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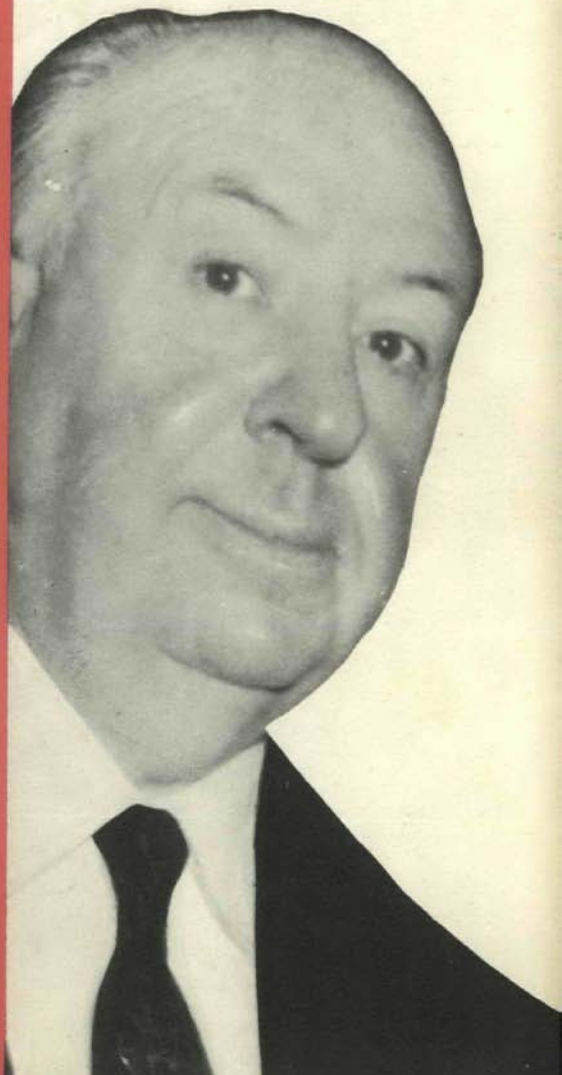
HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

February 1969

Dear Reader:

With toasts to another holiday season breaking into shards of receding memory, we may congratulate ourselves for having abided one more period of benevolence and cheer made trying by the frenzy of inventing time to enjoy it. I trust the writings in my holiday issues helped to lighten your load—whatever its nature—as the new year was born.

As for resolutions, I merely reaffirmed my original promise to bring you the best of the new mystery and suspense stories not sporadically but monthly; all of them stories you will read herein for the first time anywhere, as noted on every cover.

Please do not be concerned that with the advent of Valentine's Day there is a softening of the heart displayed within these pages. Such is not the case. Indeed, this issue is a splendid example of why mystery and suspense may well live forever (even though many of the characters definitely do not).

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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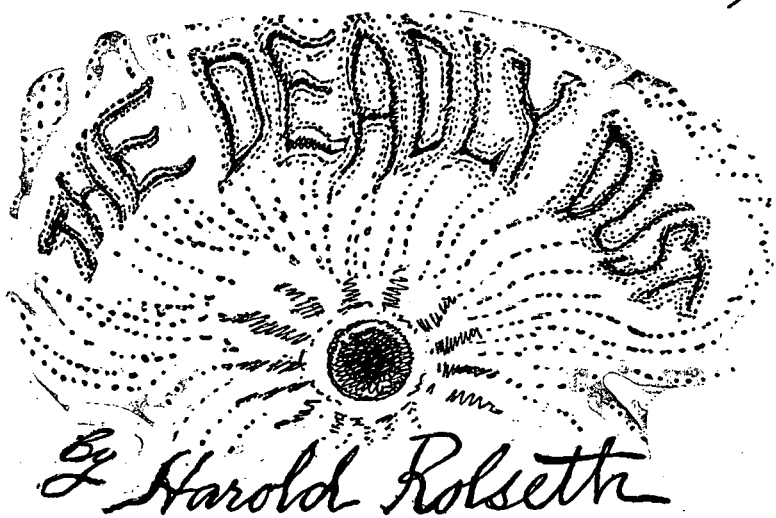
Understanding involves pausing and examining, for it is said that a man knows not how to know who knows not also how to un-know.



Across from me at my desk in my bitterly cold study sat Corbin Lee. His winter-clad figure bulked huge in the desk chair. He had scarcely moved all through my impossible tale, and his roughly molded features had given no indication as to whether he believed what I had told him or thought me hopelessly mad.

Perhaps this unemotional quality is an essential characteristic of a research scientist. I don't know. All I do know is that Corb is tops in his field of geological research, and any man who could listen to the account I had just given without some show of feeling was definitely on the iceberg side.

For the space of a minute after I had finished talking, Corb sat lost in thought. Absently, without seeing it, he picked up a copy of my latest novel. I knew Corb would never get around to read it, in spite of my publisher's enthusiastic assurance that MIDWAY TO DAWN was Michael Felton's fin-

est piece of work, his masterpiece.

Finally he put the book aside and leaned over the glass bowl which rested upon the desk. In the bowl, on chipped ice, lay the thing which made me doubt my sanity, and which had brought Corbin Lee here, three hundred miles from his research post at Harmon University.

It looked harmless enough as it lay there on the ice. It would have passed for clay molded into a perfect three inch sphere. In color it was a grayish brown, with a dry appearance that made it look as though a puff of air would blow it away in a cloud of dust. Yet it held together firmly on a rough bed of ice.

Corb removed a glove and moved his hand, rather gingerly I thought, toward the bowl. I chuckled inwardly. Corb, then, had accepted at least some of my story.

"Go ahead, pick it up," I said. "Cold, it's harmless as a billiard ball."

Corb examined the sphere closely. From the desk he picked up a letter knife and rapped it sharply. It was hard and unyielding. Even vigorous digging with the sharp point of the knife made no impression on it.

Corb swore softly to himself. I knew what he would ask for next so without waiting I rummaged in a drawer and handed him a magnifying lens.

Corb examined the sphere with infinite care. "Funny," he finally said. "Damned funny." He looked at me suspiciously as though he suspected a practical joke. "The stuff sticks together like cement, yet I can't see any trace of a bonding substance. Each particle of matter is clearly defined and seems held to its fellows by some force from within."

"Corb," I said, "to hell with how they're stuck together. The stuff is deadly . . . that's the point. It killed my dog. It tried to kill me."

Corb didn't answer. He pulled out his cigarette lighter and held it to a spot on the sphere. After a minute or so I thought I detected a slight movement of the particles that were touched by the flame. Corb noticed it too, because he snatched up the magnifying glass. Then he set the glass aside and picked up the letter knife. He held the point to the sphere where the flame from the lighter played. A wisp of vapor arose, and to my nostrils came the bite of metal dissolved by some powerful agent.

"Satisfied?" I was low enough to ask.

Corb said nothing. He sat down and stared at the stubby end of the letter knife. Finally he tossed the knife on the desk and looked at me

with baffled eyes. "You got a drink around the place, Mike?" he asked.

I hastened to pull out the bottle of brandy and glasses which I keep in my lower desk drawer, more because a novelist is supposed to have such things on hand rather than for any personal need of the stuff myself. Now I was glad I had followed tradition.

Corb took a healthy slug, and I followed him. The brandy calmed us and, except for the glitter in his eyes, I thought Corb had gone back into his shell.

He sat deep in thought for a time and then he leaned forward. "Mike, I've got to get it all straight. Go over it all again, will you?"

"Sure," I said.

"You bought this whole valley last summer?"

I nodded. "It's only about two hundred acres in area and worthless for cultivation because of the outcroppings of rock. There are small pockets of soil here and there; that's what causes the trees to grow in little clusters. That and the rocks give it a wild, rugged look that caught both Mary and me. It gives a writer just what he wants . . . a feeling of isolation without the inconveniences of real isolation. The main highway is about half a mile from our door. Gilbertsville is only four miles east of here."

Corb pulled out his pipe and tapped it on his shoe a few times.

"The foundation for the house," I went on, "had to be blasted out of solid rock. I hired a team of unemployed miners for the job. About three feet below the surface they uncovered the vein of coal that produced the sphere. It seemed to be of good quality but of no commercial significance, because at the widest it was only a few inches thick.

"The seam comes almost to the surface about twenty yards behind the house, right where I someday plan to have a rock garden. That's why I didn't follow my original plan of heating the house with oil. The miners told me I would uncover a good ten or twelve years' supply of coal any time I cared to scrape off the surface."

I took time out to light a cigarette and Corb lit his pipe.

"The other end of the coal seam ends abruptly at the east edge of the foundation," I continued.

"A fault," Corb said.

"That's what the miners called it," I agreed. "I used the coal for the first time last night. Up to then I had been burning scrap lumber and stuff I had cleared up from around the house.

"About ten last night I went down to the basement to fix the furnace for the night. The coal had been burning beautifully from the time I had tossed it in. I opened the

furnace door and glanced in . . ."

"Go on, Mike," said Corb.

"In the middle of the bed of coals lay the sphere you see on the desk. It glowed with a blue light. At first I thought it was a stone. Then it moved toward the furnace door . . ."

Corb handed me the bottle of brandy and I took a good swig.

I went on, "I couldn't believe my eyes. The thing was moving. It didn't roll; it seemed to glide to the front of the furnace. It didn't drop to the floor; it slithered down the side of the furnace.

"On the floor it stopped and the blue glow faded somewhat. I leaned forward to study the thing, and it began to pulsate as though it were alive. I could feel something radiant from it; not heat, but something powerful and evil. My scalp prickled, and I was filled with a terrible feeling of hatred and disgust. I felt that I was confronting the essence of all the evil in the world."

I stubbed out my cigarette and continued. "I snatched up the poker and smashed at the thing. It was like battering at a granite boulder. I jabbed at it and bore down on the poker, and I could feel the steel dissolve under my weight. The sting of molten metal was strong in my nose.

"I stared at the thing on the floor, and then I felt my mind being taken over by a powerful, malignant force. I fought, but it was like fighting the surging waves of the ocean. My will departed, and my hand, of its own volition, reached out for the sphere. I was distinctly aware that to touch it meant my death."

Corb's rasping breath was loud in the stillness of the room. "Go on, Mike," he said, "go on."

"At that moment I heard a 'woof' beside me, and I sensed rather than saw Sandy, my little terrier, gazing up at me. Then he saw the sphere. Chasing a ball was an old game with him, and he leaped joyously upon it. The next instant he was dead—but the diversion he had created broke the evil spell upon me. I regained control of my will."

Corb poured out a slug of brandy, started raising it to his lips, then handed it to me. I downed it in a gulp.

I breathed deeply and went on. "The sphere pulsated with appalling wrath, and I could feel tentacles of thought-force trying desperately again to secure control of my mind. I fought back with all the power of my being. It was a mad game of mental tag. I found that by not permitting my mind to dwell for more than an instant on a single idea that I could elude the force which sought to destroy me.

"In the next few minutes I learned much more. I found that no material which I had at hand was proof

against the sphere's deadly power. Metal, wood, glass, all disintegrated on contact. Heat was not the destructive force. The sphere possessed some controlled form of energy. Proof of this was demonstrated by the fact that the sphere did no harm to the floor on which it rested while it destroyed utterly everything with which I attacked it.

"It was in casting about for something upstairs or outside that I might use against the sphere that I detected change in the tone of the thought-waves which were being hurled at me. A frenzied note had entered into their cold viciousness. Somehow I sensed that the sphere feared something that my mind was about to approach. It knew in advance what I was going to think, but was powerless to direct my thinking as long as my mind was free.

"Then, in a flash, I knew. It feared the antithesis of heat. With a triumphant shout, I dashed outside and returned with a bucket full of snow. I could feel the sphere cringe as I emptied the bucket upon it."

I sank back in my chair exhausted. Corb sucked at his dead pipe.

"You believe me, Corb?" I finally asked. Corb didn't answer.

"Listen, Corb," I said, "you saw yourself what the stuff can do. Sandy's body is in a box outside. Go look."

"Take it easy, Mike," Corb said. "If I were a novelist like you, sure I'd believe you. But I'm a scientist. What you're asking . . ."

"Asking, hell! I'm telling you. What I saw and felt . . ."

"Shut up," Corb said. "I don't deny, Mike, that you've had a baffling experience. But don't ask me to chuck out the window every theory regarding life that man had developed just because you've bumped into something you can't explain—A lump of dust with intelligence, thought-force waves. Mike, after all these years . . ."

Corb's words stung me, and for a second I wanted to lash back; then I had to admit the justice of his position. I couldn't believe what had happened myself.

"You've got a point, Corb," I conceded. "I expect you'd like a demonstration."

"Check," said Corb. "I not only want a demonstration; I want to be in the act."

I nodded. I only hoped the sphere hadn't gotten religion.

Corb believed in direct action. In a matter of minutes he had thoroughly cleaned out the furnace, carefully depositing all the debris in a metal basket. A roaring wood fire soon had the house warm. In my state of confusion it hadn't occurred to me to do the same thing hours before.

We agreed that a little dinner would fortify us for the task ahead. At the table we talked of everything but the sphere. Corb tried hard to show an interest in my current novel; I failed just as dismally when he spoke of his latest piece of research, but he was interested in my news of Mary. He was happy to learn that she was doing some writing of her own while she waited back in New York fot the completion of our new home. He was overjoyed when I told him we expected an heir in the spring.

"That's great, Mike, that's great," he repeated over and over again. Then, rather hesitantly he asked, "When is Mary coming?"

"This weekend," I answered. "But now . . . what do you think?

"Let's hold off for the time being. Today is Wednesday. Still plenty of time to send her a wire or call in case . . . it isn't advisable for her to come." He tapped out his pipe and stood up. "Suppose we skip the dishes and raise some dust instead?"

I didn't much appreciate his attempt at humor.

We cleared a wide space in the center of the basement floor for our operations. I insisted on filling a tub full of snow and putting it within easy reach, although I could see that Corb considered this an unnecessary precaution.

He got the blowtorch ready while I brought the sphere from the refrigerator, where I had placed it as an extra safety measure. I let the thing drop from the bowl, and it hit the concrete floor with a dull thud.

Corb looked up and grinned. "Okay?"

"Shoot," I said, and Corb played the almost invisible flame of the torch on the sphere.

For a while nothing happened, then the sphere began to glow with the blue light it had shown in the furnace. It seemed to swell for a moment, and the blue light subsided slightly. The sphere throbbed with rapid, intense pulsations. I could feel the malignant force of it probing, searching for a way to my mind.

"You feel something, Corb?" I asked tensely.

"I feel it, Mike," he answered, a strange uncertainty in his voice.

He picked up a crowbar and held it to the sphere. I guess we both knew what would happen. It did. The hardened steel dissolved as though it were wax, and the air became filled with an acid bite.

It was hard to evade the clutching waves which the sphere sent out. I could feel them groping with cold, vicious hatred for control of my mind.

I refused to let my thoughts dwell upon anything for more than a mo-

ment, and I said to Corb, "Keep your mind shifting, Corb. Don't let it stop."

Corb answered hoarsely, "I won't, Mike," and he gave the sphere a wicked slam with what was left of the crowbar. He rose to his feet, stared at me, his face a mask of disbelieving horror.

"Mike, have we both gone mad? This thing isn't possible. Lifeless matter with an intellect . . . a monstrous intellect!"

We both knew we weren't mad,

not yet anyway, but we knew the sphere was something terrible and deadly.

Upstairs the phone jangled, and the thought flashed through my mind that it might be Mary. "Careful, Corb," I said as I hurried up the stairs.

It wasn't Mary, but one of the subcontractors who wanted to know about submitting a bid for some grading in the spring. It took a few minutes to straighten the matter out. I headed back to the basement.

The spectacle that I saw from the basement steps will always come back to me on bad nights. Corb was crouching over the sphere, and his right hand, corded and gnarled like a claw, was slowly reaching toward it. The veins in his neck and temple stood out like ropes. His face was twisted with horror. The sphere was pulsing wildly and seemed to have grown in size.

I screamed as I hurled myself at Corb. His hand was about to close over the sphere when my body hit his. We slid in a tangle across the floor and wound up against my workbench. Corb's breath was rasping in his throat so I knew he was alive.

I limped over to the tub of snow, packed a huge ball and held it over the sphere. It seemed to shrink, and I could feel its radiations grow weaker. Something took hold of me, and I wanted this evil thing to suffer. It sounds insane, but I wanted to torture it. I put the snowball on the floor and moved it slowly toward the sphere. It flattened a little on the side nearest the snow; then it began to glide across the floor away from the snowball. I fixed that. I got more snow and built a wall around it. I cackled with glee.

Corb sat up and said, "Mike, what the hell are you doing?"

He crawled over and watched as I took a little blob of snow and dropped it squarely on the sphere. The sphere quivered and shrank as I would have done if someone had thrust a hot poker into my stomach. Corb grabbed a huge handful of snow and plunged it on the sphere.

"How did it get you, Corb?" I asked.

Corb shook his head ruefully. "I thought I could meet it head-on. I just couldn't conceive of a ball of dust being stronger than I. At first I thought I was beating it back, but it was a cunning trick. Before I could pull out, it had me. It felt as though my brain was being torn out of my skull. In one more second . . ." Corb shivered.

"There's some brandy left," I said.

We packed the sphere in a bowl of ice cubes and headed for my study and the brandy.

Corb puffed jerkily on his pipe and from time to time shook his

head, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Any theory?" I asked finally.

Corb shrugged. "Any guess that you might make would be as good as mine." He passed his hand across his face in a weary gesture. "I can't seem to grasp it. If this isn't just some crazy nightmare, it means the scientific world moves its clock back a thousand years. What happens to our precious theory of evolution? What happens to all our biological science?" He jabbed his pipe toward the sphere. "That stuff came out of the carboniferous age some five hundred million years ago. It's inorganic, but it can move, and think, and hate, and suffer. And on top of that, it's meaner than a rattlesnake with a backache."

"But how can this be?" I demanded. "You're the expert. How?"

"I'd give both my arms to know," said Corb. "All I can say is that it must have been some weird, fantastic experiment of nature made when the whole world was a weird, fantastic place."

"What I'm concerned with," I said, "is to put the stuff out of commission for the next five hundred million years."

Corb swallowed some brandy and nodded in agreement. "The scientist in me says to preserve it and study it. But I'm afraid of it, Mike. Just suppose the evil in that thing were released on a big scale." Corb shuddered and re-lived for a moment the awful experience he had just gone through. "There must be some way of destroying it," he went on. "How about taking it to Harmon and working on it in the lab? Maybe electricity or x-ray or something will do the trick. You come along, Mike. You can call Mary in the morning to hold off coming for a week. Tell her furnace trouble."

I wasn't too sure I liked the idea, but I was terribly curious as to what would happen to the stuff under lab treatment; and I definitely didn't want Mary around until the whole matter was cleared up.

In the morning I decided to go with Corb to Harmon. I called Mary, but Mrs. Gilkins, her cleaning woman, told me she had gone out for the day. I left my message with Mrs. Gilkins and insisted that she write it out. I was having furnace trouble and Mary was not to come until I called. Then, to be on the safe side, I sent a telegram from Gilbertsville.

Corb had access to everything in all the Harmon labs. I expected we would have a lot of trouble with people peering over our shoulders, but we didn't. Corb says that scientists respect privacy above everything else but truth.

Corb took no chances. In a variety of containers he had enough snow to build an igloo, and under what-

ever the sphere rested upon he kept a large pan of dry ice.

"Just in case the thing decides to walk away from us," he explained. "It could, you know. At your place it could have sizzled through the cement floor and gotten away just as easy as not."

"I thought of that, too," I said. "Maybe it has a short life span or something, or maybe it was just too busy trying to murder us to think of anything else."

"Could be," Corb agreed.

At first we were baffled as to how to move the sphere about in its activated state. Corb glanced ruefully at the ruined metal tongs he tried first. "We can't spare the time to chill it every time we need to move it."

"Looks like the only way, though," I said.

Corb said nothing, but left the room and returned a moment later with a small screen strainer of the sort that is found in every kitchen in the country. He extended the handle with a piece of copper tubing.

He pointed to the sphere. "This thing is no dumbball." He grinned at my pained expression. "Either it rides peaceably in our little basket or it takes a dry ice treatment."

The sphere got the message immediately. Tucked in the strainer, the sphere was transferred from one area to another by Corb while I trotted alongside holding the pan of ice underneath it.

Heated, the sphere unceasingly throbbed its hate and sought to engulf our minds. We early hit on the device of making entirely extraneous remarks while we worked, to simplify the evasive tactics our minds had to employ to keep from being ensnared.

Corb would say, "Which would you rather have, a martini or a brandy?"

I would answer, "Did you ever make that swim across the Gulf of Mexico you were always talking about?"

Corb would reply, "I need a new pair of shoestrings."

It was silly, but interspersed with sensible comments pertaining to what we were doing, it effectively prevented the sphere from reaching our minds.

Corb tried everything on the sphere, fantastic solutions. Nothing happened. He ran low voltage and high voltage currents through it. He baked it under the x-ray, and at 3,000 F. Through it all the sphere only throbbed its hate and struggled for possession of our minds.

It went on like that. When it got too rough, we would dump snow on the sphere and relax. Late Friday night Corb gave up. We packed the sphere in dry ice and went to his

bachelor's apartment, discouraged.

Corb paced the floor. "There's got to be an answer to this thing, Mike. There's got to be."

"What?" I asked unkindly.

Corb grinned. "I was a fool not to bring some of that coal along. Maybe the secret lies in that. Anyway, let's go back to your place and start all over."

I was all for that, and early in the morning we started out with the sphere resting primly on dry ice in a paper carton on the back seat of my car. We got to Gilbertsville about noon and filled up on steak and trimmings so we wouldn't have to fuss with a meal when we got to the house. We picked up a good supply of brandy, too.

I hadn't enjoyed the good meal as I should have. I couldn't tell what it was, but I felt a vague uneasiness. The feeling grew on me as I approached my private drive. Corb sensed it too, for he glanced at me uncertainly from time to time. I swung off the highway and a minute later, when my house came into view, I knew my premonition was justified.

Black smoke was billowing from the chimney of my new house.

I don't know what I said, but Corb murmured, "Easy, Mike."

The car jumped like a spurred mustang, and the house seemed to come forward to meet us. I think I made it from the car to the front door in two leaps. Anyway, I was in the house, and there in the doorway to the kitchen stood Mary, alive. Bewildered and furiously angry, but alive.

I swept her into my arms, and I half cried over and over again, "Thank God! Thank God!"

Mary fought savagely to release herself. Then Corb came in and she realized something was amiss.

Corb pushed her into a chair. "Explanations in due time, Mary. First, answer my questions. Did you fire the furnace with coal from the bin?"

"Of course," Mary sputtered. "What else?"

"Never mind," Corb shot back. "Did you notice anything strange about the fire? Anything at all?"

Mary shook her head. "No-o . . . only when I went down a little while ago to look at it, a stone slid out. It must have been practically at the melting point because it quivered like jelly and glowed with a sort of bluish light. I meant to scoop it back into the furnace, but I got the strangest feeling in my head, and then I heard the car and hurried upstairs."

"Mike, another one!" I said.

Mary opened her mouth and would have said plenty, but Corb put his big hand over it.

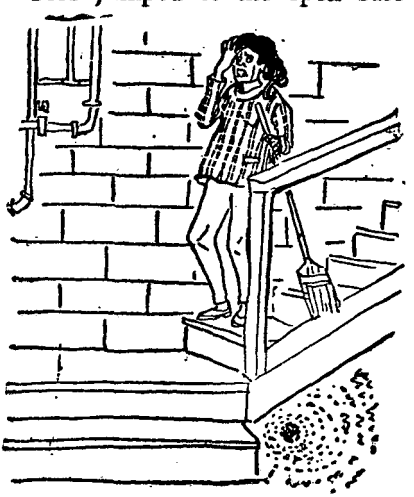
"Come on, Mike," he said.

We headed for the basement stairs, Mary behind me and still fuming with the indignity of coming to a brand new home and finding it empty. While Corb went out to get a pail of snow, I gave Mary a highly censored version of what had happened.

Corb led the way down the stairs. Mary was right behind me. For some reason she has an abiding faith in a broom as a weapon of defense, and she carried one with her now, on the alert. I hadn't even tried to make her stay back. Nothing short of knocking her out would have worked.

We inched our way down, checking overhead as well as around us. Near the bottom of the stairs we felt the familiar radiations start working on our minds.

Corb jumped to the open basement floor. I followed and turned to catch Mary.



She stood three steps from the bottom, her right hand raised to her temple as though in pain, her left hand clutching the broom. There was a strange intent look on her face, and as I stared, her eyes glazed and her lovely features twisted into a grimace of horror and loathing.

I leaped forward and hauled her off the steps. She fought like a mad-woman, clawing to get back. Suddenly she brought her head back hard against my chin, writhing downward to the floor at the same time. With her hand outstretched, she scrambled wildly for the bottom step. A foot from the step Corb's hand lifted her to her feet. Almost gently, it seemed, and not traveling more than an inch, his fist met her jaw. Her head snapped back, and I caught her and lowered her gently to the floor, well away from the step.

I saw Corb heave his pail of snow under the bottom step. In another moment, with Mary's broom he hauled out sphere No. 2.

We used some of the snow to revive Mary. She had no remembrance of the affair. The last she could recall was standing on the steps and having a strange, unpleasant feeling in her head. I explained her sore jaw by showing

her the bruised chin I got when I caught her as she fell off the steps.

Mary made no fuss about being tucked into bed and babied. I guess she thought she had it coming after all the neglect and abuse she had been handed. She hadn't received either of my two messages. She had found Mrs. Gilkins' note all right, but hadn't been able to make head or tail of the hen-scratch writing. The telegram had probably landed in some odds and ends of mail. That's the way Mrs. Gilkins operated.

I gave Mary only a few selected details concerning the sphere. I played things down, and she fell asleep with the impression that the danger from the spheres lay in the intense heat which they radiated.

While I was busy with Mary, Corb had cleaned out the furnace and started a beautiful wood fire. We went to my study and got busy with some brandy. We sat in silence for about half an hour. Several times Corb opened his mouth as if to speak, but each time he stuffed his pipe back in it.

Finally I said, "Enough of this small talk. Let's get down to business."

"Right," said Corb. "Here it is. What I want to do is warm those two bad eggs up and put them together."

My mouth worked foolishly before words would come. "Corb, have you gone crazy? Why . . . why they might form a supersphere and then what would happen?"

"It's possible," Corb admitted. "On the other hand, maybe they wouldn't like each other. Can you imagine those things being nice to anything at all, even their own kin?"

"No," I said, and I couldn't. The more I thought of the idea, the more curious I got as to just what might happen if those two vicious things were put together.

"I could take them to the lab at Harmon and try it," Corb suggested.

"No," I said. "It would be a lot cheaper to build a new house. The only thing is, I don't want Mary around when we try it."

The next morning I told Mary we would have to let the furnace go out in order to carry on our investigation and suggested that she spend the day in Gilbertsville. I had made several contacts in the town, and when I called the real estate agent and told him of our furnace trouble, he said his wife would like to have Mary spend the day with her. He put his wife on the phone and she sounded delighted at having a visitor for the day.

Mary put up no fuss, which told

me that she had no comprehension of the sphere's deadly menace. She assumed that Sandy had died of burns. When I left her in Gilbertsville, she cautioned me severely against the danger of letting the house burn down.

When I returned from town, Corb had the stage all set. He had found a piece of sheet metal about a foot square which would serve as an arena. This he intended to heat red hot with the blow torch and then drop the two spheres upon it. He had collected snow in tubs, pails and boxes. Directly above the sheet of metal he had placed a hook in the ceiling. From this hook would hang a large carton full of snow. With a rope the box could be dropped directly upon the spheres in case . . .

We tested everything and decided that our safest station would be behind the furnace.

Corb heated the metal sheet while I stuffed snow in the carton and suspended it from the hook. I ran the rope over to the furnace door handle and made a loop which I could release instantly. By the time I had got the spheres out of their ice cube nests the sheet metal was red hot. Corb centered it with a pair of pliers directly under the box. Then I dumped the spheres upon it, and we dashed behind the furnace. Corb snatched the rope from the furnace in readiness.

Fear swelled in my throat as I peered with Corb around the side of the furnace. Under my hand I could feel Corb's shoulder muscles bunched up tight, stretching his shirt tight across his back.

The two spheres quivered as the heat from the plate soaked into them. Then they began to give off the blue glow, which grew in intensity until everything in the basement assumed a bluish tinge. The blue faded, and the spheres throbbed their hate with unspeakable violence.

We could feel the familiar waves, but they were strangely different. This time they were not directed against us. Each sphere sought the engulfment of a force as potent as itself.

They slithered toward each other, hesitated a moment, then seeming almost to rise from the plate, they met.

The light from a hundred lightning bolts filled the room, there was a vicious whiplike snap, and a searing wave of heat hit our exposed faces. Blinded, we fell to the floor.

Corb released the rope, and a bursting hiss of steam filled the basement. Gratefully, we sucked in the hot, wet air that enveloped us.

How long we lay there I am not

sure, but I felt Corb tug at my shoulder and with his help I got to my feet. Heedless of everything, we groped our way to the stairs.

We staggered to the kitchen door and gulped in the sweet, cold winter air. Revived, we examined each other in the bright sunlight. Our faces had a sunburned look and felt stiff and papery. We rubbed them lightly with petroleum jelly, and I found sunglasses for our aching eyes. We could see all right, but not with much pleasure.

We went into the study and lowered a brandy bottle by several inches. Corb kept trying to catch my eye, but behind my dark glasses I pretended not to notice. I knew what we had to do.

At last Corb said, "Damn it, Mike, we've got to take a look down there. There's no telling what might be going on."

I nodded and wagged my finger solemnly at Corb. "Could be, Corb, the whole basement is crawling with baby fire balls. What we saw might have been the world's supreme case of love at first sight."

"That brandy's got you, Mike," said Corb, but he looked worried just the same.

We took another drink and sat and thought it over. There was no other answer; we had to go down and investigate.

We went down cautiously, waiting for the hate-waves to hit us. None came. At the bottom of the stairs Corb pointed to the spot where the spheres had met. In the concrete floor was a bowlshaped depression about twelve inches across and four inches deep. The sides were glazed like crude pottery. In the bottom was a double handful of fly ash. The sheet metal plate had vanished.

Corb gingerly stirred the pile of dust with the pliers. It was inert. Then he lit the blowtorch and played the flame on the pile. For the space of a minute I held my breath. My sigh was a heartfelt prayer of thanks. The dust, even under the intense heat of the blowtorch, remained simply dust.

Corb turned off the blowtorch and put it on the workbench. "Mike," he said, "I've got a great idea for your next novel."

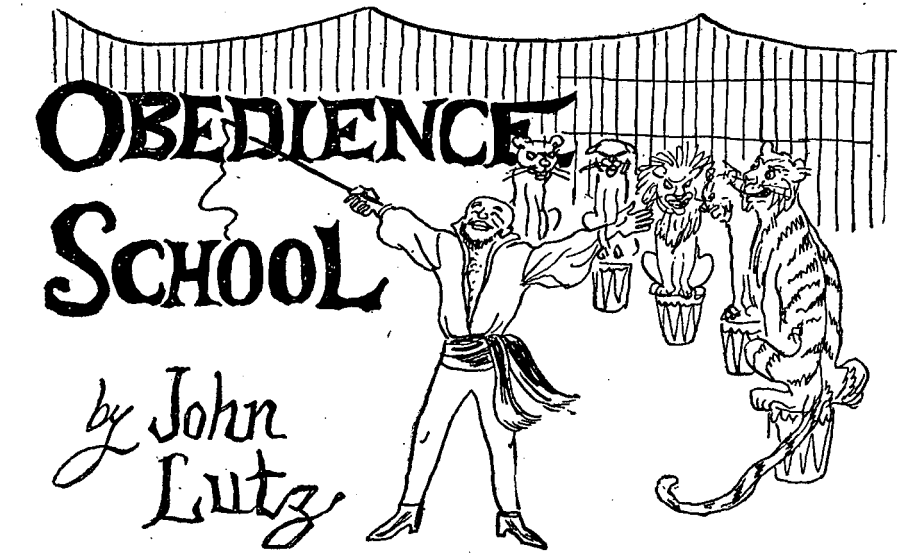
"And I've got a greater one for your next research project." I pushed him over to the coal bin. We looked at the huge pile of coal. "No wonder you were so willing to sacrifice that first sphere," I said.

"Well, I did have a hunch," Corb admitted.

"While you are figuring how to get every ounce of it over to Harmon," I said pointedly, "I'll go up and order me an oil burner."

Corb grinned. "Maybe I'll go up and have a brandy first," he said.

The pleasantest of all ties is lauded as that of host and guest—and perhaps the most volatile, too.



OBEDIENCE SCHOOL

by John Lutz

Maric's chauffeur was waiting on the dock, standing quietly by a very long, very expensive speedboat. He tipped his uniform cap neatly to William Brent and smiled.

Brent introduced himself.

"Yes, sir," the chauffeur replied, and moved into position to help him into the boat. He had apparently been given Brent's description.

They sat quietly, each mildly hypnotized by the rhythmic, somewhat choppy gray waves as the boat's engines roared and they nosed swiftly out into the glittering bay. The engines settled into a steady beat as the speedboat reached and held a fast, gently bucking speed. Beyond the rigid back of the chauffeur, beyond the raised bow of the boat, Brent could vaguely make out the purple-hued shoreline of Candle Island, where he was going to have dinner with

none other than the Great Maric.

The boat was tied at Maric's private dock, alongside a spotless cabin cruiser, and Brent and the chauffeur began to walk silently up the long gravel path that led to the huge house. Candle Island was about a mile long and a little over half a mile wide at its widest point. There were three or four private residences on it, but Brent wondered if the others were as impressive as the Great Maric's. The center of the house, the original house no doubt, was white-shingled and had ancient wood pillars supporting a high porch roof. On either side of the original house were low, modern, brick wings stretching over a hundred feet. It looked somehow like a huge wood and stone bird that had settled to rest atop the hill.

The sun was going down as the maid opened the door. She ushered Brent into a large, plushly furnished den. A glass of sherry was on a tray on a small marble-topped table.

"Mr. Maric will join you shortly," the maid said, and left.

Brent sipped his sherry and looked about. The walls of the large den were paneled in deep mahogany. Brent, sitting in a remarkably comfortable red leather armchair, could see the darkening bay for miles from a window that covered almost half of the north wall. Relaxing in the softness of the chair, Brent wondered why Maric had issued him a dinner invitation, wondered how Maric had even known he was in that part of Mexico. There was no reason they should be that friendly, really. Brent had met the Great Maric only briefly, at a small party in New York. It had been interesting to be introduced to Maric, the one-time big cat trainer, the man who had thrilled Europe with his sensational trained dog act. They had talked for no more than ten minutes, and Brent had been surprised to hear from one of his friends a few weeks later that Maric had been asking about him. Apparently he'd made some kind of impression.

Brent, at first, had tried to discover a few things about the Great Maric to satisfy his curiosity, but no one seemed to know much about the man, only that he turned up in New York occasionally, and Miami, and London. He seemed to have no permanent home, simply appeared to be drifting in his later years on the vast amounts of money he'd earned as a renowned trainer of animals. Then Brent had forgotten completely about the Great Maric until two days ago, when the dinner invitation had been delivered at his hotel.

Brent sipped his drink and wondered idly if any of the big German shepherds that had made up Maric's last act were on the estates. He'd heard no barking, but then the highly trained animals that had performed throughout the world with such precise magnificence probably wouldn't bark at strangers as ordinary dogs might.

A servant opened the den door, and the Great Maric entered and smiled as the door was closed softly behind him. He was as Brent remembered him from their meeting of six months ago; completely, gleamingly bald, with a round, wizened face and a warm smile. "Mr. Brent," he said pleasantly in his slight, choppy accent, "it is a real pleasure to see you again." He advanced to shake hands.

Brent noticed that the short, stocky body still seemed to possess a spring and strength, and Maric's grip was firm.

"Your invitation surprised me," Brent said. "I didn't even know you lived in this part of the world."

"Ah, I do not like publicity," Maric said, shrugging his compact shoulders. "I've had a lifetime of publicity."

"I suppose it does get tiresome," Brent said.

A servant entered with two more sherrys on a tray. Brent took one of them and his empty glass was removed.

"Is the sherry to your liking?" Maric asked, holding up his own glass to the fading light.

"Excellent," Brent complimented.

"It is the finest." Maric smiled and sat down.

There was a long silence before Brent spoke.

"I was wondering, do you still have any of the dogs that you trained for your act? I should think you'd get attached to them."

"No," Maric said, "I sold them all. Of course you do form some attachment with your animals, but then I've seen so many animals in my lifetime. But they were remarkably intelligent, those dogs."

Brent let himself sink again into the comfortable armchair. "I saw your act some years ago in London. That a dog can be trained to overcome its fear of fire and jump through a flaming hoop . . . amazing."

"Not so, really," Maric said. His dark eyes sparkled. "Animals, like people, think mostly by association. They will learn to perform almost any unpleasant feat for a sufficiently pleasant reward, once they understand that they will be rewarded. Then, of course, once an

animal has learned to do something unpleasant, he will always do it to escape an even more unpleasant punishment."

"I suppose the system differs with individual animals," Brent said.

Maric sipped his drink, obviously savoring it. "No," he said, "there is little difference. They all think basically alike. Mostly it is a problem of communication, of getting them to understand what will or will not happen if they do or do not perform. Of course, kindness is to be preferred, but with most animals threat of punishment is absolutely necessary. If they associate *not* performing with immediate pain they will perform, even unthinkingly."

"It sounds rather cruel when put that way," Brent said.

"Ach! Life is cruel," Maric said with a resigned smile. "The animals do not necessarily hate you, they learn to obey you." He glanced at his gold wristwatch. "Seven o'clock exactly. Dinner will be served, Mr. Brent, but do finish your drink."

Brent took a last sip of the deliciously dry sherry. "Call me Will, please," he said amiably, "or at least William."

"Very well, William," Maric said with a nod, his round, pleasantly etched face glowing.

They rose and walked together through the open den doors.

The table was long, covered with immaculate linen and fine silver and china. Brent and Maric were seated, then stood as a beautiful blonde girl walked into the room and sat gracefully in a chair held for her by a servant. She had a pale, finely boned face that needed no makeup, and she sat quietly, staring down at the table before her. Then, automatically, she picked up her folded linen napkin and placed it in her lap.

"My daughter, Christiana," Maric said in a low but unquestionably proud voice. "She has been retarded since she was nine . . . a childhood accident." Then louder, "This is Mr. Brent, Christiana. Will you say hello to him?"

Christiana raised blank blue eyes and smiled a smile that meant nothing. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Brent."

"The pleasure is mine," Brent said, feeling a wrench of pity that he was careful not to show.

Maric seemed to understand perfectly as he artfully guided the conversation. "Christiana is quite happy here with me and the servants to look after her. Isn't that so, Christiana?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, father."

Maric smiled. "Sometimes I myself envy the life she leads."

A servant silently and gracefully placed cold jellied consomme before each of them.

"She's in fortunate circumstances," Brent said. He tasted the consomme and found it to be excellent.

"Yes," Maric agreed, "Christiana is one of the reasons I chose such a remote and beautiful homesite. There are strangers who simply do not understand these things."

"The island certainly is beautiful," Brent commented. "I understand there are more homes on it, but I didn't see any as we approached."

Maric was eating enthusiastically. "They are on the other side of the island, those houses, where the land is more suitable for building. Here the wind comes in off the sea at times, so powerful that it uproots even large trees. But this house, Mr. Brent . . . William, is built to withstand any wind."

"It certainly looks it," Brent said, thinking of the low, ground-hugging brick wings.

When the consomme was finished a servant brought in tossed salads with a delicious dressing, followed by a good wine and the most succulent Rock Cornish hen that Brent had ever tasted.

"You have a superb cook," Brent said, as the table was cleared and rich, aromatic coffee was served.

Maric beamed. "She will be happy for the compliment. We have so little company that I expect she is putting herself out for you."

"All your servants seem to be experts at their jobs," Brent said.

"They are the best," Maric admitted. "A rarity these days. The decline in the quality of domestic help is one of the regrettable consequences of progress."

"And there are fewer people who can afford such help."

"That, too, is regrettable."

Brent sipped his coffee and looked over at the silent Christiana who returned his glance with a friendly, if uncomprehending, look.

"If your hunger is appeased, William, perhaps we can go into the den. I have some excellent brandy, and I heard somewhere that you enjoy a game of chess."

"True on both counts," Brent said. "And if you play chess as well as you serve dinner I'm afraid I'm in for a beating."

The Great Maric didn't reply as they excused themselves from Christiana and went into the den.

The brandy was excellent, and after a few exploratory moves Brent found that Maric was an excellent chess player.

"I suppose you are wondering

why I invited you to dinner," Maric said, moving a tall carved marble bishop to put Brent's king in check.

"The question crossed my mind," Brent said, studying the board, wondering why Maric had apparently wasted a move.

"I inquired about you after we met in New York," Maric said. "You remind me somewhat of myself as a young man . . . intelligent, sound physique, obviously of good breeding. In short, a notch above most of the people I meet in my travels."

"Well, I thank you for the compliments," Brent said, "and I only hope that they're half true." He moved a pawn to get his king out of check and Maric moved his bishop in another direction, capturing a pawn and putting Brent's knight in danger.

Brent sipped his brandy and concentrated on the board, beginning to realize that Maric was thinking several moves ahead of him. Were his compliments a maneuver to distract attention from the game? He was obviously a man who liked to finish first.

"Then too," Maric said, "we get rather lonely here at times, at a loss for things to do."

"How do you pass your time," Brent asked, "now that your animals are gone?"

"Ah, I was quite bored with training animals anyway," Maric said. "I successfully trained animals of almost every known species to the limit of their capabilities."

Brent saw that if he moved his knight his rook would be captured in two moves. He sacrificed the knight and concentrated his attack on Maric's queen. But within five moves Brent's own queen was captured, and from then on Maric played with a cool vengeance, seemingly trying to defeat Brent as thoroughly as possible to leave no doubt as to who was the better chess player. Within an hour Brent was defeated, though he was sure Maric could have checkmated him long before, without reducing him merely to his king and a few pawns.

"An enjoyable game," Maric said. He rang a bell and a servant entered immediately. He removed the board while another servant refilled their brandy snifters.

"I can't say enough about the efficiency of your servants," Brent said, trying to dismiss the unpleasant thought of his losing game.

"I think you lost because you moved your knights out too soon," Maric said, smiling. "And then toward the end of the game you were getting drowsy."

It was true, Brent realized suddenly. Drowsiness had crept up on him, a strangely unnatural drowsiness. "I think you're right," he said, setting down his brandy glass and standing. "I think it's time I should be leaving."

"But why don't you spend the night here?" Maric asked in his friendliest manner. "Surely you have nothing better to do. You have no acquaintances in this part of the world. Why, I'm sure no one even knows you are here."

"I'm sorry . . ." Brent murmured, but his jaws and face were becoming numb.

"Accept my hospitality, please," he heard Maric say.

Brent tried to keep his balance as the floor seemed to move beneath him. He took a hesitant step forward, a step into what seemed like a black and bottomless void . . .

When Brent awoke he was astounded to find that he was lying on a straw pallet and that his clothes had been removed. Sitting up, he saw that he was in a small, cement-walled room with a window near the tall ceiling to let in light. The only furnishings were a table covered with a white linen tablecloth and a cupboard.

The wooden door opened and the Great Maric, wearing khaki work clothes and carrying some kind of an odd, short stick, entered.

"Maric!" Brent said, standing unsteadily. Whatever had been in the brandy was still having its effect on him, weakening him. "What the hell's going on here?"

Maric looked at him dispassionately. "Quiet," he said.

"Quiet? Why listen you . . ." Brent rushed at Maric and a tremendous shock ran through him from the electric cattle prod.

"No!" Maric said, pointing the prod menacingly toward him.

Brent rushed again. The 'No!' and the shock came almost simultaneously as Maric stepped expertly aside.

Brent rushed again and again, then fell back on the straw pallet unbelievingly. Maric walked to the cupboard, took out some paper plates and cups and some blunt, wooden flatware.

"Set the table," he said firmly to Brent.

"You're mad," Brent said, and the electric shock ripped through his body.

"Set the table."

Brent staggered to the table and fumbled with the plates. In his haste he dropped some of the wooden utensils on the floor. Instantly the shock tore through him.

"No," Maric said patiently, almost affectionately. "The fork goes always on the left side."

There are many who are enmeshed in a particular contract, but look not herein for instruction in legal disentanglement.

by Edward Y. Breese

THERE'S a time to live and a time to die, a time to fight and a time to run," so I've heard. I'm Johnny Hawk, and for me there's never a time to run. Stand to fight —and Death and I are one-to-one. That's part of the price that the masterless man must pay for his freedom. I don't complain.

Somewhere along the road I learned that a man who wants to stay alive must watch his own back. That's all that saved my life that night in the metropolis of the Northeast.

It was early, only about ten o'clock, and the theatre district was still full of people when I left my hotel. Big flakes of snow were blowing in on a cold wind off the sea and eddying in the great stone canyons called streets. I had no real reason to expect trouble but I checked anyway.

Whenever I passed a big plate-glass store or restaurant window, I looked at what was reflected there. A trained man can pick up enough to see if he's being crowded. That's how I saw the big fellow come up fast behind me, and his hand slip under the overcoat and out again. I didn't actually see the gun, but the movement was a dead giveaway. I had to assume it was there.

He was close, and I had to move fast. A single shot at point-blank

range could crack my spine or tear out heart or lungs. He was right-handed, so I took a quick dance-step to the right, spun on my heel, and chopped the edge of my right hand at the wrist just back of the gun.

If my timing and aim had been perfect, he'd have dropped the gun—but they weren't. He hung on, yet between the surprise and the pain I had time before he could fire, and his hand was knocked aside.

My own right hand shot up to the lapel of his heavy overcoat so fast that he was still completing a forward step, and his own momentum worked for me. I saw the shock in his face. He had no time to recover. I caught his left wrist with my left hand, yanked him forward with my right, pivoted to my left and bent into a crouch all at the same instant. He was pulled off-balance, stumbling against my back. I bent forward and continued to pull, then straightened and levered at once.

He was bigger than I, but the combined pull and thrust sent him flying helplessly over my head, his legs and arms thrashing violently, and on into the street.

To give the truck driver credit, he tried to stop. His brakes locked, and the right front wheel made mush of the man with the gun.

I just walked away and rounded the next corner. Perhaps thirty people saw it happen but nobody tried to stop me. They just stood there looking slack-jawed and stupid. If I'd yelled, "Boo," I think half of them would have fainted. The rest would surely have run. Nobody wants to get involved these days.

I went into a bar a couple of blocks down and ordered a double rye. I don't often drink, but this was special. I'd seen the hood's face just long enough to recognize him. It was Cleveland Charley Miller, a professional killer—he *was,* I mean. He'd never have pulled a gun on me without orders. There had to be a contract out on Johnny Hawk. I'd put the first man down, but others would be along. Anybody who could afford Cleveland Charley could and would back him up.

I got a handful of change from the bartender and put through a long distance call to my girl Terry in Miami. We'd long ago worked out a private code, and I used it.

"When I hear your voice I hear bells." (I think the phone is bugged.)

"You're coming through loud and clear," she said.

"Cold as it is up here, I just squashed a fly." (I killed somebody.)

"Oh?" Terry said noncommittally.

"There's a contract, honey," I said. "No mistake. I can handle it, but I need to know who wants me. See what you can dig up."

"Trust me," she said.

"I'll be thinking of you at the witching hour," I said. "I'll think of you in white, by candlelight." (I'll phone you at midnight at the candle-lit lounge where we eat so often. That phone will be clear.)

"I'll be thinking of you too, Johnny. Take care of yourself."

I hung up, feeling better already, Terry was the widow of old Vince Cobarelli, who'd been one of the top figures of the crime syndicate. She'd inherited the guardianship of his grandson, an Italo-Spanish palace on Miami Beach, a couple of banks, and all of Cobarelli's private notes and papers. She had so much money that I didn't dare think about marriage. We loved each other and that was enough for us both.

She had never been personally involved in the rackets, but of course she knew Cobarelli's associates. She had sources of information that could be a big help now.

Actually I knew we both had the same man in mind. Big Stephan Mirko had been one of Vince's lieutenants in the old days and taken over the territory when he retired. He didn't seem to think that was enough. It was obvious he wanted to add Vince's fortune, and Terry, to his collection. He'd been after her ever since the funeral, but while I live he can't have her.

This was the only man I knew who both wanted me dead and had the connections and the cash to put out a contract. It had to be him.

On the long chance I'd been seen, I went out in the snow and found another bar a couple of blocks west. When a contract is out, the "in" crowd gets the word fast. Everybody hears but the man who is going to be hit. Sometimes even his best friends hear, but don't dare to tell him.

I had problems. Make that with a capital P. First I had to stay alive somehow. Then I had to get rid of the contract. Since I couldn't hope to persuade the syndicate to overrule one of its captains on a minor matter like this, I had to work on Mirko. In plain words, it meant I had to kill him.

Go to the police? I couldn't prove a thing. All they'd do would be to take away my gun as illegal and have a cop guard me to the airport or the bus terminal. Fat lot of good that would be. Mirko's boys weren't afraid to use a bluecoat for target practice. I'd just end up unarmed and on the run —and Johnny Hawk doesn't run. Along the line a man outruns his courage and his self-respect. Besides, running doesn't work. A contract goes anywhere you do. Sooner or later you get it.

I took a cab to an address I'd heard of many times. The man who lived there was a merchant of sorts. For fifty dollars each he sold me a live hand grenade and a loaded

.44 derringer in a midget holster. I put the grenade in my overcoat pocket. Then I rigged the holster to the calf of my right leg. I already had my .45 in a belt holster. Johnny Hawk was loaded for bear.

By now, of course, the word would be out about Cleveland Charley, so it would be silly to go anywhere near my hotel. Staying in the tenderloin would just be making myself a clay pigeon, but I needed to get out of the cold till midnight. I took a subway down to the village where the hippies, the addicts, and the garden-run nuts hang out. It was way off my usual beat when I come to town.

There was a store-front theater with a sign that said, "We Make Our Own Movies". I bought a ticket and joined the two dozen characters trying to watch the screen through a haze of cigarette smoke. There were two pictures. Both were awful, but they used up the hour I needed and it was warm and dark.

When the lights came on, I started out the door. I had a shadow. The man who'd been sitting at my left stayed right with me. He was a soft, round little chap and both his hands were in sight. Still, I left overcoat and jacket unbuttoned so I could get at my gun in a hurry.

Outside in the street he kept right with me. "I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Hawk," he said in a low voice. He kept his hands in the open.

"Who are you?" I asked. "And what makes you think you know me?"

"I recognized you when you came in," he said. "You were pointed out to me once in Chicago —when I was a kid, and I remembered because I always admired the things you do. You don't know me, but I want to help."

"What makes you think I need help?"

"Mr. Hawk, this district hears all sorts of things. There's a contract on you tonight. If you didn't know that, what were you doing in that show?"

"I knew it," I said. "Who do they say is back of it?"

"They don't say. At least no names. It's supposed to be a big shot from out of town. He brought in a western hood to make the hit."

"That was Cleveland Charley Miller," I said.

"Was?"

"He's dead. Now I want the man who paid him. Can you find out who that is?"

"Probably not," he said honestly enough, "but I'll try. Now, you'll need a roof tonight. You can come up to my place. I live alone. You've got to go somewhere."

He was right. I had to go someplace. Oddly enough I had a hunch he was telling the truth about himself, and it was almost midnight by then.

"I'm going to make a phone call from the booth over there on the corner," I said. "You stay where I can see you through the glass. Don't move your feet. Don't even stamp to keep warm."

Terry was waiting at the lounge for my call. She got right to the point. "I called everybody I could, darling. Nobody wanted to commit himself, but I got hints. It has to be lover-boy (our name for Mirko). He wants me, and that means get rid of you. The others won't interfere. It's his private show. They won't stop him, but if you do, they'll figure he asked for it. There are plenty ready to take his place. He's expendable."

"That's what I wanted to know," I said. "As long as it's a strictly private contract, and not official syndicate business, I can handle things."

"I hope so, Johnny. I want you around."

"I know so," I said. "Now here's what I want you to do. Get the word out that I want to talk to Mirko. Hint that I might make a deal. He's to cruise the tenderloin district up here tomorrow night with nobody but a driver. The syndicate will provide him a car, Sometime between eleven o'clock and one I'll hail him down. I'll put out the same word at this end."

"Be careful, Johnny. He's dangerous even by himself."

"So am I," I said. "You'll hear from me again."

"I better had, you big lug."

She hung up then. I stepped out of the booth and collected my volunteer host off the corner. He'd stayed in one place and kept his hands out of his pockets just like I wanted.

We walked two blocks and up three flights of stairs. The hall wasn't heated, but his apartment was —more or less. I cased the three rooms, all quiet.

"Now we can talk," I said. "First

of all, who are you? Your name?"

"They call me Artie Gee," he said.

"That wasn't exactly what I asked."

"All right. The Gee—G-E-E—is short for Ginsburg. My father wanted to be an archeologist. He named me Darius Artaxerxes. All I could salvage was Artie. I make movies like you saw tonight. They don't sell very well. I paint a little too."

"Now for the jackpot question," I said. "What's Johnny Hawk to you? Why stick your neck out for me? You know you could get hurt, don't you? This game's not played for marbles."

He stood up as tall as he could. His head came about to my chin. His brown eyes were steady as he looked at me. "You're a man of action, Mr. Hawk. I've always wanted to do the things you do, but I never have; I never will. This is my chance to get out of the rut for maybe a couple of days. I couldn't pass it up."

I understood him. Lots of people feel that way, but very few of them have the guts, or the chance, to do anything about it.

"Thanks, Artie," I said. "I'm grateful. You can be a real help. And stop calling me Mr. Hawk. My friends name me Johnny, so you'd better do the same."

I curled up on the couch in his front room and went to sleep. I figured I could trust the little guy, but I kept the .45 under my pillow. It wasn't needed.

In the morning I woke to a smell of frying bacon and eggs. The coffee was as black and strong as I like it. Outside, the snow had stopped. It was still pretty on the roofs, but the streets were almost bare.

Artie had gone out for a paper. Cleveland Charley had made page one. The cops had no witness who cared to get involved by describing me. Cleveland was identified only as "a well known hoodlum from the Midwest." I got the idea nobody really cared who did it.

After we ate I could see that something was bothering Artie. With some preliminary hemming and hawing he finally got it out: "Mr. Hawk—Johnny—I wonder if you'd understand if I asked you something."

"Try me and see," I said. I wasn't sure what was coming.

"All right, I will. I told you I paint a little. I'm not really very good—maybe not good at all—but I like it. I want to start a picture of you. I could do the sketch and make notes and put in the most important details today. Then later I could finish up from memory. It would be something I could al-

ways keep, a personal memento."

I couldn't help laughing. "Well, Artie, that's the *last* thing I expected you to come out with. What would you call it, now? Portrait of a Killer? Johnny H.—on the Day of the Big Shootout? Last Moments of a Man?"

He wasn't offended. "Just 'Portrait of Johnny Hawk'," he said. "At least it would be a subject nobody else had."

"I'm not that well known."

"In some circles you are. Anyway I want to try it. What harm could it do?"

I thought that over. "None at all, I guess. I'll let you do it on one condition. When it's finished, I want you to send me a copy in Miami. There's someone I'd like to give it to. Besides, I owe you for the bed." I knew better than to offer him money.

He was pleased. So all that morning I sat in the light of a pale, cold winter sun while he made charcoal sketches of my face from several angles.

After lunch I went out to a pay phone and called several people I knew. The reaction was the same in each case. Nobody mentioned the fact I was under a death sentence until I did. When I mentioned it, nobody seemed surprised. I'd known some of these people for ten years; real pals.

My message to each one was the same. "I know you don't know who's paying for the hit, but you do know people who get around. I want to see him. If it's what I think, this isn't worth getting killed for. There might be a couple more fumblers like Charley Miller, but sooner or later they'd get me. I want to live."

All this had just enough truth to be convincing, especially to the sort of people I was calling. Most of them would have sold their own mothers for cat's meat to call off a contract. They would put out the word. I told them how I would meet the man, just as I'd told Terry.

Of course there was no reason he had to meet me. There was a chance he wouldn't show but from what I knew of Stephan Mirko, if it were him, I figured he'd take me up. He had no reason to hate me personally, just wanted to get me out of the picture. It didn't have to be by killing, and his associates frowned on violence without cause, or anything else that hit the front pages.

I knew how his mind worked. He'd pay me a few thousand to go to Mexico or someplace like that with all sorts of threats to keep me there. Then, in a few months when my guard was down, some local bandido would get a hatful of pesos to blow my head off. No fuss, no

muss, no bother; just one more gringo in an unmarked grave.

I didn't intend to give him the chance. Big Stephan had to go. I knew exactly what I was going to do and why and how.

The only risk I really figured was while I was waiting for him to show. He might—just possibly—send a man to knock me over then, but I had to risk it. Actually I didn't think there was too much danger. All his boys would have heard that I was trying to make a deal and none of them would be anxious to chance what Cleveland Charley got.

Besides, if the try misfired and there was publicity, the Syndicate Council would hold Mirko responsible. They wouldn't like it, and he knew that. From his angle, it would be better to buy me off.

I went back upstairs feeling well satisfied with myself, and let Artie make some more sketches. He talked all the while. It's amazing what I learned about Artie Gee in one day. He had the soul of a renaissance condottiere, with more guts than he gave himself credit for. His one big fault was an overactive imagination. He thought about things too much. He'd think when he should have acted, if he ever went into my line. I told him so.

"You stick to the painting, Artie," I said. "That way you can make your dreams come alive. Your traits will work for you. If you ever try to compete with realists your own personality will kill you."

He made another mark with the charcoal before he answered. "I know it, Johnny. This picture is a memorial to my one big day. Lightning won't strike the same place again, I know."

"See that you keep it in mind. I'd hate to see you get hurt."

About nine that night we went out for steaks. By that time the die was cast, one way or the other, and I like to do my fighting on a full stomach. Of course it's not good if you take a slug amidships, but I figure on the other fellow eating the lead.

While we were having our pie I got a real shock. A quiet, graying man with hard eyes came in and sat down beside Artie, facing me. I yanked my right trouser leg up so I could reach the derringer in a hurry.

"Don't get up, boys," he said. "And don't introduce yourselves. That way I won't have to know officially who I'm talking to. I'm Burke—Captain Burke of Homicide."

"Tough Burke," I said. "I've heard of you. What can I do for you, Captain?"

"Just relax," he said, "and leave your gun alone. My boys are just

outside. No need anyway. I've got something to say, and then I'll go peacefully."

At that I put both hands on the table.

"I hear there's going to be a limousine in the tenderloin tonight," Burke said. "Care to tell me who'll be in it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"In that case," Burke went on, "I can talk of a hypothetical case, can't I? We don't like killers in this town, mister. We like killings even less. If I could, I'd run you in right now."

"You couldn't hold me," I said.

"I know that. Let me put it this way. If we find your body in an alley, we won't exactly weep but we'll try to get whoever did it. On the other hand, if the body is the one we think it is, somebody will have done us a real favor. If a witness comes forward or there's any real proof, we'll have to take up the killer. If a suspect insists on staying in town, he'll be investigated. However, the hue and cry just might fall over its feet long enough for a fast man to make it to the airport."

I said, "Thanks, Captain."

He got up to go. "I was just speculating. By the way, in case you're wondering, one of my stoolies saw you come into this place and called me."

He went away, and we finished our pie. I'd heard of Burke as an honest cop. He'd do his job, if he got the evidence. I didn't intend to leave him any.

"Artie," I said, "this is where you and I say adios."

"Oh, no," he protested. "I've come this far. I helped you. I've got a right to see the finish."

"It's exactly because you did help me that I'm shutting you out now. You wouldn't like being held as an accessory to murder. Understand?"

His round pink face got a stubborn look. "I can go where I like in this town. You can't stop me."

He was right, too. I couldn't stop him without beating him up —which I wouldn't do. It would be just like the little guy to tail me around the district with some fool idea of watching my back for me. I pretended to think things over. "Can you drive?"

"Sure, but I don't own a car."

"Okay." I gave him some money. "Rent a car and park it where I tell you. Be sure you can move out fast. I'll need a way to get to the airport in a hurry." I told him where to park. It would make him feel he was helping, and at the same time keep him out of trouble if anything went wrong.

When Artie left to hire a car I went to the movies again. So help

me, I did. This time it was a legit show, though.

At midnight I took the subway north to the theatre district. Mirko should have been cruising since eleven. I wanted him to have time to get angry and impatient. Even a little thing like that could help give me an edge.

There were no more cops than usual on the streets. I was afraid Burke might have had a tail on Mirko. Then the whole deal would have had to be postponed. I guess he was smart enough to know that. He wouldn't have solved or proved a thing by it. He'd just give Mirko time for second thoughts.

I spotted the big syndicate car within ten minutes, cruising along at ten miles an hour on the lane next to the curb, no tail. The car had cost $15,000 or better, was absolutely bulletproof. Even the driver was walled off from the rear by steel and glass panels that would stop a slug. That suited me. I had nothing against the man. The floor would stop a land mine. There was a built-in bar and TV in the rear. It was a wonder to see.

When I saw him go by, I knew for sure that Terry and I were right. Mirko was the one, and the contract was personal—not official. I could go ahead with my plan.

I waited till the car came around again in twenty minutes, then stepped to the curb and flagged him down. The driver pulled smoothly to the curb. There was no outside handle to the doors (you got in with a key or somebody let you in) so Big Stephen leaned over and opened for me. He moved to the left side of the wide rear seat. I got in and sat on the right.

"You wanta see me?" he said.

I looked him right in the eye. He had yellow eyes like a cat, and permanently blue jowls. His heavy black brows had begun to show a little white. His skin was oily and his fingernails like talons, in spite of frequent manicures. In the enclosed space he had a feral smell like a big jungle cat.

I got to the point. "I don't like being shot at."

"So?"

"So Cleveland Charley."

"I got plenty Cleveland Charleys," he said. "You know that. How many you got? Stop wasting my time."

That took care of the amenities. If I hadn't at least tried to speak up, he'd have known right away it was an act. I had to let him flex his muscle to get him off guard.

"I don't get this," I said. "I never did anything to you. I'm no cop. I'm a reasonable man."

"You're in my way," he said. That was all. He was so big he didn't have to explain. *I was in his*

way—that was his license to kill. He forgot that he was in my way too, and he'd made the first move. He forgot who I was.

"I said I'm a reasonable man," I told him. "That is, about everything but getting killed. I could be persuaded to get out of your way."

I noticed the car was edging up toward the park. "Stay on the lighted streets," I told the driver through the intercom. At Mirko's nod, he turned back at the next corner.

Mirko had a poor poker face. I could see he was pleased. As I'd thought, this was what he expected from me. "Now you're showing some sense, punk."

"Can we deal?" I asked.

"I don't bargain with punks. I *tell* them. You get out of town. Get out of the country. Don't go to Miami first. Don't phone Miami. You get me?"

"That's pretty stiff. I've got to think—"

He pushed his luck again. "Don't think. Do what I say, and the contract gets called off. Don't—and you're dead. You ain't buried quite yet, but you're dead all the same. Is any broad worth that?"

His reasoning was valid enough when applied to a man of his own stripe. I knew what he expected me to do next.

"My living's in Miami."

He positively oozed a mixture of satisfaction and contempt. "Money?" he said. "What's money? You behave, I look after you. Go to Tampico. I own a gambling house there you can run for me. How's that, Johnny?"

"It helps," I said, sliding my right hand, the one away from him, into the pocket of my overcoat. I took hold of the grenade I'd bought the night before. Holding the release lever down with the palm of my hand, I worked the pin out with thumb and forefinger. Exactly three seconds after I let go and the lever came up, that grenade would blow.

Mirko was too busy being pleased with himself to notice. He was getting what he wanted. On top of that, he was enjoying the pleasure of making tough Johnny Hawk crawl. That in itself would be something to boast about. I thought how he'd brag to Terry when he saw her.

Only one thing—he wasn't going to see her.

"Okay, Mr. Mirko," I said. "I'll take the first plane in the morning. Not that I like it."

"You don't got to like it, Hawk." He couldn't help pushing it to the limit. "You just got to do it."

He spoke to the driver and the car slid over to the curb. The streets were still full of people at

this hour. I knew he wanted me to be seen leaving. This was a moment of triumph. Mirko would enjoy flaunting it.

I let go of the grenade and let it fall to the floor of the car as I got out. I counted silently, *One thousand and one.*

"Get going, punk," Mirko yelled as he slammed the door. He hadn't noticed a thing, and the thick-pile carpet had kept the grenade from making a sound.

One thousand and two. The car left the curb.

One thousand and three. The merchant had sold honest goods. The whole rear of the limousine lit up. The bulletproof shell kept the sound down to a dull crump, and saved the driver's life. Nothing on earth could have saved Mirko. The concussion broke his ear drums, and the steel shards slashed his head and body. He was dead before he had time to feel pain. That was my one disappointment. He never knew what hit him.

I went away from there as fast as I could walk. Nobody made a move to stop me. Some of the people didn't even know anything had happened, and none knew exactly what. I was two blocks gone before I heard the first police siren wailing toward the blasted car.

Artie was right where I'd told him to be. I slid into the front seat. "Airport," I said, "and don't get stopped for running any red lights."

"It just came over the car radio," he said as he drove. "You used a bomb?"

"A grenade," I said. "It was too good for him."

It was a while before he spoke again. "Johnny," he said, "what makes you tick? How do you do it?"

"I'm a realist," I said. "I put first things first. I keep my eye on the ball. I never bluff. Hell, how do I know?"

"You're *not* a realist, Johnny. A realist would have sold out or run. The things you do make you a romantic."

"It isn't important," I said. "I'm Johnny Hawk. Let it go at that."

The night slipped by outside the windows.

As Horace so long ago observed: One night waits all; Death's road we all must go.

It was just nine when Matt Lucas turned off the station lights and snapped the lock on the office door. He went to the small room in the rear where he used to keep supplies, but where now he lived, sleeping on the cot in the corner and cooking his meals on the two burner hot plate. He changed from his coveralls into fresh chinos, plaid shirt and a windbreaker, and taking the flowers he had picked earlier in the evening, he let himself out the back door.

His car stood in the garage near the grease pit. Although it had been secondhand when he bought it in July, it was in excellent condition. The few nicks in the grillwork were not too obvious and it had been simple enough for him to pound out the dents in the fenders. After he had overhauled the motor, it purred as though it were fresh from the factory.

He had owned the station for a little over a year. After his retirement from the Stevenwell factory, compulsory at sixty-five, it had seemed a natural transition to own a service station which was complete with a garage for minor repairs and small parts. Both he and his wife were healthy and energetic, and had felt it was some-

by Hilda Cushing

thing they could handle together without hiring outside help. Although the hours were long and seven days a week, the road was only moderately traveled.

There had been plenty of time for Alethea to cultivate the garden in front of the station, to keep the little house next door, to cook appetizing meals, and to spell Matt at the gas pumps whenever he wanted a break. Coupled with the pension from the plant, it was a satisfactory living.

Alethea had been dead three months. So Matt had sold the little house and moved into the rear room of the station. It was lonely with his wife gone but it seemed less so away from the house that cried out her absence.

He was careful with the flowers as he laid them on the seat beside him. They were fall mums that his wife had planted in the spring, gay and perky like herself.

There were no green thumbs on Matt but he kept the garden watered and free from weeds, and every Saturday he picked the prettiest of whatever was in blossom. The cemetery was fifteen miles away, in Mason City, but because he opened later on Sundays than on other days, he could still get in the full night's sleep he needed.

Fortunately, the station was in Stevenwell where he had lived most of his life. His old friends went out of their way to get their gas from him, and his new neighbors were kind. The men stopped often to chat with him and the women brought him treats for his meals.

Lately, Sergeant Paul Graham of the state police was in the habit of dropping by. Riding around most of the time, he used a lot of gas. Sometimes the cruiser needed emergency repairs. Sometimes he stopped just to talk. His frequent visits helped the time pass until it was Saturday night again.

As always, after dark, the entrance to the cemetery was chained so Matt parked his car by the side of the road and walked the hundred yards or so to Alethea's grave. Because of the thin clouds across the moon, its light shone soft and mellow on the small gray stone.

Matt threw the remains of last week's flowers in the trash bin nearby. There was no perpetual care here, and now, the middle of October, the water had been turned off until spring.

Along with the flowers and the water Matt had brought a cushion. The night air made the ground damp and lately he had noticed a stiffness whenever he bent his knees. He sat for a few moments looking around the cemetery. It seemed nicer tonight. The clouds

blurred the neglected and unkempt plots. Some of the stones were large but many, like Alethea's, were of modest size. Most had dates of birth and death, while several of the larger ones had a phrase or a verse chipped into them.

His wife's stone had only "Alethea" on it. It was a pretty name, an endearment in itself, and he loved to say it. The last name was unimportant. There was only Matt. There were no children, and all their close relatives were gone. It would never matter to anyone but himself where her grave was.

After the few moments of orientation, Matt began to talk. He was a simple, unimaginative man. He didn't believe in ghosts or spirits, or that the soul stayed with the body after death; but he was lonely and because her body was in the grave at his feet and because of the name on the stone, he felt near to her here.

During their thirty-eight years of marriage, they had never been separated except for that one time —the two weeks just before her death—the two weeks she had spent in her old home town of Wortham, seventy-six miles upstate, attending to the last days and burial of her only remaining relative, her sister, Miriam. Always before, Matt had accompanied her on her visits to Wortham; the station had made that impossible this last time.

Matt sat on his pillow, his short legs stretched out from his chunky body, his head bent a little and, like every other Saturday night, he talked to his dead wife who had been short, too, and plump, and whose plain face had always appeared happy and loving.

"Sergeant Graham, the state trooper I told you about, stopped by again this morning, Alethea. Nothing new. He's on the late shift this month. Mavis—that's his wife —is going to have another baby. He says that makes three. In December sometime, they expect it."

He paused between thoughts.

"Mrs. Cunningham brought over some stew for supper. It was pretty spicy and I couldn't eat much of it, but she meant well so I threw away what was left before she sent one of the children over for the dish."

He shifted his legs a little.

"Got a letter from that lawyer who's handling Miriam's estate. The house brought a few thousand. She left everything to you —so now it comes to me. It will help. Won't have to paint the place myself. Need a few tools. Perhaps I'll get someone in to help over the weekends. Perhaps some boy from the high school."

That would please her. Alethea

liked young people. This swing, mod, hip or whatever they called it generation never irritated her the way it did Matt. She used to say they only took a "little understanding", but Matt had no tolerance for the restless, brash types who roared up to the pumps in their souped up heaps.

Somewhere in Stevenwell there must be some well brought up, ambitious boy who would like to make a little money in a part-time job; someone like the son they had wanted and never had. Perhaps he ought to talk it over with the sergeant before he contacted the high school, he told Alethea. Graham had lived in Stevenwell all his life. He should know who was headed for trouble and who wasn't. The town was small enough for that.

"Mrs. Hooper," he continued, "you must remember her, the big wheel in the garden club with the Pontiac I got the dent out of when she hit the hydrant in front of Penney's? Remember, she told you her husband never found out! Well, she says I should cover the garden after the first hard frost. Showed me which ones come up every year and promised to bring me some annuals in the spring."

His pause here was long and ended in an explosive, "It's not easy, Alethea—not easy at all—this living alone! I miss you so much!"

He swallowed hard. Only three months, and he was breaking his basic rule: to remain calm and cheerful during these visits.

"But I'm all right!" he promised hastily. "Don't you worry one bit! Keeping busy does the trick and I haven't grown sloppy either. I keep the sheets changed and the wash done. Still go every week to the all-night laundramat." He rubbed his forehead as though it ached but it was just a mannerism he had acquired lately. "Think I'll add on space for a shower stall before I get the station painted."

He could see Alethea smiling at this. Just last week he had regaled her with the unpredictability of the garden hose when it was attached to the faucet in the lavatory for his early morning shower.

He sat awhile without saying anything. There was a chill in the air. He'd better wear a pair of woolen pants next week instead of chinos.

"Oh, yes," he roused himself. "Don't think I'll close up all day this Thanksgiving, the way we did last year when Miriam came down. A few hours, perhaps. Mrs. Cunningham has invited me to dinner. A whole month away and she invited me already!" he chuckled. "She sure is nice but she's a terrible cook! Guess she can't do much harm to a turkey

though." Then he added, "Want to bet?"

The chuckle threatened to turn into a sob. He choked it back. He sat there for a while longer, then leaned forward to loosen the stems of the flowers in the container. Alethea liked them floppy. She said they were more natural that way.

"Well, Alethea," he said, heaving himself to his feet, "guess that's about all the news I got this time."

He looked around slowly and wondered what it was going to be like in the winter. Would he be able to get through the snow after a big storm? He shook his head as though to clear it. He wasn't one to worry ahead of time. He would take each Saturday night as it came.

The car started easily, as usual. There was very little traffic along the road at this time of night. Sometimes he met or was passed by a car or two just over the Stevenwell line where the shortcut to the turnpike from route 113 joined it. Now and then there would be a hitchhiker on his way to the entrance of the toll road interchange where it was fairly simple to pick up a ride.

Matt rounded the last sharp corner and was within two miles of the station when he saw him. Matt's car lights swinging around the curve had alerted him and in two quick strides he had swung himself to the center of the road, with right arm and thumb extended, and with that cocksure, confident grin they all seemed to have. He was probably around twenty, skinny, and with hair that fell like a mop over his forehead.

He was only a short distance from the turn and he held his ground until the car was almost upon him. Then just as he was about to step back and just as the grin began to fade, Matt gunned the motor and caught the thumber with such force that he was tossed into the air before he hit the macadam.

Matt backed up a few feet before he got out of his car. The boy was dead, probably from a broken neck. Matt dragged the body to the grass at the side of the road where the overhanging branches from the bushes would hide it, at least until daylight.

There was damage to the front of the car but not so much as last time. The grillwork, alone, had caught the impact, and the fresh dent from the slight weight of the boy was camouflaged by the many already there. The headlight was intact. He wouldn't have to take time to pick up each piece of glass, which was always haz-

ardous. Another car might come along.

Something had flown out from under the boy's left arm as he was hit. Matt crossed the road to find it. It was a large thick book, shabby from use and scored by gravel; obviously a college textbook, something about electronics on the cover. He tossed it over

the stone wall that edged that side of the road and stood there a few moments biting his lip.

When he started back to the car, he was still somewhat bemused and the lights and the auto were around the bend and upon him before he could reach safety.

The driver stopped. Matt could just barely hear voices. The masculine one: "He may still be alive. Get back in the car and get help—get the police. I'll wait here!"

A woman's voice, frantic: "Don't you realize what that will mean? My husband will find out! We've got to get away from here! Right away! Hurry!"

There was a moment of silence, the sound of doors slamming, gears shifting, and the revving of the motor as the car skirted his body and the driver and his companion raced away. They hadn't been as lucky as Matt. Pieces of their broken headlight lay on the road, sparkling in the moonlight.

Sergeant Graham tiptoed up the stairs and into the bedroom. Mavis, his wife, in her seventh month, needed her sleep.

It was no good. She awoke as she always did. The light flashed on before he could close the door behind him. She pushed her pillow up against the headboard, her face flushed like a child's, her hair tousled.

"You're late, Paul," she said, not accusingly but with a hint of resignation.

"Another hit and run," he answered laconically as he got out of his uniform. "DOA."

"Another!" She was wide awake now. "And on a Saturday again. How many does that make?"

"Six since the middle of July

and all on the same stretch of road between Mason City and Stevenwell."

From habit he undressed swiftly. He was in his pajamas now.

"Anyone from around here?" She was surprised when he nodded. The others had all been from distant places.

"Old Matt Lucas—owns the gas station over on Center Street."

"For heaven's sake!" She sat up straight. Her eyes were filled with concern. "The poor man! What was he doing walking along that road at night?"

"We haven't figured it out. We got this anonymous call from a pay phone around eleven. When we got there, his car was at the side of the road and he was near the middle. Must have been on his way home from the cemetery in Mason City. He was in the habit of going there Saturday nights." He hung his uniform carefully in the closet. His voice was somewhat muffled but Mavis could still hear him. "There was broken glass nearby—has to be a headlight. Maybe this time we'll be able to trace it. About time for a break."

"That poor man," said Mavis again. "Didn't he lose his wife a while ago?" She thought for a moment. "Wasn't she murdered?"

Paul slipped into bed beside her. "On the way home from burying her sister in Wortham, three months back."

"I remember!" Mavis turned out the light and wriggled her bulky body down beside her husband. "You found her and the car three days later in the Lakeville woods near the reservoir—strangled and her purse missing!"

"Right." The sergeant was tired but he knew his wife. She had to have it straightened out in her mind or she'd never get to sleep or let him.

"But you never found who did it!"

"No, not yet anyway." It had been a long night but his voice was patient. "We're still working on it but we've never had any but the one clue. Someone who knew her saw her stop her car just outside of Wortham to pick up a hitchhiker."

If behavior appears irrational at times, Nature, it is said, better understands her own affairs than we.

WILLA RANDLEMAN was well along in years when she went through her menopause, at an age when most women have all but forgotten the experience and settled into a comfortable matriarchal phase.

The aftermath for Willa was anything but comfortable. Her system refused to reorganize itself. Migraine headaches blinded her. A kidney ailment was a lurking knife. Food she'd always enjoyed worked in her stomach like undigestable porcupine quills.

Yet Willa was courageous, and resolute. She kept up a cheerful front that fooled her friends. Even George didn't know she had to struggle through hellish shadows just to stir herself of a morning. The tasty breakfasts, served on white linen and right on time, continued to greet him after he'd showered, shaved, and dressed. She remained the usual gentle and

cheerful foil for his morning grumpiness and bad temper, and always managed to see him off with a smile. George probably expected her to live forever.

Then to top it all off, Willa was mugged one night. Late in that quiet evening George stopped his incessant pacing in the living-room and appeared in the doorway to the den, where Willa was watching TV. He stood with his fists mashed against his temples.

"George?" Willa got up quickly.

"One of my nervous spells," he gasped. "I swear I'm going to jump right out of my skull! You've got to get me a tranquilizer!"

He didn't look nervous, but he'd explained countless times that he didn't have a visible affliction, like a boil that could be lanced. ("Merciful heavens, Willa, even the doctors don't really understand this kind of thing!")

He'd had this anxiety neurosis for years; and Willa had tried to understand because, once, she'd really loved George.

She started from the den and George emitted a breath that sounded as if he were smothering. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the bathroom, George, to get your pills out of the cabinet."

"I've already looked. I'm all out."

"But you had a fresh bottle."

"I don't care *when* I had a fresh bottle. Maybe you've been taking them. I haven't any now."

"Then I'll phone—"

"I've already phoned," he practically shouted. "They've no one at the drugstore to deliver at this hour. You'll have to run down and get me some."

"But, George, it's so late, so dark . . ."

"Willa, what do you want me to do? Beg? Please, please, please." He grabbed her hand. "I'm scared of myself . . . don't know what I might do. Maybe slam my head through the front window and feel the shards of glass—"

"No, no, George," Willa broke in, her lips white. "Don't talk like that. I'll hurry, only be a few minutes."

"God bless you, Willa."

Minutes later Willa was in the all-night drugstore two blocks away. She handed the empty bottle with its prescription number on the label to Mr. Freyling, the druggist on duty. "Please hurry," she said. "George is having one of his spells."

The portly druggist had known Willa for a long time. He lifted a shaggy eyebrow. "Funny," he muttered, turning from the counter, "that he never has them on the golf course, or in a poker game."

"What did you say, Mr. Frey-

ling? You're not out of them : . ."

"I said it's late. Man sending his wife out at this hour . . . You be careful, Mrs. Randleman."

The pills were in her clutch bag when Willa came out of the drugstore. She paused to look up and down the dark street. When her father long years ago had built the rather sumptuous brick home, which he'd eventually left to Willa, the neighborhood had been upper crust—sweeping lawns, neat hedges, two story houses with rambling porches—but the street hadn't been immune to urban blight. Some of the houses had been chopped into apartments, others torn down to make way for a used car dealer, a plumbing supply company, a mobile home sales office.

Willa's tapping heels broke the silence along the shadowed sidewalk. She crossed the intersection and felt a little less insecure. She thought of George with that tolerant, resigned distaste the years had developed. Could it be that she was subconsciously resentful? Her age was apparent in the gray hair, the small, wrinkled face, the myopic blue eyes, the gnarled hands with the brown blotches on their backs, but Father Time had treated George like a favorite son. Tall, flat-bellied, rangy; youthful, cleanly whittled face under a cap of brown hair, that was George. Other people seemed to inspire him. For them he always had a big smile, a back-slap, a stockpile of breezy stories. He was actually two years older than Willa, but he looked fifteen years younger.

The darkened office of the used car dealer slid by Willa's left hand. The gaudy streamers and tinsel strung over the car lot rustled in the soft breeze. Willa thought nostalgically of the days when the big Wherry house had stood here, its grounds like a lovely park, so cool in summer. Swings, sliding board, sandboxes, wading pool, Dinky Wherry's playhouse with its windows of real glass . . . Wish I'd had a child or two, Willa mused.

Then Willa's small, reminiscent smile froze as she heard the spurt of gravel under a leather sole. Her heart jumped into her throat. The toes of her shoes seemed to catch against each other. She had the quick thought that she'd surprised young vandals in the process of stealing hubcaps. The trick was to continue on without faltering, giving no sign of having seen or heard anything.

Then she actually felt the shadow fall over her. She tried to turn, hands clenching to fight to the ends of her slender strength.

A vise slammed about her throat as a strong arm choked off her

scream. A knee struck her low in the back, driving pain through the top of her head.

Stunned, she struggled as she was wrestled off the sidewalk between two cars. She heard the small, quick grunts of her attacker, felt the powerful animal strainings of his muscles. His arm rose and fell. The bludgeon, jackhandle or whatever, drove splinters of bone to the core of her brain.

A blank nothingness . . . Then Willa had the strange sense of being a little shred of the nighttime darkness, a faint, indefinable quivering at first, then her energy built slowly. The silence was pleasant, like that of a summer night after a cooling rain.

She drifted down toward the crumpled white thing lying at the car lot. This was surely a nightmare. She was looking at herself, at her own frail body! She saw the contorted face, the mouth pulled into a grimace, the eyes jutting, glazed. The silken gray hair above the right temple was matted with a red-gray ooze.

The shock sent her spinning, a tiny vortex in a spatial vacuum. She hurtled up among the gaudy streamers and tinsel before she quite realized she was moving.

She steadied and shimmered briefly over the roof of the car lot office. I'm dead, she decided, killed by a man whose face I didn't even glimpse. That's my body lying there. And this invisible thing up here? *My goodness*, the thought rocked her. *I'm a ghost!*

Mr. Freyling stared at the rows of tall brown pill bottles on the shelves before him. The irritated shake of his leonine head was for himself. He turned back to the counter to re-read the prescription he was filling. Feeling vaguely uncomfortable and annoyed, as if something were bothering him in the back of his mind, he frowned, tried to concentrate on the words a doctor's hand had scribbled.

He looked up as the front door opened. A pale, jerkily moving George Randleman swept the store with a quick glance.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Randleman?" Freyling called, assailed with the feeling that something was.

"My wife . . ." George hurried toward the counter. "I sent her here more than an hour ago . . ."

"I know." Freyling dropped the small square of paper he was holding and came around the counter. "She paid for the pills and went out."

The two men traded a look, then both went to the front door. The druggist stepped to the sidewalk and looked along the dark, deserted street.

"You won't see her out there," George said. "I just came that way."

Freyling eased back inside. "I think we'd better call the police."

George brushed past him and dropped a coin in the slot of the pay phone. He lifted his hand, but instead of dialing, his fingers went on up to touch his temple.

"What is it?" Freyling asked, looking at him closely.

"Don't know . . . Strange . . ." George turned his head and stared over his shoulder. "Ever get the feeling you knew in advance what would be around the next blind curve on a road you'd never driven before? Or that a room you walked into for the first time was somehow familiar?"

Freyling thought of the absent-mindedness, not at all characteristic, that had assailed him just before George walked in. What the devil was going on?

"Like that now," George said. "Like I've been through this scene before."

"Of course you haven't," the druggist said with a forced firmness. "You're distraught, that's all. I'll get you a pill. Maybe have one myself . . ."

Willa hovered above a battered old car in the no-down-payment row and watched the police in action. She'd had more luck communicating with the burly plain-clothes detective than anyone else so far. With George and Mr. Freyling the most she'd managed had been vague, subconscious discomfort. She'd focused her willpower on the detective, and when the small search party had reached the car lot, the man, thrusting his flashlight beam about, had unerringly discovered the body. His eyes had veiled with pity and shock. Then he'd called to his partner.

The second detective and George had come running. George had taken one look and slumped in a near faint. The younger detective had helped him to the police car where George had sagged on the rear seat to recover.

The big man (he'd introduced himself as Sergeant Rudy Chizik on arrival at the drugstore) had found Willa's clutch bag, ripped open, stripped of cash, and flung near her body; and the weapon, a rusty old tire tool. Willa had been a roiling disturbance in the void when Chizik's light picked out the weapon. It was nothing less than demeaning to have one's life sacrificed with a piece of junk!

Chizik had talked into the police car radio. A second car, trailed by a black van, had nosed into the scene. A man with a camera had aimed at the body and popped

flashbulbs from half a dozen angles. Another had dusted the weapon and clutch bag for fingerprints. Two others had eased the body onto a stretcher, covered it, and loaded the black van.

George was sitting up when Chizik leaned in the open door of the police car. "Feeling better?"

George nodded, his face a gray oval in the near darkness.

"Anything you can add to what you and the druggist told me when I arrived at the drugstore?"

"No," George said huskily. "She just went to the store to get some pills—for me. Then she didn't come back. That's all."

"It looks open and shut," Chizik said. "A punk sees her going into the drugstore, figures she's on an errand and will be coming back the same route. Finds a weapon without trouble in that clutter on the back of the car lot, waits for her."

George covered his face with his hands. "Just for the few dollars in her handbag . . ."

"He probably didn't intend to kill her, but she was struggling and in the pressure of the moment he struck harder than he meant to."

George uncovered his eyes, his hands slow claws dragging down his cheeks. "That excuses him?"

"Certainly not!" Chizik said, a cold ring in his voice. "But you can see what we're up against: no fingerprints on the weapon or bag; an unknown drifter who could be on a freight train headed in any direction at this moment . . ." Chizik let out a heavy breath. "It's the toughest kind of case to crack. Nothing but deadends. But if he tries another mugging, we may be able to tie him to this one."

"But you said he would hop a—"

"I said he might," Chizik broke in. "On the other hand, he could have bought him some horse by this time and right now be shooting a vein in a flophouse no more than a dozen blocks away."

"Do you always just hope for luck?" George asked nastily.

Chizik kept his cool. "Only when we have nothing else to go on. The net is always spread. We fine-comb every fish that gets caught. We hope for the best."

During the next seventy-two hours, as mortals in the material realm reckoned divisions of the Endless Moment, Willa observed the fate of her body. The autopsy was simply too gruesome. The fellows at the mortuary prepared her for burial with the aplomb of bakers plopping a lump of dough in the pan. The chapel was banked with flowers, and the service was brief but quite lovely. She was touched by the number of people

who showed up. The chapel was filled to standing room capacity. It was such a busy time that she didn't have a chance to get close to George until the ride to the cemetery was over.

Two friends and the Reverend Marchand accompanied George home. The minister got out of the car as George did. They stood looking at the silent, empty house.

"If you'd care to have someone stay with you . . ." Reverend Marchand suggested.

"No," George said heavily, "The quicker I face it, the better. I'll be all right." He shook hands with the men, thanked them for everything, took a long breath, and braved the front walk with a steady stride.

As soon as he was in the house a strange transformation took place. He ducked to the front window, shedding his gloom and long face with the ease of a man tossing off a jacket. He peeped between the slats of the blind, and when he saw the car pulling away, he turned and actually jumped off the floor, clicking his heels together. He rubbed his hands together, the motion somehow reminding Willa of a venomous animal licking its lips. A smile lit the whole of his face.

George swaggered to the kitchen, opened a cabinet, and poured himself a drink. Lifting the glass high before he tossed the liquor down, he boomed a toast to himself, "Here's to success!"

He'd kept himself under very tight control until this moment. Now he was in a state of wildly happy release. Willa recoiled from the evil gloating that flowed from him. She seeped through the ceiling and stopped her flight in the attic, where she was a small, lashing, invisible disturbance in spatial vacancy. What in the world had come over George? Could it mean that he, not an unknown mugger . . .

No, no! It was too much, thinking such a thing about someone with whom you'd shared the intimacy of a marriage bed. Could he have been such a stranger to her?

Willa remained in the attic while the planet darkened and the night silence deepened. She was clutched with a dread of getting so close to George again.

It was after one o'clock in the morning when she heard George stirring. She flitted across the driveway and perched on the ridge of the garage roof as he took the rear door out of the house.

He crossed the dark yard. Below her the car door closed with a soft click. The starter grunted, and the engine purred, but he didn't use the headlights until he turned into

the street. He drove out of the neighborhood at moderate speed. Six blocks from the house, the car accelerated eagerly, although George remained within the speed limit.

His destination was a modest brick apartment building across town. He chose the service alley and parked behind the building where the car was out of sight. He hurried around to the front and dashed up a stairway to the second floor rather than wait for the self-service elevator. At apartment 2-A he tapped lightly on the door with the knuckle of his forefinger. Almost instantly, the door opened just long enough for George to slip inside.

The girl that George took in his arms was every bit as lovely as Willa had sometimes in fanciful moments wished that she could be. Tall, willowy, she had a creamy face with bold cheekbones and full lips, eyes with shadows like violets in the dusk. Glistening jet black hair swept her shoulders.

The girl and George kissed. Willa, spinning against the ceiling, had the sensation of goggling. Mercy! The way the girl was emphasizing the embrace with sinuous, subtle writhings of her body! The heat of George's lust was a reddish aura.

Then the girl shoved him away. Her moist lips drew into a pout. "You took long enough!"

"Trisha baby." He reached for her, but she slipped aside and went to look out the front window, her back to him. "You didn't even phone me, George. I had to find out from the papers and TV newscasts that it was over and done."

George came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. His fingers burned through the thin nylon blouse. He nuzzled her hair and whispered in her ear.

"Baby, staying apart for six whole days has been even tougher for me, but I explained it all. Not a living soul knows about us. No one must—until the time comes to let the world know a widower has picked up the pieces of his life and met a new friend."

The pressure of his hands turned her. He caressed her neck with quick kisses. "Baby, baby . . . It got so I was revolted every time I had to look at her and thought of you waiting here . . ." His passionate mumblings became a bit incoherent. "A relief . . . satisfaction . . . to pick up that rusty tire tool and know she was out of the way at last . . ."

"If they suspect, George . . ."

"They don't. They won't. Too many cases like hers every day. Not enough cops to do the job. They'll give it the routine treat-

ment while they struggle with the rest of their workload. It's perfect, baby. The case will just slide into the unsolved file until hell freezes over."

The girl relented slightly. Her arms crept up around George.

"Did we get all you said, George?"

"It's in the pot, and the pot's ours when the routine stuff is finished. All those thousands in in-

surance, as if the trusting, foolish old biddy, alive, was worth a fraction of it! The house and lot to convert into commercial property; the stocks and bonds that have brought her a beans-and-bread income from the day her father put them in the safety deposit box."

"You were happy a long time, George, on that income and what you could pick up when somebody wandered into your real estate office and wanted to buy or sell a house."

"Never happy, baby. Not really. And the last of those years were worse than dull, grimmer than grim. Then you made me know what it was like to come alive."

They stood with faces close. The girl looked deep in his eyes.

"Now what, George?"

"Like we planned. We wait a decent interval. Then we meet, court, marry, cash in, get our passports, and go to see the sights—in the spots where the lights are brightest!"

"Hmmmm." Again the girl disentangled and slipped across the room. She paused at a table, picked up a cigarette and lighter. "I've been thinking, George; alone here, plenty of time for thinking, seeing it in the newspapers and all."

George drifted toward her. "What about, baby?"

"Well," she snapped the lighter. "You do plan to keep coming here every time you get the chance to do so safely."

"What else, baby?" George smirked.

"Meantime is what else," she said, a sudden sharpness in her voice. "Meantime, what if you meet someone else? Meantime, what if you change your mind, before that proper interval, as you put it, has passed?"

"You know I'd never do that!"

"You wouldn't want me like a poor little fish that gets stranded when the tide goes out, George?"

"What kind of crazy question is that?"

"Then you won't mind one slight shift in plans," she said, stabbing out her hardly-puffed cigarette.

"Now, baby, the planning has all been—"

"Changed," she put in. "Changed in one detail. We're going to be married now, George, tonight. We've time to dash across the state line, and return before any callers stop at your house. No one else will know—until you're ready to hint around that you've met a friend. Months from now, if you like, you can confess that we've eloped the previous night. I'll move in openly then. But—and that brings us to the last meantime—we're going to tie a little knot

tonight." A sultry smile heated her lips. She pressed herself against George, her body an offering. "While the tide is running . . . How about it, George?"

His eyes were ravenous. "Okay, grab a coat. We'll wake up a justice of the peace in the first county seat we hit across the line."

The shock of the entire revelation spun Willa into limbo. She struggled out slowly, feeling as if her energies had been scattered all over the cosmos.

The late afternoon was bright and sunny, the city its bustling self. She willed herself to the modest brick apartment building and noted the mailboxes. 2-A, Miss Trisha Hunter; secretly, Mrs. George Randleman; the second Mrs. Randleman.

Willa happened to notice the date of cancellation on a bill that had been mailed to the box. Good grief! Almost a week of material time had ticked away since her funeral.

She wished herself upstairs, in 2-A. No one was in the apartment. It was stuffy and heavy with the scent of Trisha Hunter's (Randleman's) cosmetics. A few of George's things had been tossed on a chair in the bedroom; undershirt, socks, a pair of pajamas that Willa had washed and carefully ironed just a couple of weeks ago.

The apparel, however, bore popular brands, available in any department store and not even identifiable by laundry marks. Might belong to any gentleman caller. Nothing specific to implicate George or offer the first hint toward the whole appalling truth.

If there were clues, that big fellow, the detective named Chizik, would have to find them . . .

Chizik was red-eyed and haggard the next morning when he came on

for the eight to four-thirty tour. He'd nicked himself three times shaving, insulted his wife by eating only two of the four eggs she always coddled for his breakfast, and yelled at his youngest kid without cause.

Hell of a night, went through his mind; cracking up, long before retirement age, at that.

He went to his desk in the squadroom and tried to concentrate on the mimeographed copy of reports that had come off the night shift. After several minutes he threw the report down, lighted his tenth cigarette of the morning, and barged into the office of his superior, Captain Blumengard. The harried brass was barking orders into one phone while another line held.

Chizik lighted cigarette number eleven while he shifted from one tired arch to another and waited. "Captain," Chizik said when the phones were all cradled, "I want reassignment to the Randleman case."

Blumengard rocked back. "What's turned up in the reports on it?"

"Nothing," Chizik said, "but I—"

"Then why such a request? Don't you know the papers are chewing us out on the Abernathy thing? Here we've got the daughter of a councilman, no less, involved in an LSD party that produced one suicide. What are you doing on *that?*"

"Well, I . . . this Randleman killing . . .

"Look," Blumengard said patiently, "that one hurts me too. They all hurt me, but you know the score, Chizik. Mrs. Randleman was killed more than a week ago. Routine mugging that ended up in murder. We'll expend all the time and manpower we can, but we'll have to take our chances on that one. You know that we get a workload every twenty-four hours that would keep our available resources busy for ninety-six. Figure it out for yourself, Chizik." Blumengard shuffled some papers on his desk. His gesture was sheer exasperation. "We do a damn good job with what we've got. You're part of what we've got, and I simply can't spare you any longer on the Randleman case."

Chizik knew he'd been dismissed, but a nagging insistence worried at him like invisible gnats.

"Good morning, Chizik," Blumengard said pointedly.

Chizik shook his head. "Captain, don't know what it is or why, but this Randleman thing keeps bugging me. I've got this *feeling*. Can't really describe it or shake it. Last night, it came over me like I got gooseflesh. Didn't get a half-hour decent sleep. Every time I closed my eyes and drifted off, it was like I got . . . well, an intruder in my subconscious giving me nightmares. All night, nightmares."

Blumengard rocked forward, clenched his hands on the desk. "Chizik, don't scare me with sick talk. Not right now. You mark off sick, I'll break your neck. You get hold of yourself. I've got far too few with your experience and know-how."

"That's why I thought—with my

experience, I mean—I could maybe wrap this Randleman thing up."

"The record says a mugger killed her in the commission of robbery. One of these days he'll try again."

"But, Captain, if it wasn't—"

The phone screamed an interruption. Blumengard laid his hand on the instrument. Before he picked it up, he speared Chizik with a look. "The Abernathy case is already forty-eight hours old. I'm giving you and your men exactly twenty-four more to break it. Do we understand, Sergeant?"

Willa drifted over the rooftops and felt the city sinking into ever deeper slumber, including Sergeant Chizik. She'd done all she could with him. No need tormenting the poor man further.

She was drawn irresistibly to the brick apartment building. She swirled along the alley. Sure enough George's car was there.

She lurked over the vehicle for a moment. She had the certainty that she could, with sufficient will and effort, focus her energy and cause the battery to drain itself.

George would come out tomorrow morning and, unable to start the car, would have to call a service station. George would say, "Can't understand it. Battery was almost new too."

And the bored mechanic would mumble, "Yeah, it happens. They just seem to go dead every now and then."

But would it accomplish anything? Beyond establishing an eyewitness that George had been there? Who would question the eyewitness? And would the eyewitness even remember a face at which he'd barely glanced?

Willa flowed through the brick. She hesitated in the girl's snug livingroom. She hated to witness the scene beyond the bedroom door.

If only Chizik could be standing in this very spot, a short walk would reveal George's secret affair. From that point, a detective such as Chizik would surely uncover the rest of it; but Chizik wasn't here. He wasn't going to be here. If anything at all was done, Willa would have to do it herself. She seeped through the door and forced herself to observe.

They slept now, George and the girl Trisha, George with a smug, satisfied smile on his face. He lay on his left side, facing the wall. Trisha slept on her back, one arm curled up around her head. She looked so lovely, innocent, endearing lying there that it was almost impossible to believe the evil that was really in her.

Willa seethed with a violence that knocked a tiny fracture in the cosmic time warp. The injustice of it all was simply unbearable.

But what to do? Trying to get through to people, she'd so far only

aroused in them feelings and sensations which they'd dismissed for lack of a ready materialistic explanation —except in the case of Sergeant Chizik. She'd had more luck with him than anyone else. Even if he'd explained her the next morning as a nightmare, she'd for a moment established a brief link, slipping in and feeling the very essence of the man.

The effort had come to nothing, of course, but she had learned from it. Sergeant Chizik had been sound asleep, all his conscious barriers down, unsuspecting, unresisting . . . and Trisha Hunter was in the same state of existence at this very moment.

It's worth a try, Willa decided, and she summoned all the nonspatial forces at her command, gathered and focused them. For the barest instant, Willa was a glint of fiery ectoplasm in the darkness.

Now!

Trisha Hunter reared up and tried to scream as the concentrated essence of Willa Randleman slammed into her unguarded subconscious depths. The blow was a force beyond the atomic, with a velocity, since it was delivered from the nonmaterial realm, surpassing that of light. The unique energies known as the personality of Trisha Hunter were smashed and the particles scattered to the ends of nothingness.

The lovely image sitting on the bed stirred after a moment, clicked on the bed lamp and looked about as if she'd never really seen the room before.

She flipped back the sheet, stood and crossed to the mirror. She began to smile as she turned this way and that, admiring the mirrored image that had belonged to Trisha Hunter. It was not only lovely, but the vibrance of so much health was a sheer delight—no more migraines, kidney pains, or torturing tummy. How wonderful!

Willa turned to the bed and looked with eyes that had belonged to Trisha Hunter. The nature of her smile changed frightfully as she stuied unsuspecting George. *You infatuated old fool,* she thought, *I've the weapons now, and before I'm through you'll think of hell as a welcome escape . . .*

The acts, in a lifelong play, are innumerable, unlimited.

GRAND EXIT

by Leo R. Ellis

Brett Delane left the key in the front door lock as he hurriedly stumbled down the darkened hallway. Upon entering the study he snapped on the desk lamp. The shaded glow revealed a figure crouched against the wall, the figure of a man, a man who held a gun.

Brett gasped. He opened his mouth to speak, but instead he groaned and fell back against the desk, half doubled over, clutching his middle.

The intruder moved out of the shadows and became a man, barely out of his teens, dressed in tight pants and a soiled jacket. Scraggly hair hung around his ears. He held the gun pointed.

Still doubled over, Brett worked his way around the corner of the desk and slumped into the leather chair. He reached for the desk drawer.

"Don't go for a gun, dad," the man said.

"Medicine—my medicine." Brett ignored the gun, thrust across the desk, as he feebly lifted out a vial and fumbled off the top. He placed the vial against his lips and swallowed a tablet with effort. Brett collapsed back in the chair, his eyes

closed, his face a deadly white.

The man stared at the slight, silver-haired Brett behind the desk. The gunman's trigger finger tightened but there was no shot; instead, the man looked back at the open window. His eyes swept across the pictures on the study wall, photographs of Brett Delane in many of the character roles he had played on the stage.

A moan brought the gun muzzle back across the desk again. Still the man did not fire. He brushed his hair back in a nervous, unsure gesture.

Brett's eyelids fluttered open and his eyes focused across the desk. "What do you want?"

"Loot, man—loot."

"Take what I have then and get out."

The man shook his head. "It don't work out that way now, dad. I figured to blow when I thought you were gone, but you messed things up by coming to life again. Now I've got to blast you."

Brett sat upright. "You can't mean you're going to kill me!"

"You get the idea real good. I don't like witnesses—witnesses get a guy pinched." The man raised the gun and Brett collapsed in the chair. "Cut the faking," the man said angrily. "You ain't dying. I saw you take your medicine."

Slowly Brett opened his eyes. "But I am dying," he said in a low voice. He reached out and touched the vial. "This medicine has kept me alive so far, but someday, someday —poof." He gave a sardonic chuckle. "Perhaps it would be a blessing if you did shoot me. It would be sudden, no drawn-out suffering."

"This ain't meant as no favor, pop."

Brett nodded slowly. "Death is something to dread when it comes slowly. But murder, now that would be a more fitting climax to the career of Brett Delane." Brett leaned forward and pulled himself to his feet. "Yes, then I would have headlines for my obituary—Noted Actor Dies in Mystery Slaying. Very nice."

The man backed away. "Man, you're a nut."

"No, I'm an actor. It is highly important to an actor to make a grand exit, you see." Brett raised his arm. "I want my final scene dramatic, packed with emotion and suspense." Brett dropped his arm. "No actor could ask for more, and since I am to die anyway, I feel that murder would serve as an excellent vehicle in which to frame my passing."

"Man, you are a N-U-T, a real, genuine filbert." The man's gun had drooped, but now it snapped back up as Brett started for the door. "Stand where you are, dad. You ain't leaving."

"But I insist this scene be done

right. I'll need the proper wardrobe and I want to get my maroon dressing gown. I don't suppose you would allow me time for a shower first?"

The gunman jabbed the gun while he clawed at his face with his free hand. "You *can't* be that nutty," he yelled. "Nobody could be nutty enough to fix up his own murder." He stopped and his eyes narrowed. "I get it, you're pulling a fast one. You've got this setup rigged somehow." His eyes darted around the room and stopped at the desk. "A tape recorder—you're putting this down on tape." The man dashed across the room.

"I use that machine to study my diction," Brett said calmly. "You'll find it quite empty."

The gunman shoved the recorder to the floor. He made sure the telephone was firmly in the cradle, then ran back to run his hand over the wall. "I got it now, the room's bugged. You're trying to stall me until the cops get here." He whirled and pointed the gun. "It won't work, I'm going to blow your head off right now."

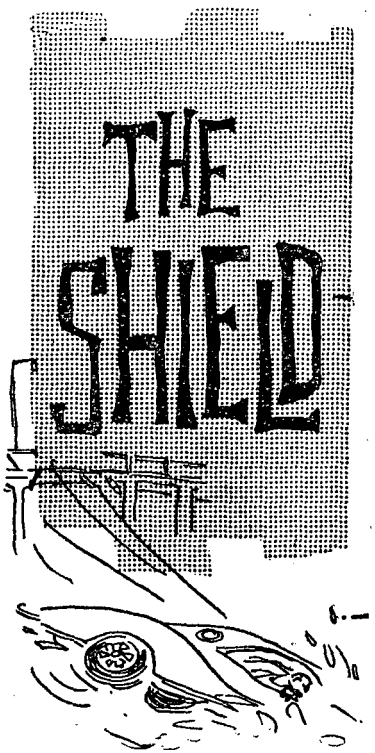
"Please, not the head. Shoot me in the body. And there are no hidden microphones."

The young man's mouth worked as he tugged at his long hair. "You're trying to sucker me into some kind of a trap. You *want* me to kill you, but I'm too smart for that. I'm not buying any murder rap." He ran to the window and threw one leg over the sill. "You'll have to die a natural death on your own, dad." The man slid outside and disappeared.

Brett Delane had finished the second of his two telephone calls when the front door opened and his wife entered. Brett kissed her on the cheek. "Frightfully sorry I had to leave the dinner so abruptly, dear. I should have known that blasted curry would tie my stomach into knots, and I had left my ulcer medicine in the desk drawer."

Brett helped his wife with her coat. "We had a prowler," he said. "It was quite a dramatic scene, and I gave a magnificent performance. You'll hear all about it when the reporters get here. Now be a good girl and hold them while I shower and put on my maroon dressing gown."

A trifling oversight is often the differential between "bum" and "knight in shining armor."



Clyde Poinsby Dexter was dead, his expensive foreign sports car smashed almost shapeless in the snow-drifted ravine under the Green Lane bridge. The problem of why was mine. I didn't want it but as second in command of the accident investigation squad for the west district, I had it.

I didn't want it because Clyde Poinsby Dexter had been head of research for the Space Division of Atlas Electronics, and Atlas would want to know very precisely and specifically what caused their famous Dr. Dexter to go off the bridge.

Along the hood of our car, heavy wet snowflakes rode to oblivion against the fast clicking windshield wipers and I knew Atlas wouldn't be content to be told this was one of the worst storms of the winter, smashing in from the northeast at five this afternoon to the surprise of the weatherman and a few million other people, most of it melting before building into a three-inch deep, half-frozen slippery slush that left you with the feeling you were driving on a bed of ball

by Stephen Wasylyk

bearings. They weren't going to want to hear my one-word summation of Dexter's accident: carelessness.

"Why do you suppose Dr. Dexter was out on a night like this, anyway?" I asked Richards, who was unlucky enough to be on the sheet as my assistant.

Richards, his hands full trying to keep us reasonably straight and in motion, had no time to answer idiot questions posed by his sergeant. He grunted.

"You're a big help," I told him. "Turn here."

The Dexter house was on a tree-lined street about two hundred yards in from Green Lane, set back by a short curved driveway; the front was long and low, solid brick except for the offset door, the rear stepped down the steep hill in back; spotlights under the eaves gave the whole picture a Christmas card look. The right side of the house ended in a two car garage, door up, the rear end of a big snow-covered hardtop showing in the gray shadow cast by the lights.

I stepped out into the snow. It was very quiet, the soft flakes drifting soundlessly through the bare trees, slanting heavily through the bright lights on the house. The only other building in sight was a yellow windowed dim shape some distance away.

Even after eight years, this call at the victim's home was the part of my job I disliked most, the part that always called for whipping up my nerve, the part to which none of us ever really became accustomed. These were the times I wished I were back on the circuit driving one of those rear-engined bombs with which I was just starting to burn up the tracks when I quit.

Richards said, "Let's tell her and get it over with, Ben."

"Don't rush." I pointed to tracks coming from the garage. "No question Dexter came from here about a half hour ago. Tracks would be more filled in if it had been longer than that."

Richards was impatient. "The lieutenant said to get a positive identification as soon as possible. He has to be sure it's really Dexter before releasing the story to the newsmen."

"I don't need any reminders. The problem will be to get someone to do it on a night like this. Let's go."

I slogged up the driveway, walking in a wheel rut left by the hardtop before stepping out into virgin snow. Punching the bell produced no results. Neither did hard rapping.

"Stay here," I told Richards.

A flatness seemed to indicate a sidewalk so I slipped and skidded to the corner of the house, down a healthy flight of stairs, found a brilliantly lit side patio and a locked

door. Pounding accomplished nothing. I looked around. Fresh footprints led across the patio toward the house next door. Must be visiting, I told myself. When I break the news, at least she'll have someone with her. I followed the tracks to the door of the house I'd seen through the trees and pushed the bell.

The mean-eyed six footer who answered with a glass in his hand and an angry look on his face dropped into the niche in my mind labeled "swinger." From the short-cropped hair to the wet alligator shoes, he looked like the kind I'd warn my daughter against, if I had one, and I was willing to bet his wife spent half her time wondering where he was.

It took only a minute to determine his name was Cannon, Mrs. Dexter wasn't there, and it was an excellent idea for him and his wife to join us because, according to him, Mrs. Dexter was in the house about three-quarters of an hour ago. Those prints in the snow looked fresher than that but I'd never won any merit badges for tracking so I let it go, mushing back directly through the unbroken flatness between the two houses without waiting, because Richards had a talent for unlocking things that they didn't have to know about. I let them get to the edge of the spotlight glare before pressing the latch and stepping inside, holding the door ajar.

She was sprawled on the livingroom rug, blonde hair spread out, young fine-boned face turned to one side, cheekbone showing a fresh, dark red bruise.

I'd been expecting someone about Dexter's age, but she could have been his daughter. Then I remembered he'd married for the second time a few years ago. At least he had excellent taste. Her pulse was steady and full, and it was clear someone had put her away real hard.

Mrs. Cannon, a small figure hooded against the snow, knelt quickly and rolled back an eyelid. "She's just unconscious. Get her into the bedroom."

We stretched her out on the bed. To the back of Mrs. Cannon's head, I said, "See if you can bring her to and call me."

In the livingroom I raised an eyebrow at Cannon. "Obviously there was nothing wrong when you left."

"Obviously."

"Dexter here?"

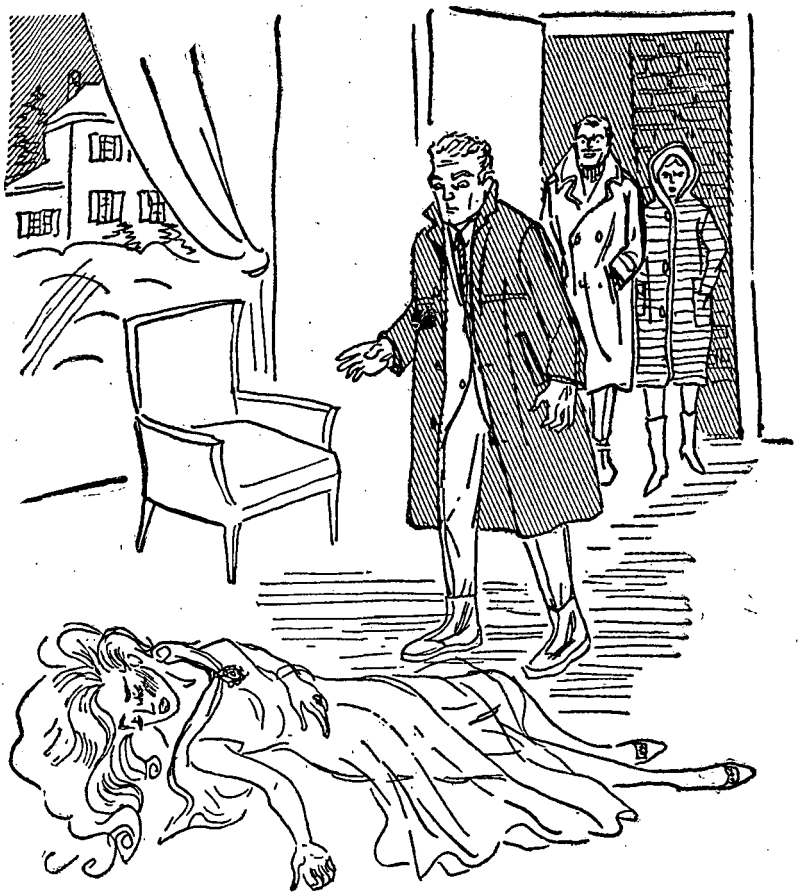
"Didn't see him."

I thought of the bruise on her cheek. "You'd better get a doctor," I said.

"My wife is a nurse. If one is needed, I'm sure she'll call."

"You knew Dr. Dexter well?"

"Very well. I worked with him."



"Mr. Cannon, we're reasonably sure the body removed from the car was Dr. Dexter, but we always need a positive identification. Mrs. Dexter is in no condition to do it. Would you mind?"

He shrugged. "As long as there is no one else."

I motioned to Richards. "Take Mr. Cannon to the hospital. Call me as soon as he makes the identification, then bring him back."

Hoping they'd have no trouble on the ten-minute trip, I picked up the phone and dialed.

"This is Shamsky," I told the voice manning the board. "Let me have Lieutenant Grainger."

Grainger sounded irritated. "Where are you? Drinking coffee in a nice warm diner somewhere?"

"I wish I were." I filled him in on the situation. "I'll let you know as soon as I hear from Richards."

"On a night like this, only you would bring me Clyde Poinsby Dexter and then an unconscious widow, instead of a simple, clear-cut accident. Who bashed her and why?"

"She can't tell me and I don't get paid to read minds. Why haven't the newsmen bothered to check out the accident? Every time it snows, they sit around waiting for someone to go off Green Lane."

"They have something more interesting. Some nut forced a tanker off one of the expressway ramps. The truck jackknifed, turned over and spilled hi-test all over the place. More newsmen there than cops. By the time they get around to you, we might have some answers. Any idea when Mrs. Dexter can talk?"

"Any minute. She should have come to by now but I'll give her a chance to settle down first."

"When you know something, call me and we'll decide on the next step."

I cradled the phone. If Cannon had been here before nine without seeing Dexter, where had Dexter been? He hadn't gone off the bridge until nine-ten, and it was only five minutes from here to the bridge.

"Ben?"

Deep inside, a chord long dormant and almost ten years silent vibrated in answer to that low voice, last heard in the semi-darkness of a hospital room, a bridge to sanity while I lay bandaged from the chin up, wondering if I would ever see again; a voice that held humor and tenderness and became all I could cling to until the bandages came off and I could see the impish face behind that voice.

I turned. The hooded coat was gone now and I really looked at her for the first time. Surprised by ten years of ageing and sadness I would never have predicted, I saw short, dark-haired Betty with the blue eyes, and I remembered now the young husband she was helping through the university was named Cannon.

"You look the same," I lied.

"So do you. Not many men look like a young Abe Lincoln. You really didn't recognize me, did you?"

"Really didn't look at you," I said. "I had other things on my mind. How's the patient?"

"Sleeping. I gave her a sedative."

I moved into the bedroom fast.

Trying to wake Mrs. Dexter would be a waste of time. "What did you do a darn fool thing like that for?" I asked coldly. "You knew I have to talk to her."

"I didn't think. She was pretty shaky so I thought it would be better to wait until morning before telling her about her husband."

"You're a nurse, not a doctor," I snapped. "I told you to bring her around so I could talk to her. Her husband gets killed, I drive up here to break the news and find her unconscious. Do you think I can leave it like that?"

She turned away abruptly. "Maybe Clyde hit her."

"What for?"

"She's the only one who can answer that."

"That's the point," I said disgustedly. "She's the only one who can answer anything."

"All right. I made a mistake. Are you going to hang me now?"

"No, but you've just made my job a lot more difficult."

She changed the subject. "How would you like some hot coffee?"

I relaxed and grinned. "Fine. Maybe I'll end up with only a mild case of pneumonia."

The phone rang and I flipped the receiver to my ear. Richards said the dead man was definitely Dr. Dexter, which was a help. One thing I didn't need was another complication. I called Grainger and brought him up to date. "You're running it," I told him. "What now?"

There was a long silence before he muttered something about stupid women.

"All right," he said finally. "I'll release the story. As far as the newsmen are concerned, Mrs. Dexter is under sedation. I can't have you sitting there all night so I'll get a policewoman to stay with her."

"Someone at Atlas should be told before it hits the eleven o'clock news."

"Let Cannon do it. He'll know who to call, and maybe they won't get around to me until morning. By then I'll be able to convince them it wasn't part of a plot to sabotage their space research."

I hung up as Betty Cannon pushed a cup of coffee under my

nose. I looked down at her and grinned. "Sure it's safe?"

"No. Loaded. You'll be out in ten seconds. Why are you treating me like a criminal for a mistake in judgment?"

"Because I'm cold, wet, tired, need answers, can't get any, and I'm a cop."

"How long has it been?"

"Since I joined the force? About eight years. You should have seen me in my uniform."

"You were probably the sloppiest looking patrolman anyone ever saw. That frame of yours would defy the finest tailor in town."

"Not so." I grinned. "They don't promote sloppy patrolmen to sergeant."

She laughed. "They probably did it to get you out of uniform. In ordinary clothes, you could be just another badly dressed citizen."

How many night hours had we passed so long ago, talking like this? For a moment, there in the warmth and dimness of that room, I had the crazy feeling the last ten years hadn't happened at all.

Jack Cannon and Richards stamped in, shedding snow all over the center hall.

Betty slipped away into the bedroom without looking at her husband, without saying a word; hardly the way a loving wife would act after he had gone out in the worst storm of the winter to identify the body of a friend.

Richards looked hungrily at the coffee cup. "In the kitchen," I said. "I don't think Mrs. Dexter or Mrs. Cannon will mind. Perhaps Mr. Cannon would like a cup."

Cannon shook his head and headed for a sideboard. "Clyde had some good Scotch here. I'd prefer that."

I asked him to notify someone at Atlas and drifted into the kitchen after Richards. I jerked my head toward the livingroom. "He say anything?"

"Not a word. When we leaving? If we don't go soon, we won't be able to."

"Relax," I said. "We've spent the night in worse places." Ordinarily, Richards and I would have been long gone, the investigation closed except for writing up the report. Grainger was right. Only I would draw Clyde Dexter and then an unconscious wife. Wandering around, I pulled a door open and found myself looking at the snow-covered hardtop in the garage. I pushed the door closed, wondering where Mrs. Dexter had been tonight. Irritated because I couldn't ask her, I watched Richards put his cup down. "Wash your cup out," I snarled at him and went back to the livingroom.

"You call somebody at Atlas?" I asked Cannon.

"The vice president of the division. He'll be over in the morning."

Probably with the head of security, I thought.

The phone rang. Cannon reached for it but I waved him away. It was Grainger.

"Ben, I've got something for you. One of the highway patrolmen gave Dexter a ticket at eight forty-five tonight, driving too fast for conditions. We also have the idea he was the guy who cut off that tanker and spilled it. The time is about right, and the make of the car is the same."

"Are you sure?"

"No mistake. Mad as hell and driving like a fool."

"Mad at who? The patrolman?"

"No. Just mad and in a hurry to get home."

Cannon looked real interested in the conversation.

"If you knew where he worked, you could check his employer," I said.

Grainger didn't need it spelled out. "Someone listening?"

"You're right."

"I'll see if anyone at Atlas knows why he was in a hurry."

"That's the general idea." I put the phone down and moved to the big window, thinking it odd the architect had faced the living-room to the side rather than to the front or rear of the house. The snow was still slanting down through the bright lights, but the Cannon house was stark and black and seemed very near.

With Dexter ticketed on the expressway at eight forty-five, it explained why Cannon hadn't seen him, but it gave him only enough time to drive home, spend about five minutes with his wife, hop in his car again, and go over the bridge at nine-ten.

Why had he been in such a hurry to get home? Lucky enough to get there, why go out again on a night like this? If Clyde Poinsby Dexter had behaved with some sense, I wouldn't be here. With nothing else to do, I stood staring at the snow.

The phone rang again.

"Ben, are the Cannons still there?" Grainger's voice was low.

"Still here."

"Be careful what you say then. I called Atlas and located a guy named Eley who was working with Dexter tonight. Had a hell-uva time getting him to talk over the phone until I told him if he didn't I was coming out there for him if I had to use a sled. Dexter was in the computer room working on a problem when he got a

phone call about eight-fifteen. He didn't want to answer, wanted Eley to get the caller's name so he could call back. The caller wouldn't give a name and insisted on talking to Dexter right then. Said it was important. Dexter answered the phone, told Eley he'd be back and took off. Eley said Dexter was mad as hell. He was beginning to worry about Dexter not coming back when I called."

"Who—"

"Some woman. That's all."

"Beautiful," I said.

"Here's another thing for you to chew on. Eley says there was a rumor floating around that Cannon was paying more attention to Mrs. Dexter than to his own wife."

I thought of the footprints in the snow on the patio and the sadness in Betty Cannon's face. "Sounds reasonable," I said.

"Find out who called, Ben. Could have been Mrs. Dexter, but why wouldn't she leave her name? Might be Mrs. Cannon. Whoever it was, it had to be something pretty important for Dexter to leave that computer, according to Eley."

Well, I'd started out wondering what Dexter had been doing out on a night like this and hadn't made any progress yet. Now, at least, I had something to work with.

Cannon was sprawled in an easy chair, a refilled glass in his hand, looking as if he belonged there. Richards had settled uncomfortably at one end of the sofa.

In the bedroom, Mrs. Dexter was still sleeping. Betty Cannon was curled up in a chair, feet pulled up under her, chin resting on a cupped hand, staring at nothing. Ten years gone by, I told myself, and you're no longer the Ben Shamsky who tested his head against the cement wall of a mile oval at a hundred miles an hour and lost, and was brought back most of the way by the small woman sitting there.

"Betty," I said softly, "come into the livingroom."

I took her arm and deposited her on the sofa.

"Mrs. Cannon, did you call Dr. Dexter at eight-fifteen?"

The blue eyes looked puzzled. "I did not."

"But you were alone at that time?"

She nodded. "I was supposed to be on my way to Miami tonight, but the flight was canceled because of the storm. I took a cab home. Since my husband wasn't there, I assumed he was working or delayed getting home, but just before you rang the bell he came in, saying he'd been at the Dexters'."

"Didn't you see your husband's car?"

"I never looked in the garage. I had no reason to."

I turned to Cannon. "So you were here when Dr. Dexter came home."

He didn't blink an eye. "That's none of your damned business."

I crooked a finger at him and led him into the kitchen. "Look, Mr. Cannon," I said wearily, "you've already lied to me once tonight. Don't make a habit of it. You were here when Dr. Dexter came home, here after Dr. Dexter left, here until a few minutes before we arrived. Obviously, you knocked Mrs. Dexter out. Now I can put you in the car and turn you over to Lieutenant Grainger, who has a short temper on nights like this, or I can listen to what you have to say and, if it has nothing to do with the accident, leave it out of my report."

He stared at me for several seconds and shrugged. "Clyde walked in on Linda and me. I couldn't figure how he knew until you mentioned the call. I was sure he'd be tied up with that computer until late. He said I was through at Atlas and every other major electronics firm in the country. Then he told Linda he was getting tired of her adventures and if she didn't behave he'd get a divorce. That was it. He walked out. Linda told me to take off since she wasn't going to jeopardize her position as the wife of the famous Dr. Dexter for some fun with an unemployed electronics engineer. I wasn't going to take that. We argued for a long time until I lost my temper, hit her and went home."

"Who called Dexter and told him you were with his wife?"

"My wife. Who else could it be?"

Who else, indeed? It sounded reasonable. If Betty wanted to lie about a personal matter, that was her business. If Cannon wanted to play around, that was his business, but this time he'd been stupid enough to be caught and in just a few minutes lost his job, his career and his playmate. The only thing that saved him was Dexter going over that bridge; lucky accident for Cannon. I shrugged it off. Even if Mrs. Dexter's version differed a little from his, it wouldn't matter much. He was in the house a good half-mile away, and all it shook down to was that none of this changed anything about the accident.

Emotionally upset and in a hurry to get back to Atlas, Dexter had overestimated his driving ability, and there was nothing unusual about his wife being knocked out after telling Cannon to get lost.

I dialed Grainger. "No point in staying here. Any objections if

Richards and I come on in now?"

"None if all the questions are answered. Don't leave any holes open for Atlas to slip through and make us look bad."

"No worries." I thought of the dim view Atlas would take of Cannon's part in tonight's activities. "Probably cost them another employee, that's all."

I heard him sigh. "I guess I can wait until you get here to find out what that means. That policewoman is on her way. Think it's still necessary?"

"Sure. I wouldn't want the Cannons to stay here all night."

"Okay. Wait until she gets there, then come in." His phone clicked dead.

I wanted to get out of that house, away from the ten years in Betty Cannon's life that led up to this night.

"Need some fresh air," I said to Richards. "You stay here while I get the car warmed up."

I shrugged into my coat and closed the door, thinking of the mess the traffic division was going to have on its hands in the morning, with a few million people trying to get to work. I started toward the car, saw the big hardtop in the garage and stopped. I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully, then slogged down the driveway to our car, switched on the radio and asked for the make and license number of the car Dexter had been driving when ticketed.

It was that hardtop!

I slogged back up the driveway, cursing my stupidity, because I had noticed earlier and then promptly forgot that the hardtop had left one set of tracks going in, the sports car one set of tracks coming out. I found the keys in the ignition and hit the starter. The engine turned over, caught, and purred softly. I turned it off, slid out and switched on the garage light.

The floor where the sports car had been parked showed the usual accumulation of dirt and grease, and something more. I knelt, rubbed a finger through it, smelled it, tasted it. It was brake fluid, and suddenly the ball game wasn't over yet!

Dexter had switched cars, taking his wife's, and the thought chilled my blood more than the cold dampness of the garage. The only person who could gain anything tampering with the brakes on Linda Dexter's car was Betty Cannon, who was conveniently supposed to have flown to Miami tonight, removing her from the vicinity when Linda Dexter would step on the pedal once too often or too hard in that hilly neighborhood.

I felt sick. Betty could do it, too. She knew a lot about cars, one reason we'd become friends in that hospital.

It turned out to be Clyde Dexter's accident, however, something Betty could never have anticipated when she called him tonight. Certainly Linda Dexter would never have called her husband to come home and catch her playing love and kisses with Cannon.

Betty knew it was important that I talk to Mrs. Dexter, but she'd given her a sedative. Compassion for the woman who had taken her husband? Not likely. She just didn't want Mrs. Dexter to get the chance to say anything about that sports car being hers, not Dexter's.

It was no surprise to me that Dexter had taken the sports car. I would have done the same thing, wanting the extra control of that stick shift, low-slung body and those big tires in this slippery mess.

Betty wouldn't have thought of that. She must have been shocked almost out of her boots to see that half of the garage empty when she and Cannon came over earlier.

I stood in the garage entrance, remembering the debt I'd owed for ten long years, and looking for some other explanation for that brake fluid, something I could tell Grainger that made sense.

Cannon and Mrs. Dexter had been isolated in the house since at least five-thirty that afternoon. Suppose, I told myself, they had talked of how convenient it would be if Dexter were eliminated. Suppose they saw the lights on in the Cannon house and realized Betty Cannon never did leave for Florida; and suppose Cannon fixed the brakes on the sports car and Mrs. Dexter called her husband and told him something that brought him rushing home. Suppose they talked Dexter into taking the sports car, if he needed any convincing, then made up the story about the indignant husband and topped it off with the unconscious Mrs. Dexter.

What would happen? Anyone checking it out would run into similar stories from Mrs. Dexter and Cannon, and would assume Betty Cannon called Dexter. Anyone finding the bad brakes on the sports car would assume Betty Cannon did it, because it was Mrs. Dexter's car.

If the idea was to get rid of Dexter and Betty Cannon at the same time, it couldn't have been worked out better.

I shook my head. Only a pair of Grade A nuts would dream up something so complicated and expect it to work. Grainger would never buy it in a million years.

Betty Cannon had made the call, and that's all there was to it.

Kicking the snow from my boots, I pushed into the house. Cannon was dozing in the easy chair, Richards and Betty Cannon talking in the kitchen.

The big window that yawned across the livingroom wall revealed the Cannon house, still yellow-windowed, in the gray distance. To my right were the dimples of footprints from the patio to the Cannon house; to the left were the tracks made when we had returned earlier; and there, glaring at me, was the one thing that might help Betty Cannon. There was only one way she could have known her husband and Mrs. Dexter were together without crossing between the houses, leaving footprints for me to find. She had to see them through this window.

Close the drapes and no one would be able to prove she saw them at all, and if she didn't see them, why should she call Dexter? I started to slide the heavy cloth across the window, then hesitated. What I was doing could cost me my badge if anyone ever found out.

I jerked with guilt when the phone rang. Grainger's voice was smug. "Listen, Ben, just for the hell of it, I decided to check the phone company, because a call to Atlas from either of those houses is a toll call and their records would show it. I did even better than I figured. The Cannon phone has been out, along with a lot of others tied into the same line, since about seven-thirty this evening. Does that mean anything to you?"

Ben Shamsky, knight in shining armor, shield against the world for a small woman who once kept him alive; also dumb cop!

"Sure," I said. "It means you saved my job."

There was a long silence. "Ben," said Grainger wearily, "do you think someday you just might hold a conversation with me that makes sense?"

"Don't go away," I told him. "If you're confused now, wait until I try to explain it to you."

Without a doubt, only a little knowledge is, at best, a risky thing.

HARRY FORTUNE woke up one Saturday morning in May with one thought in mind. He was going to kill Eddie.

Eddie was Harry's fifty-five-year-old sister, Edith, who couldn't have been more appropriately nicknamed when you took into account her masculine swagger, shingled grey hair, voice the timbre of a bullfrog's, and the unmistakable mustache looming over her thin, mean upper lip.

Harry hated her. He couldn't remember a day in his life when he hadn't loathed the sight and sound of Eddie. His earliest memory—he couldn't have been more than five or six—was of an afternoon when she discovered a small, drab, obviously injured sparrow floundering in some tall weeds. Fascinated, Harry watched as Eddie fashioned a cage of boards and chicken wire, made a nest of twigs and grass, and then commanded him to fetch a handful of sunflower seeds, a worm or two, and a shallow tin pan of water.

"Now," Eddie had said, as she settled the sparrow inside the cage and secured the wire, "you just tend to our little birdie real good and maybe we can cure what ails him."

Dutifully, Harry did as he was told. After a week or so, the injury —whatever its nature—seemed to heal and the sparrow began to chirp and hop around its cage.

"And now," Eddie said one day, "we'll see if our birdie can fly." Laughing, she opened the cage. The sparrow hopped out, spread its wings and soared skyward for a moment or two, then suddenly faltered and fluttered to the ground. It took Harry almost another moment to realize why: Eddie had tied a long—but not too long—string to one of the sparrow's legs. Still laughing, she reeled the bird in as she would a hooked fish, and placed it back in the cage, leaving the string tied.

Despite Harry's cries of protest and pleading, which gained him nothing but a sore bottom, Eddie repeated the torture day after day; tantalized the sparrow with a brief taste of freedom, and then relentlessly pulled it back into the cage. So it was almost with a sense of relief that Harry went to water and feed the sparrow one morning and found that in its frantic efforts to free itself from the string it had strangled. Harry wept. Maybe it was then that, subconsciously, he began to think of himself as another helpless sparrow tied to Eddie's cruel string . . .

When, at eighteen, Harry enlisted in the Navy, he promised himself that he would never lay eyes on his sister again, but a German submarine smashed Harry's promise and Harry as well. After spending a year in a veteran's hospital, he finally hobbled home; back to the old frame farmhouse which still squatted in gloomy solitude some fifteen miles from town.

Once there, Eddie saw to it that he didn't "baby himself," as she put it, that he pitched in to help her raise a few scrawny chickens and vegetables, and that each month he endorsed over to her his disability check.

by Alice Scanlan Reach

Things wouldn't be so bad, so lonesome, Harry often reflected dismally, if they just had a TV set. But whenever he ventured this suggestion aloud, Eddie would explode. "Ain't hardly enough money to put food in our mouths and you want a TV! If you weren't such a no-account bumbler you'd know how to fix the radio!"

Harry always subsided after such an exchange. He *had* tried, time and again, to fix the old prewar radio, but his efforts were always, in the end, futile. Sometimes it squawked to life, then quickly lapsed into dead silence.

The only day of the week that could bring a straightening of Harry's thin shoulders and an anticipatory gleam of excitement to his pale blue eyes was on Saturdays. After supper Eddie would hoist her bulk into their battered truck and wait impatiently for Harry to climb in beside her. Their destination was always the same: the nearest farmhouse seven miles down the road, the home of Sheriff Jess Snell, his wife, Ida, and an assortment of offspring. Then, having deposited his passenger, Harry would gun the truck's engine and head for town and the Easy Rest Tavern where invariably the first person to greet him as he crossed the threshhold was—the sheriff.

"Well, here he comes, right on time," Jess would boom out to the general amusement of all. "Henpecked Harry himself!" Whereupon, for the next ten minutes or so, Harry was joshed mercilessly about himself and his sister.

Harry didn't mind. He was too grateful for the warmth of the cozy tavern, the companionship of menfolk, and the sound of their laughter, even if it was at his own expense. He always just smiled, sat down at the bar, and listened to the voices around him while he sipped a couple of beers until it was time to pick up Eddie. And so it went, week after week, year after year, with not a single variation.

Harry knew the exact day and hour when he decided that the only way to get rid of Eddie was to get rid of her. It was shortly after the miracle happened; when Eddie got the letter from Cousin Lucy who lived in Ridgeway, ninety miles away. Playing her usual cat-and-mouse game, Eddie didn't immediately reveal its contents, but kept a sly, smug look on her face for almost a week before she finally mentioned it.

"Cousin Lucy wants me to come for a visit," she announced importantly as she plopped a plate of lukewarm beans in front of Harry. "Reckon you could make do alone?"

"Reckon so." Harry swallowed a forkful of beans.

"Course I'd only be gone a week or two. Maybe three."

"Uh-huh."

"Maybe we could get a TV—on time—to keep you company."

Abruptly, Harry shoved his plate away and got to his feet.

Eddie's marble-size eyes widened with surprise. "Ain't you gonna finish your supper?"

"Had enough." Harry opened the kitchen door and, unseeingly, limped out to the far pasture. It wasn't the first time that Eddie had held out a half-promise of pleasure, a half-hope of freedom.

She knew very well how much he longed for a little privacy, a little comfort, a little peace. She knew!

But what she didn't know, Harry told himself with a great sense of satisfaction, was that this time she wasn't fooling him one bit. She didn't know that less than twenty-four hours after the arrival of Lucy's letter, Harry had discovered its hiding place and read it. Cousin Lucy had made no mention of a visit. Indeed, all she wanted from Eddie was "a bit of cash to tide us over"—a request which would most certainly be ignored.

Harry paused in his aimless wandering and threw himself down among the gently waving wands of grass. How he wished that Lucy really *had* invited Eddie for a visit! How he wished that Eddie would go away not for just one, two, or three weeks, but for good! The grass smelled fresh and sweet, and for a long time Harry lay there smelling the sweetness and staring up at the stars . . .

When he picked up Eddie at the Snells the following Saturday, she'd barely settled herself beside him before she started her taunts.

"Ida says I should pack up and visit Lucy, and I've about made up my mind to do just that."

Harry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and saw the familiar sly smile on her face. He knew she was deriving enormous pleasure out of spinning her fictitious tale to Ida. At the same time, she thought he'd swallowed her lie; that he really believed she was going to set him free. And then, like the sparrow on the string . . .

Lying sleepless that night, Harry had only one thought in his head, the same thought he'd had ever since that night in the pasture; how to get rid of Eddie. He finally fell into exhausted sleep still wondering how, how . . .

Then another miracle happened on the following Saturday as he walked into the Easy Rest Tavern.

"Hey, Harry," Jess boomed. "Ida says you're gonna lose Eddie for a spell. Now ain't that a shame?" The Easy Rest patrons exploded into laughter. "How you aim to spend your spare time?" Jess prodded. This time the laughter was interspersed with acid words of advice and deprecating jibes about Harry's physical prowess.

Harry barely heard them. He had a wild thought that set his heart to hammering and caused him to spill some of his beer. He knew *how!*

When the laughter subsided and his hands stopped shaking, Harry swallowed the last of his beer, got up, and walked out to the truck. He drove out of town until he

reached a deserted stretch of road where he pulled over to the side and cut the truck's motor. Sitting there in the darkness, he worked out every detail. He decided to wait one week—no, two—just to make sure that Eddie would continue to play her vicious game, keep on telling her lies.

Eddie was in a rage when he pulled up at the Snells. When she finally lapsed into silence, after railing at him for keeping her waiting, Harry decided to risk a question.

"You and Ida talk anymore about you visiting Cousin Lucy?"

"Sure did," Eddie snapped. "Told her I might take off any day now."

Any day now! Harry almost smiled.

The following Saturday at the Easy Rest, Jess roared at him from across the room. "Guess you're almost a free man, huh, Harry? Ida says Eddie's gonna take off any day now."

"Yup," Harry replied, calmly sipping his beer. "Any day now."

He was right on time that night to pick up Eddie. She settled herself in the truck and for a few moments neither brother nor sister spoke. Finally Harry broke the silence.

"Ran into Jess at the Easy Rest," he remarked in an offhand manner. "He said you told Ida you were aiming to take off any day now."

Eddie snorted. "Your ears going bad like the rest of you? I've told you a hundred times that I was going to visit Lucy."

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "You told me, but I didn't know you'd told Ida."

"Told you that too! And I told Ida again tonight."

"You did?"

"Course I did."

"Then you really mean it?"

"Now why . . ." A sly smile played around the corners of her mouth. ". . . *Why* would I say a thing like that if I didn't mean it?"

Harry's heart sang. He drove the truck into the old barn, picked up the heavy hammer he'd hidden under the driver's seat, and followed Eddie into the house.

"Guess you'll be mighty sorry to see me go," Eddie said smugly as she turned her back to him to hang her coat and hat on a peg in the darkened hallway. "Guess you'll be sorry—"

Harry swung the hammer and cut her off. He swung it again and again and cut her off permanently. Then he methodically went to work, and as he worked, he whistled. It was almost dawn before he was finished; until there wasn't a trace of his toil and Eddie lay safe

and sound at the bottom of the old abandoned well in the far pasture.

When Harry walked into the Easy Rest the next Saturday, he didn't wait for Jess Snell's usual raucous greeting. "Eddie finally took off for Ridgeway," he announced happily as he signaled for his customary beer.

"That so?" Jess whistled. "Never thought the old girl would make it. Or your old truck."

"Truck?" Harry shook his head. "I put her on the six-fifteen bus last Wednesday. Her and two suitcases." He *had,* in fact, packed most of Eddie's belongings, and they now shared her final resting place.

There was a sudden unaccustomed silence in the room, but Harry was too engrossed in his own happy thoughts to notice.

"You put Eddie on the bus?" Jess said slowly. "Last Wednesday?"

"Yup."

"You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure!" Harry grinned. "And the first thing I'm going to do with my vet check is buy me a TV." Another happy thought struck him. "Come to think of it, maybe I'll get one of those fancy combinations—TV, radio, and hi-fi."

The silence in the room persisted. Only vaguely was Harry aware that Jess was standing next to him.

"Guess your old radio is on the blink again, huh, Harry?" Jess said.

Harry chuckled. "Hasn't been a squawk out of the old box for at least six months."

"Then you wouldn't have any way of knowing."

Harry turned to him, puzzled. "Knowing? Knowing what?"

"That there's a strike on," Jess said heavily. "That there ain't been a bus in or out of here since last *Sunday.*" He placed a firm, sheriff-like hand on Harry's shoulder. "Now, if Eddie's really gone, Harry, suppose you tell me where. Where, Harry?"

Harry stared at him, open-mouthed and speechless, and somehow the only words he could think of were: *sparrow on a string . . .*

And the little dog laughed to see such sport . . .

—Anon.

THE MARQUESA

By Ray Russell

DANNY DANE parked his car in an obscure, tree-canopied covert where it was virtually invisible to the casual eye, and completed the final half-mile of his journey on foot. It was uphill all the way, but the grade was gentle and Danny, though forty-plus, was in good condition; the public paid a mint to see his famous carcass, and he treated it reverently, like any investment.

Night had fallen, but Danny's eyes were masked by great dark wraparound glasses. The air was cool after a hot, dry day, and as he trudged he inhaled luxurious lungfuls of fragrance: lemon, lime, Brazilian pepper tree, the sweet cheap-chocolate-Easter-egg smell of laurel, for all these and more flourished here in the Hollywood Hills.

The house he reached after his short exercise was of moderate size and cost, and what he could see of it in the scant light seemed to be in excellent, if not exceptional, taste. He approached the door, and judged it to be centuries old, imported, Spanish of course, possibly from a monastery, the real thing. There seemed to be no bell, so he lifted the heavy brass knocker and tapped sharply several times. At the sound, frightened birds in nearby trees flapped away, squawking in outrage.

The moments between the rapping and the answer were filled with happy expectation for Danny. He was about to be the guest—the sole guest—of the most exciting woman he had ever met and as Danny might have put it, he had met plenty.

Emphatically Iberian, compounded of numberless dark lustres, a masterwork carved by Nature from some rare lambent aromatic substance, she had been the first person he had seen at Fran Plotkin's party the week before. He had not been able to stop looking at her and, he noted with satisfaction, she appeared to be having the same difficulty as regards his own admittedly luscious, internationally publicized exterior.

When his new young wife, Number Six, was safely out of earshot, Danny had asked Fran, "Who *is* she?"

"Down, boy. You're a newlywed again, remember?"

"Sugar Lump, you know me better than that."

"I do, but does your child bride? Yet?"

"She's got to learn sometime. Come on, Fran, give."

"She's Elena Mendoza, Marquesa de Altamadura."

"Mendoza. Why do I know that name? And a marquesa? I like it. You may not believe this, but I've never . . . Is she a real marquesa?"

"By marriage."

"Does that dirty word mean there's a marques in the vicinity?"

"Well, not exactly the vicinity. Dr. Mendoza is six feet under."

"Groovy. Fran, you must introduce me to this fascinating widow."

"You really are an awful louse, Danny."

"Look who's talking. Your husband's got so many horns growing out of his head he's beginning to look like a sea urchin."

"Danny, she's not one of your bubble-headed starlets who's going to fall over backward and say ah just because The Great Dane looked in her direction. She's an extremely respectable Spanish lady. I don't know why she stayed on here in Pillville after her husband

died; by rights she should be properly ensconced back in the family homestead in Granada or whatever, complete mit mantilla. Face it, man, she's not for you."

"Then tell me this, smart guy—why has she been flashing languorous Latin glances at me ever since I arrived? Do the honors, baby, or I'll get nasty. And you know how nasty I get when I get nasty."

The monastery door was opened by Elena Mendoza herself, more stunning even than the image in Danny's memory.

"Mr. Dane. Come in," she said, with a little smile. Her eyes were black vortices.

"Marquesa," he said, and kissed her hand, and entered.

She closed the heavy door. "I did not hear your car," she said.

"Stashed it half a mile down the hill," he replied. "You see, I pay attention. What you said about discretion, when I phoned you. Your reputation and all that."

"For your sake as well as mine," she reminded him.

He chuckled. "My reputation? Tarnished beyond hope, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps I am too old-fashioned," she said as she guided him toward the livingroom, "but I sent the servants away so there would be no chance of gossip." She offered him strong coffee. "Or perhaps you would like something stronger?"

"This'll do for now. A little later I'd like . . ." his eyes drilled her, ". . . something a *lot* more potent."

"And Mrs. Dane," she said, pouring, "what does she think you are doing this evening?"

"Pea Brain? She thinks I'm playing poker with the boys."

"When you telephoned," she said softly, "I was taken off-guard. I had not expected to see you again after that party. Yet I wished very much to see you again."

He let her talk.

"In your country, it is more easy," she said, and then corrected herself. "Easier. Your women, if they wish to see more of a man, they take the initiative if the man will not. But it is not so with us. I am pleased that you telephoned. I am pleased that you are here."

"No more pleased than I, Marquesa."

"Elena."

"Danny, then."

"Yes. Danny."

"Good! Look what progress we've made in just five minutes."

She did not look at him, her eyes studied the carpet as she said, "I do not know what you must think of me. I am recently widowed and you are recently married, we should not be here together. I

should have been cold to you when you telephoned. Instead, I invited you to come here, and I have conspired with you to make sure no one will know, conspired to be secretive, to deceive your wife. It is shameful of me, but my loneliness and my grief are so immense . . . You must please not think of me as a bad woman."

"No, no, my dear Elena. Only as a warm and beautiful lady. The most beautiful lady in the world." The Dane charm pulsed from him like electronic waves.

She smiled shyly. "I must make a confession. At first I did not plan to attend that party. I still consider myself in mourning. But when Mrs. Plotkin told me you would be there . . ."

"I'm flattered," he said, and he was.

"I have seen you on the screen so many times. I have always had such a—do you say crush?—for you. It was a kind of little joke between me and the marques. My husband was a great doctor, you know, and I was a nurse in a hospital in Madrid, that is where we met. He escorted me to the cinema on our first 'date,' as you say. It was the film in which you rescued the blonde lady from the pirate ship. Ah, you were so brave! All those men against you and you killed them all with your sword! How you swung across the deck on the rope and knocked the pirate captain into the water!"

He laughed. "I've got news for you, Elena. That wasn't me, that was Bill Wallman."

"Bill . . . Wallman?"

Danny smiled and nodded. "Ordinarily, I'd take the credit, but you're something special, Elena; you're not some little star-struck fan in a hick town. Bill Wallman is my—*was* my stunt man, and a dead ringer for me in the longshots. Up close, of course, there's less of a resemblance, but in the dueling scenes, and that rope-swinging stuff, and jumping from one speeding car to another, that sort of thing, that was always Bill. Best in the business. I miss him very much."

"He is dead, this Mr. Wallman?"

"No, he hit-and-run a little Mexican kid with my car a couple of months ago and I'm afraid he's in a jail, poor guy. May I have some more coffee?" Danny did indeed miss Bill Wallman, and not only for professional reasons. Bill had bailed him out of plenty of scrapes in the past, by taking the rap for Danny's drunken brawls and automotive mishaps. Worth his weight in gold, was Bill. After all, there was that clause on Page 8 of Danny's contract: "The undersigned agrees to conduct himself

with due regard to public conventions and morals. He also agrees not to commit any act that will degrade him or subject him to public hatred, contempt, scorn, ridicule or disrepute, or shock or offend the community or violate public morals or decency," et cetera. Bill Wallman had been a real lifesaver, and he would be awfully hard to replace.

"Perhaps," said Elena, "you would prefer some wine?"

"Thank you, yes."

She opened a cabinet. "Oh," she said, "there is nothing very good here."

"Anything at all."

"No. Not for you. You are . . . how did you say it? Something special." She smiled, and he was dazzled. "I know," she said suddenly. "There is one bottle left. Please come with me. It is silly, but I am afraid."

"Afraid?"

"The wine cellar. I do not like to go down there alone."

Danny rose. "A cellar? That's a novelty in Southern California. Lead the way."

"Enrique, my husband," she said as she followed him down the narrow, steep stairs to the cellar, "searched a long time before he found this house. He had come here to teach at the University of California. He was very dedicated about his work, very devoted to the passing on of his knowledge to younger men, but he was still a grandee, a lover of wine, a connoisseur, a man who had to live in a certain way, and he did not give up until he found a house with a real cellar for his wine. There, next to you, is the light switch."

He clicked it and a perspective of dusty bottles came into view, each resting patiently in its niche. Danny stepped forward and began examining some of the labels. A small golden spider, the color of sauterne, skittered away in panic. "You have an excellent cellar," Danny said.

She walked past him and selected a very old bottle. "Ah! Yes, it is here," she said, delightedly. "The oldest existing sherry in the world. Vintage 1750!"

"1750!" echoed Danny, duly impressed. "*That* I've got to sample." He took the ancient bottle from her and turned toward the cellar stairs.

"Wait," she said. "I think there is no corkscrew up there. At least I have not seen it. Since the death of my husband, I have not tasted wine."

It was the perfect cue for him to say, softly, tenderly, "Since the death of your husband, you have not tasted other things, as well. And that is wrong, Ana—I mean Elena—a waste of warmth and

womanhood. A waste of life." He had always liked that line from *King's Captain*. He'd used it, with variations, many times. But why had he said Ana, just now? He knew no Ana . . .

"Here it is" she said with a joyful chirp.

"What?"

"The corkscrew. Open the bottle, please."

"Now? Down here?"

"It is very old. It should not be too much jostled. My husband always said this."

Not without effort, Danny carefully and slowly withdrew the cork that had stoppered the bottle for over two hundred years. It was desiccated by time and dangerously close to crumbling, but Danny performed the act deftly, successfully.

"Here is a glass," she said, wiping the dust from a lone crystal goblet with a cloth.

"Only one?"

"We will both drink from it," she said, and there were unspoken promises in her voice.

We'll drink, say, half the bottle, Danny planned; no more, and then, what with the effects of the wine, and her loneliness, and her hot Spanish blood, and her crush on me, she'll fall right into my arms.

He poured the wine, an ichor of molten amber. She sipped from the goblet, her lips glistening, then she handed it back to him and he drained it in one bravura draught.

"Ah," he said, "like Tristan and Isolde, pledging our troth in the eternal grape, swearing fealty to each other, binding ourselves to . . . Wow, that stuff sure packs a wallop! Do you think it could be spoiled? I mean, 1750, after all. It's gone right to my head. Are *you* all right?"

She nodded.

"Don't feel woozy? Sick?"

She shook her head.

"I wonder . . . if I could . . . just sit down . . . for a minute . . ." He groped toward a stool and settled upon it shakily. Then, as fluidly as if he were a six-foot glob of mercury, he flowed from the stool to the cellar floor. He blinked up at Elena, miles above him, and saw her turn and spit out the wine she had been holding in her mouth. Then he was sucked into oblivion.

Dead, that was it; dead and buried. When Danny felt his personality laboriously swim back to him from infinite distances, he came to that grim conclusion almost immediately. He was in darkness, dense impenetrable darkness. He opened his mouth to speak, to shout, to whisper, but he could do none of these things; his jaw would not even open. It

was shut tight as the jaw of a corpse. He could not move, could not raise his head, could not bend his arms or legs. Dead and buried, that had to be it. Elena had poisoned him, murdered him, buried his body in the cellar. But why? Mendoza, something about Mendoza, but not Elena Mendoza, and not Enrique, something else, something like . . . Ana. That was it, Ana Mendoza. Something about an Ana Mendoza . . .

"Are you awake, Mr. Dane?"

The marquesa's voice came from his right, and he found he could move his head, just a little, in that direction, but not enough to see her.

"Ah, I see you are. Now I wish you to listen closely to me, because it is important that you understand what is happening to you. Perhaps you have already guessed that the wine was tampered with. A simple matter to do so: a long hypodermic needle thrust through the old cork, and a syringe full of a powerful drug emptied into the wine. Drugs and needles and other medical equipment I have free access to, the late marques being a doctor and myself a nurse. You are lying in a bed, the type of bed found in hospitals. You are strapped into

that bed, securely, and you are gagged and you are blindfolded. The bed was brought to this house for my husband, in the last months of his illness. When he died, it was stored in the cellar. You will wish to know why I have done this to you. The reason is revenge. We Spaniards believe in revenge, fervently. It nourishes us. It can make life worth living, a life from which all other reason for living is gone. And we are experts at fashioning revenges, long, elaborate revenges."

The woman's crazy, Danny told himself.

"The first thing you must realize, Mr. Dane, is that you are a missing person, and you will remain a missing person. No one knows you are here. You saw to that yourself, did you not? You told your poor gullible little wife that you were going out to play cards with your male companions. You parked your car half a mile down the hill from this house, and walked the rest of the way. That car has already been moved even farther away, so much farther away that, when it is found, it will never occur to anyone to connect it with me or this house.

"When you complimented me on my cellar, I relished the irony. It is indeed an excellent cellar. It was designed by its previous owner to serve, if need be, as an air-raid shelter, and it therefore has a secret chamber unknown even to the servants, very solidly constructed, air-conditioned, heated, sanitary, and comfortable. A person could live down here behind the wine bottles for a long time. Yes, Mr. Dane, *down here*. You are at present in that cellar; at present and forever."

With a muffled groan of frustration, Danny struggled against his bonds, but he was gripped at neck and chest and belly, at wrists and knees and ankles.

"Those straps are of the stoutest leather, Mr. Dane, half an inch thick, reinforced with steel, secured by a series of padlocks to which only I have the keys."

Sweat stood out on his skin; his veins bulged; he strained massively, twisted in frantic spasms, but he could not budge an inch from the position in which he had been riveted. He stopped, his heart pounding, his nostrils flaring for air.

Her voice now came from his left. "You mentioned, earlier this evening, 'a little Mexican kid' struck down by your Mr. Wallman. That was a double inaccuracy. It was a little Spanish kid—my six-year-old daughter, Ana. And, as I do not have to tell you, it was not Mr. Wallman at the wheel. It was you, was it not, Mr. Dane?

"Oh, yes, it was you." Her voice receded and drew closer, by turns,

as she paced, her heels clicking on the concrete floor. "You were able to deceive the police and the newspapers, but you do not deceive me. A private detective has provided me with a dossier on you as thick as the Los Angeles telephone book. Do not hope that this detective will inform the police of my curiosity when he reads in the newspapers of your strange disappearance; he did this job for me out of heartfelt gratitude to my husband who once saved his life, and that same gratitude will seal his lips. Among other sordid things, I know about your past arrangements with Mr. Wallman—how he has been the whipping boy for your mistakes, your indiscretions, your petty rages, your crimes. He has saved you from just punishment on many occasions, but he will not save you this time. This time you will pay. The people who witnessed that crime *all* said it was the famous film star, Danny Dane, who struck down my child. They recognized you—until your Mr. Wallman 'confessed' and they were persuaded to believe they were mistaken. So, as you had done so often before, you were free to go your way, free to continue stepping on human beings, leaving a trail of grief and pain and suffering, with complete impunity . . . until now.

"As for what you call proof, of course I have none in the legal sense; none that would convict you in a court of law, none that would convince a judge and jury. The proof I have is *here,* in my heart, a mother's heart, and I will be my own judge and jury."

With a sudden surge of strength, Danny tried to topple the bed over, make a noise, smash the locks, but the bed didn't even shake.

"I wish you to understand, if you can," she continued, "what you took away from me when you took away my Ana. Perhaps you are incapable of understanding, you of many divorces, but when my husband died, Ana became all I had in this world. My only child, and the bearing of her made it not possible for me to have more children. In Ana was my whole universe, and when you ran her down with your car—"

All of Danny's soul converged on his vocal chords as he strained to speak, to make words, to communicate with her, but he could muster only a pathetic whimper.

"When you ran her down, that defenseless child, you damaged her little skull, damaged it dreadfully. She should have died, but by an evil miracle, an intervention of Satan, she lived. She lives now, in a hospital bed, paralyzed; unable to move even a finger; unable to speak, unable to see. *A child!* A lit-

tle bright bird of a child, born to frolic and run and play, condemned to the unspeakable agony of immobility, of darkness, of death-in-life!"

She was silent for some time. He could hear her breathe. She was not weeping.

"You will share her fate, Mr. Dane. I am a good nurse and I will take very good care of you, the best of care, just like the fine care with which my child is being treated. For the rest of your life, Mr. Dane. The rest of your life."

Again he tried to talk to her, in vain.

"The doctors tell me there is no way of saying how long Ana will live. A month, a year, two years, five? But however long she lives, Mr. Dane, that is precisely how long you will live. When she dies, you will die. Not before. If I were you, I would pray that she dies soon."

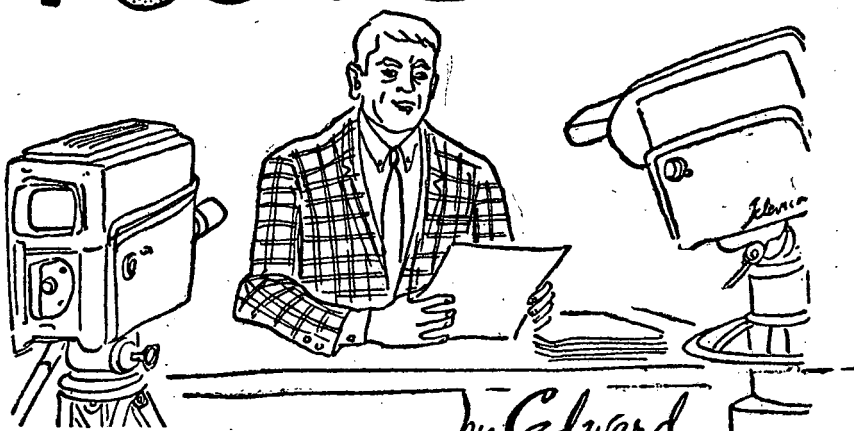
He heard a scraping sound, a wooden chair being pulled to the side of the bed. He heard the rustle of her dress as she sat down. "I wish to be fair," she said. "I wish to deprive you of nothing my daughter has, in the way of comforts. I visit her every day; I will visit you every day. I read stories to her; I will read those same stories to you. You are fortunate, for they are not Spanish stories, they are in your own language. I suppose you will resist this solace at first, but I look forward to a day, perhaps a month from now, perhaps a year, when I will come down here to visit you, after visiting Ana at the hospital, and pull my chair close and tell you that I will *not* read to you that night. I foresee how you will try to say something behind your gag, a pleading sound, for words of any sort, a human voice, no matter whose, some sound of life, some stimulus, something, anything to occupy you, to keep from going totally mad. So I hope you will enjoy the stories, Mr. Dane. They are Ana's favorites. Make an effort to enjoy them. Believe me, you will not enjoy anything else."

He heard pages turn, and he screamed silently inside his skull, Oh God, tell her, somebody tell her, dear God please tell her, make her understand that this time it wasn't me, it wasn't me, it wasn't me, this time it *really was Bill Wallman!*

"'Chapter One,'" she said. "'Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin . . .'"

Proverbially, and mayhap providentially, God never sends the mouth but he sendeth meat.

POOR SPORT



by Edward D. Hoch

JOE DAY had been back from covering the Winter Olympics for more than two weeks, but he hadn't yet resumed the familiar pattern of reporting on the city's somewhat prosaic hockey and basketball matches. He was an outdoorsman by nature, and the confining odors of the arena depressed him more than he wanted to admit.

He did the 6:30 sports show, using the last of the film footage he'd brought back from the Olympics, and then decided that he really should put in an appearance at the hockey game that evening. Jean was filing the scripts and generally cleaning up her desk when he asked, "How about taking in the hockey game with me? I don't think I can face that place alone."

"Sorry, boss. Got a date."

The "boss" was half joking between them, but the date was not. Jean Calmer was a tall and handsome young woman, exactly the sort that a top television sports commentator might be expected to employ as a secretary. She was an expert herself at a half-dozen sports, including golf, tennis and swimming, and knowledgeable in the usually masculine world of pro football and baseball, but her choice of after-hours companions had rarely included Joe Day. Perhaps she only liked to separate her business and personal life, or perhaps a 38-year-old man supporting an ex-wife and three children did not seem like a very good prospect to her.

"Too bad," he told her now, slipping into his topcoat for the brief walk to the arena. "Maybe another time."

"Maybe."

They went down together in the elevator, into the chill February night. He watched her for a moment as she said goodnight and hurried off toward the parking lot down the block. Then he turned up the collar of his coat and hurried off toward the hockey game at Midtown Arena.

The arena was a vast sprawling structure that covered an entire downtown block. It had opened with great fanfare a few years after the war, and subsisted on Golden Gloves boxing and televised wrestling until the city was ready to support big-league basketball and hockey. Unfortunately, the years of ringdom had left their mark on the place. An odor of sweat and stale beer assailed Joe Day as he entered, and he felt the familiar crunch of discarded peanut shells beneath his feet.

"Hi, Joe. Good show tonight."

"Thanks," he acknowledged. The speaker was an elderly man at the press gate, a fellow he'd known for years. Inside there were more greetings, from other press and television people, and from the usual hangers-on.

The game had just gotten started, with the players only a blur of color against the cold white ice. Joe settled down to watch it for a time, making a few notes for the 11:15 broadcast. Presently someone slid into the seat next to him, and he saw that it was Arnie Woolmark, a small-time gambler who was a regular at the arena.

"How are you, Joe? How was the Olympics?"

"You'd know if you'd been watching my show."

"Ha, ha! Same old Joe! Look, I brought you a beer."

"Thanks," Joe said, accepting it reluctantly. Arnie Woolmark always had an angle, even when he

was just buying somebody a beer. He was a thin, sick-looking fellow of about Joe's age. Nobody knew much about his personal life, or cared. He was just one of the assorted characters who was always found where there was a game to be played, a bet to be laid.

"I didn't know hockey was your game, Joe."

"It isn't," he admitted. "At least not in this barn, where they have to start melting the ice in the last period so they'll be ready for tomorrow's basketball."

"So tell me about the Olympics," Arnie urged, sipping his beer. "How was the skiing and the bobsled races? Was there much action—much betting?"

"Arnie, the weather was cold, the girls were beautiful, and I didn't see a single bet placed. It isn't like here, where you can find someone to lay money on most anything." He smiled at the thin little man. "Different climate, you know."

Arnie Woolmark grunted and fell silent. They watched the action on the ice for a time, seeing the home team come from behind in a flash of blades to tie the score. Finally Arnie asked, "Want a little action tonight, Joe? After your broadcast?"

"What kind of action is there in this town? Making bets on how long it takes the ice out there to melt?"

Arnie Woolmark cleared his throat. "I was thinking of a little poker. I know where there's a game."

"Where's that?"

"Back room at the Sauce House. George is running it for some out-of-town visitors. Lot of action."

Joe Day made a note on his pad. "I might stop by later. After the broadcast."

Arnie nodded and stood up as the period ended. There was a general shuffling toward the refreshment stands, and soon Joe realized that the little man would not be returning. Apparently, the only reason for his joining Joe had been to inform him of the poker game at the Sauce House. Well, all right, if his money was that popular with the crowd, maybe he'd let them have some of it.

He stayed through the next period, enlivened only by a brief fight at the far end of the ice, and then went back to the studio to prepare for the 11:15 show.

Jean rarely returned for the late sportscast, and in truth there was no reason why she needed to, but Joe Day often felt letdown as he entered his empty office. Sometimes he would gaze out at the night lights of the city. It was his city, from the golf courses of the East-

way Country Club to the baseball stadium at Sands Field. He knew every crazy turning in its streets, but now that he was alone, with Diane only a fast receding dot of light in his memory, the city no longer held the same fascination it once had. Now his greatest fulfillment came when he was away from it, covering the World Series or the Olympics, journeying to New York for an occasional network spot.

This night, without the strengthening influence of Jean Calmer, there was nothing for him to do but drop in at the back room of the Sauce House. It was, in reality, a large storeroom beyond the kitchen, with a beige-topped poker table beneath a hanging overhead lamp. Joe had been there before. The games often attracted big money and occasionally, as tonight, visitors from New York or Chicago or Vegas.

George Oken was an odd sort of proprietor, for either a restaurant or a poker game. He seemed bored with one and indifferent toward the other, but his fingers on the cards had the knowing touch of the professional gambler. There was no doubt in Joe's mind that the bulk of his earnings came from the gambling activities, since the Sauce House was an occasional eating place, offering a limited menu, prepared in an unmemorable manner.

Oken himself was large and bulky, giving the impression of solid granite. He greeted Joe with a sleepy nod and motioned him through the kitchen to the storeroom.

The crowd already assembled was a familiar one—Arnie Woolmark lounging against a wall, a few local sports and gambling figures at the table, the out-of-towners he'd been told about, and a wealthy insurance man who was known to go for a good game—but as he was introduced around the table, Joe realized that the group was not an ordinary one. One of the out-of-town men was Gordon Charles, a fairly successful television actor with a weekly network action series. Suddenly Joe Day knew why he'd been invited.

"Joe is our local television star," George Oken said by way of introduction. "He has the best sports show in the state. You two should have a lot in common."

"Really?" Charles said languidly. He was a handsome fellow, with a deeply tanned skin that was rarely seen in the north in late February. His suit looked like money, and so did the large diamond on his finger. Joe remembered now an article he'd read in a TV weekly about Gordon Charles and his tendency toward gambling. Per-

haps a back room in a city like this was preferable to the more publicized haunts of Manhattan or Las Vegas.

"Pleased to meet you," Joe said. "I enjoy your show." The last was an untruth, since Joe rarely saw evening television, but it seemed the thing to say.

The game got under way almost at once, with George Oken hovering on the sidelines. For a time Arnie sat in, until the stakes climbed toward a hundred dollars a hand and he was forced to retreat. By one a.m., Joe Day was down about three hundred and beginning to grow uneasy.

Gordon Charles played his cards well, bluffing at the proper times, dropping when he sensed the others were against him. He won and lost, but managed to stay slightly ahead.

"This seems to be your game," Joe remarked once, after the actor had scooped in a sizeable pot.

"Action's my game. I do as well at the track."

George Oken had slid into Ar-

nie's abandoned seat, and now he interjected, "This is the town for action, Mr. Charles. We have a track nearby in the summer, and in the winter there's lots of money riding on basketball and hockey."

"I don't bet local teams, only national." Charles paused in the act of shuffling the cards. "Who do you like in the Raiders-Blues game Saturday night?"

George Oken smiled. "You going to be here for the weekend?"

"I'll be leaving early Sunday morning," the actor said.

"Good! We'll talk about it."

The game continued till well past four o'clock, and by that time Joe had written tabs for more than a thousand dollars. Finally he dropped out. Altogether, it had been a depressing night. Walking through the darkened restaurant to the front door, he noticed Arnie Woolmark behind the bar, helping himself to a free drink.

"How'd you do, Joe?" he asked.

"Great! Just great! I think I'll stick to hockey games after this."

Joe let himself out into a gently falling snow, and walked quickly down to the parking lot.

The following day, Friday, he arrived at the studio early for the evening broadcast. There were some weekend things to be gone over with Jean Calmer, and the usual mail to be opened. He tried not to think of the previous night's activity, and the lost thousand dollars. With the constant pressure of alimony payments, he didn't exactly know where it would come from.

After the late broadcast, when he was alone in the office going over a few letters Jean had left for him, the phone rang. He was surprised to hear Arnie Woolmark on the other end. The little man had never phoned him before. "Joe? How you feeling today?"

"Fine."

"I saw your broadcast."

"Good." He waited for the man to speak. He wasn't exactly in the mood for another invitation.

"I'd like to see you, Joe. Maybe buy you a drink."

Joe Day sighed into the phone. "Sure, maybe someday."

"Right now, Joe. Tonight."

"Where? At the Sauce House?"

"No. Not there."

"I'm pretty busy, Arnie."

"It's important, Joe. It's about last night." He paused for a breath. "You know, about your tab."

"Tell George I'm good for it."

"Hell, he knows that."

"What, then?"

"I can't talk over the phone."

"All right," Joe gave in. "You know Marko's Grill? I'll meet you there in fifteen minutes."

Marko's was a shabby little place where some of the hockey players came after the games. Joe rarely went there, but it was in the neighborhood and it had always been a nice quiet spot for conversation. In the days when Jean had been friendlier, they'd stopped there once or twice for drinks.

Arnie was already there, slouched in a back booth with a beer. He might have been there all evening from the look of him. Joe slid into the booth and signaled for a beer. "All right," he said. "I'm here."

Arnie smiled and took something from his pocket. It was the IOU that Joe had signed the previous night. "Pretty big—one thousand and forty-five dollars!"

"Where did you get that?" Joe wanted to know. "From Oken?"

"You might say he asked me to talk to you about it."

"Then talk. I'm listening."

Arnie averted his eyes, staring hard at the stained wood of the table between them. "It's like this, see. If you could do a sort of favor for us, George might forget about the tab."

"It must be some favor to be worth a thousand dollars."

"It would be an easy thing for you."

"Let's have it. What does he want?"

"Well, tomorrow night when you do your late show . . ."

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow's the Raiders-Blues basketball game in St. Louis. You'll have the final score just before 11:15."

"Probably."

"We want the Blues to win by ten points or better."

Joe knew the Blues were the better team, but the game was a toss-up. "Good luck. Hope they make it."

"If they don't . . . if you get the score off the ticker and the Blues lose or win by less than ten, maybe you could make a mistake when you read it."

Joe Day stared hard at the little man. Finally it was clear to him what they wanted. "You're asking me to report a false score on television?"

"A mistake, just a mistake! Everybody makes mistakes! Look, suppose you read the score and the Blues won it, 108 to 105. You just say 118 to 105 on the television."

"I write the figures on the board as I talk."

"So you write the wrong figure. Who's to know?"

Joe sighed with ill-concealed exasperation. "You're really serious, aren't you? Look, even if I were to go along with your silly scheme, what would it accomplish? The

next news broadcast would have the correct score, and the Sunday morning newspaper certainly would carry it too."

"That's for us to worry about."

Suddenly it was all clear to Joe—too clear. "That actor, Gordon Charles, mentioned wanting to bet on that game. He also said he was leaving town early Sunday morning! What are you trying to pull?"

"It doesn't concern you, Joe. All that concerns you is this tab for a grand. Will you do it for us?

"I've got a certain reputation, you know." He lit a cigarette, his fingers suddenly nervous. "What you're asking me to do is out of the question."

Arnie leaned back in the booth, smiling slightly. "Let me put it a different way. You're a gambler, aren't you? Everybody is. Call this a gamble. The tab gets torn up after your broadcast tomorrow night, provided you have the Blues winning by more than ten points. If they really win by more than ten, you make a thousand bucks for nothing at all."

"What happens when Gordon Charles finds out he was taken?"

"Like I say, maybe he won't be. If he is, he won't know it till the next day, when he's far away. What's he going to do then—sue us? He can't afford bad publicity."

"How much is he betting?"

"That doesn't concern you, Joe."

"It concerns me."

"Ten grand," Arnie muttered reluctantly.

"He's really a betting fool, isn't he?"

"You'll do it?"

Joe stared down at the cigarette between his fingers. Why was he even considering it? Did a thousand dollars suddenly mean that much to him? True, it was a simple enough thing, a mistake of a single digit. And perhaps it wouldn't even be necessary. But if it came right down to doing it, could he? Would he?

"I'm not sure," he replied.

"You don't owe the guy anything."

"That's true," Joe admitted. No more than I owe any man. Still . . ."

"I gotta go," Arnie decided suddenly. "I'll tell Oken you're in."

"No . . . ! Wait!"

Arnie smiled and moved off. He had played Joe like a clever fisherman and now he was certain he'd made a catch.

The following morning, early, Joe phoned George Oken at the restaurant. "This is Joe Day."

"How are you, Joe?" Casual, friendly.

"I was talking to your boy Arnie last night, and I'm afraid he might have gotten the wrong idea."

"Oh? How's that add up, Joe?"

"I'm not in. The deal's off."

Silence. A full twenty seconds of silence. Then, "Joe, it's too late to call it off now. The deal's been made. The bet's on. Joe, if I lose that ten grand, I'll damn well take it out of your hide."

The line went dead, and Joe sat for a moment with the telephone in his hand before he finally, reluctantly, replaced the receiver. It was going to be a long day.

The station routine on Saturdays was a bit different and slower-paced. For one thing, there was no early sports show. Joe only had to go in for the 11:15 roundup, which came on after the movie and the news. Jean Calmer was sometimes there on Saturday nights too, if she didn't have a date. It was on Saturdays, in fact, that they'd stopped for their occasional drink. Lately they hadn't stopped at all, but this night she was there, efficient as ever, working silently at assembling the scores as they came over the news wire. He was especially glad to see her tonight.

"Hi! No date?"

She smiled up at him from her desk. "He came down with the flu or something. Just my luck!"

It was twenty minutes before air time. "All the basketball in?" he asked, a bit too casually. "The Raiders-Blues game?"

She checked down the list. "St. Louis is an hour behind us. All I have so far is a half-time score, Blues 58, Raiders 45."

He breathed a little sigh of relief. If only it could keep on that way, if only he wouldn't have to make the decision—"It'll be too late for the show."

"We should have a final any time now." She glanced at her watch, then returned to the chattering machine.

He sat down and lit a cigarette and thought of those ten men playing a game of basketball a thousand miles away. He knew a few of them by name, had interviewed some of the Raiders once, but now he could not even conjure up their faces. They were mere blurs in his memory. He ran over the other scores and the general sports news, but his mind kept returning to the game that would just be ending in St. Louis. Such a simple thing, really. A simple mistake they were asking him to make. No one could arrest him for it, no one could prove a thing. He owed nothing to a second-rate television actor who probably had money to burn—but he'd never done anything like this before.

"Are you all right, Joe? It's five after eleven."

He glanced up at her, tried to smile. "Sure. Stomach's a little off,

that's all. Too many late hours."

"I've got the final on the Raiders-Blues."

"Did the Blues hold that lead?" His heart was pounding as he asked the question.

She shook her head. "They lost it in the final minute. Raiders won, 105 to 103."

All right, there it was.

Not just a matter of changing a digit. The entire score would have to be changed, the entire result. It couldn't be done. He couldn't do it. Couldn't-couldn't-couldn't!

"Good evening, friends. This is Joe Day with all the latest stars and scores in the world of sports. Saturdays in February are usually limited to basketball and hockey, but today there was news from baseball's spring training camps, a sure sign that the warm weather can't be far away."

The show ran ten minutes on Saturday nights, with a 60-second commercial break halfway through. He gave the spring training news first, then started rattling off the scores just before the break. The last few minutes of the show would be a tape of an interview he'd done earlier in the week.

He reached the Raiders-Blues score just before the commercial. "I'm sorry to report that wire trouble prevents us from bringing you the final score of the Raiders-Blues game. I'll be back in just a moment with an interview with tennis champ Happy Clark, who was in town earlier this week. Now a few words about the beer you may be drinking . . ."

He relaxed as the filmed commercial rolled, reaching for a cigarette as his eyes sought Jean in the control room. He was off the hook. He'd gone down to the line and pulled it off. He . . .

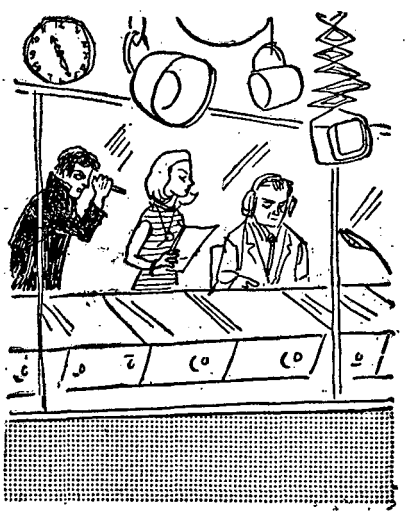
Suddenly Joe saw someone—little Arnie Woolmark—standing behind Jean and the engineer in the control room. What in hell was he doing there?

Joe read the message in Arnie's eyes all too well. Oken hadn't taken any chances. He'd sent Arnie to insure his ten thousand dollar wager. How? The idea of Arnie with a gun was laughable, and yet . . .

The cameraman signaled to Joe, and the two little red lights blinked into life on the front of the color camera. He was back on the air. He stared down at the score, then back to the control room. Arnie had taken something from his pocket and was standing behind Jean. Then Joe saw that it was a switchblade knife.

The cold fury that gripped him made the script blur before his eyes. He realized he'd been on camera for some seconds without

speaking and somehow he found his voice. "We have a score now from St. Louis on that important Raiders-Blues game. It looks as if the Blues won it, with the final score Blues 123, Raiders 105. And now here's an interview with that great tennis star—"



He didn't even hear the rest of his words. As soon as the introduction was over and the tape was rolling he left his desk and blackboard and walked quickly to the outer office.

He was pouring himself a glass of water from the carafe when Jean hurried out of the control room with Arnie behind her. "Joe, what happened to you? That score wasn't—"

Arnie, smiling slightly, and still holding the switchblade palmed in his right hand, said, "That was the smartest thing you ever did in your life, Joe."

"No, Arnie. *This* is the smartest thing I ever did in my life—" and he swung the water carafe with all his might at Arnie Woolmark's head.

George Oken was seated at his office desk, just off the bar at the Sauce House. Gordon Charles was there too, but the built-in television set was a darkened square in the wall. Oken glanced up, just a bit annoyed, as Joe Day walked in without knocking.

"Joe! We just finished watching your show. You do a great job with it."

"Not so great for me," Gordon Charles said. "I dropped ten thousand on that damned basketball game—the Raiders and the Blues."

Oken, trying to smile, said, "Would you believe it, Joe? He wanted to pay me by check! I'm finally getting the cash out of him, though."

Joe had closed the office door behind him and was leaning against it. He stared at the thick flapping of hundred-dollar bills in the actor's hand. "You should have left your set on a bit longer, George. We interrupted the late movie with a

correction on that score. The Raiders won it, 105 to 103."

There was dead silence in the office, and the clatter of glasses from the bar came clearly through the walls. Finally Gordon Charles spoke. "You hear that, Oken? You owe *me* ten grand!"

George Oken's pale eyes had not left Joe's face. "What are you trying to do, wise guy?"

"Just tell the truth, that's all. The Raiders won, and you lost your bet."

Oken kept staring at him. "I'll kill you for this, Day."

"I don't think so. Especially not after saying it in front of a witness."

"Where's Arnie?"

"He might be in the hospital by now. I hit him pretty hard."

"I don't know what this is all about," Charles said, "but you'd better have that money for me, George, or I'll sure as hell spread the word."

"Don't worry," Oken said. His eyes finally left Joe's face. The tension in the room eased a bit.

Outside, at the bar, Jean Calmer was waiting. "Buy me a drink, mister?"

"Not here. Somewhere else."

"What was it all about, Joe?"

"I'll tell you over a drink. I guess they just made an honest man of me, that's all."

Outside, it was starting to snow, big white flakes that clung to their faces. "Joe, it's not good to have George Oken for an enemy in this town."

He smiled and turned up his collar against the snow. "It's a lot better than having him for a friend."

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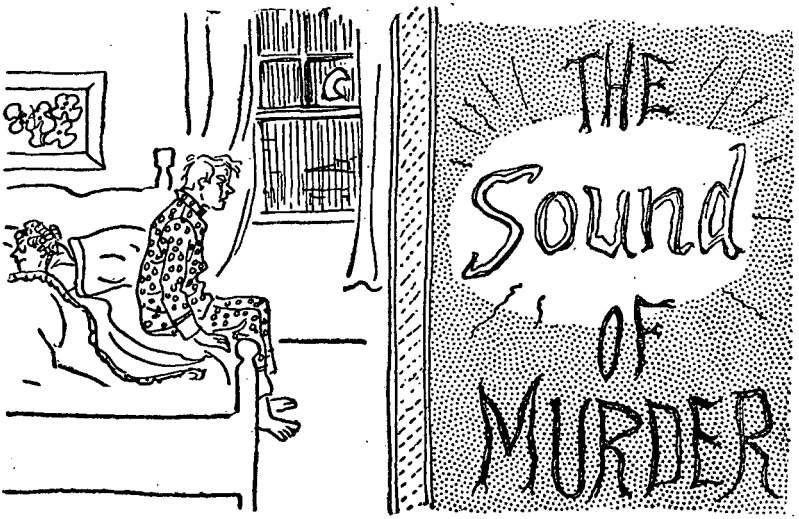
I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

There seems to be some justification that it is more practical to "Know other people" than to "Know thyself."



By Robert Colby

OWEN KENDRICK had not been asleep beside his wife though it was after two in the morning. He had been listening to sounds filtering from the next apartment beyond the thin walls of their bedroom. When he heard the man sobbing he got up suddenly and pulled on his clothes. As he was leaving he caught Elaine by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake. Nothing less would awaken her.

"I think that woman next door is in trouble," he told her. "A while ago I heard a sound like a shot, and then a man sobbing. I'm going over there."

Elaine sat up. "You probably imagined it. Anyway, I wouldn't

interfere, Owen. No telling what you could get into."

"I'm going over," he repeated.

In her pale blue nightgown, a slight, short-haired blonde with sharp little features, she went to the door with him. "Be careful!" she said softly.

Owen danced lightly down the three flights of stairs and went out. It was a great complex of three-storied, red-brick apartments; old, square buildings as graceless and practical as barracks, and the woman's apartment from which the disturbance had come was in the next building, abutting the Kendricks'. The walls were of such flimsy construction that sounds above normal conversation were clearly audible.

He followed the walk to the adjoining section and entered, climbing the three flights of stairs on the balls of his feet. At the door to 401 he pressed his ear and listened for nearly a minute. He heard nothing further and now he couldn't make up his mind. He lifted his fist to knock, hesitated. Waiting there in an absolute vacuum he decided that having come this far it was time to go in.

Owen pounded with determination and when there was no answer he tried the door. It opened upon a livingroom identical to their own.

The man had been pacing toward a window. He paused and turned to stare over his shoulder, his face starkly outlined beneath the glare of an overhead fixture. It was obvious that he was in a state of shock, that he had been weeping. "Who're you?" he said tonelessly.

"A while ago," Owen replied, "I was quite sure I heard a shot."

"There was no shot," said the man. "Not in *this* apartment." He turned completely and advanced a few steps toward Owen.

"Before the shot," Owen continued, "I heard a woman pleading hysterically."

"What woman?" said the man. "I'm alone here." A thickly built, heavy-chested man who had curly brown hair invaded by patches of gray, he had a strong face with a boldly thrusting jaw. He wore an expensive dark blue suit.

"I also heard a man sobbing," Owen said. "What's happened here?" He stepped in and closed the door.

"You must be mistaken," said the man.

"I'm not mistaken. Our bedroom is just the other side of this apartment and the walls are not exactly soundproof."

"You have no business here," the man said in a voice drained of emotion. "Get out."

"Where is the young woman who lives in this apartment?" Owen demanded. "I don't know her name but I've seen her coming and going."

"Miss DiCarlo," he replied. "She's out of town. We're old friends and she often lets me use her place. Now beat it—I'm not going to tell you again."

Owen nodded. "All right. We'll let the police handle it. I'll call them." He backed toward the door.

"Sit down," said the man. "We'll talk about it."

"Is there something to talk about?"

"Yes. I want you to understand the situation. Then, if you want to call the police, will a few minutes make any difference?"

Owen shrugged. He found a chair near the door and sat.

The man slumped on the sofa and for several moments, head lowered, remained silent. Then he said, "Believe me, I didn't kill her. She was dead when I got here just a few minutes ago. But for reasons which now I suppose I'll have to explain, I can't become involved in this."

Owen sat rigidly still. He kept his face blank. "Where?" he said. "Where is she?"

"Bedroom;" said the man.

"Show me," said Owen.

"No! I can't go in there again."

"You don't have much choice. I'm not leaving you out here to run off."

"If I wanted to run off," said the man, "you couldn't stop me. I'll be right here when you come back."

Owen got up and moved through a short hallway to the bedroom, from which a pale light seeped through a partly opened door. At the threshold he took a deep breath and entered.

She was lying on the bed in a negligee, one arm flung across her chest, the other at her side with the hand balled up into a tight fist. She was a young woman, still in her twenties, with jet dark hair at shoulder length, enclosing a face that was prettily fashioned but for slightly bucked teeth, their protrusion exaggerated in death by lips drawn back in a grimace.

Her eyes had been a lovely azure blue. One of these, the left, was sprung widely open in the fixed stare of oblivion. The other was much more grimly vacant since it was entirely missing, having been drilled back through her skull by a bullet apparently fired from a gun held at little or no distance.

Owen wheeled at once and left the room. He found the stranger exactly as he had left him, slouched over with his hands between his legs, head bowed. Owen regained his chair and for a space neither

spoke but sat in morbid silence.

"I'm going to be sick any minute," Owen told the man, "so whatever you have to say, make it fast. What's your name?"

"Magruder. William Magruder. I'm president of a realty company under the same name. We own and manage a score of apartment and office buildings in town. Beverly, Miss DiCarlo, was a legal secretary. She worked for my attorney and I saw her frequently. Sometimes she brought legal papers for me to sign. We became close, I fell in love with her."

He sighed, worked one hand inside the other, as if smoothing on gloves. "It's a time-worn situation. I loved Beverly and if I had met her long ago . . . But I have a wife and children whom I also love. Further, I own a multimillion dollar business and the complications were enormous.

"I did many things for Beverly in a financial way—bought her a new car and clothes, refurnished her apartment, supplied her with more money than she could ever make. She refused to quit her job, wouldn't budge from this apartment. She felt that our relationship would end sooner or later and she didn't want to make any drastic changes in her pattern of living."

"That brings us to tonight," said Owen.

"Yes. Well, I had been working late on some tax matters with my accountant. I was planning to stay at a hotel where I have a suite the year round, because I live nearly two hours drive from the city. We quit about eleven, then we had something to eat and we talked shop over a couple of drinks.

"Shortly after one, on an impulse, I called Beverly and told her I was coming out here. She sounded strained. She spoke haltingly, as if she couldn't find words to explain that she was tired and didn't want to see me. I'm afraid I was insistent and a bit angry. I said I was on my way and hung up.

"Now, I'm positive that when I talked to her there was someone here. Probably she told him to leave and probably she was forced to explain that she had someone else on the string who came first. There was an argument and the man killed her. When I arrived she was just as you saw her." He paused. "Do you believe me?"

"I don't know. Why should I believe you?"

"Because, my friend, if I were the killer, you wouldn't be alive at this moment. One more life would mean nothing to me. Since only you could identify me, I would get rid of you without hesitation. Isn't that perfectly logical?"

Owen nodded agreement. "I

suppose that's true," he said wryly.

"You suppose? That's not good enough. You must *know!* You must be positive!" His voice rose. "Look here, Mr.—"

"Kendrick, Owen Kendrick."

"Well, look, Kendrick, I have a gun in my pocket. See?" He produced a snub-nosed .38 revolver. "When I'm out late at night I often carry this gun because once I was attacked and robbed." He extended the gun carefully, until it was pointing directly at Owen. "Now, if I had murdered that dear girl with this gun, wouldn't it be the most natural and logical thing in the world for me to shoot you dead here and now so that you would not be a witness against me?"

"Maybe, maybe not," said Owen. "But I'm not impressed by the .38, so you can put it away."

Magruder stood and approached with the gun. He held the weapon so that the barrel was barely an inch from Owen's face. "I wonder if I can imagine what thought is passing through your mind at this very moment, Kendrick. Among other things, it has certainly occurred to you that this could be the very same gun which killed poor Beverly. Am I right, Kendrick?"

"I don't know," he said. "How could I know?"

"How could you know!" Magruder thundered. "Your nose should tell you, of course. If this gun had just been fired, there would be the smell of gunpowder. Can you detect a trace of that smell?"

Owen sniffed reluctantly. "No," he said honestly, "There is no smell of gunpowder."

"Of course not!" said Magruder. "Because this is not the gun which killed her. She had her own automatic which she kept here for protection. It used to be in the drawer of her night table, but now it's missing. Obviously, someone knew it was there and used it to kill her."

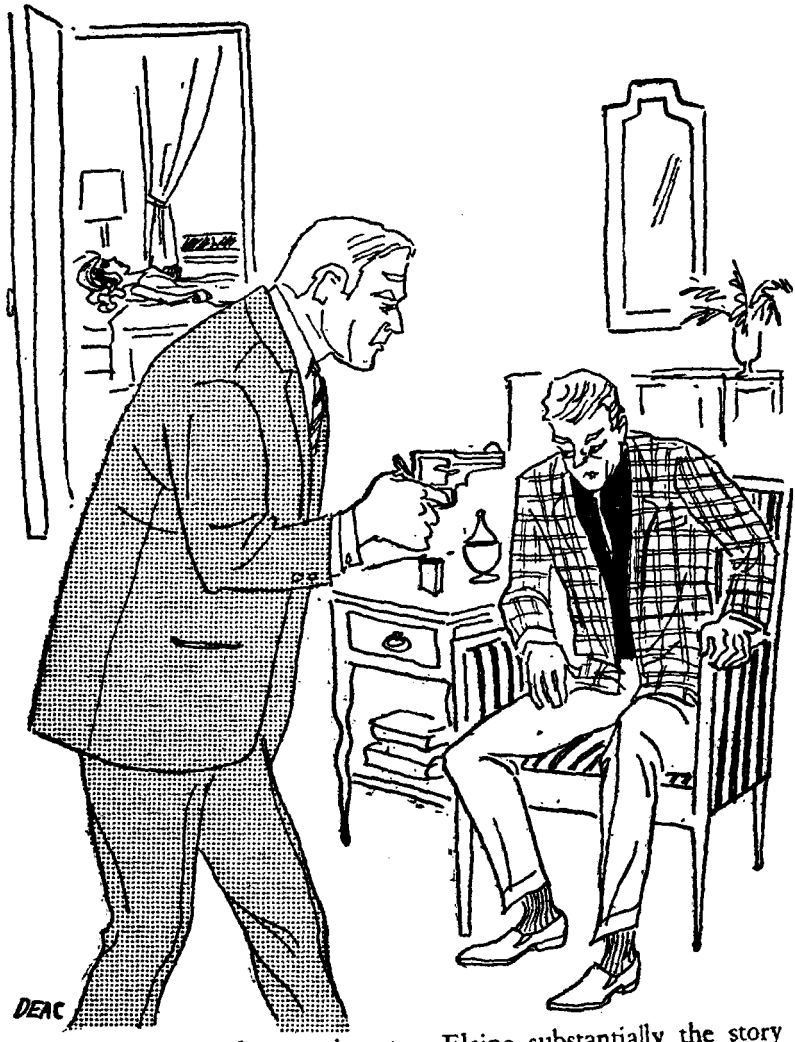
He lowered the .38, put it in his pocket, returned to his chair. "I didn't mean to scare you," he said quietly. "I simply had to convince you, that's all. It's been a dreadful shock and I'm a bit off balance. Sorry."

"My wife is waiting," said Owen. "She knows that I heard a shot and came over here to investigate. If I don't get back soon she may become alarmed and call the police."

"The phone is over there," said Magruder. "Tell her there's been a little trouble but nothing serious. A gun went off by accident. You'll be home in ten minutes."

Better to play along, Owen decided. He moved toward the phone.

"Don't touch it!" Magruder warned. "Use your handkerchief.



We don't want to leave prints to confuse the police, do we? I've already wiped clean anything I might have touched."

Owen lifted the receiver with his handkerchief and dialed. He gave Elaine substantially the story suggested by Magruder.

"Of course," said Magruder, as Owen again sat down, "you'll have to tell her the truth later. But for now, it's better this way. Just one

more thing. If you'll look on the table beside you, you'll notice a cigarette lighter. I saw it there when I came out from the bedroom. Don't touch it because I'm sure the prints of the man who murdered Beverly are on it. Just bend down and look, especially at the monogram."

It was a handsome gold pocket lighter, slender, streamlined. Between two ruby-like stars across the face of the lighter there was a monogram. Leaning close under the light of the lamp, Owen was able to read the initials, L.G.

"I have one just like it," Magruder said. He crossed the room and handed an identical lighter to Owen. It bore Magruder's initials. "She got mine when she was on vacation," he said wearily, taking the lighter from Owen and going back to his chair. "It seems now that she bought both lighters at the same time and gave that duplicate to this other man." He sighed. "I'm sorry for Beverly, of course. But now that I know she betrayed me, my one thought is to protect myself and my family. The relationship I had with her was an absolute secret from everyone, and it's got to be kept a secret at any cost."

"D'you have any idea who this man is with the initials L.G.?" Owen asked.

"No. She kept him secret from me. And until tonight, I don't think he knew I existed, either. Even so, she wouldn't have given him my name. She was too clever to risk losing a sucker like me as long as I kept the money coming."

"Well," said Owen, "none of this changes my position. Are you asking me to forget that I saw you here minutes after the woman was murdered?"

"Yes. Emphatically! The police will catch the man who murdered her, and since I'm innocent, it serves no purpose to expose me in a messy front-page scandal that will break up my home, destroy my reputation and hurt my business."

"Even if I were positive you didn't kill her," said Owen, "it would be a lot to ask of me. If I were caught concealing facts from the police I might go to prison as an accessory. Further, I'd have to convince my wife that she should also keep silent."

"There's nothing so convincing as money when you don't have it," said Magruder. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm assistant manager in a drugstore around the corner."

Magruder nodded. "If you'll come to my office at noon tomorrow, I'll have something for you. Not a bribe, mind you; just a gift

to reward you for helping me at the most crucial time of my life. Shall we say ten thousand? In cash?"

At this time Owen Kendrick had slightly more than three hundred dollars in his checking account, most of which would be depleted by current bills. In his whole life he had never been able to save more than a thousand dollars, this for the express purpose of buying a secondhand car. To have a sum of five thousand all in one piece had been one of the dream goals of his existence, and ten thousand, in his limited mind, was the key to paradise.

Nevertheless, he hesitated. This was partly because he was numbed by the offer, and partly because he did not want Magruder to glimpse the truth—that for ten thousand his loyalty and silence could be bought instantly, even to shield the truth in a case of murder.

"Well," he said after a proper interval of pursing his lips, frowning and gazing upward into space for heavenly guidance, "that does seem a rather generous offer, and since there's a lot at stake here, I'm inclined to accept. However, I want you to know, Mr. Magruder, that if for one minute I thought you really had—"

"Exactly," said Magruder. "Shall we consider it settled, then?" He got up quickly and gave Owen his card. "At noon tomorrow, Kendrick." He smiled gravely and stuck out his hand.

A few minutes later, in a wild gush of words, Owen was relating the entire episode to Elaine. ". . . And when he pointed that gun at me, then came over to my chair with a look of murder in his eye and stuck the barrel right under my nose—I tell you, Elaine, I was certain he would kill me. But I was as cool and calm as vanilla ice cream."

"Ten thousand!" said Elaine, sipping her coffee and reaching across the table for a sweet roll. "If we lived to be a hundred, and saved every spare penny, we'd never have that much money all in one gorgeous pile!"

"Yeah," said Owen with a grin. "Ten thousand green friends all waiting to obey our slightest command." He was thoughtful. "But d'you think he did it? How can we be sure?"

Elaine shrugged. "Who knows? And at this point, does it really matter?"

Next morning, Owen phoned in sick. Promptly at noon he stepped off the elevator onto the thirty-first floor, all of which was devoted exclusively to the William Magruder Company. Then, feeling as if the night's frantic dream were

merely continued with a change of scene, he moved across the burgundy carpet to the quiet dignity of the reception area.

A blonde girl asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"My name is Kendrick, Owen Kendrick."

"Oh yes, sir. Mr. Magruder is expecting you. Through the double doors, turn right and follow the corridor to the end. Last door on your left, sir."

Mr. Magruder's secretary was gray, solemn and crisply polite. "He's waiting for you, sir. He has an appointment for lunch, so we'll have to hurry." She announced him on the intercom.

William Magruder sat behind a teak desk in a corner office larger than the Kendrick livingroom. His blue suit had been replaced by a charcoal gray, and in the new setting he did not seem a man recently exposed to murder and the threat of ruin. Owen Kendrick might have been an insurance salesman granted a grudging three minutes of the great man's time before lunch.

Magruder did not rise or say a word of greeting. He simply nodded toward a chair and immediately reached into a desk drawer, removed a cardboard portfolio and handed it silently across the desk. Owen fiddled nervously with the string and lifted the flap, exposing bills in large denominations. He was tempted to count, or at least finger, the bills but did neither. Instead he closed the flap and tied it awkwardly.

"Ten thousand, as agreed," Magruder said, and waited, his face stonily composed.

"Yes," replied Owen, "as agreed. Rest assured, Mr. Magruder, and I speak also for my wife, your secret will always be safe with us."

"I'm sure of it," Magruder answered with a tight smile.

"But as I said last night, Mr. Magruder, no amount of money could persuade me if I thought for a minute that you really had—"

"Precisely," said Magruder with a curt wave of dismissal. "I knew at once that you were a man of integrity and there's no need to discuss it. In fact, from this moment there is no need for any further contact between us. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now if you'll excuse me . . ." This time he did rise from his chair but when Owen extended his hand, Magruder seemed unaware. Well, Owen was not sensitive. Besides, the warmest friends a man could ever have were tucked under his arm when he left.

The body of Beverly DiCarlo

was discovered late the same afternoon and the story broke in the morning papers. The police had at least one good lead and expected an arrest within twenty-four hours, it was reported. Sure enough, a certain Lyle Gaddis, whose initials were on a lighter found in Miss DiCarlo's apartment, was hustled off to jail that evening. He was an auto salesman who had sold Beverly DiCarlo a new car. His business card had been found in her desk. When confronted with the lighter, he readily admitted that it was his, that she had given it to him as a gift.

After an argument, which had to do with her refusal to marry him or to date him exclusively, he had returned the lighter and had not seen her for nearly a week, or so he claimed. However, Gaddis was booked and held for the Grand Jury when it was found that a .22 caliber automatic was registered in his name. The shell casing from such a gun had been ejected near Beverly DiCarlo's bed, the matching slug had come to a halt in the mattress beneath her head.

At his trial, Lyle Gaddis testified that he had loaned the pistol to Miss DiCarlo when she told him that a strange man had followed her home one night. She had kept the gun in the drawer of her night table, Gaddis said. It was never found.

Despite his further testimony that, under pressure, Beverly DiCarlo had confessed to him that she was involved with another man who supplied her with money and gifts, including the new car, Gaddis was convicted when no such man could be named or produced by his defense. He was sent to prison for life.

Meanwhile, Owen and Elaine Kendrick leased a furnished house in an exclusive area, Owen left his job and rented an impressive new car to bolster his status in the community. They soon discarded old friends and acquaintances in favor of their new neighbors, and Owen gave himself a fictional background in Big Business on the West Coast, pretending to be retired prematurely with an income from shrewd investments. To buttress their position, the Kendricks gave intimate little parties for selected couples.

It was not nouveau riche extravagance; there was a plan. Owen was convinced that one of the specially cultivated executives among the group would offer him an important position. Thus, from time-to-time he planted hints that he was becoming bored with idleness and regretted his decision to retire in the very prime of his life.

Casually, he implied that he would be open to an offer in the top echelon of business, providing the offer were an exciting one at a salary commensurate with his ability.

Owen, a good-looking sort who had a way with women, turned his full charm upon the wives of the high 'brass he was conning, especially when these were young and attractive types. Elaine grew jealous and there were some stormy battles, though she had the good sense to hold her temper until they were alone. Owen defended himself, with a degree of honesty, that it was all part of the plan; any fool knew that very often the best approach to a man was through his wife. He merely neglected to mention that he was thoroughly enjoying this particular phase of the game.

The scheme might have worked if Owen had not overplayed his part. He had been a bit *too* charming with the wives of certain moguls, while others could not find a spot for him that was worthy of his own estimate of himself. Openings for key executives were rare, they apologized. Since it was too late to downgrade himself, Owen simply smiled and shrugged and said that he could afford to wait.

In spirit, at least, he could wait forever; in practical truth he could not hang on much longer. Nearly six months had passed and, after all expenses, there was barely a thousand in the bank, and a mountain of bills.

"What on earth shall we do now?" Elaine said on a dreary morning when the skies had delivered rain in sobering buckets beyond their bedroom window. "If we don't do something fast and terribly clever, we'll have to sneak away to some bug-trap hovel while you find a job as clerk in a drugstore."

"Me in a drugstore?" Owen howled. "Only idiots and flunkies work in drugstores. I've had it with that way of life!"

"Well, you're the big, big brain," she sneered. "You got us into this. C'mon, big brain, get us out. You knew it was coming to an end. Didn't you think of the future? Didn't you once look ahead?"

"Ahh, be quiet," he said. "I've known all along what I'd have to do if it ever came to this."

Abruptly he got up and began to dress in his best blue suit.

"I was rather expecting you," said William Magruder from behind his teak desk. He looked neither angry nor disturbed. With a silver pocket lighter, he flamed a cigarette and leaned back com-

fortably in his swivel chair. "Yes," he continued, "sooner or later, you were bound to come back. They always do."

"They?" said Owen.

"Your kind, that is." Magruder smiled, not unpleasantly.

"My kind? I resent that, Magruder."

"What you resent," said Magruder in a yet reasonable tone of voice, "is that you didn't have what it takes to hold your seat on the gravy train to the end of the line." He paused, allowing smoke to drift in lazy plumes from his aquiline nose. "You know, Kendrick, people who stumble across the kind of money they could never earn seldom have the ability to hold onto it. Perhaps, in their foolish optimism, they believe that having smiled once, the gods will smile again and again, to infinity."

"Never mind the lecture," said Owen, uneasy in the face of the imperturbable when outrage was expected. "All I want from you is another ten thousand."

"Therefore," Magruder went on, "knowing that you would return when the well went dry, I was prepared for you. I made a couple of phone calls to learn the alternatives in handling a situation like this. There is only one. Either you appease a dangerous enemy, or you destroy him. I chose to appease—just once more. Remember that!"

He opened a bottom drawer and after a moment of searching produced an envelope. He passed it across the desk to Owen. It contained a signed check for five thousand, made out to Owen Kendrick.

"You mean," said Owen, "that you had this check here for me all this time!"

"Oh yes," he answered. "I made it out the very next day after you left. You see, I knew exactly how much extra I was willing to be taxed for your silence. It's worth another five thousand to me, not a penny more. Not that I can't afford it, but I have no intention of being caught and held in a web of blackmail which would certainly continue and escalate without end. Five thousand—that's my absolute limit. Come back again at your own risk."

"Is that a threat?"

"Yes. Definitely! It's more than a threat, it's a fact. All but the final arrangements have been made. With one phone call, I can buy two murders in the most professional style. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," said Owen; and he did.

"Now, I'm going to give you and your wife three days to get your affairs in order, and then I want you to leave town. You will

place yourselves at least a thousand miles removed, and there will be no return. Understand?"

"Perfectly," said Owen, and put the check in his pocket.

"D'you think he was bluffing?" asked Elaine as she studied the check. "Would he really have us murdered?"

"No, I don't think he was bluffing, and yes, I do think he would have us murdered."

"In that case," said Elaine, "he probably did shoot that woman. Would he pay fifteen thousand to keep us from talking if he hadn't? Would he be willing to have us killed to shut us up permanently if he were innocent?"

"I don't know," said Owen, "and I'd prefer not to think about it too carefully."

She looked up sharply. "Why?"

"Because if he murdered Beverly DiCarlo, the wrong man was sent to prison."

"I see what you mean," she answered. "Well, let's get packing, shall we?"

They moved to San Diego. In case of trouble, it was close to the Mexican border. Having learned how quickly money can vanish when not supported by income, Owen banked the five thousand, then went out in search of a drugstore with an opening in management. Before their marriage, Elaine had been a traveling representative for a cosmetics firm; she found a similiar job. Her territory was within the state. Sometimes she was gone three days, occasionally she stayed an entire week.

For Owen it was a made-to-order situation. Long since bored with Elaine, it gave him a chance to play the field without the risk of leaving her. That would be dangerous. She knew too much about him and, in vengeance, she might find a way to have him jailed as a blackmailing accessory to murder.

It was at a time when Elaine was in Sacramento that Owen took his latest conquest to a night club in a hotel fronting the ocean at nearby La Jolla. In contrast to Elaine, the girl had beautiful tar-black hair which tumbled down below her shoulders in scented waves. They danced to moody music in slow tempo, provided by a five-piece combo; very romantic, with the waves pummeling the shore just below.

There was an intermission, and they sat at a table by an open window. He lit her cigarette with a smartly designed gold lighter set with two ruby-like stars, then placed the lighter on the table. She gazed at it curiously for a moment, then picked it up.

"What a beautiful lighter!" she said. "I've never seen one quite like it." She held it close, squinting. "Complete with your initials, too. My, my, where did you get it?" Her jealous little smile hinted of intrigue.

"It was a gift," he replied. "Came across it today when I was going through a lockbox of secret mementos. I'd almost forgotten that I had it. Then, on a whim, I brought it along tonight."

"I suppose some pretty girl gave it to you."

"Well, I used to think she was pretty. But that was long ago and she turned out to be a horrible person—sadistic. I was in love with her, even after I learned that she had a couple of other guys in her stable. She had given each of them a monogrammed lighter identical to this one, but for the initials."

"Really!"

"Really," said Owen, rushing on because it was a chance to unburden himself without fear of discovery. "She wouldn't give up her other two lovers, so I stopped seeing her. That took willpower, believe me, because by then I had a big thing for her. It went both ways. She was furious when I wouldn't let her have her cake and eat it.

"Well, there was a vacancy in this apartment that was beside mine. Somehow she got wind of it, and she moved right in. Soon I was able to recognize her boyfriends coming and going. She was so close and the walls were so thin, I could sometimes hear them, too."

He gazed darkly at the memory. "That was her way of torturing me—her kind of kick."

"How awful for you!" exclaimed the girl, her face wrenched by a pretense of sympathy. "I'll bet you could have killed her!"

"With pleasure!" he said. For a moment his face tightened in anger, but under her stare he grinned suddenly and then they both laughed.

Later, as they walked arm-in-arm along the beach, he took the lighter from his pocket and made a small ceremony of winding up mightily and tossing it far out into the ocean.

Patience reputedly compasses anything—but dissuasion is an excellent supplement.

OAKES, the hotel detective, saw the girl as soon as she sat down at the bar near Willis Hartley the third. An attractive, slender redhead, she was wearing a short white dress that contrasted sharply with the deep tan on her shoulders and arms.

Oakes nodded appreciatively. The girl was beautiful. She'd fool the average man into thinking she was an "innocent".

With the experience gained by working five years with the city vice squad and four years at the hotel, Oakes knew she was an operator. Her game was to con the rich and the unwary and to pluck them bone dry.

Oakes watched her from a booth. The bar wasn't crowded. There was a honeymoon couple, heads close together, whispering at the far end, three middle-aged conventioneers about midway, then Willis Hartley, the millionaire, and then the girl. Hartley was obviously her target.

Oakes sat back in his booth to watch the proceedings unfold. The girl ordered a drink. As Jimmy the bartender set a paper coaster down before her, Oakes caught his eye and made a small gesture toward the girl.

Jimmy stared at her, smiled awkwardly, then leaned over the bar and said something to her.

She said nothing for a moment, and then her voice carried across the room. "I will not show you my driver's license. I'm old enough to drink in this state and you know it."

Jimmy appeared uncomfortable. "Please, miss. We're not allowed to serve minors. It isn't anything personal. I'm just doing my job."

"Now you know I'm not a minor. I'm not going to show you proof of age." The girl was furious.

The argument had attracted the attention of the three conventioneers. One of them said loudly, "Go on, let the lady have a drink. Sure she's old enough. Why don't you be a nice guy?"

Jimmy laughed weakly. "I'm just a working man. Jobs like this are hard to come by, mister." He turned to the girl. "Please, miss, I'll have to see a driver's license, or some other proof of age."

Willis Hartley the third turned and stared at her intensely.

She reached into a bag for a wallet, fumbled for her license and handed it to Jimmy. He glanced and promptly returned it. "The house rules, Miss Bates," Jimmy said apologetically.

Miss Bates nodded stiffly. Jimmy fixed her drink, brought it to her, then went off and busied himself polishing glassware.

Miss Bates gulped her drink down, looked straight ahead at the mirror over the back bar and burst into tears, then quickly dug tissues out of her purse.

Oakes almost broke into laughter. This one was a fine actress. She

could have made a successful career of the Broadway stage. She had the talent for it.

Hartley got up, walked down to where the girl was and sat down next to her.

Oakes sighed—another sucker about to hit the dust. He rose and walked over to the bar. Sooner or later he'd have to tell Willis Hartley that the girl was a con artist and was lining him up for some kind of fast swindle. Oakes knew he'd have to pick the right time to tell him. Important people, feeling perhaps that their wealth and power made them somehow invulnerable, sometimes resented being told that they were pigeons.

Willis Hartley was about fifty. He wore an excellent suit, and shoes that must have cost at least forty-five dollars, proclaiming him fair game for all kinds of hustle. You had to watch out for guys like him as the hotel didn't like it when any of the guests were hurt.

Hartley and the girl were talking quietly now. The local police had never arrested Miss Bates for anything, or Oakes would have known about it, but she was definitely working Hartley.

Oakes caught her words, interspersed with her sniffling. "I was supposed to meet my fiance. I don't know what happened to him. He hasn't called and I haven't been able to reach him. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm so miserable. I'm going to leave tomorrow morning."

"That's a shame," said Hartley. "This is such a nice place. If there's something I can do?"

His words brought on more tears for Miss Bates. She blew her nose and fled to the powder room.

Oakes rose. This was probably as good a time as any to tell Hartley the facts of life. He went over and introduced himself, then said, "Can we speak privately, Mr. Hartley?"

"Certainly," Willis Hartley said briskly. "We can speak right here."

"Mr. Hartley, I hope you don't misunderstand what I'm going to say."

"Yes, yes," Hartley said coldly. "What is it?"

"The girl you were just talking to, she's been here three days, alone —well, what I mean to say, Mr. Hartley, is that it has been the hotel's experience that a young woman alone can sometimes cause trouble for the other guests."

"She's been no trouble to me," Hartley said with a chill in his voice. "Why are you so concerned?"

Oakes manufactured a small smile. You had to be careful about offending a V.I.P. like Hartley. It was his first time here and the hotel had given him the red carpet treatment, finest suite in the hotel and the best table in the dining room. He

could throw a lot of business to the hotel. They valued him as a guest. They'd really extended themselves for him.

Oakes shook his head sadly. "I know you don't want to believe anything bad about the girl. I can see that, but believe me, sir, in my job I get to see them all, and I recognize them. The young lady is playing some kind of game, and the hotel wouldn't want anyone to get hurt."

"Really, I find that interesting," Hartley said. "You mean you take a look at a young lady and know, just like that, she's up to no good?"

"Yes, sir," said Oakes.

Hartley stared at his drink thoughtfully for a moment, then looked at Oakes. "The girl didn't approach me. I was the one who went over to her when I saw that she was crying."

"That's true," said Oakes. "I saw it. Maybe tears could be part of her act."

"You were watching me," Hartley said angrily.

"No, sir. Not you especially," Oakes said quickly. "Just doing my job, which is to keep an eye on everything that goes on, Mr. Hartley. You look at the operation of a hotel long enough, and watch the people, and after a while you're able to spot the wrongos."

"And the girl, as you choose to describe her, is a wrongo?"

"Yes, absolutely, Mr. Hartley."

"I'm curious about that, Mr. Oakes. How do you go about determining that she is what you say?"

"After a while you develop sort of a sixth sense."

Hartley gave a mirthless laugh. "All that with just a glance? What do you really know about the girl? What do you think she has in mind for me?"

"A girl like that . . . There have been cases when some just like her have worked a little extortion. You saw how reluctant she was to give her right age. She looks very young. It's a simple thing, the way they work it. The girl claims that she didn't know what was going on, maybe she says the man got her drunk. You saw the way she was crying at the bar just a little while ago. She could turn on those tears without any trouble at all, for your benefit, Mr. Hartley. Oh, they know all the tricks, sir. She could produce her dress, ripped in the right places and say that you did it. She could say that she was a minor."

Hartley nodded thoughtfully. "Just one thing, Mr. Oakes. She produced proof of age and that takes your filthy theory and drops it right out the window, now doesn't it?"

"I guess it does, Mr. Hartley, but she might have some other kind of surprise in store for you."

"I don't like your attitude toward

the girl and your attitude toward me. I'm not a fool and I'm annoyed at the bartender's stupidity in questioning and embarrassing Miss Bates. I'm inclined to believe that the hotel has some fears about the girl not paying her bill."

Oakes remained silent.

"That's what I thought," said Hartley knowingly. "Well, you can tell the management that they have nothing to worry about. I'll take care of that."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Hartley. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't say anything to the management." Oakes spread his hands in an imploring gesture. "I must have made a mistake."

Hartley waved him off. "All right, forget it. I came down here to get away from unpleasantness and business pressures. Let it drop."

Oakes thanked him repeatedly and went off. The girl had hooked him, and now all she had to do was yank at the line and set the hook. No matter what anybody told Hartley about the girl he wasn't going to believe it. Miss Bates appeared innocent, particularly lovely, beautifully formed, and she cried on cue.

Facing a combination like that, Willis Hartley didn't have a chance. Ironically, it was the worldly guys who usually fell into the trap.

There was a call for Oakes when he got back to his cubbyhole office, and he left to investigate the complaint of a distraught young school teacher who said that her wristwatch had been stolen while she'd been out of her room. A quick search revealed that the watch had fallen behind her night table. She thanked Oakes sincerely.

"Not at all, miss," said Oakes. "It's all in a day's work. Please feel free to call on me. It's our aim to make your stay as pleasant as possible."

He took the elevator down to his small room where he showered, shaved, then stretched out on the bed. All right, Oakes, the girl is going to take Hartley. A guy like Hartley pulls a lot of weight and he isn't going to like it when it happens. He's already told you to mind your own business, Oakes, but if you do, then there surely is going to be a raft of trouble for everybody and nobody needs trouble. So what do you do, Oakes? You keep your eye on them, that's what you do. You've warned him about the girl, and if Willis Hartley isn't smart enough to pay heed to a good solid warning, then it's his headache.

Oakes dressed and went down to the dining room and saw Hartley and Miss Bates together. Later they were in the cocktail lounge, which made watching them easier for Oakes. They sat in a darkened cor-

ner, holding hands and whispering to each other.

Oakes ordered a beer from Jimmy. "They never learn," said Jimmy, looking at them. "She's going to take him, but good. Look at how they're mooning at each other."

Oakes finished his beer. "Yeah, I've got to keep an eye on those two, but he's told me to butt out. I'm going up to my room. Do me a favor, Jimmy?"

Jimmy grinned. "Sure. I'll give you a call the minute they leave."

Oakes returned to his room and watched wrestling and the beginning of a late movie. At midnight the phone rang. It was Jimmy.

"They left, staggering out of here a moment ago, heading toward the elevators. It figures they went upstairs."

"It figures," said Oakes. "Thanks." He hung up and watched the movie for half an hour, then went to Hartley's room.

Outside, in the corridor, he glanced in both directions and saw no one on the floor. He listened with his ear against the door, heard no sound, unlocked the room with a master key and walked inside.

Hartley was stretched out on the bed, sleeping. His mouth had fallen open. He snored. Oakes wondered when the chloral hydrate had been slipped into his drink. Obviously it was timed perfectly, so that he'd passed out as soon as he was inside the room.

The bathroom door was ajar and Oakes could see the bottoms of the girl's feet. He went closer. She lay on her back, fully clothed, her face twisted and the color of cobalt blue, eyes shut.

Oakes stepped over her, filled a glass with cold water from the sink, went back to Hartley and poured it on his face.

Hartley gasped and awoke. He sat up in bed, totally disoriented. He peered at Oakes. "What the devil do you think you're doing? What are you doing here?" He jumped out of bed. "What's happened?" he said, and glanced wild-eyed at the broken lamp and overturned chair.

"Somebody called hotel security and complained about noise in your room. I found you and the girl." Oakes pointed toward the bathroom. "She's dead. I think she's been poisoned."

Hartley stood frozen, uncomprehending, staring at the bathroom. He went over, looked at the girl and returned, trembling, his face grey.

Oakes lifted the phone. "We'll have to call the police. You'd better sit down, Mr. Hartley. You look ill."

"Wait a minute," Hartley said quickly. "Put the phone down. It can wait a minute."

Oakes returned the phone to its cradle.

Hartley said, "I didn't touch her. I don't know what happened. I remember a blinding headache. I lay down for a moment, and that's all I remember."

"You can tell it to the police, Mr. Hartley, and I don't think they'll blame you for her death. Like I said before, I kind of spotted her for trouble. She wasn't anything. A nobody like her, it's for sure they're not going to blame you for her death. There might be a little publicity, but sometimes these things can't be avoided. It'll blow over eventually."

Hartley stared at Oakes. "You've got a thousand dollars if you get her out of here and away from the hotel. Get rid of her!"

Oakes waited a long time before he answered. "Let's be realistic. I'll have to get her out without being seen, and I'll have to put her in a place where she'll never be found. You're asking me to violate the law. That's a lot of risk to take."

"I didn't touch her," Hartley said.

"Maybe you just don't remember," Oakes said. "Ten thousand and you walk out of here as though nothing happened. You can forget all about it and no one will know."

Hartley nodded. "I've got the money in the hotel safe. I'll get it."

"Sure," said Oakes. "I'll keep you company."

They both went for the money and on the way back Hartley paid him. Hartley waited in the room while Oakes wheeled a laundry cart in, dumped the girl into it, covered her with some sheets and wheeled her out. Twenty minutes later Hartley checked out.

That was approximately the same time that Oakes, the bartender and Miss Bates were in another room in another part of the hotel, dividing the money.

Jimmy grinned, folded a thick wad of bills and put it into his pocket. "It works every time. When you can get the 'mark' to make the approach, he hasn't got a chance."

Miss Bates rubbed the blue dye off her face with a tissue and cold cream. She glanced at herself in the mirror. "I hope this doesn't do any harm to my complexion."

"I don't think it will," said Oakes. "It never bothered any of the other girls."

BIG
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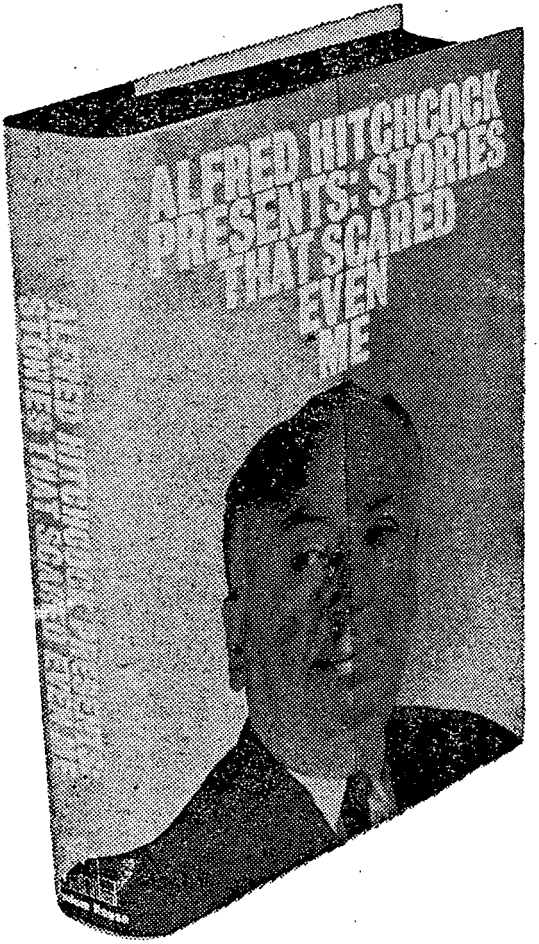
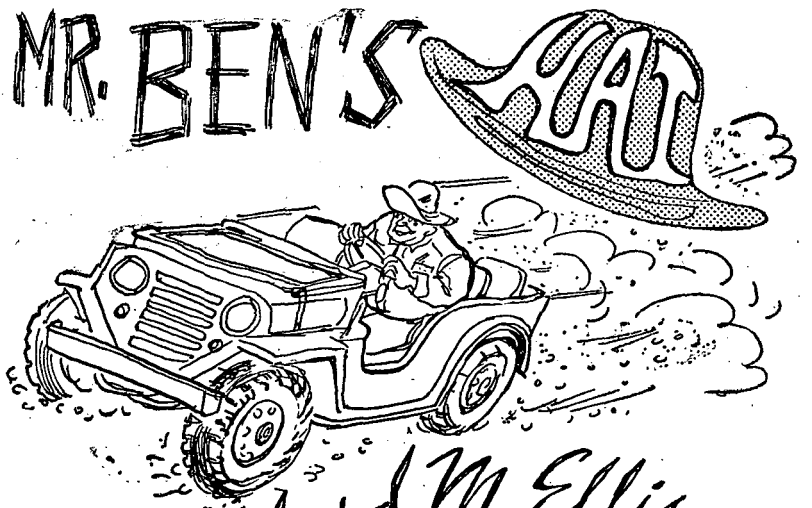
Money Saving Offer



That which is curious in conjecture is bound to lead to experiment.

MR. BEN'S HAT



by Richard M. Ellis

It's twenty years this summer since Mr. Ben Teague came tearing along the river road in that old jeep of his for the last time but the people that live on the bottom-land farms around there still talk about Mr. Ben.

My ma and my sister and me moved far away from Pokochobee County, not long after Mr. Ben died. I passed through there a few weeks ago, for the first time since we moved, and it ain't changed much. I stopped at Holley's store, which is still at the crossroads north of the river, and I talked a while with some of the old fellas sitting on the shady porch. Before long they got around to Mr. Ben Teague, and I found out that through the years a lot of pretty wild stories have grown up around Mr. Ben's death.

I heard that everybody in the

county believes that the spirits, or even the Lord Himself, struck down Mr. Ben—and that was why nobody had ever figured out just how he died. I heard that since that hot morning twenty years ago, not even the birds and animals of the woods will go near the stretch of the road where Mr. Ben was found. Shoot, one old fella looked me straight in the eye and said that lots of people had time and again heard the sound of Mr. Ben's jeep roaring down the road and then an awful groan.

Me, I just nodded my head and rolled my eyes and said, "Lord have mercy," and let it go at that. I didn't figure they was any more interested in hearing the truth now than they was back then when it happened. Back then I tried to tell, you see, but nobody would listen—except my ma—and she gave me a walloping and told me to shut my mouth and keep it shut; and then we moved away.

I suppose it's kind of strange that when I remember Mr. Ben Teague it's not the last time I saw him that first comes to mind. No, it's a time a few months before that, the day I turned ten years old.

I didn't get no presents, of course —Maw didn't have any money for that—but she did say I could skip my chores that day, and I had me a time, roaming the woods and going for a swim in the river, and along towards noonday I walked up to Holley's store at the crossroads.

The first thing I saw was Mr. Ben's dusty jeep parked in front of the store. Then I saw Mr. Ben himself, standing on the porch, telling a couple of other men something or other that ended with all of them laughing.

He was a great big man, Mr. Ben was, with a great big belly that sagged down over his belt. Even though everybody said he was the richest man in the county, he always wore sweat-stained khakis and a wide-brim gray hat pulled down tight on his head.

I sidled up to the porch and sat down on the edge near the steps. None of the men paid any attention to me, and I didn't say nothing, of course, but it was nice sitting there listening to Mr. Ben's stories, even though they made me kind of blush, most of them.

I'd found a little old turtle on the riverbank, and I took it out of my shirt pocket and set it on the porch. It had a brown shell with yellow markings, and after a time it poked its head out and looked around. Then I touched it and it jerked its head back in, along with its legs.

About then I heard Mr. Ben walking over. He looked down at me and said, "What you got there,

boy? Something interesting?"

"Nothin', just a turtle I found."

Mr. Ben hunkered down beside me, so close I could smell the sweat and tobacco on his clothes, and the corn whisky on his breath. Him taking notice of me like that made me uneasy but at the same time right proud.

Mr. Ben, he looked at the little turtle and he grinned, and he pulled a heavy case knife out of his pocket and opened the biggest blade. "Game I used to play when I was your age, boy," he said. "Watch close now."

I watched, all right, wondering what he meant to do. He squatted there, with big beads of sweat standing out on his red face and his eyes kind of shiny, staring down at the turtle. He had the knife in his right hand, holding it like you would to sharpen a pencil.

In a minute the turtle poked his head out again. Mr. Ben whacked down the knife blade, but the turtle was too quick for him. I looked at Mr. Ben but he didn't notice. I looked up at the other men on the porch. There wasn't no help there. I looked back at my turtle, just in time to see his head come out, and Mr. Ben's knife come down again—and miss again.

I said, "Mr. Ben, don't—"

He was scowling and kind of muttering, "Come on, come on."

I don't know what to do. There was nothing I could do, except watch. The turtle, he kept trying to move away, but every time he'd poke out his legs and his head, down would come Mr. Ben's knife; and every time he missed, Mr. Ben would cuss and act like that little turtle had done him a bad turn.

Me, I slid off the edge of the porch and backed away, not wanting to watch, but not able to stop watching.

Finally, Mr. Ben waited until the turtle's head came clear out, and then the legs. The turtle started moving, but still Mr. Ben waited. I could hear him breathing heavy, and his hand holding the knife was kind of shaking. Then he whacked the knife down so hard the blade buried itself in the wooden floor. He didn't miss that time. The turtle's head went spinning away, and blood poured out, and Mr. Ben gave a shout of laughter. Me, I turned and run off along the sandy road toward home. When I got there I went up the ladder to my bed in the loft. I stayed there a long time, still hearing the whack of the knife blade, and seeing the blood spurt out.

I didn't feel like playing anymore that day.

It wasn't that I had anything against Mr. Ben Teague because of what he did to my turtle. Shoot,

that would have been like getting mad at the summer sun for being hot, or the old river because it ran south into the Gulf instead of some other direction. Mr. Ben was just too big, too powerful in the county, for me to feel anything about him but a kind of—awe, I guess is the word.

He owned a lot of the farms around there, including the one where we lived. He owned a big house in the county seat, where he lived with his wife; and he knew all the important people there in town, though he spent most of his time out in the county, visiting one or another of the places he owned.

You never had to wonder if Mr. Ben was anywhere around. He had a loud, heavy voice that people said would carry five miles on a clear day, and he was always giving a shout of laughter about one thing or another.

I remember the laughter never did quite reach Mr. Ben's eyes, which were a pale blue in color and set deep in his head under big, shaggy eyebrows. His eyes were always looking right at you and on through you at something on the other side.

I remember seeing Mr. Ben racing up and down the sandy roads in that jeep of his. He sure did love to whip that jeep along. He kept the windshield laid down flat on the hood, and he'd kind of lean forward over the steering wheel, with a big grin on his face, and the front brim of his hat pushed back against the crown by the wind, and there he'd go, trailing a cloud of red dust and racket.

Of course everybody knew that Mr. Ben was a fine man. Look what he did for Ma and me, and my sister Maybelle. My Pa died of the swamp fever not long after the end of the World War two. He'd been share-cropping on a place along the river, and we lived pretty good. But then he died and Ma and me had to move in with Maybelle and her new husband—Ralph Streetman—at the farm, where we lived till we left Pokochobee County for good.

Ralph, he wasn't exactly overjoyed at having Ma and me living with him and Maybelle, but it worked out all right.

But then Ralph died. It was during the winter, and Ralph had a job at the sawmill a few miles away. Lots of the young married men around there worked at the sawmill in the winter months, when there was nothing much to do on their farms.

Mr. Ben Teague was part-owner of the sawmill and he spent a good deal of time out there. In fact, he was there the day Ralph fell against one of the big ripsaws in the mill.

Later on, one of the fellas who was there that day said that Ralph and Mr. Ben had an argument that morning, something about Maybelle, not long before Ralph was killed by that old ripsaw. It was true that Mr. Ben was the first one to find the body—or what was left of it—but shoot, that didn't prove nothing. Besides, why would they argue about Maybelle?

After the funeral Mr. Ben was kindness itself to Ma and me, and my sister. He let us stay on the farm there, which he owned, without paying him rent or anything. Why, he was so concerned about us that before long he was driving out to see us once a week, and sometimes twice.

Ma got her a day-job at one of the big places between the river and the county seat, one of the big plantation houses, working in the kitchen as the cook, so somehow she wasn't ever around when Mr. Ben came to visit. Me—I wasn't either, after the first time.

That was the day Mr. Ben's jeep came roaring down the lane and into our dooryard and skidded to a stop near where I was standing under a chinaberry tree. Maybelle was on the porch, all fixed up like she might have expected Mr. Ben to drop by. He gave Maybelle a nod and then he called me over to the jeep.

I remember that with me standing, and him sitting in the jeep, our eyes was just about on a level. He said, "Mornin', boy. What're you doin' here?"

"Why, I live here, Mr. Ben," I told him. I watched the toe of my shoe dig a little hole in the soft red dirt of the yard. It was still wintertime then, so I wasn't barefoot.

Mr. Ben grunted. "Sho'. But from now on, boy, when you hear me comin' along the lane, that's the signal for you to head out in the other direction into the piney woods . . . And when you get there, don't come back for a few hours."

His eyes were looking right through me, the way they did, and he was smiling. I nodded and ducked my head, trying not to let my hurt feelings show.

Then he handed me a silver dime, and gave a laugh. "Go on now, boy. Go get yourself a candy bar and a soda pop at Holley's store . . ."

I went, clutching that dime like I was afraid it might come to life and jump out of my hand. Later, I kind of wondered why Mr. Ben would want to be alone with just Maybelle when he came to visit. But that was the way it was.

Most times, he brought something—a sack of groceries, or a

few yards of dress material; once he even gave Maybelle a five dollar bill. And, like I said, he let us stay on at the farm without paying him any rent. So you can see why Mr. Ben was so well thought of by the people around there—a rich, important man like him, worrying about us.

For some reason Maw didn't act too happy. She never said anything, but on the mornings when Mr.

Ben was due, she had a kind of tight-lipped look about her, and she left for her job at the plantation house earlier than usual.

Maybelle on those mornings would be jumpy, and talk a lot, and break out in fits of giggles for no reason I could tell. She'd get all spruced up, combing her long yellow hair out just so, and putting on lipstick and powder and all. Maybelle was seventeen that year, and even I could see that she was good to look at. Ralph's dying hit her awful hard, of course; but she got over it.

So we went along, living just about as well as anybody out there in the bottom farmland. Spring came in, and then my tenth birthday in early June—I've already told about that. It was strange how Mr. Ben Teague never did seem to know who I was—like on my birthday, when I saw him at Holley's store—but it didn't fret me much. I knew that Mr. Ben called even some of the grown men "boy," and half the time didn't seem to know, or particular care, just who it was. Everybody said it was because he always had so many big business deals on his mind, and all.

I don't *recall* exactly what it was that started me thinking about Mr. Ben's hat. Probably it came up in talk that summer when we boys would gather to swim in the river and then lie on the bank in the sun, each boy admiring his own nakedness and making fun of the others, the way boys will.

Anyway, I did start wondering why Mr. Ben always wore that hat. People who'd seen him in town said it was the same way there. He just never took off that hat. It was a big, wide-brimmed gray hat with a snakeskin band around the crown.

The story was that Mr. Ben had some kind of sickness years back, and all his hair fell out. It was true that he didn't have hair around his ears or on the back of his head, what you could see of it below the hat, and the story was that he was awful sensitive about it. One time he was supposed to have almost beat a man to death when the man accidentally brushed the hat off Mr. Ben's head.

I asked my sister Maybelle if Mr. Ben took off his hat when he was visiting with her each week but Maybelle just gave me a funny look, and kind of laughed, and changed the subject. Shoot, thinking about it now, I can't imagine why I got so interested. But I'm twenty years older now, and I guess I don't remember how my mind worked when I was ten any better than other people do.

I do know that I was bound and determined to see Mr. Ben's head.

I'd get to imagining that maybe he had him a steel-plated skull, or maybe a glass dome painted in rainbow colors. All kinds of crazy things I'd dream up, but it was a month or two before I figured out a way to do it. I didn't tell any of my friends or anybody. I was kind of scared that at the last minute I wouldn't be able to go through with it, and then I'd get laughed at. Besides, right till the last minute, I didn't really and truly mean to go through with it. It was just something to think about during the long summer days, while I was at my chores around the house and yard.

You see, I had this spool of fishing line. Maybelle's husband, Ralph, he gave it to me. He got it down on the Gulf coast one time, when he was down there working as a hand on one of them charter boats that took rich people out to fish in the Gulf.

That line—I guess there was two, three hundred feet of it—that line was something. It was thin as thread, but you just couldn't break it. Ralph told me it was stronger than steel, and I believed him.

What I had in mind to do, was hide up in the chinaberry tree in front of our house, and when Mr. Ben came driving in I'd snake down a loop of that fishing line and jerk his hat right off his head. Of course, I knew I couldn't get away with that. Mr. Ben would—well, he would be awful mad at me. So thinking about it was far as I got, until one Friday morning in August.

Even if I hadn't known it was Friday, the day Mr. Ben usually came out, I could have told by the way Ma acted during breakfast. The corners of her thin mouth were turned right down, and she didn't have nothing at all to say to me, or Maybelle. The sun was just rising when she walked off down

the lane, headed for her job two miles away.

Then Maybelle started bustling around the house, and before long I went outside before she swept me out, along with the rest of the dust off the livingroom floor.

I went around back to the shed where we kept an old milk cow until Ralph died, and Maybelle and Ma sold it. There was still a pile of dried hay in the shed, and I stretched out on it, and first thing I knew I was fast asleep.

I must have slept for three hours or more. The sun was gleaming down through holes in the roof, right into my eyes, when I woke up. Then I heard the sounds from the house, and when I edged out of the shed and off to one side I could see Mr. Ben's jeep in the front yard. I stood there a minute, listening. It sounded like Maybelle was laughing and crying at the same time.

I trotted off into the trees on the edge of the yard and kept going until I came out on the river road, about a quarter of a mile maybe from the point where the lane to our place turned off. I walked along with the dust spurting up between my bare toes, my mind just about as near a blank as anybody's mind can get, and I came to a place where two big elm trees, one on either side of the road, had kind of shouldered their way out of the tangle. They stood right opposite each other.

I stopped and looked at them, back and forth; and I remembered I had that spool of fishing line in my overalls pocket. I dug it out. As I looked at it, and then at those two elm trees, my heart started beating real fast, and my legs got wobbly. It wouldn't hurt nothing just to try it out.

I went to the tree on my left, and sighted across to the other one. Then I took the free end of that fishing line and wrapped it again and again round the treetrunk, just a little above the level of my eyes as I stood there. You see, I remembered that day when I'd stood alongside Mr. Ben's jeep, and his eyes and mine had been right on a level.

I tied down the end of the line and, trailing more line off the spool, stepped up onto the road which was raised about a foot above the ground to either side of it along there. I crossed over and stepped down on the far side. There, I pulled the line as tight as I could and wound it around that other treetrunk just a couple of inches above my eye level.

When I had it tied good and tight, I backed off down the road a few yards, and I could no more see that thin fishing line than noth-

ing. I had to walk right up to it, almost, before I could make it out. I hooked a finger over it, tugged, then let go, and it twanged almost like a guitar string.

Suddenly I realized what I was doing, and I really started shaking. Shoot, it was just foolishness to think I could actually leave that line stretched there so it would sweep off Mr. Ben Teague's hat when he came driving by. A ten-year-old boy like me, doing something like that to a man as important as Mr. Ben, it was just impossible. Even if the top of Mr. Ben's head under his hat was made of solid gold with diamonds on it, the seeing of it wasn't near worth the trouble I might get into . . .

That was when I heard the jeep and looked along the road toward our place. There it was, racing toward me, getting bigger every second!

I didn't know what to do. Mr. Ben would get to where I was long before I could untie one end of that line and let it fall to the ground. And I couldn't wave him down and tell him what I'd done, I just couldn't; not to Mr. Ben Teague . . .

I jumped off the roadbed into the underbrush among the trees and pushed and wormed my way deep into it. Then I turned and hunkered down, feeling like I might faint. I gasped for breath.

I could hear the jeep's motor pounding along, and I got a flash of the jeep as it passed, the windshield down flat on the hood, and Mr. Ben at the wheel, leaning forward into the wind—and then he was gone beyond my line of sight. I hoped as hard as I could that somehow I'd made a mistake and tied that line too high, so that Mr. Ben skimmed right under it without even seeing it, but the jeep slowed down all of a sudden, and there was a bumping and a crashing as it plowed off the road into the trees. I started bawling. Mr. Ben was going to be awful, awful mad at me.

I expected to hear his big voice roaring out—but there wasn't a sound. Finally I pushed back through the brush to the edge of the road and from there I could see the jeep, farther along and off on the right-hand side of the road. It looked like it had run smack into a tree there. I could make out Mr. Ben's upper back and shoulders, draped forward over the steering wheel.

Then I saw something else, lying in the dust on the road itself. At first I thought it was Mr. Ben's hat, but it was setting kind of strange. Shaking and sniffling, I picked my way toward it.

I passed under the fishing line—

to my surprise I had to stoop a little to get under it—but I forgot about that when I saw Mr. Ben's head laying there in the dust.

His hat was still on, and his face turned up, all covered with red dust, and red blood. I stared and stared, not able to understand. I looked from the head, with a sticky pool spreading out around it, toward the jeep off there in the distance, where I saw there wasn't anything at all above Mr. Ben's crumpled shoulders . . .

I guess I was in what people call a state of shock and halfway expected Mr. Ben to all of a sudden let out a yell at me—but he didn't.

Finally, I thought about the fishing line and for the very first time I realized that, since the roadbed was about a foot higher than the ground to the sides, I'd tied that line too low. Instead of catching Mr. Ben's hat, it had hit him right across the neck!

I clawed the line down from the trees and I lit out through the woods, heading for the big house where my Ma would be. Somewhere along the way I dropped the fishing line that had killed Mr. Ben, and I never saw it again.

That's what really happened that day, and you can see that the spirits and the Lord Himself didn't have nothing to do with it. I tried to tell what had happened, and how sorry I was, but nobody wanted to believe that a big man like Mr. Ben Teague could die because of the foolishness of a ten-year-old ragtag boy.

So I guess Ma was right to give me that walloping and tell me to keep my mouth shut about it, but somehow whenever I think about Mr. Ben Teague, other things kind of get in the way; like that little old turtle, and Ma's face when she looked at Maybelle, and even Maybelle's husband, Ralph . . .

I don't know if it's the same with other people who knew Mr. Ben; but I do know that just before we moved away from Pokochobee County, Mr. Ben Teague's wife came out and talked to Ma, and when she'd gone back to her big house in town, Ma had a good deal of money that she hadn't had before.

It may be that wise men embrace certainty—but the foolhardy are rarely bored.

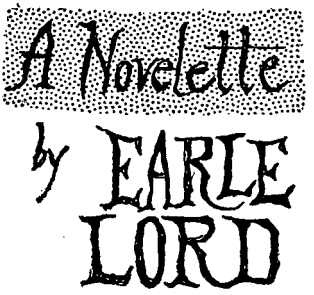
THE SEARCH FOR PAUL

I was driving north on Sepulveda Boulevard in the gloomy dusk of a Los Angeles late afternoon when my irritation got the best of me. Three cars back was a green Volkswagen. The driver was wearing a brownish porkpie hat with a yellow band and distinctive tinted glasses. I had seen him and his little foreign car every afternoon for the past four days on my way home from work. It could no longer be considered a coincidence that he was behind me because I was now driving away from my apartment, going north instead of south.

I was worried. I'd always had a thing about those little, beetle-shaped cars, complaining to my friends and acquaintances about their clogging traffic, their multiplying on dark street corners, and what I considered to be their unesthetic lines. Now, I was troubled that I might be imagining I was being followed persistently around Los An-

geles by little green Volkswagens.

I was already in a frazzled state of mind. Snug, secure, and comfortable in my job as a junior high school history teacher, I'd been severely upset when one of our combination teacher-counselors had



sailed his boat out of the Del Rey Marina and never returned. The Coast Guard discovered the boat three miles out, but he was not on it. Scott O'Neill had been a close friend of mine. I was also disturbed by being drafted to do his job of advising adolescent boys and girls in one of the three grades at the school. Scott had been extremely good at the work, had been specially trained for it. He was eager, young, and handsome. I was untrained, reluctant and thirty-five years old. In a junior high school, that is middle-aged. As for my looks, I didn't have his problem. No one ever sighed or swooned at this face, not even my mother.

Now I was seeing Volkswagens! Deciding the time had come for action, without warning I swung the car sharply into a drive-in, skidded into a slot, and turned around quickly to watch the little green car. The driver gave me a startled look, drove by, then parked about fifty feet down the street. I watched him adjust his rear vision mirror so he could see me, then take out a paper and pretend to read it.

A shapely redhead dressed in a cheer leader's costume sauntered up and took my order. I got out of the car, walked behind the drive-in, placing it between me and the little green car, then started to run at full speed toward my pursuer. He must have been waiting for this with his engine idling because he moved right out after I came into view. Not quite fast enough, though, because I got his license number, SQX399. I jotted this down in an address book, went back to my car, ate my hamburger deluxe, and drank my beer.

Then I drove home. No little green car followed me, but I noticed one parked across the street when I drove into the carport underneath my apartment. I crossed over and checked the license. It was the same. Checking the registration slip, I found that it was registered to Seymour Appelby. The porkpie

hat and tinted glasses were on the seat. I looked around for Seymour, then noticed that the lights in my apartment were on.

The door was open when I reached the apartment, and a man was sitting in my big chair, smoking a cigarette, and reading my afternoon newspaper. My anger aroused, I went to an end table and hauled out a .25 caliber automatic.

I had never pointed it at anyone before, but I pointed it at him. "Don't get up," I said. "Mr. Appelby, I presume. I'm Mike Collins."

"I'm not about to get up if you are going to be so rude!" he replied. "If I reach for my wallet and some identification, will you shoot me?"

I told him to go ahead and he took a slim case out of his inside coat pocket, opened it and handed it to me. Inside was an extremely official looking card identifying him as Sam Allen, a member of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"So," I said brightly, wondering what the United States Navy was doing in my apartment. "Would the F.B.I. know about you? This is just a nice printing and engraving job to me."

"Certainly, they do. They are working with me on this."

"You stay put in the chair," I said and went to the phone.

"That's 483-3551," he said cheerfully.

I asked information for the F.B.I.'s number, then dialed 483-3551 and asked for an agent. I explained my problem to him and he told me he would check and call back.

After several minutes, the phone rang and another man confirmed Allen's identity, gave me his I.D. number, then insisted on talking to Allen. Allen assured the agent that he was all right, hung up, then turned to me.

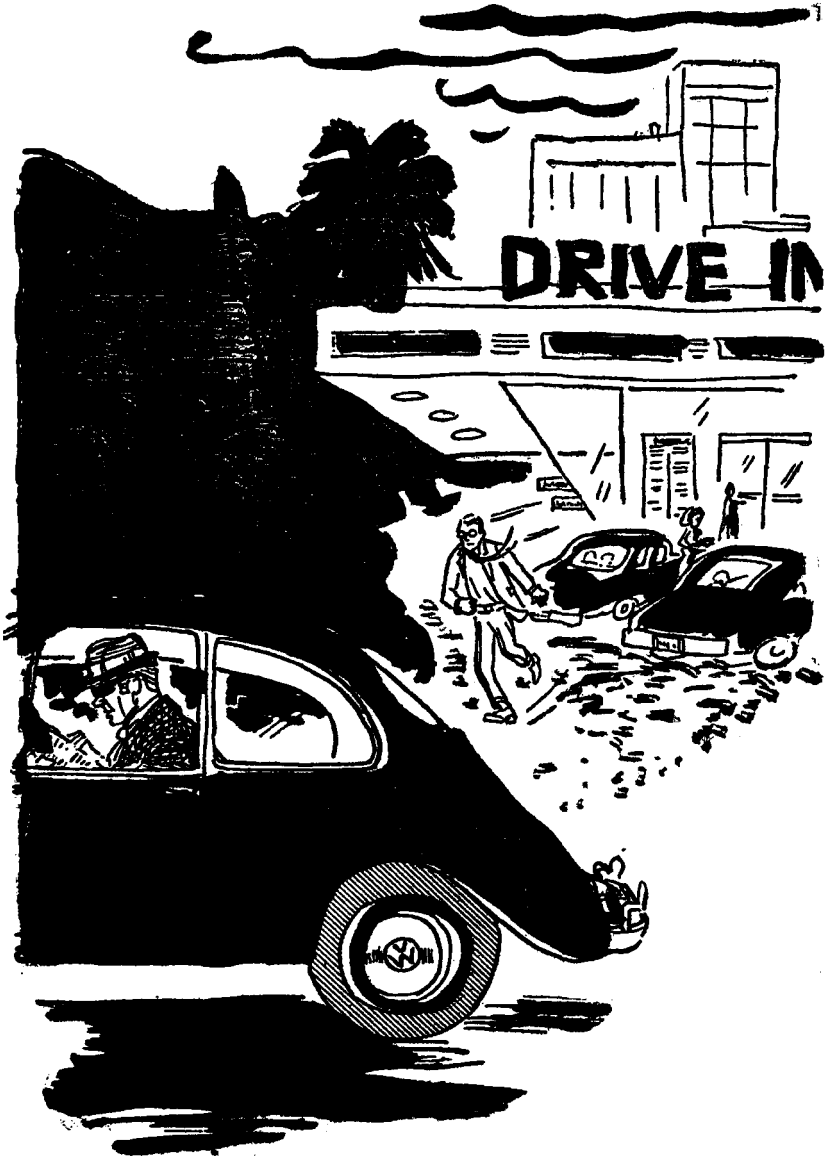
"Now, I hope you'll put the gun away, Mr. Collins. You can put these with it when you do," and he handed me the bullets that went with the gun. I glared at him, put the gun and the loose bullets back in the end table, and motioned Allen back to the big chair.

"No, Mr. Collins, you sit there. I prefer to stand when I'm making a pitch."

I sat and looked at him. He was a small, smooth, little man, impeccably dressed. To me, he looked more like a floorwalker than an intelligence agent, but then my experience with intelligence agents was very limited. As a matter of fact, it was limited to him.

"Why have you been following me home from school in that ridiculous car?"

"I have several reasons for that, my friend. Among them, I wanted to see what you would do. Tell me,


DRIVE IN

why haven't you complained to the police?"

"I did not want to tell any police officer that I thought I was being followed by little green cars. Besides, I needed a license number."

"I see. I was worried that you might have something to hide."

"I don't think so," I said, beginning to get a little hot about being on the defensive in this situation. "Is there anything else about me that worries you?"

"Well, now that you mention it, there is. We were worried about your apparent lack of lady friends, too."

I never dreamed that I would have to explain to a representative of the U.S. Navy why I had not gone out with a girl in over six months, but here it was. I said, "I am assuming you have a good reason for that kind of prying."

"I have a good reason for everything I do, Mr. Collins."

I shrugged my shoulders. Maybe I'd never get off the defensive with this little guy. "When I was in Vietnam three years ago, I was 'dear-Johnned' by my ever loving fiancee for a guy that I consider to be an absolute jackass. When I got back, I became engaged to another girl. She was killed in an auto accident three days after I gave her the ring. Every attractive girl I see reminds me of one girl or the other."

He frowned and looked sympathetic. He also managed to look relieved at the same time. "That's fine. I'm sorry to pry. We didn't know about your fiancee, and before we made you our offer, we had to be sure. Can't have any security risks working for us, you know."

"Just what offer are you making me?" I asked, beginning to wonder if this whole thing were some nutty kind of dream.

Allen reached into his pocket, pulled out a folded paper and handed it to me with a cheerful smile. It was an application for transfer, filled out by me when in Vietnam asking to be assigned to special forces, intelligence, or the regular infantry.

"You can't be serious! I filled this thing out when I was trying to escape being an army paymaster. I would have volunteered for a one-way moon shot to get out of that office."

"It demonstrates your interest, Mr. Collins. You specified intelligence work, not astronautics. I offer you intelligence work right here in Los Angeles, right at Rogers Junior High School."

This caught my interest and I closed my mouth and listened.

"We need someone inside that school and you are already there. We've checked you out, and we are

reasonably sure that you are not a Russian spy."

I started to laugh but stopped when I realized the man was quite serious.

He read my thoughts. "We not only think there are some Soviet agents in that school of yours, but we have good reason to believe that the resident director of a Soviet sleeper apparat works there as well. The school would provide a marvelous cover for intelligence activities of all kinds. We must have a man inside that school to observe it from an internal point of view. We placed a man in it last year, but we lost him last week. He sailed away."

"You mean O'Neill was your man?"

"He was a good man, but careless, probably was murdered. We want you to take his place for us, as well as for the school district. I asked the principal to move you into his job. I understand it took some doing."

"I resisted him. I'm not trained for the work."

"You were in a rut, Mr. Collins. You shouldn't burrow into a job like a gopher."

"What is a sleeper apparatus?"

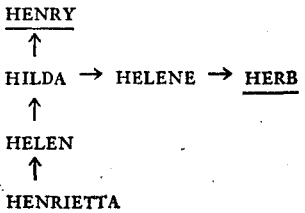
"A sleeper apparat is an intelligence unit designed to stay dormant until time of war. Its members do just enough routine work to avoid becoming rusty, much of it relatively unimportant. When war comes, they go to work on prearranged tasks. My job is to identify its members so we can gather them in when the war starts."

Allen began to pace back and forth in front of my chair. "We've known there was a sleeper on the coast for some time. We have infiltrated some men into midwestern and eastern units and picked up some leads to it. The main lead, of course, is money. The members of the unit must be paid, and if they are United States citizens, which is usually the case, they insist on hard cash. They put it in safe deposit boxes or send it to places like Switzerland for the proverbial rainy day. We believe that over $50,000 a year is sent by courier to the resident director of this particular sleeper. For a year we thought we knew one of his cover names, J. H. Rogers, but our informer had erred. He had seen the location of the resident director, Rogers J.H., on a written memorandum, but had mentally inserted a comma that was not there and gave it to us as Rogers, J.H. in Los Angeles. We've wasted an enormous amount of time and money because of that misplaced comma.

"We discovered the error in an odd, roundabout manner. First, we came up with a schematic drawing of the organization's internal cover

names and relationships. May I take some paper from the desk?"

I nodded and he went directly to the correct drawer, took out a tablet and drew this diagram:



"Our experts interpret this drawing to mean that the three underlined men are the transmitters of information to the Soviet Union, and the others are means of conveying information to them, and couriers. We've identified some of them. Hank is a San Pedro fisherman who owns a boat. He made the mistake of making a mysterious run into the offshore fog bank when there weren't any fish running. He dropped something metallic over the side of his boat which emitted a very faint radio pulse and it was picked up several hours later by a foreign submarine. This was probably an exercise, but our navy observed the whole business on a special radar frequency, and that brought me into the picture. When we ran a check on Hank, we found him to be a very lazy and sporadic fisherman who had a steady income. He is a naturalized citizen with two parents living in East Germany, and he also has a sister teaching school at Rogers Junior High, our elusive Rogers J.H.

"We'd run across references to a school being involved in the sleeper organization, so the coincidence was too big for us to ignore. We moved O'Neill into your school last September. He had worked for us in the service and had a suitable background in teaching and counseling. He managed to identify Helen and Hilda, then sailed out into the blue Pacific."

I did not ask who they were. The thought of having worked with a living, breathing Soviet agent and American traitor was difficult for me to swallow.

Allen gave me a long, quizzical look. "We can do one of two things, Mr. Collins. We can leave you pure and innocent and use you as a passive observing post inside the school, or we can tell you all we know and let you do some digging, trusting to your sense of self-preservation. O'Neill was trying to dig a little when he disappeared. He told us that he was going for a romantic sail with Helen, and some bystanders say there was a girl on his boat when he tacked out of the marina. If Helen went out with him, she must have flown back to land because she reported for work on Monday morning."

"You'd better let me dig. Otherwise, I'll be suspicious of every woman on the faculty."

"You do realize how risky that can be?"

"I don't own any boats."

"But you drive a car. Cars have frightful things happen to them in this city."

"I am naturally a very careful person. Besides I know who Helen is."

Allen raised his eyebrows at me.

"She's Midge Steiner, isn't she? I noticed Scott shining up to her in the faculty lunchroom all last week. I joked with him about it."

"Someone else noticed it. Scott was very careless. Remember, we think that the resident director of the organization is a member of your school staff. He isn't on that chart, but we've given him the name of Paul. He takes care of the payroll, keeps the organization alive, and has petty annoyances like Scott O'Neill eliminated."

"I think it would be fairly easy for me to become friendly with Miss Steiner," I said, deciding to shake him up a bit. Self-possessed people can't stand other self-possessed people.

"She's very pretty. That we know."

"I don't mean that. I think she's interested in me."

"And you've been fending her off, I suppose. Well, don't be too obvious in letting down your barriers, my friend. If you can unobtrusively and smoothly become friendly with Midge Steiner, fine, but remember that we have lots of time. We don't expect the Third World War for several years."

"I'll be cautious, Mr. Allen."

"Now, let's go back to our drawing. Helen you know. She is apparently a cutout to Hilda. Information passes from Henrietta to Helen to Hilda, who is a bank teller at the Los Angeles National Bank in Culver City. Hilda apparently can send on the information, to be transmitted in one of three ways. Hank has an account at the bank and makes regular weekly visits to it, although he lives in San Pedro. Oddly enough, he rarely visits his sister and has never been seen at the school. If there is something for him to deliver by sea, it is passed to him at the bank by Hilda.

We have an idea who Henry is. One of the male tellers in the bank has turned down a chance at a good promotion and has an elaborate, expensive ham radio setup. We've tried to monitor it. Several times he has sent out a short burst of high frequency shortwaves that we've not been able to break down. We think it's a rapid transmission code."

I raised my eyebrows at this. Allen shook his head impatiently. "I'll explain that in a minute. We think Henry codes his messages, then shoots them to Russia in coded bursts of a few seconds duration. By elimination, and by knowing the pattern of how the Russians usually organize these things, we think that Herb is probably a pilot of a light plane and that Helene is probably a cutout courier to him. They are really not important, and you should not be concerned with them."

"Leaving Henrietta," I said.

"And Paul, the resident director. I will trade the whole traitorous crew for him, my friend. He is the mind behind all of this. Henrietta probably poses as a parent and brings information to Helen, but Paul is the organizer, the paymaster, the directing intelligence. We must know who he is. This is absolutely vital."

"But surely you can pick him out by studying his background. Something in his past is bound to give him away."

"That is logical but it hasn't worked. We have checked carefully on every male in the faculty who has been there for two or more years and we have no leads. Paul is either a genuine American citizen, which would be extremely unusual for a resident director, or a Russian who has assumed the identity of one. We hoped to pick up some clues to his identity by having an inside man. We still hope this will help. That is your main job."

Allen opened an attache case and took out a transistor radio. At least, it looked like a radio.

"This is how we communicate. This is a special tape recorder. When you turn it on and push in this green button on the back, it will record your voice for about one hundred seconds at a rate of one inch per second. Try to keep your messages under a minute in length. When you want to send the message, call this number," he scribbled a number on a card from his wallet, "which you will memorize, and ask for Mr. Appelby. The girl will ask you to wait a minute. As soon as she says this, hold the recorder up to the phone and push this other switch, like this." The little gadget began to vibrate with a high-pitched whine. "This plays back your message to our recorder at twenty-five feet per second. It takes just four seconds."

"I didn't hear anything," I said.

"That is precisely the idea. This recorder plays the message back so rapidly, it raises the frequency above the range of most listening devices and nearly all human ears. The girl will come back on in half a minute and tell you that Mr. Ap-

pelby is not in, and she will ask you to leave a message. If you wish a reply you can give her a telephone number and a time to call back.

"Now, your answer will come like this. The phone will ring and the girl will ask you if you wish to speak to Mr. Appelby. You say yes to that, then hold your recorder up to the phone and push the second switch and the green button again. Leave it on for five seconds, then switch it off. I will then come on the phone, and you can tell me that you won't be able to make it for dinner or anything like that. I'll express my regrets and hang up. You can then play the message we sent you back at the slow speed. You can use an ear plug to listen to it. This is essentially an emergency measure when you want to contact us, so don't overdo it. We will, of course, contact you from time to time, usually in this apartment. Now, tell me what you think your mission is."

"I am to try to find Henrietta and keep an eye out for Paul. I shall attempt to become friendly with Helen."

"Trying not to get killed in the process. Any other questions?"

"Yes. Why do you follow people in a little green Volkswagen? Isn't that a little obvious?"

Allen did not smile. "It was meant to be obvious. First, we were testing your reaction to stress. Second, we wanted to see if you were being followed. If someone had been following you, he would have become greatly interested in the little green car, and if he followed it, we might be able to find out who he is."

"Another car was following you?"

"Yes, he's waiting down the street listening to every word we say." Allen showed me another small gadget which he took from his jacket pocket. "Unfortunately, no one was following you, so it was all a waste of time."

"It would have been quite a parade. One more question: could Casey Manning be the mysterious Paul?"

Manning is the Boys' Vice-Principal and I wanted him to be a Russian spy in the very worst way. He is the original all-American boy, tall, rugged, athletic, with a Burt Lancaster smile and a Dale Carnegie personality. I feel miserable and inadequate whenever I get within thirty feet of him.

Allen looked interested. "Paul could be any one of the eleven men working at the school who have been there for two or more years. We hope he isn't you or the Principal. He could be Manning or a teacher or a custodian. Why do you choose Manning out of twenty men

at Rogers Junior High School?"

"He is intelligent, a tremendous organizer, has a terrific vitality and energy. I've often wondered why he isn't a big business tycoon or something equally spectacular, rather than a school administrator."

"Most resident directors are very mild, vague, unobtrusive persons."

"This could be a double bluff," I said remembering my spy novels.

"We've checked thoroughly on Manning. He was in the U.S. Army in World War II and had an excellent record. He was fingerprinted in the army and the prints match. Before that he went to high school in Madera, California. We looked at his transcript. Everything seems to fit. We've wondered why such a capable man has not tried to be promoted. Turns out last year he did try, but didn't score high enough on a written examination. He may look smarter than he is. You seem to dislike him. Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe because he shows me up so much. He's actually been very helpful to me. I may just be jealous."

"Or you may have a hunch. Don't disregard hunches. Sometimes they are just about all we have, and that seems to be the case with Paul."

With that, Allen left me, with a parting warning to be cautious. Next morning, I began my career as an American counter-espionage agent. I felt very important and extremely mysterious. A few people asked me if I were ill, but most of the faculty didn't pay any attention to me, so I forgot the whole business after a few hours and started being a teacher again.

At lunch, I placed my tray across from Midge Steiner and confirmed

my hunch about her. In spite of Mr. Allen's doubts, she was obviously delighted and I very much enjoyed this part of my undercover work. Midge is a lovely girl, fresh and vibrant, with a warmth and vitality she communicates easily to others. It was not at all difficult after two

of these lunches to ask her to dinner, and it was even easier to start dating the girl on a regular basis after that. I became a regular visitor to her apartment which she shared with an elementary school teacher who was almost as attractive as Midge.

I noticed a picture of a young man on an end table one evening and inquired about him, thinking he was a competitor. She told me it was her brother and mentioned that he was a fisherman. She even asked me if I would like to go sailing with him and her. That brought me back to earth. I told her that I was deathly afraid of the mere sight of salt water. This was not actually true, but I did not like the thought of following Scott O'Neill to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

At school I drew an absolute blank. Either all the male members of the school staff looked like spymasters or none of them did. I was still hoping to get something on Casey Manning, but could find nothing remotely suspicious about him. I thought of planting something on him but decided it wouldn't be fair to Sam Allen.

Manning really bothered me. He was simply too good to be true and guys like me made him look even better than he really was. When the faculty-student softball game came up, for example, I was drafted by him to play right field. When I struck out in my turn at bat one inning, Manning hit a grand slam home run during the next inning. When I lost the ball in the sun with one batted ball, Manning made a double play when the next ball was hit to him.

At a school dance it was the same. I couldn't get the kids to dance together. The boys remained in one awkward, ungainly clump and glared moodily at the girls standing dismally along one wall of the gymnasium. Manning came in and in three minutes flat had them forming a conga line and spiraling gaily around the gym floor. This was typical of him. He was good at everything he tried, but I still like to point out that it was people like me that made him look so good.

I finally gave up on Manning. I even forgot about Midge being an agent, and began to think that Allen had been imagining things until one afternoon I stumbled onto Henrietta.

I'd laid a pile of history papers on the counter in our main office when I signed out, then picked up the pile and shoved it into my briefcase. When I arrived at my apartment, the phone was ringing. It was Midge Steiner asking if I had her math papers. I looked in

my case and there they were, under mine. I told her that I would return them in the morning.

"No, no, Mike. I need them tonight. I'll come right over." She sounded frantic, with a little hysterical edge to her voice.

I decided to play for a little time with those papers. I had an idea. "Suppose I bring them over right after supper," I said, trying to sound innocent. I heard her speak to someone else in the room, then she came back on.

"All right," she said, laughing. "You can come for supper at six if you promise to leave at seven. I have work to do. And don't forget those papers!"

I so promised, then rang off and hauled out the papers. There was something definitely wrong. Midge had never before shown any big hurry to correct papers. Like most teachers, she usually put the chore off as long as possible. She had an edge to her voice which simply did not fit the situation.

Studying the math papers carefully one by one, I struck gold with the ninth one, which belonged to a girl named Randy Jacoby. I felt the little pin pricks in the paper first, then held the paper up to a light and saw them. Many of the numerals had one or two tiny pin holes punched under them. I hurriedly copied the entire page, making the little holes with a pin of my own. Using the recorder gadget, I sent a message to Allen describing the circumstances behind the paper and told him he could find it under my desk blotter. I managed to get to Midge's place early and gave her the pile of answer sheets. She looked very much relieved, and I felt sad. She was such a lovely little traitor.

When I got back to the apartment, the copy of the message had been taken from under the desk blotter and replaced with a written message. Allen wanted me to check on whether or not Midge Steiner had ever had conferences with Randy Jacoby's parents. At school the next day, I found that either one parent or the other managed to drop in to see Miss Steiner every two weeks. A record of the conferences appeared on the Guidance Office clerk's appointment calendar. They had not been recorded, however, on the student's interview record by Midge. I had apparently uncovered Henrietta!

That left Paul, but I had no leads there until one day I had a little nibble. I had received a note from Manning asking me to see him about some new supervision ideas of his and when I got to his office during my conference period, I found his door closed and his waiting room full of belligerent looking

boys. I started to walk away when the door opened and I watched Midge's brother leave Manning's office and walk down the hall. I recognized him from his picture in Midge's apartment. Manning called me in and I had to walk right by him.

I put some bait on the hook. "That man looks familiar to me," I said as casually as I could.

Manning took the bait. "That's one of our ne'er-do-well's everloving parents. You know the Dixon boy?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Never had the doubtful pleasure. I probably saw him waiting in the Guidance Office."

Manning wanted to remind me about his annual card party weekend for male faculty members. I had never attended one of them because I preferred playing tennis to climbing mountains and playing poker. He warmly invited me to come and handed me a map. I told him I had heard so much about his place that I was planning on coming just to get a look at it.

This was true. I had heard about the fantastic spread he had in the Santa Monica mountains, looking down on the Pacific. It was big enough to sleep twenty easily, and had hot and cold running water, inside plumbing, and electricity. This was in spite of the prominent feature of the establishment, a small Chic Sale with an enormous television antenna atop it. This, apparently a relic of more primitive days, had been left up as a landmark, he explained, and I told him I'd heard about the funny looking outhouse that could be seen for miles.

I promised him I'd come, and that evening I reported the visit of Midge's brother to Sam Allen. He warned me to be careful, that Manning might very well be trying to trap me, but I couldn't see that.

Two days later, Manning made another slip. The members of our history department were having their annual argument about dates in the faculty dining room. Several of us were arguing that dates were an important discipline. Others were claiming that dates had little importance. I was sitting on the sidelines of the hassle, a little bored, because I'd heard the whole thing several times before, and didn't think that any teacher ever changed his mind about any part of it. Manning was on the other side of the arguing group, eating his lunch, looking interested, but not saying anything.

"Dates are extremely important," Mrs. Berryman sputtered. "They place you in time. You associate with them."

"That is an empty generality," Mr. Frimm replied. "Give us some-

thing concrete. Give us a specific example."

"Pearl Harbor," Mrs. Berryman said after a moment's thought.

"Pearl Harbor what?" said Mr. Frimm.

"Everyone knows where he was and what he was doing on the morning of December 7, 1941 if he was over five years old. Even you, Mr. Frimm."

Mr. Frimm reluctantly admitted that he knew where he had been—mopping up a grocery store—when the news came in. He said it was symbolic because the main weapon he later handled as a sailor turned out to be a mop. Mrs. Berryman and several others gave their locations. I told where I had been but Manning, still looking pleasant and much interested, didn't say anything.

Mrs. Berryman couldn't stand his silence. "Where were you, Mr. Manning?" she asked brightly.

"Where was I when?" he replied pleasantly. He had not been listening. I was no longer bored.

"Where were you on Pearl Harbor day, Mr. Manning?"

He smiled easily. "I don't remember, Mrs. Berryman." He thought a minute. "In college, I guess." He got up and left and my heart began to pound. I knew this was significant.

That evening I asked for and received a detailed chronological background on Manning. I plotted it on paper. He was born in 1921 near Madera, California. In 1933 his father died of a heart attack, and in 1936 his mother was killed in an auto accident. He had no brothers or sisters. In 1939 he graduated from high school and went to Fresno State College. He dropped out after one year and went to work in a grocery store. He was drafted into the American Army in October 1941, and sent to a training camp in El Paso, Texas. Pearl Harbor came two months later. No man who had been in the army for two months could possibly forget Pearl Harbor day, with its wild rumors of invasion and attack on the West Coast—but Pearl Harbor had hardly been mentioned in the Russian newspapers.

When the war ended, Manning was a sergeant in occupied Germany, not a high enough rank for a man of his abilities. He was mustered out in Europe, stating that he intended to bum around for a year or so and try to make a living by writing. Instead, he showed up at U.C.L.A. in January 1946, went right to work, had his master's degree and administrative credentials by 1952. He entered the L.A. city school system that year. Five years later, the minimum time, he became the Vice-Principal of Rog-

ers Junior High (to my dismay).

I guessed that the switch had been made in Europe in 1945, and that somehow Manning's army record of fingerprints had been altered. For someone of his importance, this might be feasible. I laid out my suspicions and described what I wanted to do about them to the gadget and played it to the Appelby number. I received confirmation and approval ten minutes later.

Early Saturday morning, I set out for Madera, California, two hundred miles north of Los Angeles in the Great Valley. I'd left a note in Manning's school mailbox that I would be late to his poker party. I arrived in Madera just in time for the library to open, and asked the librarian if they kept old high school yearbooks on file. I thought it odd when she asked me to identify myself. After carefully inspecting my driver's license, she showed me to a back shelf full of local yearbooks. I thought her actions were normal small-town suspicion of strangers. The 1939 yearbook was missing. When I asked her for it, she angrily told me it had been missing for years.

I then requested the name of the local high school librarian. After some static, she gave it to me. When I pulled out of the parking lot, her actions stopped being normal. I saw her cross the street and enter a pay phone booth in a service station lot. I drew up to within twenty feet of the glass booth and watched her. She was holding a little dog-eared card in her hand and, after dropping four quarters in a slot, she started dialing a number. I went down the street to a drugstore and checked on the toll charge to L.A. It was one dollar even.

I drove to the school librarian's home and found her in. When I tried to bribe her into letting me into her library, she refused the money but took me down and let me in. Her library had two copies of every yearbook except 1939. They both were gone. She became very upset about this, explaining that they had been missing when she came to the school in 1957 and that she had gone to a lot of trouble getting another one. She had persuaded a teacher to donate a copy, but now that was gone, too. I wasn't surprised.

She began to build up steam about the missing yearbooks. The idea of something being kept out of her library evidently really hit her where she lived. She took out a faculty list and began phoning teachers. On the fourth call, she hit home.

"There," she said, firmly putting the phone down. "Miss McNeil has one. She was a student at this

school then, and we can look at it if we promise not to read all of the goofy things written in it."

We drove about two miles to the outskirts of the little town. The lady was waiting on the porch for us. She handed the volume to me with a cheery smile and I began going through it page by page while they watched. There were three pictures of Casey Manning in the book and one written "Best Wishes to a Swell Girl," with his signature. He, like the present Manning, was blond, husky, and good-looking, but this was not our boy. It was close but not close enough. Whatever happened to the real Casey Manning I don't know, but he was not now working at Rogers Junior High.

I asked Miss McNeil if she remembered Manning. She said she knew him well, having dated with him several times. She was surprised that he was alive, having heard that he had been killed in Europe after the war. She knew him by the name of Robert C. Manning. She did not recall how she had heard of his death.

I offered her fifty dollars for the book, but she took only ten as a deposit against my not returning it. I thanked the ladies, drove the librarian back to her home, promised her to punish the people who were stealing her books, and headed back toward Los Angeles. I'd brought the message-sending gadget along and recorded my findings on it. Stopping in Fresno, I sent the message to Appelby over a pay phone. While in Fresno, I stopped in a sporting goods shop and bought a .25 caliber army carbine and three 20-round clips of ammunition. I stopped in a drugstore, bought a big manila envelope, and mailed the yearbook to an address in the Federal Building by registered mail.

I was now clear for my trip to Manning's mountain retreat. If I had to face the man who had eliminated my friend, Scott O'Neill, and had probably murdered an innocent bystander named Robert Casey Manning, I wanted to have some firepower with me. I didn't know how good an actor I could be under the circumstances. I put the rifle in the trunk after loading it.

I had no trouble finding the place. I actually heard the party before I made the final turn on the winding mountain road and saw the famous outhouse with the large TV antenna tacked to its roof. Fifteen men playing poker have a sound of their very own. I was reassured by the racket, but even so, I backed the car down around the bend and parked it out of sight of the large two-storied cabin in a little hollow beneath some oak trees,

facing it toward L.A. I then climbed over the hill between my car and the cabin and was able to approach the cabin from the rear. With the ridiculous looking outhouse between me and the cabin, I got within fifty feet of it without apparently being observed.

Listening carefully, I heard Mr. Goodman state loudly that Mr. Frimm was running a nothing bluff, and heard Matthews bellow for more beer. Then I heard Manning tell them in authoritative tones to keep the racket down because the neighbors were complaining. He was obviously making a joke because there were no other cabins in sight. He had the mountain all to himself, with a beautiful grove of oaks on one side and a chaparal-filled canyon running down to the sea on the other. I noticed that the tipsy antenna was pointing directly out to sea where there weren't any television transmitters. Part of the gag, I decided, until I noticed the heavy insulators on the thing. I had never seen anything like them on a TV antenna. I pulled the outhouse door open as quietly as I could, glancing nervously at the cabin. The racket went on but no one was visible at any of its windows.

The antenna, in spite of its tipsy appearance, was not attached to the roof but was solidly anchored to a heavy metal pole which came through the roof and went right into the ground. Using all my strength, I could raise it only a half inch, but enough to see the thick insulated cable going into a conduit into the earth. This was not a fake receiving antenna. It was a real transmitting antenna, aimed straight out to sea, and shielded by mountains on three sides. Like Manning himself, it was a colossal double bluff.

I dropped the antenna back into its concrete slot with a grunt, opened the ramshackle door cautiously, and walked toward the front of the cabin. The commotion was louder than ever. Someone had turned a radio up loudly. I stepped out in front of the cabin with my back to the porch. There were only three cars in sight and this worried me a little. One belonged to Manning, but I had never seen either of the other two cars. Something about the music was bothering me too, and I tried to think what it was. Then I realized the music was a year old. I started to tiptoe quietly down the road when a firm, authoritative voice cut through the air.

"Don't leave us now, Mike. You've just arrived. Put your hands behind your neck and lock them. Now, turn around and walk right in."

I did what the man said and turned around to face Manning. He was standing on the concrete porch with a shotgun in his hands, pointed casually at me. He was giving me that big all-American grin as he motioned me up on the porch with the gun. The door was open and I walked gingerly into a large, high-ceilinged room with a stone fireplace and hanging wagon wheel lights. There was no one else in the room, just a lonely little tape recorder making all the diverse noises of a poker party. I walked by the damn thing and stopped. He switched it off.

"Turn around, Mike," Manning said in good-natured tones.

As I did, I heard someone come in and walk up behind me. I kept my eyes on Manning and the gun, having just decided that it would be very unfair for me to get killed at this point of my life, especially when I was one of the good guys. The someone behind me frisked me expertly.

"You can put your hands down and relax now, Mike," Manning said. He still managed to sound pleasant.

"Where is everyone?" I said as cheerfully as I could.

"When I got word from Madera that you were hunting for yearbooks, I phoned everyone and called off the party. I'm now home in bed with the flu. Let's go out in the kitchen, Scott, and have a beer. You open some."

The hair on the back of my neck began to rise for the only time in my life that I can remember. I turned around slowly and faced Scott O'Neill, who seemed his pleasant, urbane self. I must have looked shocked. As we walked into the kitchen, Manning looked at me and laughed.

"Don't be so upset. He isn't a ghost. When I discovered that Scott was an American counter-espionage agent, planted right in my school, I made the guess that we could double him, recruit him for our side. We picked him up off his boat and brought him up here. He's given us enough details about your operation to convince us of his new loyalty to us. In a few minutes he is going to carry out an assignment for us which will guarantee it."

I walked into the kitchen and sat down heavily in a chair, facing a large window which framed the oak grove to the north. I thought longingly of that carbine and its sixty rounds of ammunition lying in the trunk of my car. I looked at Scott who was humming a little tune as he opened three cans of beer from the refrigerator.

"I'd like mine in a glass," I said loftily, pretending not to know what his assignment was going to be. I decided that no one was going to rescue me in spite of my still being one of the good guys, and that life was a pretty rotten business. I wished I could call Allen and offer him my immediate resignation.

Scott handed me the glass of beer and looked right at me. He appeared a little sheepish but he definitely did not look guilty. I decided to parley.

"Why give him such a nasty assignment?" I said, raising my glass in salute to the man with the double-barreled shotgun. "Don't you see it's cracking him up? Why don't you recruit me, too? I might be open to a reasonable offer."

"We don't need amateurs," Manning said briskly. "Scott is a trained professional. He speaks fluent Spanish and French. We can use him in many parts of the world."

"I speak a little broken German," I said, trying not to let my voice quaver. My heart was pounding noticeably in my throat and I could hear a shrill whistling in my ears. I thought it would be ironic to have a heart attack before they shot me.

"Drink your beer, Mr. Collins," Manning said with the voice of

doom. "I have to get back to my sickbed in L.A."

I did not drink my beer, but threw the lovely foaming stuff into Manning's face, then made the most beautiful somersaulting dive of my life right through the big window. I took out the glass with my back and shoulders, flipped over and landed on my feet, and was running before I hit the ground. Cutting behind that crazy outhouse, I lit out for the woods in a zigzag broken-field sprint, and was out of lethal shotgun range when the twin blasts went off. I took about twenty pellets in various rear facing surfaces, but they didn't penetrate. They just stung, and motivated me to run even faster. I made a mighty leap behind a sturdy old oak just as I heard two pistol shots ring out, one right after the other. I rolled sideways about ten feet, then made another rush for a tree. I got creased painfully on the right hip but I could still move fast. They began laughing at the sport, and took turns shooting at me as I worked my way through the grove. They were separated by about fifty feet as I crawled through a thick thorn bush and had the top of my right ear removed by one of their bullets.

"I knocked a little piece off him that time," O'Neill said happily.

I was beginning to get mad at the guy. He was not only a traitor, but an out and out sadist. I felt like a bird in a badminton match. Completely out of breath, panting heavily, I peered at Manning who was standing about thirty yards to my right, and was reloading. Taking a chance, I got up and made it to the crest of the hill before he let fly. O'Neill had a clear, easy shot at me but held his fire. I guess it wasn't his turn.

I fell down the hill, bleeding from a slash on my arm, sprinted across the road to my car and opened the trunk. A shot came right through the raised lid and missed my head by about three inches as I hauled out the lovely little carbine. Stepping out from behind the car, I clicked the gun to the automatic position.

Scott was standing in the road less than twenty feet from me. His gun was lowered and he was smiling happily until he saw my weapon. He raised his gun, but went down when three bullets hit him in the chest, probably was dead before he hit the ground.

I could hear Manning walking noisily down the road from the other direction. When he heard the shots, he called out, "Hey, wait for me, Scott!" Then he came around the bend. When he saw me and the carbine, he froze. He almost left one foot up in the air in the mid-

dle of a happy stride but placed it down on the pavement carefully and slowly.

"It is your turn, Mr. Manning," I said, watching his pistol which was hanging limply at his side.

Cool and intelligent, he glanced at Scott's sprawled body, then dropped the gun. Looking back at me, he raised his hands slowly and locked them behind his neck. Then he smiled very slightly.

"You see, now, why I don't like to deal with amateurs, Mr. Collins. They too often surprise you with unpredictable actions."

"I don't go on rabbit hunts with a human being as the rabbit, you big phony. Give me one reason why I shouldn't empty this clip into you. I have seventeen rounds left."

He stopped smiling and frowned. "You know, I can't think of one," he said sadly, "not even to save my life."

I almost shot him. I squeezed on the trigger to within about one tenth of an inch from release. I wanted so much to shoot him that a few tears actually came to my eyes when I didn't do it. The last time I'd felt like this had been when I was about six years old. Instead, I had him lean against a tree with his fingertips and I tied him up with about fifty feet of rope. I then crammed him into the trunk of the car and drove him down to L.A. When I got to my apartment, I phoned Sam Allen. I did not use the recording gadget, but told the girl to tell him that I had Paul locked in the trunk of my car, that it was parked in front of my apartment, and that the key was on the seat.

I took a shower and changed into another suit. When I saw Allen pull up in front fifteen minutes later, I left by the rear entrance and walked over to Midge Steiner's apartment. In spite of my change of clothes, I evidently was still quite a sight from the scratching and pounding in the oak grove. Midge became very excited about my condition and insisted on bandaging my ear, hip, and leg and doctoring some of the other cuts and bruises. I asked her point-blank why she was working against her adopted country, and she said her parents were hostage to her cooperation and that of her brother. I told her I did not want to testify against her under the circumstances and offered her two alternatives.

One was for her to get the hell out of the country. She took the other alternative, which was to marry me, immediately. We drove to Las Vegas in her car and got married at three o'clock in the morning. We got to work at the school a little late, so I had to sprint right to my class without bothering

to sign in—no tardiness for me.

I thought I thereby had a big surprise for Sam Allen and his crew of counter-espionage agents, but he had a bigger surprise for me. When I walked down the hall to the Guidance Office during my conference period, curious to see who was substituting for Manning, I glanced into his office. I took two more steps, then stopped, frozen in my tracks. I did not believe what I had just seen.

"Mr. Collins," the familiar, booming, cheery voice came ringing out of that office, "may I see you for a minute?" It was Casey Manning! It really was!

I walked back and faced him, then startled some boys who were waiting to see him in his outer office. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He was shocked. "Mr. Collins, such language! Have you seen Mr. Appelby this morning? He's waiting to see you in your office."

I glared at him for about ten seconds, speechless, then stepped back out of the office and glanced down the hall. Allen was standing in the doorway of the Guidance Office, making furious gestures at me. I walked rapidly toward him. I then shocked several more kids and some parents waiting in the office.

"Will you please tell me what the hell is going on here? What kind of nuthouse operation are you running? I want that cold-blooded turncoat locked up and locked up fast."

This brought out the head counselor. He and Mr. Allen ushered me into a soundproof testing room. The counselor gave me a very worried look, usually reserved for potential mental cases, then left, closing the door carefully behind him. I expected him to lock it but he didn't.

Before I could start yelling again, Allen spoke. "Calm down, Collins. We only asked you to find Paul. We don't want to lock him up. We must take the long view." I said something profane about him and his long view but he ignored me and went on. "If we lock him up, he and his organization will be replaced by another director and another organization, and we will have to start all over again. As it is, we know where the sleepers are now, so he is really working for us. He likes it here. We want to leave everything as it is."

"I have a surprise for you," I said. "I am married to one of your phony spies." I told him about Midge. "Now tell me how I fit in with those apples."

Allen thought deeply for several seconds, little worry lines knitting his ordinarily sunny brow. "I am

sure that Paul will be willing to add you to the group. He thinks you are very resourceful. I'll ask him about it."

"I could be Harold and act as a cut-out courier to Helen or my brother-in-law Hank," I said.

He looked surprised, then started to laugh. "I see, you are making a joke about the names. I think Horace would be better, or Horatio."

I then informed Mr. Allen very succinctly and tersely what he could do with his idea of adding me to the organization. For a man in his profession, he seemed to be a very sensitive person.

"We could allow you to transfer from Rogers, if you feel that way," he said, shaking his head while blushing.

"My friend, you are going to let both of us transfer out of your school and out of your never-never land of spies and counterspies or I call the Los Angeles Times and the Russian Embassy."

Sam Allen was horrified at this statement and quickly agreed. As he rose to leave, I reached into my briefcase and pulled out the little message-sending gadget. Tossing it to him, I asked him one final question.

"Tell me, Mr. Allen, how do I know whose side you are really on? How do I know that Manning didn't double you?"

He smiled at the query, then looked thoughtful again. The worry lines reappeared. "You never will really know, will you, Mr. Collins? You know, sometimes, it's even quite difficult for me to be absolutely sure."

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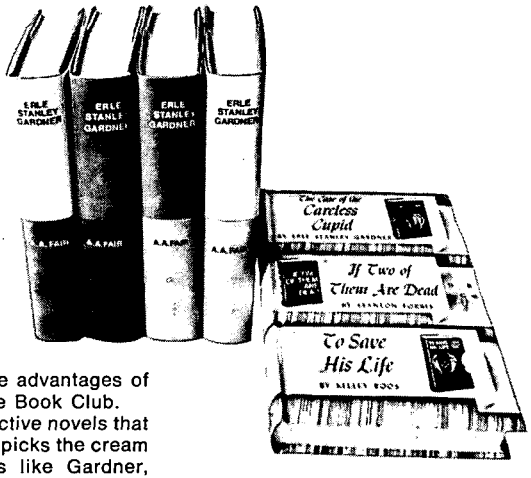

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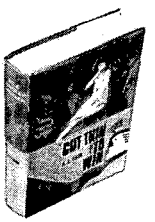

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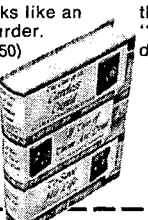

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