

ALFRED

JUNE 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories
presented by
the master
of SUSPENSE

June 1969



Dear Reader:

I hope this issue does not discourage those of you planning June nuptials, though it very well might. Marriage or its proximity and the deterrent or termination of it is treated rather thoroughly herein, as are special kinds of love of virtually every classification. You will look in vain for popular romance in any large measure, which, I trust, is the way you would have it.

Conspiring with me in bringing you some flowers of the mystery and suspense field are many of your favorite storytellers. They plant and cultivate skillfully, leaving you to reap the pleasure of the macabre.

Indulge yourself, then, in the scents of the kind of new stories you and I mutually adore—not those of bridal bouquets but of funereal essence.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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It is man's nature to inquire after truth, yet it becomes eminently evident that not everyone is privileged to endure it.

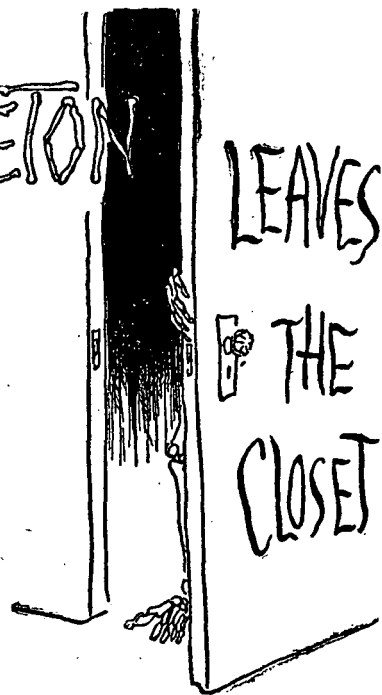


THE SKELETON

AT FIRST the murders were not considered to be interrelated. There had been several months separating one from the other and they had occurred in three different states.

Emma Rollins began the list. A bride of less than a year, she was stabbed through the heart while apparently at the wheel of the family car outside her husband's office in Warwick, R. I. Then she was driven to a nearby dump and peculiarly marked with a charcoal pencil on the left breast. An autopsy confirmed her husband's story that she was six months along the road to motherhood.

Next came Miss Hazel Jaworka. She was knifed to death five days before her scheduled marriage to a garage mechanic named Peter Barbour. The fatal assault took place in Miss Jaworka's furnished apart-



ment in Chelsea, Mass. As in the case of Mrs. Rollins, she also bore a strange symbolic marking in charcoal on her left breast.

The third victim was Miss Rita Heinsohn of New York City. Again a knife was the tool and again the left breast was bared to

permit the same inscription with the charcoal pencil. Coincidentally, Miss Heinsohn, like Miss Jaworka, was only a few days away from nuptials, but she was nearly as close to motherhood as Mrs. Rollins, according to the unequivocal autopsy report.

The male principals involved with these unfortunate young women were subjected to extensive questioning from the inception of each case and then investigated in depth for weeks afterward. All were finally exonerated of suspicion of murder.

Four months after the death of Miss Heinsohn, the police file on her was still open as were similar, even older files on Mrs. Rollins in Rhode Island and Miss Jaworka in Massachusetts. To judge from the

by Frank
SISK

paucity of evidence that had been gathered, the chances that these files would ever be satisfactorily closed grew dimmer with each passing day.

Then came the murder of Miss Joy Vaughan in Connecticut, which event immediately brought

to the fore the official services of Captain Thomas McFate and the unofficial services, a bit later, of A. B. C. Damroth of the Tillary Scientific Research Foundation.

The case can be said to have begun at 7:40 a.m. just as McFate was raising a paper cup of black coffee to his lips. The phone on the cluttered desk rang dangerously loud, the way it always did the first thing in the morning, and he answered it with a low growl.

It was the switchboard officer, a woman recently installed, who wished to inform him, in a sweet voice, that Lieutenant Bergeron was preparing to drive out to Green Plains Road to check on a reported homicide, and would the captain like to join him?

Somewhat mollified by the feminine voice, McFate asked why Bergeron was unable to extend the invitation in person.

"I believe he's in a hurry, sir," the switchboard officer said. "He's gone to the garage to get a cruiser."

"He's always in a hurry," McFate muttered as much to himself as to anyone else. "All right, young lady, tell him I'll be outside in a minute."

Two minutes later, with McFate glumly at his side, Bergeron headed the cruiser from the center of the city. "Thought you might prefer to stay at your desk," he said by

way of instigating a conversation.

"What the hell for?"

"Paperwork."

"I hate paperwork. And turn that damned thing off." This last remark was addressed to the lieutenant's act of switching on the siren to facilitate movement past slow-moving vehicles. "Now where are we going in such a bloody rush?"

"To the Green Plains Outdoor Cinema."

"Who's dead?"

"A young lady, age about twenty-one, white, dark brown hair cut boy style, very well dressed, wearing—"

"You sound like a report from O'Brien or Kingsley."

"O'Brien, sir. He found the deceased at seven oh two while on the last tour of the night."

"Did he manage to get a name to go with the body?"

"In compliance with your standing orders, sir, he touched nothing. Everything's just as he found it, and he's on guard there now."

"Did he mention what she died of?"

"Apparently a knife wound."

"Then he found a knife?"

"I asked him that same question. No. He bases his opinion on a general observation and past experience."

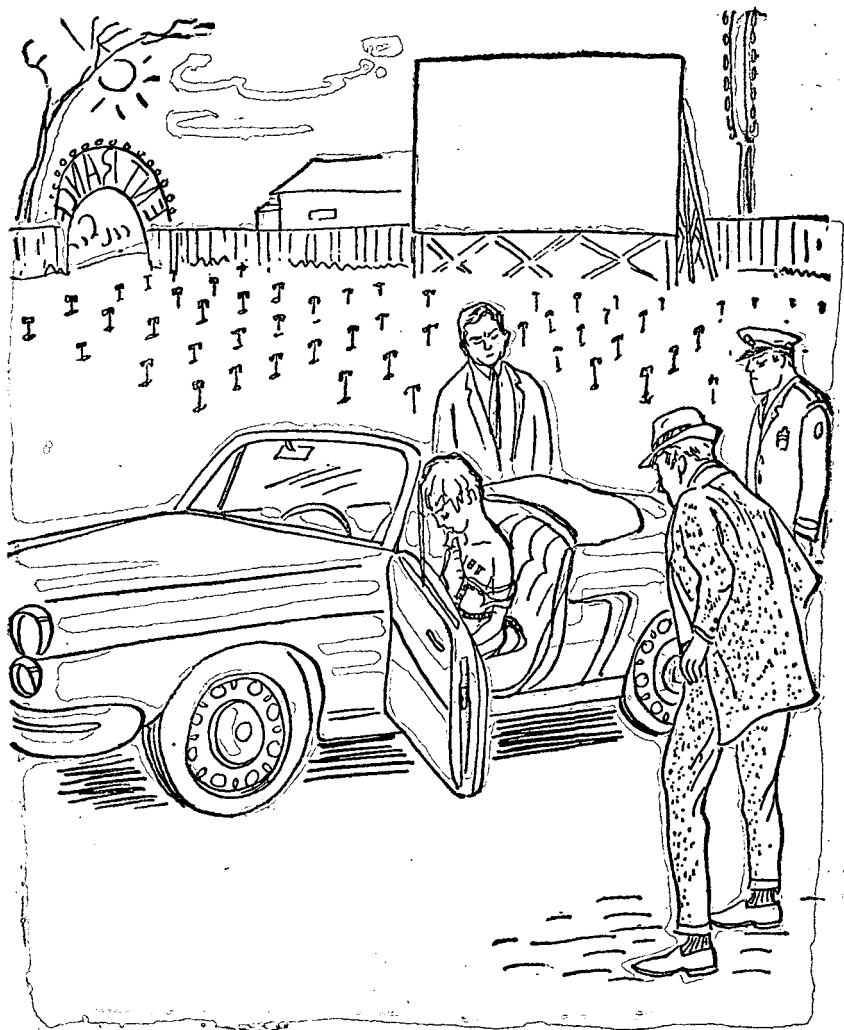
McFate subsided, eyes half closed,

and remained so until the cruiser humped up a ramp between the high curbing and ran through an arched gateway that was the entrance to Outdoor Cinema One. In the fifteen acres of blacktop planted with geometrical rows of sound amplifiers and dominated by the vaulting white screen, the two cars off to the right rear looked quite lonely. One was a black four-door sedan with a police shield on the front door. The other was a dove-colored convertible with the top rolled back. Between them, almost at attention, stood O'Brien's hulking figure.

As the two detectives climbed from their car, another cruiser cowboied in from the highway on squealing tires, siren wide open.

"Traffic division clown," McFate muttered. Then, with a casual salute for O'Brien, he walked around to the left side of the convertible and gazed down at the dead girl lolling behind the wheel. She would have slid off the bucket seat to the floor except for the safety belt buckled around her narrow waist. The wound was on the right side, just below the rib cage, and to judge by the ragged tear in the fabric of the light summer dress, O'Brien was probably right about its being a knife.

What caught McFate's attention first and continued to hold it was



the way the dress had been methodically unbuttoned down the front and then slipped off the left shoulder to expose the left breast on which, side by side, were two black symbols an inch high. They

looked to him a little like a box-type figure 8 and a double T.

"What do you make of that, sir?" Bergeron asked over his shoulder.

"I don't know yet."

"Perversion of some sort."

"Perverts rip and tear. Ten small buttons on the front of that dress, Bergeron. Count 'em. And they've all been unbuttoned. Even the bra isn't torn. Slipped down just far enough for the—ah—autograph."

"Autograph?" Bergeron said.

"Scrimshaw. Pass me that purse."

Bergeron stretched his lank frame and lifted a large white shell bag from between the bucket seats.

McFate set the bag on the hood, opened it, then extracted a clean lace handkerchief, a pocket-size package of facial tissues, an ivory cigarette lighter, a small black address book, a tube of suntan cream, a pair of green-tinted glasses and a bulging pink wallet.

He unsnapped the wallet and quickly inspected the money compartment. "Well, robbery wasn't the motive. Must be five or six hundred here." He flipped to an ID card in a transparent pocket. "Miss Joy Vaughan, or so it says here. Thirty Wyoming Terrace, this city. Asks that Norman Vaughan, same address, be notified in case of accident."

"Vaughan. That name rings a bell somehow," Bergeron said.

"It should," McFate said. "Selwood Vaughan."

"Vaughan and Pope, the road builders?"

"That's the Vaughan I have in mind. And if my memory isn't too

impaired, he lives in the West End where all the streets, or terraces, are named after states. This is probably his daughter. Dispatch that traffic cowboy to the address and have him pick up a relative who can make positive identification. Then radio the lab staff to come out right away with all their magic."

Bergeron moved away and O'Brien approached indecisively.

"That's right," McFate said. "I want to ask you a few questions. How often do you pass this driveway on your tour of duty?"

"Four times, sir. Every two hours."

"The exact times you pass here?"

"Well, I come on at midnight and go by the first time at one."

"The show's always over by one?"

"Always. And the last of the cars are just clearing out. My next trip here is close to three, a minute one side or the other."

"By then the lot is empty?"

"Always, Captain."

"Was it empty this morning at three?"

"Absolutely. And at five, too."

"How do you know?"

"On the three, five and seven trips, I always swing in here and ride the entire area and sweep all the dark corners with the spotlight."

"An understanding with the management?"

"Yes, sir," O'Brien replied, then blushed at the implication.

"And this car was not here at three or at five?"

"No, sir."

"All right, O'Brien. Have your report on my desk before you sign off."

Ten minutes later three civilians arrived in a station wagon that had been converted into a mobile laboratory. McFate's instructions to each of these specialists was succinct and to the point. Then he turned to Bergeron and said, "I'll drive back by myself and send out the medical examiner. You stay here and witness the identification of the body when the relative arrives. After that, I want to see that relative in my office. Okay?"

"Check, skipper."

McFate picked up the address book that he had taken from Joy Vaughan's purse, shook it significantly in front of Bergeron's eyes, stuffed it into the pocket of his rumpled suit coat, and departed.

It was during the 10:30 coffee break that Bergeron finally appeared in the doorway of McFate's office in the company of a thin young man with black hair and an excessively pallid face.

"This is Norman Vaughan, Captain—the unfortunate girl's older

brother." He ushered the man in.

McFate abandoned his black coffee. "Sit here, Mister Vaughan," he said, removing several folders from a chair beside his desk.

The young man sat down without a word.

"I'm McFate," the captain said, almost amiably.

The young man nodded acknowledgment.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you, Captain. I'm coming around. Just takes a little time to absorb the shock."

"Get some coffee anyway, Lieutenant. Sugar and cream, Mister Vaughan?"

"One sugar, nothing else."

"You were quite close to your sister?" McFate asked as Bergeron left.

"Very. To both my sisters. But to Joy especially because she was the baby."

"Your other sister is your senior?"

"No. I'm the oldest. Twenty-six, if you need that for the record. Harriet is next, at twenty-four. And Joy was, well, she would have been twenty in six weeks. The second of September, to be exact."

"When did you last see your sister alive, Norman? Do you mind if I call you Norman? I have a son as old as you are."

"Not at all, sir. I'd like it that

way." The pallor was beginning to yield to spots of color. "We all had dinner together last night."

"You and Harriet and Joy?"

"And my mother."

"Your father was absent?"

"He's away. On a project in New Mexico. A bridge over the Pecos, I believe, or a tunnel under it. He's been gone a month."

"Your father is Selwood Vaughan then?"

"That's right. He's known pretty widely in the heavy construction industry."

"Well, Norman, getting back to last night, what happened after dinner?"

"That's easy. Mother went to bed with a splitting headache. Harriet retired to her room to write a letter to her fiance. I—"

"Harriet's soon to be married?"

"Yes, in two weeks."

"Was Joy engaged also?"

"Oh no."

"Are you sure?"

"A hundred per cent. Even if it were a secret, she would have most surely told me." He shook his head decisively. "No, Joy was still living up to her name, and free as a bird."

"Do you know what she did after dinner?"

"Yes, she took her car and drove out to Founder's Lake for a swim. Or that's what she planned to do."

"And you, Norman?"

"I went to my father's club, the Parthenon, had a sherry at the bar, found the company rather dull and so went home and to bed at about eleven. I'm happy to say I work for a living nowadays, Captain. In fact, I was just leaving for work when the officer arrived."

"What kind of work?"

"I'm a biochemist. Research in genetics."

"Where?"

"The Tillary Foundation."

McFate's mask of imperturbability showed momentary surprise.

"You know Doctor Damroth then?"

"Quite well."

Bergeron entered with three coffees.

"Now, Norman," McFate said, consulting a yellow scratch pad on his desk, "I will read you three names. Listen carefully. If you've ever heard any of them, it may help us. Emma Rollins . . . Hazel Jaworka . . . Rita Heinsohn."

Norman's expression was pensive, but eventually he shook his head. "Unusual names. I'm sure if I'd ever heard them before I'd remember. I'm supposed to have a good memory for things like that."

"Fine. Take a look through this little book and tell me if there are any names in it you don't recognize. You recognize the book, don't you?"

"Joy's address book, isn't it?"
"Correct."

Norman took it almost tenderly. He opened it in the middle and scanned the pages, then went to the first page and began a methodical study. Finally he came to what McFate knew to be the last entry and his brows suddenly arched. "Here's one, sir. Anthony Wilhelm of Four Carver Circle. I've never heard of him before."

"I thought that might be the case."

"Who is he?"

"We don't know yet."

"Haven't you gone to this address to inquire?"

"There's no such address in the city," McFate said.

After Norman Vaughan had been sent home in a cruiser to break the tragic news to his family, Bergeron said, "Mind telling me, skipper, what was behind those three names you read off?"

"You should know without my telling you. That is, if you studied the national homicide recapitulation once in a while. Each of these women was murdered within the last year. Each was stabbed in the right side. One of them was married and about to have a baby. The other two were on the verge of marriage, and one was already pregnant. Beginning to get the picture?"

"Kind of," the lieutenant said.

"Well, to make the coincidence exceptional, each one of the victims was marked on the left breast the same as our girl this morning. At least, I assume the marks are the same. I'm having detailed photos sent from the other police departments involved."

"And you think this Anthony Wilhelm may be our man?"

"He's got the bloody humor for it," McFate said. "Four Carver Circle. That's a laugh up a sleeve if I ever heard one."

Late that afternoon, McFate and Bergeron drove out to 30 Wyoming Terrace to meet the rest of the Vaughan family.

A maid admitted them and they waited in a large livingroom comfortably furnished with deep chairs and long divans. Presently a young woman entered and introduced herself as Harriet Vaughan. Aside from being a bit more rounded, she bore a striking resemblance to her dead sister.

"My mother will be down in a few minutes," she said. "This has been a terrible, a horrible—" Her own composure nearly vanished. "None of us can really believe it."

"These things never seem real when they happen to somebody we're close to," McFate said with as much sympathy as he was ever capable of showing. "Your father

has been informed, I imagine."

"Yes. Norm phoned him a few hours ago. He's taking the first plane out of Albuquerque tonight."

"Is Norman here?"

"Not just now. He went to talk to Doctor Damroth. At the Foundation, you know."

"I see. In that case, let me check back on something. To your knowledge was Joy engaged to be married, perhaps secretly?"

"Of course not. She was not a secretive girl. The opposite, in fact. An extrovert."

"Is it possible she might have been pregnant?"

Before Harriet could answer, another voice, trembling with emotion, cried, "That is an outrageous imputation, sir, and I most strongly resent it."

McFate turned to face a white-haired woman of regal manner, Mrs. Vaughan unquestionably. Her imperious approach from the wide doorway seemed to demand unconditional surrender.

McFate decided gallantry might be called for. "Please accept my apologies, madam. But police work makes some pretty outrageous demands."

"Some demands can never be countenanced in civilized society," Mrs. Vaughan pronounced, "and your blatant inquiry is a prime example." She took a seat, sitting up-

right. "Kindly inform me what pregnancy has to do with this—this frightful crime."

"Perhaps nothing," McFate said. "But I have a theory, if you are interested in listening."

Mrs. Vaughan said, "I'm very interested."

In a few hundred lean words, McFate told her he thought Joy's murder was the fourth in a series. The connecting link, he said, was the distinctive marking of the left breast. Details of these marks were confined to police files. No newspaper account of them had ever been released. Only the killer could duplicate them.

"When there's one link among cases like this," McFate said, "we try to support it by finding something else that fits a pattern. What did the victims have in common? Well, ma'am, so far as we know now, they were all young women under thirty. They were unknown to each other. One of them was married and about to have a baby. The other two were about to be married, and one of these young ladies was already pregnant."

Mrs. Vaughan had been listening to McFate's words with polite interest, but when he spoke the last two sentences her eyes suddenly widened. "Incredible!" she said aloud but to herself. "Oh, no, no!"

"What is it, mother?" Harriet

asked anxiously. "What's wrong?"

"That cruel message," Mrs. Vaughan said, still speaking to herself. "I can hardly believe it."

"What message?" McFate asked.

"It came in the regular mail a few weeks ago," Mrs. Vaughan said, her eyes now bright with pain. "A plain white envelope, typed, and the message inside typed, too."

"Do you still have it?" McFate asked.

"Of course not," Mrs. Vaughan said, as if to keep such a thing would be an act of defilement. "I burned it almost immediately. I didn't wish my husband or children to see it."

"Was it threatening? Obscene?"

"I remember it word for word," Mrs. Vaughan said. "*You are hereby ordered to prohibit your daughter from marrying. The consequences will be grave unless her engagement is terminated within two weeks.*"

"Was it signed?"

"By typed initials: T.W."

"That's the pattern, skipper," Bergeron said.

"Yeah. But with the wrong victim," McFate said.

"You mean—" Harriet began.

"It wasn't Joy he wanted," McFate said. "It was you, Miss Vaughan."

"We look a little alike," Harriet said, "but not that much."

"It was probably dark when they met. Founder's Lake, if that's where it was, is not known for its illumination. Moonlight is about all. And then, perhaps, your sister may have pretended to be you. Is that in keeping with her character?"

Harriet didn't hesitate. "Yes, it is. As a gag, she often pretended to be older than she was."

Mrs. Vaughan broke in. "Do you mean, sir, that my daughter actually spent some time with this—this beast before he—"

"Well, he was with her long enough to give her a name and an address. She'd made a notation in her address book."

"And what, may I ask, was the name?" Mrs. Vaughan said.

"Well, assuming the initial T in the message you destroyed stands for Tony, I'd say somebody calling himself Anthony Wilhelm is our man. Does that name strike a bell?"

Mrs. Vaughan's reaction was uncharacteristic. Her face turned the color of whitewash, and she fainted.

The following morning, after the mail was delivered, McFate and Bergeron sat closeted over a collection of glossy prints that had arrived from New York, Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

"It's as I thought," McFate finally said. "Those damned marks are

identical, but what do they mean?"

"Could they be this Wilhelm's initials?" Bergeron asked.

"Not even upside down. Here, you take a good long look at them. Then duplicate what you see on this card. That way we may gain a new perspective."

Bergeron studied each of four closeups for a few minutes, then carefully transcribed what he thought he saw, handing the card to McFate. McFate looked at it:

8 11

"Does it help, skipper?"

"Not right off. Have you read the autopsy report yet?"

"Glanced at it briefly. At least Joy Vaughan wasn't pregnant."

"Yeah. And she'd been dead about eight hours when we found her. That makes Founder's Lake a likely place to start looking for some clue. Take a few men out there and ask questions."

Just as Bergeron left the office the phone rang. The caller was, not surprisingly, A. B. C. Damroth. "I understand," he said after the simple amenities, "that you had the unpleasant duty yesterday of questioning one of my young associates."

"Norman Vaughan, yes, Doctor."

"The case sounds fascinatingly troublesome."

"Now that you mention it."

"Have lunch with me."

"All right. Where shall it be?"

"The Parthenon Club. Twelve-thirty."

McFate had never been inside this exclusive club in his life, but he went as he was, somewhat baggy suit and well-weathered hat, with just one extra added: he carried a disreputable-looking briefcase.

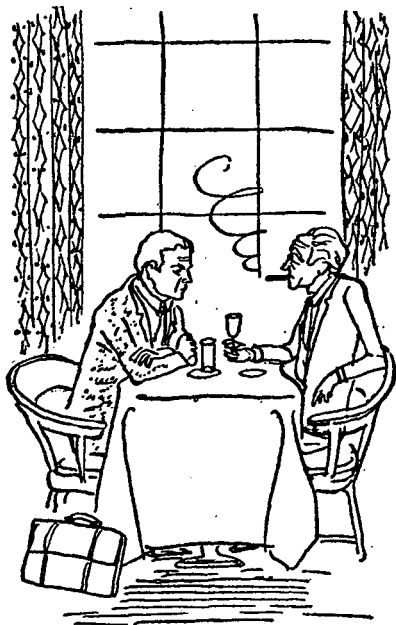
Damroth was waiting at the cloak room, all eighty years of him manifesting a lank leathery briskness. He was smoking the inevitable black cigarillo. Noticing the briefcase, he said, "I'm glad you brought a bit of work along."

"Well, there's something I want to show you," McFate said.

At a table near a bay window, Damroth ordered a whiskey sour for himself and a vodka collins for McFate, then looked expectantly at the briefcase, now open on McFate's lap.

"Before I show you these pictures, Doctor," McFate said, "let me fill you in on the ramification," and he did so in the course of the next five minutes. "Now as to these charcoal symbols, what do you make of them?"

Damroth applied a pince-nez and studied each of four photos a moment only, an amused smile lengthening his thin lips. "Well, it's perfectly obvious, Captain, that your killer has a smattering of classical education."



"Go on. You have the floor."

"These marks you find so mystifying are the Greek letters H and P."

The waiter arrived with the drinks and the menus. McFate took refuge in one and behind the other. When lunch had been ordered, he said, "That clears that up. But not much else."

"No, my dear Captain, we still have something here. The letters have a medical significance."

"Such as?"

"As TB is to tuberculosis and RQ to respiratory quotient, so HP stands for something that physicians prefer not to spell out. Pre-

cisely what this something is eludes me at the moment."

"High blood pressure maybe," McFate offered with one of his rare smiles.

"Not quite. But wait, my friend. Yes. The H may mean *hemo*, which is the Greek word for blood. And the P could mean *philia*, the Greek word for love."

"Blood love?"

"Or, medically, hemophilia. A genetic affliction."

"Isn't that generally caused by intermarriage among royal families, Doctor?"

"That's a popular supposition," Damroth said. "Also an erroneous one. As there is really no such thing as royal blood, hemophilia is visited upon king and commoner alike. The true cause of the disease is a rare freak of nature by which a female is created with a defective gene in the X chromosome."

Taking a swallow of his drink, McFate said, "Don't run too far ahead."

"A thousand pardons. The X chromosome then?"

"As a starter."

"We'll call it the sex chromosome. And why? Simply because it determines whether a baby shall be a boy or a girl. All females have two X chromosomes, all males have one. And all males receive this chromosome from their mother,

never from their father. Are you still with me, dear friend?"

"A bit short of breath, but yes."

"Well, this same chromosome, through the genes it possesses, also contributes certain other characteristics to the offspring. If one of these genes is defective, for instance, the male issue could enter the world color-blind or with webbed fingers. Or with hemophilia."

"Are you saying hemophilia is pretty much a man's disease?"

"Almost exclusively. All the historic bleeders have been men—Prince Leopold, Prince Henry of Prussia, Alexis of Russia, Alfonso of Spain."

"And women don't inherit it?"

"Almost never. They are simply carriers, like their mothers. Queen Victoria is a case in point. She had nine children. It is now a matter of record that the defective gene in the X chromosome was passed on to one of her sons, the Prince Leopold I've just mentioned, and three of her daughters. But since females have two X chromosomes, one can be defective without ill effect. The other will be normally operative in the blood-clotting mechanism, but the defective gene is always passed on to the offspring on a fifty-fifty basis. The male child who receives it will be a bleeder. The female will be a carrier."

The soup arrived. McFate gazed at it thoughtfully. "Edifying, Doctor," he finally said.

"Dubiety becomes you."

"Well, since we're far from sure that HP in the case of Joy Vaughan stands for hemophilia, I'm bound to be dubious."

"Permit me to dispel that doubt."

"By all means."

"Did Norman Vaughan tell you what his scientific specialty is?"

"Biochemistry."

"In genetics, to pinpoint it. To pinpoint further, he has been working solely with chromosomes and particularly with the X factor."

"Yes."

"Moreover, his research project is financed under the Chiappa Fund. Ever hear of Doctor Antonio Chiappa?"

"Famous brain surgeon, wasn't he?"

"True. When he died a year ago, he bequeathed half of his estate to the Foundation for hemophiliac research. The other half, which will eventually revert to us, was left in trust for a man whose name you've mentioned in connection with your investigation."

McFate's eyes widened. "What name is that?"

"I will verify this by having our attorney check our copy of the Chiappa will," Damroth said with evident relish, "but I'd take an oath

that the name of the legatee is Anthony Wilhelm. Our attorney will also know his correct address."

McFate set down the soup spoon. "Then what are we waiting for, Doctor?"

"The fillets of sole with joinville sauce," Damroth replied. "After that we will be better able to cope with this unhappy business."

As they were leaving a half-hour later, McFate was paged over the loudspeaker system. The cloak room attendant gave him the phone on the counter. He listened wordlessly, then said, "All right, I'm on my way." Going down the stone steps to the cruiser parked at the curb, he told Damroth, "My office says there has been an accident at the Vaughan residence. Norman called in."

"Who's involved?"

"He didn't say. Just said he thought I should come as soon as possible."

On the drive to the West End both men were quiet. McFate concentrated on driving. Damroth ruminated over a fresh cigarillo. It was as the car turned into Wyoming Terrace that Damroth broke the silence.

"Antonio Chiappa and Anthony Wilhelm," he said. "In view of the legacy that one left the other, Captain, what significance should we attach to the first names?"

"Father and son?" McFate said.

"*Natural* father and son. Doctor Chiappa never married." He pondered in silence again, then said: "Wilhelm? Yes, one of the peculiar advantages in living as long as I have is that you are apt to remember things that everyone else has forgotten—if they ever knew them. I remember, for instance, when Selwood Vaughan embarked on marriage twenty-seven or so years ago. He was a brilliant young engineer, just out of school, and working for a pittance as a draftsman for the State Highway Department. And why do I remember this otherwise unphenomenal event?"

McFate said nothing, so Damroth answered himself: "I remember it because the bride was the daughter of a very wealthy man who also happened to be one of the directors of the Foundation. Would you like to know his name?"

"Try me," McFate said.

"George Griffith Williams. Think about it a moment. Anthony. Antonio. Wilhelm. Williams."

McFate was still thinking about it as he swung the cruiser onto the driveway that executed a concrete semicircle in front of the Vaughan house. There was a car parked near the front door colonnades; an oval plate attached to the marker bore the letters MD printed over a caduceus. As Damroth and McFate

climbed from their car, the front door opened and out of the house hastened a thin man with a white mustache and pepper-and-salt hair, a small black valise in his hand.

Recognizing him as Dr. James Plommer, McFate nodded briefly and received as laconic a greeting in return.

Just inside the still-open door stood Selwood Vaughan, tan and trim and graying at the temples. His blue eyes showed fatigue, but he held out a hand to Damroth, saying in surprise, "What brings you here, sir?"

"Captain McFate, literally. He's a police detective."

"The police?" Vaughan's expression grew hostile.

"I called Captain McFate's office, Dad," said a voice from the hallway, then Norman appeared. "I feel this is definitely a police matter."

"I think you're overreaching a bit, Norm," Vaughan said testily. "But come in if you must, gentlemen."

"What exactly has happened?" Damroth asked, stepping across the threshold.

"My wife is dead," Vaughan said flatly.

"My profound sympathy."

"How did she die?" McFate asked.

"An overdose of barbiturates,"

Vaughan said. "That's what Doctor Plommer has just finished telling us." He lit a cigarette. "I fly home to attend the funeral of a murdered child and waiting here is one more sorrow." He ran a hand distractedly across the back of his neck. "I don't understand any of it. For the first time in my life, I feel totally inadequate."

Norman touched his father's arm. "You're worn out, Dad. Why not have Millie make you a cup of tea? Meanwhile, I'll take these men to the study and give them the essential facts."

"Maybe that's best," Vaughan said. "The facts are beyond me."

Norman closed the study door and quietly locked it. "My father doesn't realize we're dealing with suicide."

"What makes you so sure it's suicide, Norman?" Damroth asked.

"Nobody, certainly not my mother, takes sleeping pills at ten o'clock in the morning—and nearly a full bottle of them. She was quite alive and fairly well rested at breakfast. Then, after the mail arrived, a few minutes before ten, she retired to her room. When my father phoned from the airport at noon, I went upstairs to my mother's room. The door was locked. I forced it open when I got no response to knocking. She was reclining on a chaise longue. Her eyes were closed and

her respiration was faint. Immediately I phoned Doctor Plommer, but by the time he got here she was dead. She had this piece of note-paper crumpled in her right hand. I confiscated it before either Plommer or my father reached here."

McFate took the paper that was handed him and read this type-written message:

Joy was a poseur. She would not be dead otherwise. Not yet. I mistook her for the betrothed Harriet. She encouraged the mistake. I am never deceived twice, and I am pledged to destroy the seed of evil before it brings forth fruit. In the Vaughan case I nearly came too late. My true identity was disclosed to me only a few months ago through certain private papers that my late beloved father forgot to burn. I am the skeleton so long concealed in the closet. Tony.

Without a word, McFate passed the message to Damroth, who was already adjusting his pince-nez. He read it rapidly, then said to Norman, "Until we have your, ah, this man in custody, Harriet must be kept under protective surveillance."

"I don't want her to leave this house," McFate said.

"Oh damn!" Norman snapped his fingers. "She's already left. This morning after breakfast."

"Where did she go?" McFate asked.

"She drove to Greenwich to see her fiance, with the intention of postponing the wedding a few months."

"Can you reach him by phone right now?"

"I think so. He's a commercial artist and nearly always in his studio until late afternoon."

"Get to him then," McFate ordered. "Tell him not to let your sister out of his sight until I get a police escort there." He turned to Damroth. "And you, sir, I think, should phone—"

"—the Foundation's attorney to confirm my recollection of Doctor Chiappa's will, yes." Damroth looked quizzically at Norman, who was beginning to dial a number on the study phone. "Is there another such instrument available?"

"In the hallway," Norman said. "Just outside the door. It's a separate line."

Damroth exited as Norman made a connection. McFate, eyes half closed, teetered on his heels and listened.

"... Harriet there, George?" Norman was saying. "She *did*? ... You're sure? ... Well, okay then. We'll be seeing her soon. Thanks, George." He hung up and told McFate, "She left there only ten minutes ago. Her fiance is positive she's headed right back here. It's about a seventy minute drive."

"What kind of a car is she using?"

"Dad's Olds. Four-door sedan, light blue, whitewalls, marker number VA 21."

"Would she use the interstate highway?"

"I think so."

McFate picked up the phone. "I'll get the State Police on it."

Damroth reentered the room as McFate was hanging up. "Congratulate me, Captain. My memory is as reliable as ever. Anthony Wilhelm is the other legatee under the Chiappa will."

"Where does he live?"

"In the Numerant Apartments, Melrose Avenue."

"Let's get going. You come along too, Norman."

"As soon as I tell my father I'm leaving," Norman said.

Five minutes later, as the cruiser sped to the South End, Damroth, who was occupying the back seat with Norman, produced a cigarillo from his silver case and said, "Our attorney possessed several other scraps of information about Wilhelm—if you're interested."

McFate said, "Fire away."

"Well, the first item is hearsay, practically confirmed." Damroth lit the cigarillo. "Wilhelm is Chiappa's son. Age thirty, about four years older than you, Norman."

"I'm afraid I now realize he's my

half brother, gentlemen," he said.

"We're not actually sure of that," Damroth said.

"Mother's suicide attests to the fact. I'm not going to kid myself."

"Well, in view of that position, I'll speak frankly, Norman. Thirty years ago your grandfather was on the board of the Foundation. He had some excellent qualities but, like many of his contemporaries, a streak of bigotry often appeared where foreign-born citizens were concerned. Doctor Chiappa was then a young intern, penniless, no glimmer of the promise he later fulfilled so magnificently, and he was in love with a rich girl named Clara Williams. And she, I gather, with him. When your grandfather heard they were planning to elope, he terminated the relationship, in the autocratic manner of the period, by shipping his daughter to Europe. A few years later, she returned and married your father."

"Then Wilhelm was born in Europe?"

"In Stuttgart, according to our attorney's information. He was taken from a private orphanage at the age of two by Antonio Chiappa and raised as an adopted son. He received a good education but began to exhibit signs of psychopathic personality in his early teens. Twice he spent short periods under observation in private hospi-

tals. Apparently, however, Chiappa kept him on a fairly even keel most of the time, and extreme symptoms of mental disturbance didn't manifest themselves until after the doctor's death." He leaned forward to address McFate's right ear. "This will interest you, my friend. About a year ago, Wilhelm became a subscribing member of the National Hemophilia Foundation, and he spent a few days a week as a voluntary worker in the New York office, addressing envelopes, collating statistical information, things of that sort. If you follow me."

"Rollins, Jaworka, Heinsohn," McFate said grimly. "If they were carriers of that gene you talk about, he could have learned about them there."

"Yes. One other thing, our attorney says Wilhelm is definitely a bleeder. Won't even shave. Wears a full black beard."

"That checks," McFate said. "When I talked to the State Police back there, they said my department had just asked them to be on the lookout for a thin man, thirty or so, wearing a black spade beard, a description Bergeron must have picked up at Founder's Lake this morning." To Norman: "You're sure you've never met this guy?"

"Dead certain. I never heard of him, either, until I saw his name

yesterday in Joy's address book."

Damroth exhaled a thin ribbon of smoke. "Tell me, Norman, how did you happen to make the X chromosome your research project? And under the Chiappa Fund at that?"

"Well, sir, as you know, I came to the Foundation two years ago, before the Chiappa Fund was established. Chiappa was just a great name to me. I'd never met the man. But when money was set up for specific study of the X chromosome in relation to hemophilia, I decided to narrow my genetic work to that field. The reason for my decision was an interest in the death of my uncle Griffith, my mother's brother."

"Ah."

"He died twenty years ago after gashing a hip in a fall from a horse. I hardly remember him, of course, but my mother often talked about him, how wasteful it was for such a young man to die so quickly from such a wound. As I grew older and more scientifically oriented, I studied the medical notes on his case and learned that Uncle Griff had bled to death. His blood wouldn't clot."

Damroth gave a satisfied nod. "If this were a case of hemophiliac bleeding, then you wondered whether your mother might be a carrier, and where else the defec-

tive gene might be lurking. Yes?"

"Yes. I knew, of course, that I was free of it. My own cuts and bruises had always healed normally. But what about Joy and Harriet?"

"Here we are," McFate said, bringing the cruiser to a stop in front of a rambling building set back beyond a lush green lawn that was glistening under four rotating sprinklers. "The Numerant Apartments. Wait here."

Damroth and Norman waited. McFate was gone five minutes. He came back alone, glum of face, and got behind the wheel. "He left about nine this morning in his car, a small foreign job, the super doesn't know the make, and his parking space is still empty."

"Harriet left home at nine-thirty," Norman said.

"We'll take a ride south on the interstate," McFate said, turning the key in the ignition.

Ten miles down the high-speed route and moving at an even 70 mph, the cruiser was overtaken by a sleek ambulance with its siren wide open. McFate revved up to 75, 80, 85, but the ambulance soon diminished to a white gleam and a thin wail, finally vanishing completely.

"Real trouble down there," McFate said.

Damroth said nothing. Neither

did Norman. The cruiser sped on.

The scene of the accident was the gore of an exit ramp. It was guarded by three State Police cruisers and partially blocked by the ambulance. Ignoring a trooper directing him through, McFate drove up on the median strip and got out with his badge in hand.

"Sorry. Didn't recognize you, sir," the trooper said.

"What's happened?"

"An Olds tried to take the ramp and misjudged the degree of the curve. Hit the guard rail and flipped over."

"Anyone badly hurt?"

"A bearded guy is bleeding a lot, but the girl—she was driving—was saved by the seat belt. A bruise on her head is about all."

With McFate leading, Damroth and Norman crossed the highway and approached Selwood Vaughan's light blue car. Harriet was on her feet, holding a wet compress to her forehead and giving information to a State Police sergeant. When she saw Norman, she rushed into his waiting arms.

McFate walked over to the stretcher that was just being lifted from the ground by two orderlies. The pale, heavily bearded face that looked up at him had eyes in which pain and sorrow were beginning to dim.

"How bad off is he?" McFate

asked the doctor who had now appeared to supervise the loading.

"A broken arm and a stab wound," the young doctor said.

Later, on the way back to the city in McFate's custody, Harriet told the three men her story.

Leaving her fiance's studio, she had walked to a nearby parking lot and was unlocking the door of her car when the bearded man approached. He introduced himself as Howard Petrie, a Foundation associate of Norman's. She had met him briefly, he reminded her, at a cocktail party a year or so ago—when he had been beardless. He was so polite and plausible that she took him on faith. When he learned she was returning home, he wondered, just wondered, if she would object to a passenger. His own car, a few rows over, had developed a case of stone-dead battery, and because it was of European extraction the garage mechanic thought he might have to import a replacement from New York . . .

All went well the first half-hour of the trip. He talked entertainingly of books, the hippie movement, musical fads—and *then* came the first low note of the State Police siren dogging their rear. Instantly the blithe Mister Petrie was a changed man. He whipped a switchblade knife from his pocket

and ordered Harriet not to stop—in fact, to push the accelerator to the floor—and the chase began. At one time Harriet clocked the Olds at 100 mph, with the State Police pursuit car shrieking wildly behind them.

As a ramp exit loomed ahead, the State Police car was beginning to pull alongside. It was then that the so-called Petrie commanded her to do the impossible: take the ramp at that high speed and let the cruiser slide by. What happened after that was now a matter of record. The impact that broke the arm that held the knife also thrust the blade fatally home.

McFate had a question, but he refrained from asking it until he and Damroth were alone in his stuffy office late that afternoon. Passing the old man a paper cup of coffee and a soggy section of Danish pastry, he asked, "When Harriet Vaughan marries this artist in Greenwich, is she going to pass that X hex on to her kids?"

"No." Damroth took a sip of coffee and grimaced. "In the course of his research, Norman conducted a series of tests on both his sisters. He told me this while you were in Wilhelm's apartment building. Harriet is free of the defective gene, but Joy, sad the irony of it, was a carrier and knew it, and had planned never to marry."

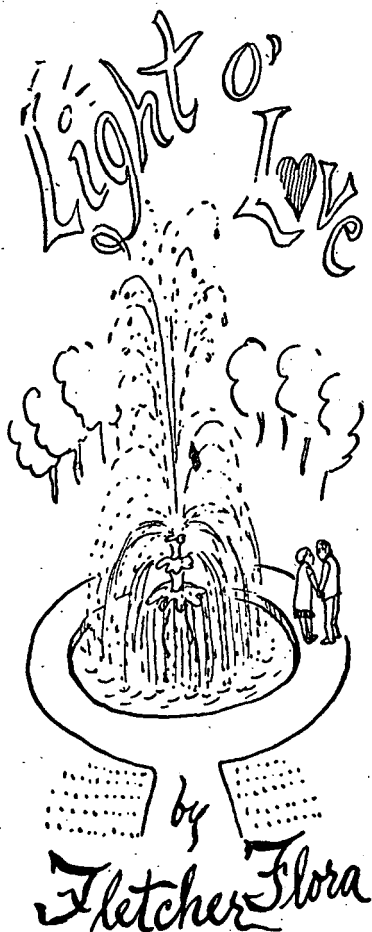
*In an exemplary relationship there may be a tendency to confuse
"sweet interludes of serenity" with premature quiescence.*



EDDWARD," said Carlotta, "I want a divorce."

It was tea time. Perhaps that was what made it more shocking than it might otherwise have been. For tea time, to Edward and Carlotta, had always been a precious fragment of their long days, a concession wrested from the rushing hours during which life reduced its swift pace to a sweet interlude of serenity between the irretrievable morning and the inevitable night. To violate it in this harsh manner by the introduction of a perturbing disclosure was surely a kind of sacrilege, like an obscene act of worship.

Edward set his cup with a faint click on its saucer. He set cup and saucer on the low table between his chair and Carlotta's. Rising, without immediately responding, he walked to the windows behind him on the west side of the room and stood looking out. The broad sweep of emerald lawn, four floors below, was bathed in the golden light of the mid-afternoon sun. There was the concrete path cutting a precise white slash across



the lawn toward a planting of silvery Russian olives, dividing between here and there to encircle a fountain which rose from a tranquil pool to fling crystal shards into the somnolent air. It had been only yesterday, having wakened prematurely from an after-lunch nap, that he had stood here and watched Carlotta and Rupert return along the path from a stroll to the olives; and it had been there, precisely there, this side of the fountain where the stone bench had been placed beside the path, that he had seen their near hands creep toward each other and clasp and cling for the duration of a dozen steps. He had known then, of course, the truth that he had only suspected before. He had lost Carlotta. She was in love with Rupert.

Despite the pain that struck his heart, the terrible sense of sudden loss and loneliness, the truth was not really unexpected. There had been signs. There had been gestures and inflections and the mute, lucid language of eyes. They had begun, these sure signs of love, shortly after Rupert had moved into 4C, three doors down the hall, some six months ago. Gradually becoming aware of them as they became gradually more apparent, Edward had nevertheless kept his overt peace, burying his knowledge in

silence with his pain. After all, it was understandable that a warm and vital woman like Carlotta should be in a measure susceptible to the undeniable charm of a man like Rupert. Slender and erect, blessed with good looks and filled with grace, Rupert was indeed enough to turn the head and distract the heart of any discerning woman. The distraction would pass. In time, its defection unmarked, the love of Carlotta would return to Edward, where it belonged, without ever in effect having been away.

Yet it hadn't. It hadn't returned; and Carlotta, sipping tea, had said that she wanted a divorce. Edward, at the window, watched the crystal shards of the fountain fall without sound into the tranquil pool. Beyond, at the end of the concrete path, the olives shook their silver leaves in the languid, golden light. He must, he knew, control himself. It was necessary, in the remnants of one's pride, to display somehow a decent front, however withered with pain the heart behind. As though to place and fix the time, he looked at his watch and saw that it was ten minutes after three. Tea had been served at three. It was always served early because lunch was always served early before it, and dinner was served early after. Turning away from the win-

dow, he returned to his chair and sat down and took up his cup.

"It's Rupert, I suppose," he said quietly.

"So you've guessed. Were we so obvious?"

"You are unpracticed in deception. Besides, I know you so well, Carlotta."

"I'm sorry, Edward. The last thing I want in the world is to cause you distress. Will you believe that I tried to avoid it?"

"I have no reason to believe otherwise."

"It was simply something that we couldn't help. It began in an instant and simply grew and grew."

The pain struck at his heart again with renewed fury. His heart was not strong, and he had recently had what he took to be minor attacks, but they had been nothing like this. In his anguish, he nearly cried aloud. He was afraid for a moment that he would collapse. Lifting his cup with his right hand, holding his saucer suspended in his left, he took a drink of tea. The tea was cold.

"Are you certain that it is not merely an infatuation?" he asked.

"Yes. Quite certain."

"In that case, there seems to be nothing more to say."

"You agree, then, to the divorce?"

"I will not stand in your way."

"Thank you, Edward. I knew that you would be a gentleman."

So there it was, all so simply and neatly ended. So capable of such monstrous dissimulation is the pliable human organism. So frail and transient upon earth are those values one thinks enduring. Words drifted like miniature cumuli out of nowhere into Edward's mind: . . . *ancient and holy things fade like a dream*. Replacing cup and saucer on the tea tray, he stood up.

"I think that I'll have a stroll and a cigar before dinner," he said. "Excuse me, please."

He put on his hat and took up his stick and went out. In the elevator he descended to the lobby, where he turned off into a passage that took him out onto a wide terrace at the rear of the building which overlooked the expanse of emerald lawn he had looked down upon minutes earlier from the window four floors above. He went down a brief flight of shallow steps and strolled along the concrete path toward the fountain. Midway, he stopped and sat down on the stone bench beside the path. He laid his stick on the bench beside him and removed a cigar from the breast pocket of his jacket. He unwrapped the cigar, tidily stuffing the wrapper into another pocket,

and carefully clipped off the end of the cigar with a small tool that had been a gift from Carlotta. When the cigar was evenly lighted and smoothly drawing, he leaned back and crossed his knees, extending his right arm along the back of the bench. The sun was warm, and he began to regret his jacket. Now the fountain was not mute. He could hear the tiny silver sound of showered drops that was like the tinkling of a thousand antic bells. He could smell, penetrating the aroma of rich tobacco, the sweet, nostalgic odor of freshly mowed grass. He could see, looking up and away over the top of a towering pine, a purple martin gliding with fluid grace against a blue and white sky.

How far had it gone? That was the thought that kept intruding into his mind and corrupting the quiet day. To what degree of intimacy had Carlotta and Rupert been seduced by their extravagant passion? What privacy had they been able to steal, under the circumstances, for the expression of love? A vision of embraced bodies flashed in Edward's heated imagination, and he was ill. It was intolerable. He must exercise some mental discipline. Retrieving his stick and rising, he strolled on to the fountain, where he paused to contemplate the crystal spray and

observe the countless random dimples that formed and vanished on the shadowed surface of the pool. Rounding the pool, he continued slowly along the path to the distant group of Russian olives, where he found another stone bench and sat down and finished his cigar and sat on and on afterward while the shadows of the olives stretched longer to the east.

He returned in time for dinner, but he did not go. Carlotta went without him and was back an hour later. There seemed to be between them an unspoken pact that neither would speak of the matter on the minds of both. Edward sat by the window and tried to read, but the words had no power to project themselves through the lenses of his glasses, and his mind, in any event, had no power to give them order and meaning. Carlotta turned on the television set and sat in front of it, the volume reduced to avoid disturbing Edward, but she was blind to the shadows of figures performing to the accompaniment of whispers. Outside, the light drained slowly off the earth. Among the stars, the moon appeared where the sun had been. Edward's book lay closed in his lap. Carlotta got up, turned off the television and paused. Looking at Edward, she lifted one hand toward him in an odd little ges-

ture of entreaty, but he did not look at her, and she did not speak. After a moment, she went silently to bed.

It was perhaps an hour later when Edward moved. He stood up abruptly, and the book, forgotten in his lap, fell to the floor with a thump. If he was aware of it, he ignored it. His head ached, and he felt a need to stretch his legs. He might even venture another cigar before retiring. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was not yet ten o'clock. The door to the terrace was not locked until ten, as he recalled. Good; he still had time for a stretch and a breath of fresh air and perhaps a smoke. Leaving the room, he turned to his right in the hall and walked quietly to the double glass doors at the far end.

At first he thought he had the terrace to himself, but then he saw that he did not. A glowing coal in the shadows betrayed a presence. Someone at the rear was sitting on one of the wide stone slabs topping the balusters that enclosed the terrace. Approaching through the shadows, Edward saw that it was Rupert. Between them, as the distance closed, there was a kind of taut line of communication in which nothing was said but everything was understood. The pain, aroused, was ripping again in fury at Edward's heart.

"Good-evening, Rupert," he said.

"Good-evening, Edward."

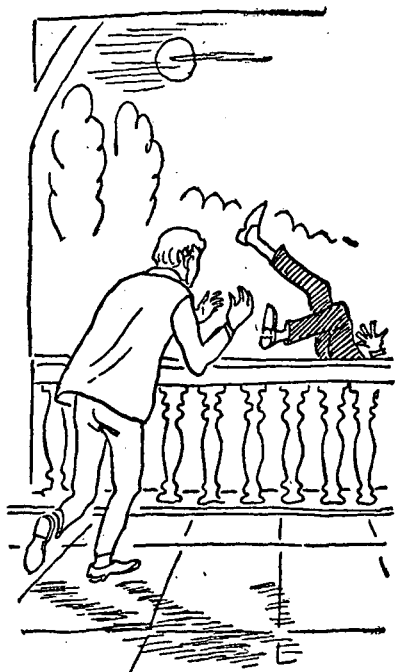
"Having a last smoke before bed?"

"As you see."

"I'll join you, if you don't mind."

He removed the wrapper from a cigar, stuffing it into the pocket that still contained the other. The little tool with which he prepared to clip the cigar fell from his fingers to the floor of the terrace. He stooped to retrieve it. Even with his eyes, dangling, suddenly a focal point of terrible significance, was one of Rupert's smartly shod feet, and in Edward's brain, suddenly ringing with all the freshness of an innovation, was the trite old cry of vengeful lovers scorned from love's dim beginning: *If I can't have her, no one shall!*

Rising swiftly, fingers laced to form a stirrup, he caught Rupert's dangling foot and flipped him neatly backward off the balustrade. Far below, a concrete drive ran up to the building, which had been left open on the ground floor to form a kind of porte cochere sufficient to shelter a dozen cars. Rupert struck the concrete with a dull, definitive thud. Going down, he had time for no more than a single squawk of terror. Inside the building, sealed for air conditioning, no one heard. Apparently, no



one saw. From a distance came the ghostly hooting of a forlorn owl. A breeze had risen to rustle softly in a million leaves of a thousand trees. In the darkness below, where the moonlight did not reach, Rupert lay broken in a seepage of blood, and there, with luck, he might lie till morning. His unsmoked cigar in his pocket, his little tool recovered from the terrace floor, Edward turned away from the balustrade and went inside and back to Carlotta.

She was awake, sitting up in bed. "I woke up," she said, "and you

were gone. I was a bit worried."

"Never mind," he said. "I wasn't far away."

"Where have you been?"

Watching her as an expression of vague alarm receded from her cherished face, he knew that he had fallen into an untenable position. It was almost certain that it would be assumed that Rupert had, for whatever reason, fallen by misadventure to his death from the terrace. If he, Edward, were now to lie to Carlotta with conviction, it was even possible that she might believe that it was true, or at least learn to live comfortably in time with the suspicion that it was not. The trouble was, Edward could not lie, not to Carlotta. He had always practiced perfect candor with her, and he knew that he could do no less in present circumstances. Nor did he wish to receive from her any favors that were won through deception. Where she was concerned, the pattern of his behavior was simply too firmly conditioned to be altered. He went over and sat down beside her on the edge of the bed:

"I've been on the terrace," he said. "Rupert was there."

"Rupert?"

"Yes. Everything is settled between us."

"I'm glad. I hope that you will be friends."

"That will be impossible. Rupert's dead. I killed him."

She stared at him with an almost stupid expression, as if she hadn't heard, or having heard, hadn't understood.

"Dead? Killed? Did you say Rupert is dead, and you killed him?"

"Yes. It was an impetuous act, really. He was sitting on the balustrade, and I simply pushed him off. I have no excuse for my action, except that suddenly I just couldn't let him have you. I couldn't bear the thought of giving you up to him."

She continued to stare at him, mute and unmoving in her bed, her mouth hanging slightly open, her eyes bright and feverish. Her face, he perceived, in its swift and subtle succession of expressions, was like the smooth surface of a dark pool on which overhead branches, stirring in the air and filtering the sun, created an infinite variety of shifting patterns. Stupefaction, incredulity, conviction, alarm, anger, a kind of incipient slyness—all passed in turn through her ductile face and drifted like shadows through her eyes. Then, to his horror, her face seemed to harden suddenly into lines of ghastly coquetry, and he had for an instant the impression, entirely illusory, that she had

turned slightly away and was looking archly back at him over a shoulder and across the top of a fluttering fan. Leaning forward, she drew him to her and held his head against her breast.

"Edward, darling," she whispered, "I didn't dream that you cared so much. It will be all right, after all. You'll see. It will be all right."

For a moment he allowed his head to be cradled there in her hands, acutely aware of the warmth of flesh, the scent of lavender, the rapid pulsing of her heart. Then he pushed away and sat watching her steadily.

"You will, of course," he said, "do whatever you feel you must."

"Did anyone see you? Will anyone suspect?"

"I don't think so. It will look like an accident."

"Don't worry. It will be all right, Edward. You'll see. It will be all right."

He stood up, still watching her steadily, and said, "Go back to sleep now. We'll talk about it in the morning."

"I couldn't sleep. I couldn't possibly. I'm far too excited."

"Have you taken your sedative?"

"Yes, but it won't be enough. I'd need more."

"Have mine as well. There's no need for both of us to lie awake."

On the small table between her bed and his, he could see the small blue capsule, his nightly allotment, that had been put there for him earlier. Standing, he walked around the foot of her bed and up the narrow aisle that separated them in their sleeping hours. He handed her the capsule and poured her a glass of water.

"Two won't hurt you for once," he said. "Take it and go to sleep."

"I shan't be able," she said. "I'm sure I shan't."

But she was. Edward turned off her bed lamp, leaving the room lighted only by pale light from the descending moon, and went over and sat down in the moonlight by the windows. He sat there silently for a long time, staring out through glass that revealed only a shrunken scene of distorted shadows beyond his own faint reflection, and then, after the passing of time, the breathing of Carlotta took on the deep and cadenced sound of sleep, and he continued to sit, his head now turned slightly her way, and listened to her breathe. At last he stood up and

walked over to her bed and turned on her light and stood looking down at her. The shadows of her lashes were on her waxen cheeks. Her thin hands held each other, as though for comfort, above her breast. Turning away, he went to his own bed and removed the pillow and returned with it. Gently, he laid the pillow over her face and then leaned upon it with the full weight of his body. She was frail, and hardly struggled, and died quickly.

Back by the window in the moonlit room, he sat on alone in the remnant of night, motionless through the thin, diminishing hours of morning on the dark side of dawn. He was empty. His heart was dead. He kept seeing in the glass beside his own image her face fixed in that terrible, terminal expression of ghastly coquetry. He could not accept the truth that he had lived fifty years with a stranger.

Except for the infrequent whisper of gum-soled shoes as a night nurse passed in the hall outside his door, the geriatrics ward was silent.



Regrets were ascribed by Dickens as "the natural property of gray hairs," yet one lives not always as he wishes, but as he can.



THE MOCKINGBIRD SINGS



by Pauline C. Smith

I SAT up on my elbows, screaming for food, and my mother . . . my mother? . . . kept popping delicious morsels into my mouth. "This is the hungriest clutch of babies we've had yet," she scolded fondly, "or maybe I'm getting old and tired."

"It's that biggest one there," my father pointed out . . . my father? . . . "He's got an appetite like a horse."

"You mean like a bird," said my mother. "In a year, a horse eats only eight times his weight, while a bird eats more than twice his daily." This bit of nature lore struck both of them as being a remarkably funny joke. Personally, I thought it in very bad taste since it was I who was the largest.

Understand, my parents' language was unfamiliar to me, still

I could make out every word! I didn't begin to puzzle over this phenomenon until later when I grew a little older and the pieces began to fit into place. In the beginning, all my efforts were concentrated on jostling for position in order to get the choicest tidbits of food, pushing into the center of the bed at sundown in order to get the warmest spot, and listening to my father sing while he sat outside in the cool spring moonlight and let the wonderful round tones pour from his throat in an amazing repertoire of tunes until Mother scolded him into silence.

So life continued uneventfully, with its daylight clamor for food and its nighttime jockeying for the warmest sleep spot, until that early dawn when, with a swift thrust of legs grown strong, I managed to kick one of my weakest sisters from the bed and she never returned!

My parents' concern was short-lived. Mother observed sadly that such an incident occurred each year. "One of them always manages to topple out and get killed." Father sang a soft blues melody as a kind of requiem.

It was not long after this that I began to feel a very annoying prickling sensation over my body as some kind of spikes pushed forth. That was a busy time, for

these things breaking through were encased in protective sheaths of tissue and I, my brother and the two sisters left, spent much time pulling away the bothersome coverings, thus taxing our strength and increasing our appetites so that our parents were continually searching for food, no longer meticulously dropping it into our open mouths, but flinging it carelessly into our midst and taking off again to gather more. Because I was the strongest, I was able to nudge aside my siblings and gorge myself to added strength, so that long before they could do more than reach for oil and slather themselves, preening and hopping about as if they were going somewhere, I perched on the twiggy rim of our abode to stretch and spread my wings . . . *Wings?* . . . It was then I put all the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle of my life together and realized I was a bird!

This knowledge proved to be such a jolt it startled me right off the edge of the nest out into the air. In split seconds, I learned the engineering art of flying, becoming instantly aware that to create the uneven air pressure necessary to keep me aloft I must flap my wings—which I did, hysterically—managing an erratic soar which sent me to the ground in an awkward landing. There, I was so am-

bivalently preoccupied by the triumph of my flight as well as the danger of my position that I postponed any further introspection as to my species and why.

I never did get back to my parents and those retarded sisters and brother of mine. I called, but who could hear with my father drowning out all sound with his own megalomaniacal voice? He imitated every bird in the neighborhood, as well as the mew of a cat and the bark of a dog, which was pretty disconcerting since I had only mastered the flight down and not the flight up into safety as yet. I managed to scrounge around and pick off a few puny insects, but hardly enough to keep gizzard and feather together.

Fortunately, I had landed close to a thorny bougainvillea vine that hadn't been pruned since it was a slip of a cutting, and there I made my temporary home under its bright, sharp branches. While my conformist siblings were probably following all the rules of survival under the protection of our parents, I was beginning to master the arts of bug hunting and flying on my own. The days grew so warm that thermal drafts rose from the land along with a mild blowing breeze, enabling me to learn to soar and glide; finally to dive so that, at last, I felt the true joy of

being a bird; but I began to wonder, what kind of bird?

By now, I was about nine inches in length, with bluish-gray upper parts and dulled white underplumage, light stripes across my wings and edging the length of my tail. I often admired myself as I preened my beautiful feathers and, softly, I tried out my voice. It proved to be a good one, not as strongly musical nor as varied as my father's, but I was sure the lack was due only to youth and inexperience, and that before the summer was over my rendition and repertoire would be as extensive as his.

My geographical range gradually widened. After leaving the bougainvillea, I found a fine aphid-infested orange tree in a scrubby back yard and settled down for a while. A noisy little boy often played there, sometimes alone, sometimes with his scruffy little friends. I didn't like the kid, but it was he who classified me in the fowl kingdom and for that I am grateful. I am less grateful for the fact that he stirred my memory into a kind of reversed atavism.

It all started on a bright summer day when I was exercising my voice, endeavoring to increase its tonal range and succeeding, probably because the kid was quiet for once so I could hear myself. I

swung on the telephone wire that reached from the pole to his house, singing my heart out, achieving such diatonic and chromatic harmony you wouldn't believe unless you've listened carefully to our kind when we're really trying.

The kid shaded his eyes, looked up, then yelled, "Hey, Ma, we got a mocker in our yard. Ma, we got a mocker."

So I was a mockingbird! I teetered in pleased surprise on my perch; then to prove I was that king of birds, aggressive and courageous as well as musician supreme, I dove on the kid and with mathematical accuracy plucked a hair from his head, then soared toward the orange tree, alighting in its topmost branches, disdainfully dropping the hair from my bill in order to sing in mockery while the kid screeched.

I was thoughtful, however, all that long summer night, my new mating song silenced. My thoughts, which glimmered revealingly only to hide again and return half-formed, were most disturbing. *I knew that I had once been a human boy*, and this profound revelation was enough to burst my bird-brain. How could that be and how could I know?

By dawn, instinct had supplanted speculation and I took off. I was looking for something, not sure of

what it was, but knowing I would recognize it once it was found. That first sundown, at the point of collapse, I rested in a eucalyptus tree only to be promptly challenged by a fool mocker (not a close relative, I hope!) who thought he owned the eucalyptus and was determined to drive me off. Exhausted right down to the air sacs of my body, I sleepily warbled my good intentions, hoping to get my message across without trouble and be allowed to sleep in peace.

But no, this disconnected dodo was determined to follow the rule of the species, which allows no trespassing by birds of the same kind and sex. To strengthen his determination, he shrieked a chopped-off war dive over me, ruffling my feathers so that I reared back, extended my wings and balanced on my spread tail, screaming my simple overnight plans in righteous indignation. He didn't listen; instead, he circled and dove again, this time with fire in his eye. Forced into defensive action, I rose and sideslipped free of him, dipping, curving, fanned by his furiously beating wings, hovering always close to the eucalyptus, screaming again and again my purity of purpose.

The battle turned deadly earnest. I shut my bill and fought for my life. My enemy zoomed from be-

neath, dove from above. He struck a low shrike blow by stabbing me between the shoulders. The thrust momentarily knocked the wind out of me so that I dropped dangerously low before catching an updraft that lifted me within inches of the feathered fanatic who crashed my left wing, breaking a precious secondary feather.

I went off in a flap into the fast-gathering dusk, vanquished.

I nursed my hurt pride and broken wing feather in a faraway mulberry tree of scraggly growth and lean insect life until I was recovered and ready to resume my journey.

I found what I didn't know I was looking for two days later, half-recognizing it upon approach, becoming agitated with the familiarity of the ocean scent a half-mile distant. I saw again the mud of the shallow meandering river and the curved hillside streets of the town. Flying faster now, I was in a desperate hurry, for this was home . . . home? . . . The sudden thought of the word and what it meant almost toppled me in mid-air, but there it was, out of the reaches of my memory, a neat frame house set on a square of green lawn, solid and true.

I sideslipped in an airstream, surprised and shocked by my recognition, and caught a limb of the

oak with my claws, rocking with wonder. From this oak had hung a rope swing and the swing had been mine. I could remember swinging in it as a boy, wishing I was a bird!

Pieces of memory comprising my childhood came back with a rush . . . little things like a basketball net hanging over the garage door, gone now; the dog called Howdy, same age as I, but old when I was young, which marvel I used to puzzle over. The cat—I shuddered, glancing over my wing apprehensively, but once I had loved her with passion—the impassively cruel black face and deceptively amiable blue eyes; we'd called her Hey Soo and fitted bells on her collar, but now, high in the oak with sleep overcoming me, I wondered if they had been warning enough. I just wondered . . .

I was an early bird the following dawn, and after I'd pulled my worm from the soft spot where I remembered I had once dug them to fish in the muddy river bottom where there were no fish, or off the ocean pier where the fish disdained worms, I took short hops around the yard and through the neighborhood, refreshing my memory, adding tag-ends of recollection. There was the spot where I was knocked off my bicycle and broke an arm—left arm long ago, left wing recently, an ironical parallel-



ogram. This was the street I took to school, and that one to walk past my first girl's house. I climbed a tree along here somewhere and

smoked my first cigarette in that alley.

The memories were coming back thick and fast, flashes of revelation,

segments of the past, and the whole of it stuck in my craw as I dozed fitfully that night in the oak.

The next morning I found the feeding station, a crude platform nailed to a half-dead tree in the back yard. I flew around it, admiring the handiwork because I had built it under my mother's direction. "Now put a little roof on it," she had instructed, "then the birds will have shelter while they eat. And we must never forget, son, always to leave food here—cereal, seeds, bread crusts . . ." But there was nothing on the feeding platform, not even remnants. I hopped the warped boards, noticing how they'd pulled apart with time and the weather.

Mother would surely see to it that the birds were fed . . . my mother! . . . a new and more powerful recollection made my heart beat faster and quivered my wings. She must be inside the house during this early morning with the sun shining through the trees on the east; she must be in the kitchen right now preparing breakfast. I sprang from the platform and hurled myself through the air toward the back door. I abruptly veered my course to land on the clothesline pole. *How could I contact her? She wouldn't know me, couldn't recognize me . . . we had no means of communication.* I was

deadlocked, imprisoned within my feathers! I wanted to weep with my frustration and had no tears.

I paced the cross-arm of the pole, attempting to figure a way of rapport between human and bird—then between mother and son—and so began filtering remembrances of my mother, a small, pretty woman. Widowed early, and because of this loss, she leaned toward a belief that was strange to me. What was that belief? It was the only issue over which we'd argued. Back and forth, my claws fitting nicely on the round rusted iron of the cross-arm, I tried to remember and, in my impotence, I sang a few faint notes of doleful litany. Ah, there was my means of communication right here in my throat! I almost had it now . . . music and something else . . . a combination in the past to cause recognition in the present.

I sat quietly, letting the memory associations take over and recalled my mother playing the piano. Of course, she was a music teacher! How could I have forgotten? The long, lazy summers when I was home from college, and she played for me in the dim light of dusk Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, for it was her favorite. "Your father lives again," she'd say softly against the lilt of the notes. "He lives now, on this earth," and our argument

would begin, our only argument but continuous.

From the heights of my academic knowledge, I answered, "But, Mom, that's impossible."

"No!" and she was fierce in her negation. My father was a perfect rose in the garden, the baby born down the street, a loyal dog given newspaper publicity, the winning horse in a race. . . "Just because you're being stuffed with education, don't throw words at me like evolution and cybernetics; crazy words I never heard of before—phylogeny, ontogeny—to prove your point, for I won't listen to them. I know, in my heart, that nothing on this earth is wasted. Ambition is always resolved at last, unfinished work is finally finished. The answer is reincarnation."

Son of a bird, she had been right!

I was proof of it, reincarnated proof! The discovery almost knocked me off my perch, for living again meant previous death, and I shuddered without remembering how and when I had died.

My mind took up its problem of contacting my mother, for I needed a bridge between the past and now. I needed to let her know that she was right and I had been wrong. The bridge was so simple! I flew a gay spiral, danced an air ballet of joy. With her obsessive belief and

my ability to sing, I had it made. If I could do it, if only I could do it . . . I settled again on the cross-arm, to try and remember and form again the one combination of notes that would sound out in *Spring Song* and cause my mother to know that her theory was valid and her son lived again.

The memory was dim and remote. Once remembered, the notes became complicated in my throat, but at last I had it, the stanzas, chords, trills and semitones. I bowed from the cross-arm to nothing; my performance was magnificent.

It was time my mother brought toast crusts from her breakfast table to the feeding platform. I enticed her with a prelude, sung clear and lusty, with antics in the air, a brush of my wings against the sun-red kitchen windows, a drumbeat of my bill on the panes, a quick flight to the feeding station, my voice swelling the air with Mendelssohn melody. At last she emerged and looked blankly at the sky. I dipped and spun to catch her attention. I sang with my heart to catch her ear. Her attention was fleeting and her ear deaf. She was an old woman now, an old, old woman. My mother was buried there beneath the senility, buried deep with no convictions, no hearing, no memory, and nothing for the birds.

She turned, empty-eyed, empty-handed, empty-minded, and reentered the house. She hadn't heard me. I had been only a bird cavorting, without sound in her deafness, without meaning in her forgetfulness. My steps in the air became a *danse macabre*, my song a dirge of sorrow.

I made an immediate decision. I slipped off the feeding station, spread my wings to catch the early morning breeze and began to mount. When I was well up, I screamed back a final frustration and winged over the town I had once known so well and flew southward. I ate frequently and well, and soon learned to fly along with the freeway but apart from it after a downdraft almost sucked me into one of those speeding, yawning radiators. I had a faint recollection of once driving a shining beast like those on the freeway, of loving the speed and power, but I knew now it was nothing like having your own wings, your own built-in power, and I sneered at the cars within their narrow white-marked lanes.

I was on my way, but did not know where until, after six days of flying, I came to rest on one of the Humanities Buildings of the State College where I had once taught. The memory came easily and without shock as soon as I landed, as if

it had been there all the time, needing only the bricks and concrete of the building to call it back. Poetry and Literature had been my subjects, for I had been a romantic, my classroom this one beyond the sill where I stood. I quivered with excitement as ghostly memories trailed their veils about me and Emily Dickinson's words whispered poetically from the past:

"These are the days when birds come back.

A very few, a bird or two,
To take a backward look."

I sat hunched on my stone perch, puzzled to think I might have come back a bird only to "take a backward look." To be reborn only to remember is a pointless return and I could not believe it to be so; there was a reason for my being here and a reason to remember. I looked through the window at the students in my old classroom to find them fogged, as if mine were a dream with the plotting simple, bringing the main characters into focus, blurring the others of no importance.

Then, with a feathered fluttering of memory, the girl crept into my mind. She had entered the classroom the year I assigned Keats, and so I thought the moment I saw her, "... a vision or a waking dream? ... Immortal bird!" for she was lovely, soft and small, with

a high sweet voice. All women to me, she became my love.

What happened? What *happened*? In the frenzy of not knowing, I hopped my cement perch, making short and nervous flights about the campus, returning repeatedly to the ledge of the Humanities Building for fear of losing the shred of memory I had found. One flight, longer than the others, took me from the campus across the boulevard and there, before a chapel which poured through its windows the strains of Wagner's Wedding March, I knew that I had married her, the beautiful girl of the high, sweet voice.

I sang with the organ, filled with memory, perched on a tree by the spire, my notes rising, full and clear. Then I fell silent to brood, remembering my mother who had not attended the ceremony. . . "She will hurt you," she had predicted. "She will ruin you."

"You don't know her," I protested. "She is soft and gentle."

"The claws will come," said my mother with the same conviction she had shown when she said, "Don't pick the rose, it might be your father."

"She loves me," I argued.

"She doesn't know what love is, only desire. She is a romantic now. Later . . . well, later, she will desire something else, then she will

hurt you, and you can do nothing."

My mother was so sure of herself, just as sure as she had been about reincarnation, but now I can remember only love as the sound of the wedding march fades into the chapel, leaving a silence for the soft-voiced ceremony. I can remember my beautiful soft wife, my adorable, adoring child-wife whom I married on a day like this in a chapel like this, with a prediction ignored and forgotten.

As instinctively as I had sought the home of my boyhood, I now sought the home of my marriage. Nearby—close to the campus, in the subdivision called Faculty Row where the young professors lived, shining bright, shining new—I flew directly to it like a homing pigeon; but it was no longer so new, certainly not so bright, although lush with growth and age.

How long had it been?

There was the house, a special house among not-so-special houses. Was she there? My only woman? My wife, my soft and gentle dove?

It was quiet, with an unoccupied, unkempt look about it. A sign stood on the front lawn which I could not read, my birdbrain not having room for such former knowledge, or perhaps the memories were beginning to fade. I fluttered my wings in a flurry of frustration. I *must* know what hap-

pened to my love and why I had died.

The thought of a letter opener intervened . . . *A letter opener?* But this was a special letter opener, given to me by my class as a wedding present, and engraved with Drummond's words: "My life lies in those eyes." The letter opener, its handle in the shape of a bird whose bill formed the knife, had lain on the desk in my home, our home, this one. My wife? Beautiful, soft and gentle with her high, sweet voice, she fades. The vision becomes faint and I fly and loop about the house, wishing to call her forth, in terror of losing the memory, recalling instead, my mother's words, "Later, she will desire something else and will hurt you."

It was late afternoon. The sun shone bright upon blind windows. Cars drove into driveways, fogged figures emerged to enter houses; professors, for this was Faculty Row, with these homecomers friends of mine, had I lived recently enough to have known them.

I tried to remember the tune of "our song" so that I could sing it and let my wife know I was there. I had loved her greatly, so she would surely hear and respond. But I could not recall an "our song" so perhaps we had none. Instead, I remembered the letter opener—tarnished, lying upon a letter—her

letter or mine? Was it important?

The words of the letter almost come back to me; almost, almost, a letter of farewell . . . Mine to her? Or hers to me? I need a brain, a man's brain for remembering, the brain of a professor, neat, tidy and ordered, a brain that is always right.

I scream in the setting sun. I beat my wings against the blind, blind window, and hop on the paint-flaked sill, and a bird, from high in the tree, sings back at me a familiar tune; familiar now or familiar then? My two lives mesh and battle; shall I answer the high sweet tones of the bird and woo her as a mate, or shall I brood here on the windowsill and try to remember about the letter opener and the letter and my wife?

I had returned home early, unexpectedly, and found the letter—the letter to me, from her. Now I knew! I stamped in rage at the bird call from the tree that distracted me from my memory. The letter, the letter of farewell, from a wife still desired but no longer desiring. . . "Later, she will desire something else and will hurt you."

The bird notes from the tree are an abomination, trilling familiar notes I will not allow to be familiar, for I must remember, must know what happened when I came home so unexpectedly to find my wife

ready to leave but not yet gone, and the note, weighted down by the bird letter opener.

I peck furiously at the lidded window of what was once my study, and refuse to listen to the song in the tree, the almost-familiar song, remembering instead, the desk inside—or the one that was once inside, where I corrected papers and wrote an important thesis on the romance poets—and where my wife, caught as she was about to leave me, said that I was dry as dust and she was shaking me from her vain high heels before she became stifled.

I pleaded, professorily, neat, tidy, dry-as-dust, quoting Carlyle, that “a Poet without Love were a physical and metaphysical impossibility,” and she laughed, her high sweet laughter mingling with the high sweet trill in the tree.

I remember—and now I reject the memory—my blinding white fury, the letter opener in my hand and how I plunged it deep in her heart, the bill of the bird red with her blood.

Now I know that she is dead and I, too, am dead for having killed her.

The closed, shaded window is red with the blood of the setting sun. The song of the bird in the tree sounds out high and sweet, a little shrill with laughter, singing *Listen to the Mockingbird*, our

lilting song of so long ago.

I dip and loop. I trill and warble. I dance and curvet while the lovely little female mocker . . . “a vision or a waking dream? . . . Immortal bird!” soft and small, stills her high, sweet voice, to watch my courtship pageantry, just as she had done before . . . exactly as it had been.

She rises with me at last. We fly together—the wedding march. We circle back to the house where once we lived. We settle in the trees whose branch overlooks the study where once lay a letter opener with a bill dripping blood.

The letter opener engraved with the quotation, “My life lies in those eyes,” an unfinished quotation which, if completed, would read: “My life lies in those eyes which have me slain.”

To complete the quotation and its prediction, I sing *Listen to the Mockingbird* to my wife and wait for her bill to plunge deep in my heart, as I once plunged a bill into hers.

Memory is fading. I look with melting eyes at this lovely female, soft and small, with a high sweet voice. All birds to me, she becomes my love, and I sing and plan our home of twigs and see nothing, know nothing except the leaves and branches, the need to sing, the need to feed, the need to love and the need to “have me slain.”

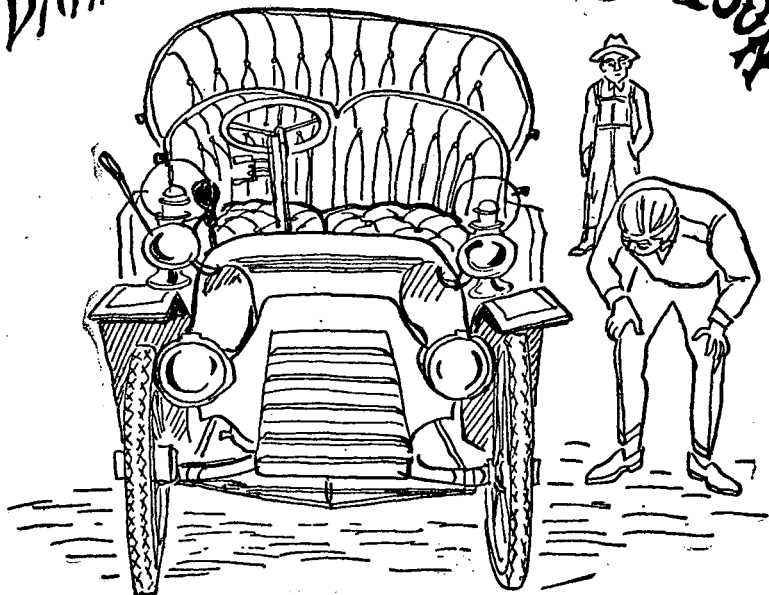
Man may talk one thing and think another, but in affairs of the heart, we are told, every eye negotiates for itself. Ayah!

RESORT bound at last, the Daniel Duttons of New York City happened to be driving through Tollenville, Vermont, a town of peaceful quaintness and order and no suggestion of murder or unexpected change. Still, some dis-

tance along Main Street appeared the totally unexpected to Daniel and he slammed on his brakes and made an abrupt swerve into the diagonal parking at the curb.

His wife, Lotus, who was dark-haired, dimpled and madly beauti-

DANIEL AND THE HADLEY-SIMPSON



ful, said with many flutterings of her appealing, lush lips, "Why? What is this? Why are we stopping in this dinky little town? Within the last five minutes you told me that we still had almost a hundred miles to travel. I would like to arrive at the resort today, not tomorrow. Why are we stopping?"

Shakily, Daniel's finger pointed at a high, red vehicle in the parking space alongside. It had brass trim, lanterns, spoked wheels.

Lotus looked at the vintage auto with hostile eyes. "I might have known. You and your antique cars! In my opinion, they are a special insanity, a really creepy insanity with you, to the point where you even have to keep that collection of model antique cars in our sad little four room apartment where goodness knows we need not be imprisoned if we could afford the proper type of a house, and how and when can that be, with you wasting so much time and energy drooling and leering and swooning over preposterous, outmoded flivvers, wherever located. You would

think you'd be weary of automobiles in general, with the parking situation in the city so ghastly that it's better to take a cab, and where's the use of owning a car at all except to travel, which we should be doing now."

This was not a photograph, Daniel Dutton was thinking with awe, but an actual 1904 Hadley-Simpson, something he'd never before seen. "Just a minute, sweetheart." A rangy, mild-eyed young man, he slid out from behind the wheel and began prowling around the vintage auto, squatting, peering, patting. "No doubt about it," he muttered. "A Hadley-Simpson."

"Time is going, Daniel," Lotus called. Even in petulance, her voice was rich, throaty, primitively disturbing. "As it gets later and later and later we begin to risk losing our reservations. Are you at all aware of how silly you look in that position? What fascinates you under that car?"

A man in faded blue overalls shambled up, glancing at Dan out of faded blue eyes.

Dan straightened. The owner; he sensed the ties between man and car. By instinct, he could always tell an owner.

"Nice day," Dan said.

"Ayah."

"Your automobile?"

"Ayah."

by Michael
Zuroy

"Interesting old vehicle there."

"Ayah."

"Made solid. They don't make 'em like they used to."

"Ayah."

"Consider selling?"

"Nope."

From a side-box, the man pulled a crank and with gangling strength jerked the motor into chugging. He lurched into the vibrating seat, rugged, unshaven face expressionless, backed and drove off. Dan watched the car wobbling through the mountain-bordered town.

In this place, where the old and new seemed to mix, Dan could understand that a 1904 Hadley-Simpson might still be in ordinary use, improbable though it seemed. That man looked like a farmer, not a vintage auto collector . . .

"Kindly stop standing there like some kind of a nut, a paralyzed one at that, and get back in the car and let's travel. Don't you think you've wasted enough time in this unaccountable place, Daniel? It's my vacation too, you know, and I don't want to spend it nowhere . . ."

"One minute, sweetheart," Dan said, and crossed the street to a service station.

"The guy that owns the old buggy, that's Elwood Hackhurst," the owner informed him. "Farmer. Place is on the Johns River Road, this side of Shoresbury. He's not

anxious to sell the old bucket, no. I hear he turned down an offer of two thousand."

"That much?" Dan carefully acted impressed. He had no intention of revealing the true worth of a 1904 Hadley-Simpson. "Pretty shrewd traders, you Vermonters."

"Hell, I ain't no Vermonter. I'm from Brooklyn."

"That so? What are you doing way up here?"

"I like the space and privacy. Plenty of room between neighbors. I figure it's Brooklyn that's all the way down there, if you dig me, Mac."

"How far is it to Hackhurst's place?"

"Six, seven miles, but it's a lonely, isolated place, Mac. Nobody from town ever goes there. Not since the murder."

"Murder? What's that about?"

"Look, Mac, I'm still a newcomer here. You want information about Hackhurst, go see Sam Putt, the barber, up the street."

Sam Putt, a withered man with a forbidding mouth, said, "Ayah, Elwood's daddy bought that heap of junk back in 1904. Took on how progressive he was, I recall; first man in town to own an automobile. Ran it until he died; then Elwood went on usin' it, never wanted any other vee-hickle. Progress! I'm drivin' a new Buick, and look at

him!" he exploded vehemently.

A customer grinned. "Now, Sam, you got to admit Elwood maintains it nice."

"He's a fair tinkerer, ain't sayin' different. He ain't got no push to him at all is what I'm sayin'."

"When would be a good time to find him home? I'd like to run out and see him about his car," Daniel said.

Sam Putt completed a snap of his scissors, turned, still holding the scissors at shoulder level, and stared at Daniel, as did his customers. Then Putt gave a barely perceptible shudder and returned to cutting hair. "Elwood ain't used to visitors," he said.

"So I heard. Something about a murder?"

"Ayah."

"Could you tell me what happened?"

"Homer Johnson went out to visit the Hackhursts one day. He ended up dead in the keepin' room. 'Thout any head."

"No head?"

"None a-tall. Someone took an axe to him. Head was missin'."

"Who did it?"

"Never could pin it on anyone. The Hackhursts all claimed they wasn't home when it happened. Said Johnson had found the house empty and sat down in the keepin' room to wait. The law couldn't

prove otherwise. That was that."

"Did they find his head?"

"Never found his head. Still missin'."

"When did this happen?"

"A while back. Years. Ain't any more Hackhursts left but just Elwood."

"Could Elwood have done it?"

Putt stared at Daniel unblinkingly. "Don't believe so."

"It wouldn't have been Elwood," the man in the barber chair said, speaking for the first time.

"Not him," another customer said.

"Then why won't people visit his place?"

"He's still a Hackhurst," Putt said. "We figure it was done by a Hackhurst, no matter what they claimed. It ain't comfortable to visit there. Only murder ever happened around here, and nobody ain't temptin' another. Elwood's odd and his place is odd and way back and solitary. Just ain't comfortable."

These New England people had long memories all right, Daniel reflected. Never forgot anything. "Well, thanks," he said. "Guess I'll run out there, though."

"Ayah," Putt said, eyeing him impassively. "He'll be home anytime now. Just went through town. If Elwood ain't in town, he's to home."

Returning to his car, Dan saw

Lotus' lovely mouth moving even before he arrived in earshot. "... truly and fantastically inconsiderate. Brute desertion. Leaving your wife to perish like a castaway while you wander in all directions berserk because of a mere glimpse of a nasty horseless carriage, an inanimate, unfeeling *thing*, not a sensitive creature with a soul and human emotions like a wife whom you haven't even given a real home yet, and don't tell me you can't do better as an accountant if you didn't give so much attention and energy and money to these superannuated tin lizzies and buy a reasonable residence where perhaps we could have children."

Dan said loudly and clearly, "Money. Buy Hadley-Simpson. Sell. Make money. Much money. For house."

"... with an inspiring view, in a good suburban area with nearby schools and shopping, away from the roaring city, yes, but close enough for its advantages—"

"Old car. Buy. Sell. Make money. For house."

"Did you say you want to *buy* that thing?"

"Sweetheart," Dan said rapidly, "if there's one thing I know, it's antique cars. There are a dozen places I could sell a genuine 1904 Hadley-Simpson in that kind of fine running condition for thirty



thousand dollars. It's a very rare find. It's just luck that in this out-of-the-way place it hasn't been grabbed off yet. I think I can pry it loose for under three thousand."

"Three thousand for that monstrosity? What about our vacation? How long would it take? How much did you say you could get for it?"

"Thirty thousand."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

Into Lotus' gorgeous eyes came a calculating glint.

The Johns River Road wound uphill through farms that grew sparser as the distance from town

increased. The Johns River itself could be glimpsed from time to time, a narrow, rock-studded stream, hardly a river, whose pure waters seemed to invite trout fishing. The road turned to gravel, then to dirt. Birch, maple, beech, closed in on the road, broken by high grass fields and long panoramas of tilted land and distant mountains.

The Hackhurst farm—barns, sheds, and an unpainted, hulking farmhouse built early in the previous century—stood at the end of a long lane off the dirt road, over a mile from the last neighbor. Hackhurst's granite face didn't move a muscle when he opened the door on them, but he invited them in hospitably enough.

Daniel looked curiously around. Must be the keeping room they were in, he decided, almost expecting a headless body; but the room looked serene enough, with its sturdy old furnishings that must also have been there since the previous century. He hadn't mentioned anything to Lotus about the murder. No sense stirring her up about that, too.

"I talked to you in town," he said to Hackhurst. "Thought maybe we could talk some more."

"Don't cost to talk," Hackhurst said, in a reluctant, labored voice.

"This is my wife," Daniel said.

"How d' you do," Lotus responded.

Hackhurst's eyes rested a split second on Lotus' devastating face, on her curved, paralyzing figure, then scuttled away, like a frightened beetle. He blushed a carnation red. He dropped his chin on his chest, fixed his eyes on a corner of the table.

"Marvelous country you have here, Mr. Hackhurst," Lotus said.

"Yes'm," Hackhurst said barely audibly, staring doggedly at the table.

"The air is wonderfully bracing," Lotus continued. "Clear, fresh, like a dash of cool spring water, to say nothing of the magnificent old farmhouses we observed as we drove out, really precious, early homesteads, marvelous material for remodeling and redecorating. How nice if we could transport one to the suburbs of New York, ha, ha, where we intend to live; as for example your own home, Mr. Hackhurst. What an exquisitely ducky pure sample, with those ells and dormers and rambling porches and snuggling woodshed, and even the furniture, so frightfully quaint and anybody can see absolutely and really authentic, like this massive early table, pine no doubt . . ."

"It's where they found the fella with his head chopped off," Hackhurst said.

"What is this about a head?"

"Right here at this table. Sittin' on that same chair you're in, ma'am. Dead. No head."

Lotus paled, rose hastily.

"It was all a long time ago, sweetheart," Daniel quickly reassured her. "An old murder. Right, Mr. Hackhurst?"

"A while ago," Hackhurst agreed, still staring at the table.

"Sit down, dear," Daniel said, and Lotus gingerly took another seat. "We're not here to discuss old murders," Daniel added. "Now, about your car, Mr. Hackhurst, I can offer you twenty-two hundred dollars for it."

"How did it happen?" Lotus asked. "Who did it? Why? When?"

"Now, Lotus," Daniel said, "I'm sure Mr. Hackhurst doesn't care to rake up an old tragedy. Twenty-two hundred?"

"Nobody knows for certain," Hackhurst said, staring now at the door. "I allus thought it might be old Raymond Hackhurst did it. They say he was a violent old fella an' he'd once had a run-in with Homer over Homer's dog botherin' the poultry."

"Just how long ago did this happen?" Lotus asked.

"A while ago, ma'am. September, 1873."

"When?" Daniel asked.

"September, 1873. Got the old

newspapers that tell all about it."

Yes, Daniel reflected, people in these New England hills had long memories all right. Here was a murder that had happened almost a hundred years ago, and they couldn't let go of it, still wouldn't come near this place. Only in New England . . . Time moved differently here. "As I was saying—"

"That's just ancient history, then," Lotus said, dismissing it. "What a dear, picturesque wood-burning range, Mr. Hackhurst, so cheerful on a winter's day. Your wife must bake delicious goodies in there."

Hackhurst's eyes moved to the oven. "Ain't married, ma'am. Live alone here."

"Oh, what a shame with all this room and everything, this great big cosy house and the barns and fields and all this marvelous *space*, to live all alone."

"Got cows," Hackhurst said with a strained look at a rocking chair. "Got horses. Got pigs. Dogs. Chicks. Cats. No woman."

"Never too late, Hackhurst," Daniel put in.

"Never was much of a hand around women. Couldn't get one from these parts to live *here* anyway. Asked one once't. Said no. Ain't askin' no more."

"Someday the right one will come along, Hackhurst," Dan said

with polite encouragement, though considering Hackhurst's Neanderthal appearance, he doubted it. "Now about that auto, my offer was twenty-two hundred."

"Ayah."

"It's a deal?"

"Nope."

"Didn't you say yes?"

"Ayah, your offer was twenty-two hundred. Nope, I won't take it. Don't care to sell, like I said."

"Come, come, Hackhurst. Everything has its price. Tell you what, instead of dickering, I'll come to my top offer right away. Twenty-five hundred."

"Ayah."

"You accept?"

"Nope."

"You could get yourself a nice late-model car for twenty-five hundred, Hackhurst. Wouldn't that be better than that elderly one?"

"On'y car I ever drove. On'y car my Daddy ever drove. Used to it. Ain't inclined to learn a strange one."

"I understand." Daniel nodded sympathetically. He'd expected Hackhurst might be difficult, but he ought to break him down within another thousand. If he could get the Hadley-Simpson for under four thousand, maybe he ought to keep it himself instead of reselling—but no, Lotus would never hear of it. "Under the cir-

cumstances," Daniel went on, "I'll up my offer handsomely. Three thousand."

"Ayah."

"You mean—"

"Nope."

"If it takes an extra push to make up your mind, I'll go along. Would you sell for thirty-two hundred?"

"Nope."

"Thirty-three hundred?"

"Nope."

"Thirty-three fifty?"

"Nope."

"I'll make it thirty-five hundred," Daniel said. "That's a lot of money for an old buggy that might fall apart tomorrow. I just happen to like it, so I'll pay you thirty-five hundred."

"Nope."

"Hackhurst, if I walk out that door, you'll lose the opportunity of a lifetime. Before I walk out, I'll give you a last chance. Thirty-six hundred, take it or leave it."

"Nope."

"All right, Hackhurst, you win. You Vermonters are shrewd traders, all right. I know you're holding out for four thousand. I give up. You can have your four thousand."

"Nope."

"Eight thousand and not a penny more," Daniel was saying feverishly later in the evening. This time he was coming close to the truth. The sum was almost all he could

raise on his current resources.

"Nope."

"Mr. Hackhurst," Lotus said, "wouldn't you really and truly like to have eight thousand dollars all your very own to do whatever you pleased with, eight thousand cash instead of a tired little vehicle not even in fashion except maybe among certain limited circles that are frankly bugs if you ask me. Eight thousand entire dollars that you could use to live it up, and you'll meet some woman who will sincerely love you eventually, and you her, and make you an efficient and worthwhile wife. Or you could travel to Nova Scotia or the New Hebrides or Haiti, for that matter, where you might try deep sea fishing under the lovely bright blue sky and afloat on the wild, free, open sea, maybe to catch a halibut. The sea, the sea, the beautiful sea—"

"All right, Lotus, all right," Daniel said slowly and loudly. "All right!" He looked at his lovely wife and sighed.

"I mean wouldn't you like to have eight thousand dollars, Mr. Hackhurst—"

"Got eight thousand dollars," Hackhurst said.

There was a silence. Hackhurst rose and shamled over to the woodbox. With his dangling arms he scooped up some split logs and

arranged them in the stove. He got the stove going. "Gets a bit chilly about now," he said, returning to his seat.

"I swear to you, Hackhurst," Daniel said hysterically, "that I absolutely cannot go above eight thousand, five hundred dollars."

Hackhurst said, "A 1904 Hadley-Simpson in good running condition is worth thirty thousand dollars. I might consider twenty-nine thousand, nine hundred and fifty."

The room fell silent again. Daniel bent down and undid a shoelace, then retied it. He plucked out a short hair from above his right ear. For a while he slowly snapped a forefinger against his palm, then changed to the other palm. At last he said quietly, "Possibly I can work something out. But I would like to inspect that auto again. You needn't come, sweetheart. It's chilly outside, and you'd be bored. Mr. Hackhurst won't mind showing me the car again, I'm sure. Just Mr. Hackhurst and myself. Alone. Just me and Mr. Hackhurst."

The room was cosy and warm. Lotus undulated her remarkable figure toward the stove and toasted herself while she waited. She sank into a platform rocker upholstered in thick ancient velvet while she ran over in her mind what she was going to say to Daniel after this

fiasco and losing time from their vacation too . . .

Daniel and Hackhurst reentered. Daniel was carrying some rope and Hackhurst some clanking chain and assorted hardware. Daniel yanked Lotus up out of the rocker, pulled her hands behind her back. Hackhurst tied her hands with the rope. Then he chained her legs together and locked the chains. Together, they put additional chains on her feet and arms and secured them. She tried to struggle, but it was impossible against two muscular men. She kept screaming.

"Do you think anybody might hear her?" Daniel asked.

"Nope. We're real private here. Anyway, woods is full of noise, come evenin'. Owls hoot. Bears call. Tree toads squall. Dogs yowl. Doubt her yellin' would be noticed any distance. But I'll gag her for sure."

He did so, and Lotus' screams ceased, though her beautiful eyes kept staring.

"Sure this won't make you any trouble?" Hackhurst asked Daniel.

"Inconvenience, maybe. No ac-

tual trouble. I'll say she just walked out on me someplace during our trip, far from here. They can't prove a thing unless they find her—and they won't do that, will they, Hackhurst?"

"Nope. Won't find her. Chain her in the basement tonight. Tomorrow I'll fix up a nice big room. Close off the windows, soundproof it, put up heavy gauge steel fencing and padlocked door. Make her a good, comfortable cage. Nobody comes here anyhow."

"To be completely honest, Hackhurst, she talks a little too much."

"Noticed."

"I wouldn't do this otherwise. Maybe also she expects too much from me, but mainly it's the talking. She's a beauty. I'd never do this if not for the talking."

"Be all right," Hackhurst said. "Couple beatings'll quiet her down some."

"Guess we're about set then, Hackhurst."

"Guess so. At last, I got me a woman."

"And I got me a Hadley-Simpson," said Daniel.



For every deed there is a reason—unreasonable though it may be.

THE BROKEN PIPE

*by Stephen
Wasylyk*

I turned into the parking lot of the garden apartment complex in time to see the ambulance pull away.

The patrolman on the door waved me through. The apartment was on the ground floor, the first one on the right, and I found McCreedy on one knee, staring thoughtfully at a broken briar pipe on the rug.

The print man nodded at me and continued dusting, the bored look on his face saying he had found nothing and expected to find nothing. The photographer was stowing used film holders in his

case. I walked over to McCreedy. "Keep those big feet away from the pipe," said McCreedy without looking up.

"Evidence?"

"Well, if *she* smoked a pipe, nobody has told us yet. It's all we have."

"Just that pipe?"

"The rest of the apartment was as you see it. Perfectly normal. Nothing out of place. No sign of a struggle. Windows locked because of the air conditioning. Door locked, too."

I felt my eyebrows go up. "Door locked?"



"Don't get excited. All you have to do is pull it closed as you go out."

"Which means she had to know the guy to let him in."

"Not had to. Probably."

"Do you have any suspects?"

"Hunter and Algeri are out looking for a few."

Joe Hunter and Lou Algeri were two of the best he had. Both were big men but the similarity ended

there. Hunter was a good looking, pleasant talking type who could easily pass for one of the commuting executives from the township. A sergeant, he was McCreedy's likely successor. Algeri looked like what he was, a hard-nosed cop. They made a good team.

The way McCreedy described their efforts amused me. "A few suspects? Won't one do?"

He carefully scooped the pipe into an envelope and rose to his feet as if he had been twenty years younger. "Well, the way it usually goes, we have to pick one out of three or four. We seldom get any volunteers."

"Fill me in," I said, reaching for my notebook.

"Her name was Janice Brood, age about thirty, no relatives. Worked as a saleswoman for Harvey Real Estate since her divorce two years ago. Had an appointment at eight-thirty this morning to show a property at nine. Harvey got upset when she wasn't there on time because she was always punctual. Called her, got no answer, called the apartment super to check. He came over, let himself in, found her and called me. I was here by nine-fifteen. Caught the doc walking down the hall as I was leaving and rode over with him."

"What does he say?"

"Looks like someone hit her. She

fell and caught her forehead on the sharp edge of that low coffee table. Half dressed or half undressed, whichever way you want to say it. Wearing one of those long, flowing negligees, so if it wasn't for the pipe we might have thought she tripped and fell."

"Might still be that way in spite of the pipe."

"I couldn't be that lucky," he sighed.

It was a strange thing to say because McCreedy never depended on luck. He ran the nine man detective squad in suburban Meridian Township with a hard-fisted efficiency. His men were handpicked and sent to the best police schools in the country. The township was one of the wealthiest in the state, and could afford it.

"Too bad this is Saturday," I said. "Fewer people were wandering around early in the morning who might have seen something."

"We'll find one. We always do."

"How about the pipe? Anything there to start with?"

"Not much. National brand that can be bought anywhere. No prints. Just some smears on the stem, and the bowl is too rough to hold any."

"How about analyzing the contents of the bowl? Find out what kind of tobacco he smokes?"

He tapped his forehead admiringly. "Very good. The day you

give up that reporter's job, see me—except the bowl is empty, scraped clean. The pipe is relatively new so don't ask me about teeth marks on the stem."

There was a glimmer in his eyes that told me there was something about the pipe I had overlooked.

"Must have fallen out of his pocket during the struggle and one of them stepped on it, right?"

"Let's say somebody stepped on it." The glimmer was there again.

This time it penetrated. "If the man stepped on it, he would have known it. The woman must have done it. The man never even knew it was gone."

"Very clever. So why didn't he see it in the middle of this nice clear floor?"

I shrugged.

"Because I didn't find it where you saw it. I found it under the sofa."

"Thanks a lot," I said sarcastically.

"Look, you're the guy who is always playing detective. You knew we picked it up to dust it but you assumed we put it back and waited for you to arrive."

"Why put it back on the floor at all?"

"Hunter's idea, to see if he could figure out what happened." There was an expression on his seamed face I had never seen before.

Algeri led a thin little old man into the room. He introduced him as Rickert, the tenant in the apartment next door.

"Mr. Rickert heard something," he said.

"A thumping," said Rickert. "Six-thirty this morning. Been getting up early for so many years I couldn't break the habit when I retired. Thought the noise was funny because Mrs. Brood was always so quiet."

"What kind of thumping?"

"Ever stumble across something in the dark and lose your balance? A lot of little thumps, then one big one."

"How long did it last?"

"Couple of seconds."

"How long is a couple of seconds?"

"Nowhere near as long as that fool commercial that was on the transistor radio I was listening to." The old man didn't like the idea of McCreedy questioning his concept of time.

"Your wife hear it?"

"Her? You could march a drum and bugle corps through the bedroom and she wouldn't stir."

McCreedy thanked him and nodded at Algeri, who led the old man out.

"Now you know when she was killed," I said.

"Now I know Rickert heard

some noise at six-thirty," said McCreedy. "You're leaping to conclusions again."

"A detective lieutenant once told me that an educated guess based on speculation as the result of a known fact was perfectly permissible."

McCreedy grunted. "Anybody who talks like that ought to be locked up."

"I know you're going to retire in six months. I didn't know you were getting so senile you couldn't remember things you've said."

He grunted again. "Let's close this place. Nothing more we can do here. Hunter and Algeri will finish up."

Outside, I asked, "Where are we going?"

"You can drop me at my office. Save Algeri the trouble. It wouldn't be a bad idea for you to go see the man she worked for to get some background information on the woman for your story. If you think you can get anything around here, forget it. The neighbors didn't know her at all."

I grinned. Ever since my first day on the job, McCreedy had gone out of his way to help me, not because he thought it was a good idea to be friendly with a reporter, but simply because he was that kind of man. Knowing everyone in the county from the commissioners on down, it was his phone call or the

use of his name that had opened many doors until I had been around long enough for my name to be recognized. "Help the kid out," he'd say, and they would do it because he asked.

This time I was obviously being dismissed. He wanted to go back to his office, put his feet up on his desk and think. He might even doze off. He looked tired.

If McCreedy had working hours, no one knew what they were. His wife had left him about a year ago for reasons known only to them, so he spent most of his time in the detective bureau office on the second floor of the building that housed the township offices. That is, if he wasn't restlessly cruising the roads at all hours of the day or night in his car, something the two men on the midnight to eight shift hardly appreciated. They had little chance to goof off on some quiet, tree-lined road with McCreedy likely to drive by.

The real estate office where Mrs. Brood had worked was a miniature bungalow with four desks, some filing cabinets and barely enough floor space to walk.

The man behind the desk in the corner wasn't much older than I, big and slope shouldered, with a round face and strong bifocals that gave his eyes a diffused watery look. He wore a sport jacket I

wished I could afford, and the gleam from the size twelve shoes was enough to blind a person.

He was smoking a pipe and his name wasn't Harvey. His name was Joe Sears and he worked for Harvey, just as the woman had.

At first he thought I was another detective, Hunter having talked to both him and his boss, while McCreedy went directly to the apartment. Sears surprised me by sounding off about police harassment, but he calmed down when I told him who I was and all I wanted was some background on Mrs. Brood.

"Forget it," he said. "You're not going to sandwich the story of her life in between the scout meetings, bridge club news and ladies' auxiliaries' activities. Not her. I'm not speaking ill of the dead when I say she went through men faster than you go through notebooks. I'm just stating a fact."

"She dropped you, is that it?"

"Me and I don't know how many others." The tone of his voice suggested he wasn't used to playing the part of a loser.

"The police might think that gave you a reason to kill her," I said. "Is that why you're so worried about police harassment?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "Should have kept my big mouth shut but I thought it was better coming from

me than from someone else." His pipe was out. He struck a wooden match to light it. "I'm not the violent type, but the way she moved around, sooner or later she was bound to run into someone who was."

"Who was the latest, do you know?"

"No. All I know is, he was an important man of some kind, some wheel in the township."

"Doesn't seem to fit," I said thoughtfully. "It seems to me that the last thing your boss would want would be someone with a reputation like that working for him. Not in this business."

"What reputation? You have a reputation only if people know about it. She made it a point to keep things very quiet. She met you in the city, across the river or down at the shore. She was smart enough not to play in her own back yard. As far as Harvey was concerned, it was none of his business."

Smoke curled from his pipe and was dissipated by the blast from the air-conditioner. I didn't know whether to believe him or not, but that was Hunter's job, not mine. As usual, McCreedy had sent me to the right place for what I wanted to know, even though I could never print much of what he'd told me.

As I climbed into my old car, I admired his; dark blue and new,

much better than anything I could afford. Sometimes I felt I was in the wrong business.

I found McCreedy where I expected him to be, except his feet were propped on an open bottom drawer instead of his desk top. He still looked tired and I felt a little sorry for him. It was going to be a long day.

"Know anything more than you did before?" He was needling me as usual.

"Why ask? Hunter already gave you the word about her. You could have saved me the trip. You considering Sears as a candidate?"

"We consider everybody who knew her. You know that."

"Find anybody else?"

"Not yet, but Algeri turned up a woman who saw a man leave the apartment house and drive away in a dark blue car about a quarter to seven. He accounted for every man in the development who owned a car that color. There were only three. They were at home and their cars were on the lot, so the man she saw didn't belong there."

"No description of the man or the car? No plate number?"

"From a woman who just woke up, wasn't particularly interested, and doesn't know one car from another?"

I thought of the car I'd just seen. "Sears owns a dark blue car," I

said. "I was just admiring it."

He grinned. "Hunter already made a note of it. He doesn't miss much."

"So now you have a broken pipe that can't be traced, a man who can't be identified, and an unknown make of car with no plate number. It's a good thing I work for a weekly."

"Hunter and Algeri will have him by nightfall."

I doubted it. "Set a time. Summer nights arrive slowly."

"Let's say nine o'clock."

"Hunter and Algeri are good, but a steak dinner says they're not that good."

"Make it a steak dinner for each of them and you're on."

"That's two to one odds," I protested. "And on my pay?"

"We have the hard part, remember? Besides, all you have to do is buy a hamburger for that doll you've been chasing lately instead of a full course dinner and you'll have enough. Better yet, get her to buy. Her father probably gives her a bigger allowance than your pay check. You may be a good looking guy with a lot of class but you're out of your league with her. Why waste your time?"

I'd been out with her just three times but still he knew about it.

"Tell you, McCreedy. I start at the top of the head and work my

way to the tips of the toes, then I listen to them talk, and if I like what I see and hear, I don't worry about their income."

"Worry about hers. Her father is big in county politics, behind the scenes stuff, so he doesn't like publicity. Sooner or later you're going to lock horns with him. If he decides he doesn't like you hanging around his daughter, you'll be out of a job."

"I'm trembling with fear," I said drily. "Big men don't intimidate me. I call things the way I see them. It's my job."

"Tell you what. I'll put in a good word with him for you."

"Stay out of it," I told him. "You've done enough for me already."

I pushed aside an empty ash tray and sat on the edge of his desk so I could look out the window. The Saturday shoppers were out in full force in spite of the heat, jamming the streets.

"You're going to check out Sears, of course," I said.

"Already have. He said he was asleep at six-thirty. Not being married and living alone, he has no alibi. It would be easy enough for him to slip out of his apartment."

"Traffic must have been pretty heavy this morning with all these people slipping around," I said sarcastically.

Hunter and Algeri came in with a young fellow wearing a dark green work uniform with the name Jack stitched above the pocket. I couldn't decide if the expression on his handsome face was scared, sullen, or both.

Algeri kept him in the outer office while Hunter came up to McCreedy's desk. "You know that all-night service station down the road from the apartment? We stopped in to see if anyone on duty had noticed a dark blue car go by, and Lou saw a blue Ford parked behind the station. Naturally we asked who owned it." He jerked his head at the outer office. "Turned out to be him. We were talking to the owner, man named Green. Asked if the kid had been there at six-thirty. No, he says. Because he had been on duty all night, he left for breakfast about six, came back about seven because Green wanted him to help out for a few hours, Saturday morning being a busy time. We asked him where he ate breakfast. He told us the diner. We stopped in to see if they remembered him being there. They didn't have to remember. They knew him, and they said he definitely wasn't in that morning. We beelined back to the station and brought him in."

McCreedy looked at me and said, "Out."

I moved. He had no objection to my standing around or talking to his men when nothing much was going on, but the rules said I couldn't be present during the interrogation of a suspect. He'd tell me what he thought I should know.

The early afternoon heat bounced off the building and popped perspiration out on my forehead before I'd taken three steps. I found a shaded spot on the low wall surrounding the parking lot. One foot on the wall, back braced against the building, I lit a cigarette and thought about Janice Brood.

Most of the deaths in the township were not like hers. The few violent ones we had came from an explosion after a slow building of hate and resentment, the loss of sanity, an accident. Seldom was any mystery involved, the guilty one usually being identified and caught quickly, sometimes even waiting for the police to arrive. Out of curiosity, I had once checked the files to find there were only two unsolved homicides in the last five years, and McCreedy knew who committed one of them but couldn't prove it.

The township was like a small town in a lot of ways. Depending on the circle in which you moved, there were very few secrets, so

Janice Brood and her lover had to do some very fancy maneuvering to keep their affair quiet, no matter how influential the man was.

I really wanted to be on the inside of this one, to watch Hunter and Algeri put together that last night in Janice Brood's life; where she had been, who she had been with; whether the man had stayed or gone; if some other man had come to visit in the early hours of the morning, but I had work to do and I had better get back.

McCreedy would call me when he had something worthwhile. It suddenly occurred to me I had no idea of what Janice Brood looked like. I headed for McCreedy's office.

His feet were on the desk this time, his eyes closed.

"How are you making out?" I asked.

He opened one eye. "Getting there. We're holding the young fellow for the time being. He won't say where he was during that hour. Hunter and Algeri are trying to find out."

I looked at my watch. "Seems to me you've accomplished a great deal in four hours. You might just make it by nine tonight but I have my doubts. Sounds like Monday before you really get anywhere."

"All it takes is one good lead. Hunter and Algeri will find it."

"I hope so. In the meantime I have to get back to work. I'll need a picture of Janice Brood."

He opened a drawer and handed me a small glossy photo. "Copy of one we found in the apartment."

It was a typical black and white studio portrait of an attractive, dark-haired woman with a sensuous face and full lips. For some reason I knew the hair was chestnut and the eyes brown. I'd seen her and couldn't remember where.

In the street? Passing in a car? My mind was blank. "I'll call you," I said.

"Just like the city reporters," he grinned. "They come out when we make an arrest."

"They won't this time. I made a deal with the evening paper to cover this territory. That's one thing you didn't know."

He gave an exaggerated sigh. "Just as I thought. That doll must be costing you a bundle. I told you she was too much to handle on your pay."

At the office I explained to my editor what was going on, called the story in to the rewrite man of the city's evening paper, propped the picture against my desk lamp and studied it. Somewhere I had seen her, and the thought nagged me all afternoon, stretched into dinner and beyond. The clock was pushing six when I finished my

work, stood up and rubbed the ache in the back of my neck.

Everyone else had gone, the office was deserted and lonely. Automatically, I put a cigarette between my lips and flicked my lighter. It was dry. Someone had helped himself to my matches so I picked up a box of the wooden safety type from the editor's desk, lit the cigarette and tossed the match into my overflowing ash tray. I turned the match box over in my fingers and suddenly remembered where I had seen Janice Brood. It had been a glimpse only, as she walked out of a restaurant, and a glimpse only of the man with her, but it was enough.

The eyes in the photo seemed to have acquired an amused expression, the filled ash tray alongside it reminding me it was possible to look at things without really seeing them.

My dinner churned over in my stomach as I realized I had the lead McCreedy said Hunter and Algeri needed. My hands weren't too steady when I phoned the dispatcher and asked him to tell Hunter to meet me.

They were waiting when I drove up. I told them where I'd seen her and with whom. They looked at each other.

Hunter asked, "Are you sure? We might as well leave the county

if you're wrong, you know that."

"No, I'm not sure," I said. "All I had was a glimpse of him."

"Meet us in McCreedy's office about eight. It will take a couple of hours to put the pieces together. The lieutenant won't buy anything less. You know that."

I knew that. When you told McCreedy you were ready to make an arrest, you had better have the thing airtight.

I phoned the girl McCreedy thought was too rich for me and called off our date, in no mood to offer an explanation, hanging up on her objections reluctantly, hoping she might cool off enough someday to understand.

The clock in the tower of the building was showing a few minutes after eight when I came in the back way and climbed the stairs to the second floor. McCreedy was checking a sheaf of daily reports.

He looked at his watch. "Come to gloat?"

"Not until one minute after nine. Heard from Hunter and Algeri?"

"Called and said they'd be in shortly."

"I guess I'll wait and see if I lose my bet."

He pointed at a chair. "Make yourself at home."

I stood looking out the window instead, thinking of the girl, wondering about Hunter and Algeri

and wishing I were somewhere else.

It was almost a half hour before they came in, coats off, ties pulled down, their faces marked with heat and fatigue. Hunter looked at me and nodded and my stomach turned over again.

"Want to call it a day?" asked McCreedy gently. "Twelve hours on a day like this is enough for anyone."

Hunter kicked a chair over to Algeri and pulled one up for himself. "No," he said. "It's done, but you might not like it, and it's going to shake the township up quite a bit."

"Let's hear it," said McCreedy quietly. "If it's that bad, your facts better be straight or you two start at the bottom again."

Hunter nodded at me. "Our friend here remembered seeing Mrs. Brood a couple of months ago with a man in a restaurant over in the next county, so we drove over to see the manager. He knew her well. She met the man there two or three times a week on off nights, when there wasn't much of a crowd around, for almost a year. The man made the reservations under the name of Conrad."

His voice sounded as if he had memorized his lines.

"They were there last night and left about one. The lot attendant

had parked Conrad's car often enough to know the plate number. It was a dark blue sedan. We looked the car up, took a picture, and showed it to the woman in the apartment house who had seen the car this morning. She identified it as the same model."

"What about Conrad?" asked McCreedy.

"We talked to his wife. She wouldn't admit it at first, but finally said she knew he'd been having an affair. She didn't know the woman."

McCreedy's lips twisted slightly. "Wifely loyalty," he said, and I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"Since we knew who he was, we went looking for the store where he bought the pipe. We found it. He bought the pipe just yesterday morning. We also know he had the habit of carrying the pipe with the bowl sticking out of the breast pocket of his suit, so it was easy enough for it to fall out."

"The township hasn't even started to tremble," said McCreedy drily.

Hunter kept talking as if he hadn't heard. "I thought that if the man realized he lost the pipe in the apartment, the sensible thing for him to do would be to replace it as soon as he could after he found it missing. We found that store,

too. He bought exactly the same kind of pipe at three this afternoon, and we have a witness who knows the man had no pipe this morning."

"This all you have?" McCreedy's voice was hard.

"No," said Hunter. "There's the young fellow, Jack. His only reason for not telling us where he'd been this morning was that he went to the apartment. He was Mrs. Brood's new boyfriend. He left the service station, parked some distance away and walked over. He heard a fuss going on, backed off, hid behind some cars and saw the man come out. When he heard Mrs. Brood was dead, he was too scared to say a word. He has a record and he's out on probation on car theft. He wasn't about to be a witness against the man he saw unless he was pushed into it."

I reached for a cigarette, realized I had no matches and was sorry I started the whole thing. I'd been hoping I was wrong but Hunter's monotone was leaving little room for hope.

"He knew we really had nothing on him so all he had to do was sit still and keep quiet and we would have to release him. It's also possible he could have had a little blackmail in mind. When we told him we knew who it was, he was

willing enough to talk because he knew we could back him up."

I decided to try to derail Hunter anyway. "Just because he sees a man come out of an apartment building doesn't prove the man killed the woman or even was in the apartment."

"Keep out of it, amateur," said McCreedy tolerantly. "With the pipe, it does. The pipe shows he was there." He turned back to Hunter. "You still need a motive."

"The kid gave us that, too. Mrs. Brood told him she was meeting Conrad last night to give him his walking papers. The man wasn't the type to buy it without an argument. That's your motive."

McCreedy shook his head admiringly. "You have it all. A little cleaning up around the edges and it's done." He waved at me. "This guy owes each of you a steak dinner, even if he did help lose his own bet. One thing—how did you know the man had no pipe this morning?"

It was my turn now. "An ash tray," I said slowly. "It's usually filled with half-burned tobacco and wooden matches. It was clean as a whistle up until two this afternoon. Then I remembered a pipe always sticking out of a man's breast pocket. It wasn't there this morning."

I paused and slid his ash tray toward him. "It's loaded now, and

the pipe is in your pocket again, and that unmarked car you drive is dark blue."

Hunter reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper. "I have a warrant. The name on it is Conrad McCreedy. Anything you want to say, Lieutenant?"

I was still wishing he'd call us all crazy and throw us out of his office. For a minute or two the only sound was the soft hum of his air-conditioner.

McCreedy was leaning back in his chair, eyes closed, looking old and tired. "No," he said finally. "I think I'll stand on my constitutional rights. They're all I have left."

Hunter and Algeri, looking the way I felt, stood up to let him lead the way to the duty sergeant on the first floor.

"Not so fast," he said. "Wait for me in the outer office for a minute and don't worry. I'm too old to pull a spectacular last-minute escape by leaping from a second floor window."

Hunter and Algeri hesitated, then Hunter silently stepped forward and held out his hand.

"If you hadn't done that, I would have seen to it you were fired," said McCreedy, handing him his gun. "Look," he said softly, "I wasn't going out of my way to give you a hard time, but you

know the rules. With me or anyone else, if you have a warrant or want one, you must be sure. You've done a fine job."

Their expressions said they wished they hadn't.

I walked to the window and stared out at the Saturday night traffic.

"If you're feeling sorry for me, don't," said McCreedy. "It's a helluva way to go after thirty-five years but that's the way it is."

"Not sorry for you," I said. "For me. I gave them the lead."

His voice snapped. "You couldn't do anything else. You did what I wanted. You guaranteed Hunter will get my job."

I whirled in surprise. "What does that mean?"

"Why did you think I didn't turn myself in?" He tapped his desk. "You think I could sit here any longer, knowing I'd hit a woman and caused her death?" He shook his head. "All I could do was try to make something good come out of it. There was talk of bringing in an outside man to take my place, and Hunter has worked too hard and too long to be treated like that. If he and Algeri were smart enough to nail their own lieutenant, the politicians would be forced to give Hunter my job and make Algeri a sergeant." He pointed at me. "That's why I wanted to

talk to you. You make sure. Play Hunter and Algeri up real big in the story, big enough so they have no choice."

"Done," I said quietly.

"Incidentally, that doll called, looking for you. She's pretty mad about you hanging up on her, but I think I cooled her off by telling her to sit tight, that you were really in love with her but didn't know it yet."

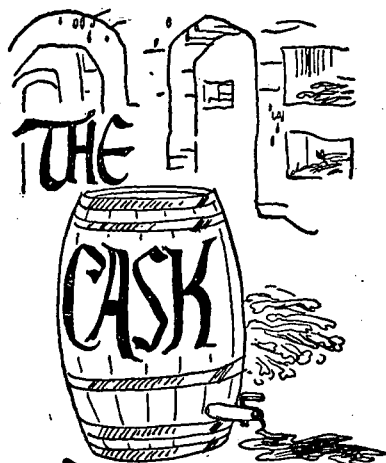
He waved aside my protest. "It's true. I could see it all over your face this morning. I told her to call back at nine if she was interested, or to let it drop here and now because you were too good a man to fool around with."

"McCreedy," I said wearily, "if you're so damned smart why didn't you just pocket that pipe this morning? It was yours. No one would have known, and without it there was no way to prove you were actually in the apartment."

"Now why would I want to do a dumb thing like that?" The glint I'd seen in his eyes that morning was back. "Especially after I deliberately broke my pipe and put it under the sofa *after* I got there this morning, then went to all the trouble of pretending to find it?"

He spun on his heel and walked quickly through the outer office, Hunter and Algeri falling in behind him.

*To get to the point, truly a straight path is seldom as interestin'—
or rewardin'—as a circuitous route.*



OF AMARILLO (TEXAS)

WAIT just a second until I finish changin' the prices on these cough syrup bottles, will you?

There we go. Everything's goin' up these days, ain't they? Mad race to catch the income tax, that's what I call it. You'd think those fellas in Washington would know that all you gotta do to raise prices and start inflation is to up the tax again, wouldn't you? Think they know that? Not a chance. They're supposed to be experts, too.

Hope you're not in a hurry. Something good's gonna happen to me tonight, and if you got a minute, I kinda like to tell you about it.

Your name's Hamey, ain't it? Everybody else in town knew about it before I did. I just sit here in this old store and watch the world pass me by. My wife Martha—she's dead now, poor thing—been gone almost ten years, but you'd never

know it, the way I go round talkin' to her. Bet you didn't know gettin' your finger caught in a bacon slicer could kill you, did you? That's what happened to Martha. Anyway, Martha used to say I was the stupidest person in the world, that a ton of bricks could fall on me and I wouldn't even know it till I bit down on somethin' hard, but I know you're the new fella. Can't miss a new face around Bench Mark. Crazy name for a town, ain't

it? Don't make no sense to me.

Now what can I get you? Some of that cough syrup I changed the price on? Comin' right up. You know, I feel pretty bad about changin' that price, so I tell you what. I'll let you have it for the old price, just to celebrate your first purchase in the store.

You're pretty lucky, Mr. Hamey. You caught me in a good mood. Like I said, tonight's the night I latch onto a lot of money; a thousand dollars—interest-free, as far as I can tell—from young Pete Marshall.

You wouldn't be acquainted with him, would you? No, I guess not. He stays pretty much to himself lately. He lives with his sister Monica in that big brown house near the distillery. You can't miss it. They built cute little brick houses on both sides of the old

Marshall place a few years back, and now it stands out like a leper in a debutante line.

Anyway, Pete's a real nice fella. Goin' to college didn't mess him up too much. I guess he graduated ten, fifteen years ago. Wanted to be an artist or something like that, but Monica—that's his sister—she wouldn't hear a thing about it. Just the two of them live there—all alone, no other relatives or anything—and I guess Monica told him to settle down or she'd cut him off without a dime. I think Pete had some notions about goin' to New York and growin' a beard, or something, but I guess Monica put an end to that. She can be real mean when she wants to, I hear tell.

Pete and Monica had lots of run-ins, if you can believe the gossip, and I usually do. Just as a for instance, a couple years ago Pete went to the big city on vacation and met this real nice girl. Forget her name. Martha would know it if she hadn't got too close to that bacon slicer. I don't guess the name's too important, though. The big thing was that Pete brought this girl home and told Monica they was plannin' on gettin' married. Way I hear it, his sister really flew off the handle then. I can't say what it was that the young girl did to provoke—probably it wasn't



anything—but Monica disliked her right away. Every time the couple would stop by, Monica'd just stare at them and walk away. Well, this got to Pete pretty good, but he was dead set on marryin' the girl, so I guess he told Monica to mind her own business, or something to that effect.

'Course, he didn't figure on Monica bein' so determined that he wouldn't marry the girl. He probably had some notions that she'd come round after she got used to the idea. The only trouble was that Monica just didn't think that way. When she wanted something, she went out and fought for it.

Anyway, folks around here say Monica went out and hired herself a private detective and instructed him to get something on the girl, you know, so Pete wouldn't love her, but after a couple of months the fella still didn't have anything real juicy, and Monica was mad as anythin'. She told the guy that she didn't care what he had to do, it was all right even if he had to make up somethin'. I guess the money was too much to resist, 'cause that's just what the guy did. Don't know exactly how he managed it, but the story is that one night Monica real dramatically plunked down a bunch of photographs on Pete's dinner plate,

and he never saw the girl again. I hear she even came around the house once or twice, but Pete wouldn't have a thing to do with her. Matt Lewis over at the garage says he bets those pictures were real doozies, if you know what I mean. Matt's a right funny fella. Does a fast job on a flat, too.

Well, young Pete wasn't the same after that. Got kinda morose, which was too bad. A lot of folks, includin' myself, used to be interested in Pete's paintin', but it was terrible the way he changed. Before the incident with the girl, he painted real nice stuff; you know, farms and trees and pretty streams. But after Monica broke up his romance, he started drawin' this weird stuff with crazy colors and with figures that didn't even look like anything. I guess he was hit real hard.

Then there was the incident with the car. You see, Monica's conscience must of hurt some, 'cause she went out and bought Pete this beautiful sports car for his birthday. Canary yellow, that's what it was. Real classy. First time I ever saw a car like that standin' still was when Pete got his. People with fancy cars don't usually stop at Bench Mark unless they need gas real bad. They just buzz right through.

'Course, it's tough to say whether

Pete wrecked that car on purpose, but it sure looked that way. He wasn't even drunk when they found him. Old Matt Lewis at the garage said Pete just shrugged his shoulders when they told him the car was ruined beyond repair, and said so what. So Matt, he says, what would you like me to do with it? And Pete says, I don't care, you can chuck it in the creek.

Well, you'd have thought things were about as bad as they could get between Pete and Monica, what with him wreckin' her birthday gift and everythin'. But one day Pete gets a letter from the girl he'd broken off with, saying she was married and a lot of other things, I guess, because somehow Pete reasoned that his sister had framed the whole set-up with the photographs.

What's that? You say I was supposed to be tellin' you about how I'm comin' into a lot of money tonight? No, I didn't forget that. I travel a pretty curvey road, but I generally get to the point after a while.

Anyway, I reckon it was about a month ago that Pete got the letter from the girl, and it wasn't a day or two later that he came in here with a prescription for sleepin' pills. Guess he was so shook he couldn't sleep. He didn't say much, just took the pills, paid for 'em, and

walked out, quiet as you please.

Well, the very next night, I happened past the Marshall place on the way back from my brother's up on the hill. It was pretty late, about two o'clock, and I noticed this movement out in back of the Marshalls'. Well, I thought it was a prowler, so I moved closer to get a better look. And you know what I saw? Young Pete. Two o'clock in the morning and he didn't even have a coat on. And the most amazing thing is that he was diggin'—with that long-handled, flat-nosed shovel Al Werner had been tryin' to get rid of for so long.

I forgot to tell you about that shovel, didn't I? My wife Martha always said I told jokes backside first and then worked back to the punch line. Well, maybe I do. Anyway, Al Werner down at the hardware store had this one flat-nosed shovel that he couldn't sell, no matter how hard he tried. He'd ordered a whole bunch of 'em just before they came out with these new-fangled snow pushers with the curved front, and everybody was buying the new kind. Al just couldn't get rid of that shovel to save his soul. He used to joke about it by sayin' that he'd already left it to somebody in his will, he was that sure of it stayin' in the store till doomsday.

Well, it was the mornin' after I

sold Pete Marshall those sleepin' pills that Al came runnin' into my store like he'd picked a long shot in the derby. I says, what's eatin' you, Al, and he says, I sold it. I just sold that flat-nosed shovel to Pete Marshall. Well, I says, how could he be so stupid as that, and Al says, I don't know. Maybe it's 'cause we're out of the round-nosed kind, but I told him it would only be a week. Never mind, he says, I need a shovel now, so he took the flat-nosed one.

Well, good for you, I says. Looks like you'll have to write that will over, and he says, the heck with that, let's celebrate. So I took down the end liniment bottle and we had a good drink. That's one thing Martha never knew about—the end liniment bottle. She even mixed them up once by mistake and my insides weren't the same for a month.

Anyway, that's why I recognized that shovel. I might never have noticed if Al Werner hadn't called my attention to it, but there it was, big as life, and there was Pete Marshall, turnin' up big scoopfuls of dirt like he was givin' that shovel some kind of endurance test. Well, I must of made a noise because suddenly Pete turned and saw me. I said, hi, Pete, nice night, ain't it? Then he mumbled somethin' I couldn't make out and kind of

slunk away. I figured he was kind of embarrassed havin' me see him doin' a fool thing like that in the middle of the night, so I just said so long and went on my way.

Well, you'd never believe how Pete Marshall avoided me after that. Once or twice he even crossed the street in town so he wouldn't have to talk to me, and that really hurt, you know? I guess if I was a different kinda fella, I'd just say the heck with him and forget about it, but I'm not that type. I decided I just wasn't goin' to let Pete Marshall snub me like that. My Mom brought her nine kids up to believe in the rule about turnin' the other cheek, and that's what I did with Pete. Every chance I got to talk with him after that, I took it. I even went out of my way sometimes.

'Course, there wasn't much I could talk about. With him paintin' horrible pictures instead of the nice ones I used to like, and the tragedy with the girl and the car wreck and general overall mess he'd gotten into, there wasn't a heck of a lot to talk about, so I just had to speak kinda generally about harmless things.

Once I run into him outside of Al Werner's store, and I said, hi, Pete, how's Monica? I ain't seen her for a long time. Matter of fact, nobody has. Well, he come back

with some remark about her bein' OK and dropped the subject real quick. To tell the truth, I didn't expect him to be too enthusiastic about Monica, so I switched to another topic. I asked him how those sleepin' pills worked.

All right, he says. That's all. That seemed like a pretty skimpy way to end the conversation, so I asked how he was makin' out with that shovel he'd bought here at Al Werner's store. Well, he just kind of squinted at me and walked off. Can you beat that?

For a while, I was pretty upset after that, but I remembered what my Mom taught us and I stuck to my guns. So every time I got the chance I talked with Pete, but it seemed like the conversation was always the same. If I'd had somethin' else to talk about besides his sister's health and the sleepin' pills, and the shovel, you can believe I would of mentioned it but, so help me, I just couldn't seem to work up steam when I got Pete alone. He had a way of freezin' me with that stare.

What's that? Sure, I understand, Mr. Hamey. Your wife'll be plenty mad, but I won't be a minute. I'm gettin' you to the part about the money as fast as I can.

Well, you see, just yesterday I got this call from my other brother up in Portland. Now he's all

excited 'cause he's got a chance to buy this cabin cruiser for a couple thousand dollars. It's a real bargain, the way he describes it, and I believe him, 'cause Jed don't lie or exaggerate.

The only trouble is that Jed's only got about half the money and he wants to know if I can raise a thousand and be partners with him. I says, sure, but you gotta give me some time, and Jed says, no good, you gotta get the money right away. Well, I saw right away it was the chance of a lifetime, so I told him to stall for a day or two and I'd try to borrow it. You don't happen to have an extra thousand, do you, Mr. Hamey?

I didn't think so. Actually, I only know three people with that kind of money. My sister Elsa, who's tight as a clam, is one. Then there's Joe Ray Gassner that I used to go to school with. He's state police commissioner now—and married to a rich girl, too. How about that? Don't some fellas have all the luck? Then there's the third person—Pete Marshall, who must have a real bundle stowed away.

Well, after a while, I decided to give Pete a try, so I hung around the general store until he showed up. He tried to avoid me again, but this time I really stuck to him like a leech—right into the grocery store and down to the end of the

block. All the while I was makin' polite conversation, because you don't just walk up to a fella and ask him for a thousand dollars right off the bat. So I batted the breeze with the usual small talk about Monica, the sleepin' pills, and the shovel. Then, finally, I came right out with it. I explained all about the boat Jed and me wanted to buy and asked if he could see his way clear to lendin' me a thousand.

Well, you'd never believe the look that come over his face when I mentioned the money. It was some kind of smile, let me tell you, only it wasn't a friendly smile. Well, well, he says, so it's a boat, eh? And I guess next month it'll be a car or a trip to Europe? That really threw me. No sir, I says, it's nothin' like that, and you don't have to be so smart about it. Maybe if you can't spare the cash, my friend Commissioner Gassner can.

That took some of the wind out of his sails, let me tell you. The smile on his face disappeared and he just went blank for a minute. Then, suddenly, the smile came back and he says, OK, I'll lend you the money under certain conditions.

Well, naturally, I thought he was gonna mention interest rates, but the conditions didn't have anything to do with that. You could have knocked me over with a feather.

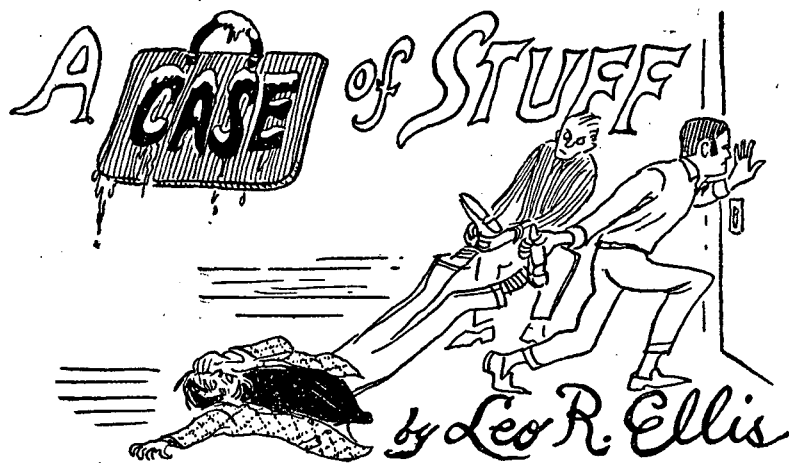
Instead, he says, I'll lend you the money if, number one, you come over to my place tonight alone and pick it up, and, number two, you swear not to tell a soul where you're goin'.

That seemed reasonable, so I agreed. 'Course, I don't see no harm in lettin' one person know, do you? So that's my story about how I'm gonna get my hands on some money tonight.

Oh, yeah, one other thing. You read any Edgar Allen Poe, Mr. Hamey? No? Well, neither do I. That's one question Pete asked that I didn't quite get—and if you ask me, I really think he's come unhinged a little. Anyway, he asked if I read any Poe and I said no. Good, he says. When you come over tonight, I'll read you a story of Poe's called *The Cask of*—and then he mentioned some wine that sounded like a city. Amarillo, I think. That's in Texas, ain't it? Yeah. Anyway, Pete says, we'll go down in our wine cellar and have a drink and read that story, how about that? Fine, I says. I mean, if that's what he wants, I'll go along with it, just so's I get my money. It don't matter to me.

So you get the point, Mr. Hamey? It's just like my Mom used to say. If you turn the other cheek and keep after folks, you'll get taken care of, after all.

That hackneyed oldie, "Handsome is as handsome does," is still applicable—in a pinch.



I SAID, "What stuff?" and Salmon-shirt smashed me in the mouth with his fist.

"You took two hours to get here. Where did you ditch the stuff?" Salmon-shirt telegraphed another punch, and I started to swing but the second goon grabbed me from behind and pinned my arms down. Salmon-shirt worked me over then, upstairs and down. "Where is the stuff—where is the stuff—where is the stuff?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know the answer. I was groggy when the two men dragged me down

the hallway and shoved me into a room.

"We'll contact the boss," Salmon-shirt said to his pal. He turned to me. "You should know better than to pull this on Mike Cormone. You're stupid, fellow. Real stupid." He closed and locked the door.

I must be stupid all right, *but where stupid?*

These goons couldn't have been sore because I'd picked up a couple of girls. The girls were nothing, fluff, a pair of wrens with built-in giggles instead of brains. It must be something else. My head cleared

some and I looked around. The room was a library with book-filled shelves. Ornamental bars covered the window, but the bars were solid. This place was a real prison.

I stumbled around the huge desk and sank down in the chair with a groan. I knew nothing for sure now except that I was Vance Marle, twenty-four and single. Certainly this mess didn't concern my job; I was nothing but a flunky at Monette Imported Motors. Of course they didn't call me a flunky; Monette Imported Motors were too high class to hire flunkys. At Monette the mechanics are Service Engineers, the tune-up man an Aligning Specialist, and the salesmen are Automotive Consultants.

Shortly after noon I'd been told to deliver Mike Cormone's car to the King's Court Beach Club. Cormone owned a Ferrari 275, GTB, a long greyhound of a car, strictly class, a genuine Gran Turismo, the granddaddy of all those fastbacks Detroit has spewed out like chaff.

I left the garage as a flunky, but once I had driven to my room and had changed my uniform for slacks and a sports jacket, I became Vance Marle, wealthy playboy, bon vivant and dashing young man-about-town.

The drive to the beach ended too quickly. I left the Ferrari in the parking lot and went around to

the front. When three members entered, I fell in step behind them and the doorman admitted me as a guest.

The King's Court was an exclusive club, in that a member must have a sizable bank account before he was allowed to join. The lobby resembled a Hollywood version of a Moorish castle, with carved pillars, ceiling high satin drapes, mosaic flooring, and a bunch of life-sized statues set around the walls.

I sauntered to the desk as though I belonged. "I wish to see Mister Mike Cormone," I said. "Mister Cormone is expecting me. I have his car outside."

While they paged Cormone I walked over and sank into a leather chair. The thing swallowed me up like quicksand. A moment later a voice spoke, and I looked up to see a heavyset Oriental in a white mess jacket.

"Will you step this way, please," the man said in perfect English.

I followed him out of the lobby and into a narrow passageway, where he turned and asked, "Do you work for Mister Cormone?"

"I have his car," I said cautiously. The man nodded. "Mister Cormone has left the club and I do not expect him to return today. No doubt you will now take the car to his home?"



I had been to the Cormone place once before, up by Malibu. I considered this a break; it would give me another chance to drive the Ferrari. "Yes, I intend to drive up to his home," I said.

The man nodded again. "You will wait for a moment please. There will be a package for you to deliver."

I bent over a match to light a cigarette. When I looked up, the passageway was empty. I walked back, leaned against the doorway and gazed out into the lobby until

I heard footsteps behind me. The Oriental had returned with an attache case.

"You will give this case only to Mister Cormone or his private secretary."

I took the case and the plastic handle felt icy cold.

"Follow me please." The man led me down the passageway, past a closed door and a row of garbage cans, and on to the outside where he pointed to a corner of the building. "The parking lot is around there. Remember, you are to deliver

the case personally," he cautioned.

Once behind the wheel of the Ferrari, I forgot about the attache case. I had a genuine 275 GTB under me and I meant to make the most of the opportunity. The two girls were an afterthought; I picked them up for show, and we cruised the streets for an hour and a half before I dropped them off and headed north for Malibu.

The Cormone place lies back up in a canyon, two miles off the Pacific Coast Highway. The house clings to the mountainside and is surrounded by a high, chain-link fence. A locked gate bars the end of the entry road and I was stuck until I remembered the telephone in the gatepost. A man's voice answered my ring, and after I had identified myself the gate swung open and I drove up the long, curved driveway.

A man stood outside the front door. He was a young, hard-eyed fellow in a salmon-colored shirt who identified himself as Mike Cormone's secretary. He led me upstairs and down a hallway to an office. I handed over the attache case and he disappeared.

A few moments later Salmon-shirt came back with another man. This was when he demanded to know where the *stuff* was. When I didn't know the answer, he had beaten me.

Now that I had reviewed the events, I could draw one conclusion. Whatever Salmon-shirt had expected to find in the attache case hadn't been there. I hadn't opened the case and the two girls hadn't touched the thing. This left me in the clear and I meant to explain this to Salmon-shirt if I had the chance; otherwise, I would come out swinging. At six-foot-one, and with some boxing experience in college, I could do better than play punching bag.

A key scraped in the lock, and I crossed the room on the soft carpet and flattened myself against the wall, ready to fight or argue, whichever the case might be. I had to do neither, for a young girl in a tailored suit walked through the door and into the room. I grabbed her shoulder from behind and clapped my hand over her mouth. "Don't scream," I whispered.

She rolled her eyes back at me and nodded, so I cautiously took my hand from her mouth. She didn't look the type to panic—a medium-sized girl with medium proportions and a healthy, fresh-scrubbed look about her that didn't fit the surroundings. She turned and regarded me with a pair of level, grey eyes. "What do you want here?"

I wanted out. The unlocked door and the girl gave me opportunity,

so I jammed my hand into my jacket pocket to simulate a gun. "Who else is in this wing of the house?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Only Burt and Hampton. They're both in the office."

"Burt is Cormone's secretary?"

The girl nodded, I jabbed the jacket pocket at her and said, "Lead me out of the house. Don't try any tricks."

The girl looked down at my pocket, but she didn't crumble. She didn't even seem to tremble as we left the library and walked down the hallway on tiptoe. The office door remained closed, and the only sound I heard was my own heart-beat. She led me down the stairs, through the kitchen and out into a rear courtyard.

The girl stopped and turned. "What now?" she asked calmly.

I looked around helplessly. I couldn't take the Ferrari, it was too conspicuous. Then I saw a car bumper through an open garage door. I had two choices: car theft or kidnapping. If I left the girl, she would set up an alarm, and I had two miles of canyon road between me and the Coast Highway. I chose kidnapping and used my jacket pocket again. "We'll take your car. Get going."

The girl didn't argue, but walked into the garage and climbed behind the wheel of a compact sedan. I

slid into the seat beside her. "Take it easy on the way out," I warned.

Halfway down the drive, the girl said, "I'm Carla Woodson."

The calm introduction caught me off guard. "I'm Vance Marle," I said automatically.

"I'm Mrs. Cormone's companion and secretary. If your strong-arm tactics concern Mister Cormone, you are wasting your time. I know nothing of Mike Cormone's activities."

"The less I know about Mike Cormone the better," I said. "I came up here to deliver a car and an attache case, and the next thing I knew I'd been worked over and locked up." I looked ahead and groaned when I saw the locked gate. "Does that thing have to be opened from the house?"

Carla glanced up to a small plastic box clipped to the sun visor. I took it down, pressed a button, and the gate swung open. "Wonderful inventions, these electronic gadgets," I said as she drove through. I punched a second button and the gate closed behind us.

We didn't speak on the way down the canyon road, and when we reached the Coast Highway Carla made a left turn and slipped into the traffic stream without an order from me.

As we headed for Los Angeles I relaxed some, but I was still shaken.

It was no secret around Monette Motors that Mike Cormone had been a big-time racketeer back east. They pretended our prize customer had turned legit, but I had noticed the man traveled with a couple of bodyguards. Salmon-shirt had said he would contact Cormone about the case. If it were that important, then I was in deep trouble.

I had kept an eye on the traffic behind, but we had entered Santa Monica before the black snout of the Ferrari poked out around a line of cars and into the high-speed lane. "Step on it," I ordered. "Turn off at the next intersection."

Carla shook her head. "I won't," she said stubbornly. "I don't want to get mixed up in—"

"Turn!" I yelled.

Most dames will panic when you shout at them. Carla didn't; she slipped the compact into the right lane and made the turn so sharply it slammed me against the wheel. The Ferrari managed to make the turn behind us.

Carla followed my orders without protest. She squealed around corners and sped down side streets, but the black car hung on our tail.

The compact rode the right lane as we approached a main intersection and the traffic light turned red. Carla braked to a stop near the curb when the cross traffic blocked

our path. The Ferrari slid up beside us, then nosed in and stopped. The doors flew open and two men jumped out, each one with his hand shoved inside his coat. I closed my eyes and prepared to die.

"Hang on," Carla cried.

I felt the compact leap backward, and with another cry Carla cramped the wheel over and shot the little car up a driveway. We missed the gas pumps by an inch as she roared through the service station and down the other drive, into the cross-street traffic. Brakes squealed, horns blared, but somehow Carla managed to sandwich us between two cars without piling up.

"Thanks for the escape," I said feebly.

"Don't gloat. Burt and Hampton meant to kill you. They won't give up that easily."

I knew that, but I felt grateful for the reprieve. It would take the goons time to get back in the car and pick up the chase. By then I hoped we could find a place to hide. "Pull in there," I said, and pointed to a car wash ahead.

Carla drove into the place and we jumped out. Two attendants pushed the compact ahead, until the chain caught hold and dragged the car into the tunnel. Carla and I hid behind a hedge and watched the black Ferrari cruise by and

pass on, gone forever, hopefully.

I heaved a sigh of relief and turned to Carla. "I don't get it," I said. "I kidnap you and force you to help me escape, then you turn around and save me—why?"

Carla lowered her eyes. "I'm not sure," she said in a low voice. "Maybe I felt sorry for you. Maybe I hate Burt and Hampton." She looked away. "Then maybe I just acted like a female."

I offered the girl a cigarette. She refused and I lighted up. "Whatever the reason, you gave me a chance to get out of town. I can call a cab here and head for the airport." I put out my hand. "Good-bye, and thanks again for everything."

Carla looked up. Her face was hard and her grey eyes snapped sparks. "So it is good-bye, just like *that*. You take off into the wide blue yonder and leave me to face the music. What do you suppose Mike Cormone will do to me when he learns I jumped the fence?"

Now I looked away. Carla had been a means for me to escape, something to use at the moment. It hadn't occurred to me before that the girl had marked herself for the morgue when she snatched me away from Burt and Hampton. Now I was stuck.

I studied my cigarette tip. "You could come with me, I suppose," I said slowly. "I'll head for my home-

town in Nebraska. It isn't much of a place, a small burg—" My voice trailed off.

"Well," Carla said with heavy sarcasm. "That was certainly a hearty invitation." She folded her arms and glared across the street.

The compact finally came out of the tunnel. I paid the bill and climbed inside. "Where to now?" I asked, trying to break the tension.

"To my apartment first. I'll need some clothes for this trip. I don't suppose the natives in Nebraska run around naked."

"No," I said with a little ha-ha. "It does get pretty cold there in the winter."

Things had become more complicated, but there wasn't much I could do about it now. I wanted to get on a plane and out of town as soon as possible, but Carla had blocked that plan. We did reach West Los Angeles without seeing the Ferrari, and I breathed easier when Carla turned into a side street. She slowed down beside some palm trees, then stepped on the gas and sped away. "That was Hampton in front of my apartment house. Burt must have dropped him off while he went looking for us."

"Oh brother!" I moaned. "Find a bar. I need a drink and a chance to think this thing out."

Carla found a small bar. The place was almost empty, and once

in a booth, with a bourbon in my hand, I could start to collect my thoughts. Carla sat across the table, behind a martini. She remained cool and silent, which was fine, for right now I didn't want to talk.

I had taken only a couple of sips when Carla's voice broke in on my train of thought. "We've been thrown together, whether you like it or not," she said archly. "Since I've been dragged into this, I think I'm entitled to know what sort of mess I'm in. Now will you please give me a few facts, Mister Marle?"

I sighed and started at the beginning. I told her how I had come to Los Angeles three months before, with the sole object of becoming rich. I told her of my flunky job at Monette Imported Motors, and admitted I had taken the position only because it was a chance to meet rich and influential people. "Wealthy people own expensive automobiles," I said. "They might do me some good."

"Like Mike Cormone?"

"Mike Cormone's money spends as easily as the next man's," I snapped.

"Well, at least we know your ethics."

"You took Cormone's money. You worked for him."

Carla opened her mouth to protest, then seemed to change her mind. "I see no point in pursuing

the matter," she said. "Now tell me what happened today."

I explained how I had been ordered to take the Ferrari to the King's Court Beach Club, and how Cormone had not been there. "Then this Oriental in a mess jacket gave me the attache case to deliver and—"

"Describe the man."

I shrugged. "Rather short, heavy-set, moon-faced—you know the old saying, all Orientals look the same to—"

"He gave you the case," Carla said impatiently. "You put it into the Ferrari and then drove up to Malibu."

"Not exactly," I admitted, and told how I had picked up the two girls. "They didn't touch the case, I'm sure of that. The three of us sat in the front seat, and the car is only built for two passengers."

"It sounds very cozy. But then you did finally drive up to Malibu."

I nodded and told how Burt had taken the case, how he had punched me and how the two men had locked me in the library. "You walked in and I saw a chance to get away." I spread my hands. "That's all I know, so help me."

Carla tapped her fingernail on the tabletop. "You must have guessed what was supposed to be in the case."

"I know Cormone was in the rackets back east. He is supposed

to be legit now, but I know he owns an importing firm here in town. I'll take a wild guess and say that it was either dope, or smuggled diamonds."

"Why diamonds?"

"Dope then," I said impatiently. "I didn't handle any, there was never any dope inside the case I delivered."

"You *thought* there was." Carla frowned at her glass as she twirled it between her fingertips. "I worked for Mrs. Cormone," she said slowly. "The woman is a semi-invalid and Cormone thinks she needs constant attention. I never had much contact with the man himself, but in the six months I was in the house I was convinced of one thing. Mike Cormone is still in the rackets. He's a dangerous man, Vance."

I touched my swollen lips. "Burt convinced me of that."

"I had to excuse myself every time I accepted a pay check. I wanted to leave, maybe that's why I helped you to escape. Maybe that's why I put myself in this situation." She suddenly reached across the table and clutched my hand. "But what do we do now, Vance? Do we run until Cormone's men hunt us down and shoot us like rabbits?"

I would have run if I were alone, but I wasn't alone anymore. Now I had Carla to consider. I took a drink and studied the tabletop.

"Well, Vance? What do we do?"

Carla expected me to come up with an answer and running away didn't sound like a good answer. The girl was dependent on me. Carla still held my hand and I liked the feeling. She expected me to protect her so I had to come up with something better than hiding out. I squared my shoulders and took a slug of bourbon. "It looks as though the Oriental is the key man to our problem," I said with an effort to keep my voice steady. "I guess it is up to me to go back to the King's Court Club and get some straight answers from him."

Carla's grip tightened on my hand. "That's dangerous, Vance. Are you sure you want to go?"

"Hell, no, I don't want to go." I looked away so she couldn't see my face. "But I don't want us gunned down either, Carla."

"We could go to the police."

"Sure," I said sarcastically. "I could tell the police that my life is in danger because Mike Cormone thought I hijacked a case of his dope. 'Is that so?' they'll say. 'Then we'll throw you in jail for running narcotics.'" I snorted. "The cops aren't bright, Carla. They don't go after big shots like Cormone, he's too smart for them. They'd rather grab a little fish like me."

"Very well, if that's how you feel," Carla said quietly. She pulled

her hand back, picked up her purse and slid out of the booth. "I'll take you to the club, but give me a few minutes to freshen up before we leave."

I took advantage of her absence to order another bourbon, a double. I needed all the courage I could drink. The last place I really wanted to go was the King's Court Club.

On the way down the freeway Carla closed the door on my last chance to bug out. She said she had been to the club several times and was known there as a member of the Cormone household. I spent the rest of the ride trying to figure out what I would do when I did get inside the club.

The doorman admitted the two of us without question. He told Carla that Mike Cormone was not at the club, and he gave me as much notice as though I had been her poodle.

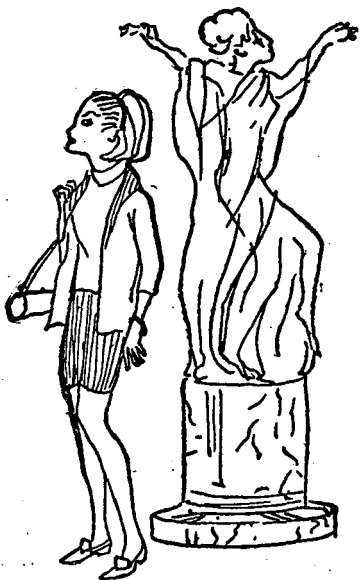
The lobby seemed to have changed since my last visit. It had lost all the warmth, and had turned as cold and as forbidding as a mausoleum. Every person in the place looked sinister. I saw Orientals everywhere—Orientals with dustpans, Orientals with trays of drinks, and they all seemed to slither around in an ominous manner.

"Do you see the man?" Carla asked.

"This is like trying to find a single fortune cookie in Hong Kong." I led Carla over to the wall and put her beside a bronze dancing girl. "You stay here," I told her. "I'll start in the passageway where the man gave me the attache case."

The passageway was empty and I walked past the closed door and by the garbage cans. Outside, I noticed a trash bin against the building. The Oriental could have hidden the case here.

I returned and found Carla still beside the dancing girl. "No luck," I told her. "I'll try in another direction." There were four fat men playing handball in the gymnasium. I found no Orientals around the



plunge, and none in the rubbing room. I poked my head into the Turkish bath with no better luck.

My spirits sank as I went back to the lobby. This had been a lost cause from the start, the whole idea was hopeless. The Oriental wouldn't have stayed around after he gave me the phony case. Now I had to go back and tell Carla to start running again.

I crossed the lobby with my head down. When I reached the wall, I looked up. The dancing girl stood alone—Carla was gone.

My stomach flipped and I broke out in a cold sweat. They had grabbed her, had taken her away. I fought down a frantic desire to run, and forced myself to think. Maybe Carla had followed a suspect. I held to this hope as I went to the cocktail lounge. No Carla, neither was she in the coffee shop nor the billiard room.

I hurried into the empty dining room, where I poked around under the tablecloths, half expecting to find Carla's body on the floor. I had thought I was alone in the room until I saw a man near the doorway, watching me. It was not my Oriental. He turned away quickly, but I knew I was being tailed by Mike Cormone's men.

I was in a frenzy when I rushed out of the dining room and across the lobby. When I passed a leather

chair, a man rose and followed. I leaned against a pillar and looked back. The man in the dining room was nowhere to be seen, but the second tail had busied himself lighting a cigarette.

Freedom lay beyond the front door, where the California sunshine streamed down on the sidewalk, but Carla might still be here in the club, so I forced my legs to carry me back to the bronze dancing girl.

My palms felt sticky when I rubbed them down my pants leg. If Cormone's men had grabbed Carla, then I had to find the Oriental. The man in the mess jacket was my only hope; with him, I might have a bargaining force to get Carla back.

The passageway was empty when I entered, just as it had been before. I stopped and reenacted the scene between myself and the Oriental. I lighted a cigarette as I had done earlier. The Oriental must have gone outside to get the attache case. I walked to the door and gazed out into the lobby. I turned the way I had done when the Oriental had returned. I reached out and pretended to take the case; my arm froze in mid-air when I remembered how the plastic handle had felt icy cold to my hand.

Why had the case been cold?

"Because the Oriental kept it in

a refrigerator," I said aloud and then shook my head. The handle had been more than refrigerator cold.

The answer hit me and I hurried down the passageway and pulled open the closed door. A wave of warm, humid air struck me in the face as I entered. The big kitchen swarmed with Oriental help, so it took some time to eliminate each one. When I found my moon-faced man wasn't one of the crew, I pushed on back to the rear wall of the kitchen.

I pulled open a door, but the room contained only vegetables and prepared salads. This was the cooler, so I hurried on to the second door. I pulled it open and entered.

The heavy door closed behind me with a dull thud. It struck me that the utter, dead silence inside the freezer was more ominous than the bitter cold. The narrow room had shelving along one wall, with each shelf piled with frosted packages. A row of cartons, stacked three feet high, stood across the back wall. I saw the words *Imported Crab Meat* stenciled on one carton, then I literally froze.

A chunky, heavysset figure rose from behind the cartons. The Oriental held an automatic, and kept the muzzle pointed at my middle as he stepped over the cartons. "So once again we meet."

"What did you do with Carla?"

The man ignored my question. "I was most disappointed to see you enter the club again. I had hoped you were dead. I expected Mister Cormone to kill you when he discovered the case did not contain the merchandise he had paid for." The man smiled faintly. "It is of small consequence, however; in fact, your complete disappearance will remove any suspicion in my direction entirely. This is an excellent spot for an execution. The walls are thick, the insulated door will prevent the shot from being heard outside."

"Where's Carla?" I asked stubbornly.

Again the Oriental did not answer. "We also have an ideal place for storage," he said, and indicated the space behind the cartons. "Your body will freeze, and will keep well until I can remove you at a more convenient time."

The man's arm stiffened, his finger tightened on the trigger. I tensed for a desperate leap, but before I could move the door was flung open and my feet were jerked out from under me. A man yelled as I pitched forward, and I heard shots fired as I was dragged from the freezer, face down.

I dug frost from my eyes to watch the action through a maze of milling legs. The man I had seen

in the dining room had an armlock on the Oriental as he dragged him from the freezer. Someone hauled me to my feet. I turned and saw the man who had followed me in the lobby. I heard a feminine voice and a girl fought her way through the crowd.

"Carla," I said, "you're safe!"

She grabbed my hand. "Yes, Vance, and so are you. These are county and federal narcotics men. I'm Carla Woodson, deputy with the sheriff's office."

"Carla, you're a cop?"

"I'm a cop, Vance. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before, but I was working undercover on this case. I was planted as Mrs. Cormone's secretary to keep an eye on Mike Cormone."

"How about that?" I said, dazed. "I kidnapped a cop."

Carla nodded. "From what you told me, I could figure out what had happened. Mike Cormone was supposed to receive a shipment of dope here at the club. For some reason, Cormone left the club before the delivery was made. When you showed up with Cormone's car, the

agent saw a chance to double-cross Mike Cormone with a phony case and let you take the blame."

I groaned. "And I helped him out by stalling an hour and a half before I drove to Malibu. I'm through with dames."

Carla squeezed my hand. "When I found you knew the Oriental agent by sight, I called my office from the bar. They told me to bring you back to the club, that they would set up a trap."

I stared at her. "You deliberately led me into the jaws of death."

Carla shook her head. "I did not, that was your decision. You made up your mind to come back here, even when you didn't know you would have protection." She gripped my hand tighter. "I'm awfully proud of you, Vance."

"Yeah, that was my idea, wasn't it?" I relaxed and grinned. "Say, forget that remark I made about cops not being too bright." I took Carla's arm and steered her toward the kitchen door. "I don't want my girl to be too bright. Besides, you won't be on duty twenty-four hours a day."



It's a stoic bird, indeed, that waits patiently for the shell to break ere he can fly.

I was lying in bed, reading, when the doorbell rang shortly past four on a Tuesday afternoon.

I laid the book, a contemporary bestseller, on the nightstand, got up slowly and put on my robe and slippers. Then I walked through the apartment to the front door and opened it.

"We'd like to have a few words with you, if you don't mind, Dave," Beauchamp said. His thick eyebrows were knit together, his mouth was pursed at the corners, and there was concern in his gray-green eyes.

"Not at all," I answered. I stood aside, and the two of them came in past me. I indicated the well-worn, olive-green furniture in the living-room. "Sit down, won't you?"

They sat side by side on the sofa.

METHOD OF OPERATION

Ned Beauchamp, the city parole officer, and Detective Lieutenant Orin Chándek were standing in the hallway.

I frowned slightly. "Hello, Mr. Beauchamp," I said, and to Chándek, "Lieutenant."



Chandek crossed his legs, letting one foot sway back and forth as if he were listening to some private musical selection. His iron-gray hair stuck up at odd angles from his scalp, his brown suit fit badly as always, and his tie was crooked at the knot. He took the perennial briar pipe from the handkerchief pocket of his suit coat and stuck it firmly, unlit, into the side of his mouth. I stood in front of them, waiting quietly.

Beauchamp said finally, "You have a seat, too, Dave."

Obediently, I went to the easy chair by the window. "Well," I said, and got a smile onto my lips.

Beauchamp's eyes seemed to be searching my face. Chandek cleared his throat, but didn't say anything.

I leaned forward on the easy chair. "Is something the matter?" I asked.

"We just talked to Mr. Tabor at Pacific Tool and Die," Beauchamp said. "He tells me you took the day off today."

"I wouldn't exactly call it taking the day off."

"You called in sick."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I picked up the bug somewhere, I guess. My stomach was pretty queasy this morning."

"You saw a doctor, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?" he asked sharply. "I didn't think it was necessary," I told him. "Besides, I can't afford to spend money on doctors." I made a deprecating gesture. "They don't exactly pay me a fortune at Pacific, Mr. Beauchamp."

"What *did* you do today, Dave?"

"Slept, mostly," I said. "They say that sleep is the best cure for the bug, and I guess they're right. I just woke up a little while ago, and I feel quite a bit better."

"You didn't go out?"

"No, sir."

"Not at all?"

"Not once."

"Any visitors?"

"No."

"Phone calls?"

"No," I said, "No calls. Listen, Mr. Beauchamp, why are you asking all these questions? Has something happened?"

"Something's happened, all right," Chandek said, speaking for the first time. His eyes were obsidian-hard. "At two-fifteen this afternoon, a man wearing a white stocking mask walked into the West Valley Savings and Loan, stuck a gun in the manager's face, and walked out again with twenty-two thousand dollars in a white canvas sack."

I came up out of the easy chair. "Now wait a minute! You don't think—"

"What are we supposed to think?" Beauchamp asked, but his voice was equable. "White stocking mask, white canvas sack, a savings and loan company. It's got Dave Vanyer written all over it."

"Damn it, I—"

"Sit down, Vanyer," Chandek said. His voice was cold. "Sit down, and we'll talk about it."

I took a long, slow breath. "You're not going to involve me in this. I'm through with that kind of thing. I've been out nine months now, and I haven't even so much as jaywalked. I report every month to Mr. Beauchamp here, just like I'm supposed to, and today was the first day of work I've missed at Pacific since I started there. Ask Mr. Tabor about me. He'll tell you."

"Tabor likes you," Beauchamp said quietly. "He has no complaints."

"All right, then," I said. "What more do you want?"

Chandek said, "We want to know why it is a savings and loan company is held up by a man using the exact method of operation of the White Stocking Bandit—your method of operation, Vanyer—on the one day you decide to get sick. Suppose you answer that one."

I didn't say anything.

"Well?" he prodded.

I moistened my lips. "Whoever it

was might have heard of the White Stocking Bandit at some time or other."

"And decided to follow in his footsteps?" Chandek smiled faintly. "Come on, Vanyer. It's been more than eight years since your little one-man crime wave."

I said, "The use of a white stocking mask and a white canvas bag isn't exactly the most novel holdup method ever devised. The stocking makes an effective disguise, and the canvas sack is a simple way of carrying the money. Anybody could have thought of it."

"You're talking coincidences now, Vanyer," Chandek said. "I don't like coincidences."

I ran a hand through my hair. "Look, Lieutenant, you must think I'm pretty damned stupid."

He watched me with his obsidian eyes.

"I would have to be just that to have pulled a job like this one. In fact, I would have to be the stupidest man alive to take a day off work, hold up a savings and loan company wearing a white stocking mask and carrying a white canvas sack, and then sit around here and wait for you to pick me up."

Chandek continued to smile, as if he were harboring some enjoyable secret of his own. "But you're not stupid, are you, Vanyer?"

"No," I said levelly. "I'm not

stupid. At least not that stupid."

"Beauchamp here agrees with you. He thinks you're a very smart man. He thinks you're too smart to try a trick like this and hope to get away with it."

"But you don't think so, do you, Lieutenant?"

"On the contrary," he said.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that you might have thought it a smart thing to do, holding up that savings and loan company as the White Stocking Bandit. The mere fact that it appears on the surface to be a dumb trick might have convinced us that you couldn't have done it. Was that your reasoning, Vanyer?"

"I told you, I was home in bed all day."

"But you can't prove it."

"Can you prove otherwise?"

"Maybe."

"Like hell."

"You've got neighbors. Maybe one of them saw you go out this afternoon."

"This is a ground floor apartment," I said. "It opens on an alleyway in back. If I had left, which I didn't, nobody would have seen me." I met his eyes steadily. "And if you'd like to search the place, you're welcome to it. You won't find anything."

The smile was gone from Chandek's lips now. He took the pipe

from his mouth and pointed the stem at me. "All right, Vanyer," he said. "Let's not play any more games. I don't like playing games with ex-cons. I want the truth, and I want it now."

"Go to hell," I said heatedly.

Chandek started up from the sofa. Beauchamp reached over and put a hand on his arm. "Take it



easy, Roy," he said. "If Dave's innocent on this, he's got a right to be sore."

Chandek sat down again. "He's guilty as sin," he said in measured tones.

Beauchamp said to me, "Look, Dave, I'd like to believe you didn't have anything to do with this West Valley job. You haven't given me any trouble in the past eight

months, and I think you might really be trying to make a go of it. But we can't overlook the obvious. The circumstantial evidence is pretty strong, you've got to admit."

"You just said the key word," I told him. "Circumstantial."

"Maybe so," Chandek said, "but it's more than enough to get a conviction."

"Are you arresting me on this?" I asked in a controlled voice.

"What do you think?"

I clamped my teeth tightly together and didn't say anything.

Chandek got on his feet. "You're under arrest on suspicion of armed robbery, Vanyer. It's my duty to inform you of your rights . . ."

I sat there, listening to the rest of it. When Chandek finished, I stood.

Beauchamp was looking up at me; his eyes held a mixture of emotions. "I'm sorry, Dave," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "You're sorry."

"Get dressed, Vanyer," Chandek said. "We're going downtown."

They booked me and relieved me of my possessions at the main desk at Police Headquarters, and then Chandek took me upstairs to the Detective Squad Room. He sat me down in a chair in his office.

I said, "I want to call my lawyer."

"Sure you do. That figures."

"Now," I said.

He smiled. "You're just like all the rest, Vanyer. You put on a nice act until we get you down here, and then the first thing you do is scream for your lawyer."

"Innocent men have a right to counsel, too, you know."

"Sure they do." He studied me for a moment. "All right," he said finally. "Who's your lawyer?"

"Jake Tatloff."

"That shyster? Well, it figures."

"What you think of him doesn't matter one small damn to me," I said. "Do I get to call him or not?"

He shoved his phone at me. Then he stood up and went out and slammed the door behind him.

I made the call, and a half-hour later Jake arrived. He was a soft-looking man with round Santa Claus eyes and a jovial manner, but he could be rock-hard when he got into court. He had defended me eight years ago, and had built a strong case on my behalf, but the evidence Chandek and the police had compiled was insurmountable. I had been convicted.

He came into Chandek's office and we shook hands. He said to Chandek, "What's all this about, Lieutenant?"

"Didn't Vanyer tell you that on the phone?"

"He told me," Jake said, "but I

would like to hear it from you."

Chandek sighed, but he went over it for Jake. Soon after that, Chandek began to interrogate me further. He badgered and harped at me mercilessly for two hours, but Jake's presence kept him from overstepping himself. He gave up finally, when he saw the questioning was getting him nowhere. He had me taken down into the basement and locked in one of the detention cells.

The following afternoon Jake came around and they left us alone in one of the conference rooms. We had been in there about five minutes when the door opened and Chandek and Ned Beauchamp came inside.

Jake swiveled around in his chair. "This is privileged communication, if you don't mind," he said in his soft voice. "I have another ten minutes with my client."

Chandek ignored him. He was looking at me, and his face was grim. "Okay, Vanyer," he said reluctantly. "You're free to go."

I stared at him. "What?"

Beauchamp was wearing the faintest of smiles. He said, "You're out of it now, Dave."

Jake had gotten to his feet. "You caught the man who robbed the West Valley Savings and Loan, Lieutenant?" he asked Chandek, and then added pointedly, "The

real holdup man, whoever he is?"

"No," Chandek answered.

"Then . . . ?"

"Our current White Stocking Bandit, whoever he is, just held up another savings and loan company," Beauchamp explained. "In the Parkridge Shopping Center, not more than an hour ago."

"Well, well, well," Jake said. His Santa Claus eyes were dancing. "I believe you owe Mr. Vanyer an apology, Lieutenant."

Chandek didn't say anything.

"I told you I didn't have anything to do with this," I said. "I've been straight ever since I got out."

"All right," Chandek admitted then. "We made a mistake. You can understand how that could happen under the circumstances."

"Oh, of course we can, Lieutenant," Jake said with heavy sarcasm.

"Never mind, Jake," I told him. "It's done with now. I don't have any hard feelings. The Lieutenant was just doing his job."

He shrugged.

I nodded to Chandek, and then went to where Beauchamp was standing. We shook hands. "Thanks for your confidence in me, Mr. Beauchamp."

He nodded. "Keep your nose clean, Dave."

"Sure," I said. "You can bet on

that. I'm on the right road now."

Some time later, in Jake's downtown office, I was sitting on his leather couch, drinking his French brandy and relaxing.

Jake, at his desk, unwrapped a cigar and regarded me thoughtfully. "Sometimes I think you're too smart for your own good, Vanyer," he said.

I smiled. "Really? And why is that?"

"This whole thing could have backfired on you."

"Nonsense."

"Suppose I had refused to help you?"

"Then I wouldn't have gone through with the plan," I said. "But I know you, Jake. You like money too well."

"It was a crazy scheme."

"Not at all," I told him. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Suppose I hadn't been able to find Malloy? Or someone like him?"

"With your contacts? Come on, Jake."

"Well, I still say you're damned lucky."

"Sure, I'll admit that. And I'm not going to press my luck, if that was worrying you. There won't be any more White Stocking Bandit robberies." I sipped at my brandy. "By the way, how much did Malloy get from that Parkridge savings and loan this afternoon?"

"Sixteen thousand."

"You and Malloy split that between you," I told him. "Eight thousand is not a bad price for your part. Besides, I took all the risks."

He chewed his cigar. "I guess you did, at that."

I leaned back against the cool leather of the couch, closed my eyes and thought about the twenty-two thousand I had gotten from the West Valley holdup. I would have to wait until my parole was up—two years—before I could spend it, of course. But that was all right; eight years in prison had taught me how to be patient. Besides, Jake had opened a bank account for me in a neighboring state, and the interest on twenty-two thousand dollars over a two-year period is quite handsome, you know.



Perhaps it is true that one cannot take everything with him—without assistance.



I guess even the toughest of us has some kind of weakness—something he won't admit to anybody else, and maybe not even to himself. With me, it's sentiment, espe-

cially when it comes to love; sad love. I'm a sucker for a sad love story. They break me up completely.

You take what happened to Denver Eddie and Sweet Alice, for instance. That story gave me the glooms for a week. What's worse, it cost me a couple hundred bucks, maybe more. I'll never forget the night I heard it. I'd like to, but I can't.

I was on my way to the regular weekly get-together of the exiles' club. We call it that, anyway. There are about two dozen of us here in Rio, I guess, and we're all what you might call expatriates. We like Brazil fine, you understand, but most of us are here for the sake of our health. I mean, it's kind of unhealthy in Leavenworth and Sing Sing and places like that, and even unhealthier in gas chambers and electric chairs, which is where some of us would have gone if we had stayed obvious. Anyhow,

by Jonathan Craig

we've formed a kind of club, and once a week we get together at a private dining room in a hotel on Copacabana Beach. Mostly we just have a few drinks and swap yarns about the days when we were all back in the States.

We've got some fine boys in our little exiles' club, and some fine women too. People like Fig Lip and Johnny the Knock and Charley One and Charley Two, and Millie from Milwaukee and Slow Sue, and Willie the Weep and Seldom Seen and the Indian and several others. Me they call the Scholar, because I finished almost two years at Hanley Miller High School.

Well, as I said, I was on my way to one of our little get-togethers. It wasn't quite dark yet, and I was just ambling along, enjoying the cool of the evening. Then I noticed this woman standing under a street lamp, eyeing me pretty closely, as if she were sizing me up. She was about sixty, I guessed, but sixty or not, I never saw a more beautiful woman in my life. At first I figured it must be the fading light, but when I got close I saw that it wasn't. She was just plain beautiful.

"Excuse me, young man," she said as I drew close. "May I speak to you a moment?" She had a beautiful voice, too—like a young

woman's voice—so soft and light.

"Yes, ma'am?" I said, and waited.

"I have to trust someone with something very important," she said. Her eyes were sheened, as if she had been crying. "You have a good face. I think I can trust you. Would you do a lady a favor?"

"It depends," I said.

"It'll take you only a minute. Please say yes."

"What's the favor?" I asked.

She nodded toward a house across the street. "Someone very dear to me is over there," she said. "He's—dead. He'll be buried in the morning." She paused. "He's lying in state. The casket's open, and—and I want you to put something in it."

"You mean you want something to be buried with the body?"

"Yes. It's something that belongs to him." Her voice had begun to tremble a little. "I know how strange all this must sound to you, but it just must be buried with him. It just must be."

"Why not put it there yourself?"

"I tried, when—when I said good-bye to him."

"Said good-bye?"

"When I looked at him for the last time, just a few minutes ago. But I have arthritis. I couldn't move my arm well enough to do it."

"I see." This noncommittally.
"Please say you'll do it for me. I'll thank you all the days of my life."

"It's that important, is it?"

"It's the most important thing in the world to me. Please, *please* say

you will," she begged pitifully.

"Just put it in the casket? That's all?"

"Yes. And make sure it's far enough down so that no one else will be able to see it and take it out again."

"What if somebody sees me do it? There might be trouble."

"There's no one sitting with the body. There's hardly even been anyone in there to see it. I've been the only one to go in or out in the last twenty minutes."

"What is it you want me to put in there?"

Her eyes lighted up, but there were tears in them too. "You'll do it, then?" she said, reaching into her purse. "Oh, bless you!"

"I'm still thinking about it," I said. For some reason, I was beginning to feel a little nervous.

She took a small, round, metal object from her purse and stood gazing at it for a long moment, as if she were reluctant to give it up. Then she held it out to me quickly, her eyes averted.

"Here," she said. "And please—be sure it's down in the casket far enough not to be seen."

I turned the object over in my fingers. In the failing light it looked like silver. But it was too heavy for silver—a round, thin case about the size of a lady's compact, but much thinner, and with a



beveled edge that seemed to be sealed all the way around.

"What is it?" I asked.

She just looked at me, smiling, and then compressed her lips, as if she were trying very hard not to cry.

I shrugged. "All right," I said, slipping the case—if that's what it was—into my pocket. "I'll put it in the casket for you."

"Bless you," she said.

"No trouble at all," I said, and turned to cross the street toward the house she had indicated.

She'd been right about there being no one sitting with the body. The shabby livingroom was empty, with the only light coming from half a dozen big candles spaced around the casket. I got the casket between myself and the front window, in case the woman was watching me from across the street, and took out the metal object she'd given me for a closer look.

It wasn't silver; it was platinum. Even sold to a fence for a quarter of its worth—which is what someone in my position would have to do—it would bring *at least* two hundred dollars.

I leaned over the casket and looked down at the face of the dead man. He'd been about sixty-five or so, and from the looks of him, every one of those years had been a rugged one. There were a

couple of ancient scars on his right cheek, and at some time or other in his life someone had carved off his left ear, flush against his head.

I brought the platinum case up so that it glinted in the candlelight a moment, for the benefit of the woman who might be watching from across the street, and then lowered my arm into the casket. When I withdrew my arm, I'd palmed the case, and a moment later I dropped it back into my pocket.

As they say, two hundred dollars is two hundred dollars.

When I came out on the street again, the woman was nowhere in sight. I turned right and resumed my walk toward the hotel and the meeting of the exiles' club. It had been a fine evening to begin with, and now, of course, it was even finer.

I'd walked about two blocks when a big, open car drew up to the curb and sounded its horn.

It was Gus from Newark, one of the oldest expatriates in Rio. "Get in, Scholar," he said.

I got in beside him and he edged the car out into the traffic again. Gus was once the top arsonist in the U.S.A., one of these big, happy types who's always either laughing or just about to. Tonight, though, he wasn't even smiling.

"What's the matter, Gus?" I

asked. "You look a little down in the mouth."

"I'll tell you something, Scholar," he said. "It's a good thing I don't believe in ghosts. Otherwise, I'd swear I just saw one."

"Oh? Where?"

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Back there," he said. "Damn near made me wreck the car."

"Ghosts'll do that."

"It ain't funny."

"Who was this ghost supposed to be the ghost of?" I asked.

"A girl I knew forty years ago," Gus said. "I was just a punk then, just coming up in the rackets." He shook his head. "But it couldn't be. Hell, she hasn't been heard from in forty years."

"Who hasn't? Who're you talking about, Gus?"

"Sweet Alice. The most gorgeous redhead ever seen on the face of this earth."

"And you thought you saw her back there?"

"Yeah. Just like she'd look now, if she was still alive. Damn near as old as me, but still beautiful. I tell you, Scholar, it gave me a hell of a jolt. I ain't over it yet."

"Why didn't you stop the car and see for sure?"

"You think I didn't? But by the time I could find a place to park and get back to where I'd seen her,

she was gone. She must've got in a cab or something."

Gus was looking glummer by the second, and every once in a while a corner of his mouth would twitch, the way a man's will when he's doing a lot of thinking about something he'd rather not think about.

Neither of us said anything more until we'd reached the hotel and gone up to the private dining room where we hold our meetings. It's kind of an unusual room, because it's circular and it has this big round table in it. All the others were already there—Johnny the Knock and both the Charleys and Fig Lip and Slow Sue and Millie from Milwaukee and the Indian and Seldom Seen and Three Time George and all the rest. It was such a big turnout that some of the others had to crowd together a bit so that Gus and I could squeeze in.

It wasn't long before people began to notice how down in the mouth Gus looked.

"What's the long face for, Gus?" Frankie the Feeb called from the other side of the table. "You look all shook up—like maybe you just found out you burned down the wrong warehouse."

"If you was me, you'd look shook up, too," Gus said, and he went on to tell everybody at the table about Sweet Alice, just about the way he'd told it to me on our

way over to the room in the car.

"That Sweet Alice must have been some female, for you to remember her all these years," Charley One said.

"You never saw anybody so gorgeous," Gus said. "Every man that met her fell in love with her. I even did, myself. She was what you call a fem—a fem . . ."

"Femme fatale," I said.

"Yeah," Gus said. "Femme fatale. That's what she was, all right—fatal. And there are five good men, dead forty years, to prove it. In fact, except for a lucky fluke, I'd've been dead right along with them." He shook his head sadly. "And all because of love. It's a dangerous thing, this love. All I got to say is, don't mess with it. Love is tougher than anybody."

"You mean this girl knocked off five men?" Millie from Milwaukee asked, amazed. "She killed five guys, and damn near killed you, too?"

"No, no," Gus said. "She didn't do it herself. Not personally. I meant she was the cause of it. Her, and the way everybody fell in love with her."

"And you say she hasn't been seen or heard from for forty years?" Slow Sue asked.

"That's right," Gus said. "And neither has Denver Eddie."

"Denver Eddie?" Fig Lip said.

"I never heard of no Denver Eddie."

"It was all long before your time," Gus said. "Forty years ago ain't just yesterday, you know. This Denver Eddie was a hit man and a bomb specialist. Usually he'd work both together, if you know what I mean. A real handsome young guy, and never once got hit with this love, until he come up against Sweet Alice."

"Was he one of the guys that got killed?" Silent Knight asked.

"No," Gus said. "But maybe he'd of been better off if he had been."

"I never heard anything so romantic in my life," Millie from Milwaukee said. "Imagine! Five guys knocked off, and all out of love for the same girl!"

"I had a guy jump off a bridge on account of me once," Betty C. said. "He lived through it, though."

"Shut up, Betty C.," Millie said. "Gus, this Sweet Alice is somebody I've got to hear about."

"You said it," Slow Sue said. "Let's have the story, Gus."

For a while, Gus just sat there, sort of frowning to himself, as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to tell it or not. Then he shrugged a little, took a deep breath, and began.

"Not many of you have got any



idea of how rough it was forty years ago," he said. "Especially in Chicago. I was with the Monk Homma gang then. There was six of us, including Monk, and for a small outfit we made out real good, considering the competition."

"It's this Sweet Alice we want to know about, Gus," Millie said.

"Well, she was Monk Homma's girlfriend. He had her set up in this real posh apartment and all, and if he spent a dime on her he spent a grand a week. He had this love, Monk did." He sighed. "And

so what happens one day but that Monk finds out she ain't true. He went to her apartment one afternoon when she was away visiting her sister in Detroit, see, and he found this tie clip on the floor in the bedroom. It was one of half a dozen he'd had made up special, as gifts for the boys in his gang and himself. He had a real sense of humor, Monk did. He had them made out of heavy gold wire, in the outline of long, narrow coffins. *Skinny* coffins, we called them. And so, when he found this one in Sweet Alice's bedroom, he knew

she'd been two-timing him with one of his own boys."

"But he didn't have any idea which one?" the Indian asked.

"No. But he figured a way to find out. He went over to the Western Union office and sent the same telegram to all five of them, signing it 'Alice', and telling each guy she'd just got back from Detroit and wanted him to come to her apartment at once on a matter of life or death. None of us was even supposed to know he was keeping her in an apartment, you see, much less know where the apartment was. So whoever showed up would be the guy that'd been double-timing him with Alice. After he'd sent the telegrams, he went back to the apartment, checked his gun to make sure he had a full load, and sat down to wait to see who would rise to the bait."

"And who did?" Willie the Weep asked.

Gus sighed. "I did," he said. "When I walked in there and saw Monk with that .38 in his hand, I figured I had maybe another five seconds to live, maybe less."

"How come he didn't kill you?" Charley Two asked.

"He wanted to read me off first," Gus said. "That's all that saved me. He was still at it when the door buzzer went off again. And damn if it wasn't another of the boys in

the gang. So then Monk had two guys to read off instead of just one." He paused. "Well, to make a long story short, what happened was that within the next ten minutes every guy in the gang had come to Sweet Alice's apartment. Monk had been expecting to trap one guy with those telegrams, but he'd trapped five."

"Wow!" Millie from Milwaukee said. "What a girl! Two-timing the boss-man with his entire gang! I mean, how romantic can you get? What happened then, Gus?"

"Well, for a while it was just a question of who would be the first to start shooting. Everybody was so mad at everybody else that nobody could hardly talk. Then all at once we stopped being mad at each other and started being mad at Alice. After all, she'd made fools and laughingstocks out of every one of us."

"Men!" Betty C. snorted. "That's just the way their minds work, all right."

"Her doing us that way sort of united us, you might say," Gus said. "We talked it over, once we finally *could* talk, and we decided Sweet Alice had to go. But after we talked it over some more, we figured that spoiling her looks might be even better. That is, you take a beautiful woman like Alice and, say, cut off her ear—well,

that's the kind of punishment that lasts a lifetime.

"And that's when we called in Denver Eddie, the good-looking young hit man and bomb specialist I was telling you about. We gave him a contract to go out to Detroit and bring back one of Sweet Alice's ears."

"Good Lord," Slow Sue said. "This is just like some olden-time romance in one of those foreign countries over there in Europe or somewhere."

"Anyhow," Gus went on, "we knew Denver Eddie wouldn't be able to throw in a ringer on us—not that we figured he'd try. Sweet Alice had these tiny little roses tattooed on her earlobes, you see. Red ones, very pretty, and maybe only a quarter of an inch across. They were real works of art. We'd know for sure whether or not it was Alice's ear that Denver Eddie brought back with him to prove he'd filled the contract."

"Did this Denver know Alice at the time?" Millie asked.

"No. He just took off for Detroit with his switchblade and one of those little bombs he always carried with him, just in case somebody wanted to make a spur-of-the-moment contract with him to blow somebody up. After he'd left, Monk and the rest of us ordered a case of booze and went to work

trying to forget about this love we'd had for Sweet Alice."

"Oh, that poor girl," Millie said, her eyes bright. "Oh, that poor little thing."

"Well, that's men for you," Betty C. said. "Send a maniac out to cut off a girl's ear, and then sit around getting boozed to the eyes."

"Denver Eddie was in luck when he got to Alice's sister's house," Gus said, "because the sister was away at the time."

Slow Sue leaned forward excitedly. "And then, Gus?"

"He took one look at Sweet Alice, and that was all for Denver Eddie. There he stood, with his switchblade in one pocket and his bomb in the other. Just one look at her, and he was a goner. It just shows what this love can do."

"But he had to cut off her ear anyhow, right?" Seldom Seen said. "A contract is a contract. If he didn't cut it off, you boys would have hunted him down and killed him, right?"

Gus nodded. "That's right," he said. "But he just couldn't do it. And he wasn't the only one that had the love. It was the same way with Sweet Alice. All it took with her was one look, too—love at first sight, just like it was with Denver."

A waiter came into the dining room with a tray of drinks, and I

grabbed off what looked like a double Scotch. I figured I'd need it, because Gus's tale was beginning to show signs of turning into one of the saddest love stories of all time. I said to begin with how it is with me and sentiment, and how I'm such a sucker for a sad love story. It's a terrible weakness; I wish I weren't that way, but I just can't help it. I took a big gulp of the Scotch, and then another.

"What a spot to be in," Silent Knight said, after the waiter had left. "What'd Denver do? What'd Alice do?"

"They went in and sat down and talked about it," Gus said. "Denver told her why he was there, and how he was just as good as dead, because if he didn't come back with her ear, we'd run him down and kill him. He wasn't about to cut her ear off, you understand; he just wanted her to know the facts. And then Alice, who's got all this sudden love for Denver, says to go ahead and cut it off, she doesn't want him to get killed."

"What beautiful love!" Slow Sue said, all choked up.

"But Denver said absolutely not," Gus said. "He said he'd think of some way out. After a couple of hours, while they just sat there, holding on to each other like a couple of kids, he came up with the most fantastic idea you ever

heard of. Only a crazy man would even have thought of it. Denver had very small ears for a man, see, and what he wanted to do was get one of them tattooed with a little rose, just like Alice's, and then lop it off and send it back to us boys in Chicago."

"Beautiful," Slow Sue said. "Just beautiful. Oh, how he must have loved her!"

"He loved her, all right," Gus said, "The first thing Alice knew, she was sitting in this tattoo parlor while the tattoo artist copied one of her little roses onto Denver Eddie's earlobe."

"It's the loveliest love story ever told," Millie said, dabbing at her eyes.

I hate to admit it, but I felt like doing the same thing myself. It can be embarrassing, being sentimental, believe me. I wouldn't have wanted to say anything just then, for fear my voice would crack.

"Then Denver puts Alice in a cab and rushes her back to the apartment," Gus went on. "He sets her down in the livingroom and tells her to stay put a minute, he's got a little business to attend to in the bedroom. But Alice knows what kind of business he means, and the second he closes the door she runs into the bathroom and takes one of the old straight razors, like they used in those days,

and slices off an ear, just as clean and pretty as anybody could ask for."

"Oh!" Slow Sue said. "What love! What love!"

"Then Alice runs out into the livingroom with it and yells for Denver to come see what she's done," Gus said. "But she was too late. When Denver comes in, there's blood streaming down the side of his face and he's holding his ear in his hand."

"Oh, it's too much!" Slow Sue said. "It's so beautiful I can't stand it."

"It was too much for Alice and Denver, too," Gus said. "When they saw what each one had done for the other, and all the blood, and realized how much they loved each other, they fainted. Both of them, just like that." He paused. "The reason I know all this is that me and Monk and the other boys broke into the apartment just a few seconds after it happened."

"You what?" Frankie the Feeb said.

"We busted in," Gus said. "After we'd finished that case of booze, see, we got to wishing we hadn't sent Denver out to Detroit in the first place. We knew we'd made a mistake. We all still had this love for Alice, and we didn't want to have her looks ruined, and so we all got in Monk's car and hit out

for Detroit as fast as we could go. As it turned out, we got to the apartment about half a minute too late."

Nobody said anything. It was so quiet you could almost hear the ice cubes melting in the drinks.

"And then?" somebody finally asked.

"All hell broke loose," Gus said. "We threw cold water in their faces to bring them to, and we used towels to stop the bleeding. When Denver Eddie came to, he thought the guys were there to kill him, and he jumped up and ran into the bedroom and held the door against them. I guess the delayed shock of cutting off his own ear and then seeing Alice with hers cut off must have snapped something in his brain. Anyway, that's what he did."

"As for Alice, when she came around she grabbed up Denver's ear, and then her own, and ran out into the hall, with me right behind her. I caught her just outside the door, and a couple of seconds later there was this explosion back in the livingroom, where we'd just been. Blew a hole in the wall not three feet from where we were standing."

"Denver Eddie's bomb?" Three Time George asked.

"Yeah," Gus said. "Denver had gone completely out of his mind."

What he'd done was open the bedroom door a crack and throw the bomb into the livingroom with Monk and all the others." He shook his head. "Killed them all. It probably took the morgue a week to sort out the pieces."

"What about Denver, Gus?" I asked.

"He went down the fire stairs, and that was the last anybody ever saw of him."

"And Sweet Alice?"

"I got her out of there fast. By the time the law got there, we were on our way to this croaker I knew, to have him take care of her ear. He gave her a local and sewed it back on again. And all the time he was working on her, she just sat there holding Denver's ear. She wouldn't let go of it for anything. Later, when I took her to a hotel, she told me all that'd happened with her and Denver."

"She said she'd find him again someday, no matter where he was. And she kept that ear in her hand the whole time; it was enough to make your skin crawl. I made her get into bed, and then I went

down to a drugstore to get her some medicine the croaker wanted her to put on her ear. When I got back to the hotel room, she was gone. That was forty years ago, and I've never seen or heard from her since."

There was a long silence, now that we all saw Gus had finished. I sat looking down at my glass. I knew now what was in that thin platinum case in my pocket, and who the beautiful woman had been who asked me to put the case in the casket with the body of the man with the missing ear.

I also knew what I was going to do with that platinum case. His body would still be lying in state, of course; it'd be no problem at all.

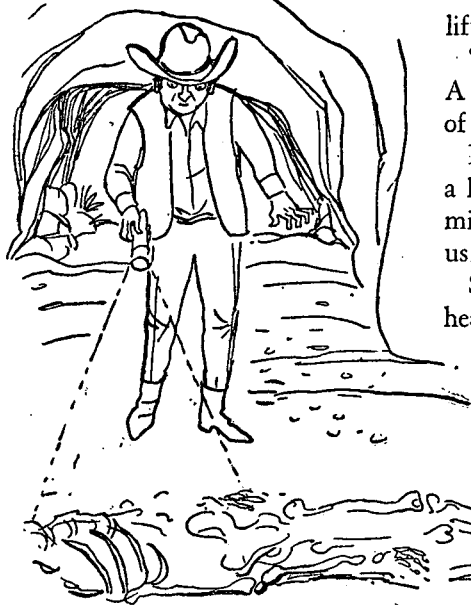
I didn't say anything about what I was going to do. It's bad enough being such a sentimental slob, without having everybody riding you about it.

But you know something? When I glanced around the table, I realized I wasn't the only sentimental slob in Rio that night. It's hard to believe, but there wasn't a dry eye in the place.



*WHERE CREDIT IS DUE, Uncle Remus say: Hongry rooster
don't cackle w'en he fine a wum.*

WHERE CREDIT IS DUE



IT WAS Sunday afternoon, but the Black Cat was rocking, bar and tables crowded, the regulars present to a man; a big day, with four more hours of eating and drinking before the first bull would explode across the arena on the outskirts of Montes. Behind the bar, Pancho patted two wineskins filled with Spanish red and white. "To toast the bulls," he laughed.

"As if we need it," Fiala replied, lifting his tequila.

"It should be a good one today. A top matador from Spain and two of our best."

Fiala lifted his glass again, and a hand touched his arm. "Ah, Domingo. Going to the bullring with us?"

Solemnly Domingo shook his head and put out his hand. A ring

By
Hal
Ellson

of odd design lay on his palm. "Could we talk outside, Victor?"

An odd request, but Fiala shrugged and they went out to the sidewalk. The sun was hot, street deserted.

"My work," Domingo said, bouncing the ring on his palm. "Twenty years ago I sold it to Juan Montanez. Remember him? According to rumor, he ran off with a woman." The ring flashed in the sun now as Domingo raised it between thumb and forefinger. "Interested?" he said, squinting through it.

An old story buried in the dust, let it rest. Besides, it was a good show at the arena today, and Fiala wasn't on duty. "Perhaps tomorrow," he began, then stopped, seeing the hurt in Domingo's face. "You're positive it's Montanez' ring?"

"Don't I know my own work, Victor?"

"All right. So you have the ring you sold Montanez who disappeared twenty years ago with a woman. You want to make something of that?"

"You might. Odd, isn't it, that no one knows the woman who vanished with Montanez, or if she ever existed. And now, twenty years later, the ring shows up?"

At four-thirty in the plaza de toros—Luis Sequra, Jesus Cordorva,

Jaime Bravo—three top matadors . . . Fiala sighed. "Odd," he admitted. "How did you obtain the ring?"

"Alvarez, the guide, brought it to my shop."

Fiala nodded. The sun was too hot out here, his friends enjoying themselves behind the thick walls of the Black Cat; the sound of their voices and music drifted to him.

"You'll see Alvarez?" Domingo asked.

"After the bullfight. I don't want to miss it."

"Many thanks."

"For what?"

"Montanez was my friend. I never believed that story about the woman. Perhaps we'll know the truth now."

Twenty years later? Fiala shrugged. "My drink's waiting for me."

"Enjoy it. Here, you may need this." Domingo handed him the ring and turned on his heels.

"What's wrong, Victor?" Pancho asked when Fiala sat down at the bar.

"Nothing yet."

"Still going with us?"

"I wouldn't miss it." Montanez gone twenty years; odd his ring showing up. What did it mean? How did Alvarez come by it? The answers could wait. He nodded

to his glass. Pancho obliged with the best tequila and a small Carta Blanca to chase it.

Four-fifteen; the hands of the clock behind the bar pointed the hour. It was time to leave for the arena. "Finish your drinks," Pancho warned. "I'm locking the doors."

Glasses were quickly emptied, chairs pushed back; cars lined the curb outside. A gay crowd of inebriates piled into them. Pancho locked the cantina doors and with the wineskins slung over his shoulder, walked unevenly to the curb to slide into a seat beside Fiala. A wild ride ensued through empty Sunday streets to the arena. The sun was blood-red in the west, the stands stained with the same violent hue, the crowd moving in, band playing. Pancho unslung the wineskins. "A toast to the band!" Steady hands guided the Spanish red and white, open mouths took the jetting wine.

"Your turn, Victor."

Deaf, Fiala was staring at a man who had just stepped from a car.

"Victor?" Pancho held out the wineskin, but Fiala turned his back and walked away.

"Senor Alvarez."

"Ah, Victor. A ticket to the fight?"

"I have mine." Fiala opened his hand. The ring flashed on his palm.

"You sold this ring to Domingo?"

"Yes. Anything wrong?"

"Perhaps. Where did you get it?"

"I bought it from Francisco Marti for a hundred pesos."

"Cheap for a ring like this."

"He needed the money for the lottery. He was desperate."

"Where do I find Marti?"

"He was at the office when I left."

"Many thanks." Fiala turned away. His friends had gone to their seats in the stands. Only Pancho was waiting at the gate. "I thought you were running out on us, Victor."

"Too hot to run. I'm walking." Fiala took the wineskin from Pancho, lifted it, opened his mouth to a jet of Spanish red. "Good!" He handed back the wineskin and wiped his mouth. "My regards to the bulls. See you tonight—perhaps."

"I knew something was wrong, but I thought you were off today."

"What I thought," Fiala answered, and headed for his car.

A fast drive brought him to the guides' headquarters. Marti stood outside the door. Fiala greeted him and displayed the ring. "You sold this to Alvarez?"

"I did. So?"

"I'd like to know where you got it?"

"I bought it for fifty pesos."

"Somebody must have been desperate. Who was the seller?"

"Three shoe-shine boys in the big plaza. One did the talking, but they were all in on the deal. They steal the ring from somebody?"

Fiala shrugged. "Don't know. Do you think you can point out the boys?"

"If they're around."

A short walk through a narrow street brought them to the plaza. Marti nodded. "There they are."

Up ahead, in the shade of a sour orange tree, three unoccupied boys squatted on their shoe-shine boxes. Fiala thanked the guide and went on alone. His shadow fell over the three boys before they were aware of him, the ring flashed in their faces. "All right, where'd you get this?" he said. "Better talk, or you're all in trouble."

Dark Indian faces turned to him without expression. "You," Fiala jabbed a finger at the tallest of the trio. "Come on, out with it."

A pair of black eyes in the round face of the boy stared back at him. Fabricating a lie, or too frightened to speak? "The truth, or you don't work the plaza anymore."

"Senor, we found the ring."

Fiala shook his head. "The truth."

The three boys exchanged glances, no question of their being

frightened. "Senor, we found the ring," the boy repeated.

"Where?"

"In the plaza."

The expected reply, but not the truth; get rough with the kids. "You stole the ring. Come on to headquarters. All of you."

The threat worked. The smallest boy found his tongue and said they found the ring in a cave.

"Ah, now it's a cave. Don't give me that."

"It's true. We were looking for arrowheads to sell to the tourists."

"And where is this cave, little fellow?"

"In Buzzards Canyon."

A neat little explanation, but why the original lie? And what was the ring doing in the cave? Fiala glanced at his watch. It was a half-hour drive to the canyon, plenty of time before nightfall. "All right, we're going to the cave."

Silence, the black eyes widened with fear; something wrong, or had he trapped them in another lie? "Come on, up on your feet."

Three reluctant boys rose from their boxes, picked them up and off they went to Fiala's car. As the detective opened the door for them, the smallest boy suddenly turned and fled. Let him go. His two companions looked up, and the taller said, "He ran because he's afraid to go to the cave."



"Why? Is something there?"

"A skeleton, señor."

A good road took them out of the city. Twenty-seven minutes across the desert and they entered the canyon. In the gray light there, and the silence, the road narrowed between naked precipices and then vanished. Fiala drove on over the bed of a dried-up stream. Presently the canyon widened again, and a grove of trees rose up before them.

"This is the place, señor."

Shadows lay thick in the grove, nothing moved, the silence was ominous. Fiala stepped from the car. The boys followed; the taller one pointed to a steep slope covered with scrub and Fiala shuddered. Climbing the iron stairway

at headquarters was bad enough, but this . . . The two boys led the way, nimble as goats, and he followed, his fifty years a burden, but somewhere above was the cave, and a skeleton. Montanez?

The ascent continued. His legs ached. He looked up and saw no sign of the boys. Had they tricked him and run off? "Hello!"

His voice echoed across the canyon, then just above him his guides appeared, staring wide-eyed. "Here, señor," the tall one said.

Stones rattled down the slope as he made his way to the boys. When he reached them, both were staring at the entrance to the cave. So, they hadn't lied. He drew a flashlight from his pocket. There was a four-

foot high opening to the cave, and darkness beyond. Were there snakes in there? For a moment Fiala hesitated, then stooped and went in.

Twenty steps and he stopped, and there on the floor of the cave, stark white against the pale limestone, lay a skeleton. Montanez? Something sparkled in the beam of the flashlight. He bent down, picked up a belt buckle and a pair of dice. Nothing else. He shook his head, turned the beam back on the stark-white bones, then retreated from the cave.

Shadows were falling across the big plaza when the car reached Montes. Fiala thanked the boys and gave each of them a five-peso note. It was too late to go back to the bullring. He shrugged and put his hand in his pocket. Out came the buckle and dice. The initials J. M. were on the buckle; interesting. Next, he examined the dice and drove off.

The Black Cat had reopened, and loud voices came from inside. He stepped through the side door.

"Ah, Victor, you miss it. What happened? What's her name? You ran out on us."

Shrugging off the verbal bombardment, Fiala went to the bar, and Pancho shook his head. "The best, and you had to run off."

"My regrets, but . . ." Fiala took the dice from his pocket and hand-

ed them to Pancho. "Your opinion of these."

Pancho weighed them, frowned, rolled them across the bar. Seven turned up. An accident, rule of chance, or what? Pancho made a face. "Loaded," he said. "So?"

"I wanted you to confirm what I thought."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"You must have had an interesting afternoon."

"Very."

"What are you drinking?"

"A small Carta Blanca. I'm in a hurry."

"You'll die with your boots on," Pancho said, and opened a bottle.

Fiala ignored the glass and emptied the small bottle in a swallow. A telephone directory lay at the end of the bar. He picked it up, found Domingo's home address and headed for the door. Cries of dismay from the tables followed him out. He climbed into his car and drove off. Ten minutes later he knocked on Domingo's door.

After a short wait Domingo answered and invited him into the patio. "A drink, Victor?"

"Thanks, but I haven't the time. I need some information from Montanez' wife."

"If it's about her husband, she won't discuss him. But perhaps I can help."

"You remember when Montanez disappeared?"

"Yes. We had lunch together that day. It was a Thursday. Friday we were going to the Festival of San Marcos, something he'd never miss, but he didn't show up." Domingo shrugged. "The next night I heard the rumor about him running off with a woman. A lie, of course."

"Why do you think it was a lie?"

"Because I'd have known if he was involved with anyone to that extent."

"But there was a woman?"

"Many, but none meant anything to him."

"Perhaps he meant something to one of them, a jealous woman. She could have . . ."

"There were no affairs, Victor. The women were all paid for, a different one each time, so . . ."

Fiala nodded. "A Thursday when you last saw him. Friday you were going to the Festival of San Marcos. Why wouldn't he have missed it?"

"A whole week of gambling. He always looked forward to that."

The dice found with the skeleton . . . Fiala touched the pocket where they nestled. "So Montanez liked to gamble?"

"Oh, yes."

"And liked to win?"

"What man doesn't?"

"Some try to make sure they do."

"Are you suggesting Montanez cheated?"

"He may have."

"If he did, I never knew about it."

"There's much we never know about our friends."

"What are you getting at?"

"If he was caught cheating, there would have been an argument. The argument could have ended seriously."

Domingo sat still, very pale now. "Thursday night," he finally said. "Every Thursday without fail the dice game at Garcia's ranch."

"He went there after you saw him that last Thursday?"

"I don't know, but we can find out. He usually drove there with Justo Trevino. I'll phone him and—"

"No, I'll see Trevino myself. Many thanks."

Justo Trevino's son opened the door to Fiala. No, his father wasn't at home, but he might be found at the Three Kings, a cantina close to the municipal building. Fiala knew it well. A hole-in-the-wall frequented by a wild crowd, the place was roaring when he entered it. Trevino had been in and left with a group for the Seville.

Fiala drove there and entered the restaurant. It was an off-hour and only one table was occupied; four men, well in their cups, sat

around it, and four mariachis stood by, playing Green Eyes while the inebriate diners accompanied them. Fiala waited till they finished, then approached and asked for Trevino.

"He was here and left with a friend," one of the diners explained. "It was barbecued goat, or a barbecued girl for him. He settled for the girl."

"Where can I find him?"

"At Senora Gongora's. Know it?"

Fiala nodded and headed for the door, while behind him the musicians began to play the anthem of the city; stirring music, a big day, bigger night. *I missed the bullfight*, he thought. *And right now I could be at the Black Cat. My day off. A joke. What am I doing? Twenty years ago Montanez vanished. His skeleton, ring, buckle and dice? A ladies' man. Did a jealous girl do him in—or a set of loaded dice send him to eternity?*

"Senor." A tall man in sombrero bowed and opened the door to Senora Gongora's. There was mud outside, but a fancy setup within, good bar, private rooms with unique features for jaded gentleman; and pretty girls, of course. Fiala glanced at them and asked for Trevino. The barman nodded discreetly to a handsome gray-haired drinker. Fiala approached him and introduced himself. He

was sorry for the inconvenience, but he needed information.

Drunk, but agreeable, Trevino stepped outside. "And what is it you wish to know, senor?" he asked.

"You were a good friend of Juan Montanez?"

"A very good friend."

"Twenty years ago he disappeared, but perhaps you remember the dice games at Garcia's ranch?"

"I remember."

"Good. Now the last time you saw Montanez was at the ranch?"

"Yes. We drove there together."

"That night did anything happen, such as an argument or fight?"

"I left early, senor, but I don't believe anything happened. We were all good friends, and—"

"Who else was at the ranch that night? Their names and where they live."

"Basilio Mendez, Juan Espada, Gregorio Diaz. You know where to find Garcia. Mendez lives somewhere in Rosario. Espada and Diaz? I've lost track of those two."

"Many thanks, I'll find them. Enjoy yourself." Fiala returned to his car. Four names in his notebook, ring, dice, and buckle in his pocket, the skeleton in the cave—a good day's work. He drove off, stopped at the Black Cat, changed his mind about going in and went home.

"You don't live here anymore?"

his daughter snapped as she opened the door.

"A busy day." He grinned, and went in to the patio to his favorite chair under the avocado. Slumping into it, he looked up. Aurora was facing him. "No, I wasn't at the Black Cat," he smiled. "And I missed the bullfight. I've been working."

"On your day off?"

"Something important came up."

"No wonder you looked tired. You must be hungry."

"Thirsty. You can bring me a cold one."

"Better if you went to bed."

"A pleasant thought, but I've got to make arrangements for tomorrow. And now if you don't mind, the beer . . ."

Two cold beers and he dozed off under the avocado. With the first light of day a mourning dove awoke him. The house was silent. He left it, stopped for coffee across from headquarters. Two cups, a cigarette, and he walked into headquarters. Captain Meza was at his desk. Fiala briefly explained about the skeleton and asked for two men and a jeep. They were granted him and off he went on the grisly chore of guiding the policemen to the cave. Leaving them, he returned to headquarters.

Chief Lopez had just arrived and was, as usual, in a black mood,

but he perked up when Fiala told him what he'd dug up. "A murder committed twenty years ago." Lopez shook his head. "How did you get your horns into that one?"

Fiala's explanation, the circumstances which led to the finding of the ring, its identification, and discovery of the skeleton weren't enough for Lopez. "How do you know Montanez was murdered?" he asked. "And if he was, how do you expect to pin down the murderer at this late date?"

"Fortunately, I know where Montanez was and what he was doing the night he vanished. I also know who he was with, and those parties have a little explaining to do."

Lopez smiled and shook his head. "All they'll say is that they remember nothing, and after twenty years who could doubt them? No, Victor, you're going to blow this one."

"If they don't remember, but I'm quite sure they will. If Montanez was murdered at the ranch, they'll have a story to cover themselves."

"In that case," Lopez shrugged, "you won't be able to pin them down."

"Except for the ace. I have up my sleeve."

"And that is?"

Fiala glanced at his watch. "I'll tell you later. There's work to be done." He turned and went out the

door, walked down the corridor.

Garcia, Mendez, Espada, Diaz—The four who'd last been with Montanez; Garcia was available, Mendez in Rosario. Captain Meza could have him picked up. Espada and Diaz were the doubtful ones. Fiala stopped at Captain Meza's desk and asked to have Mendez brought in and held in isolation. "I'll be back with the other suspects," he added.

"You're moving fast. What's it all about?"

"Later for that," Fiala answered and hurried out the door and on to Domingo's shop. The jeweler provided him with the information he needed. Espada had died; Diaz ran a barber shop across the street from the Seville.

Fiala left, picked up Diaz and delivered him to headquarters. Next came Garcia, who demanded to know why he was wanted. "You'll know soon enough," Fiala told him and brought him in.

The skeleton taken from the cave in the canyon lay in the morgue. Garcia and Diaz were secluded in separate rooms. A few minutes past noon Mendez was brought in from Rosario.

"Three men and a skeleton," Captain Meza said. "Ready for the inquisition, Victor?"

"After I have my coffee."

"Ei, you were in a big hurry earlier."

"I still am, but let those three fellows bite their nails for a while. It'll help." Fiala smiled and left for the Blue Moon cafe and his coffee. In a half-hour he returned and questioned the three suspects separately. As Lopez had predicted, their memories were faulty. They remembered nothing.

A bad start? Perhaps. But it was the end that counted in this business, and Fiala already detected a chink of light in the dark. Mendez appeared very nervous and unsure of himself, so Fiala decided to renew the questioning by starting with him. First, he called Lopez from his office.

"Got something?" the Chief asked when he appeared at the room where Mendez was held.

"Not yet, but—" Fiala turned to Mendez who had come to his feet. Fiala beckoned him to sit, then lighted a cigarette. "Now we'll begin again," he said. "Perhaps you recall the night we spoke of before. No? Nothing happened. A friendly dice game at Garcia's ranch and all of you went home to bed."

"That's right."

"That being the case, you're wondering why you're being questioned."

"I am."

Fiala nodded. "If you'll please

come this way, you'll learn why."

The skeleton from the cave lay on a crude table in the mortuary. Worried, Mendez stared at it, then raised his eyes.

"Recognize him?" Fiala asked. "No? Well, let me inform you. An old friend of yours, Juan Montanez, or what remains of him, and the reason you're here."

"The reason I'm here?"

"Ah, still a bad memory, senior. Montanez was murdered at the ranch. A friendly dice game that ended in death. You look at me strangely. I see I must convince you. Here, look at this, the silver buckle with Montanez' initials. Hold it, and these." Fiala dropped a pair of dice in Mendez' hand. "Remember them? They caused all the trouble. No? Then what of this?" Fiala held up the ring Domingo had given him. "Hard to forget such a ring, isn't it? It belonged to Montanez, who ran off with a woman. But did he? Murdered men don't run, they're carried. Montanez was carried up a slope in Buzzards Canyon and hidden in a cave. Do you remember the cave?"

Silver buckle, dice, ring, nor the skeleton itself when he confronted it, none of these made an impression on Garcia. According to him, nothing had happened at the ranch.

Confronted with the same items, Diaz, too, insisted that nothing had happened.

Nothing? Fiala had the three men brought together into the same room now. He nodded to Garcia and Diaz. "These two still have bad memories," he said to Lopez, "but fortunately Senor Mendez, after reviewing the remains of Montanez, recovered his."

"Then something happened at the ranch?" Lopez said.

"An argument. Montanez was accused of cheating with the dice and attacked his accuser, who happened to be Senor Garcia. The others went to Garcia's aid, a violent struggle followed which ended with the death of Montanez. Naturally everyone was frightened, and what did they do? Go to the police? No, they hid the body in a cave and spread the rumor that Montanez ran off with a woman."

Lopez nodded and turned to Garcia. "Is this true?" he asked. "Or do you still say—"

"It's true," Garcia put in quickly. "We panicked and agreed to hide the body, but we didn't deliberately kill Montanez. We were drinking and Montanez went wild. We subdued him, let him up, he drew a knife and—"

"You drew one," Fiala put in, "and that knife finished him. Of course, you had to defend yourself.

But it was your idea to hide the body. You talked the others into believing they were equally guilty."

"I didn't have to talk them into anything, señor."

Fiala ignored the remark and said, "You were gambling for big stakes that night, and you were lucky with the dice. Then something went wrong. Montanez began to win, and you accused him of cheating."

"He admitted it."

"And accused you of doing the same thing."

"He had to say something to excuse himself."

"Beating around the bush," Lopez interrupted. "I think everything's clear now. We know what happened at the ranch."

"An accidental killing?" Fiala shook his head. "No. Montanez was deliberately murdered, and Garcia was clever enough to induce the others to help him hide the body. That way he knew they wouldn't talk. He was also responsible for the rumor that Montanez ran off with a woman. He—"

Lopez held up his hand and cut Fiala short, then nodded to the door. They stepped into the hall, and the chief shook his head. "Victor, you may be right about Garcia, but it's only an opinion. An unpremeditated killing, that's all I can see."

"And that's all I saw till last night, when I learned the old watchman at Garcia's ranch vanished the same night Montanez did. Interesting, isn't it? Two men disappear from the same place at the same time and no one thinks anything about it. Why not? Because the killer did his work well. He tagged the rumor on Montanez about running off with a woman and it was accepted as the truth. As for the watchman, he was a poor peon with no family, so no one was concerned about him."

"But what makes you think he was murdered?" Lopez asked. "Because he vanished?"

"Because he was at the ranch. He must have witnessed the murder."

"So did Mendez and Diaz," Lopez pointed out.

"They were more than witnesses. At least they believed they were, and they agreed to a pact of silence. But the watchman had no reason to keep silent, and that made him dangerous. For that reason he was murdered."

"Twenty years ago, if it did happen. Do you expect to find another skeleton and, if you do, how can you prove it's the watchman's and that he was murdered?"

Fiala shrugged and smiled wryly. "Now where would the second skeleton be hidden? In the same

cave? Why not? If it's there, we don't have to prove anything."

"If it's there."

"I think it is. If not, the matter can be taken care of simply enough."

"It can?" Lopez said, raising his brows.

"Very easily," Fiala answered without explaining, and glanced at his watch. "Can I treat you to coffee?"

"Now?"

"Why not? I think we have it wrapped up. If Captain Meza will tend to the details . . ."

After coffee and a cigarette at the Blue Moon, Fiala and Lopez returned to headquarters. "Everything ready?" Fiala asked of Meza.

"Everything's ready."

"Good. Have Mendez brought in first."

Mendez was brought to a small room next to the mortuary, questioned and taken away. Diaz followed. Garcia came last, and Fiala pointed to the skeleton lying on a table, an unnecessary gesture. Garcia had seen it; his face was turning green.

"The remains of Ernesto Gonzalez," said Fiala. "The watchman at your ranch who vanished the same night you knifed Montanez. We found his skeleton back in the cave. Shall I continue, senor, or do you remember?"

"I remember," Garcia whispered hoarsely. "I killed him because—"

Fiala held up his hand and nodded to Captain Meza. "If you'll please take down his confession."

"Certainly. This way, senor." Meza opened the door and led Garcia away.

"You tricked him," Lopez said when the door closed. "But I don't understand. Where did you dig up the second skeleton?"

"The second one?" Fiala said innocently. "That's Montanez'. It was shifted in here when we went for coffee. A gamble, but it worked."

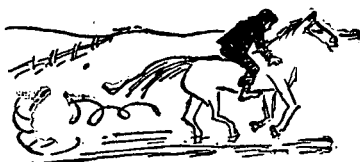
Lopez shook his head and grinned. "Clever. You're too much for me, Victor."

"Credit where credit is due," Fiala answered. "If it hadn't been for Domingo recognizing that ring and, of course, those three shoe-shine boys . . ."



One who is reluctant to take a particular road may often discover a shortcut home.

NO HARM



IN ALFIE

THERE's always a tiny vise of terror that twists my insides when the phone rings. I realize that coming from a county sheriff this sounds strange, but it's true. I receive dozens of calls a day. Most of them are nothing but small talk or righteous gripes from the citizens, but you never know until you lift the receiver which call is going to knife through your spine like an icicle. I got one of those calls last night

and I hope eternity passes before I get another.

It had been a long hot day filled with petty things that fray a man's patience. When I could finally relax, I was too tired to sleep. The late show was on, and somewhere between the commercials I must have dozed off. The jangling of the phone startled me awake. I turned off the TV and answered. "Sheriff Jackson speaking."

"This is Doctor Fanus at the Pleasant Valley Hospital. I'm afraid I have to report that one of our patients, an Alfred Loomis, has left our bed and board."

There was a hot knot in my chest as his words sunk home in my mind. "You let Alfie escape!" I whispered, not trusting my normal voice.

"Escape is not exactly the word, Sheriff. After all, Pleasant Valley is a mental hospital, not a prison."

"How long has he been gone?" I asked, looking at the clock on

by W. Sherwood Hartman

the wall. It was twenty past twelve.

"I can't tell you exactly," the doctor said. "He was here at nine, at lights out, but his bed was empty when we checked at midnight. We searched the grounds, but he's nowhere to be found."

"Did you call his brother?"

"No," the doctor said. "I thought it would be best to call you first. The man could be dangerous."

"He never was before they put him away."

"Sheriff, I had nothing to do with that."

It was true. Doc Fanus just ran the place. He had no say over who was sent there. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'll call Tom right away, and thanks." I hung up and wondered what I had thanked him for. It was August and the thermometer read a steaming eighty-five. The air outside was heavy and still. It was the kind of night for a storm that would send the hounds of hell scurrying under their master's bed, and Alfie was loose, roaming the countryside . . . But I guessed I shouldn't blame Doc. If the state would pay decent wages at a place like Pleasant Valley, perhaps they could hire some reliable security people.

I dialed Tom Loomis' phone number and waited for him to answer, while running time and distance through my mind. Pleasant

Valley was nine miles east of town and Tom Loomis' farm was three miles west. Figuring that a man can make four miles an hour on foot, Alfie could have already reached the farm if he left the hospital just after nine, but four miles an hour would be hard to do on a moonless night across rough country. Alfie would shun the roads, yet he knew every path and lane through the woods and brush like the map of veins on the back of his hand. The phone at Tom's rang for nearly five minutes and there was no answer. I hung up and dialed again, thinking that I might have dialed wrong the first time. There was still no answer. I waited for ten rings, then hung up and called my deputy.

Jake had a rough time getting awake, but when I told him that Alfie was loose he was all business. I told him I couldn't get a rise out of Tom Loomis or his wife and that I was heading out to their farm right away. He was to get help and follow as soon as he could. I had no idea of what I'd find, but the thought of help behind me was welcome. After I hung up, I had the feeling that I might be too late to help anybody. I buckled on my side arm and took a repeating shotgun off the rack and loaded it with buckshot. I was headed for the door when the phone rang again. It was Fred Acker.

"Sheriff," he said, "I hate to bother you, but something woke me up about five minutes ago. I thought I heard a noise and when I went downstairs the screen door was hanging open. I thought that maybe my wife had forgotten to hook it, but then I noticed my carbine is missing from back of the stove."

"Your dogs didn't wake you?"

"They never made a sound, Sheriff. There's only one man could ever walk past my dogs and take a pie off my windowsill without them raising hades."

"Alfie?"

"Who else? They should have never put him away. Mame used to bake an extra pie every Friday just so Alfie could steal it. It was always a surprise to find what he would leave in its place—a fresh-killed rabbit, or a pheasant, or a bag of ripe chestnuts. But, Sheriff, stealing my rifle isn't *fun* stealing! And Alfie *is* over at Pleasant Valley, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid he isn't, Fred," I said. "He escaped sometime tonight, but if he'd had any thoughts of harming you or Mame, you wouldn't be talking to me now. So go back to bed. I'll try to get your rifle back." I hung up and tried to get through to Tom Loomis again, but there was still no answer. At least I knew now that Alfie

was only five minutes away from Tom's farm, but I didn't know if he was on his way there or on his way away from there. I pushed the pickup for all it was worth over the rutted dirt road toward Tom's farm, and the harder I drove, the more I agreed with Fred. They never should have put Alfie away.

Tom and Alfie Loomis had inherited the farm after the old folks had passed on. Tom was the younger son, but with Alfie's mind the way it was, Tom took over running the place. The way it was run left a lot to be desired, but they made a living. There was a horse named Star that no one except Alfie could get near. Alfie and Star would plow the fields in the spring, but after that chore was finished they would wander off for weeks at a time, leaving Tom to work the fields after the planting. Even when Alfie was home, he never slept in the house. He'd bed down with a blanket in the stall next to Star's. Alfie, a big man with a shaggy head of unkempt hair and soft-brown eyes, was so shy that few people had ever seen him close up, but he was a familiar blur in the distance sitting astride Star with neither saddle nor bridle, as though they both knew where they were going and had no reason to communicate with anyone else.

Alfie was strange, that's true. He



could talk to animals and he was afraid of people. Perhaps he had a reason. But I could never see where there was an ounce of harm in him. Nobody else could either. He might walk past your dogs in the middle of the night and take a dozen eggs out of your henhouse, but you'd find a big-bag of dew-fresh wild strawberries on your doorstep in the morning, or something else that was worth more in time and thought than the thing that was taken.

Yet all of these things sounded bad when Tom Loomis went to court to have Alfie put away. They'd put a warrant in my hand and told me to bring Alfie in. I found him sleeping in the barn

and sweet-talked him into putting his hands out for me to put the cuffs on. Then Star started kicking splinters out of the stall next door and Alfie went berserk. I managed to deliver him to Pleasant Valley, but had three cracked ribs to live with for the next few months. All that happened two years ago, shortly after Millie came to town.

As far as I can understand, Millie arrived with a truck driver from up north and stayed on as a waitress at the Easy-Bee Cafe. She must have been hitchhiking, because the truck driver left and Millie remained to remind our little community of how far we were behind the times. From the rear she rippled under the tight white uniform, and

when she put a cup of coffee down in front of you, there was nothing left to do but start counting freckles.

I don't know if it was the ripples or the freckles, but it wasn't too long until Tom Loomis and Millie were a regular thing together. Then Tom had Alfie put away and he and Millie got married and moved into the farm. I guess it was only natural for Tom to have Alfie committed. With a woman like Millie around, and Alfie not being altogether responsible, anything could have happened. Still, it didn't seem right, depriving Alfie of his freedom and the half ownership of the farm that was rightfully his. I had done my job, but I hadn't liked it.

I liked it even less when I pulled up in front of Tom Loomis' farm and found the place as dark as the bottom of a well.

I laid a hand to the horn, but no lights came on.

It had been three months since I had been to Tom's farm. Millie had greeted me wearing a thin shift that left little to the imagination as she bounced barefoot down the porch steps. "Tom's trying to feed that fool horse," she said. I followed her to the barn. Star was standing with his head down and his lips stretched across his teeth, a powerful coiling spring of concentrated hate daring Tom to enter the stall. Tom opened the door

and shoved a bucket of oats inside, then slammed the door shut as Star lunged forward, his hooves slashing the heavy oak. "That horse is crazy!" Tom said. "When Alfie was here, he would at least tolerate me. Now he goes insane the minute I walk into the barn."

"Can't you sell him?" I asked.

"Who would buy?" he laughed. "Everybody around here knows that nobody can work him but Alfie. I'll keep trying to bring him around for a few months. Then, if he don't calm down, I'll have to put him away."

Star stopped chewing his oats and lifted his head to watch us, almost as though he understood what was being said.

"He's a beautiful animal," I said. "It seems a shame."

Tom lowered his head for a moment, then his eyes leveled with mine. "Sometimes, Sheriff Jack," he said slowly, "a man has to do things that don't make him too proud of himself." The hurt in his eyes told me that having Alfie put away hadn't been *his* idea.

"The sooner that damned animal goes," Millie shrieked, "the better I'll feel!" Star laid his ears back and curled his lip in a horsey sneer. I had left then, almost embarrassed for having been there.

I leaned on the horn again, but there was still no response. The

house was a silhouette of india ink in the dim night. I turned off the lights of the pickup and took the five cell flashlight out of the glove compartment. Then I cradled the shotgun in my left arm and walked carefully to the house. After the racking noise of the horn, the silence was overpowering. Only the soft scent of the barnyard seemed real. Even the crickets had stopped breathing, and my soft footsteps sounded as loud as drums. A loose board squealed under my weight as I crossed the porch. The door was unlocked and sighed as I pushed it open. I flashed the light slowly across the combination kitchen-livingroom. The dinner dishes and coffee cups were still at their place on the table. The room was empty. I didn't turn on the lights, regardless of the silence. I knew I wasn't alone on the farm. I checked all the rooms. The house was empty. I went back out on the front porch and listened.

There was a sound of a motor in the distance and I sighed with relief at the thought that help was on the way. Then I heard the sound of movement from the stable. I crouched low and ran across the yard to the front of the barn. The doors were open. I swung the beam of my flashlight inside and shivered at what I saw. Millie was a bloodied broken doll, her face

hidden in the straw. Tom was seated a few feet past her, slumped against the wall with his head hanging at an impossible angle. I swung the light slowly around and saw Star, the door to his stable open. Then I had a glimpse of Alfie crouched beside the horse with his rifle leveled. The flashlight smashed out of my hand as he fired and my arm went numb up to the elbow. I ran back along the front of the barn, out of the line of fire, and stretched out prone with the shotgun leveled toward the doors.

Then there was another shot from inside and a scream that was too huge to be human, then a long sigh and silence. *He shot the horse*, I thought. *Why did he shoot the horse?*

I didn't have time to think about it. Jake's car pulled around the house and the headlights turned the front of the barn to daylight. Alfie stepped through the door and put a bullet through one headlight, but he didn't have a chance to fire again. The shotgun kicked against my shoulder and tore the life out of him with one lethal whirlwind of buckshot. I pushed the gun away and buried my face in my arms.

Jake was shaking me. "Are you all right, Sheriff Jack?"

"Sure," I said, but I was lying. Somewhere, in the tiny second after I fired the shotgun, the pic-

ture of what the flashlight had shown inside the barn flashed across my mind, and I knew I shouldn't have shot him. But it had all happened so fast, and it was final. I got to my feet and we went into the barn. Jake's flashlight found the light switch and it was all there before us.

"Good lord," Jake gasped. "What did he beat them with?"

Tom's rifle lay beside him, the stock splintered and useless.

"Alfie didn't beat them," I said. "Look at the blood. It's brown now, not red. They were dead before Alfie ever left Pleasant Valley. Look at the horse." Star's front hooves were caked with dried blood. "Millie must have finally talked Tom into putting the horse away, but something went wrong." I looked at the door of Star's stall

and knew what it was. The latch had torn loose and was hanging on bent and rusted nails. "This is what Alfie found when he got home. He knew what had to be done, but Tom's rifle was broken, so he went over to Acker's and stole the carbine. He must have got back here about the same time I arrived. Star was Alfie's horse. If anyone had the right to put him away, it was Alfie."

"But why did he come out shooting?" Jake asked.

"He shot the flashlight out of my hand. That bullet could just as easily have gone between my eyes. And the shot that put out your headlight could have gone through the windshield. Alfie wasn't aiming to hurt anybody. He was just making sure he didn't have to go back to Pleasant Valley."

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*I want to thank all of you for your interest.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Pat Hitchcock*

3

GILBERT HAS A CASE

mind because he started chat-  
nervously jumping from one

**W**HERE to, Mister?"

"Nowhere. Anywhere. I don't care. Just drive around."

"It's a nice day," I said. "How about one lap around Central Park?"

"I don't care if you take me on a scenic tour of the Fulton Fish Market. All I want is time to simmer down."

I could see that my fare was in no mood to look at scenery, but that was no reason why *I* shouldn't enjoy a pleasant ride, so I headed up Sixth Avenue for the entrance to the park.

He must have had a lot on his

mind because he started chatting nervously, jumping from one subject to another without really saying anything. I let him ramble on because he looked like a prospective client. Finally, he got to his problem.



"Are you married?" he asked. "Well, I'm married," he went on without waiting for an answer. "And do you know what that wife of mine has done? Well, I'll tell you. She's been taking out a hundred dollars a month from our joint account. And to make matters worse, she denies the whole thing!" "That sounds like a familiar situation," I remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever heard of blackmail?"

"Blackmail?" he exclaimed. "Don't be silly. My wife has nothing to hide. Except, maybe, her face."

"Don't dismiss the possibility," I cautioned. "In my business you get a sixth sense about things like that."

"Your business . . . ?"

With a flourish, I produced my calling card.

"Quentin Filbert," he read aloud. "Defective?" he added with surprise.

"That's supposed to be 'detective', but the printer made a slight mistake," I explained. "I got a good price on them, though."

"I never heard of a cabby detective."

"Why not? If New York City cops can moonlight as cab drivers, what's wrong with a cabby moonlighting as a detective?"

He shrugged, but said nothing.

"I'm glad you came to me," I said in my most professional tone.

"Hey, wait a minute," he protested, "I didn't come to you. I mean, all I wanted was a cab ride."

"Well, it's a good thing I happened along," I went on. "You've got a problem and you need professional help, Mr. . . ."

"Pfister. Charlie Pfister."

"Mr. Pfister. Do you have any idea who is blackmailing your wife?"

"Don't say that," he snapped. "We don't know that she is."

"On the other hand," I reminded him, "we don't know that she isn't."

He thought about that. "That's true."

I asked him to think back over the past year to recall anything suspicious or any change in his wife's routine. He fell silent as we started down the west side of the park. We had just passed Tavern-on-the-Green when he finally spoke.

He remembered that the withdrawals had begun about the time his wife had started going to Zoltan Kandor. "He's an astrologer—supposed to be a good one—with many wealthy clients and a penthouse office on Park Avenue."

My mind started clicking and the possibilities began falling into place. "Maybe this Zoltan character

finds out things about his clients, deep dark secrets from their past, and blackmails them to keep quiet." The wheels continued to turn. "Look," I said, "I know how I can help you. I'll go to this Kandor and make believe I want him to do my horoscope. I'll dangle some bait in front of his nose—some phony story about a juicy incident from my past—and we'll see if he bites."

"No. That's ridiculous."

We were coming out of the park and I could see he still needed selling. "I take all the risks and *you*—"

"Let me think it over and if I'm interested, I'll come to your office."

"You're in my office now," I reminded him.

"We're only guessing," he went on. "And, anyway, I can't afford a detective."

I persisted. "I'll tell you what I'll do. My usual retainer is fifty dollars, but for you I'll make it \$2.45."

"Why the odd figure?" he asked.

I told him that was the amount on the taxi meter.

"Drive two more blocks to my office," he said, "and I'll make it an even three bucks."

As I pulled up outside the Associated Chemical Building, I left him with a word of comfort. "Don't you worry. Your troubles will soon be over."

He must have been choked up

with emotion, for all he could say was, "Yeah . . . yeah, sure," and ran from the cab.

So that's how I got my first case! I had to wait two days for my day off before I could get started. Dressed in my best suit, I approached Kandor's apartment house on Park Avenue with a jaunty, confident gait. I was stopped at the front entrance by a doorman who gave me an icy stare, then informed me that the only way to Kandor's penthouse was by a private elevator around the corner.

I found the door and walked into a small square vestibule. It was absolutely bare except for another door. I opened that and found the elevator waiting for me.

It was like no elevator I had ever seen before. The walls were paneled in rich mahogany, the thick carpet on the floor was gold and there was a bench along the back wall padded with green leather.

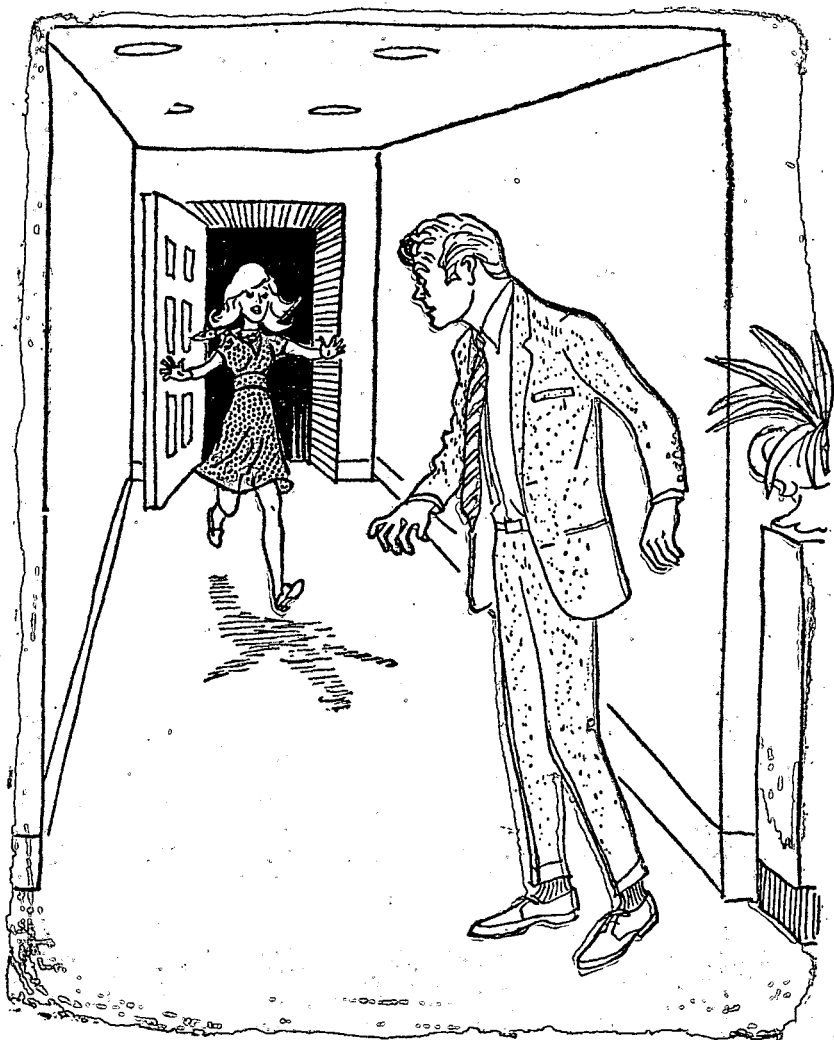
The doorman had said it was a private elevator. It sure was! The only button on the panel said PENTHOUSE. I pressed it, sat down on the cushioned bench, and enjoyed the quiet, smooth ride to the top of the building.

The elevator stopped, the door slid silently open, and I found myself in a small reception room. It was empty. I cleared my throat,

and coughed, but no one came. As I settled back in a comfortable sofa, a piercing scream rang out from another room.

I started to run. Then I remembered that I was a detective and

working on a case, so I headed down a long corridor. A door at the other end flew open and a tall platinum blonde came running toward me, her face as pale as her hair.



She threw her arms around me and sobbed, "He's dead! Someone has killed Zoltan!" Then she fainted in my arms before we could be properly introduced.

I was stunned. I had jumped from Lesson 14 (Blackmail) to Lesson 25 (Murder)!

My detective's manual—which I had left at home—is pretty complete, but I couldn't remember if it had any instructions for a situation like this. I knew I should look at the body, try to revive the girl, and call the police . . . but then I decided that I should first put the young lady down. She was getting heavier by the second.

What I did next I'm not quite sure, but I did revive the girl. Her name was Julie Archer and she was Kandor's secretary. I also got a look at the body. He had a gaping hole in his chest. After Miss Archer revived me, I think I called the police because the next thing I knew, they were all over the apartment and a cigar-chewing detective with a cigar-chewer's breath was giving all his attention to me.

Lt. Kaplan—that was his name—had a lot of questions to ask me but he didn't give me time to answer any of them. What was my name? What was I doing there? How did I happen to walk in right after Kandor was killed?

I told the inquisitive Lt. Kaplan that I could not answer any of his questions as I had to protect my client.

"Client? What kind of a client?"

I was forced to reveal my true identity. I produced my calling card which I had secreted in my wallet. The lieutenant's eyebrows came together as he studied it.

"Quentin Filbert?" he said. Somehow, he made it sound dirty.

"Yes," I answered proudly.

"Filbert," he repeated. "Like the nut?"

I blanched. "No. Filbert . . . like the saint."

He took another look at the card. "Defective?" he asked in that same tone of voice.

I explained about the printer's mistake.

"Show me your license," he demanded.

"I left it in my cab."

"In your cab?" That man only seemed to speak in questions. I explained that I was a cab driver, but that I had studied nights to be a detective.

"So you moonlight?" Another question.

"Only every other week," I explained. "When I work at night, I daylight."

His eyebrows did a funny little dance over his eyes. Then the barrage of questions started again.

What was I doing in Kandor's apartment? Who had hired me? Why couldn't I tell him? Why was I investigating the astrologer? Did I know that I could be arrested for withholding valuable information?

Finally, I was forced to tell him how I had gotten the case. Then we turned to the matter at hand—solving the murder of Zoltan Kandor.

We walked into the inner office where detectives, photographers, fingerprint experts, and the coroner were busy at work.

The medical man told Lt. Kaplan that the astrologer hadn't been dead more than an hour.

Another man motioned us over to the desk. "Listen to this," he said as he switched on the dictating machine.

The tinny voice that came out of the machine must have been Kandor's because his secretary, sitting in a corner, started to cry all over again.

There was a lot of mumbo-jumbo on the tape about Venus being in parallel with Mercury and that business deals were to be avoided in the next week. Then there came a sound like a door being opened and Kandor stopped in the middle of a sentence. There was a pause after which he said, "Are you back again? I thought you had left. What do you want?" Kandor's

voice now got excited. "That gun—what are you doing with that gun? No!" he screamed. "No, put it down!" There was the sound of a shot that almost shattered the loudspeaker.

The recording stopped and the secretary started crying hysterically. One of the cops helped her out of the room.

"Well," said the younger detective, "this is the first time I've ever heard a murder actually being committed."

"But what good does it do?" said Kaplan. "He didn't mention any names."

"No," I added, "but Kandor *did* leave a clue."

I had wandered over to the desk and was leaning over Kandor's still form. After the first shock of seeing a dead body, I was becoming accustomed to it.

"What do you mean?" the lieutenant asked, reacting to my last statement. "And stay away from that body!"

"I'm here to help you, Lieutenant," I reminded him.

He didn't comment, but his eyebrows got together for another wrestling match.

I pointed to a row of heavy round bronze discs on Kandor's desk, each with a different symbol. There were about a dozen of them, but there was a space where the

ninth one should have been. I pointed out that the missing disc was clutched in the dead man's right hand.

Kaplan pushed me aside, got the piece of metal out of Kandor's hand, and held it up for us to see. The only thing on it was a picture of a half-man, half-horse holding a bow and arrow.

"I think it's a sign of the zodiac," the younger detective volunteered.

"It's a clue," I exclaimed. "In his last dying moments, Kandor was trying to name his killer."

"You sound like Perry Mason," Lt. Kaplan said unkindly.

"No," I corrected him. "Nick Carter."

Kaplan turned and went into the outer office where Kandor's secretary was resting in a chair.

"What is this?" he asked as he held up the bronze disc for her to see.

She studied it for a second. "Why, that's Sagittarius. It's one of the twelve signs in the zodiac."

Number Two detective had a question. "What period does it cover?"

"Let me see," she said. "It comes right after mine . . . so that would make it November 22nd to December 21st."

"Do you have any idea why Mr. Kandor would have grabbed this particular disc?" Lt. Kaplan

wanted to know. "Is there any particular significance to it that might give us a clue to the murderer?"

"I don't think so," she answered. "He may have just grabbed the closest thing on the desk."

The lieutenant then wanted to know who had been to see the astrologer that morning.

There had been three callers, according to Miss Archer. The first was Gloria Grant, the fiery-tempered movie star. She had stopped in on her way to the studio where she is currently making a movie. Barbara Sterling, the much-married socialite, had been the next to arrive. Just before noon, a Mr. Winston Carlisle had shown up. Miss Archer informed us that he wasn't a client, nor did he have an appointment, but he insisted on seeing Mr. Kandor.

After Carlisle left, Miss Archer had gone out to lunch and left her boss to dictate some horoscopes. "I was only gone half an hour," she concluded, "and when I went into his office I—I found him like that." She dabbed her eye again with a soggy handkerchief. Then she added: "I heard a noise in the outer office and found this man standing there."

All eyes turned to me.

"I've told you why I came," I said.

"But why today? Why at the

very moment the body was discovered?"

"That is a coincidence, isn't it?"

"You haven't answered my question," he barked.

"Today's my day off. I couldn't start work on the case until today."

"Would you please tell us, then, everything that you saw as you entered?"

"There's nothing to tell. I tried to go in the front of the building but the doorman sent me around the corner to the private entrance. The elevator was waiting for me, I stepped out into this room, heard this young lady's scream—and the rest you know."

Lt. Kaplan's assistant spoke up. "Anyone could have sneaked in while Miss Archer was out to lunch and bumped him off."

Kaplan shook his head. "No. Kador said, 'What are you doing back?' It has to be one of the three callers."

Kaplan got the addresses of the suspects from the secretary while I jotted them down on my shirt cuff. Then he turned his attention to me. "Well, it looks like you don't have a case. Kador is dead so you can tell your client he has nothing to worry about."

"Yes," I said. "It's a good thing Mr. Pfister's wife didn't show up here today."

The secretary gasped. "Pfister?"

Good grief, I had completely forgotten about her! She was here this morning, too. Very early. She only wanted to pick up her new horoscope; said she couldn't wait for him to mail it."

My heart shot up into my throat.

"Well, isn't that interesting?" Lt. Kaplan gloated. "Thank you, Mr. Filbert. You've been most helpful."

I hurried out of there and lost no time in beginning my murder investigation. I had to find the real murderer and clear poor Mrs. Pfister's name.

My first stop was the Brooklyn studio of Colossal Pictures where Gloria Grant's new movie was being shot. I had no trouble finding it because I had taken fares there many times. It's a big sprawling place in the middle of a run-down residential neighborhood. They say they used to shoot a lot of silent movies there.

I discovered that my detective's license (which I had picked up on the way) was a key that could open almost any door. It got me right into the makeup department where glorious Gloria herself was being made up to look like a tired old scullery maid. She told me that the whole makeup job would take two hours. My wife can get the same effect by just getting out of bed in the morning.

Before I could ask her a ques-

tion, the door opened and a natty little man with a stump of a cigar in the corner of his mouth and patent leather hair stalked in. He turned out to be Gloria's manager and muscle man, Eddie Compton.

Both Gloria and this Compton guy seemed genuinely surprised to hear that Zoltan Kandor was dead. Gloria started to cry and so did the makeup man when he saw what the tears were doing to his makeup job.

"Oh, what am I going to do now?" Gloria wailed. "I've been going to dear Zoltan for years and I never make a movie without consulting him."

Eddie Compton had a different point of view. "I'm glad he's dead," he said. "Now maybe you'll start listening to me." Compton turned to me. "Do you know what that guy did? He advised Gloria not to take the lead in 'Honeymoon For Three.' Do you realize what that picture could have done for her career? And that's not the only bad bit of advice he gave her."

"Oh, Eddie," she chided.

"Don't 'Oh, Eddie' me!" Eddie screamed back. "You've lost a lot of money because of that guy . . . and fifteen percent of that would have been mine!"

"Sounds like both of you had good motives," I remarked. That stopped them both.

I asked Gloria to tell me about her visit to Kandor's office that morning. There wasn't much to tell. She had her chauffeur stop off at Zoltan's place so she could pick up her new horoscope. He appeared well and happy, and she stayed only a minute.

I had to find out if Kandor was blackmailing her, so I phrased my next question in a subtle way. "Did you give him any money?"

She didn't flinch or bat an eyelash. "No. My accountant sends him a check every month."

As I left, I asked them when their birthdays were. Gloria's was Leap Day, February 29th, and Compton's was November 25th. He'd been born on a Thanksgiving Day.

"Yeah," said Gloria, "and your mother got a real turkey."

During the name calling that followed, I sneaked out and headed next for the Fifth Avenue apartment of the eccentric socialite, Barbara Sterling.

Barbara—as she is known affectionately in the society and gossip columns—literally sparkled when I walked into the drawing room, but it wasn't her personality. She looked like a walking ad for Tiffany, Cartier and Harry Winston all rolled into one. She had enough diamonds on her to balance the national budget and I was sur-

prised that she could lift her arm to shake hands with me.

She seated me between the three poodles and the two Siamese cats on the white silk sofa and introduced me to Edward Baldwin, a young ballet dancer. She called him her protégé, but the papers say he's the future Mr. Sterling the Fifth. As the conversation progressed, I could see she was keeping him on his toes.

"If you are here about poor, dear Zoltan," Barbara began, "we've told everything we know to some gentlemen from the police. They were here just a few minutes ago."

I told her that I was investigating the case for a client of mine who was also involved, but I was careful not to mention anything about blackmail.

"Mrs. Sterling has been going to Zoltan for years and years," Baldwin piped up. "He advises her on the stock market. Isn't that right, dear?"

"Yes, dear." By her tone, I almost expected her to pat him on the head.

"Why, I bet she's one of his *oldest* clients. Isn't that right, dear?"

"Why don't you walk the dogs, dear?" she snarled.

"But, Barbara, I took them for a walk when we came back from Zoltan's."

I smelled a clue. "Did you *both* visit Zoltan this morning?" I asked.

"Why, yes," said Barbara. "My poodles go everywhere I go. And wherever the poodles go, Edward goes."

"Then you are both suspects," I announced.

Edward dropped his teacup on the white carpet and Barbara shot me an icy stare. "What do you mean, we are both suspects?" she demanded. "The police said nothing about our being suspected of poor Zoltan's death."

"Suspect! Suspect!" Baldwin exclaimed. "I can't get mixed up in a murder case. I've got my career to think about."

"Oh, shut up!" said Barbara. "Why should I be suspected?" she asked me. "I had no reason to want him dead."

"Are you sure? We have ways of finding those things out."

"Well, I will admit that because of some advice he gave me, I lost quite a bit of money on the market."

Eddie-boy's head shot up. "You lost money? How much?"

I pursued the subject. "If Zoltan's advice was costing you money, why did you keep going to him?"

Her answer was vague and evasive. Now I was ready to spring my secret weapon. "Was it blackmail?" I asked.

This time, it was Barbara's turn to drop a teacup.

"What's he talking about?" Baldwin wanted to know.

She ordered him out of the room, much against his wishes.

"Just when it's getting interesting," he pouted as he closed the door behind him.

Barbara turned to me with fiery eyes. "What do you know about the blackmail?"

"You mean, you were really being blackmailed?" I asked.

"You mean, you didn't know?" she shot back.

"Just a lucky guess," I confessed.

"How many people know about it?"

"Nobody else," I assured her.

"You mustn't tell a soul," she pleaded. "It started with a stupid mistake that I had made when I was very young. My father had managed to keep it out of the papers, but Zoltan found out about it. He had ways of extracting information like that." She leaned over and grasped my hands. "You must keep my secret. I've suffered enough." Then she began peeling off bracelets and her earrings and depositing them in my lap. "Please take these and—"

I placed the glittering rocks on her coffee table. "Please, madam, I am a licensed detective and I do not accept bribes. Rest assured that

your secret is safe with me. Unless, of course, I can prove that you really did kill Zoltan Kandor and I can absolve my client's wife."

"I swear to you, I am innocent," she cried as she knelt at my feet.

"We shall see. We shall see."

I started toward the door, then remembered an important question. "By the way, Mrs. Sterling, when is your birthday?"

"What has that got to do—?"

"Never mind. I just want to know when you were born."

"Why, I'm a virgin."

"I didn't ask about your—"

"No, you don't understand," she said. "I was born under the sign of Virgo. September 1st."

"And Mr. Baldwin?"

"He's a lamb."

"No doubt," I remarked.

"April 4th. Aries."

I thanked her and left.

The last suspect on my list—Winston Carlisle—was the hardest to get to see. My detective's license didn't impress his secretary. "No one sees Mr. Carlisle without an appointment. He's a very busy man."

"So am I," I snarled, deciding that a little Mike Hammer was needed. "Pick up that phone and tell Mr. Boss-Man it's about a little matter of murder."

The secretary eyed me suspiciously, then picked up the phone

and did as I had commanded. Presently, I found myself in the tycoon's office.

Once again I had beaten the cops because my announcement that Zoltan Kandor was dead seemed to come as a surprise.

"How come a private detective is investigating the murder?" he asked.

"Never mind that now," I said, still in my Mike Hammer character. "What I want to know is, why did you go to see a fortune-teller when you are not a client of his?"

Carlisle was trying to be as tough as a cookie as I was trying to make believe I was. "If you know I went to see him," he snapped, "then you must know why I was there."

"Suppose you tell me," I said, wishing I had a cigar to chomp on.

"Well, it's no secret," he began, "that my daughter, Pamela, has fallen in love with this fortune-seeking phony. I could see that it was really getting serious, so this morning I went to see him and demanded that he stop seeing her."

"You had a fight, then," I said, trying to lead him on.

"A verbal one, yes. I accused him of being interested only in Pamela's money. After all, he's old enough to be her father."

"What did Zoltan say?"

"He said their love affair was written in the stars and that I

could do nothing now to stop them."

"And you threatened to kill him," I surmised.

"That secretary told you!"

"Miss Archer? No, I merely guessed it. But I'm sure she heard the whole thing and will testify against you."

Mr. Carlisle started losing his cool. In fact, big drops of sweat began rolling down his forehead. "I admit I said it, but it was just an idle threat. I never meant anything by it."

"Well, you're still a prime subject and I wouldn't leave the city if I were you," I cautioned him. "Oh, by the way, what is your birthday?"

"November 12th," he said, startled.

"Oh? Mine is the 11th. We're both Scorpios."

"Is that bad?"

"Well, you can thank your lucky stars you're not a Sagittarius," I said.

I turned, opened the door, and walked right into Lt. Kaplan's assistant.

"Well," said Mr. Smarty-Pants, "look who's here. Still playing detective?"

I ignored the insult. "I'm through with Mr. Carlisle," I said coolly. "You can have him . . . if you can think of any questions to ask him."

"Oh, incidentally, Mr. Brazil . . ."

"The name is Filbert."

"Sorry—wrong nut."

I ignored that, too.

"We just came from your client's house. If I were you, I'd stay away from there."

"Why?"

"He just threatened to kill you!"

I found Pfister's address in the phone book and hurried over to fill him in on my investigation and to find out why he was in an ugly mood. We almost collided at his front door.

"I was just going to scour the city for you," he said heatedly. "Let's go into the kitchen. I don't want your blood to stain the living-room rug."

"Are you unhappy with my services?" I asked.

A blood vessel started throbbing on the side of his neck. "With your services? I never hired you."

"It's true we didn't sign a contract, and I didn't press you for a retainer, but I distinctly remember—"

"If I gave the impression I wanted you to investigate that Zoltan character for me, I'm sorry. All I said when I left your cab was a noncommittal, 'I'll think it over.'"

"But Mr. Pfister," I protested, "I've got this case well in hand and I can help prove that your wife is innocent."

Another blood vessel started popping in his neck. "My wife was entirely out of the case until you opened your big fat mouth. Lieutenant Kaplan told me all about it."

"I admit I did make a slight boo-boo," I confessed, "but if I could only talk to your wife . . ."

"You'll do no such thing. She's upstairs having hysterics. And she's not speaking to me, either."

"Why?"

"She thinks I hired you and got her involved. She's furious that I thought she was being black-mailed, and she was humiliated when she had to explain that the money she was taking out of the bank was going to her no-good unemployed brother. She hadn't wanted me to know."

"But if I can only prove that she isn't guilty—" I pleaded.

"The police have already done that. She had no motive to kill Kador."

"Well, that's good news. All the other suspects have good motives."

"She also has an alibi for the time of the murder."

A horrible thought hit me. "Alibi! I knew there was something I had forgotten."

"What's that?" he asked.

"In my investigation, I forgot to ask the others about their alibis."

"Some detective!"

"Well, this *is* my very first case."

Pfister purpled. "You mean you were trying to palm yourself off on me—without experience?"

"Even Sherlock Holmes had to start somewhere."

"But why did you have to start with me?" he cried.

"You'll feel differently when I crack this case. I'm working on a valuable clue which the police don't seem to think is important. As soon as I figure it out, I'll know who killed Zoltan Kandor. By the way, when is your wife's birthday?"

"July 14th. Why?"

"Good. She's not a Sagittarius."

"No," Pfister sighed. "She's a Crab!"

I left and headed for the park. I had a lot of thinking to do, so I rented a boat and rowed out to the middle of the lake. I wanted to be away from any distractions so I could clear my mind and figure out that elusive clue. Now, how would Sam Spade go about it?

Well, in his last dying moments, Zoltan wanted to leave a clue that would point to his murderer. So he grabbed the little bronze disc for Sagittarius. Now, does this apply to anyone in the case? Only one. Eddie Compton, Gloria Grant's manager. But he's the only suspect who was *not* in Zoltan's office this morning. And we heard

Zoltan, in his own voice, say: "What are you doing *back?*" The clue, then, has nothing to do with anyone's birthday.

So, I continued to reason, what do we have left? A picture of a half-man, half-horse, and none of our suspects fits that description. Was Zoltan trying to tell us that it was a *man* that shot him? No. That would so far apply to two people. What *was* Zoltan trying to tell us?

On the disc, the half-man, half-horse is holding a bow and arrow. Are any of our suspects proficient at—and then it hit me! The answer to the clue and the name of the murderer! How stupid of me! It was so obvious that I had completely overlooked it!

I was so excited I jumped up, forgetting I was in a rowboat. The boat tipped, I lost my balance, and fell into the lake. But I didn't care. I had solved my first case and I couldn't wait to get to police headquarters and confront Lt. Kaplan. I managed to get ashore, got into my cab, and drove downtown.

I stormed into Kaplan's office with three cops hot on my heels, trying to stop me. Before I could speak, Kaplan took one look at me and said, "Filbert, you're all wet!"

"You haven't even heard my story," I protested.

"What story?"

"How I solved the Kandor case."

"You what?"

I told him about my investigation and how I struggled to figure out the clue. "So, I realized that it had nothing to do with anyone's birthday—or a half-man, half-horse."

"A centaur," said Lt. Kaplan.

"Oh. Well, I knew it had nothing to do with that. But what was the—the thing holding in its hand?"

"A bow and arrow."

"Precisely," I said, jumping to my feet. "And what do you call a man who uses a bow and arrow?"

"An archer," the lieutenant answered.

"Correct! Zoltan Kandor was trying to tell us that his murderer was an archer. Miss Julie Archer, his secretary."

The lieutenant smiled. "I know. We arrested her an hour ago."

"So all you have to do is arrest—You know? How did you . . . ?"

"You gave us the answer yourself earlier today. You said that when you came to see Mr. Kandor, you found the private elevator waiting. Remember?"

I remembered.

"Well, then," he continued, "what Miss Archer told us was not true. She said that she had just come back from lunch and found Kandor's body. But if she had just come back from lunch, the elevator

would have been at the *top* floor and not at the bottom. Right?"

I nodded.

"Which means," he went on, "that Miss Archer never went out. She overheard the fight between Kandor and his last caller, Mr. Carlisle. She realized that Kandor had jilted her. She was in love with her boss and now she knew for certain that he was going to marry someone else. When Carlisle left, Kandor told her to go to lunch. Instead, she found his pistol and went in and shot him. And that's when you arrived."

"Oh."

"So you see how simple it was, once I recalled what you said about the elevator." He smiled. "And you went to all that trouble to come up with the same answer."

I was beginning to feel sick.

"You really figured out that clue all by yourself? That's kind of clever."

"You really think so?" I said. "Would you mind writing that in a letter of recommendation?"

"Oh, get out of here," he retorted with a wave of his hand. But I noted a hint of a smile on his face.

So I picked myself up and sauntered out of the office. I had solved my very first case and, somehow, I had the feeling that Lt. Kaplan and I would be working on more cases together in the future.

*Proverbially, whatever is unknown is magnified.*



**A**s soon as I got out of the car I heard the urgent, blood-chilling, whirring buzz of a big rattler in a bad mood. I reached back into the glove compartment for the cheap, six-shot .22 revolver I always take on fishing trips. Turning, I spotted him coiled at the edge of the road in the shade of the high sawgrass that walled the sandy track.

My first shot missed him clean. A body shot wouldn't have fazed the big five-footer, and the head

was a small, weaving target. I steadied the gun barrel over my left wrist and my elbow on the car hood and took careful aim. This time the hollow point blew out whatever brains he had. Some men don't bother to kill snakes. I do. I hate a snake by instinct—whether he crawls or walks.

I dropped the little gun into the big side pocket of my canvas hunting jacket and got the rest of the gear out of the old clunker I keep for these trips back-country. I was wearing faded khaki pants and shirt, jacket and aged felt hat, and high leather boots as protection

against the hated, deadly snakes.

I put together my best hollow glass spinning rod, reel and monofilament. Extra gear went into a duffel bag, slung over one shoulder, along with a couple of sandwiches and a pint thermos of hot coffee. A razor-honed sheath knife swung at my belt. Last of all I reached into the glove compartment for some extra .22s. There

The Millers had poached a half dozen fortunes of sorts and gambled and drunk them away. I half suspected Pop of still doing a small trade in illegal 'gator skins at six dollars a prime foot. I was positive he had a makeshift still on one of the tangled hammocks near his shack.

None of that mattered to me. I'd met Pop four years before in



## *A Novelette by Edward Y. Breese*

was only an empty paper box, but it didn't worry me. There were still four shots in the cylinder.

This was where I left the old car. The road, a couple of sandy tracks between twin walls of sawgrass, went on a mile farther to Pop Miller's place, but the canal bridge at this point was rotted out and a couple of planks were missing. I could still walk across.

Pop Miller was a native, a swamp rat who lived in a shack his grandfather had built on the edge of the Big Swamp back in '95, when a fortune could still be made in poached egret plumes.

a crummy gas station and bar on State Route 41. He was drunk at the time, and a pair of cane cutters were happily going through his pockets. After I changed their minds for them, I put Pop's head under the pump until he woke up. He insisted on taking me home with him out of gratitude, and I went along to see that he made it.

After an eight mile drive and a mile walk, we reached his cabin on the edge of nowhere. His daughter Marabelle, then long-legged and fourteen, made us a breakfast of near-solid black coffee laced with raw corn from the still,

boiled grits, and fillets from a couple of the biggest bass I'd ever seen.

It was the start of a beautiful friendship. Whenever I wanted to go fishing Pop was my host. In return, I acted as guide and factotum on the rare occasions when he and Marabelle came into Miami.

I also arranged for one of my favorite juke joints to buy up the jugs of villainous whiskey he brought in from time to time. They resold it out the back door, at cut rates, of course. When Pop had tossed in a possum to "sweeten the mash," and even the skid row boys couldn't swallow the result, I made up the difference to them.

Over the years Pop's whiskey got worse, his joints stiffer, and Marabelle blossomed like the wild hedge rose. The bass seemed to get bigger and hungrier every year. It was a lovely relationship.

My mind was full of peace, contentment, and big bass as I walked up the ruts through double walls of sawgrass. My nose smelled sun and swamp. The long rod in my hand shivered like a living thing. Johnny Hawk was a country boy for the present. Johnny the adjuster, who made his living doing the things that no one else dared to try, was left back in the roar and tumble of the Gold Coast megalopolis. I was happy in a very special way.

Now the ground lifted gently

out of the swamp like a whale's hump showing at sea. The sawgrass turned to jack palmetto and dwarf cypress, and an armadillo ambled out of my way.

I came happily over the rise and saw Pop's shack on the bank of the drainage canal. I saw the big one in the boots and leather jacket holding a struggling Marabelle.

I saw Pop against the wall of his home, with his arms spread high and wide and his hands nailed to the planks to keep him erect. His head hung loose on what I knew must be a broken neck. Someone had ripped off his khaki shirt and knifed a ragged, bloody swastika across his chest and belly. I heard voices and crashes coming from inside the shack, and standing in a neat row were three big motorcycles, painted shiny black except for a red swastika on each.

Marabelle and the big man saw me at the same instant. "Go back, Johnny," she shouted. The man yelled for his pals inside.

I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck and the adrenalin jump into my blood. I wanted to watch the red face with its yellowed teeth and scraggle of beard dissolve under the impact of one of my heavy .45 slugs, but all I had was that lousy little .22 in my pocket, the knife and the rod, and the hot, red boil of rage inside. Then I remem-

bered one thing more. When it came to fighting for keeps, I was the professional and these were only apprentices. It was wolf against alley curs, and I knew what I would do.

I came easily into the clearing, strolling, in no more hurry than the turkey buzzard circling overhead. The rod was in my left hand, tip advanced. I kept my right away from knife and hidden gun. I just walked in to tea.

The big fellow gave Marabelle a cuff that knocked her flat on the sand, and stripped off his wide belt of cycle drive-chain. This was his weapon, a sort of combination sword and club that could cut a man to bloody rags.

His friends came out of the shack, gabbling like feisty hounds after a coon. The little one had a knife half as long as his arm. The other was tall and thin with a bush of sandy beard. There was blood on his leather jacket. This must have been the one that cut poor Pop. He had the only gun I saw, a lightweight .38 on an aluminum frame. When a gun like that is fired, the recoil kicks a man for sure. Even a good shot can't hit anything at fifteen feet. I felt better right away.

I stopped still and put the butt of the fishing rod into soft sand in front of my feet. My left hand gripped it at shoulder height, form-

ing a rest, for better accuracy.

The three cycle riders did exactly what I expected. They fanned out about fifteen feet apart, waved their weapons, then came on slow and stiff-legged. At forty feet the gunner snapped off a shot. It went over my head as I expected. He tried again, but the hammer only clicked down this time. I took the .22 out of my pocket and rested the barrel in the angle formed by my left hand and the rod. I knew it shot high and left, so I pulled trigger when the sights touched his right cheekbone. The little bullet made a neat round hole slightly left of center of his forehead. Even a .22 in the brain kills.

The other two ran to my left, where the palmetto scrub was thick enough to give some cover. A .22 won't bring down a running man unless he's hit in the spine or brain, and the gun I had wasn't accurate enough to make that shot on a moving target. Still, I wanted the big one, at least.

I grabbed my little sheath knife and gave it all I had in a long, overhand pitch. It was only a try, but my luck was in. The point went into his bull neck right at the base of the skull, missed the spine, but ripped the jugular. He dropped, spurting blood.

The little one with the big knife made it into the scrub and went



right on through. When he came out the other side he was on the road and out of my sight.

I knew he was too far ahead to chase, so I walked over to where a bruised and white-faced Marabelle was trying to get up off the

ground. I helped her to stand.

"I'm all right, Johnny," she said. "Oh, Johnny, go help Pop."

"Pop's A-OK, Marabelle," I said. "Nothing can hurt him now. Nothing at all."

She got the point. I could see she

wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. "Oh, Johnny," she said, "they wanted money. They thought Pop had money hidden out here. Then they decided they wanted me, too. Oh, Johnny . . ." The last came out in a wail. She was close to breaking right then.

"Did he?" I asked. "Have any money, I mean?"

"Thirty dollars," she said. "Thirty lousy dollars in a tin can, to buy cornmeal and grits and side meat. You know Pop. He couldn't hold onto money if he wanted to."

"I only got two of them," I said. "I didn't have a proper gun."

"It's all right. I'll know the third one when I see him. I'll get him someday."

"Don't even think that way, Marabelle. Killing's not for you. Leave him to his karma to kill. Besides, that's not what I meant. These dogs run in packs, don't they?"

"That's right," she said, dusting off her blue jeans and the ragged man's shirt she wore. "This bunch call themselves the Nazi Raiders. There's thirty or forty of them. They ride those things and hang out in back-country bars. There's women with them, too. What's a karma, Johnny?"

"Never mind," I said. "The end of it is death. Now we've got things to do before Knifeboy brings all

of his pals back looking for us."

"Oh, Johnny, do you really think he will?"

"Of course he will," I said. "As soon as he gets to the bridge he'll jump the wires on my old heap and go for help. The question is, how far does he have to go?"

"Not very far, I'm afraid. You know that bar you pass right after you turn off the highway? The Raiders have taken to hanging out there since you came here last. There's always some of them."

Now I remembered having seen cycles parked with the cars when I passed the bar a couple of hours earlier. At the time it hadn't really meant anything to me. Now it did. "One road out of here," I said, "and they sit at the end like a cork in a bottle."

There was no way to go around the bar, either. The road was the only strip of land this side of the highway that wasn't swamp-muck and under water; at least it was if you didn't count the banks of the drainage canals the State and the Army Engineers had built. The bar plugged the road.

"You have a gun, Marabelle?" I asked.

"All we had was Pop's old shotgun. They threw that in the canal. They wouldn't have got it, only Pop wasn't feeling too good."

Pop had been half-drunk, of

course. Rest his feckless old soul.

"They came on us so fast, Johnny, we didn't have no time. The machines come up the road before we knew. Pop was trying to find shells for the gun when they grabbed him. I ran for the dugout but the big one grabbed me. They took an axe and stove in the dugout *and* the boat."

"That's no good," I said. I'd expected to use one of the boats to get away.

"They *like* to smash things, Johnny. You wait till you look inside. Everything smashed. First they looked for money. Then they wanted to torture Pop, but he fought 'em. He fought 'em good, Johnny. That's how come they broke his neck, I guess. The tall one and the little one nailed him up like you seen. Then the big one said he'd take me first. After they all had me, he said, I'd talk or they could burn me. That's when you come along, Johnny. Right out of heaven you come along."

"There's plenty wouldn't agree with that," I said. "Anyway, I'm glad I came."

"What kind of people are they, Johnny? Pop never done nothing to them."

"Marabelle," I said, "I don't know what they are. There's times I don't think they *are* people. I've known good men and bad men,

but someway these aren't even like men at all. But that's not our problem. They'll be coming for us soon. We've got to get out of here. We can't use the road, and we've got no boat."

"I know a way," she said. "It just might work if the water ain't too high. Pop and I know this swamp better than any living person."

"It had better work," I said. "Now you go and pack up some food and whatever you think we'll need. Just don't make the pack heavy. We'll travel fast or not at all."

I went and got my knife out of the dead man's neck. Dead, he looked even more like some kind of animal than when he'd been alive. The body was so dirty I tried not to touch it, but I had to look for more weapons. I left the chain belt, and took his switchblade knife. The bum had sixty dollars I didn't want, and his share of Pop's roll would have been only ten. On his left wrist he wore a cheap wristwatch.

When I got to Longboy I picked up his snubnose .38. First, I checked to see why it misfired. That was easy. There were only three shells in the cylinder and all three had been fired. He had no spare cartridges in his pockets or saddlebags either. I understood his

carelessness better when I found three marijuana cigarettes in his shirt pocket. The gun was no good without ammunition, so I pitched it into the canal.

That left me with my knife and three lousy rounds in the .22. Marabelle had a razor-edged fish knife and the gig she used to spear fish. Close up, it made a mean weapon. Still, nobody could accuse us of being over-gunned this trip.

I knew I had to get Marabelle away from there fast. She was eighteen now, and leggy in a different way. With her brown skin, light blue eyes, regular features and figure, she was as beautiful as a doe. They'd be in no hurry to kill her, especially if she managed to get that gig into a couple of them before they caught her. She'd go through a special hell first.

The long drainage canal to handle overflow from the big lake twenty miles away skirted the rim of Pop's hammock, set off from the swamp proper by high, man-made banks. Those banks were shaggy with dwarf mahogany, pin-oak, and trash brush like a big hedge standing above the sawgrass and muck. This time of year the water was low inside the banks. For anyone with a boat, the canal was like a six lane highway. A canoe could be paddled to any point, carried over the bank, then

set down in the swamp or in one of the ponds or overgrown natural waterways, thus offering a wide choice of ways out.

Lacking a boat, it wasn't simple at all. While this wasn't the Everglades—actually we were only on the edge of the big sea of grass—it was still tropical swamp. Nobody could just walk across. If the snakes or the gators didn't eat you, there were always the bugs. There was mud and quicksand and leeches and sharp-leafed sawgrass. There was heat to smother and kill a man, and knee-deep mud, and ponds too deep to wade and too weed-foul to swim.

Somebody who knew the swamp like his own hand might just possibly be able to find a safe way through. Nobody else stood a chance. I was betting Marabelle had learned enough from Pop.

We couldn't stay on the canal bank forever, either. Going east and south, it made a bend and went under the old bridge where I had left my car. One man with a rifle could wait for us there. I was sure the Raiders knew that as well as I did.

The other way, west and north, it was twenty air miles to the lake; at least twenty-five by canal. There was plenty of time for some of them to go around by road, rent a boat, and wait for us a couple of

miles up the canal. Either way, we'd have had it.

I was willing to put blind faith in Marabelle. She put some black and salty country ham and cold biscuits in a sack along with a bottle of water and a pint flask of Pop's whiskey, an antiseptic among other things. Wearing a pair of old laced army shoes on her bare feet and a battered "cowboy" straw hat on her head, she had an old compass on a strap around her wrist, and had put new batteries in Pop's five-cell frogging flashlight. We were ready to go.

We scrambled up on the near bank of the canal and she unhesitatingly turned west, going deeper into the swamp. The sky was cloudless, and the water almost smoked under the summer sun. Walking wasn't easy in the tangle of brush—no path here, of course—and we were sweat-soaked in minutes. There was no time to waste and we pushed ourselves as fast as we could, what with dodging brush and watching for snakes. We hadn't even waited to bury Pop. It wouldn't have done much good anyway in wet sand. We'd taken him off the wall and laid him decently inside his shack. If we made it, we'd come back for the body.

The start was none too soon. We were barely a quarter of a mile

along the bank when we heard cycles roaring on the road. They didn't know we'd left, so they stopped on the far side of the hammock and skirmished through the palmettos. That took a few minutes. When they came out into the clearing, I glassed them with the lightweight binoculars I carry in my fishing bag.

The little man was there, and five more. All of them wore black boots and leather jackets with red swastikas, and long hair under crash helmets or black caps. I'd expected more, but I guess Junior had just brought along whoever was at the bar when he got there. They all had pistols, and one had a rifle. The thing I liked least was that one had a walkie-talkie. That meant they could keep in touch with their friends and send people to head us off, whichever way we went.

Marabelle and I stayed quiet in the brush so's not to give away our position. We could have spared ourselves the trouble. They tracked us onto the canal bank easily enough and saw which way we'd gone. Then they came right along after us at a run. We could track them by the waving brush and grass. As soon as we took off, they could spot us the same way, though we were both better woodsmen than any of them.

That made no real difference anyway. It was a one-way street with no ending. All they had to do was keep coming till they wore us down in the heat. Even if I'd had a real gun, as they probably assumed I had, they were six to one. They had revenge, and the thought of Marabelle, and God knows what twisted urges besides, to whip them on.

We kept going as fast as we could over mud, stones and tangled roots. We ducked under larger branches, and the small ones whipped us cruelly. Vines snatched our feet and thorns bit like hornets and tugged at our clothes. On one side was a forty-foot wide canal, an average of twelve feet deep. On the other was sawgrass, water, quicksand and mud. Coming up fast behind were the six armed hoodlums wearing the swastika badge.

It couldn't last forever, and we both knew it. I stopped running finally and caught Marabelle's elbow. She was winded, and her face was white under the sweat and tan, but this was a daughter of pioneers. There wasn't any whining or crying. She just waited to see what I had in mind.

I gave her the .22. "There's only three shots, honey. Only three. Go on a ways, and if they catch up, use the last one on yourself. It'll be best."

"Yes, Johnny. I know it will."

"Give me the gig and leave me here. By now they're all strung out chasing us. I'm going to try to take the first in line and hope he's carrying a real gun. If he is and I can get it, then an army won't bother us. You understand?"

"Let me stay and help, Johnny."

She meant that, and I knew she'd be as good as a man in a fight, but I had to turn her down. "Pop wouldn't like it, baby, and I fight best alone. Just keep going away. They won't find it easy to run over Johnny Hawk. Should you hear me go down, you take to the swamp and hide. They won't find you."

She reached up and kissed me. Somehow it was a child's kiss and a woman's all in one. Then, without a word, she went on through the brush.

Where I stood, the canal made a fairly sharp bend from west to north. By getting over the rim of the bank right at the start of the bend I'd have cover, and anyone following would have to come right at me. The way the brush grew there, the easiest and most open ground was on my side. Natural instinct would bring him up on my side and head-on. That's why I'd picked this spot to make a stand.

I went over the rim. The slope

was gentle so I didn't slide on down. Thick grass and vines held my feet.

The grandfather of all water moccasins was coiled up in the grass about four feet to my right and a little below. I never saw him till he reared his head to hiss at me. Then it was too late to do anything but freeze. He looked as big around as a tire, and I'd guess him a hundred years old. The fangs hung out of his cottony mouth. If he decided to move in and strike, there was very little I could do about it. I had to go on as if he weren't there, and trust to whatever angel was doing guard-mount over Johnny Hawk that day.

I hung there with the cold sweat on my spine and the mud-and-snake stink in my nose and wished I'd brought a proper gun. I felt as if I'd left both arms at home, but there was nothing I could do about it.

The hue and cry was coming up fast now. I watched the brush and figured the lead man must be a hundred feet ahead of the next one.

I'd meant to stay under the bank till the last minute, but the big moccasin made that impossible. Hanging to the slope as I was, with no proper bracing, I wouldn't be able to use the gig with any real force.

As carefully as I could I began to

pull myself back over the lip of the bank. The big snake watched. His tongue vibrated and his head turned to follow me. I was moving away and not attacking, and I guess he knew that, or maybe he was fat enough to be lazy. I'll never know. Anyway, he didn't strike. That's all that really counted at the time.

I got over the top on my belly. Somebody was coming in fast just beyond a clump of bush. His feet jarred the ground as he ran. I got up on my left knee and braced myself.

He came around the bush at a run right in front of the four sharp tines of the gig. I had just time to notice it was the man with the rifle. Then I went into action.

I rose up to plant both feet, and drove the gig forward and up with all the strength I had. There was a solid shock that almost knocked me off my feet. The tines went through the black leather jacket as if it were a paper towel. I hit him high and far enough left so both heart and lung were torn.

His face went slack with horror and shock as he dropped the gun and tried to scream. Blood came out with the air like a struck whale blowing. His hands clawed at the slippery bamboo shaft of the gig.

I flung him over the bank, then scooped up the gun, an ancient

Mauser. It was cocked, and I shot the second man as he came into sight down the line. From the way the bullet slammed him I knew it was soft-nosed sporting ammo in the magazine. The man reeled to his left over the bank. I heard him hit the water hard.

"Pour encourager les autres," I said to myself.

"You shouldn't swear, Johnny."

It was Marabelle coming out of the brush behind me with the .22 in one hand and her fish knife in the other. I might have known she wouldn't leave me. "Not at a time like this. Not at a killin' time you shouldn't." Marabelle had had a couple of years at a small high school, but the course hadn't included French.

"Somebody up there likes us, honey," I said. "Now I'm going to be busy for a minute. I think the rest of these bums will stay quiet for a while, but you watch, just in case. Yell if you see movement."

I looked over the bank on the canal side. The second man I'd hit was just barely floating in the muddy water. There was blood around him and the body twisted convulsively as catfish and other creatures worried the exposed flesh of face and hands. What little current there was pushed him slowly back toward his friends. I hoped they'd all get a good look at him.

Much nearer to me, the first one was still on the bank—mostly because the shaft of the gig had caught in the vines. The big snake there had hit him a couple of times and gone back into the water. I could see his head watching me from the lip of the mud.

I was careful going down to the body. Between the blood and the mud, that bank was slippery, and I didn't want to fall. With some effort I went through the pockets and found a full box of twenty rounds for the rifle and four loose cartridges. I checked the magazine and filled it. I had twenty-eight rounds in all.

I got the gig out of him and cleaned the tines in mud and grass. I didn't touch his wallet or the ten-inch length of lead pipe which was his only other weapon. I rolled the body into the water. Like the others, he was so dirty I hated to touch him.

"He's one of their big people," Marabelle said. "I've seen him with Whitey lots of times. They'll never forgive us now."

"I'm not asking them to," I said. I assumed Whitey was their captain or fuhrer or whatever. I looked at my watch. It was 5:42 in the afternoon. I'd shot the rattler at my car just before noon.

I got out my binoculars again and scanned the canal bank. All I

could see was the shimmer of rising heat waves. That figured. There were still four of them back there someplace, but now they knew I had the rifle, which reversed the odds for sure. They weren't likely to try moving again till dark.

"We could move safely enough, honey," I told Marabelle, "if only I thought it would do us some good. They'll have both ends of this dike plugged up before long. I don't know that it makes much difference what part of it we sit on."

She'd been wiping at her face with a blue bandanna. Now she gave me a reproachful look. "I don't lead nobody into no trap," she said. "You know I've lived in here all my life. Unless the water's higher than I think it is, there's a way out. Leastwise, there's a fighting chance we can make it through."

*And a little child shall lead them,* I thought. Then I looked again. Marabelle was no child. I said, "Just what do you have in mind?"

"You see that little hammock out there?" She pointed at the small island of trees and brush against the horizon. It seemed a long way off in the sea of grass. "That's where Pop's got—had—his still. I been there often."

"By boat," I said.

"Pop's a fox," she said. "You

know that, Johnny. He'd never paint himself into no corner. He keeps a dugout there for emergency, and that ain't all. There's a way to get there without no boat. It's a ridge, a reef like, of coral rock that comes out of the mud and runs for miles. The top's under water all the way and it twists around some, but a man can walk it safe if'n he knows where to find it. Way we found it was when they built this canal they had to blast a cut through it. Pop and me, we went out later and traced it right out to his hammock there and beyond."

I'd have kissed her then except I was a little afraid of what would come next. This was no time to forget where we were. "That'll do it," I said. "How far is this reef ahead of us?"

"Bout a quarter mile ahead of here is all."

"Then all we have to do is to keep from being run over or pushed past it until dark—and I don't think we'll be pushed. Only four of them are close to us now, and I don't believe there's a volunteer hero in the lot."

There wasn't. I think they sent one man back for food, and a long hot trip of it he must have had. The other three could watch for us and keep us bottled up with their pistols. They had the walkie-talkie

to keep in touch with their pals.

Marabelle and I moved up the dike a little way to where we could sit under cover but still watch the elbow where the fight had taken place. A real bush fighter might have come up on us under shelter of one of the banks. The Raiders were just apprentice assassins, without the nerve to attack an armed and alert enemy.

We sat there and ate my sandwiches and drank coffee from the thermos. Marabelle began to feel the shock and grief of Pop's death.

"What am I going to do, Johnny?" she asked.

"Come into town with me, honey," I said. "If Pop had title to the hammock, we'll get you back to it later if you want. In the meantime there's a woman friend of mine who'll take care of you for a while. You just get us ashore, and let me worry about the rest of it."

"I'll do that," she said between bites. "I'll take us in near Dandytown where you can get the sheriff to go after those murderers."

I thought that one over, then decided to give it to her straight. Marabelle was growing up fast. "It won't be that easy, Marabelle. We've got no proof of anything against the gang or its leader. They can claim the ones we killed were the only ones involved, and we can't prove different."

"We got truth and the Lord for us."

"We do, but the Lord can't come into court. And these days it takes more than truth to convict. It takes very special kinds of evidence, which we haven't got. Why, if they have a smart lawyer, he'll probably accuse us of starting the whole thing and want *us* tried."

"They'd never listen. They'd never—"

"I wish I were that sure. The police have been looking for something on me for a long time."

"What will we *do*, Johnny?"

"It's sure we have to do something. You can't come back here while they run loose, and I can't rest. There's identification in the glove compartment of my old car that'll lead them to me. They'll want to see me about their dead pals. We're the ones who'll have to do something to stop them. But don't worry about them now. I've got an idea, and I'll play it off the cuff as we go."

"I trust you, Johnny."

What man could ask a finer accolade?

Sunset would come about 7:30 that night, and there's no real twilight in the tropics. We had to be at jump-off point before dark so Marabelle could be sure to recognize the spot. We timed it well, moving very carefully. Marabelle

had a good eye. We scrambled down the east bank of the dike just at dark and found hard footing under several inches of water and thin mud. Once we got twenty feet off the bank, the sawgrass swallowed us up.

I tied the blue bandanna over the head of Pop's shrimping flashlight so only a little light could get through. Marabelle used it in the tight spots, but mostly she trusted to memory and to sounding for the rock ahead of her with the shaft of the fish gig. The reef was only a few feet wide at the top so we had to be careful, even though I'd taken a compass sight on the hammock. If we lost the rock, it would be easy to die in that mud. We didn't lose it.

Instead, we just about lost our minds. With the dark came the mosquitos. They came in regiments, brigades, divisions and whole armies. They blackened our faces like masks and gloved our hands, and all of them were hungry.

I ripped pieces of my shirttail to make masks so we could breathe. They could literally have clogged our nostrils. It was as bad as anything I've ever been through. Then I remembered there should be insect repellent in my duffel bag. We smeared it on hands and face. It slowed them down, but some of

them came on to gorge anyway.

We kept going. It took us two hours to cover the mile-and-a-half to the hammock. Once I stepped on a snake. He twisted and struck at my leg. The boot saved my life. I kicked him away into the grass.

Once at the hammock, Marabelle guided me to a narrow path through the jungle growth to a clearing where Pop's still sat in slightly less liquid mud. Near it he'd built a thatched chickee, the open-sided, roofed platform of the Seminoles. Pop had improved the original design by adding mosquito netting all around. It was old and torn, but a lot better than nothing.

It was safe to light the kerosene lamp in the chickee as long as we kept it turned low. The heavy growth confined the light. After that hike we were both tired enough to eat some of Marabelle's country ham and biscuits, washed down by the last of the coffee. She offered me some of Pop's whiskey. I don't drink when I'm working.

"Where's the headquarters of this bunch of motorcycle hoods?" I asked when we'd finished.

"I really don't know, Johnny. They hang out at bars and old motels, places like that, along the back roads. Pop and me, we stayed away from them as much as we could."

I thought about it. "Never mind.

Tonight I think most of them will be at the bar on the road to your place; as close as they can get to the action and still liquor up and be out of the bugs. How long will it take to get there from here, honey?"

"Johnny!" She was shocked white enough so the freckles on her nose and cheeks stood out. "We ain't going *there*, Johnny? That's the last place—"

"They'll look for us," I finished for her. "Besides, we've got to go."

"Maybe if we got clean away from here?"

"No dice. There are gangs like this everywhere. Sooner or later they'd find me—us—and it would all be repeated. I wouldn't last long, if I left unfinished business behind me."

"What can you *do*, Johnny?" She was worried.

"To kill a snake," I said, "you cut off the head. I'm going to take their top man and give the rest something to remember as long as they live. If it works, we'll both be safe. If not . . ."

This time she finished for me. "Pop always said a man only dies once. All right, Johnny."

She dragged an old tin trunk out from under the floor of the chicken. "Pop's war chest," she explained, and opened it. When I saw what was inside I kissed her for

sheer joy. We were all set now.

There was dry clothing and some gear we didn't need, and a couple of packages wrapped in pieces of an old plastic raincoat. Inside the first was a .45 automatic and about twenty cartridges in the half-moon clips. It was old, and it wasn't sighted like my gun, but it was good enough to make me a whole man again. The second package was nearly as good; it contained three sticks of dynamite and a short length of fuse.

"It's real old and been wet," she explained. "Came from when they were blasting for the canal. Pop said it might be handy someday. He . . . uh . . ."

"Liberated it," I said. "The wet won't matter. This stuff is waterproofed or they couldn't have used it. Okay, Marabelle, let's go."

She had to make one more try. "Couldn't we just go away from here, Johnny? I've always liked you prime. We could be real good for each other. It ain't me. I don't want you hurt."

I kissed her, and I guess I knew how she liked me. "I like you plenty, honey," I said. "It's not that. There just isn't any other way. Even if I were willing to run, it never works that way. Now come on, before you make me lose my nerve."

She didn't argue anymore.

It took us three hours to pole the dugout from the hammock to solid ground near the bar we wanted to raid. That made it about one o'clock at night, time enough for the Raiders to get drunk and careless. We could hear them yelling and the jukebox slamming away even before we saw the red neon letters that spelled out Rose's Bar—Eat—Drink.

*And be merry*, I thought. I'd told Marabelle just what to do while we were crossing the swamp with some of Pop's mosquito net around our heads.

As I'd thought, they had no sentry. Why should they? There must have been thirty men and girls inside, and we were supposed to be hiding in the swamp, waiting till they came for us.

I was relieved to see my old car parked with a couple of others in the lot, along with a gaggle of motorcycles. If I'd brought the good convertible in the morning, they'd have sold it someplace by now. I can't ride a cycle—at least I never tried—and I liked the feeling that, if all went well, we'd have wheels to go home.

I went over to the car and fixed it where they'd jumped the wires, and started it with my key. It was OK, so I gave Marabelle the key. "If anything happens to me inside, you use the car to get out of here.

Go get the sheriff. With my body fresh, he'll have to go after them, particularly if he has you for an eyewitness."

I wasn't nearly as sure as I sounded, but I knew if I didn't give her a good reason to get out of there, she'd stay and fight the whole mob by herself. I guess she believed me.

There was a big clamor going on inside while they worked up their nerve to go after me in the morning. I gave Marabelle the rifle and the extra shells, and put the .45 under my belt on the right hip, butt forward the way I liked it. What was left of my fishing jacket covered it. I unsnapped the scabbard so my knife would slip out fast and easy. Then I bunched the three sticks of dynamite and tied them with a couple of half-hitches in the length of fuse. I took the mosquito net off my face so I could see.

I went in through the swinging screen door.

At first nobody noticed me. The men were all too busy drinking and pawing the women and bragging about themselves. I'd have spotted the leader easily enough even if Marabelle hadn't pointed him out through the window. He was in the middle of the bar, drinking bourbon out of the bottle. They called him Whitey because he was an albino—white hair, red eyes and

all. Still, that was the least of it.

His getup was the silliest rig I'd seen yet, but in its own way almost frightening. The long, silky white hair protruded from under a World War One German spike helmet to frame his thin face. The red eyes gave a touch of color. His jacket was black *velvet* and pinned all over with real medals from some hockshop. Around the thin neck was what looked like a woman's diamond necklace with an Iron Cross Second Class for pendant. Add tight white pants and black, tooled leather cowboy boots and you have the picture.

Two guns in patented quick-draw-special holsters were tied down to his thin legs. They were frontier models with ivory and silver handles. Silly as they looked, a slug from either one would break me in half.

I got well into the room before anybody noticed me. Then it had to be the little guy I'd last seen on the canal bank. He knew me, all right. Most of them heard the screech he let out, and the rest saw him point at me. Everything stopped but the jukebox and the giggling of a woman in a back booth.

I kept moving toward the middle of the bar. Everybody got out of my way merely because I kept coming and nobody told them not to.

Even Whitey did a slide to the end of the bar at my left. The two hundred pounds of over-aged tramp, who must have been Rose, just goggled at me from behind the bar.

I've watched hoods most of my life. A man who knows what he's doing can make time to do it by catching them off balance. These were no exception.

The little man with the big knife was telling them who I was. His voice was cracking with excitement and, in spite of himself, fear. Because panic is contagious, and because they did nothing while they listened, I let him finish. I could see eighteen men in the room, and a dozen women. Most of them were young, but four or five of the men and a couple of the women were older. These would be the dangerous ones if the lid blew off. The kids are enthusiastic in a fight, but without the needed experience. They all wore boots and some sort of black jacket. Beyond that, the sky was the limit. There were red swastikas all over the place.

I walked up to the bar and set the bundle of dynamite right in the middle, like a crazy candlestick. Everybody watched. A few were realizing I was only one man and were beginning to get their nerve back.

"That's dynamite," I said needlessly.

Whitey finished counting his seventeen friends. All of them were armed, if only with chain-belt or knife. "So what," he said.

"So this, punk." I raised my hand, and Marabelle rammed the Mauser's muzzle right through the glass of a front window. Everybody jumped. She stood to one side so they could see the gun, but not who was behind it. They saw only the gun barrel, the window and darkness.

"That gun's aimed right at the dynamite," I said. "Anything happens to me and one shot will touch it off. Then this whole place goes to toothpicks—and you with it."

"You too," Whitey offered.

"I'll be willing," I said. "You ready to join me?"

"The cat's crazy," a woman said. "He's gotta be crazy."

"Don't bet on it." This was one of the older men in the back of the room. "That's Johnny Hawk. You crazy apes run Johnny Hawk into the swamp! I'm declaring out right now. You hear me, Johnny? I'm out of any fight."

"I hear you, Sam," I said. "Just put your hands flat on the table and keep them there."

I could see a few of them had heard of me. Whitey was one. "What do you want?" he asked.

"This—all of you get out of this county—out of this area. I give you till noon to call in your men and move. Go so far a letter can't find you. If any of you try to stay, or to come back, you're dead. I promise."

Whitey licked his lips. He couldn't say yes and stay boss. "No. You're crazy." He shot a sidewise glance at the unwavering rifle in the window.

"I'll make you a proposition." I spoke as much to the rest of them as to Whitey. "If you, Whitey, can take me right here and now, my friend with the rifle will go home. If I take Whitey, the rest of you get out by noon. Go anyplace you want, I don't care, and nobody'll follow. That's a sporting proposition."

I watched them think it over. Whitey didn't like it. All he could see on me was the sheath knife, and still he didn't like it. He was smarter than he looked.

I couldn't give them too much time to think. Somebody might remember that most of a dynamite blast is down. Three sticks wouldn't come close to killing all of them. It was a chance to be a hero. I didn't want heroes.

"It's a chance, Whitey," I said. "It's the only chance any of you have. Turn it down and I step out the door, and *wham*; the blast

goes off. So take it or leave it."

His followers snarled at him in chorus. *The king must die for his people*, I thought. That's why they let him be lead wolf in the first place. It added up to no choice for Whitey.

"The time is *now*, Whitey," I said.

It still took him thirty seconds to work up his nerve. Then he went for the two big guns. He'd have been smarter to try for only one, but he'd been practicing with that quick-draw rig and, for a punk, he was fast enough.

I'd been killing men when he was drinking mother's milk. My .45 came out waist high, the hammer fell as the gun leveled. His guns had barely cleared leather. I pulled trigger again.

The two shots knocked him off

his feet. He was dead on the dirty board floor. Some of the drunker ones didn't even see it happen.

"Anybody else?" I asked. "Is there a hero in the house?"

There wasn't.

"Remember," I said, "everybody out of the county by noon. Anybody who comes back, I send after Whitey." I was positive nobody would try to stay.

I went over to the bar and stuffed the dynamite into my pocket to show them I didn't need a cover anymore. "Hasta mañana," I said, and walked out the door. I didn't even warn them not to follow. I knew they wouldn't.

Marabelle was at the car. "Let's go," I said. "It's been a long day. I want to get home and relax."

"Yes, Johnny," she said. Then, "I hope Pop was watching."



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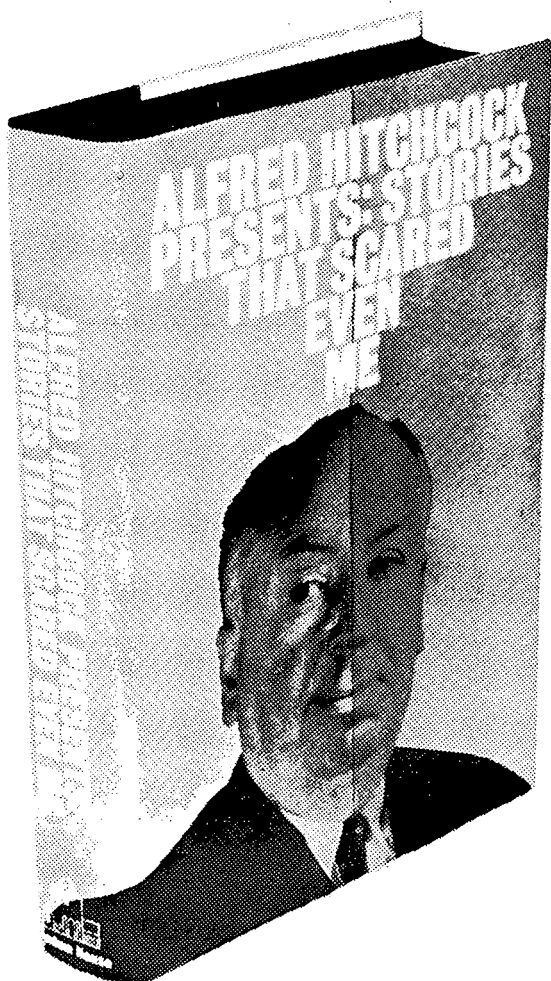
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