fat Jow signaled First Son to cut him off.

They broke radio silence at irregular intervals, and little more than an hour later came the welcome word that Sallie, unharmed, was on her way to a hospital for observation. Her bewildered guard was in custody.

"Now then," said Cogswell ominously, "we got a fix on you. Will you come in, or will we go out there to get you?"

"We shall not move," said Fat Jow, to the accompaniment of a long sigh from Sarazin, "until you arrive to relieve me of the burden of guaranteeing Mr. Sarazin's safety."

Cogswell mumbled something unintelligible. "He's all right, isn't he? I mean, he'd better be."

Fat Jow held the microphone

over his shoulder, against the glass between compartments. "Tell him, Mr. Sarazin."

Sarazin said sarcastically, "Oh, I'm fine. What'd you think?"

Cogswell said, "That sounds like him. Stay right there. We're on our way."

The radio went dead, and Fat Jow returned the microphone to First Son. He rested his head against the seat-back. "A long night. An old man misses his sleep."

Sarazin said, "I think I've been infinitely patient with you. Cut me loose."

Fat Jow did not stir. "We shall not come near you. The police will see to your improved comfort."

"And I'll have a thing or two to tell them," Sarazin said darkly. "Harassment, intimidation."

Fat Jow smiled a little. "I wonder exactly what you will tell them. And how would the national press present the story, Mr. Sarazin? The potential variety is endless. You do have an image to maintain."

After a pause, Sarazin grumbled, "The first stray thread . . . now the unraveling begins."

Sirens echoing among the seacliffs announced the coming of the authorities. Out of the fog materialized three cars: two from the San Mateo county sheriff's office, one from the city, Fat Jow noted.

Cogswell came first, assessed the situation at a glance, bent with hands on knees to look in at Sarazin. "You don't look too chipper, Cliff. You seem to have got yourself tangled up in something. Any complaints?"

"I'll have to think about it," Sarazin said glumly.

Cogswell beckoned his men. "Get the ropes off him and take him downtown. Conspiracy and kidnapping will do for a starter."

Fat Jow and First Son emerged from the car. Fat Jow handed Cogswell the notebook. "This may be of use," he said.

Sarazin shouted past the men working on his ropes, "Illegal search and seizure!"

"I was merely keeping it for Mr. Sarazin," said Fat Jow. "When he was feeling drowsy earlier this evening, he dropped it."

Cogswell handled it as he might an art treasure. "Don't you worry, Cliff, you can have it back after we've copied it." He tilted it to the light and glanced through it. "We'll take the best care of it." He gave it to one of his men. "Round up everybody in this book, and check out all the license numbers with Motor Vehicles. The bank accounts we'll go into in the morning."

They conducted Sarazin from

the car. He stretched cramped muscles, turned to look at the cliff's edge, and saw for the first time the several heavy rocks which First Son, laboring on hands and knees and under cover of fog, had maneuvered into the path of the front wheels.

Slowly Sarazin turned to Fat Jow. "You—old—fraud!" he said grudgingly. "It's high time I retired. This pace could be too much for my heart. I may even turn state's evidence. After tonight, I'll be safer on the inside looking out. Several gentlemen are going to resent the attention of the police." He looked again at the rocks. "And there are certain explanations I doubt I'll ever be able to make."

The two sheriffs' cars departed with Sarazin, and Cogswell directed the remaining man to deliver Sarazin's car to the police garage. He waved Fat Jow and First Son toward the waiting city car. "I'll give you a lift home. I know it's foolish of me to ask—but you wouldn't just know where Charles Low is, too?"

Fat Jow got into the rear seat. "If you care to make a small detour to my shop, you may then take Low Kan to Sallie at the hospital."

Cogswell stopped where he was. "That's what I thought." He slid in behind the wheel. "Sallie Low, Cliff Sarazin, Charles Low—a fair night's work. While we're at it, is there anything else you have for us?"

A vague discomfort suggested caution. Fat Jow asked, "And how was Miss Baxter when you left her?"

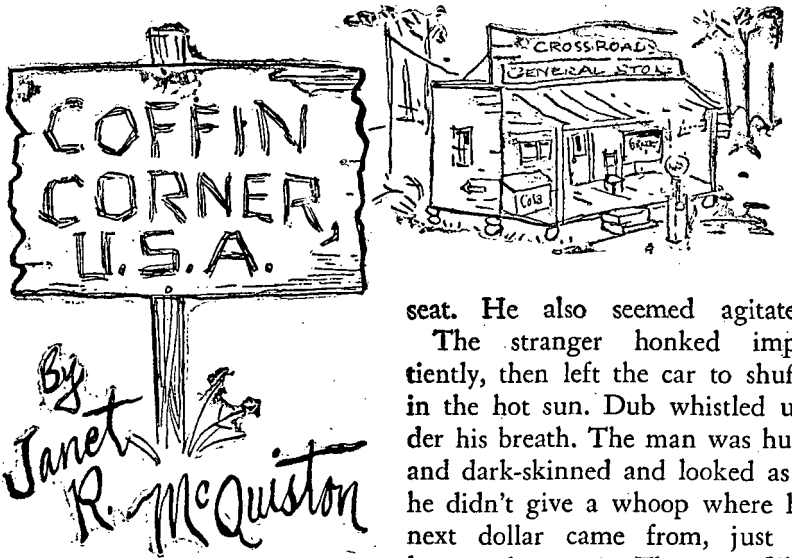
Cogswell pulled out upon the pavement. "We only talked to her on the phone. And we wouldn't have believed her at all, if we hadn't already heard about Sallie from Mrs. Collins. Who ever believes anything Adah Baxter says? Some wild story about a kidnapping, and Cliff Sarazin taking you for a ride. She was worried about you—that was the only reason she called."

A statement, not a question: "You did not go out to the house."

"No reason, was there?" Cogswell chuckled. "Old faithful Adah . . . she was in rare form tonight. After telling us all that, she had to look important, too. 'Oh, by the way,' she says, 'there's something else. I've had to dispose of somebody—in the usual manner.' What an imagination! By now, I suppose there's a nice neat new patch in her cellar floor."

Fat Jow refrained from inquiries about George Haskins, and spoke no further word all the way downtown.

Some folks make a livin', and a livin' sometimes "makes" folks.



THE Illinois car that rolled off of old Ninety-Four and stopped beside the single gasoline pump was a rich man's sedan. Dub Norton did not move from the high stool behind the counter inside the Crossroads General Store. He inventoried the car speculatively through the dust-coated window and waited for the stranger to debark. The stranger seemed alone—unless someone was asleep and out of sight on the back seat. He also seemed agitated.

The stranger honked impatiently, then left the car to shuffle in the hot sun. Dub whistled under his breath. The man was huge and dark-skinned and looked as if he didn't give a whoop where his next dollar came from, just as long as he got it. The man filled Dub with apprehension, and he was tempted to lock himself in his quarters at the back of the store and wait for the man to go away.

The car horn bleated again. Dub jerked, then stood in uncertainty, his right hand near the butt of the ancient .45 on the shelf under the cash register. Illinois plates, big car, big *tough-looking* man, alone, feverish, angry—the man had to be a criminal. Dub yanked out his shirttail, stuffed the gun under his

belt and along his spine, then dropped the shirttail over the gun before he walked out into the sunshine. He approached the stranger warily, prepared for anything. "Howdy," he said cautiously.

"Where ya been?" rasped the big man. "I've been sittin' here five minutes."

"You-all want gas?"

"Hell yes, I want gas. Why would I wheel in here if I didn't want gas? I'm near empty. Fill me up. Is that stuff in your pump ethyl?"

"Nope."

The big man swore. "You ain't got ethyl?"

"I got just one pump, mister."

"That stuff'll ruin my engine. Well, put it in anyway. Where the hell am I?"

"Crossroads."

"Huh?"

"This here is Crossroads General Store."

"Where's the rest of the town?"

"Ain't no town. Jus' the store and two roads that cross."

"This is Mississippi, I trust?"

"Yep." Dub nodded. "This here is Pine Country. And down the road a piece is Swamp Country."

"Man! See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet, huh?"

Dub was puzzled.

"Never mind, never mind," snapped the stranger. "Ain't you gonna give me a tank of gas?"

"Shore."

"Then give!"

The stranger walked out to the road and Dub was more at ease with the man at a distance, where he could see him; he didn't want the stranger to move in behind him, ever.

The stranger returned as Dub was hooking the nozzle on the gas pump and for the first time Dub noticed the coat bulge on the left side of the man's chest. Dub put a hand on his hip, his fingers just inches from his secreted gun.

"Okay, how much?" rasped the stranger.

"Six dollars."

"Even?"

"Yep."

As the stranger reached into the left side of his coat, Dub's fingers were on the butt of his revolver, but the stranger brought out a fat wallet and fished out a bill. Then he cocked his large head and eyed Dub. "Man, I don't get it. Just this one store out here in the corner of nowhere?"

"It's my place," Dub nodded. "My pappy left it to me."

"But where do you get customers from?"

"I got kinfolk round."

"Where?"

"Out there." Dub made a circling motion with his arm, taking

in the pine trees that surrounded them.

"People live out there in them trees?" the stranger bleated in disbelief.

"Yep."

"And you live here?"

"Yep."

"You got a wife?"

"Nope."

"Nobody?"

"Nope."

"You live here alone?"

Dub put his hand on his hip again. "Yep."

"Makin' your fortune."

"Yep."

"Bet you hide money in fruit jars. Maybe bury the jars, huh?"

"Now you-all talkin' nonsense, mister."

"Man, I gotta be at the end of the earth! Okay, so tell me, how do I get to the Gulf from here? I hate to admit it, but I'm lost, fella. Somewhere along the line I got on the wrong road."

"You-all take Ninety-Four back 'bout twelve miles."

"Ninety-Four?"

"That there road behind you, mister. It's called Ninety-Four. You-all take it back till you-all hit One-O-Seven. You-all go south on One-O-Seven. That'll get you-all to the Gulf."

The stranger came around the sedan. "Boy, if I ever find civilization again I'll never leave, that's for sure." He started to extend the bill and then he lowered his arm. "Hey, you got a cafe with this place?"

"Nope."

"I'm hungry. I thought you might have the only cafe in the state, too."

"Nope."

"Well, it's 'bout noon. You didn't happen to be eatin' a little something when I drove up, didja?"

"Nope."

"I thought I might get some kind of meal from ya. I'll pay."

"I got some hot grits inside, but—"

"Grits! Wowie, I've been that route, and, no thanks, not again! I'll just take along a couple of candy bars. Here's a ten spot. You take the gas and candy out, huh?"

"I got to go inside to make change."

"So let's go inside, fella."

"You-all go 'head."

The stranger grinned suddenly. "Polite, too?"

Dub went behind the counter and watched the stranger closely while the man took two candy bars from the rack. The man turned, and Dub said quickly, "You-all got to stay on that side o' the counter. It's a rule o' the place."

The stranger cocked his head.

"How come you're so jumpy, fella? You think I'm gonna rob ya or somethin'?"

Dub eyed the stranger bravely. His right hand was on the .45 butt. "Nope."

"Okay, so gimme my change. Man, I gotta get out of here. It's gettin' creepy round this joint."

Dub made change and walked around the counter. The stranger took the change and turned to the door.

Three afternoons later the two patrol boys rolled up to the general store, left the official sedan and came inside.

Dub remained perched on the high stool behind the counter. "Howdy, boys."

"Howdy, Brother Dub."

"Hot."

"Ain't it? You-all seen a stranger out this here way lately, Brother Dub? Say the last day, two or three?"

"Nope."

"Lookin' for a feller. One of them Yankees from Ill-in-oise. Suppose to have been drivin' down to the Gulf. 'Pears he never got there, and now his Yankee kin is worried. We figured he might've got a wrong road, somethin'. Might've come along Ninety-Four."

"Maybe the swamps got him."

One of the patrolmen chuckled. "Ain't no sense lookin' if'n they did, is there? We-all know them swamps, eh?"

"Ain't no man round knows the swamps like me."

"Amen, Brother Dub," grinned the patrolman. "Well, we-all gotta git. Keep an eye, hear? Ill-in-oise."

"Shore."

The patrolmen started out the door, then the chuckler turned. He still wore a grin. "If'n we-all don' find this here feller, how many's that make we done lost in these parts in the last couple o' years?"

"Six, seven, maybe eight folks. I rightly lost count."

The patrolman sobered, shook his head. "Strangers and swamp country. They-all jist don't mix."

"Feller's gotta be all-mighty careful," Dub agreed.

After the patrolmen had departed, he went into his living quarters, carefully locked the door behind him, got down on his knees and snaked the small metal box from under his bed. Opening the box, he recounted the two-year accumulated cache. It totaled near nine thousand dollars, now. The last one, the big man from Illinois, had been the best. He had been carrying more than two thousand dollars in the fat wallet. One more like him and a man could live easy in a Gulf shanty for the rest of his days.

Just sprawled in the sun . . .

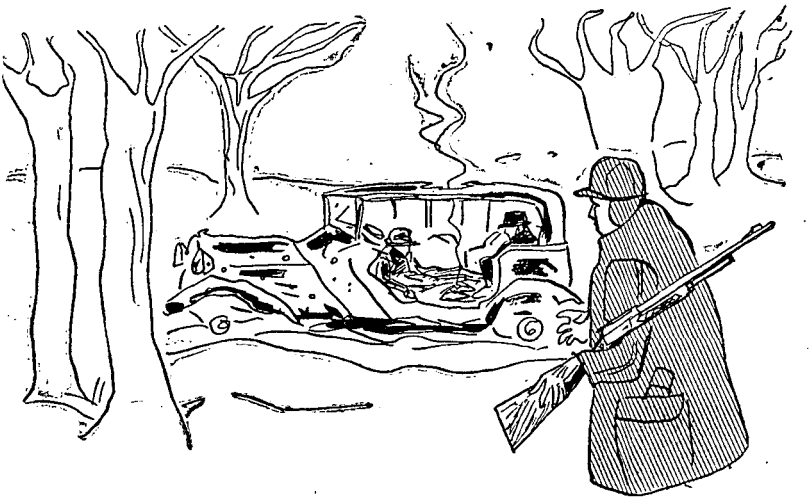
After all, how often does a gambler win the jackpot with his "openers"?

PETERSON left the cabin as soon as the sky lightened enough to allow him to move through the woods easily, and headed toward his favorite valley with the hope the big buck he had seen yesterday would still be there. He'd been saving the spot over the fireplace in the cabin for years, waiting for that magnificent head, and today he had sworn to hunt until dark, if necessary, to get a shot at him. He was prepared from the skin out for the ten degree cold, with a pair of sandwiches tucked inside his shirt and a thermos full of hot tea in one pocket. Rifle cradled in his left arm, he moved through the two inch dusting of snow that had fallen the night before, swiftly and surely, although he hadn't hunted this area in years.

He topped a low rise and paused. The downslope ended in a meadow and through the trees he could see the snow covered hulk of an old sedan, its wheels and windows long gone.

The car had been there since he had been a boy, simply emerging one spring from the melting snow as if it had decided to grow along with the meadow grass and mountain flowers. Whoever had driven it there had to do it through underbrush and trees, a trick Peterson's father said could be done only by someone blind drunk on a moonless night. Guesses ranged from racketeers who had to get rid of it, to a stubborn stranger who lost his way, fell asleep, looked around in the morning, said to hell with it and walked out.

Peterson started down the slope and pulled up short. Unless his imagination was playing tricks on him in the gray morning, smoke was curling from the car. Someone must have built a fire inside. Nothing unusual in that. It wouldn't have been the first time a hunter, lost and caught out by the quick late-fall darkness had enough sense to hole up in the wreck. Someone had once thoughtfully chopped a hole in the roof and punched holes in the floor to act as a grate, and unless the wind whipped through the glassless windows and countless bullet holes left by hunters who couldn't resist taking a shot at the rusted hulk, it didn't make a bad emergency shelter at all, the metal reflecting the heat and acting as an oven.



As Peterson approached he saw there were two men and they

weren't hunters. Wearing felt hats, topcoats and ordinary street shoes, one huddled in the corner of what had been the rear seat, his hat over his eyes, the other hunched over the weak flame of the dying fire.

"Hey," Peterson called.

The one hunched over the flame lifted his head and stared dully. Pinched and white above the turned up topcoat collar, the face belonged to a red-haired kid who couldn't be more than half Peterson's age. In spite of the fire, it was cold in the wreck and he knew the kid would take a little thawing before he could walk. Well conditioned and strong as he was, Peterson wasn't about to try to haul out a kid almost as big and as heavy as himself.

He poured a cup of hot tea and held it out. "Drink it slow," he said, "Then we'll get you out of there and moving. You've got to get your blood circulating. What about your friend?"

The kid sipped the tea, clutching the cup in both hands, savoring the heat. "Dead," he whispered.

Peterson walked around the car, pulled the door open and tried to straighten the huddled figure. He was dead all right, the body stiff, but the cold alone hadn't done it. There was a hole, surrounded by a small brown stain, in the chest of the topcoat, easy enough to overlook if you had never seen one like it before. Then Peterson knew who the two men were. The late news broadcast the night before had carried a rare item for that section, the holdup of one of those big hardware stores that sells everything from tools to television sets in the town some twenty miles to the north. One of the two holdup men was believed wounded by an off duty policeman as they escaped with something like eight thousand dollars. Peterson wondered how they had ended up here in the middle of nowhere. He looked up to see the kid watching.

"Lucky you didn't freeze to death, too," he said. Let the kid think Peterson didn't know a bullet hole when he saw one. Peterson walked around the car, yanked open the other door and held out his hand. "Let's go," he said. "You've got to get moving."

They trampled the snow down pretty well before the kid's legs began to function well enough for Peterson to let him shuffle back and forth alone. "How are your feet?" he asked.

"Can't feel a thing."

"Get your shoes and socks off." Peterson looked at the dead white flesh. "Man, you're in trouble with those. Here." He handed him a fistful of snow. "Rub them down

gently. Try to get some feeling in them." The corpse in the car had been wearing a woolen scarf. Peterson brought it back to the kid. "Getting anywhere?"

The kid shook his head. "Nothing yet."

Peterson tossed him a large handkerchief and the scarf. "Dry your feet with the handkerchief and get your shoes and socks back on. Wrap the scarf around your head to cover your ears. We've got to get out of here. Can you walk on those feet?"

"Well enough."

"What's your name?"

"Grogan. Joe Grogan."

"Okay, Grogan. Let's get moving. We'll send someone back for your friend." Peterson shoveled snow on the fire in the car. The corpse wouldn't need it. Grogan was standing when he turned around, a .38 pointed at Peterson's belt buckle. Peterson laughed. "What do you think you're going to do with that?"

"Take those warm clothes and get out of these damned woods."

Peterson yanked the zipper down on the quilted jacket he was wearing. "You want the clothes? I'll give them to you. You think all you need is warm clothes?" He waved at the trees. "Which direction do you take? And even if you knew, how far do you think you'll get on those feet? Grow up, Grogan. You're a city boy and you're going to die out here unless I get you out. So put the gun away."

"Not so fast, Dad," said Grogan. "I'm not as bad off as all that. You came in. I'll follow your tracks out."

Peterson grinned. The kid wasn't exactly stupid. "Now what makes you think I came in here straight from somewhere?" he lied. "I've been cutting back and forth looking for deer sign. There's another little thing you haven't counted on." He pointed at a few random flakes drifting down. "It's starting to snow. How long are my tracks going to be there?"

"I'll make a deal," said Grogan. "Get me out and I won't kill you."

Peterson zipped up his jacket and reached for his rifle.

"Leave it," Grogan said sharply.

Peterson sighed. "Look, Grogan, this is bear country. Run into one a little hungry and he can be mean and that popgun of yours isn't going to bother him much. The rifle goes with us."

"Then unload it and put the shells in your pocket, Dad. This popgun will buy you enough time to reload if one shows up."

Grogan's feet might not be in great shape but there was nothing

wrong with his head. Peterson levered the rifle empty and picked up the cartridges out of the snow. "Tell you what, Grogan, I'm leaving. You want to come along, fine. You want to shoot, go ahead. We'll both be found in the spring when the snow melts, maybe. But as long as we're talking about deals, I'll offer you one. If you hadn't pulled that gun on me, I would have taken you out for nothing. Now I'll get you out, but you'll give me the money you boys took last night."

Grogan's lip curled. "An honest citizen like you doesn't want stolen money, Dad. You should be willing to help me from the goodness of your heart. How did you know, anyway?"

"Radio, what else? Which gives you another problem. There are only a half-dozen roads you could have taken and I'm sure the troopers have road blocks on all of them. I can help you there, too. You think about that a little as we're walking. Now, what about the money? I can use that much cash."

Grogan waved the gun. "Get moving. I'll follow."

Peterson moved out along the tracks he'd left. Grogan didn't look like he used the gun because he enjoyed it but because it was the only way he knew to get what he wanted. Strangely, Grogan would continue to consider that gun the most important thing in his world, yet out here and right now it didn't mean a thing. He himself would never have backed down from taking over the warm clothing. Grogan should have pressed the point, needing the warm woolen hat, quilted jacket, gloves and heavy boots far more than Peterson, even if they wouldn't have fit him very well, but being a kid from the city and more scared than he let Peterson see, he wouldn't know how the cold could sap a man's strength slowly and the man wouldn't even be aware of it, or even realize what a great part physical condition would play out here. Twice Grogan's age, Peterson so far had been on a morning stroll while Grogan had a bad night and walked more miles than he had in years.

Peterson wasn't worried about the gun; not yet anyway. What bothered him was the time it would take to get this kid out, get rid of him and come back in. Valuable hours, and there just might not be enough of them left to get that big buck before the season ended at sundown. Could be years before he saw another like it. His wife hadn't understood that, calling last night. That buck

meant more to him than anything else right now. He sighed. Well, maybe the money could keep the day from being entirely wasted.

Grogan triggered a shot that kicked up snow in front of him. "You're walking too fast, Dad."

Already angry at the kid for ruining his plans, Peterson whirled. "You take one more shot at me, kid, and I'll shove that gun down your throat. The only reason I let you keep it is because I don't feel like taking it away from you."

Grogan started to say something, saw the look on Peterson's face and changed his mind. He waved him forward with the gun.

I'll have to take it away from him eventually, thought Peterson. *The minute he thinks he can make it on his own, he'll use it.* He slowed his pace, swinging away from his tracks so he'd come out above the cabin. The snow began in earnest now and he groaned. That finished his buck for this year for sure. The weatherman had said it wasn't supposed to snow until night. He led the kid for almost an hour before a fallen tree caught his eye and he kicked the snow off it, rested his rifle against a nearby trunk and motioned Grogan to sit down.

"Why are we stopping?" Grogan held the gun on him steadily.

"The old technique," said Peterson. "Walk fifty minutes and take ten. You make better time that way when you have a long way to go." Grogan couldn't know the cabin was only ten minutes away.

"You crazy?" screamed Grogan. "It's cold, my feet are frozen, it's snowing and you want to take a break?"

"Sit down," Peterson said calmly. "And don't get excited when I reach into my shirt. I have a couple of sandwiches in there, not a gun." Peterson tossed one of the sandwiches at him, and Grogan caught it with one hand.

"You said a couple. I'll take them both."

Peterson grinned, tossed him the second and held out the thermos. "You better take this, too."

Grogan tore into a sandwich. "You're pretty generous, Dad."

"It isn't free. You're going to pay. Something like eight thousand dollars, if I'm not mistaken."

Grogan stopped chewing. "You're nuts, Dad. That money cost me too much just to hand it over to you."

"You will, though. It's a low price for staying alive. How did you and your friend get to that old car last night anyway?"

"Hit an icy spot on a curve and spun into a tree after bugging out of that town. Hung around for a

while hoping we could stop another car but the only one that came by almost ran me down. Figured they'd tell the cops so we grabbed a flashlight and took off into the woods, trying to find a house to hole up in, Lefty with that slug in him and all."

Peterson chuckled. "You must think you're in the suburbs. You don't know how lucky you are. Nobody lives this high up on the mountain. I suppose you just stumbled onto the car."

Grogan finished the tea. "Good thing, too. Lefty was almost finished, it started to snow, and the flashlight was almost done. I found enough dry wood to get the fire going and the next thing I knew, you came along."

Peterson shook his head in wonder. "You know you should be dead, don't you? You used up just about all the luck one man has in a lifetime."

"Enough talk," said Grogan. "Let's get moving."

Peterson leaned back. "Not before you pay your bill."

Grogan thumbed back the hammer.

Peterson held up a hand. "You ever play poker, Grogan? Well, I'm sitting with a pat hand and you're trying to draw to an inside straight. Who do you think is going to win? You shoot me and you wander around until you die or find a road or a house. From the look of those feet of yours, I figure you have only a few hours before you'll be a real amputation case. On the other hand, I can lead you around until you're so cold and your feet so bad you'll beg me to carry you out. I can just take the money then and leave. I'd rather you hand it to me now. That way we both come out ahead. Aren't your feet and your life worth eight thousand dollars?"

"Suppose I give you the money. How quick will you get me out?"

Peterson shrugged. "Maybe an hour," he lied.

Grogan thumbed a shot into the tree above Peterson's head, showering him with snow. "I'll follow you for just one hour. If we're not out by then, I'll kill you and if you don't move *now,* I'll kill you right here because I figure I'm one hour closer to wherever you're taking me."

Peterson sighed and reached for his rifle. He had pushed the kid far enough. Grogan, half frozen in spite of the food and hot tea, and stumbling along on dead feet, was just liable to run out of patience.

He led Grogan down a slope to a low stone wall above a rutted road that was just a tunnel through the trees. The wall was only knee high, but the earth on the other

side dropped sharply to the road a good six feet below. To Peterson it presented no problem. He could step over the wall and jump. Grogan wouldn't find it that simple with those cold chilled muscles and frozen feet, but there was no other way to get to the road.

"It will be a little easier walking down there," Peterson told him.

"Which way do we go?"

Peterson shook his head. "Tell you that and you don't need me anymore. This is as far as I go without getting paid."

Grogan looked in both directions, the falling snow and trees isolating him in a two hundred yard segment of the world where the wall and the road continued into invisibility, and nothing indicated which way led to civilization and which led deeper into the forest.

Peterson brushed snow from the top of the wall and sat down. "You ready to talk business?"

Grogan's eyes narrowed. "I'm ready to shoot you, you greedy old ridge runner. I wouldn't put it past you to let me die out here just so you could get that money. I ought to kill you now and take my chances."

"Before you shoot, remember if you pick the wrong way, you're dead. By the time you decide you're wrong, it will be too late to make it back. Even if you knew the right way, you have no guarantee you'll last long enough. Then you have to contend with the state police. You need a car and I have one."

Grogan, shivering, cursed him.

"I'll take the money now," said Peterson sharply. "What good is it if you end up with no toes or just plain dead? You get no more cards, kid. You play what you have. Do you call or fold?"

Grogan looked up and down the road again. "It sort of looks like I fold, Dad," he said slowly. "You honest citizens are all alike. You'll spend it even though it's stolen, but you don't have the guts to go out and get it. Then when you have someone like me over a barrel, your hand is out." He unbuttoned his coat and tossed a thick brown packet to Peterson. "You think I won't tell the cops I gave it to you if they catch up to me?"

"Doesn't matter. They won't believe you. I'll say you must have lost it in the woods." Peterson hefted the packet. "No eight thousand here." He wasn't disappointed. That figure had seemed too high from the beginning.

"Never was. Maybe two thousand. That store manager was just trying to build up the insurance claim, that's all."

"You wouldn't try to kid me,

would you, Grogan? Two grand?"

The kid spread his arms. "Six thousand in small bills is a big bundle, Dad. You see my coat bulging anywhere? You've got it all, except for maybe three or four hundred I used to light the fire. Easy come, easy go. Want to complain about that?"

Peterson laughed. "Since it probably kept you alive, it was cheap at the price." He tucked the packet inside his jacket. "You have a deal, kid. You've bought yourself a few more weeks or months or whatever until you get yourself into trouble again, and as long as you're paying me to get you out, put the gun away. You don't need it." He waited until Grogan slipped the gun into his pocket, then swung around and dropped to the road. He knew what the kid had in mind. He still had that gun, so he'd wait just long enough to see which direction Peterson headed, stop him, take the money back, and leave Peterson behind. The kid was nobody's fool, but he was making a big mistake in thinking Peterson was one. "Come on," he called impatiently.

Grogan sat on the wall, swung his legs over and hesitated. That jump looked big to a half-frozen man with feet that had no feeling. It was going to hurt when he landed. He pushed off, hit the steep bank, slipped in the snow and lost his balance, his legs collapsing under him. Sprawled flat, he felt Peterson's knee in his back pinning him down. Peterson took the gun from his pocket, then pulled him to his feet and pointed him up the road.

A slow five minutes later Grogan was baking in the heat from the fireplace in Peterson's cabin. A fast half hour later four men were on their way in to get Lefty's body, and Grogan was bundled in a blanket on his way to a hospital in the rear seat of a state police car, with Peterson following in his own.

Grogan twisted to look back. Nothing in the world was free, the old duck said. He jerked a thumb at Peterson's car. "You know you're going to have to hold old Dad back there for receiving stolen goods. He forced me to give him the money to lead me out."

"Forget it, kid," said the trooper. "I know Pete has the money. He and I need it for a few hours after we drop you off."

"What's he going to do, give you a cut?"

"You could get hurt talking like that," the trooper said grimly. "Peterson will turn the money in, all right, even though it's his."

"His?" Grogan stared at the trooper.

"His. Peterson happens to own that store you hit last night. All you did was give him back his own money."

"Then he must be some kind of nut. I'm telling you if I didn't give him that money, he'd have me out there until I died."

The trooper grinned. "Knowing Pete, I don't doubt he had you believing there was still ten miles to go right up until he pushed you into that cabin. That's why no one around here plays poker with him without setting a limit first. You just never know what cards he holds. How long did it take to get to Peterson's cabin from that car?"

"About an hour."

"That's what I thought. The only way to make it any faster is to run. Peterson brought you straight out, which is why those feet of yours are going to give you only a little trouble for a few days rather than a lot of trouble for a long time."

Grogan, remembering how he had cursed Peterson when they saw the cabin so quickly, wondered why the old duck hadn't done it the easy way by just taking the gun from him and then the money.

In the car behind them, Peterson whistled softly. As long as his hunt was ruined and the big buck lost for this year, talking the kid into giving him the money while he still had the gun was like raking in a big pot with an ace and a king showing and nothing to back it up, while the other guy really held the winning hand. He hadn't enjoyed himself so much in years.

He thought of his store manager than, and stopped whistling. Eight thousand dollars! That high-living so-and-so hadn't inflated the figure because of any insurance. He'd been nibbling at the profits all along but Peterson's accountants hadn't pinned him down yet. When the store was robbed he saw an easy way to pocket the difference between what they took and what the safe held. If anyone but Peterson had picked up Grogan, it would have been his word against Grogan's and anyone's guess as to what had happened to the missing six thousand dollars. As soon as they dropped off the kid, he and the troopers would pick up that store manager. There was no way for him to juggle the books this time.

Peterson speeded up the windshield wipers against the thickening snow, regretting the lost opportunity to get that big buck. Still, maybe that store manager's hide was trophy enough for one season, even if he couldn't hang it over the fireplace in the cabin.

Good advice oft comes too late; however, at a timely moment it would only fall on deaf ears.

HARRY was slicing lemons behind the bar when the kid came in and told him it was a stickup.

Very carefully, Harry put down the saw-knife he had been using and wiped his hands on his apron. He looked at the kid standing in front of the cocktail slot, his hands in the pocket of his thin, cotton jacket, his white face pinched and perspiring.

"I don't see any gun," Harry said, peering pointedly at the kid.

"I've got one, all right," the kid answered, but there was no conviction in his voice.

"You'd better show it to me," Harry said, "and you'd better do it now. Because if you haven't got one, I'm going to come around and kick you out on your ear."

The kid tried to stare Harry down. There was a strange light in his eyes. But Harry didn't flinch; there wasn't much that he was afraid of.

"All right," Harry said after a moment, and started to come around from behind the bar.

The kid turned and ran.

Harry watched him run through the door and down the street. He smiled to himself, and went back to slicing his lemons.

A little while later one of his regular customers, a short, stout man named Irv, came in. He sat at the bar and ordered a beer. Harry poured it for him.

By Bill Pronzini

"Little commotion down the street," Irv told him.

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"Kid held up old man Dowd at the liquor store."

"What kid?"

"How do I know what kid?" Irv said. "Some kid, that's all."

"They catch him?"

"Not yet."

"How much did he get?"

"Twenty bucks," Irv said. "Big deal."

Harry began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Irv asked him.

Harry told him what had happened earlier.

Irv sipped at his beer. "Must have been the same kid."

"Sure," Harry said. He was still laughing. "I'll bet he scared the shorts off of old man Dowd. And he didn't even have a gun."

"Not everybody's like you, Harry."

"No," Harry said. "And that's a fact."

Harry had a nice crowd that night, but it thinned out shortly after ten. By ten-thirty, the place was completely empty.

He didn't hear the front door open. He was washing glasses in the stainless steel sink under the tap, and he wasn't aware that anyone had come in until he looked up and saw the kid with the white face standing there in front of him.

A slow grin touched Harry's mouth. "Well, well," he said.

The kid did not say anything. He had both hands in the pocket of his cotton jacket, as he had that afternoon. The strange light in his eyes was brighter now, more intense.

"I see you had a little better luck down the street today," Harry said.

"That's right," the kid said in a high-pitched voice. He was watching Harry intently.

"What'd it do?" Harry asked. "Give you enough courage to come back and try me again?"

"Not exactly. No, not exactly."

"I hear you got twenty bucks off old man Dowd," Harry said. The laughter began to bubble from his lips. "Don't spend it all in one place."

"But I already did," the kid said. "I spent it all in one place, all right."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so," the kid said. "I spent it on this."

He took the gun from the pocket of his jacket and shot Harry three times in the chest. Harry was dead before he hit the slats.

The kid was sitting on the floor, cradling the gun in both arms, crooning to it, when the beat patrolman came running in moments later.

If one's shoes fit, he should wear them, or at least take them along.

by Hal Ellson

FIFTY MILES of desolate road stretched between the village of Palmas and the city of Montes; a lonely sinuous passage through a monotonous terrain. Victor Fiala's car leaped forward toward the yawning emptiness of the desert. Five miles out of the village a sharp curve forced him to reduce speed and there beside the road sat a pair of new, yellow shoes. At sight of them he slowed his car still more, finally braked it and looked around. No one, no sign of habitation. A pair of shoes sitting in the middle of nowhere didn't make sense. Where was their owner?

No answer in the empty landscape. He surveyed it again, shook his head and drove off. It was forty-five miles to Montes, the sun growing hotter. He turned on the radio, turned it off, lit a cigarette. A

puff and he tossed it away, pressed harder on the gas. The big car ate into the dusty road. One free day left. Make the most of it. The quicker he reached Montes . . .

A pair of yellow shoes in the middle of nowhere: stupid. He switched on the radio again; a blast of band music. He dialed it out and from Montes across the desert came the soft notes of a guitar. Better, he thought, eyeing the road. Empty as far as he could see, like all back-country trails. Not like Montes with its wild traffic and ungodly noise. Suddenly he found he'd missed it. Gone two days for a visit with his brother in a tiny village where time didn't exist and the loudest sound was the cry of a cock. Peace and quiet he'd sought and now here he was speeding toward Montes with this yearning within him.

It didn't make sense, nor did the shoes back there at the side of the road. Disturbed, he lit a cigarette, took a sharp turn and roared past a ghastly scene, a dozen buzzards gluttonously skeletonizing a dead animal. A commonplace along this road. Over the radio came the soft notes of the guitar—a lament for the dead? Again he saw the black eaters of carrion plundering the forlorn carcass. The scene vanished, carrion and carrion-eaters replaced by a pair of yellow shoes. Irritated, he shook his head. Who left them there? He had no answer, nor did the silent desert. Shimmering, it stretched before him, withholding its secrets and distant Montes.

It was two o'clock when he entered the city, a stricken hour, markets closed, streets empty. No one came to greet him at home. His three grandchildren were asleep on a single bed, his daughter dozing in a patio chair.

Let them be. He returned to his car and drove to the plaza in back of the municipal building where the mayor presided and Lopez ruled the police with an iron hand.

One more day before you can chew me out, he thought, entering the Blue Moon restaurant. The place was deserted and hot in spite of the whirling fans.

"Ah, you're back, Victor? How was the vacation?" the counterman asked.

"Good, but too short." Too short? No, he was glad to be back, but . . .

The counterman set a cup of coffee before him. "It's been very hot here," he remarked.

"No excitement?"

"Nothing."

"Good. Let it stay that way," Fiala said. He finished his coffee, checked his watch and left.

Tables and bar were crowded at the Black Cat. Cries of welcome arose. "Ah, you're back, Victor. A good rest? Pancho, a drink for the traveler."

The rotund proprietor extended a hand across the bar. "We missed you, Victor."

"It's good to be back."

"Going to work?"

"Tomorrow's soon enough."

Pancho uncapped two bottles of beer. "One for Lopez?" he said with a mocking smile.

"Don't remind me of him."

They laughed and drank, but the damage had been done. Mention of Lopez and, once more, Fiala "saw" the yellow shoes sitting in the midst of nowhere.

"Something wrong?" asked Pancho.

"I was thinking of a pair of shoes."

"An odd thing to think about, no?"

"A brand new pair on the desert road. Does that make sense?"

"Perhaps someone was having a joke."

"Perhaps." Fiala emptied the bottle, glanced at his watch. Three o'clock. Hours and hours ahead to relax, but . . . The shoes—forget them? He paid for his drink, and Pancho looked up in surprise. "Leaving so soon?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter, you sick?"

"No, I'm going to see Lopez."

"Ai, now I know you're sick."

Chief Lopez stood at a window with his back to the door. A cough and he swung around, brows came up. "Ah, Victor, what brings you? I thought you were holed up in the desert."

"I got back earlier than I expected."

"Something wrong?"

"No, but I've a request."

"If it's more vacation time . . ."

"Not exactly. I'd like to go on duty—as of today."

"An odd request, Victor."

And awkward to explain. Lopez would probably laugh and wave him off. A lie might help. Complicate too. Better the truth. He explained.

"A pair of yellow shoes in the desert and you think something happened. Ah, Victor, you and your feelings."

"I'm sure something happened out there."

"So?"

"I'm due back on duty tomorrow and I'll probably be here, but if I'm not . . ."

"You have a very strong feeling about those shoes, or you know more than you're telling and expect difficulties."

"I know nothing, but there may

be difficulties. If I don't show tomorrow, you'll know."

"That is if I grant your request."

"Then you won't?"

"This time a pair of shoes." Lopez shook his head. "All right, Victor. Be gone."

"Many thanks." Fiala started for the door.

"Your vacation, Victor. How was it?"

"Good, but brief."

"The nature of all vacations," Lopez said, lighting a cigar.

Fiala went out the door to his waiting car. Forty-five miles to the place in the desert where he'd seen the shoes. A long drive, and if someone got there before him . . .

Far in the west the sun burned the bleak flanks of the mountains, red flares in a dance of light, half the desert bathed in this fleeting incandesence; across the other half, the night moving in a hungry rushing tide. Fiala swore. Engine trouble had delayed him, now the night invited new difficulty. He swore again, the car leaped forward, began to shudder in complaint—and darkness fell.

Twenty minutes later his luck changed. Yellow flashed in the beam of his spotlight on the ghost-edge of the road. The shoes! He braked, jumped from the car, picked them up. Yellow leather, high heels, pinched toes. Only a young man and a fool would don such gear.

He put them in the car, stepped from the road and probed with his flashlight. Shriveled mesquite, cat-claw, bristling cacti. Nothing else? Fifty feet back from the road a man sprawled behind the dry rotted trunk of a fallen yucca.

Dead. A dozen stab-wounds marked the body. A vicious killing. He stopped, probed the corpse. No wallet, a few coins, unmarked handkerchief, comb—nothing to identify the man. A tourist? His features and clothes shouted this.

The beam of light traveled the length of the corpse. No shoes. Odd. Fiala returned to the road, examined the ground beside it. Tire marks. A car had stopped here. The tourist's? Stolen by the murderer?

He returned to his car, examined the yellow shoes. Small and narrow. Not the dead man's.

After a fast drive back to Montes, he found the "Beggars" market still lively in spite of the hour. It was slow going through the muddy lanes. In the heart of the market Fiala braked his car and got out. All in turmoil here, flares burning, loud cries, tide of shoppers, black-shawled women, gaunt men, barefoot children—and mud, the eternal

muck leavened with orange peels and rotting fruit.

"Ah, Victor. A good pair of shoes tonight?" the vendor greeted him from under a sagging canvas that covered his wares, a collection of sad-looking shoes and cheap sandals.

Fiala smiled. "No sale, but what about these?" He raised the yellow shoes he'd found in the desert. "Recognize them?"

"Should I?"

"Perhaps you sold a pair like this in the last few days?"

"Ai, business has been bad."

"I'm sorry. Here, let me have a bag for these."

The shoe-vendor obliged, and Fiala dropped two pesos in his palm.

At the next stall, the vendor recognized the shoes. At least, he'd sold such a pair to a young fellow two days ago. "What did he look like? Skinny as a wisp, a little moustache, sideburns, dressed like a city boy, but from the country, I'm sure."

"Many thanks." Fiala drove to headquarters. The chief was gone. A captain took the report on the murder of the tourist; the body had to be picked up. Fiala gave directions and started for the door.

"You're not going with us?" the captain said.

"No, I've other work."

Out the door he went on the run, the yellow shoes in the market bag. The large plaza fronting the municipal building was still crowded. He sat down on a bench and immediately the barefooted shoeshines spotted him. One, two, three, finally eight squatted on their boxes before him, begging to give service. He smiled with good reason. If the owner of the yellow shoes had walked here, these sharp-eyed ferrets wouldn't have missed him. He drew the shoes from the bag, held them up and questioned the boys. Suspicion shone in their dark eyes, whispers circulated among them; finally the leader shook his head and shrugged. "Senor, we don't know anything."

A ten-peso note came from Fiala's pocket. He held it up, and eight heads drew together. A whispered conference ensued, then the leader pointed to the smallest boy. "Chico can tell you something, but first, the money."

Smiling, Fiala handed the note to the small one and the leader snatched it away, explaining that all were partners and each shared in the profits. Fiala shrugged and turned to the smaller boy. "Now, about the shoes?"

The little fellow examined them and solemnly nodded. "My customer."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because in this plaza hardly anybody wears shoes like those. And see that?" The boy pointed a grimy finger at one of the shoes. A faint line crossed the toe, the remainder of a scratch. "That fellow didn't want a shine," the boy went on, "But I followed him till he sat down on a bench and showed him the scratch. He was very angry, but I got the job, a big tip. One peso."

"Generous. Where did this fellow go after you shined his shoes?"

The boy smiled. "You know Luis, the guide?"

A fellow who moved within the law, or outside it, whichever way a quick peso could be made. Fiala found him at his usual spot, the front of the Hotel de los Reyes, waiting for tourists to appear. "Busy, Luis?"

"No, Senor. Is something wrong?"

"Not eactly, but . . . " Fiala described the one he was seeking and asked Luis where he'd taken him.

The guide shrugged, he knew nothing. A routine denial. Squeeze him. "Better come to headquarters," Fiala said.

"But for what? I've done nothing."

"The one I'm looking for did, and you were seen with him."

"Ah, yes, now I remember. A real country boy from Palmas. Oh, those yellow shoes." He chuckled.

"Where did you take him?"

"No place. He didn't have the money."

"You're lying in your teeth."

"Well, that was the first time. Last night he came back. No yellow shoes, but money. He was loaded."

"You accommodated him?"

"He wanted to see some girls, so I took him to the District, first to Alicia. Too fat. I brought him next door to Carmen. That's the last I saw of him, and that's the truth."

"You said he was loaded."

"Oh, man, plenty of American dollars. That country boy must have got on to something big."

"Real big." Fiala returned to his car, drove to the District, a wild and woebegone area of squalid shacks and boisterous cantinas. On a rutted street he found Carmen standing in the doorway of her shack. "Ah, Senor Trouble. What did I do now?"

"Nothing. Let's go inside."

A bed, chair, crucifix, burning oil-lamp and nothing else in the shack. Fiala described the one he was seeking and said, "He was here last night. Tell me about him, or is your memory bad?"

Carmen sat on the bed. "That one, I think he was crazy. He wanted me to quit the business and go with him. Oh, the money he

had, in every pocket. Caramba!"

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"You think I'm a fool? In a week he'd kick me out and I'd be right back here."

"Do you know where he went when he left you?"

"To the Fourth Corner. He wanted to dance. He had all that money, so I went along. Between dances we drank." Carmen spat. "Three drinks and he didn't know what he was doing, so I passed him on to Manuel Garcia. See him if you want to know anything else."

Garcia—a man with his hand in many things. Fiala found him at the bar of the Fourth Corner. He was reluctant to talk. A little pressure and he admitted to playing cards with the country boy.

"How much did he lose?" Fiala asked.

"Very much."

"How much is that?"

Garcia shrugged. "Let's say this fellow couldn't have earned that money if he worked ten years for it—but who am I to say he didn't earn it?"

"But you relieved him of it?"

"It may as well have been me, and I didn't have to cheat him. If that's why you're here . . ."

"No, but another question. The money was all in American?"

"True."

"Thanks." Fiala left. It was late now, but one wouldn't have known it by the District. The area was roaring. A terrible cesspool where some bathed and others drowned. A bad place, but accepted for many reasons by many people, even the police. Fiala shook his head and got into his car, relaxed behind the wheel. A long day, two trips across the desert; his body was rebelling.

Go home. He knew the man he wanted. A mere matter of time to pick him up. But what if he got away? Crossed the border? Lopez would hang him from the balcony of the municipal building.

He shook his head. No sleep tonight, he told himself, and drove off. A slow ride through the District, then out of it, fading noises behind, dark road ahead, ruts, potholes. Calamitous if he broke down here. The car crawled, bumped, shuddered past the shacks of the poor. Then a highway, smooth concrete. He stepped on the gas.

A half mile and he realized he was going nowhere, slowed again and tried to bring his mind to bear on the issue at hand; fatigue stupefied him. Look for his quarry, or go home?

A turn in the highway brought him into his own neighborhood. Another turn and the street where he lived, his home. Temptation to

stop, but no, he had to go on.

Five minutes later he braked in front of the Black Cat and entered by the side door. Only Pancho there, cleaning up for the night. "You're back, Victor?"

"Half of me."

Pancho grinned. "Less than that. You look ready to drop. A quick one?"

"If it won't hold you up."

Pancho poured. "Take your time."

The trouble. He didn't have the time. The drink went in a gulp. "A question, Pancho. Where does a man go when he has no money?"

"Home. Where else?"

"Exactly the answer I should have thought of and didn't."

The late sounds dying, Montes dozed under the shadowed buttresses of naked mountains, cool air flushed the empty streets. Leave them behind. A pale winding ribbon in a sea of darkness, the desert road stretched before Fiala. If the murderer had no money, he'd head for home, the tiny village of Palmas. Simple to pick him up. Carmen had given him his name. The sheriff could lead him to his quarry.

A silent sleeping village. Only one light visible, a lamp hanging from a nail in front of the sheriff's house. Fiala stepped from the car and a low growl held him fast; a bony, massive dog with a long head came bristling out of the door, followed by the sheriff. Fiala greeted him, stated his business. He was looking for Luis Mendez.

"What has he done, Senor?"

"Killed a man."

"Ai, I knew something was coming, but not that." They moved off in the dark, and the sheriff shook his head. "A nice boy till he started going into Montes. He always came back with queer ideas. Palmas wasn't good enough any more. He said he was going to get a big job in Montes."

"He was right about the last."

"Too bad." The sheriff stopped before an adobe house, knocked on the door. Finally it opened part way and a woman's face appeared. "Senora Mendez." The sheriff apologized for disturbing her and asked for her son.

"He's not here. Is he in trouble?"

"Unfortunately, Senora."

"What has he done?"

Fiala intervened, introduced himself and asked Senora Mendez when she'd last seen her son.

"Yesterday morning," she answered. "What did he do, Senor?"

Tell her? Her grief would come soon enough. "I don't know," he lied. "I only came to pick him up." He turned away. The door closed. He said to the sheriff, "Do you

think she's concealing her son?"

"No. If she said he isn't there, he isn't there."

They walked in silence to the sheriff's house. Fiala climbed into his car. "If the boy shows up, hold him."

"But if he killed a man, he'd probably head for the border."

"If he knew he was going to be arrested. Apparently he doesn't. He's been having a good time in Montes."

"Then why come looking for him here?"

"Perhaps I arrived too soon. Anyway, I'm returning to Montes. If you'll keep watch on the house meanwhile . . ."

Back on the desert road, Fiala shook his head. A mistake coming to Palmas. Mendez was heading for the border and there was no possibility of catching him. He groaned at the thought, and of having to face Lopez.

Montes was dark and quiet when he reentered it, a sleeping city. Weary, he climbed from his car, entered the house. Go to bed? He sat in the patio, smoked and thought of his blunder. In the morning, Lopez would make him suffer. In the morning . . .

He fell asleep, woke at dawn, his body all aches but mind alert.

Return to Palmas? He left the house. A cup of black coffee at the Blue Moon, and the desert again, the road utterly empty, no car, ox-cart or burro coming or going between city and village. Then, ten miles from Palmas—a car parked off the road. No one at the wheel, no one sleeping in back. He noted the dusty license plate. A tourist from the States.

Excited, he drove on. Two miles from the abandoned car a man walking the road, his face haggard, clothes powdered with dust, shoes tied together and draped around his neck. Mendez? "A lift, Senor?"

The walker got into the car. It moved off. "Headed for Palmas?" Fiala asked.

"Yes, I live there."

Fiala glanced at his passenger. Young, he thought. A mere kid. But was this Mendez? "That your car I passed back there?"

"No."

The truth? But of course. He'd stolen the car from the tourist. Stolen his money too, and blown it to the winds in Montes. No funds and not enough gas to take him home. Fiala glanced at his passenger's shoes. They still hung from his neck. "Trouble with your feet?"

"Yes, the shoes hurt. Too large. I was cheated in Montes. The man said they were the right size."

"Too bad." Fiala nodded to the market bag that lay between them. "A pair in there that might fit you. Take a look."

A glance in the bag and the blood drained from the young fellow's face. "I don't think I can use them, Senor."

"I'm sure they'll fit. After all, they belong to you."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, or do I have to tell you what you did with your knife?"

Mendez hesitated, then said, "You're a policeman?"

"Detective Fiala, from Montes. You have the knife?"

Mendez hesitated, then handed it over.

"Thanks. Now do you want to tell me about it? How did you meet up with the tourist?"

"The fellow's car broke down and he asked my help. I obliged, and he noticed my shoes. They amused him. That made me angry."

"So you stabbed him and took his car and money?"

Mendez shrugged. "Only because he was dead. The car and money were no good to him. But how did you know I was the one?" he asked.

"Because of your shoes. You left them in the wrong place, but why did you abandon them?"

Mendez shrugged again. "The tourist's were better, Senor."

"But didn't fit," said Fiala, turning the car about and heading back toward Montes.

At headquarters, Fiala entered the patio, climbed to the balcony and entered the chief's office. Lopez looked up from his desk, frowning. "Well, Victor?"

"It's finished. I picked up the killer. A young fellow from Palmas, Luis Mendez."

Oddly, Lopez wasn't impressed. "Permit me to inform you about the victim. He was on the run, a holdup job in a Texas bank near the border. A matter of ten thousand dollars." Lopez smiled and rubbed it in. "That's something you didn't know, hey, Victor?"

"I just didn't think he'd stolen that much," Fiala calmly answered.

"What? You knew of the holdup?"

"Not exactly, but I assumed the victim had stolen the money Mendez took from him."

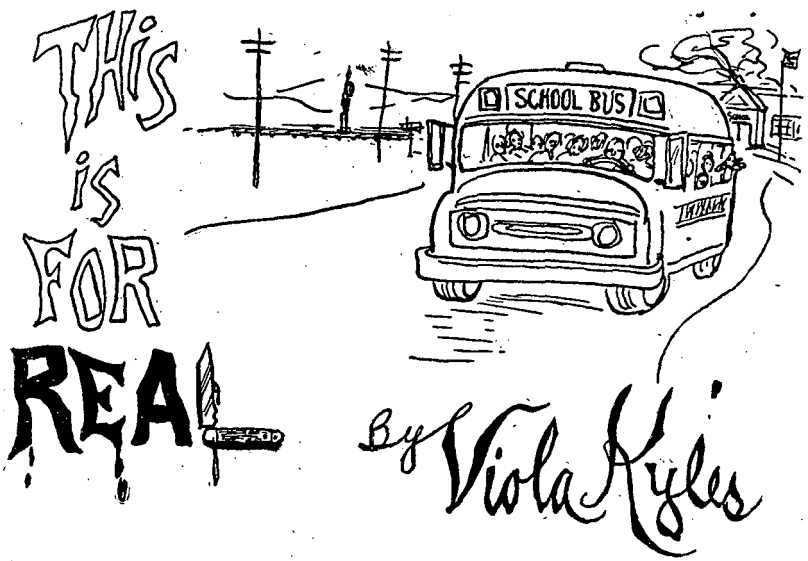
"But how . . . ?"

Fiala shrugged. "It was simple. Tourists never carry so much cash."

"And Mendez? How did you know he was the killer?"

"Because of a pair of yellow shoes. They were his undoing," Fiala said with a smile, and started for the door.

A challenging situation can be a well of despair—or a hotbed of inspiration.



By Viola Kyles

"ALL RIGHT!" Pop Harris pulled over to the curb and stopped the long orange bus in the middle of the block. "All right!" he shouted. "We don't move from here until it's quiet!"

It always worked; in twenty-two years of driving a school bus he'd never had a group he couldn't control, though this year's high school crowd was just a little tougher.

"Knock it off, you fellows!"

They continued to mill and he waited, controlling his temper. That was the secret of his safe driving record—never getting mad—well, not really mad.

It was quiet suddenly. Turning in his seat, Pop couldn't conceal the shock he felt. The children saw his startled, incredulous look and most of them snickered as Mark Davidson and his long-haired crowd surrounded him, and

knives in the hands of at least three of them gleamed spitefully.

"Get going, Popsy!"

Pop turned back to the wheel, started the bus, signaled and pulled out into the traffic. It wasn't fear he felt, but guilt—a terrible hopeless feeling of shame that he had seen this ugly flaw in well-fed privileged children.

Mark sat directly behind Pop and leaned on the back of his seat. "Don't ever pull this again, Popsy. We don't like it, do we, guys?"

"You know, of course, you can be thrown out of school for carrying those knives!" Pop said.

"Knives? Who's got knives?"

"I don't see a knife."

"Do you see a knife?"

It was a joke. They milked it, laughing at all their clever versions, until Mark silenced them.

"Popsy, you're the only one who even thinks he saw a knife and you will forget it because if you don't, those knives you didn't see will cut notches in your darling daughter's ears."

Fear grabbed Pop then—it was the dialogue from a bad television script, but it was alive. The warm, foul breath on the back of his neck came from a living being.

"This is for real, boy! Don't you even mention my little girl's name or you'll get more trouble than you know what to do with!"

"Not me, Popsy. I don't like trouble. You give me just a teensy bit of trouble and you'll have to put me in jail to stop me from keeping my promise."

Pop gripped the wheel until his fingers ached to keep from smashing a fist into Mark's face, and forced himself to breathe deeply and drive sanely. He had twenty-six other youngsters for whom he was responsible.

"Sit back in your seat, Mark. You've accomplished what you were after. You've made old Pop Harris mad—enjoy it?"

"Not especially. I was told you thought you were tough, so I looked for something that would get to you, and old Lucy Belle is it!"

"This has gone far enough!" Pop said through clenched teeth.

"It's up to you." Mark shrugged and finally leaned back in his seat.

It was instinct that kept Pop going. Lucy Belle was his darling, the baby his wife had given her life for, the child of his middle-age and his reason for living.

Mark's stop was near the end of the route, but his gang stayed on with him, hanging over the seats and howling at each pearl of humor that rolled from Mark's loud mouth.

As Pop braked to a stop, Mark leaned on his seat again, showing

off now for his enthralled audience.

"Just make it once around the park again, driver. We like the ride." It was the most childish remark he'd made, but it was the straw that broke Pop's control. He clapped a big hand to the back of Mark's skinny neck, shoved the release lever and hurled him out the door.

Still motivated by trembling rage, he stood up to face the remaining gang. "All right, one or all of you!"

Two boys scurried out to Mark's aid and others stood uncertainly for a moment until Danny Cox shoved in, hate distorting his pale features.

"Not just yet, old man!"

"Danny!" Rage was deserting Pop, leaving him cold and sick. "Did you hear what Mark was saying about Lucy Belle?"

"Sure," he sneered. "I told him about her."

"We used to be your friends, Danny."

"Used to be is right!" He started the other boys out the door with a shove, jumped down himself, and Pop closed the door and drove away.

The Mills twins were sitting big-eyed in the back of the bus, and Pop pulled around the corner to his last stop. The girls hurried off the bus, filled with the exciting tale to tell Mother, and Pop was filled with worry. It could grow and turn him into the villain of the piece.

He headed back to the school, but by a different route. Lucy Belle would be almost home by now. She walked, and usually had supper started by the time he got home. He found her as she was crossing the street. He opened the door and called, "Come on, baby,

ride on over to the lot with me."

Her blue eyes were puzzled, but she got on. "Okay, if you want a late supper."

"We'll eat out tonight." It wasn't a good excuse, but he could think of no other reason on such short notice.

"Oh, Daddy, what are we celebrating?" She was still little girl enough to like surprises.

"My having the most beautiful daughter in the whole world," he said.

She laughed at him in the rear view mirror, pulling her blond curls high on her head and posing. "Sure, I've always been the most beautiful, but why go all out now?"

"Because I've just discovered you're not conceited."

"Daddy, don't tease me, you're worried about something." She was wise beyond her fifteen years.

"I just made a fool of myself and I would like to forget it, I guess," Pop admitted.

"What did you do?"

"I took Mark Davidson by the nape of the neck and threw him off the bus."

"Oh no!" She laughed. "Good. That's really something to celebrate."

"You know him?"

"Sure. Mary thinks he's cute, but I can't stand him—he doesn't have pupils in his eyes, just black holes in his head. He turns my stomach!"

"Stay away from him, honey." He tried to sound serious enough for her to pay attention to, but not to be afraid.

"Don't worry—I hate him. And you know somebody who's trying to be like him? Danny. He let his hair grow and everything. I told him if he wanted me for a friend he'd better get his hair cut."

"Yes, I just noticed Danny today," Pop said.

They had their evening together and it was fun. It wouldn't be so bad having her with him until he figured out what to do about Mark's threat. It was a fantastic, unbelievable tale to take to the principal with no proof. Only Mark's cronies had heard the talk and seen the long-bladed knives, but there would be some very visible bruises on Mark.

Next morning Pop finished shaving and stuck his head out the bathroom door. "It's all yours, honey."

"Go ahead. I'll dress after breakfast." Lucy Belle had an hour after Pop went to work.

"No, dress now. I'm taking you with me."

"Daddy!"

"Snap it up." He hadn't thought what to tell her yet, but she had to

be with him whenever possible.

"I was going to finish my English!"

"You can finish it at school."

She got ready and followed him out, bewildered and a little angry. He took her to school, walked with her to the office and told her to stay there until classes began.

"Honey, I'll explain tonight. Okay?"

"Okay." She started to pout and then she smiled, stood on tiptoe and kissed him. "I love you even if you have gone crazy."

The morning run was uneventful. In fact, if Pop had allowed himself to believe it, there was an ominous quiet, but he'd had enough of unreal drama. He refused to read anything in the sharp looks of the boys filing past him. Mark had a scraped cheek, a taped eyebrow, but no word was said.

Pop unloaded, checked the bus, and made his run for the kindergarten children in time to meet Lucy Belle for lunch. The crowd outside the cafeteria door was big and loud, but not unusually so. Pop leaned against a wall, thinking.

Children were his life. In twenty-two years he'd seen all kinds—from dirty corduroys to tight pants and long hair—but Mark was different, seemingly without conscience. Pop had been threatened before, by angry children, irate fathers and crying mothers. It didn't make sense that now, when he was fifty-four years old—too old to change jobs—he was twisted with dread by the thought of a boy, not yet sixteen, and by wanting desperately to take Lucy Belle and run.

His sister had begged often for him to send Lucy Belle to her. Perhaps he should have, but he was a coward there too, wanting her always with him.

Suddenly, he was alert—there was a change in the loud talk, a scream near the center of the crowd. Pop pushed through, his heart pounding so loud there was no other sound in his ears now.

A circle of stunned children moved away and Lucy Belle was rising slowly, blood running down her neck into the collar of her white blouse, and blond curls were tipped with red. Pop pressed his handkerchief to his daughter's ear and helped her to her feet.

"I fell down," she said simply.

Others chimed in, "Danny tripped her!"

"Mark and Jerry were shoving!"

"No matter—let us through, kids, let us through!"

Someone had run for Miss Arden, the school nurse, and she met them in the hall.

"I only fell down," Lucy Belle

said. "That's all I really know."

Miss Arden took one look and asked, "Your car here?"

Pop nodded and swung the girl up into his arms. He was surprisingly calm and strong. He carried her to the car and handed her in to Miss Arden, then drove to the hospital.

Miss Arden came back to Pop in the waiting room. "She'll be all right. She must have caught her ear on something sharp—it was badly torn—that was the reason for all the blood. The doctor is taking stitches and she'll have to stay in the hospital at least overnight."

"Yes." Pop turned to walk away.

"Mr. Harris!"

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"You ought to see the doctor."

"No!" He walked out.

On the corner was a pay phone. His sister would come tonight to take Lucy Belle away as soon as she was released from the hospital. Everything else was in order. He had only to finish his day's work.

The kids were still excited when they boarded the bus, many of them asking how Lucy Belle was.

"All right," Pop said to each one.

"Some excitement, hey Popsy?" Mark wisecracked, sucking in his cheeks, and some of his gang snickered.

"Yes," said Pop. "Excitement . . ."

The Mills twins ran up and Pop held up his hand. "No! You're grounded—you'll walk for the rest of the week."

"But-but—" Emily's face was white with shock, Erma's red with anger, but Pop motioned them out of the way and closed the door.

Mark's gang screamed with laughter. This was their day.

They formed a stomping chorus that rocked the bus, filled the air with smoke from forbidden cigarettes hidden in cupped hands, but they got not a flicker of anger from Pop. He drove carefully, glancing often at his watch, until he had deposited all of the students, except Mark's gang, at their stops.

Mark mocked him. "Speed up, Popsy, you're ten seconds late."

"Slow down, Popsy, my old lady doesn't want me home so soon."

They reached Mark's stop, and he was in rare form. "Thank you, my good man, maybe I won't make you carry me piggyback up to the house today."

Pop didn't open the door. "Would you like just once around the park today? After all, you fellows are my special passengers."

"Why not? You want to start on your insurance payments?" Mark asked slyly.

"Yes," Pop said, and drove on.

"Where will we go, gang? We've

earned a nice trip, haven't we?"

Somehow, the excitement was abating. One of the boys complained, "I don't want to go for a ride in this crummy bus."

"You ride in a crummy bus if I tell you to ride in a crummy bus," Mark told him, "or next month, when I'm sixteen, you don't ride in my new car."

"Are you sure your old lady bought it?"

"She better had," Mark said darkly, "or I'll make her wish she had!"

Pop turned onto First, up to the railroad crossing. A train was going past, so he swung onto Adams, which paralleled the tracks, and raced it.

Mark caught Pop's eyes in the rear view mirror. "You're not trying to scare us, are you, Popsy?"

"No," Pop said. "Of course not."

"You know we keep our word, and she can't stay in the hospital forever." Mark's eyes were shiny with remembering.

"Yes," said Pop.

The engineer of the train was close enough for them to see the surprised look on his face when they caught up to the train and passed it. Apparently he'd never been raced by a school bus before!

"And there's not a damn thing you can do about it, is there, Popsy?" Mark sneered.

"Yes, there is!" Pop said, and the rush of the speeding train emphasized his terse reply as he made a sharp turn onto Third, crashed through the railroad crossing gate, slammed on the brakes, and wedged his foot against the door lever.

Dear Fans:

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members into the ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, and it is very rewarding to hear from our enthusiastic and loyal present members.

Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, California 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

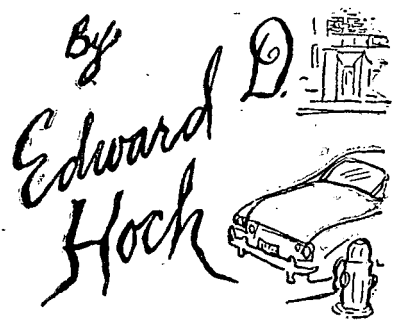
Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

The secret of the riddle of successes everywhere is said to be that some little second fiddle is carrying the air.

NO GOOD AT RIDDLES

By Edward D. Hoch



CAPTAIN LEOPOLD'S job was homicide, not arson, so he paid only a passing interest to the flaming destruction of an aging retail block on the south side of the city. It was the second such fire in little more than a week, and the papers were hinting at arson, but again it was not Leopold's concern. The fire had been discovered after midnight, when the buildings were unoccupied except for some tenants in an adjoining apartment who'd been led to safety.

It wasn't until four days after the blaze that he heard the name of Conrad Crane for the first time. Sergeant Fletcher brought him the folder, and sat in the chair opposite while he glanced at it. "What's this, Fletcher? A missing person?"

"Missing four days, Captain. Name's Crane. Friends call him Connie. Connie Crane."

"Should I be interested?" He knew Fletcher wouldn't be bothering him for nothing.

"Funny thing, Captain. The missing persons report's been in

for three days, but the guy's car was just discovered."

"Where was it?"

Fletcher smiled. "At the police auto pound. It had been towed there the night he disappeared."

Leopold leaned back in his chair. "Come on, Fletcher, give me the payoff. I'm no good at riddles today."

Fletcher flipped over the pages of the police report. "Here it is, Captain. It was towed away because it was blocking a hydrant at the scene of that fire. Connie Crane never claimed the car, and he's been missing ever since."

It was just improbable enough to interest Leopold. He'd learned long ago not to dismiss Sergeant Fletcher's hunches. "You think he died in the fire? That his body's in there somewhere?"

"It fits the facts, Captain."

"And what was he doing there? If he set the fire himself he'd have had time to get out."

"Maybe he couldn't, Captain. Maybe somebody killed him and set the fire to cover it up."

Leopold sighed and stood up. "I think you're dreaming, but I suppose it's worth a check. Won't be the first time I went looking for work."

The 400 block on Carter Street South was a cluster of retail stores in the midst of a fast decaying neighborhood. The houses in the adjoining block were mainly the three-story apartments one saw throughout New Haven and Stamford and the other cities along the Sound. In recent years they'd become a bit more paint-peeled, a shade more run-down, and only occasional yards had enough grass to show green to a passing car. The apartments now were occupied mainly by young married couples struggling through first pregnancies, or elderly widows living out their twilight days. Leopold knew the sort of neighborhood it was, because he'd come from one like it himself, forty-odd years earlier. The lucky ones escaped when the first baby came, scraping together enough money for a little ranch in the suburbs. For the rest, lower middle-class families trapped in an economic squeeze, there might never be an escape.

"There it is," Fletcher said, pulling up across the street from a block of charred and gutted stores.

There was nothing remaining except the walls, and through the windows that weren't already boarded up they could see the twisted confusion of the collapsed roof. A few children still wandered by, fascinated by the charred ruins even after four days, but for the most part the thrill was past,

the ruins familiar to motorists who drove this way every day.

Leopold and Fletcher crossed the street and wandered around back, where a well-dressed man in a checkered topcoat was giving instruction to a pair of workmen.

"I'm Captain Leopold, and this is Sergeant Fletcher. You the owner of the building?"

The man looked them over before replying. "That's right. Hugh Kranston. You from the arson squad?"

"Not exactly," Leopold told him. "We're investigating a missing person report."

"They have captains on missing persons detail now?" Kranston asked, raising his eyebrows.

Leopold ignored him and went on. "Fellow named Connie Crane. Know him?"

"No."

"We think there's a chance he's dead in that wreckage."

Hugh Kranston seemed to blanch visibly. "Impossible!"

"Why's that?" Leopold asked him.

"Well, for one thing the firemen didn't find any body. Surely they'd have seen him if he was in there."

Leopold walked over to the ruins and stared down at the place where the floor had been. "With all that smoke the firemen could easily have missed a body, and it seems the whole place fell into the basement. Anything could be down there."

"What would he have been doing there? Trying to rob the place?"

"Or burn it. Are these workmen getting ready to tear down the walls?"

"That was the idea. We've got a power shovel coming."

Leopold nodded. "Fletcher, you'd better stay around here for a while, see if they turn up anything."

He went back across the street to the police car and got in behind the wheel. The case was beginning to have a feel to it—a feel and an odor. Kranston had denied knowing Connie Crane, and yet the name had meant something to him.

The missing persons file listed Crane's address as 134 Wildwood, a suburban area across town. Leopold drove over there and found a series of new, low-slung apartment houses not far from the yacht club. He was hoping that Crane's roommate would be home at this hour of the afternoon, and he was in luck.

"Yes?"

"Captain Leopold, police. I'd like to ask you about Connie Crane."

The fellow was quite young, with large blue eyes and sandy hair worn a bit too long. "He's miss-

ing. Been missing for days now."

"I know that," Leopold said. "I'm looking for him. You're his roommate?"

The sandy hair nodded briskly. "Tom McGee. I work with him at Dall's."

Leopold nodded. Dall's was the city's largest department store. "What do you do there?"

"I'm a window trimmer. Connie works in the art department."

"An artist?"

"Not really. He helps build displays and things."

They'd gone into the apartment, and Leopold was confronted with a dazzling montage of wall posters, some pop, some op, all in vivid colors that battered his eyes. He could only hope the windows at Dall's weren't coming to this. "You've lived together long, Mr. McGee?"

"A year or so," he said with a shrug.

"Did he have any girls?"

The look was a bit calculating. "I wouldn't know."

"I see." Leopold decided to change tactics. "His car was found over on Carter Street South. Know any reason why he'd have been over in that area?"

McGee selected a pink-tipped cigarette from a case on the coffee table. "He used to work nights in a liquor store on Carter."

"Can you give me the name?"

The young man shrugged. "Won't do you any good. The place burned down a few days ago."

It took Leopold till eight o'clock that night to track down the owner of the Carter South Liquor Store, one of the block of stores destroyed in the fire. Her name was Helen Fargo, and she was a blonde widow still on the right side of forty. Leopold found her at home, watching a television variety show which she turned off with obvious reluctance.

"Police," he told her. "My name is Captain Leopold."

"You've come to talk about the fire. Have you caught him yet?"

"Caught who, Mrs. Fargo?"

"The guy who burned my store, that's who!"

"Actually, I'm here on another matter. But your stock must have been covered by insurance."

"Sure it was, but what do I do now? I can't start a new business. My husband built that up before he died, and now I'm left with nothing."

"I'm sorry," Leopold told her. "But actually I came to ask you about a former employee, a young fellow named Connie Crane."

"Him!" She snorted and went in search of a cigarette. "What do you want to know about that queer?"

"Queer, you say, Mrs. Fargo?"

"Him and his gay friends were always hanging around. I finally fired him. Couldn't stand that sort around me!"

"What friends were these?"

"The fellow he lived with."

"McGee? Tom McGee?"

"That's him, always coming into the store at night and standing around talking to Connie. The two of them were enough to keep customers away!"

"Did Crane frequent this area, Mrs. Fargo?"

"The bar a few blocks down—the Nugget. He hung out there some. Look, why all the questions?"

"He's missing. We're looking for him."

"Forget about him and find out who burned my building."

"Why do you think someone burned it?"

She waved the cigarette and left a trailing shower of sparks. "There's a door in the back that leads to the basement. See, all the stores shared a joint basement, with only little partitions between our areas. A couple of times lately I've found the door open in the mornings. Somebody was using the basement for something—kids, maybe, or the local bums. The neighborhood's really gone downhill the past few years."

Leopold chatted with her a bit longer and then departed. As with Crane's roommate, he had not mentioned the possibility of the missing man's body being in the wreckage. He was thinking to himself that it might be something of an accomplishment to solve a murder before the body was even discovered.

In the morning Sergeant Fletcher turned up, looking somewhat subdued. He didn't take his usual chair opposite Leopold's desk, but stood as he made his report. "They've got about half the junk out of that basement, and there's no sign of a body so far, Captain."

Leopold surveyed the growing stack of work on his desk. "All right. I guess maybe we were wrong. Take a run down there for a couple of hours. If nothing turns up, we'll forget it and turn the case back to missing persons."

He worked through the rest of the morning with little thought for Connie Crane and the fire that had destroyed Kranston's building. There were other matters that needed his attention—a knifing in a bar the previous night, a hit-and-run death, the usual dredgings of a city's life. At one point, when things let up, he did find time to phone somebody on the arson squad about the previous fire that the newspapers had mentioned.

That case was closed; a laundryman had left his iron on when he went home, and the resulting fire had spread rapidly through the old building.

It was just before lunch when Fletcher called. Leopold was about to tell him to come back in, when he heard the words, "We've found him, Captain."

"What?"

"Crane. His body was in that basement, all right."

Leopold took a deep breath. "I'll be right out," he said.

The morgue wagon was there ahead of him, and another police car. The neighborhood children were beginning to gather on their way home for lunch, and a few adults had been attracted too. They stood in silent little groups, aware that something was up, yet not quite certain of what.

Leopold saw that Hugh Kranston was there too, looking unhappy. "I hope this isn't going to cause a lot of trouble," he said.

Leopold kept walking. "That depends."

Sergeant Fletcher nodded to him and pulled back the khaki blanket which had been spread over the body on the ground. It had been a man, all right, but there was little more anyone could tell about it. The clothes had been burned almost completely off, and the face was badly blackened and charred.

Fletcher dropped the blanket back into place. "He isn't much to look at."

"How did you know it's Crane?" Leopold asked him.

"Well, I guess I don't know. But who else could it be?"

Leopold didn't answer. He walked to the edge of the hole and was staring down at the wreckage that remained. Here and there he saw the remains of broken bottles from Helen Fargo's liquor store, their water-soaked labels seeming somehow sadly lost among the cinders and broken glass. When he went back to the body, the morgue people were trying to rub some of the soot from the head, and Fletcher was down on his knees, running hesitant fingers over the corpse.

"There might be a head wound, Captain," he said. "I can't be sure."

"Leave it for the medical examiner."

Hugh Kranston came over to them, his hands plunged deep into topcoat pockets. "Do you think he started the fire and then didn't get out in time?"

"We don't know yet," Leopold told him. "It's a possibility."

"I don't want trouble."

"Sometimes it comes anyway." Leopold thought of something. "The first time I mentioned Crane's name to you, I thought I


AMBULANCE

detected some recognition by you."

"I was just startled at the thought of a body down there, that's all. How would I know him?"

"He used to work at Helen Fargo's liquor store. She was one of your tenants, I believe."

"If I knew everything that went on in my building, I'd be something of a wizard. I live all the way across town."

Leopold felt a drop of rain and glanced up at the leaden sky. "Where were you the other night, Mr. Kranston? The night of the fire?"

"I was at a real estate meeting in New York City. My wife and I drove down, spent the night at the Hilton, and drove back the following day. They phoned me the news of the fire. I can produce a dozen people who were with me most of the night."

Leopold nodded, apparently satisfied, but when he'd walked away with Fletcher he said quietly, "Check that."

"Right, Captain. Where you going now?"

"Down the street a few blocks, to a bar called the Nugget."

The early afternoon crowd at the Nugget was surprisingly large—a mixture of hard drinkers and workers from a nearby factory. The place was one of those neighborhood bars which looked presentable only after dark, when the artificial light somehow managed to lend a golden hue to the worn wooden tables and the fly-specked walls. By daylight, the effect was too stark, the view too truthful.

"What you drinking, mister?" the bartender asked.

Leopold showed his badge. "Just information. You the owner?"

"Just the bartender. Do I look like the owner?"

"What's your name?"

"They all call me Jimmy. Make it fast—I've got customers waiting!"

"You work nights, Jimmy?"

"Three nights a week."

"Were you working the night of the fire?"

"Sure. Till closing." He turned from the bar to open a bottle of beer for a noisy customer near the door.

"I'm looking for a missing person, fellow named Connie Crane. I understand he was in here the night of the fire." It was a shot in the dark, but worth trying.

"Crane? No, he wasn't in here. You think I want to lose my license, serving queers? I tossed him out a long time ago."

"How long ago?"

"Couple weeks, maybe a month."

"And he hasn't been back since?"

"He knows better than to come back."

"He wasn't here the night of the fire?"

Jimmy sighed and started moving away. "What'd I just tell you? He wasn't here. Now stop bugging me!"

Leopold thought about pursuing it, but decided there was nothing more to be learned from Jimmy the bartender just then. He went back downtown and waited for Fletcher's report.

The sergeant finally arrived in late afternoon, looking tired and grim. "The body's at the morgue, but it'll probably be morning before we have a report, Captain."

"All right."

"We took some pictures and I spent an hour climbing around down there, but I didn't find a thing."

Leopold nodded. "Mrs. Fargo told me somebody was using the basement under her store. There's a rear door to it that was sometimes found open."

"You think it was Crane?"

"He might have made a habit of picking up guys at the Nugget bar and taking them down there. Maybe somebody didn't like it and killed him—and then burned the place down to cover the murder."

Fletcher nodded agreement. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"Who filed the missing persons report on Crane in the first place? His employer?"

Fletcher checked the file. "No. It was the roommate, Tom McGee. Crane left their apartment Thursday evening, the night of the fire, and never came back. McGee called the police Friday afternoon."

"He didn't wait very long," Leopold mused. "Maybe he knew something. Maybe he knew Crane wouldn't be coming back."

"Should I get him in here, Captain?"

"I think so. We'll need him to identify the body, anyway." Outside, the rain had finally started in earnest. Leopold was glad they'd gotten the body out of the wreckage in time.

Darkness came early with the rain, and the lights were already on in Leopold's little office when Fletcher returned with Tom McGee in tow. "We've just been over to the morgue," he reported.

Leopold stared up at the long-haired young man. "Well? Could you identify the body?"

"I . . . I *think* it's him, but he's so . . . It's hard to tell for sure. What's left of the clothes—the sock and shoe—are his, and he's the right build. It *must* be him."

"Fletcher?"

"I just talked to his dentist, Captain. The teeth check out. We're

trying for some fingerprints now. I'd say the odds are ten-to-one it's Crane."

Leopold grunted. He'd never been a betting man. "Sit down, McGee, and tell me about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell," he said, but he sat anyway. "I told it all to you yesterday."

Leopold watched him through half-closed eyes. "Was Connie Crane in the habit of picking up people in bars?"

"Girls, you mean?"

"Girls, guys, anything."

"No. He never did things like that."

"You used to hang around Mrs. Fargo's liquor store when Connie worked there, didn't you?"

"A few times, yeah."

"After she fired him, he kept his keys, didn't he? He used to sneak down to the basement through the outside door. Isn't that right?"

"I don't know anything about that." But Leopold could see that his palms were damp with sweat. "Maybe he did."

"What was he doing there the night of the fire, Tom?"

"How should I know?"

Leopold sighed and waved him out. He seemed to be running into a series of dead ends and reluctant witnesses.

When they were alone, Fletcher said, "You know something, Captain? We still haven't got a murder case. What if Crane just fell asleep down there with a cigarette or something?"

"I've got a feeling about this one, Fletcher. It smells like murder. It smelled like murder from the first, when you walked into my office with the file." He was staring out at the rain. "Did you have a chance to check Hugh Kranston's alibi yet?"

"I made a couple of phone calls. He's clean. He made a speech to this real estate group in New York and then had a few of them up to his hotel room."

"All right," Leopold said. Now there was something else gnawing at the back of his mind. He was remembering the broken liquor bottles among the charred timbers and collapsed floors. He was deciding that another visit to Mrs. Fargo might be necessary.

He called at her home in the morning, found her once more before the television set, but this time she seemed almost pleased at the interruption. "I miss the people that used to come into the store," she told him.

"Are you planning to reopen somewhere else?"

"As soon as I get the insurance money. Mr. Kranston says he might have space in one of his

other buildings. I hope he has."

Leopold sat down, speaking over the babble of the television. "Mrs. Fargo, did you store liquor in the basement of the building that burned?"

"Sure. I had a little stockroom area. How'd you know?"

"I noticed a lot of broken bottles in the ruins, and they didn't seem to be in the right place. Was this stockroom locked?"

"Of course!"

"But Connie Crane would have had a key, wouldn't he? He had one to the basement itself, so he must have had one to the stockroom as well."

"Sure. Why?"

"Didn't it ever occur to you that the activity in the basement might have been your ex-employee Connie helping himself to a free bottle of booze?"

"If I ever caught him at that I'd have killed him!" she sputtered, and then clapped a hand to her mouth. The morning paper was there on the coffee table, with the story about the finding of the body. "I didn't mean that, of course," she said.

"No, of course not." Leopold got to his feet. "I should talk to some of the other tenants. Do you know where I could reach them?"

She thought about it. "Well, two of the stores were empty, you know. Besides me, there was just the tailor and the pizza place."

"We'll check them."

"You think Connie burned the building?" she asked, a bit sadly.

"That's what we're trying to find out."

He left her then and found a telephone and called Fletcher at Headquarters. "Do you have the medical examiner's report yet?"

"Not yet. He said in about an hour."

"All right. Look, go out and talk to the other people who had stores in the burned block. I think there were only two of them."

"Right, Captain."

"I'm especially interested in basement storage areas. Find out if they'd noticed anything missing recently."

Leopold hung up and went back to his car. He drove slowly downtown, through the sparse morning traffic, thinking about Connie Crane and how he'd died. He often thought about the victims, those people he never got to meet, and about what sort of life they'd missed out on. For Connie Crane, meeting in bars and sneaking into basements might have been all that life held. Perhaps, for him, death had been a sort of release.

Back in the office, Leopold found the medical examiner's re-

port on his desk, neatly typed on the official forms. His eyes scanned quickly over the medical jargon to the summary at the end: *The body is that of a Caucasian male in his mid-twenties. Time of death is difficult to establish because of extreme tissue damage due to burns, but is estimated at from 30 to 48 hours prior to autopsy. Death was caused some time prior to burning, specifically by a .32 caliber bullet fired into the cerebrum from a point just above the left ear.*

All right, Leopold sighed to himself. Now we've really got our murder case.

When Fletcher returned from his mission, Leopold was bent over the morning reports for the past few days. He glanced up, thankful to be interrupted, and reached for a cigarette. "Learn anything?"

"Not much, Captain. Of course the pizza guy didn't have anything missing. The other one, the tailor, thought he might have missed a bolt of cloth, but he couldn't be sure."

Leopold tossed him the autopsy report. "The M.E. did it this morning. I've been chatting with him on the phone."

"Shot through the head! I thought I felt a wound."

"Get anywhere with fingerprints?"

"We have a couple. Sent them on to the Washington FBI office."

Leopold picked up the phone, dialed the duty officer. "I want a Patrolman Yates. Is he on duty now? Fine. . . . Good, I'll be right down."

"What's all that?" Fletcher asked. "Who's Yates?"

Leopold merely smiled. "Come along. I might need you."

They found Yates in the police garage, about to go on duty. Leopold identified himself to the stocky patrolman and asked, "Do you remember filing a report night before last—some kids burning trash at the Mason Street dump?"

"Sure, Captain. Neighbors complained, but they were gone when I got there."

"Did you see them?"

"No. I guess somebody put it out before I got there. All quiet."

"Do you often have trouble with kids there?"

"Never did before. Not at night, anyway."

Leopold thanked him and walked out to the street with Fletcher. "Here's what I want, Fletcher. See if you can get a good picture of Connie Crane from his roommate. Then start checking the motels and hotels in the area. And the hospitals too."

Fletcher's eyes brightened. "You think he's still alive!"

"I don't think anything at this

point. Just go and check it out."

"But who does the body belong to, then?"

"Let me worry about that."

Leopold went back to his office and waited.

It was dark when Fletcher returned, and Leopold was close to dozing in his chair. He came awake with a start and saw the smile on the sergeant's face. "You were right, Captain. Treated at the emergency ward of St. Jerome's hospital the night of the fire. Burned left hand. Bad, but he wouldn't stay. Said he was burning some trash."

"Motels?"

"Nothing there, but I couldn't get to all of them."

"We don't need it."

Fletcher puckered his brow. "Funny thing. McGee got all worried when I asked for the picture. As I was leaving I heard him phoning somebody. Maybe he was warning Crane."

Leopold put down his pencil. "How long ago?"

"Maybe four, five hours."

"Come on."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"I hope not," Leopold said.

They reached McGee's apartment building in ten minutes of wild driving, and found it dark. Leopold was pounding on the door when they heard the shot from inside. Then both of them hit the door with their shoulders. Tom McGee was sitting on the floor by the overturned lamp, bleeding from a shoulder wound.

"He shot me," he kept mumbling. "The damn fool shot me!"

"Take care of him, Fletcher," Leopold shouted, already drawing his gun as he hit the bedroom door.

The window was open, its vivid blue drapes flapping in the night breeze. Leopold went over the sill, gun first, and saw the flash of the revolver from the ground below. He ducked and fired twice, and heard a grunt of pain.

A moment later, as he stood by the wounded man, Fletcher came running around from the front door. "You got him! You got Crane!"

Leopold shook his head. "Crane is dead. That was his body we found yesterday."

"Then who killed him?"

"In a sense I suppose you and I did, Fletcher," Leopold said, shining his flashlight at the man on the ground, "but I think the courts will convict Mr. Hugh Kranston of it."

"Kranston! But he was in New York the night of the fire!"

Leopold nodded. "You see, that's where we went wrong. Connie Crane wasn't murdered on the

night of the fire. He wasn't murdered until the night before last."

The paperwork at the end of a case was always boring to Leopold, and he delayed it as long as possible while he sat in the office with Fletcher.

"It was a very simple crime, really, once you saw it in the proper perspective. Hugh Kranston owned the building, and he was losing money on it with all those empty stores. He'd gotten to know Connie Crane at the liquor store, or maybe even caught him stealing from the basement. Anyway, the fire a couple of weeks back must have given him the idea, and he hired Connie to burn down his building for the insurance, making certain he was well alibied in New York on the night of the blaze. Everything went off on schedule, except that Connie burned his hand starting the thing. I gather it flared up sooner than he'd expected."

"But why did he disappear?"

"He must have hidden in an adjoining lot when the fire engines came. Then, when he managed to get back to the street, he discovered his car had been towed away for blocking a hydrant. Here he was, placed at the scene of a suspicious fire, and with a badly burned hand to add to the evidence against him. He managed to get to a nearby hospital for treatment, and decided to go into hiding and play dead."

"But Kranston knew about it?"

"Of course he called Kranston. He needed his money. And he called Tom McGee too, to let him know he was alive. Unfortunately, McGee had already filed a missing persons report on him, and that brought us into it."

"You said in a way we were responsible for the murder."

Leopold nodded. "And we were. We went down there and told Kranston we thought Crane's body was in the ruins, and that gave him the idea for the whole thing. Crane was talking about more money, and as long as he lived he'd be a threat, so Kranston went out to the place where Crane was staying—probably a motel on the outskirts, someplace where he could rent a car. Kranston killed Crane, and drove the body to, I think, the Mason Street dump. I'll have to check that part, but I imagine Patrolman Yates' trouble call was the body being properly burned. It must have taken a strong stomach to transport that charred corpse back to the fire scene and hide it in among the ruins. That's where you found it the next morning. Kranston figured he was in the clear, because he had a perfect alibi for the night

of the blaze. I think we'll find traces of the body in his trunk."

"What about tonight?"

"McGee, knowing Crane was alive after the fire, must have guessed what happened. He phoned Kranston and threatened him. Kranston decided one more murder wouldn't matter much, but we arrived in time to throw his aim off in that darkened apartment."

"All right," Fletcher said. "But how'd you know it all?"

"The autopsy report placed Crane's death at thirty to forty-eight hours before this morning—but the fire was six days ago—more than a hundred hours before the autopsy. The M.E. couldn't have been off by that much. So I figured the killing for two nights ago, maybe twelve hours before you found it and about thirty-three hours before the autopsy. There was confirmation—some soot you rubbed off that wouldn't have been there with all the fire hoses washing over the ruins. I was convinced he was killed later, then hidden in the wreckage—and that pointed the finger squarely at Kranston, the only one who knew we were looking for the body there. I purposely hadn't mentioned it to anyone else. Kranston had the most to gain from the fire, and the whole thing fitted together neatly. Especially when you came up with that hospital report."

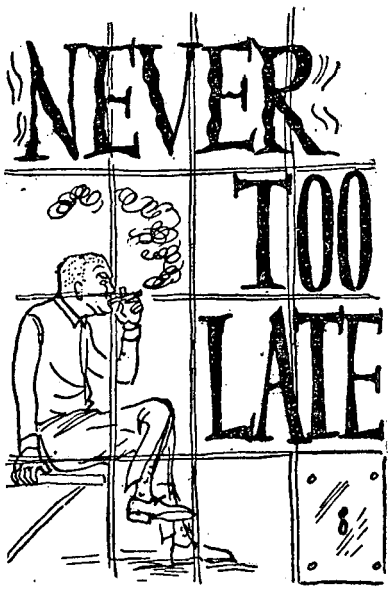
"The body might have been somebody else, though."

"Doubtful. If Kranston had been trying for a false identification he'd have done a more thorough job of burning off the fingerprints. Besides, McGee was shook up when he saw the body—much more than the previous day—when he knew Crane was actually alive and in hiding."

Fletcher leaned back in his chair. "It was a pretty good night, Captain."

Leopold thought about it. He thought mainly about Connie Crane and wondered if he could have acted differently to keep him alive; but to Fletcher he said only, "There've been better nights. I ripped my suit going out that window."

One who achieves his difficult peace has, by then, suffered quite enough.



HE WAS a man, Father Paul thought. There really wasn't any other way to describe him. He was an in-between—between old and young, tall and short, stout and thin, blond and dark, good looking and plain. The word nondescript had been coined for the sake of this particular man.

Only his clothing and surroundings made him stand out of the pack in any way at all. His trousers had been slit up to the knee, and his head was newly shaved. He sat on the single cot in Death Cell Number Two.

He was smoking a dollar cigar. Quite possibly it was only the third or fourth really good one he'd tasted in a lifetime. "Thank you for coming, Father," he said. He seemed to mean it.

"I'm glad you wanted me," Father Paul said. Sometimes, he thought, they don't.

"Of course I wanted you, Father. I'm not an atheist. I want to make my peace with Him up there. I've already made it with Life down here. I could do that alone. For the other I need your help."

"That's what I'm here for," Father Paul said. It was all he could think of to say. He didn't really

by Edward Y. Breese

know this man who was going to die in minutes. The hard ones, the bitter ones, the defiant and the shaking-scared who sat in these cells he knew, even if he had never seen them before. This man was not any of these things. In the last few moments of his time of Truth his face showed nothing.

"Tell me, my son." Father Paul tried the oldest gambit of his trade.

The man gave him a steady look out of eyes that were not quite either gray or brown. "I know you don't understand, Father. Maybe I don't quite understand myself, how I can take this so calm like. Even though I'm guilty."

The priest crossed himself.

"Oh, yes, I'm guilty. I can say that now the governor's turned me down. Why pretend, I mean? I shot Big Dave in his office just like they said. It was for the money—the numbers bets his runners had brought in. Over twenty thousand dollars. It would have been enough for me and my wife to get away from all this. I'm not sorry about that at all."

"God says 'Thou Shalt Not Kill.'"

"You were an Army chaplain, Father," the man said. There was no reproach in his eyes. "You know there's killing and killing. If it had been only Big Dave, I might've got off. For sure I'd have got life instead of the chair. I am sorry about killing the cop, aside from that, though. I didn't mean to. He had to blunder in and shoot at me first."

"Does that excuse anything?"

"No, of course not. But it was all so quick. I didn't really know what I was doing. But I should've known it would happen. My luck. All my life, my luck never changed. Not once."

"What does luck have to do with this?" It was the first time Father Paul had seen him show any emotion at all.

"Oh, Father, you must know. Somebody must've told you, for sure. All my life I been a gambler —what they call compulsive. A little poker; slot machines; slogan contests; shooting craps Saturday nights; all the time horse bets. Nothing big—just every cent I got went to gambling. You ain't one yourself, you can't understand it. My wife worked to feed us. When she was sick and needed me, all I could think of was to try to win the money for the operation. That is, till I thought of the biggest gamble of all—knock over Big Dave when his roll's fat."

"There were always other ways, my son."

"Not for me, Father. Oh, I tried. You'll never know how hard I

tried. I couldn't stop gambling. And I couldn't win. All the time I lost. Look now, if I had cell seven maybe the governor would've listened. But here I am in cell snake-eyes. Like always."

Father Paul could think of no way to say it. The man did it for him.

"Then how come all of a sudden I'm so calm about things? You think gamblers ain't ever calm? You're right too. Only thing is, Father, I'm no gambler anymore. When my lawyer told me about the governor turning the commutation down, then I knew. For the first time in my whole life I ain't bucking odds anymore. For the first time I remember I ain't waiting for no race to end, no point to make, no card to come up. For the first time, it's all settled. The chips are all down and the game's finished. I got no big *if* to bother me. It's wonderful, Father."

"Wonderful, my son?"

"That's the only way to say it. I'm through gambling. My luck never turned. So what? I'm at peace now, Father. It's all over. I can die like a man. Now will you pray for me, Father? Will you show me how?"

When it was over and the lights had dimmed three times to the ritual surge of power, when the nondescript man was only a nondescript corpse, Father Paul went slowly down the long corridors to the warden's office. The man's wife was waiting for him there.

"How did he take it, Father?" she asked. "What did he say when you showed it to him?"

Father Paul took the yellow telegraph form out of his pocket and passed it to her. "I never told him. Believe me, it was better that way."

"I don't understand." She smoothed out the sheet of yellow paper and read it again.

"DEAR MR. ADAMS," the telegram said, "YOU HAVE WON THE GRAND NATIONAL CONSOLIDATED MOTORS SWEEPSTAKES FIRST PRIZE OF TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS IN CASH. OUR CHECK IS IN THE MAIL. CONGRATULATIONS TO THE LUCKY WINNER."

MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO AND SEND ORDER TO

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine

2441 Beach Court Riviera Beach, Florida 33404

ZIP CODE MUST BE SHOWN ON ALL U.S. ORDERS

★★★

NAME ....

ADDRESS ....

CITY .... STATE .... ZIP CODE ....

THIS IS A NEW ORDER ☐ EXTEND PRESENT SUBSCRIPTION ☐

Send GIFT CARD SIGNED 144

★★★

NAME ....

ADDRESS ....

CITY .... STATE .... ZIP CODE ....

THIS IS A NEW ORDER ☐ EXTEND PRESENT SUBSCRIPTION ☐

Send GIFT CARD SIGNED 144

★★★

NAME ....

ADDRESS ....

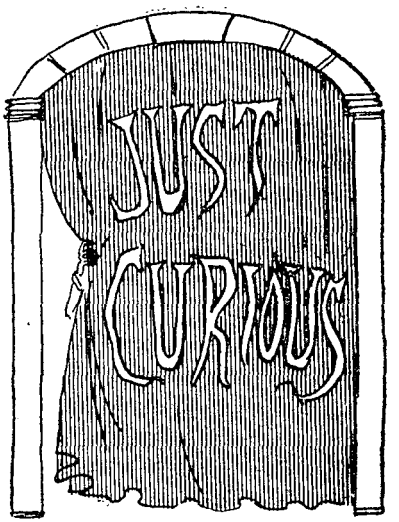
CITY .... STATE .... ZIP CODE ....

THIS IS A NEW ORDER ☐ EXTEND PRESENT SUBSCRIPTION ☐

Send GIFT CARD SIGNED 144

★★★

Perhaps the avenging hand of Zeus is omnipresent. Remember Pandora?



ROY LITTON'S apartment was on the eighteenth floor of the Torrell Arms. It was a pleasant place which cost him thirty-two thousand dollars a year. The living-room had a wide veranda which served in season as a sun deck. Far below was a great park. Beyond the park, drawn back to a respectful distance from the Torrell Arms, was the rest of the city.

"May I inquire," Roy Litton said to his visitor, "from whom you learned about me?"

The visitor's name was Jean Merriam. She was a slender, expensive brunette, about twenty-seven. She took a card from her handbag and slid it across the table to Litton. "Will that serve as an introduction?" she asked.

Litton studied the words scribbled on the card and smiled. "Yes," he said, "that's quite satisfactory. I know the lady's handwriting well. In what way can I help you?"

"I represent an organization, Jean said, "which does discreet investigative work."

"You're detectives?"

She shrugged, smiled. "We don't refer to ourselves as detectives, but that's the general idea. Conceivably your talents could be very useful to us. I'm here to find out whether you're willing to put them at our disposal from time to time. If you are, I have a test assignment for

by JAMES H. SCHMITZ

you. You don't mind, do you?"

Litton rubbed his chin. "You've been told what my standard fee is?"

Jean Merriam opened the handbag again, took out a check and gave it to him. Litton read it carefully, nodded. "Yes," he said, and laid the check on the table beside him. "Ten thousand dollars. You're in the habit of paying such sums out of your personal account?"

"The sum was put in my account yesterday for this purpose."

"Then what do you, or your organization, want me to do?"

"I've been given a description of how you operate, Mr. Litton, but we don't know how accurate the description is. Before we retain you, I'd like you to tell me exactly what you do."

Litton smiled. "I'm willing to tell you as much as I know."

She nodded. "Very well. I'll decide on the basis of what you say whether or not your services might be worth ten thousand dollars to the organization. Once I offer you the assignment and you accept it, we're committed. The check will be yours when the assignment is completed."

"Who will judge when it has been completed?"

"You will," said Jean. "Naturally there will be no further assignments if we're not satisfied with the results of this one. As I said, this is a test. We're gambling. If you're as good as I've been assured you are, the gamble should pay off. Fair enough?"

Litton nodded. "Fair enough, Miss Merriam." He leaned back in his chair. "Well, then—I sometimes call myself a 'sensor' because the word describes my experiences better than any other word I can think of. I'm not specifically a mind reader. I can't predict the future. I don't have second sight. But under certain conditions, I turn into a long-range sensing device with a limited application. I have no theoretical explanation for it. I can only say what happens.

"I work through contact objects; that is, material items which have had a direct and extensive physical connection with the persons I investigate. A frequently worn garment is the obvious example. Eyeglasses would be excellent. I once was able to use an automobile which the subject had driven daily for about ten months. Through some object I seem to become, for a time which varies between approximately three and five minutes, the person in question." Litton smiled. "Naturally I remain here physically, but my awareness is elsewhere.

"Let me emphasize that during this contact period I *am*—or seem

to be—the other person. I am not conscious of Roy Litton or of what Roy Litton is doing. I have never heard of him and know nothing of his sensing ability. I am the other person, aware only of what he is aware, doing what he is doing, thinking what he is thinking. If, meanwhile, you were to speak to the body sitting here, touch it, even cause it severe pain—which has been done experimentally—I wouldn't know it. When the time is up, the contact fades and I'm back. Then I know who I am and can recall my experience and report on it. Essentially, that's the process."

Jean Merriam asked, "To what extent do you control the process?"

"I can initiate it or not initiate it. I'm never drawn out of myself unless I intend to be drawn out of myself. That's the extent of my control. Once it begins, the process continues by itself and concludes itself. I have no way of affecting its course."

Jean said reflectively, "I don't wish to alarm you, Mr. Litton. But mightn't you be running the risk of remaining permanently lost in somebody else's personality . . . unable to return to your own?"

Litton laughed. "No. I know definitely that can't happen, though I don't know why. The process simply can't maintain itself for much more than five minutes. On the other hand, it's rarely terminated in less than three."

"You say that during the time of contact you think what the other person thinks and are aware of what he's aware?"

"That's correct."

"Only that? If we employed you to investigate someone in this manner, we usually would need quite specific information. Wouldn't we have to be extremely fortunate if the person happened to think of that particular matter in the short time you shared his mind?"

"No," said Litton. "Conscious thoughts quite normally have thousands of ramifications and shadings the thinker doesn't know about. When the contact dissolves, I retain his impressions and it is primarily these ramifications and shadings I then investigate. It is something like developing a vast number of photographic prints. Usually the information my clients want can be found in those impressions in sufficient detail."

"What if it can't be found?"

"Then I make a second contact. On only one occasion, so far, have I been obliged to make three separate contacts with a subject to satisfy the client's requirements. There is no fee for additional contacts."

Jean Merriam considered a mo-

ment. "Very well," she said. She brought a small box from the handbag, opened it and took out a ring which she handed to Litton. "The person in whom the organization is interested," she said, "was wearing this ring until four weeks ago. Since then it's been in a safe. The safe was opened yesterday and the ring taken from it and placed in this box. Would you consider it a suitable contact object?"

Litton held the ring in his palm an instant before replying. "Eminently suitable!" he said then.

"You can tell by touching such objects?"

"As a rule. If I get no impression, it's a waste of time to proceed. If I get a negative impression, I refuse to proceed."

"A negative impression?"

Litton shrugged. "A feeling of something that repels me. I can't describe it more definitely."

"Does it mean that the personality connected with the object is a repellent one?"

"Not necessarily. I've merged with some quite definitely repellent personalities in the course of this work. That doesn't disturb me. The feeling I speak of is a different one."

"It frightens you?"

"Perhaps." He smiled. "However, in this case there is no such feeling. Have you decided to offer me the assignment?" he asked her.

"Yes, I have," Jean Merriam said. "Now then, I've been told nothing about the person connected with the ring. Since very few men could get it on, and very few children would wear a ring of such value, I assume the owner is a woman—but I don't know even that. The reason I've been told nothing is to make sure I'll give you no clues, inadvertently or otherwise." She smiled. "Even if you were a mind reader, you see, you could get no significant information from me. We want to be certain of the authenticity of your talent."

"I understand," Litton said. "But you must know what kind of information your organization wants to gain from the contact?"

Jean nodded. "Yes, of course. We want you to identify the subject by name and tell us where she can be found. The description of the locality should be specific. We also want to learn as much as we can about the subject's background, her present activities and interests, and any people with whom she is closely involved. The more details you can give us about such people, the better. In general, that's it. Does it seem like too difficult an assignment?"

"Not at all," Litton said. "In fact, I'm surprised you want no

more. Is that kind of information really worth ten thousand dollars to you?"

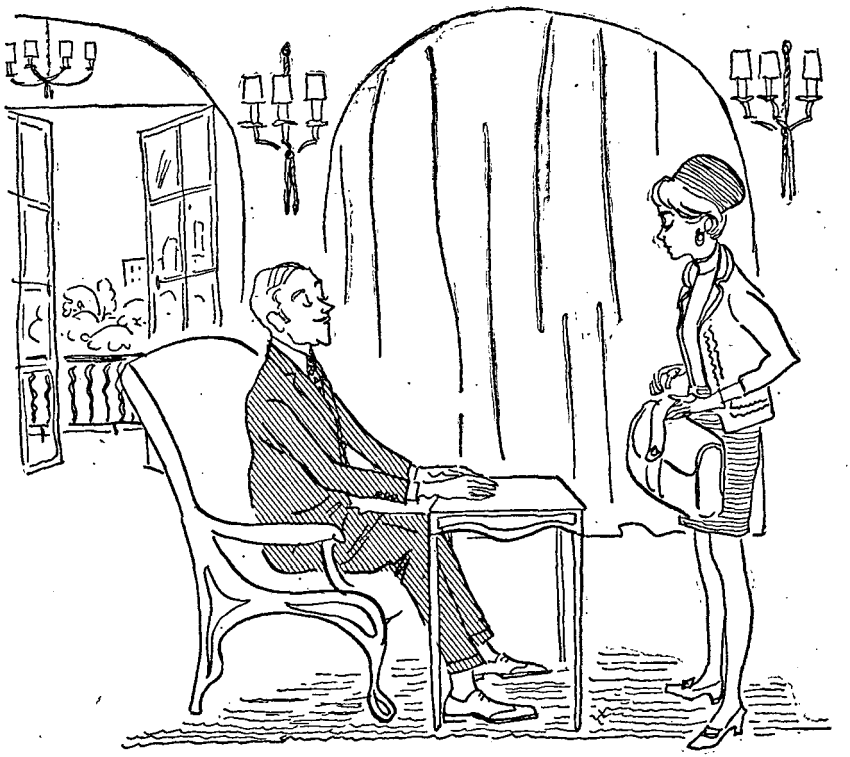
"I've been told," Jean said, "that if we get it within the next twenty-four hours, it will be worth a great deal more than ten thousand dollars."

"I see." Litton settled comfortably in the chair, placed his clasped hands around the ring on the table, enclosing it. "Then, if you like, Miss Merriam, I'll now make the contact."

"No special preparations?" she inquired, watching him.

"Not in this case." Litton nodded toward a heavily curtained alcove in the wall on his left. "That's what I call my withdrawal room. When I feel there's reason to expect difficulties in making a contact, I go in there. Observers can be disturbing under such circumstances. Otherwise, no preparations are necessary."

"What kind of difficulties could you encounter?" Jean asked.



"Mainly, the pull of personalities other than the one I want. A contact object may be valid, but contaminated by associations with other people. Then it's a matter of defining and following the strongest attraction, which is almost always that of the proper owner and our subject. Incidentally, it would be advantageous if you were prepared to record my report."

Jean tapped the handbag. "I'm recording our entire conversation, Mr. Litton."

He didn't seem surprised. "Very many of my clients do," he remarked. "Very well, then, let's begin. . ."

"How long did it take him to dream up this stuff?" Nick Garland asked.

"Four minutes and thirty-two seconds," Jean Merriam said.

Garland shook his head incredulously. He took the transcript she'd made of her recorded visit to Roy Litton's apartment from the desk and leafed through it again. Jean watched him, her face expressionless. Garland was a big gray-haired bear of a man, coldly irritable at present—potentially dangerous.

He laid the papers down, drummed his fingers on the desk. "I still don't want to believe it," he said, "but I guess I'll have to. He hangs on to Caryl Chase's ring for a few minutes, then he can tell you enough about her to fill five typed, single-spaced pages. . . That's what happened?"

Jean nodded. "Yes, that's what happened. He kept pouring out details about the woman as if he'd known her intimately half her life. He didn't hesitate about anything. My impression was that he wasn't guessing about anything. He seemed to know."

Garland grunted. "Max thinks he knew." He looked up at the man standing to the left of the desk. "Fill Jean in, Max. How accurate is Litton?"

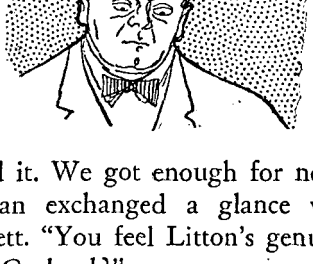
Max Jewett said, "On every point we can check out, he's completely accurate."

"What are the points you can check out?" Jean asked.

"The ring belongs to Caryl Chase. She's thirty-two. She's Phil Chase's wife, currently estranged. She's registered at the Hotel Arve, Geneva, Switzerland, having an uneasy off-and-on affair with one William Haskell, British ski nut. He's jealous, and they fight a lot. Caryl suspects Phil has detectives looking for her, which he does. Her daughter Ellie is hidden away with friends of Caryl's parents in London. Litton's right about the ring. Caryl got it from her grandmother on her twenty-first birth-

day and wore it since. When she ran out on Phil last month, she took it off and left it in her room safe. Litton's statement, that leaving it was a symbolic break with her past life, makes sense." Jewett shrugged. "That's about it. Her psychoanalyst might be able to check out some of the rest of what you got on tape. We don't have that kind of information."

Garland growled, "We don't



need it. We got enough for now."

Jean exchanged a glance with Jewett. "You feel Litton's genuine, Mr. Garland?"

"He's genuine. Only Max and I knew we were going to test him on Caryl. If he couldn't do what he says he does, you wouldn't have got the tape. There's no other way he could know those things about her." Garland's face twisted into a sour grimace. "I thought Max had lost his marbles when he told me it looked like Phleger had got his information from some kind of swami. But that's how it happened. Frank Phleger got Litton to tap my mind something like two or three months ago. He'd need that much time to get set to make his first move."

"How much have you lost?" Jean asked.

He grunted. "Four, five million. I can't say definitely yet. That's not what bothers me." His mouth clamped shut, a pinched angry line. His eyes shifted bleakly down to the desk, grew remote, lost focus.

Jean Merriam watched him silently. Inside that big skull was stored information which seemed sometimes equal to the intelligence files of a central bank. Nick Garland's brain was a strategic computer, a legal library. He was a multimillionaire, a brutal genius, a solitary and cunning king beast in the financial jungle—a jungle he allowed to become barely aware he existed. Behind his secretiveness he remained an unassailable shadow. In the six years Jean had been working for him she'd never before seen him suffer a setback; but if they were right about Litton, this was more than a setback. Garland's mind had been opened, his plans analyzed, his strengths and weaknesses assessed by another solitary king beast—a lesser one, but one who knew exactly how to make the greatest possible use of the information thus gained—and who had begun to do it. So Jean waited and wondered.

"Jean," Garland said at last. His gaze hadn't shifted from the desk.

"Yes?"

"Did Litton buy your story about representing something like a detective agency?"

"He didn't seem to question it," Jean said. "My impression was that he doesn't particularly care who employs him, or for what purpose."

"He'll look into anyone's mind for a price?" It was said like a bitter curse.

"Yes . . . his price. What are you going to do?"

Garland's shoulders shifted irritably. "Max is trying to get a line on Phleger."

Jean glanced questioningly at Jewett. Jewett told her, "Nobody seems to have any idea where Frank Phleger's been for the past three weeks. We assume he dropped out of sight to avoid possible repercussions. The indications are that we're getting rather close to him."

"I see," Jean said uncomfortably. The king beasts avoided rough play as a matter of policy, usually avoided conflict among themselves, but when they met in a duel there were no rules.

"Give that part of it three days," Garland's voice said. She looked around, found him watching her with a trace of what might be irony, back at any rate from whatever brooding trance he'd been sunk in. "Jean, call Litton sometime tomorrow."

"All right."

"Tell him the boss of your detective organization wants an appointment with him. Ten o'clock, three days from now."

She nodded, said carefully, "Litton could become extremely valuable to you, Mr. Garland."

"He could," Garland agreed. "Anyway, I want to watch the swami perform. We'll give him another assignment."

"Am I to accompany you?"

"You'll be there, Jean. So will Max."

"I keep having the most curiously definitive impression," Roy Litton observed, "that I've met you before."

"You have," Garland said amiably.

Litton frowned, shook his head. "It's odd I should have forgotten the occasion!"

"The name's Nick Garland," Garland told him.

Still frowning, Litton stared at him across the table. Then abruptly his face paled. Jean Merriam, watching from behind her employer, saw Litton's eyes shift to her, from her to Max Jewett, and return at last, hesitantly, to Gar-

land's face. Garland nodded wryly.

"I was what you call one of your subjects, Mr. Litton," he said. "I can't give you the exact date, but it should have been between two and three months ago. You remember now?"

Litton shook his head. "No. After such an interval it would be impossible to be definite about it, in any case. I keep no notes and the details of a contact very quickly grow blurred to me." His voice was guarded; he kept his eyes on Garland's. "Still, you seemed familiar to me at once as a person. And your name seems familiar. It's quite possible that you have been, in fact, a contact subject."

"I was," Garland said. "We know that. That's why we're here."

Litton cleared his throat. "Then the story Miss Merriam told me at her first visit wasn't true."

"Not entirely," Garland admitted. "She wasn't representing a detective outfit. She represented me. Otherwise, she told the truth. She was sent here to find out whether you could do what we'd heard you could do. We learned that you could. Mr. Litton, you've cost me a great deal of money. But I'm not too concerned about that now, because, with your assistance, I'll make it back. And I'll make a great deal more besides. You begin to get the picture?"

Relief and wariness mingled for an instant in Litton's expression. "Yes, I believe I do."

"You'll get paid your regular fees, of course," Garland told him. "The fact is, Mr. Litton, you don't charge enough. What you offer is worth more than ten thousand a shot. What you gave Frank Phleger was worth enormously more."

"Frank Phleger?" Litton said.

"The client who paid you to poke around in my mind. No doubt he wouldn't have used his real name. It doesn't matter. Let's get on to your first real assignment for me. Regular terms. This one isn't a test. It's to bring up information I don't have and couldn't get otherwise. All right?"

Litton nodded, smiled. "You have a suitable contact object?"

"We brought something that should do," Garland said. "Max, give Mr. Litton the belt."

Jean Merriam looked back toward Jewett. Garland hadn't told her what Litton's assignment was to be, had given her no specific instructions, but she'd already turned on the recorder in her handbag. Jewett was taking a large plastic envelope from the briefcase he'd laid beside his chair. He came over to the table, put the envelope before Litton and returned to his place.

"Can you tell me specifically

what you want to know concerning this subject?" Litton asked.

"To start with," Garland said, "just give us whatever you can get. I'm interested in general information."

Litton nodded, opened the plastic envelope and took out a man's leather belt with a broad silver buckle. Almost immediately an expression of distaste showed in his face. He put the belt on the table, looked over at Garland.

"Mr. Garland," he said, "Miss Merriam may have told you that on occasion I'm offered a contact object I can't use. Unfortunately, this belt is such an object."

"What do you mean?" Garland asked. "Why can't you use it?"

"I don't know. It may be something about the belt itself, and it may be the person connected with it." Litton brushed the belt with his fingers. "I simply have a very unpleasant feeling about this object. It repels me." He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid I must refuse to work with it."

"Well, now," Garland said, "I don't like to hear that. You've cost me a lot, you know. I'm willing to overlook it, but I do expect you to be cooperative in return."

Litton glanced at him, swallowed uneasily. "I understand—and I assure you you'll find me cooperative. If you'll give me some other assignment, I assure you—"

"No," Garland said. "No, right now I want information about this particular person, not somebody else. It's too bad if you don't much like to work with the belt, but that's your problem. We went to a lot of trouble to get the belt for you. Let me state this quite clearly, Mr. Litton. You owe me the information, and I think you'd better get it now."

His voice remained even, but the menace in the words was undisguised. The king beast was stepping out from cover; and Jean's palms were suddenly wet. She saw Litton's face whiten.

"I suppose I do owe it to you," Litton said after a moment. He hesitated again. "But this isn't going to be easy."

Garland snorted. "You're getting ten thousand dollars for a few minutes' work!"

"That isn't it. I . . ." Litton shook his head helplessly, got to his feet. He indicated the curtained alcove at the side of the room. "I'll go in there. At best, this will be a difficult contact to attempt. I can't be additionally distracted by knowing that three people are staring at me."

"You'll get the information?" Garland asked.

Litton looked at him, said sullenly, "I always get the informa-

tion." He picked up the belt, went to the alcove and disappeared through the curtains.

Garland turned toward Jean Merriam. "Start timing him," he said.

She nodded, checked her watch. The room went silent, and immediately Jean felt a heavy oppression settle on her. It was almost as if the air had begun to darken around them. Frightened, she thought, *Nick hates that freak . . . Has he decided to kill him?*

She pushed the question away and narrowed her attention to the almost inaudible ticking of the tiny expensive watch. After a while she realized that Garland was looking at her again. She met his eyes, whispered, "Three minutes and ten seconds." He nodded.

There was a sound from within the alcove. It was not particularly loud, but in the stillness it was startling enough to send a new gush of fright through Jean. She told herself some minor piece of furniture, a chair, a small side table, had fallen over, been knocked over on the carpeting. She was trying to think of some reason why Litton should have knocked over a chair in there when the curtains before the alcove were pushed apart. Litton moved slowly out into the room.

He stopped a few feet from the alcove. He appeared dazed, half-stunned, like a man who'd been slugged hard in the head and wasn't sure what had happened. His mouth worked silently, his lips writhing in slow, stiff contortions as if trying to shape words that couldn't be pronounced. Abruptly he started forward. Jean thought for a moment he was returning to the table, but he went past it, pace quickening, on past Garland and herself without glancing at either of them. By then he was almost running, swaying from side to side in long staggering steps, and she realized he was hurrying toward the French doors which stood open on the wide veranda overlooking the park. Neither Garland nor Jewett moved from their chairs, and Jean, unable to speak, twisted around to look after Litton as they were doing. She saw him run across the veranda, strike the hip-high railing without checking, and go on over.

The limousine moved away from the Torrell Arms through the sunlit park, Jewett at the wheel, Garland and Jean Merriam in the back seat. There was no siren wail behind them, no indication of disturbance, nothing to suggest that anyone else was aware that a few minutes ago a man had dropped into the neatly trimmed park

shrubbery from the eighteenth floor of the great apartment hotel.

"You could have made use of him," Jean said. "He could have been of more value to you than anyone else in the world. But you intended to kill him from the start, didn't you?"

Garland didn't reply for a moment. Then he said, "I could have made use of him, sure. So could anyone else with ten thousand dollars to spare, or some way to put pressure on him. I don't need somebody like Litton to stay on top. And I don't like the rules changed. When Phleger found Litton, he started changing them. It could happen again. Litton had to be taken out."

"Max could have handled that," Jean said. Her hands had begun to tremble again; she twisted them tightly together around the strap of the handbag. "What did you do to get Litton to kill himself?"

Garland shook his head. "I didn't intend him to kill himself. Max was to take care of him afterward."

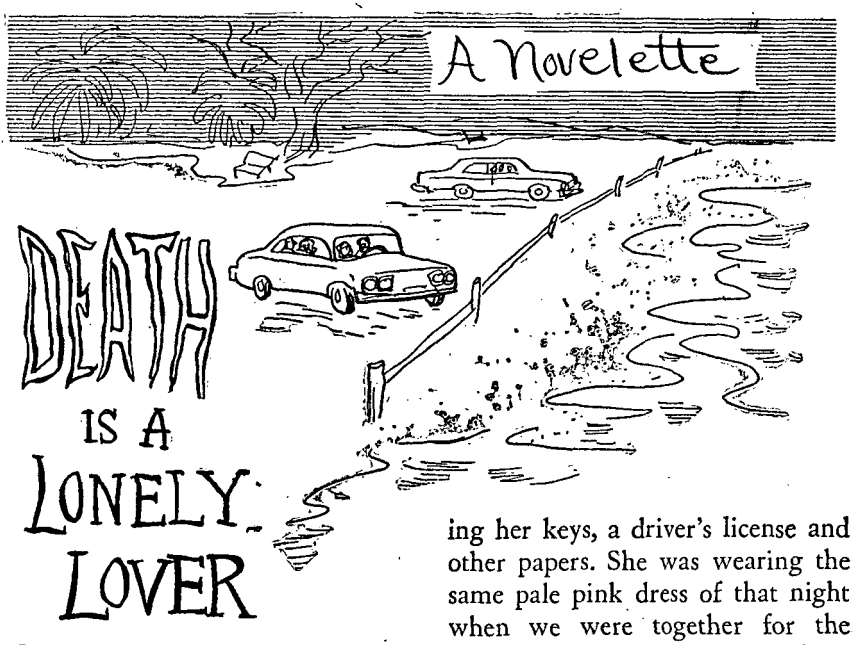
"You did something to him."

Garland drew a long sighing breath. "I was just curious," he said. "There's something I wonder about now and then. I thought Litton might be able to tell me, so I gave him the assignment."

"What assignment? He became someone else for three minutes. What happened to him?"

Garland's head turned slowly toward her. She noticed for the first time that his face was almost colorless. "That was Frank Phleger's belt," he said. "Max's boys caught up with him last night. Phleger's been dead for the last eight hours."

No matter how ill one may at first appear, there is often something more to aggravate the malady.



by Robert Colby

CARL KOENIG: I came apart like a toy watch when I read about Lorrie Proctor in the newspapers. They had just found her body—six months and thirteen days after it happened. Beside her in the grave was her pocketbook containing her keys, a driver's license and other papers. She was wearing the same pale pink dress of that night when we were together for the last time, and now the rotted fragments of it covered a skeleton.

She was also wearing my engagement ring, an item which wouldn't bring five bucks at a pawnshop. Her killers didn't even bother to remove it. Try to picture

that tarnished band wobbling around on one bony little finger.

When the news broke and I read that pathetic bit about the ring, I cried. Later, when I was calm and empty of all but the hate which had grown like an extra organ inside me, I knew it was time to kill—no, execute—the four people responsible for Lorrie's murder.

I had been ready a long time because that little voice in my head told me that Lorrie was dead. Yet did you ever hear of a judge passing sentence on a hunch? No, I had to wait until her death was a fact.

You might think I would go to the police. Listen, I *did* go to the police—right in the beginning, right after it happened. I was barely conscious from the beating I had taken, but the police thought I was drunk. They gave me a hard time. When I finally squeezed some oil of truth into those mechanical brains with which some cops come equipped, it was too late. They couldn't find clue one. Even when they had recovered her body and the stuff buried with her, they came up with exactly nothing.

I broke contact with the police after the first week and moved from the address I had given them without giving a forwarding. When I could see that there would never be any legal justice, I kept what I knew to myself and prepared my own justice in secret.

Lorrie had *six* killers, but the law was aware of only *two* and would condemn only two as guilty of the crime. Such is the blindness and stupidity of legal justice. Since I could not find the two who were wanted by the law, the other four had to die first.

There were two men and two women. I decided that the women should precede the men. The men should be made to suffer their loss as I had suffered the loss of Lorrie.

The women were Nancy Jarrett and Vera Wynn. I chose a night and phoned to see if Nancy were at home. She was. I faked a wrong number and hung up.

I had been over the route several times before and I had no trouble finding the house. It was a bright yellow Cape Cod sort of cottage off Wilshire in West L.A. Amber light jeweled its windows, and set against the darkness, it looked snug and inviting. It had a phony air of innocence and cheer.

I parked a ways beyond and cut the lights of my station wagon. My dog, a sleek Doberman and a trained man-killer, was in back. I gave him an affectionate pat and, more from habit than necessity, told him to stand guard. An order to such an animal is something

like cocking a loaded gun, and much more reliable.

Carrying a package under my arm, I climbed out and walked toward the house. I was wearing dark slacks, a light blue jacket and a matching visored hat, plus a thin pair of gloves. Most people are gullible, and if you offer something for nothing, any half-baked uniform will seem official enough.

I stood at her door, but through a near window I could see she was huddled in an easy chair before the television, her stockinged feet propped up on an ottoman.

She was alone, but that wasn't news to me. Her husband, Bruce Jarrett, was a radio engineer. He worked half the night at the transmitter, a lonely little hut beside a signal tower which sprouted from the crest of a hill. It was a beautiful spot for what came later.

I rang the bell, saw her start, scramble into her shoes, approach. She opened the door to the extent of a chain-guard and peeped out.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Jarrett?"

"Yes, it is."

"Package for you, ma'am. Special delivery."

"Oh, my! All right." She released the chain and swung the door wide.

She was a small woman in her late twenties with a wolf-whistle figure. She was rather pretty, I suppose, but I didn't really notice. She waited expectantly for me to offer the package.

"You'll have to sign," I said, tapping a printed slip tucked under the cord binding the box. "It's registered."

"Heavens, how important!" she sang.

"You got a pencil?" I asked, like I was bored with the whole routine. "Every other delivery I lose a pencil to some joker."

"Hold on," she answered. "I'll get you one."

She went away, into the living-room. I sprang inside, eased the door shut behind me, just in time. She was returning with the pencil, coming a bit unglued when she found me standing there on the wrong side of the door.

She hesitated a few feet from me, her eyes searching my face for a danger signal. That was when I lifted a flap at the end of the box close to my body, reached in and yanked the box free.

I thought her jaw would fall right off her face when she looked down the barrel of that sawed-off shotgun.

I said, "Do just as I tell you, Nancy. Otherwise, I might spread you all over the room."

She took a step backward. The pencil fell from her hand. "Who—

who are you?" she asked in a kind of whisper.

"It'll come to you, Nancy, before long. I'll help you remember. Now go and draw the curtains—every one!"

She hesitated, moistened her lips, swallowed.

"Hurry, Nancy. Hurry!" I centered the barrel between her eyes. Watching me, fascinated, she backed, sidestepped. She closed a drape, then another, until it was done. Then I stepped into the livingroom.

"What do you want?" she asked, "I have a few dollars in my purse. Please take them and leave."

"Where do you keep your purse, Nancy?"

"In—in the bedroom."

"Well then, let's go and get it."

"No!" She shook her head violently. "I don't believe you. It isn't money you want at all."

"You're a real thinker, Nancy." She backed off as I moved toward her.

Suddenly she turned and ran. I danced after her, caught her in the kitchen. She was hurling herself at the back door. Her fingers swarmed all over it, like crazy worms, trying to find the bolt in the dark.

I slammed the side of her head with the gun barrel. She fell, whimpering.

"Oh, please," she moaned. "Please, what have I ever done to you?"

I told her. She was on the floor staring up at me and I was holding the muzzle of the shotgun a foot from her face. When I stopped talking, I squeezed the trigger.

After the sound died, I bent to look at her. She had no face—no face at all.

Del Wynn: I hadn't seen Bruce or Nancy Jarrett for nearly a month. Although Vera and I were close friends of the Jarretts, we had moved to the other side of town and it was inconvenient to get together as often as we did when we lived practically around the corner.

Still, in that dreadful state of shock, I don't imagine Bruce would have come running over to tell us that Nancy had just been murdered. Further, the news did not reach the papers until afternoon of the following day. However, I got the story about midmorning from an entirely different source.

A couple of detectives came to see me at my office in Burbank. I was working as a PR man for an aircraft company and I had my own private cubbyhole.

After they had settled in chairs before my desk, Sergeant Newbold

lighted a cigarette offered by his partner, Detective Ferguson, then told me abruptly that Nancy Jarrett had been blasted to death with a shotgun charge which all but tore her head from her body.

I was extremely fond of Nancy and it took me a minute or so to recover my composure. I could see that Newbold had more to say, but he waited patiently and made comforting sounds in a flat, cool voice which seemed as if it had long ago been drained of any emotion.

"Bad as it is, Mr. Wynn, I wish that were the end of it," he continued. "But I suppose you guessed we wouldn't be here unless there were additional details involving you. Also your wife."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said blankly.

"The killer left something behind," Newbold said, and passed me a small square of white paper which showed typed names and a few rusty splotches of blood. I studied the paper:

ORDER OF EXECUTION

Nancy Jarrett
Vera Wynn
Bruce Jarrett
Del Wynn

My name and Vera's leaped out at me!

"As you see," Newbold said evenly, "Mrs. Jarrett's name has been checked off. The rest is obvious." He extended his hand and I gave him the list. "This paper was pinned to Nancy Jarrett's blouse," he went on as he folded the paper and tucked it into his wallet.

I said, "Why should anyone want to kill me, or my wife?"

"Why should anyone want to kill Nancy Jarrett?" Ferguson asked with a wry twist of his lips.

Newbold nodded agreement. "Do *you* know why, Mr. Wynn?"

"No," I said numbly.

"In any case, the killer planted that list to scare hell out of you people."

"Speaking for myself, it does just that." I sent him a weak smile.

"There's got to be a connection," Ferguson reasoned. "You're all linked to something. Any idea what it might be?"

"Not the least," I told him. "The Jarretts've been friends for a couple of years. We lived close by, got together about once a week. We played bridge or went to movies, night spots—things like that. Perfectly innocent stuff, never any trouble."

Newbold squashed his cigarette in my desk tray. "You belong to any mutual societies, clubs, lodges—any sort of organization in which you were all members?"

"None. Nothing like that."

"Maybe you all went to a party," said Ferguson, groping. "There was an argument, a fight. You four took sides against someone."

I shook my head. "Never. Listen, you've got a point, but you're moving in the wrong direction. Let me say from the beginning that, as a foursome, we didn't take sides against anyone. There were no fights, physical or verbal. We're all mild enough, certainly not belligerent, and we kept pretty much to ourselves."

Newbold shifted uncomfortably

in his chair. "Can you think of a time when some guy made a pass at one of the wives, causing a public scene?"

"No."

"Or there was some, uh, private incident. When you men heard about it later, you took action."

"Absolutely not. That would make it easier to understand."

Newbold sighed. "Take your time, think about this from every angle, all the way back, inside and out. Examine anything that has a taint of friction. The smallest event is important."

We were silent for a space as I forced my mind to poke in every corner of the total relationship. "Sorry," I said, "there just isn't anything at all to work with. And believe me, I'm a lot more anxious to get at the truth than you boys could ever be."

"Then we've got a psycho on our hands," Newbold said firmly, "someone who merely imagines that he or she has been given a rough time by you people. True or not, it doesn't help. The end result is the same."

"We're just as dead, you mean."

"Exactly."

"You think he'll go through with it, Sergeant?"

"Nancy Jarrett was no bluff."

"Can't you stop it?"

"We can try to find him," Ferguson said. "That's the only sure way to stop it."

"Don't count on finding him too soon," Newbold warned.

"I want protection," I snapped. "My wife is next, you know. Can't you give us a guard or two?"

"I could do that, yes," Newbold answered. "For how long?"

"I don't know. Indefinitely. Until he's caught."

"Impossible. We don't have the manpower for a long period of guard duty. We get maybe half a dozen calls a week asking for protection, one reason or another, and turn them all down. Of course, this is a quite different case, the need is obvious. But after a couple of days or so we'd only have to call our men back."

"What good are the police, then?"

"How would you like to live without us?" His smile had an edge.

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Wynn," Ferguson said. "If a man is set and determined to kill you without fear of consequences, he'll get the job done, sooner or later. All he needs is patience, a suitable weapon and a decent plan."

"Coming from a policeman, that's a lousy piece of information," I growled.

"At least it's honest," Newbold defended. "It's realistic."

"No, it's plain negative," I said bitterly. "Maybe we should give up and pin targets to our backs!"

"Not at all," replied Newbold calmly. "We're starting with rock-bottom truth. Awareness is a kind of armor. President Kennedy was guarded by the FBI, the Secret Service and about half the police force of Dallas. One man got to him. That's a sad fact, but the truth.

"We're only trying to show you that the best watchdogs guarding each one of you night and day is no guarantee of safety. We've got to do a lot more. We've got to hunt this killer down and put him away! And we'll be hard at it, that's a promise.

"Meanwhile, if you and your wife can afford to slip out of town undercover, fine. If not, take every precaution. Perhaps the best precaution is for you two to get together with Jarrett and come up with an answer. When and where did you make yourselves an enemy? Who and why?"

He passed me his card. "Just as soon as you can tell me that, call me. Day or night . . ."

Nothing worked in our favor. We couldn't afford the expense of leaving town and my job might not be there when I returned. More, Bruce Jarrett was no help at all. The poor guy was too broken to help us discover where or how we had made an enemy and didn't seem to care.

Vera made a big try, but together we couldn't pick up a single thread. I kept her locked in the house with a small automatic I had bought her, and she was not to open the door for anyone. I called five or six times a day to be certain she was all right.

Mornings I ducked into my car and raced to the office, then raced back. We had laid in a supply of staples and frozen goods. We never left the house after dark. Most of this was done for Vera's sake. I don't scare easily; I am only bothered by an enemy I can't see—who won't come out and fight in the open.

In the third week, at lunchtime on Valentine's Day, I phoned Vera from the office. She thanked me sweetly for my card and again mentioned the little bottle of perfume I had given her that morning. The mail had come just a minute before my call and she had received a heart-shaped box of chocolate covered cherries from her brother in Pasadena.

Delighted, she opened the box as we talked and I heard her munching. Then she made a small gasping sound and there was a thud, as if the receiver had been dropped to the floor.

I drove wildly, with mindless abandon. A cop raced after me. He was a bright one and gave me a full-siren escort after I explained, but death and cyanide are only seconds apart. Vera was long gone when I reached her.

Bruce Jarrett: Del Wynn just left. He made a special trip out to the transmitter this evening, and since mine is a one-man job with nothing much required but to log the meter readings and do an occasional bit of maintenance, we had time for a long talk.

When Vera Wynn was poisoned and I saw that Del was man enough to put aside his wretchedness and take a stand for doing something about the murders other than weeping behind locked doors, I was ashamed. I agreed to help him make a real effort to put the killer or killers of Nancy and Vera in the gas chamber. It would be a kind of ironic justice for Del, since cyanide is used to execute murderers under capital punishment in the state of California.

Because of the threat to my life, a special patrol of the area had been ordered. Working alone at the transmitter made me a vulnerable target, so I kept the only door locked and made Del go around to a window where I could see him before I let him in.

We shook hands and I said, "Well, how are you bearing up?"

He didn't answer. Instead he went past me to a chair by the control board and sat down. I took my place behind the panel. Music was blaring from the monitor so I reached for the fader and lowered the gain.

"You look beat down," I said. "I suppose you're going through the same emotions—the lost feeling, the sleepless nights full of images and memories. I think it's the little things you remember that get to you when you lie there and—"

"Shut up!" he barked. "Please just keep it to yourself, will ya?"

"Well, now listen, Del, I was only trying to—"

"Sure, sure," he said, waving me off. "But that stuff is all downhill —nowhere. I have the same feelings, but I can't afford to indulge them right now. Let's cry later and get to work. Okay?"

"Sorry," I said woundedly.

Ignoring me, he got up and paced a moment before he said, "I think we've got to try a new approach. We need tangible clues. It'll be a long process, but there's only one way to find them."

"How?"

"We'll start from the ground up —from the first day we four met. On paper we'll make a chronological list of every single occasion

when we were all together. We'll put a label to each date. When that's done we'll go back again to the beginning and talk in the details, step by step."

"It might work," I said, "but it could take half the night."

"Got anything better to do? Then find a pencil and some paper."

It went much faster than we had expected. We had drawn up a timetable of events and had discussed the details of the first fourteen months in less than two hours—drawing a blank. Then the phone rang.

It was Lieutenant Thatcher of Homicide. I had met him only once; most of my dealings were with Sergeant Newbold and his partner. Thatcher was hot on the case, working with the night trick. He had the mug shot of a suspect he wanted me to identify. He was sending a Detective Murray Gladstone with it in about an hour.

I asked for the name of the suspect in the mug shot, but he said he was going to withhold the name and let *me* tell *him*. It would be more conclusive.

I shared the news with Del. He said Thatcher was probably groping in the dark and it was a long-shot. We went on with the task.

Nothing developed until we reached a night in the summer of last year. This particular foursome was labeled: *Malibu for dinner at the Lockwoods'. Drinks at The Point, followed by drive along coast.*

We were about to discard this one also when Del said, "Wait a minute! We didn't just cap the night with a drive and then go home. Don't you remember? We pulled off the coast highway into a parking area by the beach. We sat looking down at the ocean and we made a big funny deal about necking like kids."

"So?"

"So there was one other car in there, about a hundred feet off to the right. I'm not sure, because it was dark and cloudy that night and I never did get the whole picture, but I think there were two, or maybe three men in the car—and a girl. The men had a fight and the girl screamed. Now do you remember?"

I nodded. "Sure, a bunch of drunks having a brawl. So what?"

"At the time, nothing much, though it did upset me. But now, in the light of all this, I think it's worth a close look."

It was. In fact, once the scene was dredged up from my memory with Del's prodding, I had the awful conviction that this was the moment of truth about the murders and about myself. I can only guess

that some Freudian block kept the memory locked in that secret closet of the mind where we hide from ourselves—because, by an accident of circumstance, I had seen more of that fight than the others, and for reasons of my own, remained silent.

We were using my car that night and after I parked at the edge of a shallow cliff above the beach, I sat listening to the others jabbering a minute, then got out and went for a stroll. I was cold sober but I had been mixing my drinks on top of a heavy meal and I hoped to walk off a sneaky feeling that I was about to be sick.

I was returning when I heard a low moan, as of a man in pain, then scuffling sounds. It came from the area of the other car quite close behind me, and I turned to look.

Three men and a girl were caught dimly in the splay of lights from a passing car. One man had another on the ground at his feet and was booting his ribs viciously. He came to life, scrambled out of range and struggled to his feet. The man brought him down again with a clubbing motion, though if there was something in his hand I couldn't see it because his massive back was to me.

The third man had a tight hold on the girl's wrist, their heads were turned to watch the beating. Suddenly the girl broke away and ran. The man who had been clutching her wrist, chased and caught her. He gave her a wicked backhand across the face and she screamed. The scream drew the attention of the kicker and he went jogging toward them.

Farther removed, talking noisily among themselves, Del, Vera and my wife had seen nothing, had heard nothing but the scream. Alarmed, they then climbed from the car to look. I hurried up to them. There was safety in numbers and I was afraid.

The men were powerfully built animals and there was about them and their actions an aura of savage brutality. I could almost feel the bones of my face splintering under the impact of cast-iron fists, my ribs kicked in at the point of a stone-hard toe. I detest all forms of violence, I can't bear pain, and I did not want to become involved.

On the other hand, Del Wynn was fearless and he welcomed a good fight. If I gave him the true picture, he would plow in with fists flying. What, then, could I do? Stand and watch? I would be naked before them, an exposed coward. Below the surface, Nancy would never understand or forgive.

"What's goin' on over there?" asked Del. He was straining to see

in the gloom. Except when the lights of a passing car brought the figures out of darkness for a few seconds, they were mere shadows.

"Bunch of drunks," I said, "fighting over some cookie. Kid stuff."

"We heard a scream," said Nancy.

"The boyfriend gave her a little slap," I belittled. "Probably she was flirting and he was jealous." For all I knew, that might be close. "Nothing to it. C'mon, let's hit the road."

"Maybe we ought to go over and teach them some manners," said Del, molding a fist in his palm.

"Nahh, I wouldn't hit some lousy staggering drunk. That's one thing I never do—punch a drunk."

Del sent me a probing glance but said nothing. He seemed about to turn away, but just then a car moving along the coast highway came out of the north and splashed the scene with light.

Two of the men stood facing the girl, one shaking a finger in her face. The third, the injured one, was climbing to his feet. As if to back my story, he swayed and looked very drunk as he faced us and waved in a loose, awkward signal for help. At the same time he shouted something at us. It came out garbled—again, as if he were drunk.

Now, as the car on the highway swirled past, he stumbled toward the two men and the girl and was lost in the darkness.

"That guy is in trouble," said Del. "I'm gonna find out what kind. You comin', Bruce?"

"Can't you see he's drunk?" Vera said. "Please, Del, leave it alone. I don't want you mixed up with a bunch of drunks brawling over some little tramp."

"She's right," I agreed. "None of our business anyway. Let's go!"

Ignoring us, Del moved off deliberately. He hadn't gone but a few steps when the car backed, circled and rocketed away, racing without lights until it reached the highway.

That seemed the end of it, but when my car neared the exit, a narrow opening in a chain fence because a parking fee was collected during the day, a man rose up and weaved toward us. It was the man who had taken the beating. He was young, dark-haired and slender. His clothes were torn and disordered, but there didn't seem to be a mark on him.

The very sight of this guy looming up suddenly to confront us was astonishing. When he vanished, we had all assumed that he had driven off with the others despite the fracas.

As I drew abreast of the man

he grabbed the window frame and said something idiotic which sounded like, "Worry, worry." His eyes were wild and hugely dilated, there was a definite smell of whiskey on his breath.

He sagged and fell to the ground. I paused a few feet beyond him, waiting for a hole in traffic. The women wanted to take him along but he didn't look hurt and I was against it. Unexpectedly, Del

backed me up. "Stoned out of his mind," he said. "Let'm sleep it off."

That settled it, we left him. The incident crept into my mind briefly the next day but there is nothing I can rationalize and forget so quickly as any situation which tends to accuse me. I never thought of it again.

Yet now that Del had revived the experience and I could see a possible connection to the nightmare of murder and threat which followed long after, I didn't hesitate. I told him exactly what happened and why I had kept silent.

He paced across the room, turned. "Don't you get it!" he cried. "One guy is holding the girl, the other is beating the man, kicking his ribs in. Was that a drunken brawl over a dame? Right now we've got every reason to damn well believe it wasn't!

"I'll spell it out for you. Two of those guys were probably there for just one reason—to rob the man and take his girl off somewhere to rape her. Then what? Chances are ten to one they were afraid to turn her loose, so they murdered her.

"The girl's husband, boyfriend or whatever, sees the four of us watching like it was some kind of sideshow. So he goes psycho. He tracks us down and takes his revenge."

"We're absolute strangers," I objected. "How does he find us?"

"Yeah, that part had me boxed, but it just came to me that the only possible answer is too simple. He got your license number and he made a point to remember it. From there he just followed his nose, that's all."

Something hard and accusing crept into Del's eyes. He moved toward me with his big jaw clenched and his fists balled. He stood poised above me. "Two of us

are dead and the other two might as well be dead," he hissed. "Why didn't you drive us all over a cliff that night, Bruce? We'd've been better off!"

For a moment I thought he might knock me out of the chair, but he turned abruptly and left without looking back. I heard his car thunder off and fade down the hill.

Carl Koenig: I read that Vera Wynn is very dead. Certain types of candy don't seem to agree with her. It was quite clever the way I did it. I injected each piece with a shot of poison from a hypodermic syringe, leaving an invisible hole.

I had spent weeks snooping secretly, linking the Wynns to the Jarretts and gathering information about each one of the four. Posing as an investigator for a credit bureau I asked a few guarded questions and got some useful answers. One fact led to another and I soon discovered that Vera had a brother who was a real estate agent in Pasadena. When I found out where he lived, I put his return address on the package of poisoned candy.

I'm still laughing.

A while ago I called Bruce Jarrett at the transmitter to set him up for the kill. I told him I was Lieutenant Thatcher of Homicide, a name I got from a newspaper report on Nancy Jarrett's execution. I told Jarrett I was sending Detective Murray Gladstone with a mug shot.

Gladstone is not a phony name, he's a real cop and was the first one to talk to me after they found out that I wasn't drunk; I had a fractured skull and a couple of busted ribs, to say nothing of a ruptured spleen. I was in and out of a coma then, and Gladstone didn't get through to me until after they had operated and I had recovered enough to make sense.

I didn't lie about the drinking. Sure, I had quite a few, but I wasn't drunk. I had at least half a dozen drinks with Lorrie that Friday night. We had a lot to celebrate. We were getting married the next weekend and that day I had sold the interest in a marine supply store which my father left me a few months back when he died.

I had been working as a clerk in the store and I was always broke. Now I had a few thousand and I was planning to buy out a boat rental business. Also, I could afford to get Lorrie a new ring, a real diamond although she claimed to have a sentimental attachment to the old one and wouldn't part with it.

Then there was this little furnished house in Venice where we

were going to live after we were married. Lorrie said it was "cute," but it was kinda shacky on the outside. I took it because it had a fenced yard and they didn't object to my Doberman, big and mean as he is. I had just signed the lease and paid a couple of months rent in advance. Like I said, we had a lot to celebrate.

On the night I lost Lorrie I was living in two rooms over a garage south of Pico in Santa Monica. My station wagon had a bad battery and when I went to start it, the battery was dead. I phoned Lorrie and she picked me up in her sedan. I didn't want to take the dog in her car so I left him home.

That was a fatal mistake. But for a dead battery, Lorrie might be alive today.

We were pretty well loaded and very gay when we pulled into this parking strip by the ocean. It was a cloudy, moonless night. Once in a while there would be a wash of headlights from the coast highway but otherwise it was a blackout. There was only one other car in the area, nosed in quite a ways from us—a comfortable distance, you might say.

I was behind the wheel. We had been talking it up and loving it up for about five minutes. Suddenly, my door was yanked open and something struck me across the side of the head. When I came to I was lying on the ground. A hand was exploring for my wallet, snatching it. I felt dizzy and disoriented. I waited for my head to clear.

A car passing on the highway showered us with a sidespray of light and I saw Lorrie standing by the sedan. This ape had his paw locked around her wrist and I knew what was up—I got the picture. I tried to rise but the other goon began to play football with my ribs. One of those kicks went wild and ruptured my spleen, but of course I didn't know it then.

I rolled out of range and made another try for my feet. I saw the blackjack whipping down but it was too late to duck. A hot poker stabbed my brain. I don't even remember falling. Distantly I heard Lorrie scream and I knew I had to hold on.

From that moment everything became distorted, as if seen under water. Somehow I was on my feet, balanced on a tightrope. Under the sweep of headlights I saw the two couples standing beside their car, gaping at me dumbly as I shouted and waved madly, beckoning for them to come and help me save Lorrie.

I couldn't believe it! They were wax dummies rooted in place. We were actors, and they were watch-

ing our poor performance with barely concealed yawns.

These soulless mechanical beings considered themselves mere bystanders who were above soiling themselves by becoming involved in a messy struggle to save a stranger from being robbed and beaten senseless while a frail, defenseless girl was mauled and taken off to be raped and murdered.

What was the matter with those two gutless, husky men? And why didn't their women run for the police? Why didn't *anyone* send for the police!

There was no time to wonder. Moving like a sailor on a heaving deck, I went toward Lorrie and the animals attacking her.

I heard her car being fired up and I ran. I made a dive onto the rear deck and clung to it. We shot to the exit and then one of those hoods leaned out and hammered my hand with his sap. I let go.

I don't remember standing, but there I was, squinting into headlights. The car with the two couples drew up beside me. I saw their blank faces, their eyes watching me curiously as I made a grab for the door.

"Lorrie, Lorrie," I said to the driver, my own voice sounding far away, submerged. "Help Lorrie!" He gazed at me with a sneer of contempt, of disdain. He drove on, braked at the highway, as I went down again. I looked up from the ground and saw the blonde woman, Vera Wynn, leaning out the window, staring back at me. There was an odd twist to her lips, as if she might burst out laughing at any moment.

The blonde and her friends were something out of a dream, a mocking, violent dream. A great surging hate mounted inside me. I despised these people and all the self-loving, coddled ones of their breed.

Exhaust fumes choked me. I glanced up and saw the lighted tag. I read the license and wrote it in giant neon on the front wall of my mind. As the car sped away I repeated it over and over until it became a permanent fixture in my memory.

Later, a patrol car, making a routine check, hauled me semi-conscious to the drunk tank of the county jail. My injuries were not visible, these cops said later. My thick hair hid a broken skull. I talked, looked and smelled like a drunk. It was three days before I could tell a coherent story to Detective Gladstone, but by then the trail was cold . . .

Now, having borrowed Gladstone's name and dressed for the part, I drove up the winding road

to the transmitter. A squad car, searchlight poking in dark corners, was circling the building. I went on by and when I returned it was gone. I wheeled in and parked.

I got out and brought the Doberman along on a leash. He hadn't been fed all day. At the last minute I had merely teased him with a few scraps of meat, allowing him a couple of morsels from the bowl, then removing it. He was in a savage mood.

I hammered the door with my fist. Jarrett came to the other side and asked in a nervous voice who it was. I told him I was Murray Gladstone from Homicide, but he wanted to look at me through the window.

I knew he wouldn't recognize me, so I went to the window and, keeping the dog out of sight, showed him a fake badge. He frowned, hesitated, then left to open the door.

"Sorry," he said, "but you can't be too careful."

He studied me. "Say, have you been on this case before? I'm sure we—"

Then he saw the animal coiled beside me, jaws gaping, fangs gleaming. The head was lifted sharply, the eyes impaling Jarrett with unblinking malice.

"Brought you a little friend," I told Jarrett, and planted my foot determinedly against the door.

I removed the leash and as Jarrett backed, the dog advanced with a deep soft growl. I closed the door behind me. Jarrett was darting looks over his shoulder for a weapon, a route of escape. A jazzy discord of sound filtered from a speaker, adding a touch of unreality.

The Doberman came to a halt and stood crouching, poised. I gave him an order: "Lorrie—says —kill!"

Jarrett had reached back to clutch a chair and was trying to raise it when the animal launched himself and fell upon him, attacking him in a snarling, snapping frenzy.

Jarrett moaned, cried out as his fingers circled the dog's neck, tightening desperately. Oblivious, the Doberman tore chunks from his face until he screamed and relaxed his grip. Then with a snakelike thrust, the dog fanged his throat.

That was the end of him, but I allowed myself another full minute of delicious satisfaction before I called the dog off.

He turned instantly, trotted over and stood waiting for praise, looking up with a crimson grin of expectancy.

Del Wynn: Sergeant Newbold

phoned close to eleven p.m. to tell me that Bruce Jarrett has been murdered—literally torn apart, mutilated by some savage animal, probably a killer dog. Bruce was discovered soon after his death by the chief engineer, alerted when Bruce failed to answer a call from the studio.

Why, oh why, did I leave!

I had been trying to locate Newbold to tell him that Bruce and I were certain we had discovered the motive behind the murders, that we had information he could use to identify the killer and hunt him down. Newbold was out and the desk man said he would try to locate him by radio. I didn't make a big issue of the matter since I assumed that Bruce would make a full report to this Detective Murray Gladstone who was enroute to see him at the transmitter.

Newbold was astonished. He informed me that Detective Gladstone had not been on the case for months. It didn't take a minute to guess that our "executioner" was the fake Murray Gladstone.

Newbold was excited about the beach parking lot affair last summer. He agreed that we had probably uncovered the truth. He had the man's name on file—Carl Koenig, a former marine supply store sales clerk who had vanished.

Koenig had been engaged to a Lorrie Proctor. She had been abducted after parking with Koenig by the ocean, her skeleton had recently been found in a grave beside a desert highway. Koenig had been terribly beaten defending her.

At this late date, with the whole bloody horror nearly at an end, plainclothes cops are being sent to stakeout my apartment house to prevent my murder and arrest Koenig when he makes his move toward me, as he certainly will before many days have passed. Further, I will have an armed escort to and from work.

What a filthy joke! I want to tell them, "Listen, thanks a lot, boys, but aren't you just a bit too late?" Instead, I keep silent and wait sleeplessly with a gun at my elbow.

I am exhausted in body and spirit. I am indescribably depressed.

Carl Koenig: From the very first step of the plan I had an uncanny sense of timing and superb judgment. I never made a mistake. With three down and one to go, with the newscasters shouting about "an unparalleled manhunt in progress," I still had the same feeling of god-like power and invincibility.

The sluggish machinery of the law was finally in high gear and,

following the execution of Jarrett, it came to me at once that I must not delay, that I must put the last of Lorrie's known murderers to death in the next hour or two. The police could be stampeded into action by the prodding of headlines and the politically inspired whippings of their dull masters.

I went back to the rented house in Venice where I had been living all these months. It was the same shacky little house which I had leased as a place for Lorrie and me after we were married. The house was rented at the last minute, on the very day Lorrie was murdered, and I had told no one about it.

I left the dog in the car because I figured he might come in handy. I went inside and took a used leather suitcase, bought for the occasion, from a closet. The case was filled with paper-wrapped pieces of scrap iron. Atop the suitcase I placed a gray overcoat and a gray felt hat.

I washed and checked my clothing for bloodstains. Then I adjusted shell-rimmed glasses to my face, a pair I used only for reading. They added a touch of age and dignity to my rather boyish features. The gray hat compounded the impression.

Folding the coat across my arm, I carried the suitcase out to the station wagon and drove off. I parked the wagon at an all-night gas station a block from Del Wynn's apartment house and gave the attendant a buck, warning him to keep away from the Doberman.

Next, I called a cab. When it came, I gave the driver Wynn's address. Apologizing for the short ride, I handed him the heavy suitcase and a five dollar bill. He practically drooled all over me.

I saw the unmarked police car in the shadows across from the entrance. I was expecting it. What is more obvious than a couple of men slouched in the front seat of a car a few minutes before midnight? I knew there might be other cars nearby and other men around the building.

The coat over my arm, I climbed from the cab and asked the driver if he would carry my bag to the door of my apartment. After my generosity he could hardly refuse.

As we walked up the steps to the entrance I took a ring of keys from my pocket and examined them casually. Behind me I heard a car door slam and I knew that we were being followed.

Sure enough, as we waited for the self-service elevator, two hefty cool-eyed types joined us. One was older and had a wart on his cheek.

"Evening," I said.

They nodded but did not smile.

"Been outta town?" Wartface asked me. He made it sound like a felony.

"New York," I answered. "You like cold, dirt and noise, I'll sell it to you cheap."

"Yeah," said the cabbie, fingering his cap, "know what ya mean. I come from Jersey."

The cops were wooden. "Haven't seen you around," the younger cop said as the elevator arrived and we stepped on. "Must be a new tenant."

"If you haven't seen me around, then you haven't *been* around," I said cheerfully. "I've been up in 4C nearly five years." I thumbed the four button.

"What's your name?" asked Wartface with a lift of his eyebrows.

"Benson. Charlie Benson." There was such a guy, he did live in 4C. I knew he spent the winter in New York and rarely returned until April. He lived across the hall from the Wynns.

"I guess *you* guys are the new tenants," I said with a chuckle as we jolt-stopped and the door flew open.

They didn't answer and I got off, the driver behind me, toting the bag with a grunt, the cops on his heels. We turned a bend in the corridor, all of us. I walked up to 4C and began to fumble with the keys. It was a tight spot and I was worried. The two cops had paused and stood watching a few feet away as the cabbie set my bag by the door.

Stalling, I said to him, "You've been most helpful, my friend, and I'd like to give you a little something extra."

He looked at me in amazement. "Nahh, that's all right, you already—"

"No, I insist!"

As I produced my wallet, I glanced up pointedly at the cops. "Did you fellas want something?" I said acidly. "Maybe you'd like to come in and have a drink."

Wartface approached me. He flipped his ID and badge in my face. "Police officers," he said. "Sorry, sir, but we're expecting a bit of trouble and we're checking everyone. We have men covering every possible entrance to the building."

"That's different," I said. "What's it all about?"

"Can't tell you that, sir. But I would suggest that you remain inside your apartment until morning. Good night, sir." He turned and, followed by his partner, went down the hall.

The cabbie was fascinated and wanted to make small-talk about the incident. I let him go on until the cops had time to leave the building. Then I gave him another

couple of bucks and I said, "Sounds like there's gonna be shooting here. You better scoot outta the area on the double or you might get hurt."

He thanked me and hurried off. When he was out of sight I moved the suitcase across the hall and parked it beside Del Wynn's door. In my overcoat pocket I had some gadgets to open just about any door lock. Without a sound, I had this one open in less than a minute. It didn't surprise me to find a chain-guard fixed in place. I had a gadget for that too.

Bringing the case and overcoat with me, I slipped inside and closed the door silently. It was a dangerous moment because he might have been watching the door with a gun in his hand. As a matter of fact, he was. The gun wasn't in his hand, however. When I followed the sound of his snores, I found it on a table beside his chair. I stuck it in my pocket.

I glanced around. The drapes were open. I closed them softly. I went back and turned on the lamp by his chair. That didn't faze him in the least, so I shook him gently. His eyes flew open. He stared at me, then reached for the missing gun.

"Hello, Wynn," I said. "Remember me?"

He examined me without a sign of fear. "I don't remember you, but I know you must be Koenig."

I grinned.

"You're making a mistake," he said calmly. "You've made a terrible mistake from the beginning. We would've helped you save the girl if we had known the real situation. It looked like just another drunken brawl."

"I'm touched," I said. But I had a small stab of doubt. I couldn't let him con me, so I began to reach into my pocket.

I saw his hands tighten around the arms of the chair and when he leaped at me, I danced aside. He went sprawling and I gave him a few brutal kicks in the ribs. He groaned, but he was game—and agile. He did a roll, bounced to his feet and went after me in almost the same motion.

He had a fist like a steel mallet. The first blow cost me three teeth. The second felt as if it had jarred my brain loose from my skull. I knew then that he could finish me in a matter of seconds. So I feinted, then booted him in the groin. When he doubled I reached for the sap in my hip pocket and clubbed him down.

After that, I simply kicked and stomped him to death.

"That's just the way it was," I told his corpse, and went out.

There was a problem: how to

leave the building. I was a mess. Blood poured from my mouth and drenched my suit. The swelling at my temple threatened to close one eye. Even unmarked, they would certainly stop me.

I didn't bother with the elevator. I took the stairs, two at a time. I dashed through the lobby and out to the front steps. I stood there, shouting for help. The same two cops raced up to me. I heard the pounding of others coming.

"Upstairs," I said breathlessly, "in 4D. Man beating Del Wynn to death. Tried to stop it, but—"

Wartface gave me a wild-eyed look. "C'mon!" he cried, and a whole flock of cops took off like a covey of frightened birds.

I sat on the steps and mopped my face with a handkerchief. Then I got up and wandered down the street. Around the corner I broke into a run. I slowed at the gas station. Hiding my face, giving the attendant my back, I climbed into the wagon and drove away at a leisurely pace. It was over. I had lived for the one purpose and I was empty. There had been a vague plan to spend the rest of my life hunting down the animals who had done the actual killing, but right then I could not ignite a spark of interest.

As I braked beside what had once been my little "dream" house, I noticed a dim light in the living-room. I could not remember leaving a light on, but I had gone out in a rush and it was quite possible. I wasn't disturbed.

I took the Doberman out to the back yard, then entered the house and went to the bathroom where I began to wash and patch my face. As I did this, a feeling of deep melancholy overcame me. Hate is a kind of companion, and now that the rage was burned out, loneliness swallowed me.

I went toward the bedroom and froze in the doorway. Light from the hall revealed a woman stretched out on my bed. It was a king-sized affair and, curled up, she was lost in the center of it. She was asleep. At the foot of the bed there was a small black suitcase.

I flipped the light switch and abruptly she sat up.

It was Lorrie Proctor!

When I was able to believe it, I became hysterical. I went over and shook her violently by the shoulders.

"How could this happen!" I shouted. "What've you done to me?" I sobbed. "Why, Lorrie? Why, why, why!"

Lorrie Proctor: Carl was even more upset than I had expected, but when I was able to calm him a

bit, I gave him the whole sordid story. It all had to do with my former husband, Buzz Proctor, whose name I continued to use, even after we were divorced. There were certain things I hadn't told Carl about Buzz: that I still had a big secret thing for him; that he was an ex-convict; that he wanted me back and was a violent type who usually took what he wanted.

Since Buzz could turn me on like crazy, I had gone along with him on a lot of borderline schemes. When he asked me to drive and play lookout while he and Rusty McGrath held up a certain bank, though, I said, No thanks—and goodbye! You didn't turn Buzz off that easily, so I had to bide my time and sneak away. I hid out in Vegas while getting a quick divorce which he didn't dare fight because I knew too much about him that I could use in a contest.

I met Carl after I moved to Santa Monica. He was as much in love with me as I was with Buzz. What I felt for Carl was deep and quiet and solid—good for me, but not exciting.

If you skip the hearts and flowers, that brings us to the summer night a week before Carl and I were to be married, the night we parked by the ocean.

Did you guess? Sure, it was Buzz and Rusty McGrath who pulled that sweet little caper. Buzz had been brooding. He wanted me back and he went all out to track me down. I didn't know it was Buzz kidnapping me until I saw him in the light from a passing car. He told me that if I made a fuss, he'd kill Carl on the spot.

I was taken to this old house in the Valley where Rusty's girl, Zelma, was waiting. She shoved me into a room, made me strip and grabbed all my clothing, "So you won't get any ideas about running away." But why did she force me to give her Carl's engagement ring? And what really happened to my pocketbook? She told me it was lost in the scuffle.

Late the next day, Buzz brought me a whole bunch of new clothes and the four of us took off for Mexico. Buzz gave me some ID papers to carry, including a tourist permit, all under the name of Alice Kemp. He said that if I behaved myself, Carl wouldn't get hurt.

We drove all the way to Guadalajara where Buzz rented a big house on the outskirts for a song. In a very short time he managed to turn me on again as if we had never been apart. I could easily have escaped and gone back to Carl, but I was never so happy, especially since Buzz and I were planning to remarry.

One day Buzz got careless and left his desk unlocked. Curious, I explored and found a metal box which contained quite a bit of cash and a clipping from an L.A. paper. It informed me that *my* body had been found in a shallow grave beside a desert highway. The extreme heat had "accelerated decomposition" and "I" was little more than a skeleton.

That thing in the grave could very well be a girl about my age and size whose name was Alice Kemp. I was carrying her papers and it seemed logical.

In the metal box there was also a policy on my life. I had taken it out while working for an insurance company, making Buzz beneficiary. Apparently Buzz had kept up the premiums in secret. Why? In the beginning did he plan to murder me? Then, for some reason did he kill Alice Kemp and suddenly decide to use her corpse for my double?

A letter attached to the policy had been forwarded by one of Buzz' con friends. It stated that the insurance company wasn't going to pay off because, for one thing, the police had not yet made a positive identification of the corpse.

They were trying to locate my dentist so they could check my dental chart. Well, I had fine teeth and never went to a dentist in L.A. Years ago I had gone to a dentist in Philadelphia but he had died, and if my dental chart still existed the police would have a tough time tracing it.

I took some money from the box for a getaway and, while Buzz slept, I escaped on the next plane to L.A. I went to a hotel where I spent hours in my room trying to work up enough courage to get in touch with Carl. Once I had made up my mind, I couldn't find him. He had vanished.

In desperation I went over to "our" little house, the one Carl had leased for us to live in after we were married. I thought maybe someone had moved in there who would have a clue. The house was dark and empty but as I walked around to the back yard I was amazed to find the small green boat Carl had used for fishing set up on blocks; also the doghouse, and the big metal bowl from which he fed the Doberman.

When we rented the place, Carl had decided to keep an emergency key hidden on a hook inside that doghouse. I bent down and searched. The key was there! I opened the front door and went in. When I found Carl's clothes about, I returned to the hotel for my suitcase . . .

I was sure that Carl would for-

give me, but as I neared the end of my confession his face became fixed in this odd expression and his eyes were, well, weird. His features were swollen and lopsided from some awful fight which he refused to explain, and I suppose this added to the impression.

I said, "Listen, I'll make it up to you and you'll forget. I know how you must've suffered; but I'm alive and it's as if nothing ever happened. Just a little water over the dam, that's all, darling.

"Ahh, I can see that you're upset and all closed up inside yourself. Well, here, come let me hold you, darling."

I held out my arms and Carl got up and came toward me.

Carl Koenig: I held on to her for a long time—my thumbs pressing, my hands closing tighter and when she was long dead, I couldn't seem to let go.

After that I don't remember much. As in a disembodied dream, I was suddenly at the police station and they were putting me in a cell. It took a couple of days, but they recorded the whole thing on tape.

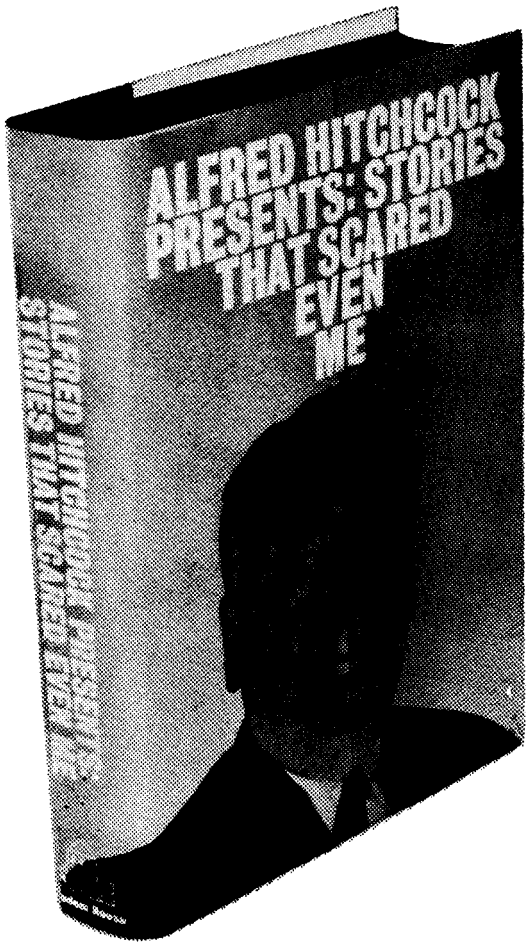
They tell me now that I'm a crazy psychopath and they've got me locked up for life in the state hospital for the criminally insane.

Well, I'm not insane—not in the least! The real nuts are those who kill for no reason at all. What I did was perfectly justified. I simply executed some people who committed the worst possible crime when they murdered poor Lorrie Proctor.

Does that make me insane?

BIG
BIG
BIG

Money Saving Offer



For details please see other side