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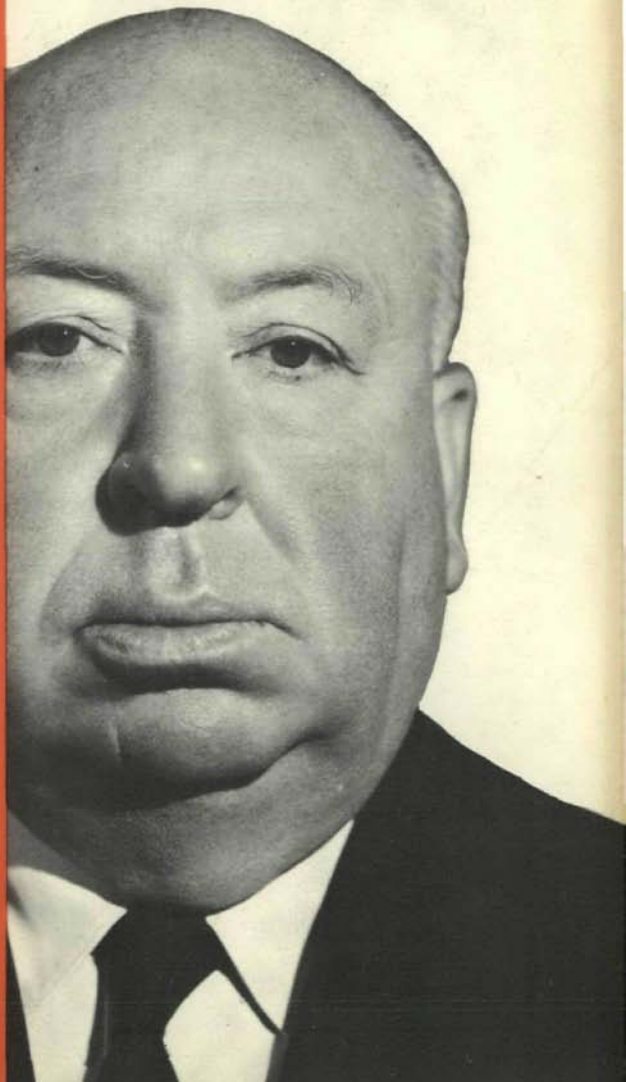
ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

September 1969

Dear Reader:

It is not yet too late for a vacation this year, not even for a second trip. If your usual haunts have paled, perchance my ideas will offer a solution, though I must confess that they are not designed strictly for a rest.

Such is the case with my first suggestion, a homey hotel in the city run by the mob, or another in the wilderness run hardly at all. For a change of pace, try a taxi tour at gunpoint, a hospital frequented by a barber who gives a singular trimming, a movie set where scalping is permitted, a country store where—but enough.

Perhaps you would rather stay at home. If that is the case, you may still experience these trips from your favorite chair. They and many more are presented within by an outstanding group of travel agents.

Read on . . .

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VOLUME 14, NO. 9 SEPTEMBER 1969

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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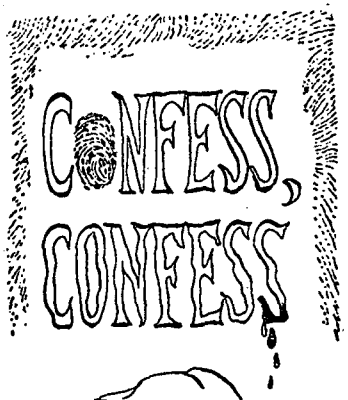
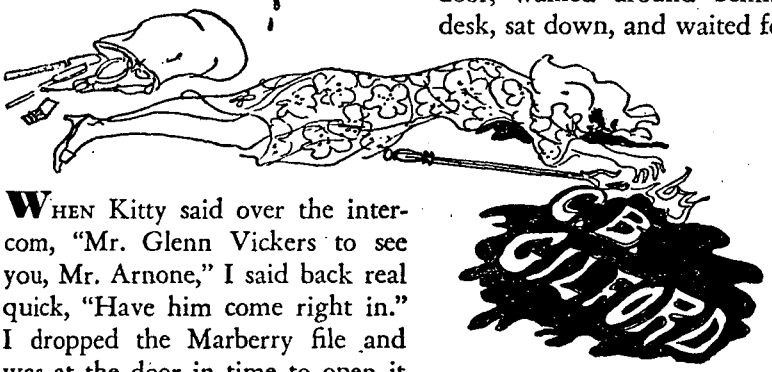
NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 14, No. 9, Sept. 1969. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions $6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $7.00 (In U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of addresses should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404.

Several famous scribes have penned, "Truth is stranger than fiction," but we are indebted to an unknown for the appendage, "—but not so popular."





WHEN Kitty said over the intercom, "Mr. Glenn Vickers to see you, Mr. Arnone," I said back real quick, "Have him come right in." I dropped the Marberry file and was at the door in time to open it for the visitor. An unexceptional lawyer reacts that way when the visitor is a man who almost became governor of the state, might still become governor, could go on from there to even greater things, and at the very least is considered a power in political circles; reacts that way even if he thinks he has something the big man wants—and he must have wanted something or he wouldn't be dropping by in the first place.

"How are you, Mr. Arnone?" Vickers began as he came into my office, and shook my hand in what might be called a sincere fashion.

I ushered him to a chair, shut the door, walked around behind my desk, sat down, and waited for him to say what he wanted from me.

He didn't hesitate. "Are you still Jimmy Dent's lawyer?"

I nodded. Of course all this had to concern Jimmy Dent.

"Do you still keep in touch with him?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever go up to the . . . to the prison?"

"Yes, I go up to visit him in the death house," I answered, reminding him of the exact place, though I was sure he didn't need the reminder.

Glenn Vickers swallowed, then licked his lips. He was an impressive-looking fellow, medium height, broad shoulders, football player's build. Although he was about forty, he still had all his hair, and it was silvery gray. His face was strong, square, handsome on the rugged side. "Dent has about two weeks, doesn't he?" he asked.

"He's slated to go at six a.m. on the twenty-third," I said.

"You've tried everything, Mr. Arnone." It was a statement and a question too.

"Everything I know. I'm all out of legal maneuvers."

"Maybe I can help," he said suddenly.

I tensed and fidgeted. Maybe I had already guessed that he had something like this in mind, and yet it was strange for the widower of a murdered woman to want to save the life of the convicted murderer. There was an angle too, I was aware of that.

"I've been through the courts," I told him. "It would take executive action from the governor."

"I know that, Mr. Arnone. But I have some influence with Governor Masden."

He was nervous. His hands kept clenching and unclenching. He didn't drink or smoke. His publicity had always made a point of that, so I didn't offer him anything —but he needed something. Finally he leaped out of the chair, paced a few lengths of my little office, and ended up standing at the window, looking out at the city, his head turned away from me.

"I'll level with you, Mr. Arnone."

"That would be best, Mr. Vickers."

Then he talked, never once glancing back at me. "Let me assure you, Mr. Arnone, that I have no affection for Dent. He killed Audrey. I'll be the first to admit that my wife and I weren't on the best of terms, but I certainly didn't want the problem solved that way. It's rather ironic, isn't it, that Dent's life is in the hands of Governor Masden, and that if it weren't for Dent, I'd be up there in the executive mansion?"

He paused, but I was sure he wasn't waiting for comment from me.

"Dent murdered my wife," he went on after a moment. "I don't see that there's any doubt about that. He admitted planning the burglary when he read the item in the paper about our leaving town

to attend that political meeting. Right? He admitted breaking into the house. Right? He even admitted seeing my wife . . ."

"But he denied killing her," I said.

He whirled on me. "The jury didn't believe him," he shot back. "They took the evidence. A sack of burglary tools dropped in the house when Audrey surprised him, no prints anywhere, none on the murder weapon, because Dent wore gloves like any good burglar, but inside the tool bag was a book of matches, with a print on it—Dent's. They picked him up. He confessed to the burglary—"

"But not to the murder," I insisted.

Vickers bit his lower lip, trying to keep his emotions in check. "That's just it. He's been convicted. Why doesn't he confess? What does he have to lose now?"

I looked back at him steadily. "What does he have to gain?" I asked.

He waited another few seconds or so, probably to get himself under better control, or to gather courage. Then he left the window and sat in a chair facing me. "That's what I've come here for," he said in a fairly calm voice. "Dent has a lot to gain by confessing. His life."

"Go on," I urged him.

"Governor Masden and I are friends. I know his thinking on this matter. The jury assessed the death penalty, but the governor doesn't like capital punishment. He'd like to commute the sentence, but he'd like to have a good reason for showing mercy. A more cooperative attitude on the part of Dent might turn out to be a good reason."

I sat back. The deal smelled, but I didn't dare describe it to Glenn Vickers in quite those terms. "You're suggesting," I said, "that Jimmy Dent save his life by confessing to a crime he didn't commit."

He stared intently at me. "Do you believe your client to be innocent, Mr. Arnone?"

"I think there's a good possibility. Juries can be wrong. Your wife, Mr. Vickers, was bludgeoned to death in a particularly vicious way. She was struck on the head with the fireplace poker half a dozen times. One blow would have been enough, at least enough to knock her unconscious. A burglar surprised in a dark house thinks only of escape. He might strike one blow, granted. Then he would flee. But there were many blows."

"But Dent admitted he was taken by surprise," Vickers came back. "Surprised and confused. That was why he dropped his tools." It sounded like the argument the

D. A. and I had gone through at the trial. "He was excited, rattled. So when he hit the person who surprised him, he hit oftener than was necessary. He had read the item in the paper about our departure, and he was so surprised to find somebody in the house, he lost his head."

Vickers made that explanation sound even more convincing than it had sounded in the courtroom. Jimmy Dent, an experienced burglar, had indeed, uncharacteristically, lost his head. I remembered his version all too clearly. He had heard a noise in the front hallway and flashed his light in that direction. The beam of his flashlight caught a woman standing there. The whole thing had been so unexpected that he'd lost his nerve, according to his own story anyway. He lammed out of there and didn't even realize till much later that he'd dropped his bag of tools. According to his own story anyway, but could it have happened differently? Somehow I'd always believed little Jimmy Dent.

That was what I told Vickers now. Rattled or not, Jimmy just wasn't the type to hit a woman with an iron poker and keep on hitting her, getting in several blows before the body toppled to the floor. Jimmy was a burglar. Mrs. Vickers had been murdered by a maniac, cruelly, even sadistically.

"Wasn't that your conclusion, Mr. Vickers," I challenged him, "when you discovered your wife's body?"

He swallowed, licked his lips. That was how he reacted when he was nervous. I remembered those little habits of his from the witness stand.

"I didn't do much thinking that day," he said. "But afterward, when the police discovered the house had been forcibly entered, I . . . I . . . well, it became obvious how it had happened. Audrey had gone to bed, and the house was mostly dark. We'd left a couple of small lights on, just the sort of lights a burglar expects to see on in an empty house. When she heard the noise, she probably thought I had returned. We'd had an argument, of course, and at the last minute Audrey had decided not to go on the trip with me. She must have been sure I'd come back, maybe to say I was sorry. Maybe that was the last thought in her mind before . . ."

He stopped and looked away. I respected his feelings and his silence, so I didn't comment.

He didn't look at me either when he resumed. "Dent obviously killed her," he said. "He was in the house that night, and she was dead when I returned to the house

the next morning and found her."

I didn't say anything. We were both silent for a long moment, but between us was the unspoken thought, the thought that had been in the minds of a lot of people after the murder of Audrey Vickers, all during Jimmy Dent's trial, and had endured ever since. For any newspaper to have printed it would have been an invitation to a libel suit, but it had been whispered. I

had heard the whispers repeatedly.

There was another person who could have murdered Audrey Vickers—Glenn Vickers.

He could very easily have murdered his wife. He'd had the motive, a girlfriend named Leslynne Harwood, his secretary, good-looking, ten years younger than his wife. Glenn and Audrey Vickers had been on the verge of divorce but had stayed together for the sake of his political career. That hadn't stopped him, however, from continuing to play around with Leslynne Harwood. On the night of the murder, by his own admission, he had argued with his wife; subject, the Harwood girl. His wife had decided not to accompany him on the trip. That was why she had been alone in the house when Jimmy Dent broke in. Vickers had left by automobile, he'd said, drove a hundred miles, turned around and drove back with the idea of seeking a reconciliation with his wife. He'd found her murdered, of course. So he'd been driving alone all night, and had no alibi.

People had whispered . . . Maybe Glenn Vickers had come home in the middle of the night, had been told by his wife a burglar had broken in, abandoning a bag of burglar's tools, and maybe he had taken the opportunity to frame the unknown burglar for a murder that he himself committed.

"I know what you're thinking at this very moment, Mr. Arnone," Vickers said finally. "It's what many people seem to think, especially my enemies. I'm under a cloud, quite a black cloud, Mr. Arnone. I had to drop my candidacy for governor. Sorrow over my wife's death was the reason I gave, but you know what the real reason was. If I'd continued as a candidate the suspicion would have come out into the open. The trouble is that, even though Dent has been convicted, some people still have doubts. It's crazy. Dent was found guilty in a fair trial, but because I'm in politics, I'm vulnerable. My enemies don't accept the verdict, or they pretend not to accept it, because it's good politics for them to keep the suspicion alive."

"And a confession of guilt from my client would solve your problem," I finished for him.

He nodded. "Jimmy Dent," he said, "holds my whole future in his hands. I don't want him to be executed, Mr. Arnone. That would make everything worse to try to close the case that way. 'Petty criminal pays the penalty while big shot goes free.' I'd be deader than Jimmy Dent."

"Then the fact is," I pointed out to him, "that you don't want Jim-

my executed in any case. But you want to trade Governor Masden's clemency for a confession."

Vickers' face hardened. "You're right, Mr. Arnone. I don't want to see Dent executed, either way. If Dent dies, I'm dead, too, but I've got to take the gamble and the governor is backing me up. I can promise you this: if Dent doesn't confess, he'll go to the gas chamber."

"This stinks," I said. "You and Masden have the power."

He stood up. "Right," he answered. "I'm a desperate man. Also I happen to be an innocent man. Look, why should I be so tenderhearted about Dent? He killed my wife. Now his refusal to confess to that bloody crime is ruining my life. You'll forgive me, Mr. Arnone; if I fail to show too much concern for your client's feelings or his rights. I'm fighting for survival, and I'll fight dirty if necessary. Now if you want to go to the papers and tell them I made this offer, you go right ahead, and I'll say every word of it is a lie . . ."

I jumped up, too. "I'm not going to the papers," I interrupted him. I guess the man's sincerity had impressed me, more so than it ever had in the courtroom. "Mr. Vickers, I'll talk to my client. I can't promise any results. But I'll talk to him."

Some of the tension went out of Vickers and he almost smiled. "Fair enough. I'll be grateful . . ."

"Don't make me any offers, Mr. Vickers," I said. "I'll do what I can. For my client's sake, not yours."

My client, when they let me talk to him in that bare little square visitors' room up at the prison, didn't want to confess.

"I didn't commit any murder, Mr. Arnone," he insisted, for at least the thousandth time in private conversation between him and me.

Jimmy Dent had been a small man when I first met him, and he had seemed to shrivel during the course of the trial and now during his stay in the death house. The prison dungarees flopped around his thin body like a loose-fitting shroud. He had a tiny wrinkled face, with quick-darting little eyes. He was forty-four, had admitted to burglary as a lifelong profession, had been in prison twice before. Now he was a three-time loser.

"The governor could commute your sentence to life," I mentioned, "or maybe less. You might get out of this place some day."

"With a record like mine?" He laughed softly, wrinkling his face still further. "After I do those big shots a favor, after I take the heat off Vickers, they'll forget about me. I'll rot here. Besides, I didn't do it,

and I'm not going to say I did."

I tended to believe in his innocence, as I always had before, but I had believed Vickers, too. Maybe I was just gullible. Jimmy Dent had been a burglar. Glenn Vickers had two-timed his wife. I didn't approve of either, but here I was, believing first one and then the other when he said he hadn't committed murder.

"Jimmy," I said, "don't you want to stay alive at least? While there's life, there's hope."

He kind of grinned at me but it was hard to tell, on that strange, wizened little face of his, what any expression really denoted. "You're an honest man, Mr. Arnone," he said. "Maybe it sounds funny, but I appreciate honesty. Tell me the truth now. Do you think I ought to make a deal like this?"

I had to shrug. "I can't tell a man what to do with his life, Jimmy. I'm just the messenger boy. Glenn Vickers' future is at stake. Your life is at stake. I don't have any advice to give. It's up to you."

He was silent for a minute or two, and I didn't interrupt his thoughts. Then he said, "Vickers killed his wife, Mr. Arnone. I didn't. I saw her, but I didn't touch her. I swear I didn't. She was alive when I left that house."

I found myself believing him. I hadn't handled many criminal cases. Maybe I wasn't accustomed to how skillful crooks are at lying; but was little Jimmy Dent lying when confessing to the truth might save his life?

"You saw her, huh?" We'd gone through all this, of course, lots of times, Jimmy and me, and then Jimmy on the witness stand. He had never changed his story. Either it was the truth or it was well rehearsed. "Tell me your story again, Jimmy," I said.

"You know my story, Mr. Arnone. Are you trying to trip me up or something?"

"Tell it to me, Jimmy."

"I saw in the papers that Mr. and Mrs. Vickers were going out of town to a political meeting. That's how I always worked, watching the papers. I liked empty houses. I got into houses by mistake a couple of times when the people were home, you know, so I liked to do it my way. I'd heard of Glenn Vickers. I knew he had money and spent it. There'd be things around his house to pick up. So I went there. I wore gloves, like always, carried my bag of tools. I don't know how that book of matches got in there. I smoke too much, I guess. The doctors always say if you smoke too much, it'll kill you. I guess they're right, huh?"

He grinned wryly, but I didn't

laugh at his spontaneous witticism.

"When I got to the house I saw a couple of small lights on but it didn't fool me. People usually leave lights on just that way. I saw a window that looked real easy, so I jimmied it open. No real trouble, but I guess I left a mark. I climbed inside. I walked around in the dark, listening just in case, staying away from where the lights were. I got to the front hall. There wasn't any light there. Then I heard a sound, not loud; like somebody walking on the carpet, but it was right behind me. I guess I jumped. I had a flashlight in my hand. I turned it on as I swung around, and I got a quick look at this woman . . . Mrs. Vickers. Eyes mostly. Just a little higher than my own . . ."

Jimmy was short. Audrey Vickers had been tall.

"And hair. Waving around her head, like a woman's does. Light colored, kind of gray, I guess. Light colored anyway . . ."

Audrey Vickers had had gray hair.

"I smelled her perfume, too. The hair and the perfume . . . I knew it was Mrs. Vickers. I don't know why I should have been so scared, knowing it was a woman. What can a woman do to you, unless she has a gun maybe? And I didn't see a gun. Maybe I was scared because of the way she sneaked up behind me . . . and surprised me suddenly . . ."

Was this the flaw in Jimmy's story? He had said he knew he'd been confronted by a woman, and yet he'd been scared. Why? He'd been so scared that, although he'd held onto his flashlight, he'd dropped his tools. The bag of tools, with a book of matches inside, the matches bearing one of his fingerprints, had been his undoing. Hadn't it been uncharacteristic of Jimmy Dent to have panicked like that, to have dropped something, and run? From a *woman?*

"So I got out of there fast," he was saying, "but Mrs. Vickers was alive when I left."

Jimmy Dent had seen photographs of the dead woman. Yes, she'd been the one he saw, he'd testified, and very much alive when he'd departed the Vickers' residence.

"Mr. Vickers came home later," Jimmy rattled on. "His wife told him there'd been a burglar in the house, and there were my tools, so he saw his chance."

Yes, I knew of that possibility. The whole town knew it.

"Jimmy," I said, "if you could give me a better explanation of why you got so scared . . . If you saw something or heard something that you don't remember . . ."

"You don't believe me, Mr. Arnone?"

"It's the weakest part of your story."

He nodded sadly. "The jury didn't believe me. Now you don't believe me."

"Oh, I believe you were scared, Jimmy. The jury believed that much, too. You were so scared that you grabbed the fireplace poker and—"

"I wasn't even near the fireplace. I was in the front hall."

Round and round, familiar territory; maybe Jimmy hadn't wielded the poker, maybe Glenn Vickers had. It might take a Solomon to decide which of them was lying, but there was one inescapable fact: it was Jimmy Dent who was here in the death house, not Glenn Vickers.

"Okay," I said, "you don't seem the type to have bludgeoned a woman to death, scared or not scared. But it seems you'll have to confess to it if you want to save your life."

Jimmy's little eyes stopped darting around for a moment and looked at me squarely. "I save my life and spend it in prison," he said. "Vickers gets cleared of suspicion and lives happily ever after with that blonde of his. Is that a good deal, Mr. Arnone?"

I stood up. "It's the only deal you can make. Let me know if you decide to take it." I left to let him think it over.

It was pretty irregular, the widower of the murdered woman visiting the condemned murderer in the death house. Glenn Vickers had been able to arrange it, of course, because he had influence. I was invited to come along to chaperone, or maybe to referee.

These two men, so far as I knew, had never exchanged words before. They had seen each other every day during the trial, Vickers as a witness and a spectator, Jimmy Dent as the defendant sitting at the table with me. Now for the first time they met face to face, eye to eye.

Vickers had come to the death house to repeat the offer of Governor Masden's clemency. My pitch hadn't been persuasive. I suppose Vickers thought he could make a better one. He went through the same routine, but then at the finish he hit at Jimmy from a different angle. "Mr. Dent, what about your conscience? You killed a woman. You committed a crime. Wouldn't it make you feel better to try to make up for that a little by making a clean breast of it? You can't return my wife to me. You can't make that kind of restitution, but you can give me back my good

name. I'm in public life. A man in public life needs his good name. If I don't have that, you may just as well have murdered me, too."

Jimmy had been peering closely at his visitor, wrinkling his face, wrinkling his nose in that odd little way he had. I thought for a moment that he was impressed, maybe that he was going to cry—which would have been out of character completely for him—but it turned out that he was neither crying nor impressed.

"My conscience is clear, Mr. Vickers," he said. Then, his face still wrinkled, his nose twitching, Jimmy asked an odd question. "Were you there when I broke into your house?"

Vickers looked startled. "No, of course not!"

"I mean," Jimmy persisted, "I always thought you came home later and your wife told you there'd been a burglar in the house. But maybe you were actually there when I was."

It was an interesting possibility, I thought suddenly. The jury had believed Vickers' story that he'd driven a hundred miles or so, then turned around and driven home again. He'd had absolutely no proof. He hadn't stopped for gas or a cup of coffee, and thus had encountered no service station attendant, no waitress, or anybody else to verify his absence from the house. The point had always been that Vickers had *claimed* not to have been there, and Jimmy Dent had been *proved* to have been there.

"That's ridiculous!" Vickers was protesting. "How do you think I would have reacted to a burglar if I had been home?"

"By seeing you had a chance of killing your wife and framing me," Jimmy answered right back.

Impasse, and I became convinced at the moment that Jimmy was never going to confess. He was going to die maintaining his innocence, and a lot of people would go on agreeing with him . . . or at least pretending to agree in order to spoil Glenn Vickers' political future.

Vickers stood up, frustrated and furious. He was six inches taller than Jimmy, twice his weight. Obviously he wanted to wring the life out of Jimmy Dent right then and there, but he controlled himself finally, with that fist-clenching gesture of his.

"Thanks anyway, Arnone," he said to me, then turned and signaled the guard to let him out of the little room.

I stayed. Vickers and I had driven up here to the prison in separate cars because Vickers had had an earlier appointment with the governor and had come from the oth-

er direction. Now I was glad. I didn't want to ride home with Vickers in the mood he was in. With the way he might drive, we might not get home.

Also I wanted a word with Jimmy. "That's a curious idea you had," I told him when Vickers was out the door, "about the possibility that maybe Vickers never left home that night and was there when you broke in. What suddenly gave you that idea?"

Jimmy was sitting slumped and tiny in his chair. He looked at me, his eyes dull and hopeless. "His smell," he said.

"What smell?"

"His shaving lotion or cologne or whatever he wears."

"What about it?"

"It was the same smell I smelled in the house that night."

I leaned across the table. "Explain," I ordered him.

"I told you, didn't I, that I knew it was Mrs. Vickers because I saw her and because I smelled her perfume?"

"Yes, you said that."

He shrugged. "Well, when I smelled the same stuff on Vickers just now, I thought maybe . . . well, maybe I saw a woman . . . but smelled a man. Mrs. Vickers was there all right, because I saw her, but maybe it wasn't her perfume I smelled. Maybe it was her husband's cologne. Maybe he was standing right behind her, even if I didn't see him. It was dark, and I jerked my flashlight around just for a second, but the smell was real strong. I recognized it just now—"

I was on my feet halfway through his explanation. "Your idea gives me an idea of my own," I interrupted him. "Now you're absolutely sure you can remember that particular smell and can identify it?"

"Sure, Mr. Arnone. Didn't you smell him?"

"I got a whiff. It didn't mean anything to me, though, but I'll take your word for it." I started to leave. "Look, I'll let you know how my idea pans out."

He shrugged again and grinned. "I'll be here for another week," he said. "After that I won't be interested in anybody's ideas."

I left fast, found a guard to escort me out of the building, then out through the rest of the maze. Visitors' cars had to be left parked in a lot beyond the main gate. I arrived there just in time to see Glenn Vickers in his blue sedan pull out onto the highway. I was sure it was Vickers, and was equally sure he didn't notice me. I ran to my old car and in another minute I was racing after him.

I caught up with the blue car in a couple of miles, got close enough to make sure it was the same car

and that Vickers was in the driver's seat. Then I dropped back to a safe distance, but I doubt if it ever entered his mind that he was being tailed.

We were headed back to the home town, of course. I had thought he might drop by the governor's mansion again, but he had some other destination in mind. I had a notion what it might be, but I preferred that he go first and show me.

Following the blue sedan was easy enough on the highway, but when we hit the suburbs I had trouble. I wasn't used to this kind of work and Glenn Vickers was in a hurry. He ran yellow lights and even a couple of red ones, but I kept on him somehow.

We arrived finally, more or less together, at a fancy garden apartment setup. His car eased into a parking slot. I drove a hundred feet farther on and found my own. When I climbed out of my car, Vickers was just jogging through the entrance of one of the buildings. I followed at a more leisurely pace.

There were nameplates in the lobby. I found the one I had rather expected to find, Leslynne Harwood, 2-B. I stared at the thing for a moment, thinking Vickers must have it bad for that female. After all the publicity following the murder and during the trial, the story was that he had dropped Leslynne, hired a new secretary, and was trying to repair his image. Well, it looked now as if that story was propaganda.

I took the carpeted stairs and the carpeted hallway to 2-B. The door was closed. No sounds came from the other side. I pushed the bell.

I had to push it four times before anyone paid attention but finally my patience and persistence were rewarded by the knob turning and the door opening a few inches, revealing the face of Leslynne Harwood. She didn't know me or didn't remember me.

"I'm Sam Arnone, Jimmy Dent's lawyer," I introduced myself. "I tailed Mr. Vickers all the way from the prison and I'd like to speak to him."

Harwood looked blank, but the decision wasn't hers. The door was yanked open, and there was Vickers. He looked disheveled, distraught, but not like somebody who had been caught in the act of doing something wrong.

"Did Dent change his mind?" he questioned urgently.

"May I come in?" I asked back.

He stood aside, and I walked between them. Vickers closed the door.

"Did he change his mind?"

"Yes and no," I said. As long as

I didn't commit myself, I held an advantage. So I stalled.

As I'd passed Vickers, I'd caught a strong, sweet scent. What could I prove with that? I walked to the middle of the room, then turned back to face my host and hostess.

I'd seen Leslynne Harwood, although she had not been a witness at the trial. Tall, slim, sort of statuesque blonde, she was good-looking, I suppose, but not sensational; younger than Audrey Vickers, but other than that not any more attractive. Why should a man in public life risk everything for her sake, I wondered. There's no accounting for taste.

Yet here he was in her apartment, an apartment for which he was undoubtedly paying. An unemployed secretary couldn't.

Vickers stood there now, tie awry, sweat on his forehead, both fists clenching. "What do you have to say, Mr. Arnone?" he demanded. "What did Dent tell you?"

I tried to choose my words carefully. "Do you know why," I asked him, "Dent accused you of being at home on the night your wife was murdered?"

Angrily he shook his head.

"Because he smelled a sweet scent, perfume or something, that night, when he was surprised in the dark hall. He smelled the same thing today when you visited him at the prison. He smelled it on you." I paused, giving him time to digest my information morsel by morsel. "Mr. Vickers, what perfume or cologne are you wearing right now?"

His countenance was perfectly devoid of any expression whatsoever for a long moment. Then a look of horror began accumulating in his eyes. It grew, ate up his whole face. Slowly, slowly he turned from me to look at Leslynne Harwood.

"You spilled that stuff of yours on me this morning," he said in a choked voice.

She'd begun backing away from him.

"You were there that night," he went on. "I phoned you . . . I told you I'd had an argument with Audrey, that I was going to the meeting alone . . ."

She was shaking her head in desperate denial.

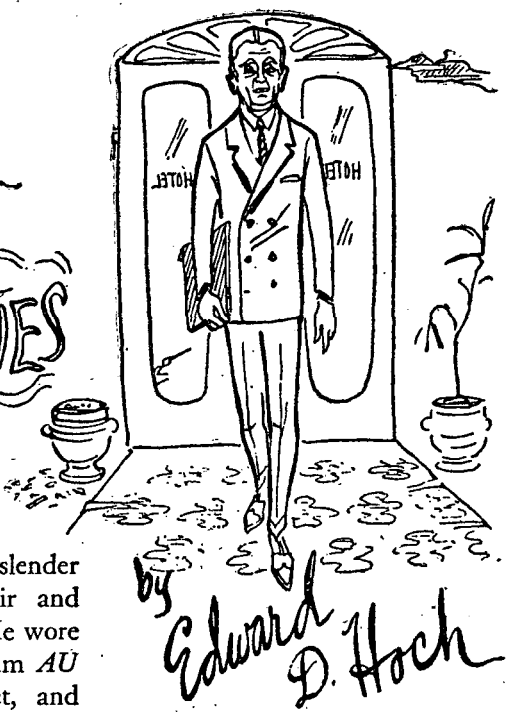
"You, Leslynne . . . you killed her . . . oh, Leslynne . . ."

I walked out, out of that place that seemed to reek now with the stink of spilled perfume, out into the fresh air. On the sidewalk I glanced back up at the windows of 2-B.

I couldn't prove anything, I knew that much, but I had a feeling that Glenn Vickers was going to get the confession he'd been wanting.

In any controversial matter, it is readily recognized that arbitration can be successful only when the intermediary is the best in his field.

ARBITER of UNCERTAINTIES



by Edward D. Hoch

ARTHUR URAH was a tall, slender man with thick white hair and the bearing of a dignitary. He wore silk shirts with the monogram *AU* over the left breast pocket, and this was what had led some in the business to dub him the Arbiter of Uncertainties. It was a good name. It fit him perfectly.

He had never been to the Brenten Hotel before. It was in an old section of town, and in truth it was an old hotel, dating back some fifty-five years in the city's history. No one of importance stayed at the Brenten any longer, and thus it was perhaps a bit odd to see a man of Arthur Urah's obvious character entering the lobby on a Sunday afternoon.

"I'm to meet some people here," he told the desk clerk, a seedy little man chewing on a

toothpick. "My name is Arthur Urah."

"Oh, sure! Room 735. They're waiting for you."

"Thank you," he said, and entered the ancient elevator for the ascent to the seventh floor.

The corridors of the old hotel were flaky with dead paint, and a dusty fire hose hung limply in a metal wall rack. Arthur Urah eyed it all with some distaste as he searched out room 735 and knocked lightly on the door.

It was opened almost at once by a slim young man with black hair and pouting lips. Arthur Urah had known the type for most of his life. The room itself was as shabby as the rest of the hotel, and its big double bed had been pushed against one drab wall to give more floor space, revealing in the process a long accumulation of dust and grime.

"Arthur! Good to see you again!" The man who came forward to greet him first was Tommy Same, a familiar figure around town.

Arthur Urah had always liked Tommy, though personal feelings never entered into his decisions. "How are you, Tommy? How's the family?"

"Fine. Just fine! Glad to have you deciding things, Arthur."

Urah smiled. "I don't play favorites, Tommy. I listen to both sides."

The other side was there, too. Fritz Rimer was a little man with a bald head and large, frightened eyes. It was obvious at once that he was out of his league. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Urah," he mumbled. "Hate to get you down here like this on a Sunday."

"That's his job!" Tommy Same pointed out. "You and me've got a disagreement, and Arthur here is going to settle it. He's an arbiter, just like business and the unions use."

Arthur Urah motioned toward the door. "I'm not used to settling cases with a gun at my back. Get rid of the kid."

Tommy Same spread his hands in a gesture of innocence. "You know Benny. His father used to drive for me. Benny's no kid gunman."

Urah eyed the slim young man with obvious distaste. "Get rid of him," he repeated. "Let him wait in the hall."

Tommy made a motion and Benny disappeared out the door. "Satisfied?"

Urah gave a slight nod, running his fingers through the thick white hair over one ear. "Now, who else is here?"

"Only Sal. She won't bother us."

Urah walked to the connecting door and opened it. Sally Vogt was lounging in a chair with a tabloid

newspaper. "Hello, Arthur," she said. "Just catching up on the news."

He closed the door. "All right," he decided. "She can stay. Nobody else, though. Tell the room clerk nobody comes up till we're finished."

"I told him that already."

Arthur Urah opened the slim briefcase he carried and extracted a notepad. "We'll sit at this table," he said. "Since Fritz is the offended party, he gets to talk first."

It was only an outsize card table, with rickety legs, supplied by the hotel. Sitting around it on their three chairs, they looked a bit like reluctant poker players defeated by the odds.

Fritz Rimer cleared his throat and nervously fingered a pencil. "Well, everybody knows what the trouble is." He paused, as if suddenly aware of his smallness at the table.

"Suppose you tell us anyway," Urah prodded gently.

"There are thirty-six horse rooms in this city where a man can lay a bet on the races or the pro games. Twenty years ago, when I started in business, there were thirty-six individual owners of these places. We all knew each other, and helped each other out. When the cops closed down one place occasionally, the rest of us came to the owner's aid. We were one big family, see?"

Tommy Same moved restlessly in his chair. "I'm crying for you, Fritz. Get to the point."

"Well, about a year ago, Tommy Same and some of his syndicate friends moved in and started taking over the city's entire bookmaking operation. Some places they forced out of business and then bought up cheap. Others, they demanded a big cut of the take and sent somebody around to baby-sit and make sure they got it. Right now the syndicate is a partner in thirty-five of the thirty-six places in this city—all but mine."

Arthur Urah nodded. "And now he wants yours, too?"

"Right! He sent that guy Benny down last week to scare me, but I told him this wasn't like the old days. I don't scare. If he wants to kill me, he can, but that just might be the end of Tommy Same." As he talked, a certain courage seemed to flow into the little bald man. Now his cheeks were flushed and there was an unmistakable power in his words. The others had not stood up to Tommy, but little Fritz Rimer had, even though it might cost him his life.

Tommy Same cleared his throat. "When do I get a chance to talk? You going to listen to this guy all afternoon?"

Urah smiled slightly. "You can talk now, Tommy. Is Fritz telling the truth? Are you trying to take over his operation?"

Tommy Same leaned back in his chair, frowning. "It's like labor unions, Arthur. We all have to stick together, to protect ourselves from the law, and deadbeats, and occasional swindlers. With all thirty-six horse rooms in town linked together in a sort of syndicate, it's better for everyone."

"And that's your defense for this?"

"Sure. I'm not trying to force anyone out of business. I'm giving valuable services, and I just want a share of their profits in return."

"Did you threaten Fritz here?"

"Look, this isn't the old days! If I'd threatened him, do you think I would have allowed him to call you in? Do you think Capone or some of the other old-timers would have sat still for arbitration?"

"You're not Capone," Arthur Urah reminded him quietly.

"No, but I can realize the importance of us all sticking together! If Rimer goes his own way, pretty soon the others will start to, and then where'll we be? Back to the old days when the cops could knock off the places one at a time."

It went on like that for another hour, with each man arguing for his side. Arthur Urah had heard it all before, in a dozen different contexts, and at these times the dialogue took on a soporific quality that dumbfounded him. Petty criminals, the dregs of society, taking up his time in a shabby hotel room while he listened to their sordid tales. He had sat, a year earlier, as mediator in a boundary dispute involving some big underworld names in Brooklyn, and it was the peaceful settlement of that potentially dangerous situation which had made his reputation as a gangland mediator. It was a reputation he had never sought and never fully accepted, and yet it stuck and grew through a half-dozen other disputes. He was Arthur Urah, the Arbiter of Uncertainties, the one to call when there was bloodshed to be prevented.

"That's enough for now," he told them finally, pushing back from the card table. "I think I have enough information to reach a decision."

"When?" Rimer asked him.

"Leave me alone for a bit to ponder it all."

They went out of the room, Rimer to the hallway, and Tommy Same to the girl who waited next door. Urah stood and stretched, feeling at that moment every one of his fifty-three years. He walked to the window and looked down at the Sunday afternoon street seven

stories below, ominously deserted.

Presently, as he stood there, he heard a footstep on the rug behind him. It was Tommy Same, returned for a few private words. He slipped his arm around Urah's shoulder and spoke in tones of brotherhood. "You and I know how to handle these things, don't we, Arthur? These punks like Rimer have to be coddled just so far. Imagine—sitting down at a table with the guy when I should be kicking his teeth in!"

"Times are changing, Tommy."

"Sure they are. That's why I'm taking over the horse rooms in this town! The day of the independent operator is gone forever."

"Fritz Rimer doesn't think so."

Tommy took his arm away. He was nearly a head shorter than Arthur Urah, and standing there close to him he reminded Urah somehow of the wayward son he'd never had. "Look, Arthur, be good to Rimer. Tell him he's all through and save the poor guy's life."

"You're telling me something, Tommy, and it's not something I want to hear."

"I'm telling you the facts of life in this town. I like to keep everybody happy and look respectable, so I go along with this arbitration bit. But I can't afford to lose the decision. The other thirty-five guys would all bolt if Rimer got away. They wouldn't be still a week."

"So?"

"So you rule against me, Arthur, and I gotta score on Rimer. I'm up against a wall. There's no other way."

"You'd be crazy to try it."

"Arthur . . . I already told Benny. He's waiting out in the hall. If you rule that Rimer stays in business, he never leaves this hotel alive."

Urah stared out the window at the occasional passing cars below. The afternoon shadows were already long, offering a hint of approaching night. "Get out," he said to Tommy. "I'll pretend I never heard that."

"Whatever you say, Arthur."

Then he was gone, and the room was quiet once more. Urah sat down at the card table and began to make a few notes. He'd been at it for ten minutes when another visitor entered through the connecting door.

He glanced up and smiled. "Hello, Sal."

Sally Vogt was a cute blonde trying hard to stay under thirty. Most of the time she succeeded, thanks to her hairdresser. "What have you been doing with yourself lately, Arthur?"

"Bringing people together. Making peace."

"I mean besides that. We used to

see you often down at the club."

"That was a long time ago. We travel in different circles now."

"Arthur . . ."

"Yes?"

"He sent me in to talk to you. He thinks he handled it badly."

"He did."

She shifted her feet and gazed at the worn carpet. "He's up tight, Arthur. If he loses control of these horse rooms, he's all finished in the organization. They don't give anybody a second chance."

Arthur Urah shrugged. "Maybe they fire him and hire Fritz Rimer in his place."

"Don't joke, Arthur."

"I'm not. Is he really going to kill Rimer?"

"Of course not!"

"Then what's Benny for? Just to scare people?"

She lit a cigarette and inhaled slowly. "Benny's left over from the old days. Tommy inherited him, along with everything else in town."

"Not quite everything."

"Arthur, Arthur! This isn't your big moment in Brooklyn with the syndicate chiefs. Nobody cares what happens here. Give Tommy Rimer's place and everybody lives in peace."

"You just said Tommy's bosses cared what happened here. That makes it important to him, at least."

"How much would you take to give Tommy the decision, Arthur?"

Urah rubbed a hand across his eyes. "First Tommy, and now you. Do I get Benny in here next, with his gun?"

She didn't answer that. Instead she said, "I suppose you'll make a decision this afternoon."

"There's no reason to delay it. In fact, I think you can tell them to come in now."

As he waited for Rimer and Tommy Same to appear, the room clerk from downstairs stuck his head in the door. "Some of the big boys are waiting in the lobby. They want to know how long you'll be."

"Not long," Urah said, resenting the intrusion. Their presence in the lobby meant that someone didn't trust him to handle the situation.

Fritz Rimer came in alone, shuffling his feet over the faded carpet, hardly able to look at Urah. "It's going bad for me, isn't it?"

"Not so bad."

"Even if I win, I lose. He'll kill me—I know it."

"Then why did you fight him? Why didn't you just pull out?"

"That place is my life. I don't just see my whole life crumple without trying to hang on."

Tommy Same and Sal came in, and she stood behind his chair while they waited for Arthur Urah

to deliver his verdict. He cleared his throat and snapped on one of the table lamps, because the room was growing dim in the afternoon twilight.

"I've studied the issues," he began, "and tried to arrive at a fair decision." He cleared his throat once more. Sally Vogt caught his eye and seemed to be telling him something, but he paid no attention. "My ruling is that Fritz Rimer has the right to remain in business as long as he desires. If he should sell his establishment, or pass away, the business should be made part of Tommy's syndicate. But until that time, Rimer is to continue as sole owner and manager."

Tommy leaned back in his chair, saying nothing.

Rimer got to his feet, shaking. "Thanks, Mr. Urah. Thanks for nothing! That decision just sealed my death warrant!"

"You can sell out to Tommy," Arthur pointed out.

"Never! He'll have to kill me if he wants my place!"

"That's something I can arrange," Tommy said quietly.

"There'll be no violence," Urah told them, but even to his own ears the words carried a hollow ring.

Fritz Rimer turned and headed for the door. Tommy Same got up and started after him but then Fritz turned and showed them the little silver pistol in his hand. It looked like a .22, like something he might have borrowed from his wife. "I'm leaving here," he said. "Alive."

Then he was into the hall. Tommy bolted and ran after him, and Arthur was at Tommy's side. Fritz was halfway down the dingy hallway, heading for the elevator, when Benny appeared at the opposite end of the corridor. He saw the gun, and immediately drew his own weapon.

"No!" Sally screamed. "Don't shoot!" but it was too late for anyone to listen now.

Benny fired one quick shot without aiming, and Rimer's little gun coughed in echo. Tommy Same was shouting above the roar, and then he seemed to stumble back into Arthur Urah's arms. He tore free, lurched into the dusty fire hose on the wall, and then fell forward on his face.

"Tommy!" Sally Vogt was on the floor at his side, trying to turn him over, but her left hand came away all bloody from his back and she screamed once more.

Down the hall, Benny had dropped his gun and was running forward. Fritz Rimer simply stared, more terrified than ever, and then he suddenly darted into the elevator. Within moments the room clerk had arrived, summoned by some hotel guest lurking terrified

behind his locked door. There were others on the scene, too; the big boys whom Arthur Urah knew so well—Stefenzo and Carlotta and Venice, big men in the syndicate—bigger men than Tommy Same had ever hoped to be.

"What happened?" one of them asked, staring down at the body on the floor. This was Venice, a slim, almost handsome man.

"There was a shooting," Urah explained carefully. "Benny here took a shot at Rimer and missed."

"I didn't mean to," Benny mumbled, too frightened to say more.

The room clerk looked up from the body. "He's dead."

Somebody had taken Sally aside, but her sobbing could still be heard. One of them picked up Benny's fallen gun and brought it down the hall. "This looks too big for the hole in him," somebody observed.

"Search everyone," Stefenzo ordered. "The girl, too."

"Rimer's gone with his gun," Benny said. "He did it, not me."

A quick search of Arthur and Benny and Sal and the dead Tommy revealed no other weapon. There was only Benny's big .38 and the missing gun with which Rimer had fled.

"We don't want the police in on this," Venice told Arthur Urah. "Not yet, anyway. We'll never convince them it was an accident."

"No," Arthur agreed.

They wrapped Tommy Same's body in a sheet and carried it into one of the rooms.

"Check everybody on this floor," Stefenzo ordered the clerk. "Make sure there's no one who'll talk."

"Most of the rooms are empty."

"Check anyway."

Arthur Urah walked past the still stunned Benny and into Sally's room. She was over by the window, staring out at the lights coming on all over the city. "He's dead," she said without emotion to Arthur.

"Yes."

"So what good was all your arbitration? In the end, it came back down to a couple of people shooting it out in a hallway."

"I tried to avoid that."

"Tommy wanted too much. That was always his trouble. Too much. Not thirty-five horse rooms, but thirty-six. He wanted to be too big."

"Yes," Arthur agreed quietly.

She turned suddenly to face him. "What did you do before?" she asked. "Before you started to arbitrate their disputes?"

"Various things. I studied law once."

"But they trust you. Both sides trust you."

"I hope so."

After a time she left him and went in to look at Tommy's body in the next room.

Venice came in to sit with him. "We've taken Benny away," he told Arthur. "He was always a little nuts."

"I suppose so."

"Dangerous."

"Yes."

The telephone rang and Arthur answered it, then passed it to the syndicate man who listened intently. After a moment he held the receiver down against his chest. "They've run Rimer to earth. He's home, packing, apparently getting

ready to skip. They want to know if we want him alive or dead."

"Alive," Arthur Urah said without hesitation. "There's been enough killing."

"I suppose so." Then, into the telephone, "Bring him down here."

Arthur Urah sighed and sat down to wait.

An hour later, they had gathered in the room again, around the rickety card table. Rimer was there, under protest, and Benny had been brought back, too. The room clerk from downstairs, and Sally, and the three big men from the syndicate were all seated, their eyes on Urah as he spoke.

"What we have here," he said, "is an interesting problem. We cannot, like the police, dig into Tommy Same's body and compare bullets under a microscope. We cannot do anything except take testimony and examine the facts. I was there in the hall myself, and I saw what there was to see. The hall, for our purposes, is about fifty feet in length from the door of Tommy's room to the spot where Benny stood. Fritz here was about halfway between the door and Benny, at the elevator, when the shooting started."

"Benny fired toward us," Sally interrupted to explain. "Fritz fired away from us."

"And there was no third shot?" Venice asked in a puzzled tone.

"No."

"Tommy just staggered and fell," Urah said. "And therein would seem to lie the impossibility of the thing. The wound indicates to us a small caliber weapon—as nearly as we can tell without being able to dig for the bullet—yet Rimer's small caliber gun was fired in the opposite direction from where Tommy was standing. Benny's larger gun, fired toward Tommy, would have left a bigger entry hole."

Stefenzo grunted, lifting his bulk from the chair. "Yet there was no other shot, no other gun."

"Why waste time, anyway?" Carlotta asked. "Tommy's death was an accident, no matter how you look at it. The bullet bounced off the wall or something. Let's get on to splitting up his holdings."

"Well, I don't think it was an accident," Sally told them all. "I think he was murdered by Fritz Rimer."

"I didn't . . ." Rimer began, and then fell silent.

Arthur Urah cleared his throat. "I was called in to decide the matter of Rimer's horse room and Tommy Same's claim to it. In that affair, my original judgment of this afternoon still stands. The horse room remains in Rimer's control and, since Tommy is now dead,

there's no question of his taking over after Rimer's possible death."

"You can talk about this all you want," Sally told them, "but I'm more interested in how Tommy died." She stormed out into the hall, seeking perhaps some sign, some scrawled revelation on the wall.

"You don't need me for anything," Fritz Rimer said. "Let me get out of here."

"Wait a bit," Carlotta told him.

"I have a business to attend to!"

"On Sunday night? Wait a bit."

Arthur Urah interrupted. "Let him go. The killing of Tommy was accidental."

Rimer left, a little man and fearful. Then they settled down to the business at hand. In the hour that followed, Tommy Same's empire was divided. Arthur Urah listened to it all, taking little part in the discussions. This was not his job, and he would only be needed if a dispute arose. He wandered over to the window at one point, and then into the next room. It was there that Sally Vogt found him.

"I was in the hall," she said.

"Yes?"

"If you look, you can see the marks where both bullets hit the wall."

"I didn't look." He was starting to zip his briefcase. It was time to be going home.

"Arthur . . ." Sally hesitated.

"What is it, Sally?"

"Are they still in the next room?"

"Yes. The territory has to be reassigned."

"Reassigned. Tommy dies, and the territory is reassigned."

"Life must go on, Sal. You know that."

"And what about his body, wrapped in a sheet like some mummy?"

"The body will be given a decent burial."

"In the Jersey dumps?"

"Sal . . ."

"The wound was in his back, Arthur. In his *back!* He was facing the other two, but you were right behind him. He stumbled into you, just before he fell."

"I had no gun," Arthur Urah said quietly.

"No, but you had this!" She brought her hand into view and dropped the ice pick on the low table between them. "Tommy wasn't shot by a small caliber bullet at all! He was stabbed with this ice pick just as the other two fired at each other. Then, while we bent over the body, you simply pushed the ice pick up the nozzle of the fire hose in the hall—where I just found it."

"You try too hard, Sally. You look too closely. This world isn't made for people who look too

closely, who find ice picks in fire hoses."

"You killed him because he wouldn't go along with your settlement, because he was going to get Rimer."

"Perhaps I killed him to save Rimer's life, Sally."

"I'm going in there and tell them, Arthur," she said. "It won't bring Tommy back, but at least it'll avenge him just a little."

She had moved toward the door when he reached out to stop her. "Not that way, Sally. Listen a bit."

"To what? To the Arbiter of Uncertainties, while he foxes out another decision? What will it be this time, Arthur? What will they give you when I walk in there and tell them? Life or death?"

"You don't understand, Sal."

"I understand! I'm going to tell them."

"You don't have to. They know."

She paused again, backing against the coffee table, staring at him with widening eyes. "They know?"

"You asked once what I did before I became the Arbiter. I did many things, Sally. Some of them with an ice pick," he admitted.

"No!"

"Tommy was getting too big. They wanted his territory. They thought Fritz might do the job for them, but Fritz was a coward. When I saw my opportunity, there in the hall, I had to take it."

"And all this talk, this investigation?"

"For your benefit, Sally. And Benny's."

"If they won't do it, Athur, I will." She bent down for the ice pick again, but he merely brushed it away, onto the floor.

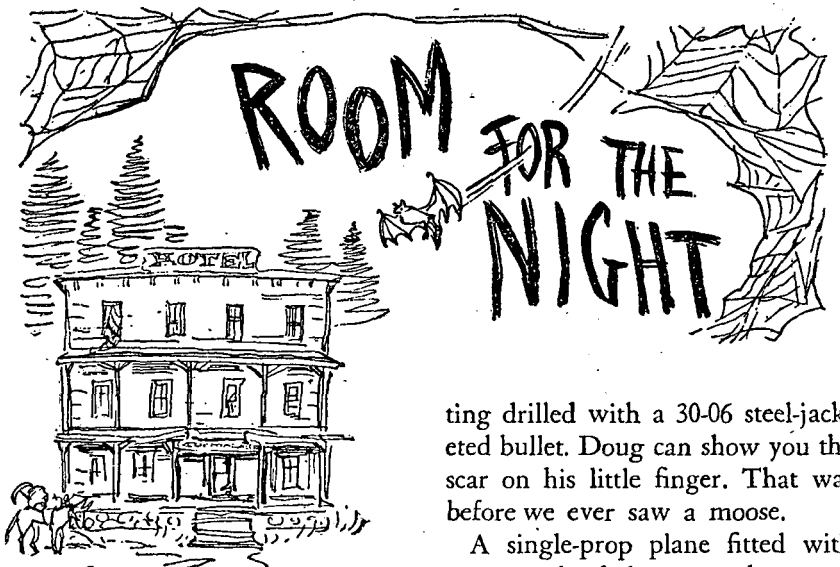
"Get out, Sally. You don't want to get hurt."

"Damn you! You're not even human, Arthur! You're some sort of monster!"

He smiled sadly. He'd been called worse things in his life. He picked up the ice pick and dropped it into the briefcase, and finished zipping it shut.

After a time, when Sally had gone, he went down in the elevator. He nodded to the room clerk as he passed, and then went out into the night.

The experience to be had in attaining a particular destination may well constitute every bit of half of the total enjoyment.



By Waldo Carlton Wright

That fall Doug Gregory invited me to go along on a Canadian moose hunt. The first night out was the nearest I ever came to getting drilled with a 30-06 steel-jacketed bullet. Doug can show you the scar on his little finger. That was before we ever saw a moose.

A single-prop plane fitted with pontoons landed us near the source of the Liard River, taxied us to shore. Half-naked Indian children and barking dogs scampered down to welcome us. Four Indian guides stood with folded arms, waiting. Doug had arranged for them in Edmonton.

Everyone, including the pilot, lent a hand unloading our gear from the fuselage. The guides carried the heavier boxes of provisions on their backs to a shed. Nearby the canoes lay upbottomed on

racks, waiting to ferry us up river into moose country.

This village had once been a lively mining town during the gold rush. Sourdoughs left here with their pack mules, shovels, pans, flitches of bacon and bags of flour, headed for pay dirt up river. Then, after the gold ran out and the discouraged drifted away, the Indians moved in, took over the old store, the flophouses, even the saloon.

It turned out only one of our guides could speak a little English. Tomo had charge of the others, two pack bearers and a cook. In the valleys the tundra-like country covered with muskeg moss was too boggy for horses, even if they had been available. Everything had to be toted across the portages between the small lakes before we hit moose country.

Now that morning light came early, Doug was all for hopping off by five-thirty. He indicated the starting time to Tomo on his wristwatch. Then he asked where we could bed down for the night.

"Sheep Nose run hotel."

The broad-shouldered Indian motioned up the dusty street lined with little wooden shacks. I was reminded of bleak mining towns in West Virginia where I had worked one summer with the Peace Corps, except instead of unemployed coal miners, here were sullen Indian faces, with greasy long black hair that had never felt a comb.

The lone hotel looked like a false front propped up in Universal City for a Western movie, with its leaning porch, a broken window stuffed with an old quilt. A lean mule stood on three legs, the head of a miner's pick sticking out from a tarpaulin pack lashed to its sagging back.

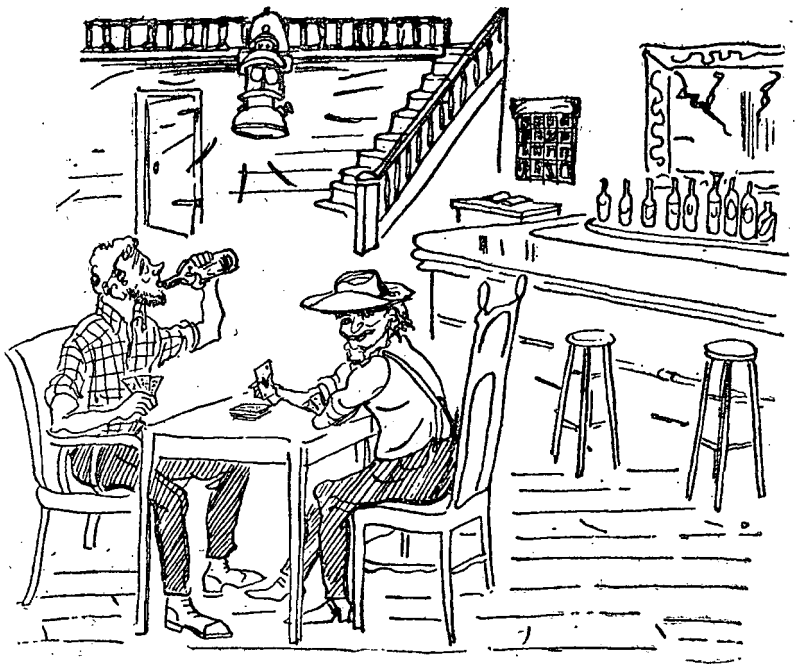
Over the door hung a faded sign. *Occidental Hotel.* The planks of the porch sagged as we trudged in with our rolled-up sleeping bags over our shoulders. Doug kicked open the front door sagging on one hinge.

Inside, a mahogany bar edged the far wall, backed by a chipped silver mirror. Beyond the bar stood the counter of the hotel, backed by pigeonholes of the mail rack. Cobwebs were everywhere.

Under a lantern strung on a rope from a rafter, two men sat at a small deal table, their faces hidden in shadow.

"Who's boss here?" Doug called out, dropping his sleeping bag on the planks.

Neither of the men looked up but continued to draw cards from the pack. Now I could see that the younger man had the high cheekbones of a half-breed. His nose



stuck out like the horn of a western saddle through a half circle of black beard. It was plain why Tomo had called him Sheep Nose.

"That's me. What you want?" he called when Doug repeated his question. He looked around, a deep furrow of annoyance between his beady eyes at the intrusion of cheechako, outlanders.

"Can we get rooms for the night?" I asked.

"Take your pick." He nodded toward the balcony. His French accent placed him from Quebec, rather than from the Mackenzie.

"How about supper?" Doug asked. Our breakfast at the railhead had long since been jolted out of us by the choppy flight north.

"What you prefer—bouillabaisse or lobster a la Bordelaise?" He tipped up the bottle at his elbow, then handed it to the other man.

The other man was evidently an old prospector just back from the hills. He still wore his floppy hat. His beard hid the collar of his faded shirt and his grey hair hung like ravelings on his shoulders. Only his beadlike eyes, red from drinking, showed how eager he was to win another stake.

Doug knew how to deal with these north country men, having hunted moose in the Canadian woods every fall for the last nine years.

"We're not particular," he said quietly, in a voice he might use to gain the confidence of an unbroken husky. "Couple plates of beans will do fine."

The half-breed laid his cards face down and really looked us over as human beings and not contemptible cheechako.

"Maybe I could roust up some bacon and eggs." He pushed back his chair.

"First I'm calling you," the prospector said. "Three ladies back to back."

"Cards running against me." The half-breed nodded to us and disappeared through a door, beyond the desk.

"You're hunters, ain't you?" the old man said as he scooped a stack of silver dollars into his hat with a quick flip, then laid them out like crowned checkers.

"Moose hunters," Doug said. There was a difference, men or moose.

"Seen three grazing on the flats about twenty miles up river yesterday." He picked up the bottle, rubbed its neck under his armpit and offered it to Doug.

Doug poured a jigger into the half-breed's glass and threw the liquor back into his throat, much as a horse doctor would douse a colicky horse. He gasped for breath. His face turned as red as a Hudson Bay blanket. I pounded him on the back, fearing he would choke.

"That's white lightning," the old prospector said to me. "Most miners mix it with snow."

"Near blasted my head off." Doug kept clearing his throat. The prospector held out the bottle to me.

"No thanks," I said, then turned to Doug. "Hadn't we better take a look at our rooms?"

"Mine's the one at the end of the hall." Then recalling some vestige of his pre-prospector manners, he added, "Folks call me Gabby, probably 'cause I talk to myself."

I pushed open the numbered door at the head of the sagging stairs, tossed in my sleeping bag. The light from the downstairs lantern outlined the bare springs of a metal bed, cane-bottomed chair and oak dresser. An ironstone pitcher and basin sat on top of the dresser.

"I'll take the next room down the hall," Doug said. "It can't be much worse."

I lifted the glass chimney off the wall-bracketed lamp, lit the charred wick. A bat flopped along the ceil-

ing, then hung upside down from the roller of the blue blind. I unrolled my sleeping bag on the bedsprings and, leaving the lamp burning, joined Doug downstairs.

The old prospector was laying out the silver dollars he had won from the half-breed proprietor in stacks of five, to keep track of his winnings.

"Forty bucks, good day's strike," he said, looking up, his fuzzy handlebar moustache spread in a grin.

"You headed up country tomorrow?" I asked.

"No, the easy gold's all gone. They're putting in dredges, won't let a man pan his workings anymore."

"How you plan to live?" Doug asked.

"Got my dust." He pulled a leather pouch out of his shirt, shook it. "Need a dog team."

"Where you headed?" I asked.

"Cali-for-nia if I can make it. Buy me a little cabin up Fresno way, where I was born." He seemed to be looking over our heads as if he could already see the cabin in the pines. There he could dream out his last years.

The door beyond the hotel counter swung open and the half-breed backed through with a tray.

"Sit here," he said, laying out plates of ham and eggs. He plopped down huge coffee cups into saucers that looked more like soup bowls. "Pull over chairs."

The ham was maple-sugar cured, but the eggs tasted fishy, probably had been robbed from snow geese nests by the Indian children. Yet after our ride from Edmonton to the railhead and the choppy flight in the single-prop plane, even the potatoes fried in rancid fish oil tasted delicious.

"You're a good cook," Doug said, sipping the coffee. "How do you make out with your hotel?"

"Indians don't eat much here," he said. "Hunting parties pass through. Sometimes lucky with the pasteboards with prospectors."

"You ain't done well tonight," Gabby said. "I'm going to clean you out. Even your dog team."

"Evening's young. Sourdough talk's cheap," the young man said, but his voice seemed to quaver as if he weren't so sure who would win the last hand.

"Where's the privy?" Doug asked, shoving back his chair.

"Out back of woodshed," the half-breed said.

Doug went outside.

"Want take hand, stud?" Sheep Nose asked me.

I shook my head, sipping the last of my coffee. "I've had it today, all the way from Edmonton. Ready to turn in."

When Doug came back I fol-

lowed his footsteps out back. It was bad. When I came back, Doug was filling the pitchers from our rooms with water from the barrel in the corner.

This was my first brush with life in the primitive. I wondered why I had agreed to come on this hunt. I might have spent the afternoon on the Providence beach, then dined on shish kebab with red wine in the village inn, late dancing with Sally at the Pirates Den and so to bed between white sheets on a slumber-foam mattress.

I imagined I could still smell the dead odor of the ancient privy in this lantern-lit old hotel, like a ghostly reminder of the boom days of sweaty miners and black pantied bar girls rustling their red velvet skirts. I could almost hear the coarse laughter of the men above the tinny piano, now silent in the corner, its three-legged stool upside down on its top.

"How are we going to get awake at five?" I asked Doug as he set a pitcher in the washbowl in my room.

"Always wake up early, a bad habit," he said. Then seeing the bat still clinging upside down from the blind, he added, "Just like the old days, a bat in every room."

Somehow it wasn't funny, his effort at humor to offset the grimness of our quarters this first night far, far away from white sheets.

I slipped off my field boots, splashed cold water from the bowl over my face and neck, and dried on my wool shirt, in lieu of a towel. Then I raised the glass chimney of the bracketed lamp and blew out the flame. The inside of my sleeping bag, as I wriggled into it, felt as cold as the privy.

As I lay there listening to the muted sounds of the card game, I wondered how Harold was getting along with the layout of the Providence Journal, doubling up on my job on the photoprinter, while I took off on this moose hunt.

Sally probably wouldn't be missing me, on that Caribbean cruise of six calypso ports in fourteen days. Why hadn't I gone on that swingles bash, instead of stalking some harmless, mangy old moose that had its own troubles battling green-headed flies?

In my dream it was winter again. Doug and I were lying on our bellies on an ice floe, waiting for a white bear. Now he was swaggering toward us head-on, slobbering, the head of a salmon hanging from his jaws. Doug brought his carbine close to his jaw. I heard the explosion as the rifle bucked on his shoulder.

The shot brought me wide awake. Bits of plaster pricked my face. I crawled out of my sack,

stumbled to the wall, groping to find the lamp bracket. My hand was shaking so that it was difficult to hold the match to the wick. The lamp shadowed a jagged hole halfway up the wall and another hole right over my bed.

I pounded on the wall to waken Doug. Then I heard him moving about. Suddenly, right over the lamp, another patch exploded and a ricocheting bullet brushed my hair like a comb.

I pushed open the door, tiptoed along the balcony into Doug's room. He was standing under his lamp, staring at his hand. Blood was dripping from his fingers. Over his head I made out the hole where the second bullet had plowed from the next room, the room the old prospector had told us was his.

"Gabby's gone berserk, trying to kill us," I whispered.

"Damned near blew off my little finger." Doug was wrapping a handkerchief around his hand.

I lifted Doug's lamp from the wall bracket; we moved quietly along the balcony, to the last room. Another shot almost made me drop the lamp.

Doug kicked open the door with his boot.

In the dark the old prospector was sitting on the edge of his bed. A rifle lay over one knee, the muzzle pointed toward the wall. He was jerking and pumping the slide, cursing, quite drunk.

At first the light of my lamp blinded him.

"Can't get the cartridges out." He was talking to himself. "Crazy fool might shoot me if he wins my gun."

"Let me have it." Doug grabbed the barrel of the rifle, yanked it loose from Gabby's grip. Pointing the muzzle toward the floor, Doug pumped the slide, sent the remaining cartridges tumbling on the floor. I stooped, gathered up four shells and slipped them into the breast pocket of my wool shirt.

Doug handed the empty carbine back to the old prospector. "You held your finger on the trigger," Doug said. "You damn near killed both of us."

It was plain old Gabby was too drunk to know what he was doing.

"He took me for my stake." He was almost crying. "All I got to put up is this carbine."

Gabby staggered through the door, his hobnailed boots pounding on the stairs.

"I'm calling you, Sheep Nose," he yelled, waving the carbine.

"Let him go," Doug said. "He's through shooting."

"How bad is your hand?" I asked. Doug was unwrapping the bloody handkerchief.

"Just a flesh wound," he said. "You got a first aid kit in your ditty bag?"

"That drunken miner might have shot our heads off." I could still feel the whirr of the bullet through my hair.

"I have a hunch he's not as pie-eyed as he pretends," Doug said. "I think it's safe to get some more shut-eye."

Back in my room, I left the light burning and slid back into the warm sleeping bag, but the voices downstairs, buzzing over their game, kept me awake. Their argument grew louder and louder. Then I heard the chairs being pushed back over the bare plank floor and the faint screech of the front door—and then silence.

Doug was tapping on my door.

"Five o'clock," he called. "The guides expect us in half an hour."

Downstairs, the lantern hanging from the rafters still burned. It outlined the body of the old prospector huddled in a chair, face down on the deal table. I shook his elbow.

"Where's the boss?" Doug asked him.

Old Gabby was mumbling something in his stupor. I shook his shoulder. At that he sat up, stared at us with bloodshot eyes from his grizzled mask. Then for the first time I realized how he got his name. He was the spitting image of Gabby Hayes, who played an old prospector back in silent movie days.

"Is Sheep Nose getting our breakfast?" I asked hopefully.

"I'm boss now, won everything back," Gabby said, now wide awake. "That'll be a dollar apiece for your rooms and fifty cents each for your meal last night."

"But the half-breed?" Doug asked.

"Gone," Gabby said. "I got into him for his last forty bucks. He put up the hotel, winner take all. He lost."

"And took off?" I couldn't believe that.

"Sure did, headed down river with his dog sled."

"Why didn't you go with him? You're California bound, aren't you?"

"Changed my mind, now the hotel's mine, fair and square."

"But you lost your gold dust, didn't you?" I asked.

"Didn't have none," he chuckled. "Just some pebbles in that leather poke to fool him."

"Suppose you could fry us a little bacon?" Doug sounded doubtful.

"Sure, I'm a better cook than he was. How about flapjacks and bacon?"

After breakfast we paid our bill. Doug and I picked up our sleeping bags. Outside, a team of huskies

lay beside the old mule. I wondered who owned the dogs.

The guides were waiting by the storage shed. They had packed our gear in two broad-beamed canoes. Tomo hurried over to meet us.

"You not hurt?" he asked.

"I managed to scratch my finger," Doug said. "Why did you ask?"

"Old miner, he shoot Sheep Nose, right over there." The guide pointed across the street toward one of the cabins.

"Is he hurt?" Doug asked.

"Dead. We drag body into the shed."

"How do you know Gabby shot him?"

"Sheep Nose over there, harness dogs. We pack canoes. Old miner wave gun. He shout."

"What did he shout?"

"Mark deck, mark deck. Then he shoot Sheep Nose, dead."

"You better send someone for the Mounties," Doug said. "There's one at Mayo's Landing."

The guide shrugged his shoulders. "Sheep Nose cheat everybody plenty. Indians glad he dead. Old miner honest man. He run good hotel for white hunters."

"But Sheep Nose?"

"Squaw carve him up for dog meat, burn bones in fire, before Mounty come."

Doug turned to me and shook his head.

"They've got their own law," I said.

"So that's why Gabby grabbed up one of the cartridges when I unloaded his gun." Doug seemed to be talking to himself, arguing with his conscience. He took hold of the prow of the lead canoe, motioned for me to crawl in.

"Let's go," he said. "Plenty of time to tell the Mounties, when we fly back to Edmonton. Now let's get a shot at those moose Gabby saw grazing in spruce country."

Two weeks later, when we came down river with two moose racks to the old mining town, a board had been nailed over the front door of the hotel. Doug asked an old Indian sunning on the porch where the old prospector had gone.

"He go that way—with dog team." And he pointed south.

A woman holds the answers to many problems.

by Robt. G. Southers

I TOOK Irene's gloved hand as she swung gracefully out of the car. A subtle scent lingered from that long, red hair as she passed close by my face. She nodded at an old four-story brownstone propped up by a row of overflowing trash cans.

"He's in there," she said. "Second floor."

I steered her to the door. The sidewalk was gritty beneath our shoes. Cars moved slowly up and down the street, drivers trying to avoid the potholes. It was a real gone-to-hell section of town.

A single bulb burned feebly in the hallway. We wove our way through the boxes of junk on the foot-frayed carpet. I drew deeply on the cigarette and followed the girl up the stairs, admiring the easy swing of her hips. A baby was crying somewhere on the floor above us.

Irene stopped at a door and knocked softly. She tried to control the tremble in her hand by clutching her purse tighter than before.

I heard the creaking of bedsprings and the rattle of the latch being lifted. I dried my palms on my jacket and checked to make sure I had the matchbook.

Irene had moved away, out of the line of fire. "Go on in . . . slowly," she said.

The door swung open easily and I stepped into the darkened room. The hall light silhouetted me nicely, and I wondered if I hadn't made a very bad mistake. A muscle began to jump in my leg.

The sound of a gun being cocked

came out of the darkness, and then the voice: "Let's see 'em, buddy."

I raised my hands slowly; the crimson tip of the cigarette was like a beacon in the gloom. The light switch clicked on behind me. The girl stepped inside, bolting the door quickly. I stood very still.

He stood at the other end of the room, feet spread wide apart. He was young, maybe Irene's age. His T-shirt was the show-off kind, cut to display a heavily muscled chest and arms. One lock of sun-bleached hair was contrived to spill casually over his deeply tanned forehead. He was a real Jack Armstrong type, except for the big automatic in his hand.

"I'm not carrying a gun," I said.

"We'll see." He motioned for me to turn.

His free hand ran over me in a fast frisk, missing nothing. Even the hat was lifted from my head and checked.

"Satisfied?" I asked.

"Man, if I weren't satisfied, you wouldn't still be standing there."

I lowered my arms and turned slowly, noting that he was cocky enough to tuck the .45 away. I took one more puff and dropped the cigarette to the floor.

"All right, Gillis. Let's talk deal," I said. "I don't have all night."

Irene flinched from his savage scowl. He said, "I told you not to mention my name! Can't you do anything right?"

"This whole town knows your name, my friend. Irene told me nothing," I said. "It's common knowledge that you put the arm on Ben Singer's man the other night. You shot up a couple of his best boys and made off with the whole week's take from his south-side operations. Singer put out a contract on you that same night."

"No kidding?" He seemed pleased. "How much?"

"Ten thousand bucks. Every two-bit pistolero in town is on the scan for you. The guy that brings in your scalp can sit in Singer's lap for the next five years."

I reached inside my coat and saw Gillis tense up. "All right if I smoke?"

He shrugged. "It's your health, man."

I tore the last match from the folder and lit up. I made a big show out of balling up the cover and flipping it away.

Irene ankled over to sit down on the sagging bed. She laid her purse and gloves on the nightstand before she looked at me. "Can you still get him out of town?"

"I'm a regular travel agent, honey. I can send him where Singer can't touch him."

Gillis snorted. "But it's really going to cost me, isn't it?"

"Do you think I'll do it for nothing? It will cost you the same price that's on your head. Ten thousand clams."

"That's pretty steep."

"You're pretty hot." I dropped the butt, grinding it out with my shoe. "What do you say, Gillis? Yes or no?"

"Looks as if I don't have much choice." He pulled a satchel from beneath the bed and dug out a sheaf of bills. Grudgingly, he tossed it to me.

I caught the money and checked the count. "Ten thousand," I said. "For another fifteen hundred, I can fix it for Irene to go along. There's no heat on her."

"We decided that it would be best for Irene to come along later."

Irene rose and walked across the room to adjust her hair in front of the cloudy mirror. "Yes." Her voice was bitter. "We decided that would be best."

"Suit yourself," I said. "I'll set it up tonight, and you will be ready to roll by morning." I shook out another smoke.

"What do you do," Gillis asked, "eat those damn weeds?"

I slapped my pockets. "Just give me a light."

"I don't smoke, man." He shook his head sagely. "Those things might kill a guy."

Irene never turned from the mirror. "There's a lighter in my purse," she called.

I broke open the bag and took out the little derringer that we had stashed there earlier. Turning slowly, I thumbed back the hammer and placed the muzzle against his head.

"Get rid of the gun, Gillis."

He jerked stiff as a ramrod. Most of his tan seemed to drain away; his hand was inches from the .45 in his belt. He knew the girl had sold him out, and he badly wanted to take her with him.

"Nobody's that fast," I said.

The gun hit the floor beside his foot, and I kicked it under the bed.

Irene hurried over and snatched up her purse and gloves. She grabbed the packet of bills that I picked up for her.

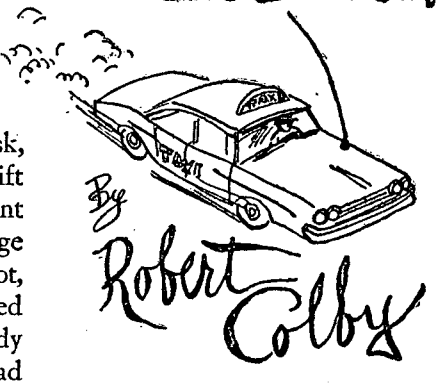
"Thanks," she said. "Thanks, Mr. Singer." The door closed behind her, and the sound of her high heels faded away as she scampered down the hall.

Gillis turned his head slightly, tears glinting in his eyes. "You're Ben Singer?" His voice quavered. "Any chance of making a deal?"

I shook my head. "You were sure right about one thing, though." I dropped the unlit cigarette and watched it roll beneath the bed with the gun and the money. "Those things just might kill a guy."

One who means well often has a facility for doing poorly as a benefactor.

CODE BROWN



By Robert Colby

GAVIN MCCORD waited until dusk, when all the cabs of the night shift were on the road. Then he went down to the West L.A. garage where, across the street on a lot, dozens of reserve cabs, fully gassed and otherwise serviced, stood ready to roll. That afternoon he had swiped an ignition key from one of the new cabs on the long feeder line out at the L.A. International Airport. All the keys were identical —one key would fit any cab of the lone company which held the franchise to blanket the city.

It had been simple enough. Drivers usually left their keys in the switches when they went into one of the terminals to buy a paper or check the schedule of arrivals. Gavin had been wearing the regulation company hat and looked like any other of the thousand-plus drivers. Leaning against a cab door behind a paper, it had been child's play to grope around the dash and lift the key.

The driver would blame himself. He would think he had mislaid or lost the key and he would send for the road super who would furnish him with another after chewing him out.

Now, again wearing the hat and carrying a small zipper case, he entered the unattended lot and strolled among the cabs. He wouldn't be questioned, but even if he were, he was a driver who had reported in late and was searching for the cab assigned to him. He chose T-six-seven, a new Ford, radio equipped.

As he climbed in with the case, he noted that T-five-four, an older radio cab, was parked beside him. Fine. He would identify himself to the radio dispatcher as T-five-four, a cab that would remain on the lot at least until the graveyard shift. For a safe deception, he must not use the call letters of the stolen Ford, nor the call letters of any other cab presently on the road.

He opened the case and brought out a clipboard of trip sheets and a loaded .45 automatic. Arming it with a backward jerk and release of the slide, he placed it beneath the seat with the butt toward him. The unwieldy .45 was a lot more gun than he needed, but the psychological effect of its great size would produce quick obedience.

Now, with the trip-sheeted clipboard beside him on the seat to complete the phony picture, he inserted the stolen key and started the engine. Lighting a cigarette, he maneuvered his way from the lot, pulled the headlight button and finally warmed the two-way radio.

Comfortable darkness had settled in and the soft lights of Beverly Hills beckoned discreetly as he drove west on Santa Monica Boulevard, then swung south on Rodeo and headed for the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, a grand old establishment which housed many rich travelers, ranking executives and even a movie star or two in permanent residence. It was only a two-cab stand but, as he circled the block and approached it from the rear, one cab pulled out with a passenger and he took its place, switching to parking lights.

Shortly, the driver of the first-up cab undid himself from behind the wheel and idled over to Gavin's window. Gavin was unhappy, but not unnerved.

"How ya doin'?" the driver said. He was short, paunchy and semi-bald, older than Gavin who was a lean thirty-one.

"Don't know yet," Gavin answered. "I only been on since five and all I got was a few jerk rides—nothing much over a buck each."

"Yeah?" said the cabbie with a wry, disparaging face. "Well, I only come on at four but already I made book."

"You got real talent," Gavin replied. "Some guys have it, some don't, that's all."

"Talent my eye! It's plain dumb

luck. First ten minutes I got a ride to the port, then way downtown to the Statler. From the Statler a couple of old dames send me to Brentwood. Then I stand a spell and snag a walk-up to the Valley. Some days you can do no wrong, brother." He paused. "Ain't seen you around. You a new one?"

"Nope. A rehire. Been away for a while."

It was true that he had once been on the payroll. He was caught high-flagging, and they were threatening to sack him when he quit. At the time he had been driving out of the Hollywood garage, and wasn't known by the West L.A. bunch.

"It's bad when you break off and come back," said the cabbie. "You lose seniority, they shove you on the night trick and make you drive the worst old junk they got. Hey, how come *you* rate new wheels, hardly outta the factory?"

Gavin smiled. He had felt it coming. "This wreck I had went to the shop, day man just pulled in late with this job and they tossed it to me for a one-nighter."

The man snorted, was about to reply when he caught the flashing signal of the blue light fixed to the side of the building. "That's me around front," he said. "Hope it's a port load. See ya, fella."

Gavin turned the key and eased into the first-up spot. In that brief time when he had driven legitimately, everything had gone to hell. He had been out of a job before, and in the first month of driving he did little more than catch up with past-due bills and the rent. Meanwhile, Mary Ann was pregnant out to here and he didn't have the $500-plus to see her through it.

They'd had a good old Chevy. He wanted five hundred, but the used car people shook their heads and wouldn't go four. A driver, Pete Kromback, offered four and a half. Gavin accepted promptly. Pete was a day man, and as he came off, Gavin went on. They met at the garage, Pete forked over four Cs and a fifty, Gavin delivered the title and pocketed the money.

A few minutes after ten that night, Gavin plucked a couple of men from the bus depot downtown. They sent him to a dark street in a shabby section of East L.A., poked a gun at the back of his head and demanded his money. He gave them the night's take from his wallet and swore that was it. They searched him anyway and found the four-fifty, then hammered his skull with the gun until his brain went dead and his next awakening was in the hospital.

There was an odd little sidelight to this happening. During the three-day training period, in an-

swer to a question about robberies, the instructor had said, "Sure, it's a big town full of hungry creeps, and a driver is an easy mark. But don't go out expecting to be robbed and you won't. It's a funny thing, but the records don't lie. Some of the same drivers are being held up again and again, while most of the others go free. We got guys who are accident-prone and guys who are robbery-prone. Don't be one of them!"

Gavin had figured the instructor for a nut, but there it was—in some dark pocket of his mind he had carried the fear and expectation that he would be one of the victims . . .

As he sourly contemplated his disaster, Gavin caught the blue wink of the signal light and careened around front, braking sharply at the entrance. When he saw the rich leather bags, he bent out quickly and helped the doorman stow them in the trunk. The two customers were a plump graying man and a dark-haired slender one who danced around the other with fawning anxiety. When they were seated, Gavin swiveled his head and the old guy said, "Airport—United."

Gavin cranked the meter, circled and came back to Santa Monica Boulevard. Heading west toward the freeway, he drove carefully and without haste. The two men were talking big-deal business, using a peculiar terminology which evaded and bored him. He tuned them out in favor of his own bitter thoughts.

The first two days in the hospital he was barely conscious and on the critical list. He slowly recovered but, though he seemed none the worse physically, he became sullen and hostile, as he now regarded the vast, esoteric forces of the world.

When he got out of the hospital the company brass were sympathetic but they wouldn't make good on the loss of his own money. He knew that technically they were not obligated, but he was deeply resentful and bitter. So he began to run with the meter off, flat-rating the customers at his own figure, high-flagging it all over the place, telling Mary Ann he would have the cash when her time came . . .

Gavin did not take the freeway. Instead he went parallel, south along Sepulveda, ready with an excuse about a shortcut, if one were needed. But the two clowns were so busy jawing they didn't notice, probably wouldn't know one route from another.

Mary Ann was frightened, she had no faith in him, in his ability to produce—none at all. So she took off for South Carolina to live with her parents, who despised him —enough to pay for the baby's de-

livery and care if only she would divorce Gavin. Or, so it seemed, for she refused to return, and certainly he wasn't going *there,* to live under the scorn of her folks. So it was a stalemate . . .

Gavin was nearing a cross-street on which there were some dark little shops, long ago sealed for the day. Behind these shops there was an alley. Abruptly he turned into it.

He had quit the company under fire, got a job pumping gas, had a few bucks saved and he was hanging on. The baby was born and Mary Ann sent him a snapshot. He fell in love with the baby's picture and its dim likeness to himself, was still far gone for Mary Ann. Though she had deserted him, with her family cheering in the background, he desperately wanted her back; babe in arms. He called her.

"No," she said. "And it isn't because I don't love you, Gavin—I do. I really do! Sure, I know it's not your fault that you got robbed and clubbed half to death. But, honey, that's done and finished and you've got to get up off the ground and fight back, until you make a solid place for yourself—for us.

"You have two hundred saved and that's a good start. But you should bank at least another thousand to hold us in any emergency. When you have it, we'll be on the next flight. Okay?"

Okay-okay-okay, Mary Ann! See, I'm fighting back. I'm right in there punching. Oh, man, am I! I hope you'll never know, baby, what I'm doing to rustle up that dough in one big crazy night! Revenge is sweet, Mary Ann, and my turn has come!

Now the cab was rocking over the pitted pavement of the alley, and the old guy, suddenly waking up, was saying, "Hey there! Where you going, driver?"

"Shortcut to the freeway, sir. Brings us right out at the entrance."

"Well, never mind the shortcuts," he replied acidly. "We're in no hurry and we'd prefer a nice, easy ride."

Gavin braked behind a building, erased the headlights and showed them the muzzle of the .45. "Surprise!" he barked. "Cabbie holds up passengers. How's that for a switch!"

The two men eyed the gun with disbelief. "Is this some sort of a joke?" asked the chubby man. He looked more indignant than frightened, while the eyes of his gaping junior-satellite widened and blinked absurdly.

"Yeah, it's a joke," said Gavin. "If you get laughs out of having the top of your head blown off with a .45 slug. Now let's see some fat

wallets—and don't waste any time fumbling."

"Mr. Porter never carries any money on a business trip," the slender young man announced. "I handle all the disbursements and I have only about forty dollars left."

"That right? You handle the, uh, disbursements, huh? Well, start disbursing, junior, and we'll let Mr. Porter speak for himself. You got any cash in the wallet, Mr. Porter?"

"Of course I have money! This man was foolishly trying to protect me—and he's an idiot!" Porter declared. Both men now produced

wallets which they extended, the younger offering his with a scared, sheepish expression.

"I don't want the damn wallets," Gavin said. "Just hand me the cash —all of it!"

When they had placed the cash in his palm, Porter relieving his wallet of some large bills, Gavin climbed from the cab and ordered them out. In the gloom, they stood facing him warily, the young man slightly crouched behind Porter, as if to shield himself from a bullet with the fleshy bulk of his chief.

"What about our baggage?" Porter asked. "There's nothing of any real value to you in those suitcases—look and see, if you like."

Gavin chuckled. Watching them, he backed around to the rear of the cab. The way it worked, the license plate was fixed to a spring and could be swiveled upward to reveal the trunk lock and the key, always left inserted. It was another company gimmick to solve the eternal key problem.

He opened the trunk and hurled the cases at them with a left-handed toss. "Walk straight up the alley and don't look back," he ordered.

The young man hoisted the bags and was moving off with them when Porter caught up and disdainfully snatched his own from the other's grasp. Shoulders canted by the weight of the bags, they trudged woefully along and slowly receded. They created a ludicrous picture, yet somehow they were also sad in a way that Gavin could not have described; and for just a moment he experienced a pang of regret.

He shrugged and got into the cab, backed to the street, set his lights and gunned away. The meter was of no importance to him but he wound the flag up to 12 o'clock again because with the flag down, the dome light was off, signaling the cab was occupied. Better to operate according to Hoyle, else he would be noted by other drivers and perhaps even by a road super who might be scouting the area.

Likely, in a matter of minutes, Porter and his flunkie would report to the police, but Gavin wasn't disturbed, for drivers in company hats, cruising the streets in darkness, could not be distinguished one from another. Further, as expected, neither of his victims had once looked for the cab number; like most people, they were probably unaware of such numbers, and he had not given them a chance to read the tag.

With an ear to the radio he took the freeway to Westwood and parked at an empty stand on a dim street at the edge of U.C.L.A. to count the money. There were two hundred-dollar bills, three fifties,

five twenties, a ten and eight singles, a sum of four-hundred and sixty-eight dollars. This was just a few bucks over the amount cleaned from him in the robbery, Gavin mused, and pretty good justice. Now he would collect for damages to his skull, for time in the hospital, and for the loss of Mary Ann.

He couldn't bear another week apart from Mary Ann, and wondered if she had the least idea of how many months it would take him to save her thousand-plus by pumping gas. *I went to the races, Mary Ann,* he composed, *and I bet twenty on this long-shot daily double that paid over a hundred bucks a ticket . . .* Well, maybe that wasn't exactly a tale to inspire confidence, so he'd dream up another.

He put the cash in the zipper case and then went around and locked it in the trunk. He lighted a cigarette and sat listening to the radio. An alarm would be sent in code, but the code was simple and he knew it by heart. There was no alarm, however, and he began to listen for a dispatch he could answer that would take him into one of the rich neighborhoods for a fresh sucker. At last the dispatcher called a stand in nearby Brentwood. When the call was repeated he knew the stand was empty and grabbed the mike, not forgetting to identify himself as T-five-four instead of his own T-six-seven.

The dispatcher gave him an address on North Barrington, an area of regal homes, and he sped to a swank split-level in little over five minutes.

He circled up the drive and paused in front. The door stood open and he heard the sounds of a party and saw people milling about. Gavin blew his horn and in a moment a young couple appeared. The stocky young man with angry eyes and a block jaw wore a dinner jacket and a look of self-importance. The attractive, dark-haired girl in the silver lame dress kept glancing at the man as she moved beside him with a drooping, apologetic air.

The man opened the cab door and, when she had entered, sank heavily beside her. "Don't you fellas ever get out and open a door for a lady?" he growled.

"Sorry about that." Gavin grinned back at the girl, who responded with a flickering smile, watching her companion from the corner of her eye as if to learn whether or not he found smiling appropriate to the occasion. The man ignored her and snapped an address on Tigertail Road, a climbing, twisting, solid-gold residential street only a couple of minutes away.

Gavin yanked the flag down and took off, descending to Sunset where he swung west. The couple rode in grim silence and Gavin suspected there had been a spat which had only been suspended in his presence and would be continued at home.

Well, he would give them something else to think about—a little distraction. He felt sorry for the girl, and since she'd have to walk in her tight dress and high heels, he decided to dump them near the bottom of Tigertail, a place of sparse traffic and such tree-shrouded isolation, he could not have chosen a much better spot himself without tipping his hand.

He came to the turn and left Sunset, slipped past the mouth of Tigertail and pulled to a stop at the curb. "This is as far as I go," he said, and reached for the gun.

"Whatta ya mean, this is as far as you go!" snarled the man.

Gavin shoved the .45 at him as he blacked the headlights. "This should answer your question nicely," he said. "Just empty your wallet and the lady's purse and nobody'll get hurt."

"I'll be damned!" the man exploded. "Now I've seen everything!" The girl shrank in her corner and stared with bug-eyed fascination.

"Waiting makes me nervous," Gavin said truthfully. "Let's have it!"

"Not a dime," said the man, folding his arms rigidly across his chest. "You'll have to shoot me first."

"If I have to shoot you, then that's what I'll do," Gavin replied coolly, and was astonished at his own conviction. For one startled instant he had an exterior glimpse of himself and saw a stranger.

"Gene!" the girl said, "are you insane? Do as he says!" She opened her small, jeweled purse. "Here, I've got some money and he has—"

That was when the man made a grab for the gun and as his hand closed around the barrel, Gavin fired reflexively, the .45 booming with an awesome sound in the confinement of the cab. Clutching his head, the man fell sideways on the seat, the girl screamed, and Gavin was in a state close to panic. He lowered the gun and gave the cab a moment of light. The man was lying still and the girl was bent over him, sobbing and stroking his head and then looking with horror at her hand, upon which blood now appeared.

Then the man sat up slowly and Gavin saw that the bullet had merely grazed the side of his head. The wound was very minor and he was more frightened than hurt, all of his bravado collapsing in shock.

Gavin switched off the light and again leveled the gun while the girl dabbed at the wound with a handkerchief, saying, "Gene, Gene! Oh Gene, darling, are you all right?"

"That was plain stupid," Gavin declared, his calm somewhat restored. "Graveyards are jam-packed with heroes like you, buddy. Get his wallet, lady, and give me the money. Same with your purse."

She fumbled for the wallet, found it in his trousers, emptied it and added the cash from her purse. Gavin stuffed the bills into his pocket.

"Now beat it, both of you! You got five seconds before I change my mind."

She scrambled out and he followed meekly, holding the handkerchief to his head. When they were clear, Gavin made a U-turn and roared away without lights. He looked back once. The sound of the shot and the attending commotion had attracted a trio of people who now stood on the sidewalk in a bewildered huddle as the couple went toward them, the girl glancing over her shoulder at the vanishing cab.

Out of sight, Gavin flicked on the headlights and flew down Sunset to the freeway, taking the on-ramp south, knowing that at sixty-five he could cross to traffic-swollen Wilshire and lose himself in a couple of minutes.

He had barely reached the speed limit, however, when sirens rose and fell behind him, growing in the night as bursting red lights winked evilly in his mirror and bloomed larger with every jolt of his heart. Gavin sank his pedal foot to the floor, but beyond this mechanical reaction, there was little in his head but a cyclone of fear.

It was obvious at once that he wasn't going to escape, couldn't even hold his distance. It wasn't much of a decision. You let them catch up for a shoot-out against impossible odds, or you took the first exit and prayed to the devil for his kind of luck. He would take the first exit.

But the exit was too far and the cops were too close, not a hundred yards behind. With terrible resignation he lifted his foot and let the cab drift.

There were two patrol cars. As the first came abreast, the passenger cop turned his head and gazed at Gavin with a curious expression of narrowed eyes and pursed lips, as if he were mildly disapproving. Then the cruiser sped past and was replaced by another, the performance being repeated in much the same way by a second officer who looked back with a deep frown as his partner hustled him away.

Gavin got the full picture when he slowed for the Wilshire off-

ramp. In the distance beyond he could see that there had been an accident. Cars were stalled for a quarter-mile south of the exit and now an ambulance swerved through traffic with a screaming demand and took possession of the emergency strip to plow ahead toward a sea of flashing lights and blazing flares. So the cops had had no interest in him, except to note that he was wildly exceeding the speed limit, a matter of small importance under the circumstances.

At any other time it might have been funny, but he was trembling as he swooped down the ramp to Wilshire and nosed into westbound traffic. Soon he turned a corner and pulled up at the side entrance of a familiar bar, a place with a dusky interior where he could put down a couple of quick drinks while pondering his next move, and since there was no one about, he counted the take from the second stickup.

He was stunned. He had nearly killed a man for a lousy fifty-two bucks. Suddenly he was afraid to go on with it. Maybe he had better quit while he still could. He would think about it over a drink.

He put the bills in his wallet and was lighting a cigarette when a man came out of the bar, saw the cab and moved toward it with a jaunty step. He was tall and slim and fortyish, had pure white hair and wore a natty blue business suit. Bending, he leaned into the cab, bringing with him the faint aroma of whisky.

"There's an office building out near El Segundo," he said. "Pacific Coast Electronics. Know where it is?"

"Sure," said Gavin. "Big tall job right off the Coast Highway. Can't take you, though. I'm about to check in."

"So you'll be a little late. I'm in a big hurry. I left a rented car in the parking lot behind the building. Gotta pick it up and then catch a plane. It would be worth an extra ten to me."

"Like you said," Gavin replied with a grin, "I'll be a little late. Hop in!"

He cranked the meter and zoomed off, purposely avoiding the freeway and heading toward Lincoln. A guy who could grease a cabbie with ten bucks would have plenty to spare. Further, it was a made-to-order setup. The P.C. Electronics building would be closed tight now and the dark, unguarded lot would screen a holdup.

"I came down from San Francisco, first of the week," the man said. "We had a whole bunch of meetings and then this evening one of the local brass drove me in town for a few drinks. In the bar he met some dame he knew. He was load-

ed and wouldn't drive me back, so here I am."

"That's the way it goes," replied Gavin. "They'll do it to you every time—the dames."

"Well, it wasn't exactly the gal's fault. This guy got—"

"Yeah, but in the background—a woman. Right?"

The man chuckled. "Right."

They were within a few blocks of the electronics building when the call came over the radio: *Attention all drivers! Attention all drivers! A code brown on unit T-six-seven. Last approximate twenty-one, west on Wilshire near Westwood exit of the freeway. If you have a twenty-one for this unit, green your dispatcher at once! Repeat: A code brown for T-six-seven . . .*

That was it! A general robbery code to cover all situations. Somehow the holdups had been linked to the hot cab he was driving. Translated, the message meant: Robbery in progress, cab T-six-seven. Last seen westbound on Wilshire near the Westwood exit of the freeway. If observed, contact your dispatcher . . . A driver without a fare would know enough to follow at a safe distance and keep reporting.

The patrol cops en route to the wreck, informed earlier of the robberies, likely had noted the number of Gavin's speeding cab and marked his departure from the freeway at the Wilshire exit. On the chance that this was the cab involved in the passenger stickups, they had asked the company to check it out. Then the truth had been discovered.

Behind him the man was saying, "What was that all about—the bit on the radio?"

"Nothing much," he answered. "Cab broke down. If there's a driver in the vicinity who doesn't have a fare, he's supposed to give assistance or have the dispatcher send a tow truck. Happens all the time."

"Oh," said the man. "So why do they radio something like that in code?"

"Public image stuff. Keeps the customers from knowing that our cabs break down once in a while."

"Interesting. Every business has its little secrets, huh?"

Gavin was silent, nervously watching for other cabs and police cars, wondering if he should skip this one, let the guy go free. Yeah, that would be best. It was now only important to escape!

When he came to the building he turned into the drive which curved to the parking lot at the rear. The building was dark, he noted as he descended the ramp and entered the lot.

"Down at the other end," said his passenger. "It's that white Bu-

ick parked on the left-hand side."

When Gavin braked beside the car he knew something was phony because the Buick was a good five years old and the U-drive-it people did not rent old cars. By then it was too late. The man had jammed a gun in his back, ordered him to douse the lights and was demanding his money.

"If you're for real," Gavin groaned, "this is one for the books! Some people are accident-prone, but me—I just get robbed all the time!"

"Never mind the gab. Just keep your mouth shut and fork it over. C'mon, c'mon!"

Gavin gave him the bills from his wallet. Well, there was still nearly five hundred in the case, and thanks be for small favors.

"Okay," said the gunman, "now you can get out."

He could reach for the .45 but it was a long gamble and not worth the risk. He got out.

"Now open the trunk."

"The trunk? There's nothing at all in the trunk, buddy. It's empty."

"Yeah, but in a couple of seconds it won't be. Open it!"

Gavin turned the key and the lid sprang up.

"Thought you said the trunk was clean, wise guy. What's in the case?"

"Couple of sandwiches and a thermos I always bring along," Gavin told him, remembering how it used to be.

"We'll see about that. Toss it over."

Reluctantly, Gavin pitched the case to his feet.

"Now," said the gunman, "suppose you climb in the trunk."

"You're not gonna lock me in *there,* are ya?"

"Don't worry, someone will get you out when the electronics people come to work in the morning—if you make enough noise. Anyway, it buys me some time."

"Ahh, now listen," Gavin said desperately, "I may not *live* in there until morning! I can't stand to be cooped up in a small space. So help me, I'll panic and die! Then you'll have a murder rap on your hands!"

The gunman hesitated. He seemed on the verge of relenting. Then he said, "A lotta cabbies were locked in trunks and came out okay. I read about it in the papers. Now hurry it up! You want a bullet or the trunk?"

Gavin sent him a last pleading look, turned and climbed in. The lid came down sharply. Soon he heard the Buick start up and move away. He was alone in a vacuum of absolute stillness, smothering in tomblike confinement.

For a few moments he lay supine, taking slow, deep breaths, trying to

keep his mind a blank, his emotions in control. Then, caught in a slowly mounting wave of fear, Gavin kicked mightily and repeatedly in the area of the lock. He was rewarded by the thunderous applause of metal holding fast.

He began a frantic gulping for air as his imagination expanded to the edge of hysteria. It was like waking up in your coffin six feet down—couldn't move, couldn't breathe! The thought made him cry out as he beat on the steel. He called insanely for Mary Ann, saying her name over and over.

At last he caught a thread of logic and followed it to a conclusion. If he were to survive he would have to still his panic, quiet his fear. So he would lie at ease and he would think of other things—like about Mary Ann and all their good times past, and yet to come, and his first look at their baby's picture.

In the morning he would shout and pound and someone would come and let him out. With the fiction that he was leaving to make his report to the police, he would slip away. After wiping his prints and retrieving the .45, he would quickly ditch the cab—and vanish.

The gunman in the aging Buick was having some thoughts of his own as he approached the rooming house in which he plotted a variety of dark schemes. He was congratulating himself upon an astonishing haul—the combined cash from the cabbie's wallet and case coming to over five hundred green ones.

His joy was somewhat clouded, however, by a small doubt. The cabbie really seemed petrified at the prospect of being closed away in the trunk. If a guy lost his cool in such tight quarters and went berserk, wasn't it possible that he could die? With nothing to lose, why should he accept the odds of fate on a murder one?

In another minute he was dialing the cab company from a phone booth.

". . . You say the driver is locked in the trunk of his cab!" cried the operator.

"That's right, ma'am. In the parking lot behind the Pacific Coast Electronics Building, off the Coast Highway near El Segundo."

"Can you tell me the cab number, sir?"

"How would I know! A cab is a cab. There's only one on the lot!"

"Thank you, sir. I'll report it to the police immediately! May I have your name?"

"I think not," he said, "on the grounds that it might tend to incriminate me."

Chuckling, he cradled the receiver.

Perhaps he was Kipling's Thousandth Man who was said to stand by a person's side, "To the gallows foot—and after!"

Who Was HE?

by Joseph Payne Brennan

SEVERAL months ago, while I was in the hospital recovering from a coronary attack, I underwent a bizarre and frightening experience which I am at a loss to explain. Now I want to get the facts down before they begin to fade, as most events seem to do.

After I was released from the intensive care unit, I was put in a small single room near the end of what I referred to as "coronary corridor." This corridor was long, rather narrow and not particularly well lighted. There were about a dozen other single rooms situated along both sides of it.

After a day or two, I usually kept my door shut in order to muffle the racket of radios and television sets which came from the other

rooms. I preferred to read quietly.

One day as I was reading, the door softly opened. I didn't hear it open but I was perfectly aware, even before I looked up, that someone was standing in the doorway.

I had hoped it might be a visitor, but I saw with disappointment and a twinge of annoyance that it was only a hospital barber. He wore a thin alpaca jacket which looked a bit seedy and he carried a small, rather disreputable black bag. Instead of speaking, he merely formed a wordless question by lifting his thick black eyebrows.

I shook my head. "Not right now. Perhaps later on."

He looked inordinately disappointed and he lingered in the doorway a moment. Finally he turned, closing the door quietly.

For some reason, I could no longer concentrate on my book. I admitted to myself, at length, that he had startled me and that this had made me angry. Not a proper state of affairs, I realized, for a coronary patient. I took a tranquilizer and tried to sleep—unsuccessfully.

I slept reasonably well that night, however (with the aid of a sleeping tablet), and the next morning, after various ablutions, bed-changings and temperature-takings, etc., I settled back to my book. I found that I was still unable to concentrate on it, although it had held my attention well enough the day before. At length, as I glanced around the small room, frowning with fretfulness, I realized what the trouble was.

My door was again closed, as I had requested, but now I found that I no longer wanted it closed. For the life of me, I couldn't say why. Since I was still forbidden to walk, I rang for the nurse.

A nurse's aide, a rather breezy, flaxen-haired Swedish girl, swept in. "Tired of being a hermit already? I thought you'd change your mind!" I smiled, rather sheepishly I suppose, and she went out, leaving the door open.

I returned to my book, but some buried part of my mind kept mulling over the business about the door. I finally had to admit the truth: I definitely did not want that shabby-looking hospital barber to open the door while I was reading and startle me again. The raucous screech and blare of television and radio continued to irritate me, but I tried to read over it. In this I was only partially successful.

After lunch I began to feel drowsy. I laid aside my book and was starting to doze off when a terrific, hair-raising scream lifted me upright in bed. I was sure that it had originated in one of the oth-

er nearby rooms along the corridor.

I could feel my heart pounding, and tried to tell myself that the scream had come from a television set. Someone, I assured myself, had suddenly and inadvertently turned a volume dial up to its maximum potential.

Moments later I heard a great commotion in the corridor. Nurses and orderlies rushed by. I'd had no idea there were so many people on the floor. Doctors hurried past. There was a brief period of murmured commands, conversation, and then nearly complete silence. Slowly, the nurses and orderlies walked back down the corridor. A few minutes later a still form, covered from head to foot with a rubberized sheet, was rolled past my door.

I waited a while and then rang for a nurse. The flaxen-haired Swedish nurse's aide hurried in. I had never known her to respond so swiftly before. I thought she looked a little pale.

"What happened?" I asked her.

She hesitated, then shrugged. "Mr. Caldress. Across the corridor, one room down."

"Fatal attack?"

She nodded.

I watched her face. "Isn't it—unusual—for a heart patient to cry out like that?"

Again she hesitated. When she spoke, she appeared to be choosing her words carefully. "It is—not usually the case. But, sometimes, things like that happen. Probably he, well, had a very sudden severe pain. Most patients would just—crumple over. But he managed to scream. It was—unusual."

She smiled, rather mechanically I thought. "But you don't think about it! You are getting along fine! You read one of your good books and don't think about it!"

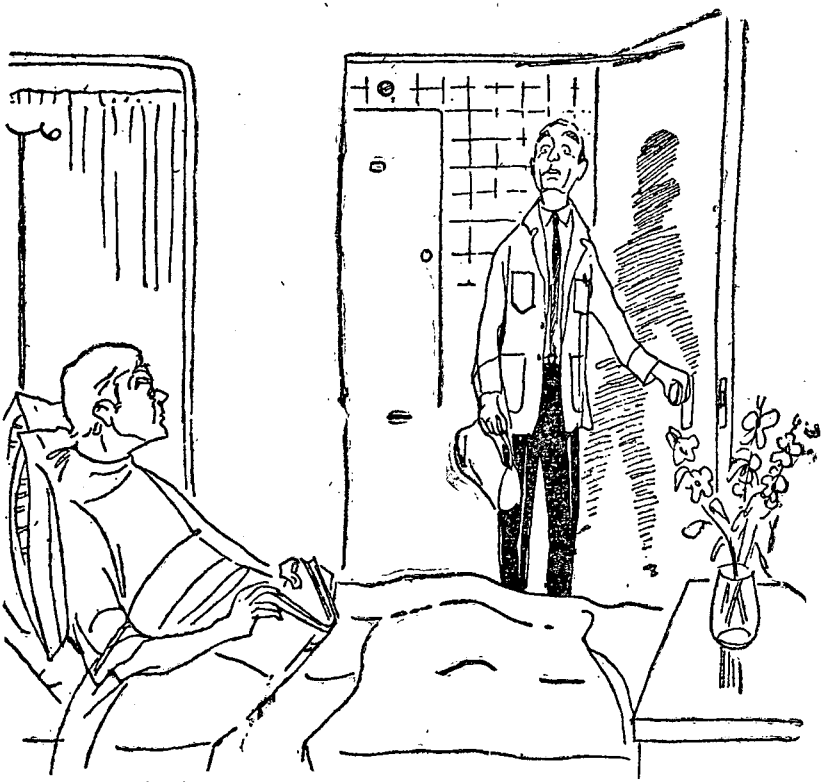
Of course I did think about it. I thought about it all the rest of the day and into the evening, and they finally gave me an extra sleeping tablet to settle me down.

A couple of days passed uneventfully and then one afternoon as I was reading, again with the door open, I experienced the unpleasant sensation that I was being watched—closely, intensely.

I looked up. There stood the shabby hospital barber in the doorway, with his sleazy alpaca jacket and his scuffed black bag. As before, the heavy black eyebrows lifted in a wordless question.

As on the previous occasion, I was angry because he had startled me. *Damn the man!* I thought. *Can't he have the common courtesy to tap on the door, even though it is open?*

"I don't need a haircut!" I told him forcefully. "When I do, I'll



have one of the nurses inform you!"

Still he hung in the doorway. His face looked bland, expressionless, like a mask, but the bright, black eyes positively glinted with disappointment, and something more than disappointment. I wasn't sure what it was. I might say resentment, but that seems too mild a word. It looked more like positive animosity.

I felt the blood rising to my neck and face. "Will you please leave?" I flung at him. "You're very rude."

I may have imagined it, but I thought he bowed ever so slightly. A moment later he was gone.

Resolving to speak to the head nurse, I tried to settle back to my book, but it was some time before I could comprehend what I was reading.

I had begun to relax and was even looking forward to dinner when my mood was shattered by another cry emanating from a nearby room. It was not a high-pitched

scream this time. It was a moan, a subdued wail, but there was terror and hopelessness in it.

I froze, my heart thumping again. I heard a shout, then running feet. An emergency exit door at my end of the corridor opened and I heard light but frantically-running feet clattering down the fire escape. A minute later they were followed by heavy, purposeful feet, pounding down three or four steps at a time.

I could not see too clearly into the corridor and, in addition, the room from which the cry had come this time was farther up but, as before, I heard people rushing along, exclamations, commands, murmured conversation, and then silence.

In my mind's eye I visualized the stretcher rolling down that dim corridor once again with its silent rider huddled beneath a gray, rubberized sheet.

My Swedish nurse's aide was off that day; a new aide, a rather attractive little redhead, brought in my dinner. It was obvious that her cheerfulness was forced.

"Who was it this time?" I asked.

She was silent a moment, pretending to arrange my tray. "It was Mr. Mayerton. Room 375."

My room was 377. Mayerton's was just two rooms away.

I tried to extract more information from the new aide, but I was unsuccessful. She told me she hadn't been present, that she had heard of Mr. Mayerton's demise only a few minutes before, when she first came on duty.

The next day I tried to pry more information from the other nurses. I had no luck. Either they had been instructed not to talk, or they had so decided themselves. They assured me that Mayerton had died peacefully, and professed ignorance of the moan, or wail, I described. They told me that Mayerton had rung for help just before lapsing into unconsciousness. If there were a cry, they insisted, it was "involuntary."

They shrugged off my question about running feet on the fire escape. I was probably drowsing, one of them said, and imagined the sounds.

I tried to forget the episode, but I was far from satisfied, and that afternoon as I was reading mail, I heard a smart rap on the door. I looked up.

A neat young man with glossy hair and a toothbrush moustache stood in the doorway. He was wearing a spotless white jacket and he carried a small beige case.

"Haircut, sir?"

I hesitated. "Well—not right now. In a day or two, perhaps."

He nodded affably. "Just as you

say, sir. I'll check back in a few days."

As soon as he left, I was sorry that I hadn't told him to go ahead and cut my hair. In the first place, I needed a haircut. Beyond that, I wanted to question him about the other hospital barber. I hoped his shabby predecessor had left for good.

The other barber, I told myself, had "conditioned" me to give a negative response. Smiling ruefully to myself, I went back to my mail.

My recovery proceeded rapidly; before the new barber made the rounds on my floor again, I was assisted into a wheelchair one afternoon and rolled down to the solarium to sit for an hour.

While I was sitting there, looking rather bored, I suppose, one of the hospital security guards strolled along. I hailed him and he walked over for a chat.

In my somewhat unsystematic "career" I have held a number of different jobs. Some years before, for instance, I myself had worked as a part-time security guard. Very shortly, therefore, the hospital guard and myself were engaged in friendly and animated conversation.

Inevitably, the conversation veered to the two recent deaths in "coronary corridor." I noticed at once that my new friend became less loquacious. He looked around uneasily a number of times to see if anyone were listening. He appeared to ponder a decision; finally he shrugged.

"If you promise not to say a single word to anybody—especially anybody here—I'll tell you a little story."

I swore on my honor not to breathe a syllable.

He frowned, not sure how to begin. "Well, there was something mighty peculiar about those deaths. First of all, both those patients were found dead with a look of fear frozen on their faces! Eyes still open and starin', as if they'd seen something so awful they'd died of fright! And both times, right after they yelled, or groaned, a little guy carryin' a black bag was seen runnin' down that corridor! In fact, the second time I saw him myself. I chased him!"

I felt my heart thumping. "Can you describe him?"

"I saw him from the back, mostly. Small, wiry character wearin' a thin grey jacket. Carried a crummy little black bag. I just caught a side glimpse of his face. Looked smooth, not much expression, a poker face. Thick black eyebrows."

"That's the other hospital barber!" I told him.

He stared at me. "The *other* barber? There's only one—a young

guy with a toothbrush moustache. Wears a white jacket. He's been here over a year." He hesitated. "Hey, did you see this guy, too?"

I waved a hand. "Never mind that now. Go on."

He scrubbed his chin. "Well, I didn't see this creep the first time, but the second time I was right there on the floor. Right after Mayerton groaned and rang for the nurse, I saw this wiry guy run out of his room. I started after him, down the corridor. He bolted out the emergency door and down the fire escape."

"Catch him?"

He shook his head. "Not a chance. He ran like a rabbit. And he went over that parking-lot fence like a deer. It took me two or three minutes to climb over; by then he was nowhere in sight." He looked at me. "But the craziest part is yet to come. You know that little black bag he carried?"

I nodded.

"Well, when he hopped over the fence, the bag caught on the top strand of wire and fell back in the parking lot. I picked it up later, and what do you suppose I found inside?"

"I have no idea," I told him. "Don't keep me in suspense!"

"Dirt!" he answered. "Just plain dirt! Earth dirt!"

As I pondered this, he went on. "And that's not all. Listen to this. When they ran in after Caldress and Mayerton died, you know what they found sprinkled on both their beds? Earth dirt!"

At this point a nurse came to return me to my room. The guard bid me a hasty good-bye, promising to look in on me later.

I didn't sleep well that night. The Swedish girl scolded me because my pressure had gone up; the night nurse said I had a temperature.

The final denouement was yet to come. I was sitting in the solarium a few days later, feeling quite chipper (the young barber had just given me an expert haircut), when the security guard came along.

He sat down, looking around warily. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I might as well finish the story."

"Please do!" I urged him.

"Well, I had to turn in that little black bag full of earth, but before the police got it, I filled a paper sack with some of the dirt. I gave it to a friend of mine who works in a laboratory. He's got a microscope and all kinds of testing stuff. You know what he found out?"

"I couldn't imagine!"

He leaned closer. "That dirt, that earth dirt—he swears it must have come out of a cemetery!"

I felt my heart thumping again,

but I pretended that I was skeptical. "Oh, how could he tell that?"

"From little bits of things that he found mixed in the dirt: tiny chips of marble and granite, like from gravestones; bits of artificial flowers and wreaths. And not only that. He says there were even a couple of little bone splinters that check out as human! And all the dirt was mixed with moss and mold, as if it had been dug out of a wet, dark corner of the cemetery!"

That's the story and I can offer no explanation. The wiry little man with the mask-like face, the glittering eyes and the heavy black eyebrows was never seen again.

A certain friend of mine, who considers himself quite a clever fellow, says the explanation is obvious. The man with the black bag, he tells me, was a typical psychopath who was either born with a terribly disfigured face, or acquired one in some horrible accident. Wearing a mask, he slipped into the coronary unit and literally frightened the two patients to death by merely entering their rooms and whipping off his mask. My friend says that the sprinkling of cemetery earth on the beds was only a macabre whim generated by a twisted mind.

This explanation may sound plausible, but I am by no means convinced that it is the correct one. I myself feel certain, that for some obscure psychic reason, the frightful creature whom I mistook for the hospital barber was powerless to enter a patient's room unless bidden to do so. I believe that both heart patients who cried out and died gave him permission to come into their rooms. No one, of course, seemed to remember whether or not they needed haircuts! I cannot explain my conviction. It remains with me; that is all.

I will add only this: I am quite positive in my own mind that if I had given that lethal intruder assent to enter my room, you would not be reading this story—because I am sure that I would not have lived to write it.

I shall probably spend the rest of my life asking myself the question: *"Who was he?"*

Certainly, innate trickery is not universally commended, but time and circumstances have a propensity for tempering generalities.

RHEA WEST was waiting when I pushed open the door, her flame-colored hair brightening the place considerably, and her spectacular beauty causing no little flutter among the three women in the outer office.

My heart jumped. Five years ago, Rhea and I had been an item for the nightclub columnists, but she had left town to become one of the top recording stars in the business.

"John." The way she said my name had lost none of its magic and reminded me things had never been the same since she left.

I grinned. "Personal visit, or do you require the services of Chetkos and Stoneman?"

"Maybe a little of both." She cocked her head and studied me. "Still the only man I ever knew who looks like a distinguished attorney."

I made up my mind not to get involved again. "If it is business, perhaps my partner should sit in."

"Maybe he should," she said slowly. "That marvelous old man

will be able to help, if anyone can."

I held open the door of Chetkos' office and signaled my secretary we would take no calls.

Chetkos rose from listening to the news on the FM set I'd bought him last Christmas, a broad smile on his wrinkled, seventy-year-old face. "I knew something would brighten my day," he said. "It's a pleasure to see you, Miss West."

"You may not think so later, Mr. Chetkos."

"Never," he said gallantly. "What can we do for you?"

She pointed at the radio. "You may have heard that a Mrs. Kincaid was killed by a prowler last night."

He nodded.

She turned to me, eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Ann," she said. "She married David Kincaid."

Five years ago Ann West had been a gawky seventeen, pretending to be in love with me when I called for her sister.

"I'm sorry," I said. I was. Ann had been a real nice kid.

"They say a prowler did it. They're wrong," she said bitterly. "David killed her. I don't know how, but he did."

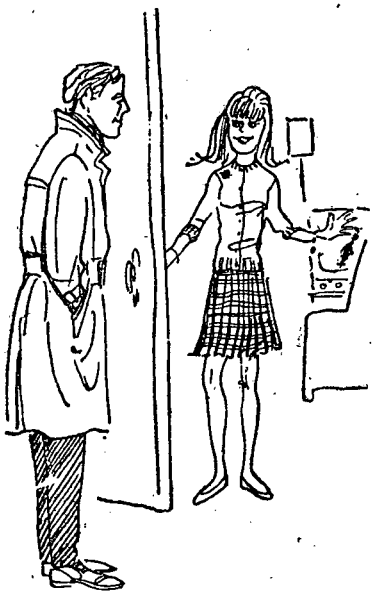
We both stared at her.

"Did you tell this to the police?" asked Chetkos.

She nodded. "They won't listen. They say there was no way he could have done it, no way at all."

"Why would he want to?" I asked. "Didn't he and Ann get along?"

"Ann wrote that she was going to get a divorce. I won't bother with the details, but David treated her very badly, both mentally and physically. He told her he'd kill



her before he would let her leave."

"The radio gave no specific information," said Chetkos. "What were the circumstances?"

"David and Ann lived in the suburbs. David was in town last night. He came home on the eleven-thirty train, walked to his house, found Ann asleep, and went next door to talk to their neighbors, a

family named Holbrook, who were still sitting on their patio. While there, they heard a scream and a shot. David ran home, found Ann dead and the back door open. A man named Adair, walking his dog, also heard the scream and the shot, and saw David run into the house."

I looked at Chetkos and shrugged.

"It would seem impossible for your brother-in-law to have done it," said Chetkos. "I'm sure the police feel the same."

"David is exceedingly clever," she said. "He must have found a way."

"Why discount the prowler?" I asked. "It might be convenient for Kincaid, but those things do happen."

She shook her head. "No. I can tell from the way David talks and acts that he's laughing inside and, from Ann's letters, that's the kind of man he is."

Chetkos tented his hands piously. "It's a police matter, Miss West. We have no reason to interfere. Perhaps a private investigator—"

"If you were a private investigator, would you take the case?"

"In all honesty, only if I were primarily interested in your money."

"That's why I'm here. Some things must be taken on faith. Of all the people I know, you two are in the best position to help, not because it is wise or sensible but because you must believe me."

There was little we could say to that. We promised to look into it and let her know what we found.

"You will go and talk to the lieutenant in charge," said Chetkos after she had gone. "The sooner the better."

"I would prefer you to handle this matter alone."

The wise eyes swiveled toward me. "You wish to avoid contact with Miss West?"

"Five years is a long time, but not long enough."

He nodded sympathetically. "I shall handle that end of it, then. You do the necessary footwork only. What is your schedule this morning?"

"I'm due in court to defend Hammer Hanson."

Chetkos made a face. "Which of our innumerable statutes has Mr. Hanson bent now?"

"The usual; policy, writing numbers. When the police broke in, Hammer tried to chew the slips, but he requires either a bigger mouth or faster jaw. They found enough paper to nail him."

"I shall defend Mr. Hanson if I cannot get a continuance. How is Mr. Hanson's health?"

"Same as ever. With those bad lungs, he writes numbers or starves

to death. Trouble is, he's on probation now. I hope for a suspended sentence, but Hammer just might end up in prison."

"Rest and good food in prison might be good for him."

"I've never heard of prison being a rest cure," I said drily. "I'll call the lieutenant."

Chetkos picked up my brief on Hanson, and I grinned. He'd cause a small sensation, defending Hanson. The only time the old man is seen in court these days is for something far more important.

I watched him go, with affection. He'd taken me out of law school a long time ago, taught me everything he'd learned in forty years of criminal law, inoculated me with all the wisdom and deviousness of that exemplary brain of his, made me his partner, and now rested his seventy-year-old bones in the sun while I did most of the work and he took most of the credit and a goodly portion of the firm's profits.

I picked up my week-old Maserati from the lot after circling around it carefully, examining the costly wire-wheeled beauty for dents and scratches. The attendant parked sports cars as if he were driving in the Grand Prix, and watching him was as exciting as any race in the world, as long as it wasn't your car.

Heading toward the suburbs along the expressway, I opened it up a little, enjoying the handling and the power, and remembering Rhea West.

It had taken a long time before I woke in the morning without thinking of her. There had been many hazy nights and a great deal of bourbon, with Chetkos watching from the sidelines, until I came in one morning, red-eyed and just barely moving, to run into a tongue-lashing that centered around the fact that at his age, Chetkos had no intention of becoming the surviving member of the firm. My hide burned for days.

After that, there had been nothing but a massive loneliness. I turned, for something to do, to fine cars, working my way up to the Maserati, and even Chetkos didn't know how many sleepless nights his forty-five-year-old partner had sent those cars boring through the darkness on the almost deserted high-speed highways around the city, wondering if it were just a way of seeking self-destruction.

Now Rhea was back, looking for help, and all we could do would be to conduct a discreet inquiry, hoping we wouldn't tread on any police toes. The job was difficult enough in the city, but far more difficult in the suburbs since suburban police weren't noted for

their cordiality toward urban attorneys.

Luckily, I drew one of the helpful kind. His name was Hunter, and if Rhea thought I looked like an attorney, she could have told me the dark-haired, well-dressed Hunter certainly didn't look like a detective.

He leaned back in his chair and looked very serious. "I can understand Miss West's feelings, but she's walking on dangerous ground spreading such an accusation."

"You know it, and I know it. She doesn't. I think the best thing to do is check it out so thoroughly she will be convinced."

"She should be convinced now." He meant that since he was in charge of the investigation, nothing had been overlooked, and I felt a little stir of anger. No man should be so positive.

He realized how it sounded because he grinned, and I grinned back. If Kincaid had killed his wife, those two grins meant he wasn't going to get away with it.

"I suppose, because of Miss West's concern, I can do no more than extend every courtesy to her attorney."

"Which the attorney will certainly appreciate," I said. "Just exactly what did happen?"

In more detail, he told me the same things Rhea West had. Kincaid was with the Holbrooks when the scream and the shot were heard.

"No question as to the time of death?"

"None at all. The medical examiner fixes it as between eleven-thirty and twelve. Death was instantaneous, the result of a gunshot wound in the heart from a thirty-eight fired from approximately three feet. The revolver, with one spent shell, was lying on the floor at the foot of the bed. It belonged to Kincaid and had no prints except his, which were somewhat smeared."

"The assumption being that the intruder found the gun, was discovered by Mrs. Kincaid, and used it."

He nodded. "And then ran out the back door as Kincaid came in the front."

"Why didn't he hang on to the gun?"

"Panic, I suppose."

"You checked Kincaid's movements last night?"

"To the minute. Even interviewed the conductor on his train. It's all a matter of timing. No one can get around the fact that Kincaid was outside when the killing took place."

I stood up. "Only one thing left to do, and that's visit the house.

Do you think Kincaid will have any objections?"

"I'll go along with you to make certain he doesn't."

He walked admiringly around the Maserati. "The firm of Chetkos and Stoneman must do all right," he said.

"You arrest them, and we defend them. If there weren't so many, we'd starve to death." I handed him the keys. "Be my guest."

Somewhere he had learned to drive, and the Maserati was like a toy in his hands. For ten minutes, Hunter had the time of his life, shaking his head regretfully as we purred to a stop in front of the Kincaid house. "Sometimes I think I'm in the wrong line of work," he said.

I thought of all the cars that had led up to this one, and why I had bought them. "You wouldn't want to pay the price I did to get it," I said, "and I'm not talking of money."

Kincaid wasn't too happy about letting us in but evidently couldn't think of a good reason for preventing it. He was a tall, thin-faced type, his blond hair long and combed back, wearing a blazer, an open shirt and a pencil mustache. The thin mouth seemed twisted in a perpetual smirk and the narrow eyes were a little too close together to suit me. A radio announcer, he had a deep syrupy voice that sounded affected, and probably was. He didn't impress me as being overly sad at the death of his wife.

The house was at the end of a row of similar ones, set back from the street, patio on the side, and everything on one floor. A combination livingroom-den opened on the patio, and was lined with books radiating from an elaborate stereo setup in the center of one wall. The bedroom was on the opposite side of the house.

Hunter pointed out where the body had been found sprawled on one of the twin beds, where the revolver had been kept in the night stand, and where the gun had been dropped.

I walked down the hall. It was apparent that the intruder, running from the bedroom, would reach the

back door before Kincaid, coming from the front, would reach the hall. I opened the back door and stepped out. Fifty feet away was a wall of trees.

"I suppose you searched the neighborhood thoroughly," I said to Hunter.

"You can bet on it. How the man got through is beyond us, especially in this section. A stranger would be spotted immediately."

"So the assumption is that the intruder was no stranger."

"That's what we're working on at the moment."

"Why select this house? Kincaid have a reputation for keeping valuables at home?"

"No more than anyone else. Another strange thing: so far as Kincaid knows, nothing of value was taken."

I examined the door. "Doesn't look as if anyone broke in," I said.

Hunter pointed at a triangular rip in the screen. "The inner door was open. He sliced open the screen, reached in and unlocked the screen door."

"Is it possible he *intended* to kill Mrs. Kincaid?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Fingerprints on the door?"

"Fingerprints nowhere. He must have worn gloves."

"A careful workman, then. A pro."

"He was apparently no amateur."

It seemed hopeless. As certain as Rhea was that Kincaid had killed her sister, it was equally certain all she was basing her suspicions on was woman's intuition.

"When Kincaid heard the shot and the scream, the Holbrooks, the people next door, heard them and so did Adair, walking his dog. When Kincaid ran for the house, Holbrook phoned for the police, then followed him. A car was here within three minutes. Within ten we were searching the neighborhood."

We thanked Kincaid, who looked at me curiously when introduced, and ignored us thereafter. Yet I knew that Ann Kincaid must have mentioned my name as a friend of her sister at one time or another.

Now there was a laughing gleam in the close-set eyes, something that was there for me and not for Hunter. Rhea was right. I felt it now.

I let Hunter drive us back to his office, not wanting to deprive a kindred spirit of the opportunity to drive the Maserati.

He swung into the parking lot and stepped out. "Are you satisfied?"

I slid over behind the wheel and thought for a moment. "No holds barred," I said. "I want it all. You

closing the file on Kincaid and concentrating on the intruder?"

He answered carefully. "There's always the possibility the intruder was hired by Kincaid, which would make Miss West correct. As far as closing the file on anyone, nothing gets closed until I have an answer."

"Fair enough," I said. "I appreciate your cooperation, and I promise to take Rhea West off your back. If anything turns up, you'll call me?"

"You can count on it."

I waved and threw the Maserati in gear.

Chetkos was listening to the radio when I walked in. "Can you tear yourself away long enough for lunch?" I asked.

"Not without hearing your conclusion first."

"You won't like it."

He switched off the radio and clasped his hands over his cane. "Explain."

"Just that," I said. "The facts say Rhea West is wrong. My gambler's instinct, like her woman's intuition, says she is right. Kincaid either killed his wife or had her killed."

I went over the entire morning with him.

"You have nothing factual upon which to base your hunch?"

"Not a thing."

"What do you think we should tell Miss West?" he wondered.

"Calm her down, and let the man out there do his work without interference. He's a rare one, and if anything can be found, he'll find it." I walked to the door. "Let's go to lunch. I don't think too well on an empty stomach."

"Your performance this morning indicates you had no breakfast," he said with a bite to his voice. "You go ahead. I'd like to sit here and consider the situation."

That meant his secretary would bring in snapper soup, crackers and tea, and thinking of the old man munching a cracker and staring out the window destroyed my appetite. I found a spot in the air-conditioned drugstore downstairs and ordered a sandwich the would-be chef couldn't damage too much.

I was certain Rhea was right about Kincaid. The big question was how to prove it. There was no point in trying to pull his story apart. I was sure Hunter had already tried that in several different ways. If it could have been destroyed by the usual thorough investigation, he would have done it by now.

There had to be an answer somewhere. I sat there, munching on the tasteless sandwich and listening to the piped-in music when it came to me. I dropped the sandwich, finished the coffee, and hurried to the

office of a singularly clever friend.

He listened carefully, nodded, said, "No problem at all," and kept me waiting for the best part of the afternoon because it really wasn't quite that easy. A great deal depended on what I was doing, and it had to be as nearly perfect as possible.

I had the package tucked into my pocket when I walked into Chetkos' office.

His eyes were closed. He opened one eye warily. "The sound of your footsteps indicates you are agitated."

"I have an answer," I said.

"The length of time you took for lunch indicated that you might. I have one, too. Something occurred to me that unfortunately cannot be proved."

The snapper soup must have done for him what the soggy sandwich did for me.

"I won't ask what the conclusion is, because I'm afraid it's the same as mine," I said. "If so, I was thinking of restoring the evidence."

Chetkos' voice grated. "As an officer of the court, you would not do anything illegal?"

"As a friend of Rhea West, I certainly would," I said slowly.

He bristled. "You are letting your affection for this woman cloud your judgment. I forbid you to entertain the thought."

"Forbid away," I said. "It's the only way he can be caught." I turned away from his glare. This was the closest to an argument we'd come in twenty years.

"I will not permit it," he said quietly. "There must be a better way."

"I'm open to suggestion."

He said nothing.

"You see?" I said gently. "The man was very clever. He knows he can't be convicted if no evidence exists. He's laughing at the law and the courts and Hunter and you and me and everyone like us. You want to let him get away with it?"

"Better to let him get away than to break the law yourself."

I disagreed. "You know how I feel. Fight fire with fire."

"I strongly disassociate myself from any such idea."

"That is exactly why you're not going to hear about it."

"For years I have hoped your penchant for violence, innate trickery, and friendship with disreputable characters would not get you into trouble."

I grinned. There were times when he hadn't been so fussy when it suited his purpose. Even now, he had an idea of what I was going to do but would do nothing to prevent it, depending on my good sense not to go too far.

"I want you to do me a favor," I

said. "A small favor. Will you?"

"As long as you do not wish me to join you in breaking the law."

"I wouldn't dream of it. All I want you to do is see that Hunter gets Kincaid out of the house tonight for a half-hour, after dark."

"I will talk to the lieutenant. Suppose he does not wish to go along with the idea? Will you be in touch?"

"No need. If he doesn't, I'll know about it."

"Where will you be?"

I fingered the package. "That question is irrelevant."

Halfway to the parking lot, I realized the Maserati would be too conspicuous so I rented an innocuous dark sedan and headed for Kincaid's house. My disreputable friends would have been proud of the job I did casing the neighborhood.

Knowing what I was going to do and how, I headed back to town for a few pieces of equipment I'd need.

At dusk I was back, dressed in rubber-soled shoes and dark coat and slacks. I had a pair of gloves in one pocket, a set of lock picks in another, and the package in a third.

Leaning against a tree in the patch of woods behind Kincaid's house, I waited for Hunter to get Kincaid out. I wished he would hurry. Even Chetkos would have a difficult time defending me if I were picked up in these woods dressed and equipped the way I was, just a day after a woman had been killed.

It was after dark when Kincaid climbed into his car and took off. I moved to the back door quickly, pulled on my gloves, unsnapped the catch through the still torn screen, and went to work on the door with the tools. My hands fumbling from lack of practice, precious minutes slipped by before the door was open.

On a calculated guess, I headed for Kincaid's bedroom to start my search. I guessed right. In the pocket of a sport jacket, I found the small metal cylinder I expected to find. Now I was certain for the first time that my idea had been correct, and I knew exactly how Kincaid had killed his wife and avoided suspicion. I put the cylinder back where I found it.

One thing was left to do now, then Hunter could do the rest.

I turned the package over in my hands reflectively. Planting evidence was not only against the law, but would get me disbarred for life, with hardly the formality of a hearing. If found out, Kincaid would go free as fast as a judge could be found to say the words.

Too, there was Hunter. He certainly wouldn't even consider it. To make an arrest on the basis of

falsified evidence would place him in a very vulnerable and embarrassing position, and if he so much as suspected me, he wouldn't pull any punches. He'd work harder to put me in jail than he would Kincaid.

I asked myself why I was doing it. Because I wanted Kincaid caught, or was it because of Rhea West?

If Rhea hadn't been involved, would I be standing in this hot, musty house, perspiration wilting my collar, after entering like a professional burglar, willing to falsify evidence against a man I didn't even know before today?

Reluctantly, I slipped the package back into my pocket. Much as I wanted to, I couldn't do it. I couldn't go against everything Chetkos had drilled into me. I grinned wryly. Maybe that's why the old man hadn't tried too hard to talk me out of it. He knew me better than I knew myself. As he said, there must be a better way.

I'd have to play it by ear now, I decided, and I headed for Hunter's office.

Kincaid was no longer with him.

I poked my head through the door. "Am I invited in?"

He leaned back in the chair. "Don't see why not."

I played innocent. "Saw Kincaid leaving," I lied. "What was he doing here?"

"Needed his signature on some papers. This evening was as good a time as any." He said nothing about Chetkos calling him, waiting for me to commit myself.

"I had a thought this afternoon," I said. "You still have the gun, of course."

He nodded and shuffled some papers on his desk.

I looked at the ceiling. "It might not be a bad idea to examine the barrel of the gun to see if a silencer were clamped to it at one time or another."

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully before picking up the phone and talking to the lab.

"Odd," he said. "The barrel does have some fresh marks that could indicate a silencer. Why would a home owner need one?"

"An excellent question. You can also ask why was it removed, and where is it now?"

"Probably still in the house."

"Good guess," I said, knowing it was in the pocket of Kincaid's sport jacket. "But if the gun had a silencer, how could Kincaid have heard the sound of a shot? Can you imagine the intruder taking off the silencer before shooting Mrs. Kincaid?"

"Not a chance."

"Funny," I said, "because a gun exists and someone hears the sound of a shot, everyone assumes the

gun made the sound, even in this day and age when it is so easy to reproduce sound with great realism."

The message got through to Hunter very quickly. "I think I should pay a visit to Kincaid's house," he said.

"Not without a search warrant at this stage of the game," I warned. "The man's home is his castle now. You had your chance to tear it apart when investigating the killing originally. Kincaid could have refused us admission this afternoon if he'd wanted to, but it makes little difference. A warrant will avoid future complications."

"A warrant also has to be specific."

"Be specific. If you are wrong, it won't matter. I'll go along, if you don't mind. If anyone questions the propriety of my presence, I am merely Miss West's attorney, protecting her interests as the only living relative of the dead woman."

"You try to touch all the bases, don't you?"

I laughed. "It's very easy to miss one. Suppose I am called as a witness by either the prosecution or defense? I will be testifying under oath. At this point, I can truthfully say it was your idea to look for the silencer, and while I may have an idea of what else you will be looking for, I am really not certain so don't tell me."

"I see your point," said Hunter. "Let's go."

Kincaid was annoyed. He was even more annoyed when Hunter showed him the search warrant. "Go ahead," he said, "although I can't imagine what you're looking for. Do you think the prowler left something and I hid it?"

"No," said Hunter, "not something the prowler left. One thing we're looking for is a silencer for your gun. Do you want to save us the trouble, Mr. Kincaid?"

Kincaid turned white. Hunter motioned the two men with him into the house. Being experts, it didn't take long before one of them, the steel cylinder resting in a handkerchief in the palm of his hand, came up to Hunter.

"Unusual item for a man like you to have, isn't it, Mr. Kincaid?" Hunter's voice was mild.

They were standing in the hall. I drifted away into the livingroom, slipped the package from my pocket and pulled out a reel of tape which I threaded quickly through Kincaid's recorder, turned on the machine and waited. It had to be now or never, I knew.

Kincaid was still protesting he knew nothing about the silencer when they came into the livingroom. Hunter glanced at the recorder and looked at me sharply. I shook my head gently.

Kincaid was still talking when the sound of a woman's scream and a shot exploded from the recorder. Startled, he whirled and headed for the recorder as Hunter stepped in front of him.

"That tape isn't mine," said Kincaid. I could almost see his brain racing, reaching back to the actual tape he'd used, and darting forward to wonder where this one had come from.

"On your recorder?" Hunter sounded very patient. "Not yours, like the silencer isn't yours?"

"It's some kind of trick," snarled Kincaid. The pencil mustache stood out on his pale face and his forehead was beaded with perspiration. He was turning a little green now, because the human thought had come that somehow, in some way, he'd made a mistake.

"I don't know how it could be," said Hunter. "The silencer and the tape are in your home."

"Planted here," snapped Kincaid. "I was out earlier, you know."

"Were the silencer marks on the gun barrel planted, too, Mr. Kincaid?" asked Hunter. "They gave you away first. We know now that you killed your wife last night with a silenced gun, removed the silencer, dropped the gun on the floor, cut the screen, placed the reel of tape with the recorded scream and shot on your recorder, went next door and waited. When the scream and shot sounded, no one could tell it was a recording, not with this elaborate setup you have and the facilities and knowledge available to you as a radio announcer. You rushed in, turned off the recorder, and pretended to find your wife."

"When I find out where that tape came from, it will mean your badge," blustered Kincaid, his fingers working nervously. Whatever he had done with the actual tape, he still wasn't quite sure he'd destroyed it.

He wasn't quite sure. I could feel it. *Hit him now,* I thought. *He's on the edge and you might be able to push him over.* "I don't understand," I said quietly. "How can you be so certain this isn't the tape you used?"

"Because I know damn well I erased my tape!" he yelled, trying to convince himself as much as us.

The silence was deadly. Kincaid pulled out a handkerchief, dried his face, murmured something like "Oh, my lord," and sank into the nearest chair.

"He's all yours," I murmured to Hunter. "Keep the tape and label it as a demonstration only. I put it on the machine when we came in. Nobody ever said it was his. He assumed we would claim that."

I walked out, feeling tired. With

a clever attorney, Kincaid might still get off but at least he'd come to trial.

I called Rhea and told her Kincaid had been arrested and why. "I don't know how to thank you, John," she said softly.

"I did nothing," I told her. "Hunter did it all. I merely threw him a few hints." The fewer people who knew about the tape I had made, the better.

"I'll be leaving after the funeral," she said. "I'd like to see you before I go."

"Sure," I lied. The only way I could possibly avoid slipping back to the misery of five years ago was not to see her again.

I stopped by Chetkos' apartment. The old man took one look and silently pointed at the bourbon bottle. I splashed generous amounts into two glasses. He might not need it. I did.

"Things work out the way you planned?"

"Fairly well," I said. "Too risky to do it every day."

"You were legal, I hope."

"I resisted temptation and gambled. It worked out."

"There was no other way. Perhaps Mr. Kincaid will confess."

"He has, but not in so many words."

"Then that solves your problem."

Nothing solved my problem, which was Rhea West. I finished the bourbon and headed for the door. "Incidentally, what happened to Hammer Hanson?"

"Mr. Hanson was given a small fine and told to go and sin no more."

"Friendly judge?"

"No. Someone encouraged Mr. Hanson to cough rather excessively in court. The judge would have to be extremely courageous to send an ill man to prison on a minor charge."

I grinned. "And you accuse me of innate trickery."

"Trickery?" He snorted. "I was merely defending my client to the best of my ability." He looked at me shrewdly. "I had a lengthy conversation with Miss West this evening."

"Good night," I said. "I'll see you in the morning."

"She is tired of show business and seriously considering giving it up. If she had a good reason, that is."

I held the door half open. "Not just talk?" I asked cautiously.

"Not just talk," he said. "Of course, you might have to give up that car . . ."

Perhaps five years ago was too soon, and the right time was now. I closed the door on his broad grin and started walking very quickly. It was only two blocks to her hotel.

Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm, but destiny does not always so devise it.

THE HELMSMAN

by M. G. OGAN

RELAXED and half drunk, and slouched in a deck chair on the yacht club veranda to finish a cigarette, I heard a man's hoarse whisper from around the corner.

"We'll be rid of him for good after tomorrow night."

Ten minutes before, I'd left my wife and junior partner in the crowded bar to check the mooring lines of my new cabin cruiser, the *Janice*. A night wind was rising and water in the bay was choppy, so I'd made sure $100,000 worth of boat wasn't chafing. Whoever the man was, the sound of water slapping the sailboat hulls in the slips under the high veranda had prevented him hearing the creak of the deck chair when I dropped my two hundred pounds into it.

"You're sure we can get away with it?" This was a woman's whisper.

"You just get him drunk tomorrow night and leave it to me."

"Do I have to see him drown? I don't think I could stand that!"

The man chuckled. "Just close your eyes, then," he said in a normal tone of voice.

The woman still whispered. *"How soon will you get rid of Trisha?"*

Trisha! That name nailed the woman's identity, and I knew now who didn't want to see me drown. The whole world around me went into a slow spin!

"In a month, or maybe two," my partner said casually. "After waiting seven years, we don't want to rush things now, Jan."

"I guess not."

"We'd better get back in the bar," Bob Lange decided. "Hollow Legs has had time to sneak that extra drink from the bottle he hides in the chart drawer. We don't want to ruffle his alcoholic disposition, you know."

I heard the door open and click shut as they stepped back into the bar.

My tenth wedding anniversary had turned sour, indeed!

Shock neutralized the alcohol in my system. My first thought was of Trisha Lange, asleep in their beach house Bob had bought with her money for weekends away from Chicago's North Shore. I wondered if any troubled dreams haunted her sleep; then decided Trisha was too healthy to be troubled by nightmares of a murderous husband.

Now that shock was wearing off I found myself cold sober, a new experience of late years and not pleasant. It had been Jan's idea, and not mine, that passage across Lake Michigan from Chicago would make a good shakedown cruise. Sudden sobriety reminded me of this fact.

"We can stay with Bob and Trisha at their beach house," she'd pointed out, "and bring them back with us Sunday night so they won't have to fight traffic."

Thoughtful Jan! With hazel eyes and creamy blonde hair, Jan had the face of a Madonna and a bikini figure. I now realized how well she'd played her role, and how cleverly she had encouraged my heavy drinking—or was that her idea?

"But, my darling, don't be silly! You're a social drinker, Gary, and not an alcoholic."

That line of Jan's ran like a refrain through the last seven years of our marriage. I'd believed her—what drunk doesn't want to believe he's a "social drinker"? Drinks before noon, two or three nightcaps every night, and never mind the booze necessary to make the afternoon and evening hours bearable!

"You get him drunk . . . and leave it to me."

My cigarette scorched my fingers. "Damn!"

I flipped the butt over the railing.

When it hit the water I knew how Bob planned to drown me and get away with it. We planned a Sunday night passage back to Chicago, and when Jan had me drunk enough he'd simply push me off the boat. Drunken boat owners are likely drowning candidates.

When this happened, Trisha would be asleep, of course, and when they woke her she'd believe whatever they told her. I was certain the Coast Guard inquiry would buy their story, too.

Since my ever-loving wife was my only heir, no nosey private investigator would come along to upset their apple cart. Jan's friends, as a matter of fact, would consider my death a thinly disguised blessing.

He drank, you know . . . Yes, quite a good deal, for a forty-five year old man. Jan is young and pretty. She'll make another marriage, poor girl . . . Oh, yes, he left her quite well fixed.

Half a million after probate is still a tidy sum for a young widow, even with inflation, and then there was Trisha's million or so, inherited from a meat packer father. Jan was probably thinking it would be share and share alike with Bob when Trisha and I were long gone.

I knew better. A calculating ruthless streak runs under the icing of Bob's handsome good looks and youthful charm. That streak was why I'd chosen him for my junior partner in Seaver-Lange Electronics. I'm a sentimental slob, myself.

I'd loved Jan, and I'm stubborn, too, so I couldn't exorcise my love completely, on a moment's notice. I began looking for excuses—reasons why she was plotting with Bob to kill me.

A gentle hand touched my shoulder. The scent of Jan's expensive and subtle perfume tickled my nose.

"So *here* you are, Gary." Jan's was a musical voice, soft and lovely. "I've looked everywhere. What took so long?" Then she asked, carefully, "How long have you been sitting here?"

"Just a few seconds." I grinned at her. "Did you and Bob miss me?"

"I did. My, but we're sober tonight, and on our tin anniversary, too. Do you feel all right?"

"Just fine." I was out of the deck chair and had linked my arm with Jan's. "Where did you leave Bob?"

"He's waiting in the bar to drink to our health, darling."

"How very nice of Bob," I said.

Surprisingly, Sunday was a good day. I was keyed up and moving through it in a reckless mood. The four of us were the good companions, lazing in the sun and swimming in the lake.

Trisha was the puzzle I tried to

solve that day; there were no scales on my eyes when I watched Bob and Jan. Snub-nosed, always cheerful Trisha, the fine swimmer, was a diverting riddle.

"She's the only woman I know," Jan said once, "who can look like a hausfrau in a Dior original, poor thing."

One woman's judgment of another is always acute, but never fair. Wide-spaced blue eyes, a high forehead, and a generous mouth—all good features individually—didn't combine to accomplish beauty, but inner vitality made Trisha glow.

The only attributes she and Jan had in common, I decided, was their age, thirty admitting to twenty-nine.

I spilled my drinks that Sunday to keep a clear head, and got away with it. At the same time, I played the inebriate bit, which wasn't hard —I'd had plenty of practice.

Bob and Jan shared an undercurrent of excitement. I had to admit to myself that they made an attractive couple.

The day passed slowly for Bob and Jan, as usual for Trisha, very fast for me. At nine o'clock that Sunday night we cast off for night passage to Chicago. I fumbled the mooring lines fore and aft, and stumbled over the spring lines. It was a good drunk performance evidently, because Jan called, "Careful, darling, you might hurt yourself."

Even Bob was concerned that I might break a leg and ruin their drowning party.

"Watch it, Gary," he said, scowling.

Jan and Bob let the condemned man play skipper aboard his own boat. Bob cheerfully checked the oil dipsticks, and ran the bilge blower before I started up the marine engines, while Jan and Trisha coiled lines.

I took the *Janice* out of the bay into Lake Michigan, steering a course that raised a few eyebrows on the yacht club veranda, no doubt. I purposely came close to, but didn't graze, any other boats.

"Have a peek over the transom, Bob," I ordered when we were running clear. "See if the pipes are spitting."

No water coming out of a marine engine's exhaust pipes indicates cooling trouble.

"Okay, this time," Bob said, passing me at the wheel, "but next time you hang your head out in those exhaust fumes."

He'd confirmed my suspicion of how they planned to get me into the water. All Bob would have to do was lift my ankles while I was peering over the stern, out in the middle of the lake. I wondered what excuse he'd find for stopping

and then restarting the engines.

Jan was plying me with liquor, which I was spilling over the side.

A roll of nickels was heavy in the right pocket of my trousers. I'd gone to some trouble to get that roll of coins. The South Harbor druggist had sold them to me when I contrived a Sunday evening trip into town alone.

A handgun would have been more consolation than the weight of those nickels, but you can't buy a weapon on a moment's notice—not in South Harbor on a Sunday. Anyway, since I didn't intend that anyone get killed, or even hurt badly, nickels suited my purpose. With a fist wrapped around them, and forewarned as I was, I was confident I could knock Bob cold.

Trisha is a ten o'clock girl. "I think I'll go to bed," she said at ten minutes until the hour. "Is there milk and chocolate in the galley?"

"Oh, Trisha!" Jan faked momentary pettishness, then became the hostess. "I'll fix your health nightcap, darling."

The two of them vanished down the companionway, arms around each other.

"Nice wives," Bob commented.

"The best."

"Want me to spell you?"

"Sure, take it, my glass is dry."

"Gary needs a refill," Bob called down the companionway.

"Coming up." Jan's voice was lilting. "Don't come down, Gary."

Trisha's nightly chocolate, I supposed, was being sedated enough to put her to sleep quickly, but not enough to keep her asleep when they wanted to wake her.

An hour later a 12-knot wind had raised a chop that necessitated a steady hand at the helm to keep the cruiser on course. My nerves were tight as fiddle strings. Bob had gone below, while I took the wheel, and reported back that Trisha was sound asleep.

"I wish I could sleep like that," Jan said.

"It's the sleep of the just," I told her. "Our Trisha has a clear conscience. Doesn't she, Bob?"

Bob's grin was engaging and friendly, but his eyes showed wariness. "I really wouldn't know about that, skipper." He pointed to my empty glass in the rack at my elbow. "Your husband is running dry, Jan. Will you freshen my drink while you're at it?"

I tensed as soon as Jan was below; then realized one of them would have to stick with the helm now, so I was safe until she came topside again.

Jan brought me a darkly wicked concoction; Bob's was light amber.

They watched me too closely now for me to chance spilling my drink, so I knocked the liquor back

a quarter of the glass. It had a bitter taste. So does chloral hydrate, or "knockout drops." I let the glass slip and smash on the cockpit deck.

"Hey, there, watch it," Jan said. "Let me steer while you go below for a fresh one, Gary."

"Good idea." I needed time to find out how much that quarter of a drink had slowed my reflexes.

In the galley, I ignored the half-empty bottle to stare at Trisha's cup and saucer in the sink. My head was slightly fuzzy, but that was all. I poured and downed a glass of milk.

The marine engines faltered, sputtered, and died.

"Hey, Jan! Wrong gismo," Bob said. "Gary? Hit the deck, fellow."

The starters growled as I climbed back on deck. The hot engines started up again. "Check the exhaust, will you, Gary?" Bob made it a friendly order. He had the wheel now. "Give him a hand, Jan."

I decided that Jan was over her squeamishness. She'd evidently been elected to do the honors.

The cruiser was rolling enough to account for some of my unsteadiness. I didn't reach in my pocket for the roll of nickels. I was convinced that Jan would be easy to handle.

At the same time, I couldn't help wondering why Bob would take a chance on Jan being able to get me over the stern and into the wake. I decided he was overconfident—if I hung out over the stern to peer down at the spitting pipes, she could easily do the job.

I didn't plan to let her catch me off balance. At the stern, I started to turn and face Jan, but my eyes suddenly went out of focus; a dizzy spell staggered me, and saved my life.

I hadn't looked behind me because I didn't want to make them suspicious. Bob had cat-tracked back through the cockpit, and his lunge, with arms stiff in front of him, missed me when I staggered.

Momentum smacked his kneecaps against the combing and he dived over the narrow transom deck into the boiling wake. My wild grab at his shirt to save him nearly put both of us overboard.

Jan was steering a roving course. Still staggered by dizziness, I scrambled forward to grab the helm and come around.

Jan sat the high helmsman's seat, staring straight ahead. "Did you do it?" she asked, when I was directly behind her.

I tried to push her out of the seat, reaching for the wheel at the same time. Her head snapped around and she screamed in my face.

"He's back there, Jan!" I gasped.

Silent now, eyes wide with hor-

ror, Jan took a step backward, across the cockpit, just as I swung the wheel hard to port. From the corner of my eye I saw her throw up her arms.

The momentum of the swerving boat should have overcome the centrifugal force, and dropped her on the cockpit's decking, but it didn't. I looked around just in time to see the soles of her shoes disappear over the starboard rail—and to see Trisha, braced against the slanting deck, dust her hands.

In a panic, and groggy, I spun the wheel hard to starboard, hoping to skid the stern far enough port, but I was too late—Jan was sucked under the hull and chopped by the propellers.

I was shaking, and Trisha took the helm and said, "Get a boat hook, Gary." She continued the cruiser's turn as I scrambled forward to the peak.

As we plowed back through our wake, Trisha snapped on the cruiser's powerful spotlight and it picked up Bob's wet head almost immediately. She was handling the boat beautifully, backing off, then coming ahead slowly, as I leaned out and jabbed the boat hook toward Bob's grasping hands.

The only sign of Jan had been a dark stain in the wake.

Bob had just touched the boat hook when Trisha opened both throttles, wide. The raked, sharp prow slashed over his floundering body, water stifling his scream as his head jerked under, and Trisha ran the *Janice* right on over him, full speed ahead.

I crawled back along the deck and racked up the useless boat hook. In pajamas and a robe, with her sunburned hair snarled, Trisha was swinging back on course for Chicago.

She still smelled faintly of sleep. "You're quite green, Gary," she said conversationally, her arm around my shoulders as I leaned against the helmsman's seat to keep my knees from buckling. "I didn't drink Jan's hot chocolate."

"What I need is a stiff drink," I finally managed to say.

Trisha shook her head. "No, you don't," she said, "because you'll need a clear head to explain tonight away when we dock in Chicago." Trisha's was a warm and understanding smile. "Kiss me?"

I did as she said.

"Now make me a drink, darling, just one, but make it good and strong."

My knees were all right and I started for the companionway.

"You'd better open a fresh bottle," she called after me. "Pour the liquor in the one Jan was using down the head. Both of us want to get to Chicago, don't we?"

Perhaps a man, once bought, does stay bought; that is, unless he has a strong aversion to ruts.

THAT MORNING JOE DIED

By E. Crandall

THE PHONE call, the first one, came just as I finished dinner. Martha started to clear the dishes, and I sat watching her, thinking how lucky can a guy get. Daphne and John had both gone about their teen-age business and it was mighty pleasant to sit at the table, smoking a cigar and thinking that I was just about the luckiest guy on the whole police force. I had a nice home even if it wasn't fancy, a beautiful and wonderful wife, two kids who were doing all right even if I didn't understand them —and then the phone rang.

"I'll get it," Martha said quickly. "I'm closer."

She tossed her dish towel over the back of a chair and went into the hall where we had our downstairs phone. I wasn't paying any attention until she came back and said, "It's for you, Perry," and picked up the towel again.

Hoping it wasn't special duty again, I went into the hall, picked

up the receiver, quietly said hello.

"Hi, McMasters. This is Ragan. You remember me?"

I felt the hair on the back of my neck begin to stiffen, but I kept my voice steady. "Sure, Ragan, I remember you. What can I do for you?" There was a brief sound of laughter as if I'd said something funny.

"Well, McMasters, I was telling the boys how I'd done you a favor once, and that you'd most likely want to do me a favor now. That right?"

"I thought I did you a favor," I said slowly and grimly even if my stomach was beginning to knot up. "You kept half of that thousand in your own pocket, didn't you? I figure we're even."

There was a little chill in Ragan's voice as he answered me. "Well, the boys, these friends of mine, when I told them about the little piece of business you and me'd transacted, they figured a little different. They think you owe me a favor and since I sort of owe them a favor, I think maybe we can do a little business."

"We can't do any business. Goodbye," I said, and hung up. For a moment I stood there at the phone, sort of mentally pulling myself together before I went back into the kitchen, but I didn't even get to the door when the phone rang again. I hesitated, then turned to take the receiver.

It was Ragan again. "Don't you hang up on me, copper!" he said angrily, his voice harsh.

"You listen to me—" I started to say but he broke in, his voice louder.

"Shut up, and listen to me! The boys figure that when a guy's been bought, he stays bought. And that's you, copper! Now, don't be foolish. You do a little favor for us, and maybe you get a little present. You don't want to play, then maybe the commission gets a little present, like a phone call."

"You think you can bluff me?" I yelled savagely. "You aren't going to say anything because if you do, you get it hard! You hear me!" I hung up again, and walked out into the kitchen, my fists balled at my sides.

Martha looked at me, her eyes wide and frightened. "Perry, what's wrong? I heard you shouting, and you're white as a ghost. Who was that?"

I shook my head angrily and went on into the livingroom. "Nothing to bother you with, Martha," I called over my shoulder. "Some punk trying to make me sore."

Martha followed me to the doorway. "Well, I think he must have succeeded, from the looks of you."

I made an effort to laugh, only it didn't come out so good. "Well, Martha, some things do make me mad, you know."

She followed me into the living-room and put her arms around me. "Don't you be like that," she said softly. "It scares me when you get mad, you're so darned *big!*" She looked up at me in mock fear, with a little teasing in her eyes.

I do come to six three and tip the scales at two thirty when I am in good shape. It is sort of funny, a huge, out-sized monster like me getting a tiny woman like Martha who has to stand on tiptoe to make five six, and who doesn't make more than one ten soaking wet. I will say, though, that those hundred ten pounds are distributed in just the right way to make a woman who was all woman—and thank God, my wife!

I sat down and turned on the TV, and Martha went back to the kitchen to finish stacking the dishes in the washer. The boob tube brightened but I didn't even notice what channel it was tuned to because I was thinking of that phone call. I was thinking there are some things you can't solve by just being outsized, but this had to be a bluff. Anyway, it better be, because *I* was bluffing and I knew it.

Not that I wouldn't have given up most everything I owned if I could go back and erase a few days out of my life and memory. Yet, thinking about it, I didn't see how I could have done different—or should have, as far as that goes.

In this business of being a cop, nothing is learned earlier than that there are judges—and judges. You can go out and nail some hood right in the act of stealing a car, and when he gets in front of a judge nothing happens. You have to take half a day of your own time, maybe a dozen times, and then you just hear the judge say *dismissed for lack of evidence,* even if you actually saw the hood steal the hack!

John was just fourteen when a bunch of older guys he knew only slightly picked him up on the street. They said they were just riding around, but what they didn't tell him was that the car was hot. When a squad car spotted them, the driver of the car tried to outrun the cops, and there was a hundred-mile-per-hour chase all over the west end of town. They were finally boxed in an alley and taken to the local precinct.

John phoned me—they were allowed one call—and told me what had happened and that he'd used a fictitious name. Well, I knew what it would mean to John to be hauled up before a judge, and

what it would mean to me, too. John would have a record, and I'd be canned. I didn't want to lose my job. I'm just a cop, nothing but a cop, and that's just what I want to be, but more important, I knew what a car theft conviction would mean to John, and his future. Besides, he wasn't guilty, because he wasn't even with them when they took the car.

I knew that precinct, though. It was one of the bad ones because it was in Horgan's territory. The cops in that precinct took orders. So I called Ragan. I hated his guts, but I told him what I wanted.

"Sure, McMasters," he said smoothly. "It'll cost you a thousand dollars."

So I went into hock and paid him the thousand dollars to put in the fix. God knows I'd seen it happen plenty of times when I was the arresting officer, and to get John off the hook I did it myself. I never felt right about it, but I couldn't let John get a record when he wasn't guilty.

John, ever since that time nearly two years back, has been as good a son as any man could want. One of the crazy things, too, is that he wants to follow in my footsteps and be a cop! Of course there are times when I think he has rocks in his head, yet there are guys like John and me who, I guess, were just supposed to turn out to be cops, and that's all there is to it.

Martha came into the livingroom and sat down beside me, tucking her hand under my arm. "Don't tell me you're listening to that!" she exclaimed.

I focused my eyes and started to listen to four shaggy-haired fellows in skintight pants wail at the top of their voices about thanking somebody very very much for something. I grinned at Martha and reached over to turn off the set. Then I put my arm over her shoulder and pulled her close to me. "Have I told you, you got a husband who loves you?" I asked. "Recently, I mean?"

She snuggled up against me, and put her fingers to my cheek. "Not nearly recently enough, copper," she said with pretended gruffness. "So tell me more recently."

So I did, several times and in several ways. When we came up for air, Martha looked a little breathless and mussed up. "You're a bully," she told me severely. "If I was big enough—"

"You'd what?" I broke in and put a hammerlock on her.

Martha pushed me away and glared at me sternly. "Will the detective lieutenant now tell me what that phone call was about? Or do I have to use third, fourth and fifth degrees, simultaneously?"

I glared back at her. "I am going to bed," I announced, "because I go on duty at six-thirty in the morning."

Martha threw up her hands in despair. "Oh, no! Not again! What is it this time?"

"I have to go down and watch that dame in the hotel," I said simply. "You know, the eyewitness that maybe will send a couple of our top hoods up for a long, long time."

Martha showed quick concern in her dark eyes. "I wish you didn't," she said seriously. "I don't like that one."

I shrugged. "So go call the captain and tell him your husband can't do his assigned duty. Then start running, because he'll send the whole force down for me."

The phone rang again, and I closed my eyes, because down inside I knew that it was going to ring. Like Ragan said, a guy bought once, he stays bought.

Martha started to get up but I put a hand on her arm. "It'll be for me, baby," I said heavily. "I'll get it."

It was, of course. It wasn't Ragan, though. It was the big boy himself, almost spilling over with warm friendliness, only all the time staying coiled like a poisonous cobra ready to strike.

"McMasters, Horgan here. I think Ragan must have done a lousy job of explaining what it is we want, but I don't think a telephone is a good way to talk about it. How about I send a car around, and we can talk a little where we won't be interrupted?"

"Listen, Horgan—" I started to say but he broke me off smoothly.

"I know the address. Nice place you have, McMasters. Beautiful wife, too. I've seen her—your two kids, too. A boy and a girl. Now, what were you saying?" he asked suddenly, his voice as cold as the river bottom.

"Okay, Horgan," I said in resignation. "Send your car around. I'll be waiting."

I hung up and went back into the livingroom. Martha had turned on the TV again, but I knew she wasn't listening.

"I'm going out a little while," I said lightly, or anyway making a real effort to sound light. I went to the closet, got my harness and put it on, Martha watching me with wide eyes that showed how frightened she was. But she's a cop's wife and didn't say anything. I slid into my coat and went to the door.

"Take care," Martha said quietly as I hesitated. I went back and kissed her on the lips and she clung to me for a moment. "Take care," she whispered again.

I went out of the house and down to the front walk to wait. It wasn't a long wait, either, because in less than five minutes the long, dark car slid up to the curb. I noticed Fowler was driving—I knew him when he was a numbers runner. From the back seat, Horgan himself gestured with his hand impatiently. "Get in, McMasters," he said, his voice cold and quiet.

I slid onto the seat and closed the door as the car took off. I saw he had a mobile telephone setup and I knew how he could be by to pick me up so soon. All the windows were up and the air-conditioning was cut in. I felt the muscles along my jaws tighten.

Horgan took out a cigar and handed it to me. "Light up, McMasters. Nothing so relaxing as a cigar."

I shrugged and took it, biting off the end. Then I leaned to the light he held in his hand and drew deeply on the cigar, looking over the lighter into Horgan's black eyes. They were steady and calculating.

For a little while we rode without saying anything. I noticed Fowler turned into Indian Park and headed around the big circle.

The glass was up between the seats and I saw that Horgan didn't trust Fowler. I laughed to myself briefly, because I wouldn't either, if I was Horgan.

"All right, let's see where we stand," Horgan said quietly. "There's something you can do for us, and I know you'll do it."

"What makes you so sure I'll do something for you, Horgan? I hate your guts."

In the yellow flashing light of a passing car I could see his hawklike features as he stared at me without any expression at all. I noticed Fowler still followed the circle drive through the park. Horgan took his own sweet time answering me.

"I'll tell you why," he said finally. "Because there are two kinds of people—those who can be bought and those who can't. You can be bought. When you bought your kid off, you sold out. You know it. I know it."

I started to break in but he raised a hand toward me and I waited.

"It's simple," he said, "because we give you a choice. We won't harm a hair on your head because you'd never break. You have a wife. Name's Martha, I believe . . ."

He let the words hang in the air and I felt a terrible anger start to well up in me, tight and dangerous. But a cop can't blow his cool too easy. I waited.

"If you have any idea of knocking me off," Horgan went on, "forget it. If you kill me—I know you got your harness on—we're locked in here and the glass is all bulletproof. So Fowler just drives to where the boys take care of you. And I promise they will call at your house after they take care of you."

I sagged back in the seat and wet my lips. This was his hand, and it had been ever since I got in the car. If you want to live you don't bet against a pat hand, not in this business; not when your life is in the pot, and your family's, too.

"So?" I said.

Horgan took out another cigar and took his time getting it lit. "We're legit, now. You know that because the old days, they're all gone. But this broad wants to stir up the past, something that happened a long time ago." He glanced at me. "At exactly seven tomorrow morning, right on the dot, you are going to get thirsty and you're going to walk down to the drinking fountain at the end of the hall, and take a good, long drink. *That's all you have to do!*"

"And if I don't?"

"You want me to draw a picture? You're too smart to think

the organization is going to let that broad testify."

I thought about it for a moment. Her name was Millie. She'd lived a long time with one of the two hoods she'd fingered. She'd done the fingering because he'd tossed her out and brought in a younger woman. Millie Strange. Who the hell was Millie Strange, that I should get killed for, or let something happen to Martha? That's what I said to myself, but I knew I was just making up words. One thing sure, I wasn't going to do anything sitting in a bulletproof car with Horgan.

Horgan was talking again. "You don't have to say a thing. I mean to me. You know the score." He picked up the intercom and pressed the button. "Take him back," he said. The car swung out of the big circle and headed back.

I didn't say anything on the way home, and when we got there, I slid out of the car and stood on the curb watching it move away, smoothly, quietly—and deadly. I went into the house slowly, feeling as though the world was about to fall in on me.

Martha called down from upstairs, "That you, darling?"

"You expecting somebody else?" I joked, only I wasn't feeling like joking. "I'll be up in a few minutes." I glanced at my watch and was surprised to see it was only eight-thirty. I sat down on the divan and turned to the TV, but I didn't switch it on.

I thought about myself. I thought about tomorrow morning when, because I was to get thirsty right on schedule, a woman was going to die. I didn't know her. I didn't know how they planned to do it, but only that it would be while my back was turned. I supposed they'd got to my partner, too, because of course Joe would be there at the door with me. There were always two guards, and I suppose they figured we'd both get thirsty.

Suddenly I sat up straight—Joe was one of them! I felt sick, because he had to be. Then I felt sicker, because so was I. I was one of them! I was a dirty hood as much as Horgan. Or Joe!

I thought of John upstairs doing homework—my son, who wanted to be a cop. Would he still want to be a cop when he knew his father had taken a drink of water so a woman would die? I clenched my hands in front of me and drew my shoulders together because it was as if I was being tortured right there in the most terrible way a man can be. For twenty-one years I'd been a cop and I'd been proud of my record. Record! What would my record be tomorrow? There'd be one hell of an investigation, and

I'd be asked, how did you happen to be thirsty *right then?*

It took me half an hour to make up my mind—if I could get Martha and the kids out of the way, I'd be able to get a little freedom of action. I went up the stairs and into the bedroom where Martha was reading. She looked up, surprised.

"Hello, there," she said, "what's with you?"

"John, Daphne, come in here," I said firmly but softly.

Martha put her book down and waited quietly. The two came in, their eyes showing puzzlement and a little fear at the way I'd spoken.

"What's up, Dad?" John wanted to know.

"Listen, all three of you. You know where we store our blankets under the middle seat of the wagon? Well, in a few moments I want you, John, to go down with me and your mother. I want you to help me get your mother hidden in that place we store the blankets. Then I want you to drive the wagon out of the garage, with Daphne, and head west. If anybody stops you, you are going to say you are going to a movie down at the Plaza. And if there *is* a car following you, you will go to that movie and watch it all the way through, so you will go out with the crowd when—"

"You mean the outdoor movie?" John broke in.

"That's right, so you'll be driving in a crowd of cars and no-

body will be able to tail you. You will drive right on out of town. Stay off the big highways and drive west, and drive *all night!* You won't stop, except for gas." I dug into my pocket and took out my wallet. "Here are my gas credit cards and sixty dollars. At five o'clock in the morning go to a pay phone and dial here. Let the phone ring three times and then hang up. Do you understand?"

"Gee, Dad, sure, but—"

"Your mother can get out of the box under the seat when you are out a hundred miles. Keep right on driving until tomorrow evening and then you will call here again, station to station, and let the phone ring three times. If I don't answer, hang up. If somebody else answers, hang up. Drive straight through to your grandmother's in Denver. Got that? *And do not call again!"*

Martha was already moving quickly about the room, changing her clothes. Her face was white, and her dark eyes wide with a terror she couldn't understand, but she didn't ask any questions. She glanced at John and Daphne. "Get clothes on that will be warm enough," she said, then glanced at me. "No luggage, I suppose."

"No luggage," I answered, and in spite of myself I felt tears well up in my eyes because I loved them all so much. Impulsively I reached out and caught all three and drew them to me, my arms about them. "I love you all very much," I said huskily. I looked at John. "Your mother's life may depend on your doing this right."

He looked at me, wide-eyed. "Don't worry, Dad. I'll do just what you said. But how about you?"

Martha looked at me, too, her dark eyes filled with tears. She put her hands on my cheeks and kissed me quickly. "Your father knows what he's doing," she told John. "Run along now, both of you."

She turned to me and for a long moment we stood and looked at each other. "You have to do it, Perry?" she whispered. "You have to?" She didn't ask me what, because she knew I was a cop. Then she was in my arms, holding me close, her face tight against my chest, her arms around me. "Oh, Perry, I love you!" she said, her voice quavering.

"I love you," I whispered, and wondered if I would ever hold her in my arms again. Then I pushed her away. "Finish getting dressed."

"All right, darling."

We left the lights on upstairs, then went down the back stairs one at a time, careful not to let a shadow touch any window. It was only a short, shadowed walk to the garage and Martha walked beside

John. Daphne waited on the back porch. In the darkness John and I opened up the middle seat and spread out a blanket for Martha to lie on. I kissed her again and felt the wetness of her silent tears on my cheeks. Then I helped her into the hiding place and John and I put everything back together again.

I touched John's arm and gestured toward the house. We walked through the shadow and up the back steps. In the dark kitchen I told John and Daphne to go back upstairs again, get ready to go to the movie just as they always would, and then to come back down, turn on the garage lights, and back the car out, just as they would do it ordinarily.

"You're going to be stopped," I said soberly. "I think it will be all right." How I wished I could promise it!

Daphne's eyes were enormous. She kissed me quickly. "We'll take care of Mom," she said, her voice shaky. "Don't worry."

I sat in the livingroom and waited. In a moment John and Daphne called out a good night to their mother as if she was upstairs. Then they stuck their heads in the livingroom and called out a good night to me. I told them not to be late, and I thought what a terrible load to pile onto a couple of nice kids!

Yet I knew it was the only way. If I reported it, even all the way to the commissioner, there would be nothing this side of heaven that he or the whole force could do to protect my wife and kids. Their only chance was to get away! Then I would have some freedom of action—I could be a cop.

I sat there with the TV on for a long time, but I wasn't watching it. I was just waiting because I had to know if it worked. I didn't even dare go to the door and look out. When it got to be ten-thirty I went upstairs and lay down on our bed. I couldn't sleep—I didn't even try.

Once I paid a thousand dollars to protect John, but maybe the full price would be Martha's life as well. I just knew there was one thing that had to be done. I had to call the captain and tell him the whole story and take my lumps as they came. If the kids and Martha were safe, I could do that. Deep inside of me I knew that if I did what they wanted, I was through even if nobody ever found out about it. They'd come at me again and again until I wouldn't have any life at all. You pay blackmail once, you pay it the rest of your life, so the only thing was to blow the whistle and let the chips fall. If only Martha and the kids make it—I had to wait until five to get John's call. Three rings and I'd

know they were safe. I didn't dare pick it up because it might be bugged, and for them to know the kids got away would tip my hand, and likely I wouldn't even make it downtown.

The hours crawled by and I wished I had a shot of whiskey to make me relax, only I knew that wouldn't do because it would slow me down. I didn't have to wait until five. The phone rang at two o'clock, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck begin to crawl. Something in my gut began to freeze, because there shouldn't be any call at two. After the fourth ring I picked it up.

"Hello," I said quietly, not knowing who would answer. It was John, and he was crying.

"Dad!" I could just make out his words through his sobs, "they got her!"

"John! Pull yourself together. Where are you? No, don't answer that! What happened?"

"They stopped us and got Mom. They told me to wait until two and then call you."

"Where's Daphne?" I asked.

"She's right here—she's in the booth with me."

"Let me talk to her."

Daphne's voice came on. "It was my fault, Dad," she sobbed.

"Never mind that," I told her, but she went right on.

"I-I j-just glanced at the seat and they knew! Daddy, they took her!"

"Where?"

"They put her in a car—a big car—and drove off, and they told us we mustn't call before two or Mom would be k-killed!"

"Let me talk to John again," I said heavily. "It wasn't your fault! Don't blame yourself!"

John came back on the line, his voice under control now. "Dad, what are you going to do? I'll drive home and we . . ."

I yelled into the phone, cutting him off. "John, listen to me! You will do exactly as I told you to do, and you'll do it *right now!* You can't help your mother, but you can save Daphne. *That's your job,* son. Hear me?"

There was a pause before John answered, his voice low. "Yeah, Dad, I hear you."

"All right. There's no time to lose!" My voice softened. "I'm proud you're my son. Now, give me Daphne again."

"D-Dad? Can you s-save Mom?" Daphne asked.

"Yes," I answered. "Don't worry. Do what your brother tells you to do. I-I just wanted to hear your voice again. Now, get going!"

I hung up and sat down on the bed. I looked at the phone, hopelessly, waiting for it to ring—because it was going to. I took a

deep breath—so Millie Strange was going to die. Millie for Martha. I had the drink of water scheduled for the morning. So what's in a drink of water? Only a woman's life—a cheap woman. Martha was worth a hundred, a thousand of that kind. I'd seen them on the streets, I'd seen them with their men, glamoured up with enough makeup to paint a house, flouncing around with their minks . . .

The phone rang and I picked it up; everything on schedule.

"Hello," I said, my voice sounding dead in my own ears.

"McMasters, that was a clumsy thing to do. Now, we let the kids go, because we figured we didn't need them. Your wife is enough."

"Let me hear her voice."

The phone connection wasn't good—there was a lot of background noise for some reason—but when Martha came on the line I recognized her voice well enough.

"Perry?'

"Martha, are you all right?"

"I haven't been hurt, Perry. Are John and Daphne safe?"

"Yes," I answered briefly.

"And Perry, I don't know what this is all about, only you do what . . ." I heard her give a little, muffled scream and then Horgan came on again.

"I think you understand, McMasters," he said. "Your wife will be all right if you do as you are told."

"Horgan," I whispered, "I'll do what you want, but let me tell you, if you hurt her, if you so much as touch her, I'll find you and I'll kill you!"

"No need to be dramatic. Your wife will be all right—providing you know your lines well. Don't bother to threaten me, McMasters. You punks make sounds, but remember, you've been bought."

"Damn you—"

"Just remember what I told you. At seven you are going to get a drink of water down at the end of the hall—a long drink. And don't get a crazy idea of trying to get your wife. You'd never find her."

"All right," I answered, and when I heard the click, I hung up.

They had Martha, and it was up to me. It was either Millie Strange or Martha, as if that was a choice! So I was a sold-out cop. Who would say I was wrong when I had to make a choice like that? The commissioner himself wouldn't be able to do any different.

I thought about Martha and my eyes filled with tears. I went downstairs again and sat down before the TV, its face blank.

How do you fight hoods like that? Where can you be safe from them? I resolved that when this

was over I'd take Martha and we'd get the kids and leave this part of the country and never come back. I'd get a job digging ditches if necessary, so they'd never be threatened again; Martha, Daphne and John would be safe.

Then I realized I was only fooling myself, because you don't get away, ever. You just have to do what you have to, and then pay the piper, no matter what. If I ran out, they'd follow me because I knew too much. I was one of them now, and when you are, you can't resign—or you only resign feet-first, that's all. *Well,* I thought, *maybe I'll be a rich cop, anyway.*

I sat there until nearly five, thinking. There were little things about Joe I could remember now—times when he'd been at the wrong place at the right time; things that the hoods had seemed to know when they shouldn't. Joe! We'd been together three years. Had he been bought all that time? I felt a strange anger because at the same time I was calling Joe names, I knew I was no better.

All sorts of crazy ideas went through my head—about where they might be holding Martha; about me finding her before I had to go on duty, and then shooting Horgan and a couple of his hoods for good measure. My muscles ached while I put my hands around Horgan's neck—in my mind—because there wasn't anything I *could* do.

When I'd heard Martha's voice, what was that noise I could hear in the background? I frowned, trying to think, but it didn't seem familiar. Yet I was sure I'd heard it once before, anyway. I glanced at my watch, thinking this was one night that was never going to end, and I started to think back to everything that had happened.

Then the phone rang again! It was after five. Was John calling again? Was he in trouble? Was he being tailed? Had they decided to hold John and Daphne, too? Or maybe an accident. I visualized a wreck someplace, and Daphne—

I went to the back hall, took the receiver off the hook and said hello.

"Perry, this is Harrison. We got a tip there's going to be an attempt to kill Strange, so when you and Joe relieve Morrison and Trane, watch out for trouble, because we think it may be coming. Got it?"

"Yeah, Captain, I got it," I said heavily. "I'll watch out."

He hung up and for a moment I stood there with the phone in my hand, my mind sort of blanked out, because Horgan was going to think I tipped. Then what? Would they deliver Martha in a sack, dumped on our front porch, to re-

mind me what I'd done? It was going on six, and in an hour, more or less, Horgan would know that the police had been tipped.

Oh, Martha, I cried silently, *I'm sorry!* because I'd never see her alive. I thought of the sound of her voice when they pulled her away—that little scream. It came to me then, suddenly. Those background sounds were the same as when Horgan had called me from his car! They were keeping her in the car, riding around. So that was why Horgan said I'd never find them!

I grabbed the phone, dialed Communications and got the officer in charge in a hurry, using our emergency identification.

"Perry McMasters, 491. How long to set your direction equipment on the frequency of a mobile phone setup?"

"Three minutes," he answered, asking no questions.

"All right. In exactly five minutes I am going to dial a mobile phone," I gave the number, "and I will keep him talking. Get a cross on him and direction, because lives hinge on this! I'll call you back. Got it?"

"Got it, McMasters," the man answered laconically, and hung up.

I watched the second hand on my watch tick off the time until five minutes were up. I put the call through, praying I was right, and then I heard Horgan's voice.

"Hello," he said softly, caution in his voice.

"Horgan, this is McMasters. I got to know something. My partner, Joe Petrucci, is he in on this? Because if I got to take him out too . . ."

Horgan swore softly. "How'd you know where to call me?" he asked.

"I was in your car, and I gambled you'd be there. I saw the number. Hell, I'm a cop. I'm trained to remember these things. About Joe . . ."

"He's in," Horgan said briefly. "You got about an hour."

"Okay, Horgan. Seven, I take a drink of water . . ." I hung up, and dialed communications again.

The man was waiting, because the bell rang only once. "McMasters?"

"Listening," I answered. "You get it?"

"Yeah. Indian Park. On the old circle, heading north counterclockwise."

"Okay. Thanks."

Fowler's in a rut! I thought as I started for my old heap in the driveway. On the back porch I turned back and got my riot kit and headed again for the car. In thirty seconds I was on my way down the street. The park wasn't

more than four miles away. I fingered the gun in my shoulder holster, making plans—but that wasn't any good—the car was bullet proof. I got to the park and headed around the circle, clockwise, the opposite of Fowler. *Don't leave the park!* I whispered, half a prayer and half a curse. *Stay on the circle!* I was playing a long shot and I knew it. Maybe they'd taken Martha some place. Maybe she was already dead, because they might have played it that way, and I was scheduled to join her.

Then I saw it. That long special car with the dimmed lights—I knew it instantly as I drove past. I U-turned two blocks after I passed it. Then I followed it, moving a little faster, but not too much. They mustn't suspect I was there —I had to be just another car. The big car moved along at a steady twenty miles per hour. I fumbled in the seat beside me, driving with one hand, and I got the riot kit open.

I came up beside the car, slouched down in my seat, my hat nearly over my eyes, then moved slowly past it. Just as the front door of my heap was across from their front bumper I reached over and tossed the tear gas right in front of the big car. Then I stepped on the gas and cut over in front of Horgan's car.

It had worked! The intake had pulled the gas into the car and it was weaving wildly. To miss my car, it jumped the curb and headed across the park toward a clump of trees. I sprinted after it as it banked on one tree, then hit another head-on and came to a stop. I grabbed the front door and jerked it open. Fowler was holding his hands to his eyes, trying to fumble his way out of the car. I hit him in the temple with my gun barrel and he collapsed. Then the back door opened and I heard a steady stream of obscenities. I hauled Horgan out, bounced the barrel of my gun off his head and he, too, dropped.

I stuck my head in the car and I could see Martha against the far side, her arms held over her face. I reached across, holding my breath, and got hold of her. Then she was in my arms and I was running away from the car and the gas. Martha was crying and sick, but she was in my arms and that was all that counted. I put her down on the grass and gave her my handkerchief to hold over her streaming eyes.

A squad car pulled up to the curb and the officers got out. They ran over to me, their guns out, handkerchiefs over their faces. I knew one of them and he recognized me.

"McMasters! What the hell!"

"Louie, where'd you come from?"

"Communications called and said a squad better get here, but didn't say why."

"Fowler and Horgan," I gasped, trying to draw clean air into my own lungs. "They're over there. Take them in!"

They went over and picked up the still blinded hoods, and I carried Martha to our car. Then I returned to the squad car, called in and told the dispatcher I wanted Harrison, and now! I had him in thirty seconds.

"Captain, McMasters. I got Fowler and Horgan on a kidnap charge and I can tie them into the Strange case. I won't make it to the hotel —the break will be at seven—and, Captain, *watch Joe!*"

Harrison didn't ask a lot of questions. He just told me he'd see me later.

The officers loaded Fowler and Horgan in the squad car and headed downtown. I drove home and it was nearly six-thirty when we got there.

Martha could walk, and her eyes weren't streaming so much. I carried her into the house, though. Then, after I'd put her to bed and placed cold compresses on her eyes, I told her about it—all of it.

"Oh, Perry! How horrible!" she murmured. "And John and Daphne?"

"We'll hear from them this afternoon, because they should make it to Denver about that time," I said, laughing a little from reaction. "Pretty soon I'll call your mother and tell her the kids are on the way. She can tell them to call us."

When the attempt to kill Millie Strange came, Harrison's men were ready. When the smoke cleared, Joe was dead, and so were four other hoods.

I sent Martha out to Denver until Horgan was put away. Because I could tie him to the scheme, he was tried on an attempted murder charge and it stuck, and when he gets out, he'll have to stand trial on a kidnapping charge.

Harrison did see me later, and I squared myself with him.

And John *still* wants to be a cop!

They are even odds only that the dead Indian is a dead Indian.

The DEAD INDIAN

By Robert W. Alexander

IF SOMEONE should ask how I got into this fix, I'd say because of a dead phone, but strangely it is because I was a dead Indian that I might escape unscathed. The only flaw in my ingenious plan is trusting an actress. The police want me, a syndicate bookie wants me worked over or eliminated and, worse if possible, a certain disgruntled man of the underworld has specifically ordered my demise. I'm sure!

Except for the police charge, I'm innocent, even though I have the money. Before all that, I was just making a few bucks at a job, to get the right clothes and meet the right people. I'm an actor—well, I wanted to be an actor. I had a taste of it, my first and only part, just a few months ago.

I've heard it said that if a per-

son will knock around Hollywood long enough, opportunity is bound to strike. Nobody mentioned disaster. Anyway, after bothering casting offices and agencies for a while, I happened to be in the Levine agency resting my feet when they got a hurry-up call for an actor.

Previously, my lack of experience had precluded employment. I had never been in a movie or on TV; in fact, I'd never even been in a high school play. Doris gave me the idea. She's a ravishing brunette who is ga-ga over actors. So I thought, okay, if it's an actor she wants, I can emote with the best of them. All I needed was the chance, which is tough to come by.

Doris seemed offended when I told her. Her yen for actors didn't include me? One would think she tried to identify with actors to further her own career. Well, she's young. She'd have to fawn around me when I was a star. I didn't mind starting as a bit player, and I could learn. I mean, what yokel couldn't squint down the dusty trail and say, "They went that-a-way."

The man in the Levine office was desperate enough to dash out to his waiting room to survey us hopefuls. I couldn't believe he decided on me! I'm rather plain.

"How quick can you get to Mervin Studios?" he asked. "They need an Indian. You got a car?"

It wasn't exactly the role I was looking for, but I said, "I could take a cab."

"You got the fare?"

"Uhhh . . ." I hedged. He shuddered, clenched his jaw and resignedly shook his head. I guess he knew that most of us would-be's are broke and barely get by on meager night jobs, to be able to sit around in agents' offices all day.

However, my face must have fit the part because he advanced me ten bucks, had me sign an agency contract for the part, and then sent me out to the street to await the taxi he'd phoned.

At the studio, a huge one, I handed the unimpressed guard my paper. He said, "Get a hustle on. Stage three."

"Where's it at?"

My question pained him. "About a half mile straight down, you'll see the arrow. They're on their fannies waiting for you! Ya should've been on time. They'll never hire you again."

"I just got the role . . ."

"Don't tell me your troubles. Move!"

If they were in such a fireball hurry they should have had a limousine waiting—a car, at least. It was a long way. I dog-trotted

down the pavement, hoping to sight a movie star, but no luck. Oh, well, I was on my way. Doris would be shocked. Someday in the near future I'd let her come along when I'm chauffeured down this lane in style.

I found an arrow pointing to Stage 3, an immense building, and picked up speed. The door was at the far end and I raced up to it, yanked it open and dashed in. The first words that greeted me were: "Who the hell opened the door?"

An angry man in an open-collared shirt flew around a prop blocking my view. "Didn't ya see the red light?" he screamed. There was more screaming with everybody seeming to yell, "Quiet!"

I was quiet. I handed him my credentials: my paper from the Levine agency. He snatched it from me.

"The Indian!" he hissed, then eyed me suspiciously. "Ugh!" he exhaled. "Well, follow me, and don't make a sound! They're reshooting the scene you spoiled."

The sound stage was impressive. They had an outdoor desert real enough to watch for rattlesnakes. There was a stagecoach, horses, a pretty girl in a checked gingham dress, and a suave, blue-eyed cowboy who was obviously the leading man.

Everybody greeted my apologetic smile with black glares, except the pretty girl in gingham; she seemed to have a twinkle in her eyes. Then they all ignored me, and I stood beside the assistant director who held my paper and watched them shoot the scene. It was an interesting shot of the girl getting out of the stagecoach.

I'd always thought they laboriously redid scenes over and over to get perfection, but not this crew. As soon as they filmed the girl getting out of the coach, the large director in the chair yelled, "Print it," and then they hustled the camera up to her face for a close-up. I wandered up beside the director where I had a better view.

After he yelled, "Print it," for the close-up, he whirled to the assistant director and ordered, "Shoot the Indian." The assistant director worriedly nodded and rushed toward me, but the director was furious for any delay and screamed in my ear, "Where's the Indian?"

"I'm the Indian," I said. He looked at me in horror. Then he roared out a string of unprintable words, right in front of the gingham girl, who stonily pretended not to hear. I blushed.

Perhaps the flush on my face made me look more like an Indian. There were curses and threats for not having the Indian ready, and

excuses that the Indian actor ahead of me had suddenly taken ill, gotten drunk or something. Anyway, they broke for an early lunch to let me get into costume and makeup. I quickly learned why the Indian actor before me suddenly took ill.

The assistant director rushed me to the nearest men's room and helped me strip off my clothes. I thought they would have dressing rooms, but I later learned it was a low budget picture, the whole movie to be shot in three days.

When I was stark bare, the assistant director handed me a buckskin G-string.

"It's cold in here," I told him.

"Will you hurry!" he roared. I assumed that assistant directors were allowed to yell at bit players, so I got into the buckskin and looked for the rest of my costume. There wasn't any!

"Now wait a minute," I complained. "There's a girl out there."

He grimaced. "Do you think an Indian would care? Now, what are you? An actor or a misfit?"

It was a case of misfit, believe me. I'm on the skinny side and the low-budget costume was loose. I showed him, and he scoffed.

"Don't worry, we'll pin it tighter after we smear on your war paint."

I shrugged. Anything for art; I wasn't going to blow my career.

He hustled me out of the lavatory and across the way to where a dainty man with white hair and cold hands applied a film of reddish mud over my torso.

The assistant director approved. Then the real shocker came when he said, "Shave his head."

"What!" I blurted. If it weren't for Doris' obsession for actors, I'd have walked off.

"Look," he argued, "did you ever see an Indian with sideburns?"

I shook my head. Frankly, I'd never seen a real Indian—not one in war paint. So he shot me the ultimatum.

"The script calls for a shaven-head Indian. Do you want the part, or not?"

The makeup man clipped me clean and ran an electric shaver over my head. My reddish locks dropped to the floor; some hair stuck to the grease on my body and had to be picked off.

The director was ready for me when I got back. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Steve McKing," I said, using my stage name.

He looked like he might be sick, but he explained my part. "You're the dead Indian," he said. "You just lie down there and don't move." The assistant director

placed a tomahawk in my hand and showed me where to sprawl out on my back.

I heard them clack the sound gizmo, and I kept my eyes closed. Nobody had bothered to explain the story or the plot of the picture to me. I figured I would have to pay to see it, to find out what it was about.

I heard the pretty girl in gingham pretend to get off the stagecoach again. I was lying right at her feet. Suddenly, I heard her gasp! I thought, *My god!* I opened my eyes to see if—

Everybody yelled at me for moving. All she had gasped about was at seeing a dead Indian. It was part of the story. So the second time I didn't flinch when she inhaled. I heard her say to the leading man, "I suppose you shot him?"

He said, "Yes'um, I did."

"But he's just a boy," she retorted.

"He'd'a split yer head with the tommyhawk," said he. "Don't trust 'em. Not even a dead one!" With that, he pushed his pointed boot into my ribs. I'd been having fits with a tickling hair in my nose, and when his boot touched near my armpit, their dead Indian jumped a foot.

I caught hell, of course, but they finally got the scene they wanted on the fourth try. That was all the use they had for me, but no one told me that. I stood around freezing until quitting time, when everybody suddenly took off and left me.

The makeup man had disappeared too, and I didn't have any way to get the greasepaint off. I couldn't even touch my clothes. I wandered around, looking, and finally the girl in gingham, who had changed to a chic mini-skirt, saw me outside the building asking passing workmen if they had any cold cream. She brought me a jar and told me where I could find a shower. Later, out at the gate, I found her waiting for some friend she had phoned to pick her up. She smiled at my nude head. I had a look at myself in a mirror, and I couldn't fault her for grinning.

"Hideous, huh?" I lamented.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, watching my eyes compare her to Doris. "You might get a lot of work with a bald head."

"Really?"

"Sure. Not many boys your age are bald. Might be smart to keep your head shaved. A lot of 'quickie' companies can't afford elaborate makeup."

"That's mighty nice of you to tell me. I'm fresh out of loot right now, but tomorrow when I get my check from the agency—"

"I'm spoken for," she smiled. I

smiled back. I had figured she might be, a budding star and all. Another thing, I'm cursed with looking younger than I am. For some reason I look nine years younger than my twenty-six.

A Lincoln picked her up.

I didn't break the great news to Doris that I had worked in a picture until the next day. After I collected my check from the Levine agency, I dashed up to her apartment. She lives only a block from my one-room pad which has running water at the end of the hall. I hammered on her door and hoped it wouldn't be opened by her roommate. I was in luck. Doris opened the door, but her mouth sagged.

"My god!" she exhaled.

"Oh, this." I touched my skin head. "I was a dead Indian," I announced proudly, and waved my check.

"You're a dead duck! A plucked one, at that! If you think I'll be seen with you, you're nuts!"

I lost my temper. She was envious because I had gotten a part. All she had ever managed was propositions. "You're jealous," I said.

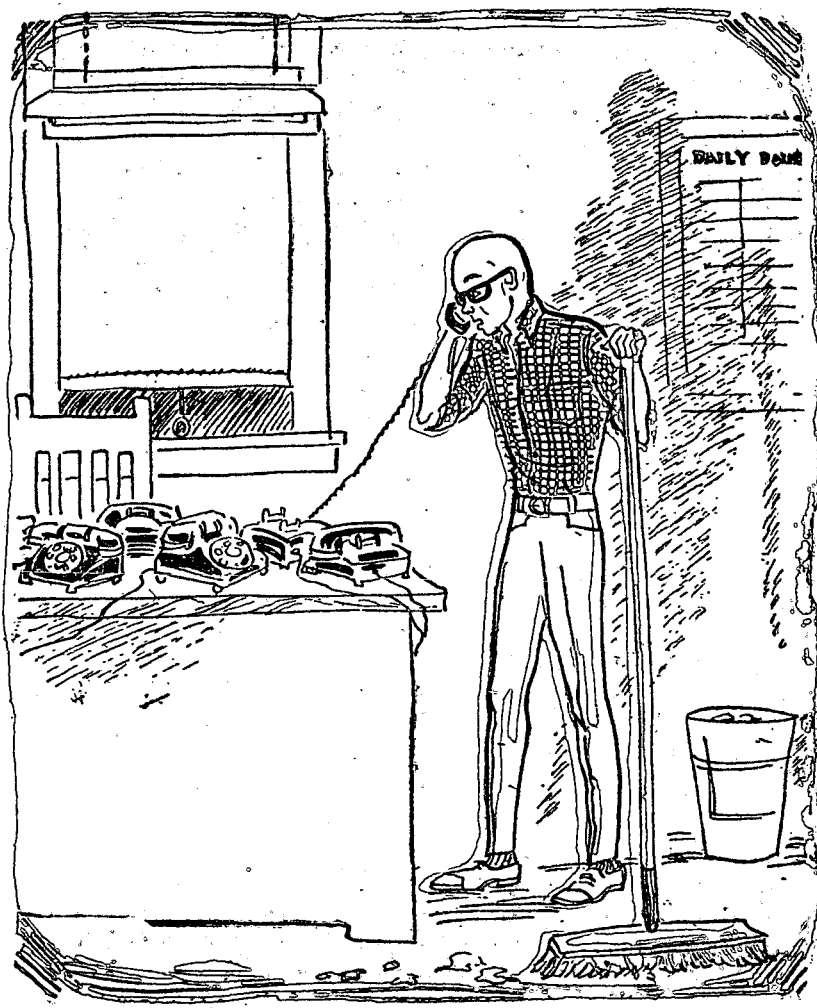
She slammed the door in my face. Worse, my taunt prompted her to speak to Mr. Crenshaw, who hires and fires at the drive-in where I filled in on Saturday nights as a counterman. She's a carhop there.

Mr. Crenshaw took a look at my head and said, "Uh, uh. You're not working here. You'll give the customers indigestion." But I knew Doris got him to fire me. He doted on Doris with futile high hopes, and I told him, "With her you'll make nothing more than change," *after* he fired me, of course.

So, I was a dead Indian as far as Doris was concerned, and could have given up acting, except that I liked it. I kept shaving my head and making the rounds of the casting offices, and I bothered the guy at the Levine agency every other day or so. "We'll call you," he'd groan, but I knew to keep reminding him that I existed.

Naturally, I had to find new employment to make out, and that meant a night job so I could pursue my career in the daytime. My bald head was a deterrent. Finally, after I added a pair of horn-rims with plain glass lenses, I appeared the studious type—I said I was working my way through college—and I got a janitor's job in an office building, a kind of run-down building, but located near the center of town.

A fat man with a lot of phones on his desk sat in his office by himself and tipped me to burn personally all his scrap paper. He said he was in the brokerage business.



This Mr. Shelly was really a bookie—I knew it—and one night at about seven, when I was sweeping up his place, the phone rang and some guy named Miller wanted to put ten on a horse in the fifth at Santa Anita the next day. I said, "Okay," and left a note for Mr. Shelly..

"Not on my desk top!" he stormed at me the next night. "Ya crazy?"

"Sorry, Mr. Shelly. Thought I was helping."

He calmed down after I assured him I knew he was a bookie. He lit a cigar and studied me.

"Tell you what, Steve," he said, using my stage name that I gave everybody. "I'm moving out of here. Like, right now. How'd you like a job? You like figures?"

"Passionately."

"Yeah, well, these are numbers, but you can spend the profits on your choice."

So there went my night work. I became an assistant bookie. Sam Shelly worked for a national syndicate, and the bookie business was no small operation. I was amazed. Sam knew a lot about horses, too. He personally booked some bets.

"Look at this," he said once. "Two hundred to win on Stella Fancy. She ain't got a chance." So he didn't write the bet in the book, nor did he relay it to the syndicate. The horse lost and he pocketed the whole two hundred.

Hm, thought I. So, when Sam Shelly was out one day and a sucker called and wagered ten to win on a hopeless long shot, I booked the bet. The damn horse won and I had to cough up three hundred dollars, my entire salary for three weeks. I had to admit it to Sam, because he personally took care of the payoffs.

"That's the way it is," he shrugged. "Take the risk, pay the penalty. But, get this, Steve—not too often. And be careful who you book. The syndicate hears we're taking bets on our own, they'll break our heads."

He didn't have to worry about me doing it again.

Two weeks later, Sam happily announced we were moving again. "Hey, top spot, kiddo. How about that? The boys promoted me to luxury. Watch the type of bets we get now."

He was right. We rented a swank office on the Strip and handled what Sam said was lay-off money. In cash! Sometimes five and ten thousand dollars a bet. Sam raised my salary to two hundred a week and I was nearly tempted to give up acting.

Most of the time I was a runner. Any time the money in our safe reached fifty thousand, I took it in a locked satchel to a big hilltop home with a view of the ocean. I gave it to a Mr. Bozelli, a large bull-necked guy who was sort of uncouth, would be the word. He had dark eyes and bushy brows and all he ever did was glare at me.

"Hey, baldy," he said on my second trip. "Ya know better than to touch this." He slapped the briefcase I'd given him.

"Yes, sir," I assured him, removing my glasses and pretending to be duly alarmed. The alarm didn't

take much effort, but I don't know why I pretended I couldn't see very well without the fake glasses—unless I was afraid to let him know I was ogling the blonde out by the pool. Her sunsuit wasn't much more than ribbon.

I knew the blonde. She was the star of that Grade Z Western. The Levine agency told me the producer hadn't been able to get it distributed.

Mr. Bozelli said, "I'll get you the receipt for Sam." He never counted the money I brought in my presence, but went into a private office. It usually took him eight minutes. With nothing else to do, I used to clock him. Today was different.

I tore out to the pool. When she looked up, I said, "Hi, there."

"Well, hello." She was surprised. I didn't want her telling Mr. Bozelli I shaved my head. He might think I was nuts, since he didn't seem to be the type who understood actors. He might even order Sam to fire me. I explained my position to Miss Vida Lamour, after she told me her name.

She laughed. "Don't worry, Mr. McKing. Your secret is safe."

"Thank you. Uh—do you know Mr. Bozelli very well?"

"Yes." She contemplated me with amusement, obviously thinking me years her junior.

"I'm twenty-six," I said.

"Oh?" She winked. "Come on."

"Honest, I just look young." She didn't believe me. I shrugged. "There'll be no joy in Mudville . . ."

She cocked her head. "The mighty Casey struck out? Is there more than the obvious connection?"

"Casey is my real name. Steve McKing is just for the stage."

"I sort of guessed." Her brown eyes were suddenly friendly with that light of encouragement a woman can give. I whipped my wallet from my pocket.

"Would you like to see my driver's license?"

"I believe your name is Casey."

"No! My age. I'm twenty-six." A horrible thought struck me. "Uh—you're not married to Mr. Bozelli?"

"No. He's my uncle. Are you working for him?"

"Not directly. I work for a man who works for him."

She smiled. "You don't look the type. However, Casey—"

"I'd, uh, prefer you call me Steve. I started out as Steve McKing and they might not understand."

"All right, Steve—"

We were suddenly interrupted by Mr. Bozelli. "Who the hell told you to come out here?" he demanded. He grabbed me by the arm and propelled me through the house and out to the front porch where

he handed me the receipt. "Don't try that again," he threatened, without allowing me to explain.

I didn't tell Sam Shelly about Vida Lamour, but that afternoon, about an hour after I got back from Mr. Bozelli's, I heard Sam answer a phone. "You want who? Twenty-six?".

"Hey! That's for me!" I yelled. I pushed the button and took the call on my line. "Miss Lamour?"

"Are you really twenty-six? You look eighteen."

"That's encouraging. Everybody used to say *seven*teen."

We chatted on a little bit, me kind of under pressure with Sam sitting there. I took the opportunity, when he was busy with a phone bet, to tell her I was going to let my hair grow. She didn't want me to.

"No, Steve. I called to see if you'd be interested in joining a theater group. We're casting a play."

Naturally, I was entirely interested, and at the tryout I won the minor part of a woman whose head was shaved by the Nazis. I was with Vida every night that week, and life was good. Then it happened. Sam Shelly caught the Hong Kong flu.

I was left in charge of the whole operation—and I was busy! I had to handle all the phone calls, and the rare cash bets that were brought to the office. One thing Sam always did with the huge cash bets was to notify the syndicate immediately. If some outfit was trying to score with a fixed race, the syndicate seemed to know, and would bet a like amount at the track to cover themselves.

There was one guy in particular who visited our office every now and then and placed some heavy bets, but Sam took care of him personally. He was a sharp dresser with slick black hair, but his piglike, expressionless eyes ruined his looks. He usually had a couple of his boys with him. He gave me the creeps, and I didn't cultivate his acquaintance.

He walked in during the second afternoon that I was alone. Both of his men were with him. He placed a briefcase on my desk and waited until I hung up a phone.

"There's ten G's on Fightin' Fool in the third at Santa Anita. Count it."

That took a while, of course, and personally accepting the wager shook me a little, too. I wasn't conscious of the time—post time, that is, and I mean *our* post time. The track had the race scheduled for 1:40 p.m. and that meant we wouldn't take any bets on the race after 1:10 p.m. Our rule was that we had to have a half-hour leeway

on any bet over a thousand. I looked at the clock. It was five minutes after one, so The Greek—that's what Sam called him—had just made it.

I wrote him a receipt in a hurry, and didn't bother to answer the ringing phones. I had a number to call—but quick!—to tell them of the bet I had accepted. The Greek picked up his receipt for the bet with a stone face.

"If it wins, I'll be back at five to collect. Okay?"

"Okay," I nodded. Sam had that kind of arrangement with him. So I watched him leave and then rapidly dialed our center control office.

My phone was dead! I had five ringing phones, and my private line to the head office was dead! Not even a buzz. I told myself, *Calm down, boy, use another phone.* I wildly grabbed the one nearest to me. Some guy who called himself Chazz, an old customer, attempted to place five hundred on Fightin' Fool!

I told him he had a wrong number. The idiot argued with me and stoutly maintained that he recognized my voice. He demanded to speak to Sam.

"Sam's sick!" I shouted, and hung up the phone. I took time for a breath and then lifted the receiver again. He was still on the line, cursing a blue streak and yelling that he had paid a hundred dollars for the tip, and that I wasn't going to gyp him out of a bet.

I dropped that phone and picked up another one. Another imbecile wanted to place a bet and wouldn't get off the line. All I could do was take his bet: two hundred to win on Fightin' Fool!

When I finally got him off the line I called central control, but got a busy signal. Never! had that happened before. I was getting sick from a knotting in my stomach. I called Sam at his apartment.

"I'm sick," he groaned.

"Sam, listen. The Greek was in. Bet ten thousand, and I can't get our office. The line's dead!"

"Ohhh, I'm dying . . ."

"Sam! Damn it! What'll I do? The line's dead!"

"Ohhh . . . jiggle it. It's a private one-way line. Sometimes it sticks. Don't bother me." He hung up.

Jiggle it? I shook the living daylights out of it. Then I dialed, and shook it again, and dialed.

Finally, Mac answered. That's all the name I had for him. I tried to sound calm.

"This is Steve calling for Sam. The Greek wants to bet ten thousand on Fightin' Fool in the third—"

"You know the rules. He's a

minute past our post. That's final."

"You don't understand—"

"Tell him no!"

"The phone's been dead!"

"I've been sittin' right here, buddy, and you got me loud and clear. Tell him we're laying off and can't handle any more."

He hung up on me!

I called Sam again, but he wouldn't answer. My hand began to feel clammy, and I noticed a decided tremble when I lit a cigarette. I debated calling Mac again and telling him how I happened to accept the bet. The syndicate might not kill me; accidents happen. I decided it was better I explain to the syndicate *before* the race was run, than to attempt an explanation afterward to The Greek.

I was reaching for the private phone when the guy who runs the elevator broke into the front office. He dashed inside to where I was.

"The vice squad!" he hollered. "I saw them come in the lobby, and I shot up here. They'll grab the other car. You got about two minutes!"

Sam paid the elevator gang a hundred a week to spot the police. They knew every man on the vice squad, and they earned a two hundred dollar bonus for tipping us.

We kept the bets on a roll of paper like adding machine tape. I grabbed that and the ten thousand I'd placed in our escape valise—that was all the cash I had taken in so far—and raced to the elevator with my savior.

He clanged the doors shut and we started down just seconds before the police in the next car came up. I grimaced, and the elevator boy, a guy about my age, grinned.

"Wonder who tipped them?"

"I've got a good idea," I said. Undoubtedly the customer, Chazz, was mad because I didn't take his bet. "I'll see that Sam pays you," I told him.

"Don't forget," he said. He let me off on the second floor. I knew the escape route. I walked innocently down the back stairs and whipped through a parking lot. Sam had a car staked out in the second lot down. The key was in it and I was out of there in nothing flat.

I drove a few miles and stopped at a drugstore. I locked the money in the trunk of the car and went in to use the phone booth. Where does time go? It was already 1:42 p.m. on the clock in the store. The syndicate would never understand my phoning about the accidental bet *after* the race was run!

Maybe the horse will lose, I hoped. Wow! If it did lose, I was rich. I might have to split with Sam to keep his mouth shut, but five thousand? Wow! I left the

drugstore and raced back to the car. I let my hopes build as I drove. After all, there were other horses in the race, and the odds were real great in my favor that it would be OK. Anything could happen. Why, just a few weeks ago, the jockey fell off Swordfish when the horse was the favorite.

Fightin' Fool won the third at Santa Anita! Not only did he win by four lengths, but he paid $14.20. That's over six to one, and the syndicate owed The Greek over seventy thousand dollars and didn't know it.

I wondered how they'd settle it.

Actually, I'm not in bad shape—especially financially. I'll miss Vida Lamour, of course, but not for any longer than I did Doris. Down here in San Diego, where I'm residing, I met a redhead by the impossible name of Mary Jones.

I'm letting my hair grow, and I discarded the useless glasses, and even Sam hadn't known that I didn't need them. The only person now in the know—that I'm not a bald-headed unfortunate—is Vida Lamour. That's her stage name. Her real handle is Thelma Bozelli, a name I'll never forget.

I chanced a phone call to her, at the theater where we were doing the rehearsals for the play about the Nazis. I didn't go into details about the trouble I was in. I just told her that I wouldn't be able to participate in her play.

She seemed to understand. She just asked, "Where are you?"

I said, "San Francisco." Then I said, "I just called . . . well, not only to tell you I'm out of the play, but to ask you to keep your promise not to tell your uncle or *anybody* that I'm capable of growing hair."

"Oh? Are you letting your hair grow?" She laughed nicely, too.

"Uh, yes. My jet black hair is sprouting up."

"That's odd. You had fiery red hair before they cut it."

"You remember," I laughed with her. "I've, ahh . . . been coloring it a little."

"I see. Well, Steve McKing, don't fret. I wouldn't *dream* of telling about your disguise."

"It's not really a disguise," I said quickly. "It'll be me, and I'm sure hoping nobody will recognize me."

"If they do, you're a dead Indian," she said.

We both laughed again—I had to force mine—and then hung up. She's not a bad actress. I hope she doesn't think blood is thicker than the bond between bosom troupers, because if she reveals that I'm a redheaded boy of twenty-six who looks eighteen, I *am* a dead Indian.

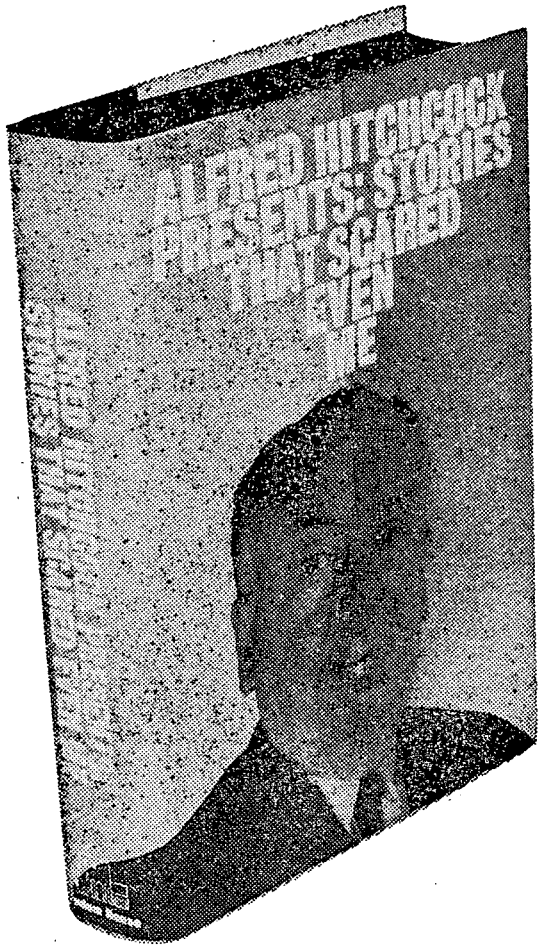
WHILE THEY LAST

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER

~~$12.95~~

$6.98

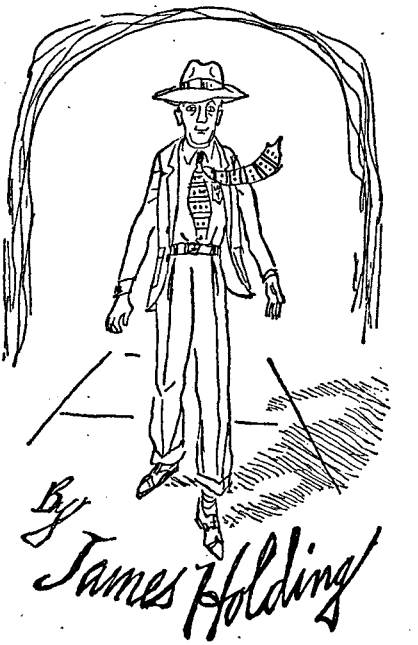


For details please see other side

A customer's satisfaction begins with friendly—albeit unknowledgeable—service.

SAM SCOTT claimed he was absolutely honest through the whole affair, even though it was a crime that gave him the chance to get what he considered the most satisfying bargain of a bargain-hunting life. Of course, Calvin Hamey disagreed with him violently when he learned the facts, and the twelve thousand people who lived in Cycleville were about evenly divided in their opinion of who was right.

If anything, the popular judgment was weighted slightly on Sam Scott's side of the scales, because Sam had a solid reputation for honesty in the town, built up over forty years of truth-telling and



straight-dealing among the people who patronized his hardware store. Besides, Sam was a deacon in his church, a member of the board of two local charities, and a faithful supporter of the YMCA—hardly the type of man who would suddenly take up lying just to get a bargain, although a lot of folks thought he had done just that.

Sam was as well known for his love of bargains as for his honesty. He wore shirts with other men's monograms on the pockets because he could get them for a song after the men for whom they had been monogrammed left town before the shirts were ready, or refused to accept them for one reason or another. He wore wide neckties after narrow ones came into style because he could get the wide ones then at such excellent prices. If the price was right, Sam would buy a hat, slacks, gloves, any old thing, even though they might not be quite the right size for him. As a result, he always looked slightly odd and ill at ease in his clothes. The same uneasy disorganization was apparent in the furnishings of his home, too. Nothing in the house "went together," but as far as Sam was concerned, who cared as long as everything was a bargain? In Cycleville it was maintained by most that Sam Scott had never in his entire life paid list price for anything that he had ever purchased.

However, Calvin Hamey, who owned the best shoe store in town, didn't go along with that. Sam had tried wearing bargain shoes, picked up at sales here and there, when he first went into the hardware business forty years ago. Being on his feet all day long, trotting back and forth waiting on customers, Sam was soon made painfully aware by his ill-fitting shoes that in the foot department, at least, he would be wise to sacrifice bargain prices in favor of comfort. So at Calvin Hamey's shoe store he had ultimately found a pair of shoes, enormously comfortable and virtually guaranteed to prevent blisters, fallen arches, bunions, hammertoes and heel spurs, and had paid full price for them: $12.95. That was in 1930 and Hamey had been selling him one pair of the same shoes—same make, same last, same color (black)—every two years ever since, and collecting full retail price for them always. On the occasion of each purchase, of course, Sam plaintively demanded to know why those shoes were never on sale, and Hamey would explain that they were bench-made, hand-sewn specials, fair-traded, and he couldn't sell them at a reduction or all hell would break loose at the factory.

Anyway, the argument about Sam's honesty started on the day

when Sam could no longer put off the purchase of a new pair of those shoes. His old ones were cracked and split, and his cut-rate shoemaker declared them beyond any further repair. So about ten minutes to twelve, leaving his clerk in charge of his store, Sam walked the two blocks to Hamey's shoe store.

He nodded pleasantly as he passed George Jessop of the Sheriff's Office, who was leaning against a corner of the courthouse chewing a toothpick. He was given a polite greeting in return. Jessop had been one of the kids who came to the "Y" to play basketball, Sam remembered, when Sam himself had coached the "Y" team. Seemed like only yesterday, but it must be thirty years ago. Sam sighed as he pulled open the door to Hamey's store and went in.

The little bell fastened to the inside of the door pealed briefly to announce his entrance. There wasn't anyone in the salesroom, so Sam sat down in his usual fitting-chair.

In a minute a young, open-faced lad bustled in from the back room. "Good day, sir," he greeted Sam. "What can I do for you?"

"Where's Mr. Hamey?" Sam asked, unlacing his right shoe.

"Stepped out for a minute. I'm his new clerk. Did you want to look at some shoes?"

"Yes. I'm Sam Scott, son, an old customer. I want to buy a pair of shoes just like these I got on." Sam held out his old shoe. "Same size, same color, same make. Best shoes I ever had."

"Okay," said the clerk. He took the shoe and looked inside for the size markings. "The only trouble is, Mr. Scott, that I'm so new I don't know much about the stock yet. Only started work this morning."

Sam nodded understandingly. "Pretty tough the first day," he said. "Takes new clerks in my hardware store a couple of weeks, usually, to learn their way around." He pointed toward the shelves on the right rear wall of the salesroom. "Mr. Hamey always goes over there for these shoes I wear, son. You ought to find them there somewhere. Second shelf up, I think."

"Thanks," the clerk said. "I'll have a look." He went to the spot indicated, ran his eye along the shelf and exclaimed with satisfaction, "Here we are." He pulled out a box, removed the lid, brought the right shoe over to Sam. "You want to try it on?" he asked. "It's exactly like the pair you're wearing, I believe."

Sam checked the shoe markings. "Don't need to try it on, I guess. It's the one, all right." Then, idly, "Where'd Mr. Hamey step out to

this time of day? You know, son?"

The clerk shrugged. "I don't know. His wife telephoned a few minutes ago, so maybe he went to do an errand for her."

Sam turned the new shoes over in his hand approvingly. "You got another pair of these shoes over there, son? I'll take two pair if you have."

The clerk returned to the shelf. "Yes," he said, "here's another pair."

"Black? Size nine double-A? Four-A heel?"

"Yes, sir. Right here."

"Good," said Sam. "Wrap 'em up, son."

He paid for the shoes, thanked the clerk, tucked the package under his arm and left, his spirits high.

He strolled down the block in the pleasantly warm spring sunshine. George Jessop was still leaning against the corner of the courthouse. Sam came to a halt before him. "Listen, George," he said, "you got a minute?"

Jessop pushed himself away from the wall and discarded his badly frayed toothpick. "Sure, Mr. Scott. What can I do for you?"

Sam indicated the package under his arm. "I just been down to Hamey's shoe store, George, and I think something's kind of wrong in there."

"Wrong?"

"Yep. The young fellow who waited on me didn't seem to know beans about his job. Didn't know the stock, or prices, or anything."

Jessop gave Sam a patient look. "Maybe he was new on the job, Mr. Scott."

"He was. Said he just started this morning."

"Well, then, what's funny about it? Complain to Mr. Hamey. It's his clerk."

"Hamey wasn't there. This clerk said he stepped out for a minute."

"You got the shoes, though, I see," said Jessop. "Aren't you satisfied with them?"

"Oh, I'm satisfied, George. Only thing is, I'm kind of worried about Mr. Hamey, that's all."

Resignedly, Jessop asked, "Why?"

"Because, like I told you, I think something's wrong, George. This clerk told me Hamey's wife telephoned him this morning. You know as well as I do that Hamey's wife's been dead for twenty years."

Jessop gave Sam a startled look. "Why didn't you say so?" he barked.

"I just did."

Jessop started on a run for Hamey's store, holding his hat on with one hand and trying to keep his holstered revolver from bouncing against his hip with the other.

Sam called after him, "Wait'll I get there, George, before you go

in!" and took out after him, puffing along as fast as his years would let him.

Fifty feet from Hamey's store front, Jessop paused and waited for Sam. "Why?" he asked when Sam came up.

"The clerk knows me," Sam said, "so I'll go in first. You stay out of sight till I get his attention. Then come in quick and put your gun on him, and we'll find out what's going on."

"I'm paid to take chances, so I'll go in first. You stay right here," George said.

They were still discussing strategy when the front door of Hamey's opened and the shoe clerk in question stepped briskly to the sidewalk. He carried a small briefcase in one hand.

"Hey!" Sam Scott said to Jessop. "There goes the clerk now, George! Fellow with the briefcase." The clerk had turned up the street in the other direction and was walking casually away.

While Jessop strode rapidly after the departing clerk, Sam Scott entered Hamey's store and went directly to the back room, where Jessop found him two minutes later as he shepherded the shoe clerk, briefcase and all, into the room in front of his drawn revolver. There is where Calvin Hamey lay prone on the floor, his mouth taped, his wrists and ankles tightly bound with clothesline.

Sam set about releasing Hamey from his humiliating position while Jessop kept his gun and his eyes on the shoe clerk who no longer wore the open-faced look Sam remembered, but a bitter, malignant one instead.

"How about that for nerve, George?" Sam said as he stripped the adhesive tape from Hamey's mouth. "Right in the middle of robbing the store, this kid is interrupted by a customer. Instead of running, or sticking up the customer, he comes out bold as brass and *waits* on me!" There was a hint of admiration in Sam's voice.

The minute it was free of the muffling tape, Hamey's mouth began to work overtime. "Is that what he was doing when he went out into the salesroom, Sam?" were his first words. "Waiting on *you?*"

Sam nodded, helping Hamey to his feet.

In a temper, Hamey kicked at the rope Sam had cut from his ankles. He turned a glare on the shoe clerk. "This fellow held me up with a gun when I went to wait on him," he said. "He made me come into the back room here and lie down on the floor and he tied me up like this. And after he made me tell him the combination to my safe, he taped my mouth." The

small safe stood in a corner with its door wide open. They could see it was empty.

"Look in the briefcase, Mr. Hamey," Jessop directed. "Your stuff's probably inside."

To Hamey's relief, Jessop was right. The briefcase proved to contain not only Hamey's operating funds but the thief's nickel-plated revolver and the remains of a hank of clothesline as well.

"Okay," Jessop said. "You owe Mr. Scott here a vote of thanks for reporting this so quick, Mr. Hamey. Hadn't been for him, the guy would have been long gone before we knew you'd been robbed."

"And I might have starved to death in my own back room. How'd you catch on, Sam?"

Sam told him about the clerk's reference to Hamey's wife.

Hamey said, "Well, gosh, Sam, I *do* owe you a vote of thanks, all right. So thanks."

Jessop pushed the bogus shoe clerk toward the door. "Go on, you," he advised him. "We got a date at the courthouse."

As they left the store, the thief turned a vicious look on Sam Scott. "You old goat!" he spat out with appropriate adjectives to underline his point, "you're as crooked as I am! The price you told me for those shoes!"

Well, that did it. Hamey waited until Jessop and the thief had gone, then he put a jaundiced eye on Sam Scott and said, "Looks like two pair of shoes you got there, Sam."

"That's correct," Sam admitted. "Two pair, Calvin."

"First time you ever bought two pair at once."

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"Only that you must have got a bargain to buy two pair. Was the kid right, Sam? Did *you* tell him the price of the shoes?"

"Stands to reason he wouldn't know himself," Sam said.

"What did you pay for those shoes?" Hamey's face was gradually becoming an angry red. "What did you pay, Sam?" He tried to remain calm.

Sam replied without hesitation, "Why, twelve ninety-five a pair, Calvin."

Hamey gave a high yelp of indignation. "Then you lied to him! You *know* they're thirty-one fifty! They haven't been twelve ninety-five for forty years and you know it! I said thanks for helping catch the thief, Sam, and I meant it, but I'm damned if I'll say thanks to you for cheating me out of thirty-seven dollars and ten cents!"

His voice had risen to a shout. He was waving his hands around wildly. Then, struck by a sudden

thought, he paused, gulped and said sheepishly, "Say, Sam, I'm sorry. I'm all upset by the robbery. You were suspicious of the kid and just told him the lowest price that would seem reasonable, isn't that it? Intending to pay me the balance later?"

Slowly, Sam Scott shook his head. "No, Calvin," he said regretfully but firmly. "I won't lie to you. I told him twelve ninety-five deliberately, and I'm not going to pay you the difference."

Hamey looked at Sam with the air of a man stunned. His anger returned, reinforced by the sadness of sudden disillusionment with his old friend. "Sam Scott," he said in a tight voice, "I knew you were a complete fool about bargains, but I never thought you'd stoop to *lying* to get a bargain. But if you told that boy those shoes were twelve ninety-five a pair, you were lying. You, Sam Scott, supposed to be as honest as Abe Lincoln! Wait'll Cycleville hears about this! And I'll tell 'em!"

Sam raised a hand in protest. "Now wait a minute, Calvin. Before you start calling names, listen to my side of it."

"You lied and cheated, that's your side of it!"

"No, I didn't lie, Calvin. I told the truth. You've got to realize what the robber's exact words were, then you'll agree with me."

"It's *your* words I'm thinking about. Your lying words."

Sam shook his head. "Listen, Calvin, I told the kid where to find the shoes on the shelf. Then, after he'd found me the first pair, he said your wife phoned. It caught me so completely by surprise that I ordered another pair of shoes to give myself time to think!"

"Maybe so. But you still lied about the price."

Sam said, "When I caught on that the kid didn't have an idea in the world what to charge me for the shoes, I sat there waiting for him to ask me the price I usually paid. And I would have told him thirty-one fifty a pair, Calvin, and *paid* him thirty-one fifty a pair if that's what he asked me. But he didn't ask that."

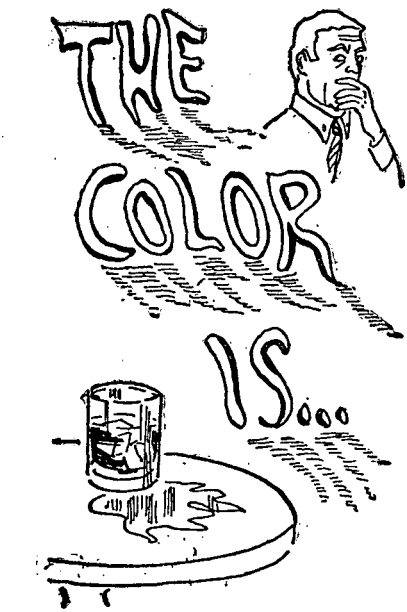
"What did he ask?"

"He phrased his question in such a way that I could give him an honest answer and still get a legitimate bargain."

"Huh!" said Hamey in deep disgust.

"He didn't ask me what I usually paid for those shoes, Calvin," Sam said, "or what their regular price was. What he said was, 'Since the boss is out and I'm so new at this, Mr. Scott, maybe you can tell me what these shoes are *worth*?' So I told him."

What it is that changes one's taste is usually—not always—too subtle for perception.



I HAD always liked the color of good Scotch splashed over ice. It's a warm color, the way it bends and filters the light to make bright brown hazy patterns on the table under the glass. Now the color bothers me. It makes me shrink inside, and the patterns start me thinking, which is a useless exercise.

Maybe an hour or two one way or the other would have changed things, but it didn't work out that way. I did promise to drive the car, I did have to catch the plane and I did get a late start, so there wasn't much time for sleeping when I left Miami and started up the Parkway.

It was a beautiful day too, with clear skies and little traffic. The road was wide and straight and the land flat and green, and I was glad I had agreed to take the car to Washington for Charlie. I had done much traveling by jet lately and it was good to see the land going by in real chunks for a change. I had the feeling I was actually going someplace, rather than just sitting in a time box for a few hours while they shifted scenery outside.

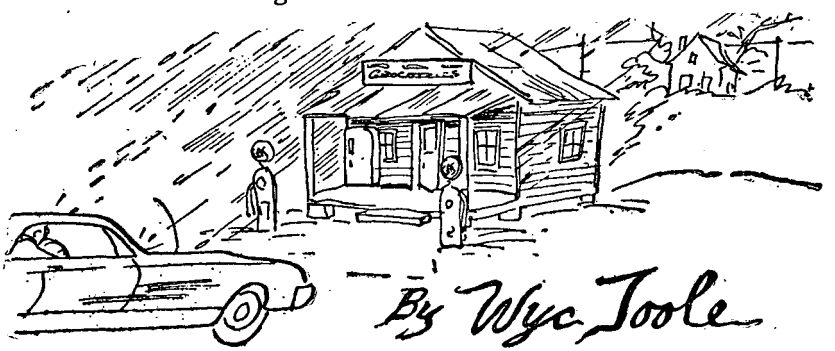
It was a big, solid, heavy car, and I averaged over seventy going upstate. In the early afternoon, I left the Parkway north of Orlando and cut across the neck of Florida north of Jacksonville to pick up Route 301. By this time, the cloud cover had increased and the day had lost its brightness, but driving was easier without the glare. The car was air-conditioned and I had been

getting good music on the radio all day. So, I was rested and still enjoying myself when I reached Folkston. I probably should have stopped then, but I was behind schedule because of the delay in leaving Miami. I did stop long enough to have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie while they gassed the car, and I took time to walk around and stretch my legs. The countryside was all scrub pine, motels and service stations. There was a smell of rain in the air, but the clouds were high, grey and smooth. It looked as if the rain might hold off at least until the next morning.

The traffic seemed heavier when I left Folkston, but it dropped off again just before dark. I turned on the headlights and continued to eat up the miles, although I felt the fatigue of driving starting to build in my legs. The music sounded flatter and I shifted in the soft seat to relieve the tension growing in my neck and shoulders.

When I realized I was not enjoying the drive any longer, that I was working, I decided to pass up only one more motel and then stop for the night.

That was a mistake, of course, because right after I rolled by a big, brassy, 100 unit mansion that advertised itself with a thousand flashing lights as a palace of pleasure with restaurant and vacancies, the road became a lonely tar strip bounded by empty fields and thick woods. In less than an hour, rain was falling and I was picking up more static than music on the radio. I did pass a few small motels, but they were only showing lights over the "no vacancy" signs and their parking lots were filled with tired, dusty cars. I had no choice other than to keep driving. The route that Charlie had laid out for me might have saved a little time, but it certainly wasn't the best for driving alone.



It was after eleven when I began

to go through some small towns and was able to get gas and coffee. However, by then I had gotten my second wind, or was used to the tight feeling in my shoulders. I pressed on.

It would be hard to say how much longer I drove. The night was dark and the rain came down steadily. The road was empty except for a few blurred headlights that flashed by, going the other way. The car radio grew fuzzy and confused, shifting stations and music and places without my changing the dial, as the transmitter signals bounced off the night layers and homed in on my receiver according to strength. The windshield wipers clicked rhythmically and monotonously. I was tired and I drove restlessly, following highway markers without really knowing where I was. My only goal was either daylight or Washington, and the steps in between were meaningless.

Sometime between twelve and one in the morning, I made a wrong turn and lost 301. One minute I was on a straight, flat highway, and then I was driving down a narrow, curving road that appeared tunnel-like because of the high trees that pushed to the edge on both sides. Exactly how long since I had lost the main highway was questionable. My initial feeling was disgust, followed quickly by anxiety. I didn't like either being lost or the emptiness of the road. The tunnel seemed blacker and longer; but since there was no place to turn around and backtrack, I drove on even faster, looking for a road sign or someplace to stop and ask directions.

The tires hummed, the windshield wipers clicked and the radio crackled for what seemed an eternity before my headlights flashed momentarily on a sign that marked the outskirts of a town. I didn't catch all of the name, but it began with an "M" and registered with me quickly as a man's name. I knew it would be a small town with that kind of a name—a town that had grown up around a country store or a farm and had held on to the owner's name. People would say, "I'm going to Monroe's," and the name stuck because the town never got big enough for the people to change it.

Almost immediately, another sign cut the speed limit to 25, but I slowed only to 55. I would have welcomed a police car and been glad to pay a fine to get some directions back to the highway. I passed about ten minutes of lonely farmland before the road widened slightly and some dark, squat, plain buildings began to appear. They lined each side of the road for about two blocks, all closed and

dark. There was a good-sized service station on one corner, but it was shut also, with a single bare light bulb burning over a cash register and throwing long thin shadows across the concrete apron. I slowed down, looking for any sign of life, but nothing moved in the "center" of town. I gave up and began to increase speed when I saw a light reflecting through a window onto the pavement ahead. As I drew closer, I saw that the light came from a store separated from the main part of town by about a mile. When I reached it, I pulled off onto a dirt strip in front of a wooden store that had once been a house. Two ancient gas pumps were stuck in the bare ground where the front yard had been. There were two lights on inside, and the front door was partially open. I got out of the car and ran through the rain onto the front porch. My feet made a hollow sound on the weathered wooden boards and the rain rattled heavily on the tin roof that covered the porch. I stamped the mud off my shoes on the door sill and went in. A bell attached to the frame rang loudly. I closed the door. The room was damp from the rain and had a dusty, stale smell. It was small, with wall shelves filled with canned goods. On the left was a long counter, half of which was glass and filled with candy and baked goods. The two bare light bulbs, swaying gently on long cords that hung from the plywood ceiling in opposite ends of the room, made more shadow than light. There was no one in the depressing room, but a door in the far wall stood open. Beyond it was darkness.

"Is there anybody here?" My voice sounded hollow and thin. There was a moment of dead silence, and then I heard footsteps in the back of the building. A man came through the open door. He was small and thin with a day's growth of beard on his pinched face. As if movement were an effort, his shoulders were hunched with fatigue and his feet shuffled on the rough boards. His eyes were set far back in his head, the eyelids red and grainy, the pouches under them black and puffy. They looked as if they would be sore to the touch. His mouth was thin and his lips almost purple. The clothes he was wearing were at least a size too large. The only thing that fit was a dirty, sweat-stained hat that he wore on the back of his apparently bald head.

My attention was drawn to his hands. They were covered with blood, and he held a short cutting knife, the blade red and sticky-looking. The front of his shirt and trousers were splattered with dark spots.

The man walked about three steps into the room, stopped and said in a thin, tired voice, "You want something, Mister?"

His appearance was so bizarre and unexpected that I backed toward the door. I was a good five inches taller and at least sixty pounds heavier, but I was frightened of him. Several new, long-handled shovels were propped up against the counter and I reached over and picked one up.

The man watched me curiously, looked down at his hands and then back at me. "You kin put up that shovel. I reckon I do look right bad." He held out his hands. "I been out back cleanin' chickens. Din't figure how I'd look when I walked in. Wait a minute. I'll go clean up and come right back." He turned and walked through the dark doorway.

I heard his footsteps echoing on wooden boards, and then the sound of running water. The palms of my hands were wet and I felt cold. A big clock on the wall ticked loudly. Then he was back in the room, drying his hands on a dirty towel. His sleeves were rolled back and his arms were thin and white with black grime still in the creases of his wrist.

"Now, what you want?" he asked, stopping a few feet from me and ignoring the shovel I still held.

The change in him was startling. Suddenly, he was only a small, unimpressive, hard working, farmer type, bent with fatigue and cautious of a big man who had wandered into his store in the middle of the night. I felt foolish standing there with a shovel in my hands and my heart racing. I cleared my throat nervously and grinned at him.

"I'm lost. I'm supposed to be on 301, but I took a wrong turn somewhere. How do I get back?"

He looked at me with tired, sad eyes. "You did take a wrong turn, fella. You a long way from 301. Best way back is, go on down this road till you git to the crossroad. C'aint miss 'er. First crossroad you git to. Take a lef' there 'n go about three mile till you hit another road. Go right and you'll run dead on to the highway."

"Can you tell me the route numbers?"

The man walked behind the counter, talking as he went. "I ain' so good at road numbers. I jes' know you go on down to the crossroad, turn lef' and then right. Not many roads out here to git lost on." As he talked, he took a battered coffeepot off a hot plate and filled a heavy white cup with steaming coffee. The fragrance filled the room with its first friendly smell. He bent down and took a second cup from under the counter and

held it out toward me. He showed his teeth in what he must have meant as a smile and said, "You wan' some? Probably do you good. You look tired as I feel."

His hands were almost clean and the cup was white and the coffee smelled as good as a warm bed. He looked like a tired little man trying to run a poor little store and not doing a very good job of it. He was so small and thin and pale it was hard to understand the feeling of fear that I couldn't shake. In fact, it was foolish to stand there holding a shovel, when it was obvious I could break him apart with my bare hands.

I grinned sheepishly at him and said, "Yeah, thanks. I could use some coffee." I walked over to the counter, leaned the shovel against the glass case and picked up the cup he had filled for me. He leaned back against the wall and watched me drink. It was bitter and harsh, but it made my blood race a little faster and lifted some of the weight from my shoulders and neck.

He made a sound that I took for a laugh and said, "Cut the moss right off your teeth."

I smiled back at him. "It's pretty strong, but it tastes fine. You haven't got any sandwiches back there, have you?"

"Should be sump'n lef'," he answered. He walked over to a battered old refrigerator, opened the door and stuck his head inside. In a second, he came out holding a big sandwich wrapped in wax paper. "How 'bout ham?" He tossed it on the counter.

I picked it up and unwrapped it. The waxed paper made a loud sound in the quiet room as I crumpled it. The sandwich was two slabs of heavy bread with an uneven hunk of country ham stuck between them. Pieces of the bread stuck to the ham when I opened it to see what it was like inside.

"I ain' got nothing to put on it," he apologized.

"That's all right. It's fine." I took a bite of the heavy meat and bread and a swallow of the thick coffee. The little man leaned against the wall, sipping his coffee and watching me over the edge of his cup. Getting down a mouthful of the gluey bread and ham took a lot of chewing, and I felt strangely exposed as I stood there working my jaws steadily while his red eyes bored into mine.

It was then I heard the sound. I couldn't place it at first. It was all through the room; a steady weak knocking, as if he were kicking the wall with his heel. I stopped chewing and swallowed the lump in my mouth.

He spoke before I did. "Is all right. Jes' my wife hittin' the wall.

She wan's me. I'll go in a minute. She don' sleep so good no more. But I don' either." He took another swallow of coffee and the feeble pounding stopped.

"You and your wife live here?" I asked.

"Yeah. We stay 'ere now. Use ta have a big house out back 'fore the fire, but we stay 'ere now. Keep the place open. Don' get many people round 'ere at night, but don' sleep, so gives me somethin' to do." The expression on his face never changed and his sore eyes never left mine. "You got kids, Mister?"

"No, not yet."

"Oughta. Man oughta have kids. I had six. Woman don' hold up good less'n she got kids to worry 'bout. She'll be knockin' again in a minute, I reckon." The tone of his voice matched the sadness in his face. He was walking on some raw nerves inside himself, but he seemed to want to talk.

I took a small bite of the sandwich and asked, "You lost all your children?"

He picked up the coffee pot and refilled our cups. "Ever las' one of 'em. Oldest was eight and the young'n 'bout six mons. Wife and me came down 'ere one night 'bout a year ago to do some paintin'." He looked around the room. "Use ta be a real pretty place. Funny thing —use ta close ever night round seven and now we're 'ere all the time, but I got more done then. Not so tired, I guess. Anyway, we come down 'ere. Night like out there right now—kinda misty . . . rainin' hard sometime . . . sometime the water jes' hangin' in the air. It were cold—real cold—and I lit the oil stove up in the house 'fore I lef'. Wanted the kids to be warm. You know, I member jes' as clear how I was stirrin' a can of green paint when I heard that damn thing blow. Must of blowed oil over everthin'. We ran up, but we couldn't do nothin'. Couldn't git near it. I tried and she tried. Jes' got burned. Kids couldn't git out. You could hear 'em hollerin' and yellin' . . . For a long time we could hear 'em—for a long, long time."

He emptied his coffee cup with one swallow, looked back at me and said, "We buried 'em back by the tree and moved down 'ere. Jes' need one room. Ole lady sure is funny sometimes though. I'll catch her talkin' away to those kids—fussin' with 'em, laughin' with 'em. Kinda worries me, but—"

The pounding on the wall started again. It seemed weaker this time, more uneven, and I thought I could hear her crying real low.

"I gotta go," he said, putting his cup on the counter. "You 'member how to git where I said?"

I nodded. "How much do I owe

you for the coffee and sandwich?"

"Fifty cent all right?"

I fished in my pocket and came up with two quarters. I put them on the counter and left without saying another word. The rain had stopped. I paused before getting into my car and watched him inside the store, standing by the door to the back rooms. He never moved until I started my car. As I drove off, he turned and disappeared into the darkness of the hall.

I found the first crossroad and turned left, but too many miles went by without reaching the second one. I finally found a service station open in a small town and asked about my directions while I was getting gas. The man there said I was really lost this time. He couldn't understand the directions I had been given, because they had taken me away from 301. I was closer to 95 and that's where he suggested I go. He was able to give me a map that was marked. I found the highway about thirty minutes later and headed north again.

My tires sounded different on the big, smooth highway now. The hum was steadier, more rhythmical, and I knew I was too tired to go on. At the next turnoff, I found a motel with a sleepy man on duty and got into bed just as dawn was breaking.

I slept until noon, showered, had a big breakfast and started driving again. I was still tired and the day was grey and wet. The windshield stayed wet and muddy from the spray off the tires of passing cars, and it was hard to see. All the exhilaration and pleasure I had felt the previous morning was gone. I was ready to reach Washington. The bright and sunny Wednesday morning in Florida had existed in another place and another time, and my mind was full of the stop I had made at the dim, tiny store. In the grey light of day the whole thing was unreal, like a bad dream that holds on after you wake up and nags and pulls at your mind. My initial fears of the pitiful little man seemed foolish, but I could not rid myself of an uneasy feeling about him and the thought of listening to the children burn to death; and the half dead woman I had not seen made me even more morose.

When I finally reached Washington and left the car keys with the desk clerk at Charlie's apartment, I just wanted to get away. I did not even want to spend the night in his apartment, as he had arranged. I took a cab to a motel out by the airport, had dinner, took a sleeping pill and spent the rest of the night in a restless dream peopled with sobbing children and men with sad, tired eyes.

The next morning, I got up in time to eat before leaving for the

airport. I caught the morning plane for Los Angeles, where I was to change for Hawaii. The stewardess brought the morning papers after we had leveled off at altitude. I was unable to get interested in the reports or books that I had with me, so I leafed aimlessly through a front news section. I had not realized I was looking for anything in particular until I found it on page four: a short article datelined Morgansville, North Carolina. The state police announced they had arrested a suspect in the slaying of a Morgansville family. The man, who had been an inmate of the state mental hospital until his release a year ago, had apparently stabbed Mr. and Mrs. John Williams to death late Wednesday night in the back room of their country store. From the evidence at hand, it appeared that he came upon the couple while they were painting the store. Later, he had set fire to the house that stood behind the store. It was the fire that alerted the town to trouble at the Williams' store. The four Williams children perished in the blaze. The police were certain there were no others involved in the murders that shocked the small town of 1500 people, despite a report that a car was seen parked in front of the store after midnight.

I don't know for certain that I was in Morgansville, or that I could have done anything. However, I know I have to write the police, and I am going to have to quit drinking Scotch. It's the color. When the light hits it, it looks as if someone has washed old blood off his hands in clear spring water.

Dear Fans:

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Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

One may get but one chance to renew ties with the past, as it were, but the choice of methods is distinctly his.

"Bulls and Bears," said Marcus.

"What?" said Sergeant Bobo Fuller, and cursed himself silently in italics for saying it.

He should have known better. After a long and uneasy association with Detective Lieutenant Joseph Marcus, he was bitterly familiar with the lieutenant's disturbing practice of exploding abruptly and quietly with an enigmatic and apparently irrelevant expression that

might mean something or nothing. He did it deliberately, a cheap trick to excite curiosity and provide another opportunity to show off the involved mechanics of his precious brain. It was Fuller's grim determination to reveal neither surprise nor curiosity when these predictable small explosions occurred, and here he was, rising promptly as usual to the obvious lure. He cursed himself silently, fluently, with practiced artistry.

"I said," said Marcus, "Bulls and Bears."

"I heard. Care to tell me what you mean?"

"The stock market, Fuller. Bulls buy on the rise, bears on the decline. Or is it the other way around?"

"I wouldn't know. On my salary, I've had no experience. You been playing the market?"

"Not I, Fuller. Not now. I used to play it when I was a kid."

"Oh, come off. What with? Nickles and dimes? A child prodigy of finance?"

"Not the market, Fuller. The game."

Now thoroughly confused, and in spite of stalwart intentions and bitter resolve, Fuller was now sucked in. "All right," he said with heavy emphasis. "What game?"

"I just told you, Fuller, Bulls and Bears; a game about the stock market, very complicated, with dice and markers and little cards and all those things. Sometimes requires hours to complete. I haven't played it for years."

"That's fascinating. I've been waiting a long time to come across a bit of information like that. Now that I've got it, though, I don't quite know what to do with it. Any suggestions?"

Marcus smiled faintly and happily. He was never so delighted with Fuller as he was when Fuller had been prodded into a display of sarcasm. He was fond of Fuller, liked him most when Fuller was surliest.

"File it away, Fuller. It may come in handy. The point is, Jake Frontenac invented it. That's what made me think of it."

"All right. So far, so good. Is Jake Frontenac supposed to be significant?"

"We'll see. Anyhow, he's dead. When he was alive, he was the father of Foster Frontenac."

"The corpus delicti?"

"The corpus, at any rate. It remains to be established that he's delicti."

"With your record, he's delicti. You can count on it."

"I relish your pessimism, Fuller. You're probably right."

"Not pessimism. Realism. You're on your way to the scene, aren't

you? Where Marcus goes, murder's been."

"With Fuller at his side. Very good, Fuller. You've developed a happy knack for the apt expression. There's reason for your pessimistic realism, I must say. Foster wasn't the most engaging fellow in the world. As a matter of fact, his record, brief as it was, incorporates some astonishingly precocious delinquencies, not to mention probable felonies. An accomplished black sheep, Fuller. An available candidate for murder, you might say."

"Oh, one of those—a passel of suspects, everyone eligible for the honor."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Hate is a motive, Fuller, but there are others. Pride, for instance. Greed, for instance. Self-preservation, for instance."

"To pick one, take greed. How so?"

"It's ironical," said Marcus, "that Old Jake invented Bulls and Bears. I mean, he must have been among the world's worst speculators. He inherited a small fortune as a young man and lost it all. The market wiped him out. Then he sat down and worked out the details of this game. It was all the rage for a long while, and it still hangs on. Every Christmas you see it in the shops. I'm surprised that you never had a game, Fuller."

"I was a deprived child. What happened to what we were talking about? Greed as a motive, that is."

"Greed is always possible, Fuller, when a fortune is involved. Do you have any idea how much money can be made in royalties from a game like that? Take Monopoly. There's a game you're surely acquainted with. How much money do you think has been taken in royalties by the inventor of Monopoly?"

"I haven't any idea."

"Neither have I," said Marcus.

Having thus truncated what might have developed into a prolonged speculation, Marcus retired into silence and addressed himself exclusively to driving. As for Fuller, removed from Marcus by an interval of animus, he slumped onto the back of his neck and gave himself up to a recurrent dream that this time Marcus would come a cropper and land in a mess from which he, Old Faithful Fido Fuller, would rescue him with deductive pyrotechnics. It was a sweet dream and endured into the suburbs. It ended under the portico of a big house of stone and stucco, less impressive than pretentious, where Marcus killed the engine of the police car, debarked, and started lengthwise from side steps across a veranda toward the

front door. Fuller, returning from the possible to the probable, followed.

They were admitted by a manservant who was clearly expecting them and showed no doubt that they were clearly what he expected. In a tone of voice appropriate to a house of death, which was his normal tone, he directed them up a wide flight of stairs to a bedroom on the second floor. Dr. Clement, he said, was waiting for them there. Marcus and Fuller, Fuller a step behind, went up and along the hall to the room and entered without knocking. Inside, a young man was lying face down on a disordered bed. Beside the bed, sitting very erect in an armed straight chair, was an elderly man with thick silver hair and a clear smooth face blooming delicately pink in the cheeks. The skin of the face, instead of sagging and folding into the wrinkles of age, had apparently shrunk and grown taut with time over its frame of fine bones. The skin had a soft sheen, like off-white satin. The man, rising from his chair, turned to meet Marcus.

"Hello, Joseph," he said. "It's been quite a long time."

"I stay healthy," Marcus said.

He shook hands with Dr. Clement, the clasp lasting long enough to indicate an old affection. Fuller, who had noted the use of Marcus' first name, now timed the handclasp and thought sourly that this was surely, somehow, another one of the lieutenant's shoddy little shockers, a trick employed with questionable intent. That Marcus knew the doctor and had expected to find him in attendance on a corpse, and that he had not, nevertheless, informed Fuller of either the familiarity or the expectation, aroused the latter's bruised and sensitive mind to an instant condition of irrational resentment. As though sensing all this, which in fact he did, Marcus released the doctor's hand and turned back to Fuller.

"Dr. Thomas Clement," he said, "Sergeant Bobo Fuller. It was Dr. Clement, Fuller, who called me personally at headquarters and asked me to come out here. It was also Dr. Clement who, some forty years ago, relieved my mother of a future cop. It may have been a mistake."

"Quite likely," Dr. Clement said. "You were always a pigheaded fellow, Joseph. For some strange and obdurate reason, you insisted upon becoming a bloodhound instead of taking up a sensible trade or profession. Well, here's your chance to be one. There's a body. Somewhere there's a murderer. Let's see you sniff your way from one to the other."

Having thus, in effect, thrown down the gauntlet, the doctor withdrew a few steps from the bed and became a spectator. Marcus, with an uneasy feeling that he was about to fumble the ball in the big game, advanced to the bed and looked down at the body of the young man sprawled upon it.

Foster Frontenac lay on his bel-

ly, in which position he had thrown himself down to sleep, apparently, with most of his clothes on. Very convenient for a strangler, Marcus thought. A dark red string tie extended from the body on both sides of the throat like a thin line of dry blood that had run while wet, in violation of a natural law, slightly uphill and two ways at once. Dr. Clement, diagnosing death with minimum disturbance, had wisely left the body undisturbed. Now Marcus rolled it over. Empty bulging eyes. Blackened protruding tongue. Shoes and coat had been removed. Also, of course, the tie. Shirt open at the throat. On the throat, an ugly linear bruise where something, presumably the tie, had been drawn tighter and tighter until the eyes popped and the heart stopped.

"Strangled," Marcus said.

"Obviously," Clement said. "With the necktie."

"He was a young man. No weakling from the looks of him, yet there's no sign of an exceptionally violent struggle. Why would a young, strong man lie still while someone strangled him?"

"According to the family, he had been on the prowl all night. He came home this morning exhausted, in an evil humor. He was certainly in a very deep sleep when his murderer approached him."

"Foster had developed a reputation. Bad habits. I've heard reports."

"He was a scoundrel, a thorough bad one. The fault was in his blood." The old doctor spoke as if he were reading an indictment before the bar, his voice dull and impersonal but somehow suggesting a kind of restrained evangelical fury. "Wastrel, liar, cheat, thief, destroyer of those who might have loved him, that was Foster. He started young. There's no good in repeating all that he was. It has the peculiar dullness of repetitious evil. He killed his father as surely as if he had shot him, and he has been all his life a curse and a burden to his mother. I was Old Jake's doctor, as I have been doctor to the whole family, and I can assure you, whatever euphemism I put on his death certificate, that he died because his son killed him. Was it Shakespeare who said that men have died but not of broken hearts? Whoever said it, he was wrong. Men *have* died of broken hearts. Old Jake Frontenac did."

"A charming fellow. Foster, I mean. He must have worked hard at being a bad boy to accomplish so much in so short a life. How old was he?"

"Barely thirty. He was born on the sixth of August, 1939. I delivered him, God forgive me. I

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"According to the family, he had been on the prowl all night. He came home this morning exhausted, in an evil humor. He was certainly in a very deep sleep when his murderer approached him."

"Foster had developed a reputation. Bad habits. I've heard reports."

"He was a scoundrel, a thorough bad one. The fault was in his blood." The old doctor spoke as if he were reading an indictment before the bar, his voice dull and impersonal but somehow suggesting a kind of restrained evangelical fury. "Wastrel, liar, cheat, thief, destroyer of those who might have loved him, that was Foster. He started young. There's no good in repeating all that he was. It has the peculiar dullness of repetitious evil. He killed his father as surely as if he had shot him, and he has been all his life a curse and a burden to his mother. I was Old Jake's doctor, as I have been doctor to the whole family, and I can assure you, whatever euphemism I put on his death certificate, that he died because his son killed him. Was it Shakespeare who said that men have died but not of broken hearts? Whoever said it, he was wrong. Men *have* died of broken hearts. Old Jake Frontenac did."

"A charming fellow. Foster, I mean. He must have worked hard at being a bad boy to accomplish so much in so short a life. How old was he?"

"Barely thirty. He was born on the sixth of August, 1939. I delivered him, God forgive me. I

should have strangled him then with his umbilical cord."

"It all works out in the end. Someone has done it now with his necktie. Presumably."

"Better late, I suppose, than never."

"Who discovered the body?"

"I did."

"You?" Marcus' eyebrows shot up. "I assumed that you were called afterward to make the final diagnosis."

"No. You were always inclined to leap to conclusions, Joseph, even as a boy. It's a bad habit, I should think, for a detective. As a matter of fact, I dropped in to check up on Hattie, Foster's mother. She's been a bit under the weather lately, nothing serious. She asked me to look in on Foster while I was here. As I said, he'd come in this morning after a hard night somewhere, looking sick and full of venom. Cursed his sister and sneered at his mother, came up here and fell on his bed, apparently. Personally, I was reluctant to lift a hand to help him, even if he was dying. Better off dead; he and everyone concerned. But I'm fond of his mother, as I was fond of his father. I stopped in, as she asked, and found him as you see him."

"Did you come in here immediately after you left Mrs. Frontenac?"

"No. I was reluctant to come at all, and I went downstairs first and had coffee with Adele. A fine girl. Lovely."

"How many children are there?"

"Three. Counting Foster, that is, who was the oldest. Then comes Young Jake, a year younger. Then Adele, a year younger than Jake. Stepping stones, you might say. Hattie was twenty-eight when she was married. She didn't have Foster until she was thirty. I guess she and Old Jake decided it was getting late and stepped up the pace a little while there was still time."

"How long were you downstairs with Adele?"

"Must have been an hour, bit more or less. Then I came back up to Foster. Good thing I didn't come sooner. I might have interrupted a good job."

"So? You think this murder was committed while you were downstairs?"

"Thereabouts. It might have been done, of course, a little earlier. Not much."

Marcus went down onto one knee beside the bed. He was not a doctor, but experience had given him a degree of acumen in such matters, and the condition of the body indicated that Dr. Clement was not far off, if off at all. Obeying an impulse, perhaps triggered

by what he knew of the body when it was a man, he unfastened the cuffs of the white shirt and slipped the sleeves up the arms. Afterward, for a long minute, he remained quietly on his knee in the posture of prayer, as if he were asking mercy of the imponderable powers of light and darkness for a lost soul.

"When you were reading the roster of Foster's faults," he said at last, "you omitted something. How long has he been a drug addict?"

Dr. Clement, behind him, made an odd retching sound. "I don't know."

"You did, however, know that he *was* one?"

"Certainly. The evidence was unmistakable."

"Did his family know?"

"His mother did. She discussed it with me."

"How about the rest of the family?"

"I don't know. Maybe they knew, maybe they didn't. If they did, they didn't mention it to me."

Marcus pulled down the white sleeves, leaving the cuffs loose. He stood up, stood staring down at the body for a moment longer, sighed in weary acceptance of the perversity of all things in general, murder in particular, and turned again to the doctor.

"How is she?" he said. "The mother, that is."

"She's all right. As I told you, she's just a bit under the weather. You can expect such things in a woman of sixty."

"I didn't mean that. I meant this." Marcus made a gesture toward the bed. "Shock or anything?"

"Well, with her it's hard to tell. No fainting or hysterics. Nothing of the sort. She's a tough old girl in an admirable kind of way. She rolls with the punches, and she can take a lot of punishment. Foster, over the years, has given her a lot of practice."

"Where is she now?"

"In her room. In her bed. When I told her about this, she simply climbed in without a word or a tear, and there she lies, looking at the ceiling."

"I wonder if she feels up to talking to me?"

"Probably. She wouldn't take a sedative, although I tried to give her one. In my opinion, she's lying in there waiting for you."

"In that case, I won't keep her waiting any longer."

"I'd prefer to go along with you, if you don't mind. Just in the event I'm needed."

"Fair enough." Marcus diverted his attention to Fuller, standing apart. "Take over here, Fuller. The

crew should be along any minute. Also the medical examiner. Make them welcome."

He walked between Fuller and the doctor and out of the room. The doctor followed.

Hattie Frontenac was in bed, but she was no longer lying on her back looking at the ceiling. She was sitting erect, braced against the headboard with pillows at her back. Her hair, soft and dark and dusted with gray, had been brushed and gathered in a bun behind. Color glowed faintly under the translucent skin of her face. Her eyes were bright and dry. Beneath and beyond the depletions of age, Marcus detected the lingering traces of exceptional beauty.

Dr. Clement, passing Marcus, went to the bed and leaned over her with a display of tenderness in excess of the routine sympathetic bedside manner, passing one hand gently over her smooth hair. "How are you feeling, Hattie?" he said.

"Very well, Tom." She smiled briefly and, raising a thin hand, still strong and steady, laid it lightly against his cheek, as if it were he, in her time of loss, who needed the understanding and the help. "You mustn't worry about me."

The doctor straightened and turned to Marcus. His voice sounded suddenly gruff, almost angry. "I've brought Joseph Marcus to see you. He has the title of lieutenant, I believe. For some perverse reason, he has chosen to become a policeman. My fault entirely. I brought him into the world and saw him through whooping cough, mumps, measles, chicken pox and all the other nasty diseases that he insisted on having. As I said, he was perverse. He wants to talk with you, if you feel up to it."

"Yes. Of course. Draw up a chair and sit down, Lieutenant. I've been expecting you."

Marcus found a straight chair and drew it near the bed. Dr. Clement wandered to a window and stood looking out. Marcus sat down and hung his hat on his knee.

"I'm sorry that I must disturb you," he said. "It's my misfortune, it seems, to be forever intruding."

"Don't be sorry, Lieutenant." She folded her strong hands above the silk bedspread and stared at them with a strange effect of serenity. "If you are referring to the death of my son, as you surely are, there is nothing to be sorry about. He is dead, and I feel no grief. He should have died long ago."

"Perhaps. That's one way of looking at it. It might be argued, at least, that he should have been allowed to die in his own way and his own time."

"Be that as it may, he is dead. We must accept death when it comes, in whatever way."

"You're extraordinarily calm about this, Mrs. Frontenac. Forgive me, but I am tempted to say indifferent. Surely you had some love for your son. Mothers usually do."

"Once. Once I loved him above all others, but that was long ago. One cannot sustain for a lifetime her love for a degenerate."

"That bad? Why, in that case, may I ask, was he allowed to live on in your home?"

"I felt a commitment. No matter. It was something entirely personal. He was, in a way, retribution. One must bear one's cross, Lieutenant."

"Quite so. Your son came home, I understand, sometime this morning after being out all night. Is that true?" Marcus wanted to know.

"That's true. But not unusual. He was often gone for days and nights on end."

"Was he dependent on you?"

"Not at all. His father, when he died, left him quite a large inheritance."

"But he continued to live under this roof?"

"Sporadically. His room was always kept for him. I imagine that much of his inheritance has been dissipated by this time."

"Most of your husband's fortune, I suppose, was left to you?"

"This property. Half of everything else."

"The other half divided among your children?"

"Yes. Equally."

"Would you mind telling me what dispostion you have made of your share?"

"Not at all. It will be divided equally between my daughter and my younger son."

"Foster was excluded?"

"Yes. I did not choose to repeat my husband's mistake."

Well, thought Marcus, there goes greed. There goes the possibility of an heir in a white hat killing the heir in the black hat to avoid wasting what will probably be a very large bundle. Good enough. One less motive to confuse the problem.

"About this morning," he said. "What happened when Foster came home?"

"There was a scene, most unpleasant. Adele, his sister, tried to reason with him. He cursed and abused her. I attempted to intervene. He cursed me. Then he came upstairs to his room. I have not seen him since. Now that he is dead, I intend never to see him again."

"Mrs. Frontenac, do you realize that all indications are that your son was killed by someone in this house? Excluding the servants and Dr. Clement, that means by a member of your family."

"Nonsense. No one in my family would have killed Foster, whatever the provocation. He was murdered by the man who visited him in his room shortly after he went there."

"What?" Marcus was startled. "What man?"

"I don't know. I was here in my own room at the time. I heard his footsteps approach from the rear stairs and pass in the hall outside my door. I went to the door and looked out just in time to see him entering Foster's room."

"What did he look like?"

"I can't say. I caught the merest glimpse of him as he passed through the door."

"Was your son often visited by strange men in his room while he was staying here?"

"Not often. It has occurred."

"Did you know any of them?"

"Never. I'm sure that my son's associates were not men that I would care to know, or who would care to know me."

"This man this morning, was he admitted to the house?"

"I don't know. Perhaps one of the servants would."

"Could he have entered without being admitted?"

"Oh, yes. There are four ordinary entrances; the front and back doors, a side door to the terrace, another door on the opposite side of the house that opens on a landing of the basement stairs. There is a short flight leading up from the landing into the kitchen."

"Aren't these doors kept locked?"

"No. At least, not in the daytime. Anyone could enter."

"Do you suppose that your son invited this man, whoever he was, to visit him here?"

"I assume so."

"You are sure, quite sure, that you know none of your son's associates?"

"Quite sure. Possibly you could discover them for yourself. Don't the police have facilities for that sort of thing?"

"We do. It would help if we

could narrow the field. Mrs. Frontenac, your son was addicted to narcotics. You are aware of that. Is it reasonable to suppose that the narcotics were sometimes delivered to him here?"

"I have no knowledge of how such things are accomplished."

Suddenly, at the window, Dr. Clement made again the sick, retching sound that he had made in the other room when Marcus, kneeling beside the body of Foster Frontenac, had discovered puncture marks in his arm. Turning away from the window, his face grown gray, the doctor returned to the bed and took up one of Hattie Frontenac's hands and held it in both of his, chafing it gently, as if it were cold, as it may have been.

"This is nonsense, Hattie," he said, his voice colored again by that strange, incongruous suggestion of anger. "You must not torture yourself so. It is unnecessary. Believe me, it is unnecessary."

She closed her eyes and went limp against the pillows. Her lips moved slightly to shape silent words which Marcus, rising, read.

"Dear Tom," he read. "Dear old Tom."

The doctor replaced her hand gently upon the other in her lap. Turning, he took Marcus by the arm.

"Enough," he said. "She's had enough. Come away, Joseph. Let her rest."

Marcus had thought she was bearing the ordeal remarkably well, but he did not protest. He permitted himself to be led from the room.

In the hall, a few steps from the door, he said, "She is an admirable woman."

"She's proud," Dr. Clement said. "Proud and strong."

"She seems to be very fond of you."

"And I of her. We are old friends. Very old friends. Many years ago I was deeply in love with her. I wanted to marry her, but I was poor at the time, and she married Jake Frontenac instead. A wise choice, perhaps. And yet, she may later have regretted it. No matter now. I remained her friend, as well as her doctor. Her very good friend. It may strike you as significant that I have never married. Anyhow, I will not have her harassed. I understand that you must do what is necessary, but I will not have her harassed. She has suffered enough."

"As you say," said Marcus mildly, "I must do what is necessary."

Proceeding slowly in the hall, they had reached the head of the stairs, where they stopped. From behind the closed door of Foster

Frontenac's room as they passed had come the sounds of movement and mixed voices: the crew at work; the practiced routine in progress; the hounds were out in grim pursuit. Wasn't that, Marcus thought, what Dr. Clement had called him? A hound? To be specific, a bloodhound. Well, perhaps the appellation was just. A bloodhound, perhaps, was what he was. What else had the doctor called him? Perverse, he had called him. Marcus sighed. Sometimes, when he was tired or inflicted, as now, with a nebulous sense of nameless dread, he wondered wistfully what it would now be like if he had decided in the perversity of his youth to become something other than what he was.

"I had better talk with the other members of the family," he said.

"You'll find them somewhere about. Adele, I believe, has gone to her room." Dr. Clement turned half around and pointed in the direction from which they had come. "There's the door. This way a bit and across the hall from Hattie's."

"Thanks."

"The others, Young Jake and Lena, are downstairs. Or were, at least, when last I saw them."

"Lena?"

"Young Jake's wife."

"I see. No one, I'm sure, has mentioned her before."

"I suppose not. She hardly seems, after all, to be involved in any of this. Anyhow, here they are. Help yourself. As for me, if there are no objections, I'll be running along. I have reduced my practice lately, but there are still a few patients who rely on me."

"No objections. You've been most helpful here. I appreciate it."

Dr. Clement went down the stairs, and Marcus, doubling back, went into Foster Frontenac's room. Between the door and the bed, he met the medical examiner, a thin, gray, dyspeptic man, who was just leaving.

"He's all yours, Marcus," he said sourly. "You're welcome to him."

"Thanks. Don't bother to tell me he was strangled. I've already guessed."

"Did you see the marks of the needle?"

"I saw them."

"Mainliner. Poor devil. Death saved him a lot of grief. I suppose you want my guess as to time of death?"

"It's customary."

"Say ten o'clock. That's as close as a guess can come. I'll have the autopsy report for you in the morning. See you later."

The medical examiner went out, carrying his black bag, and Marcus went on to the bed and stood looking down once more at the body

of Foster Frontenac. Poor devil—the words of the medical examiner. Poor devil was right. Poor dead devil. The lids had been drawn over the bulging eyes. The tongue had been tucked in. Even the thick brown hair, previously wildly tousled, had been smoothed down and brushed back off the forehead. The medical examiner liked to leave things tidy.

Marcus turned away and looked for Fuller.

"Fuller," he said, "find the servants. I don't know how many there are. Probably not more than three. I want to know if one of them admitted a strange man to this house this morning just before the murder. Someone asking for Foster Frontenac."

"Right," Fuller said.

Marcus went to the door and out, Fuller trailing. In the hall they diverged, Fuller going to the stairs and down, Marcus to the door of the room of Adele Frontenac, on which he knocked. He was promptly invited in, and in he went. Adele Frontenac had been standing at a window, looking out across a deep back lawn that sloped away to a line of slender poplars. Now she had turned, facing Marcus with the bright light behind her. Dr. Clement had said that she was lovely, and so she was; poised and slender, pale hair

and clear, sun-browned skin, wearing a yellow pull-over sweater and a short brown skirt ending, in the current fashion, inches above the knees. She had the legs for it. Marcus had an instant conviction that he was looking at Hattie Frontenac more than three decades ago.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he said. "My name is Marcus. Lieutenant Joseph Marcus."

"I know. That is, I know you must be from the police. Come in, please, and sit down."

She indicated a chair, and Marcus sat. She, casually, sat on the

edge of the bed. Her short skirt slipped up her thighs, as short skirts will, but she made no gesture of mock modesty to draw it down again. Nowadays, Marcus thought, they never did.

"Miss Frontenac," he said, "I must talk to you about your brother. Foster, I mean."

"An unpleasant topic, surely. However, I suppose it's inevitable."

"I'm afraid so. Under the circumstances."

"Have you talked with Uncle Tom? Dr. Clement, that is."

"I have."

"And Mother?"

"Yes."

"Whatever they said about dear Foster, if it was bad enough, goes double for me. In spades."

"He seems to have incited an extraordinary prejudice in this house."

"Prejudice? I don't think so. Anger. Disgust. Bitterness. Shame. Not prejudice."

"You omitted hatred."

"Did I? Let me correct the record. I won't speak for the others, but as for me, you are right. I hated him."

"Enough to kill him?"

"No. Just enough to be glad he's dead. It's a good thing for the family."

"Are you sure? Let me remind you that he was murdered. For someone in this family, it may be a very bad thing."

There was a pack of cigarettes on the bed where she had previously tossed them. She took a cigarette from the pack. Marcus, rising, supplied a light and sat down again.

"That's absurd," she said.

"Is it? Hatred, Miss Frontenac, is a powerful motive. It is stronger, sometimes, than consanguinity. As a precedent, I refer you to Cain and Abel."

"Hatred of Foster was not confined to this family. Any number of eligible people would have been glad to see him dead. Men and women."

"He was murdered, however, here. In this house. In a room across the hall. Scarcely the most favorable circumstances for an outsider."

"Unless, of course, the circumstances were exploited deliberately to throw suspicion on the family."

A neat point. Marcus had thought of it himself, but he gave her credit, nevertheless. She was not only lovely. She was also, obviously, clever.

"Why would an outsider attempt to throw suspicion on the insiders?"

"To divert it, I should imagine, from the outside."

"That's possible. Your mother

said that your brother sometimes had visitors in his room. Do you support that?"

"Yes."

"Did he have a visitor this morning?"

"Yes."

"Oh? Who?"

"I don't know."

"A man?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you hear or see whoever it was?"

"No."

"Then how do you know there was a visitor?"

"Foster was murdered. He was murdered by no one in this family. Therefore, he was murdered by someone outside it."

"Your syllogism is faulty. The minor premise assumes something not proven."

"You are committed by your job to that position. I'm not."

"Would a visitor have entered the house without ringing and being admitted?"

"This one surely would have."

"Because he knew your brother was here and slipped inside and upstairs with the intent to kill him?"

"Obviously."

"He would have taken a great risk of being seen."

"Perhaps. Still, if he were challenged on the way in, he could simply explain that he was going up to see Foster. It's happened before. If he were challenged going out, he could at least have been gone and away long before it was known what he had done. Anyhow, murder is a risky business, isn't it?"

"It is. Under the best of circumstances."

She stood up abruptly and crushed her cigarette in a tray on her bedside table. Marcus, never the pure aesthete, again admired her legs with tainted emotions.

"We seem to be talking in circles," she said. "I'm sorry. I'd really like to help you if I could."

"No complaints," said Marcus, rising from his chair. "You've been honest. I'm grateful."

"You must have been shocked by what I said about Foster, but I'm not such a monster as I may have sounded. Really I'm not. You must realize there's a limit to what you can accept or excuse or rationalize. Foster was outside the limit. He was born outside it. If only he had been defective in another way, physically deformed or mentally retarded, then I would have loved him, protected and cared for him, and wept for him when he died. So would we all. But he wasn't, and we couldn't. There it is, and you must make the most of it."

"If I must," said Marcus, "I must."

Which was, he thought wryly, an inane remark at best. At the door, he hesitated, looking back. She was already at the window again, slim and lovely and somehow lonely against the bright light. He opened the door and went out.

In the hall below, Marcus paused, listening. Now removed from the activity upstairs, he could discern no sound in all the house. Moving toward the rear, he pushed his way through a swinging door and found himself still in the hall, although it narrowed this side to half its width on the other. It ran straight on, splitting the house, to the back door. To his left, standing slightly ajar, was a door from behind which came a soft whirring sound that he identified, after listening, as the drone of an electric mixer on low speed. He pulled the door open and entered the kitchen. A fat woman with a round, cheerful face the color of coffee was supervising the mixer with a hard rubber scraper in her hand. She was holding the scraper against the inner side of the slowly spinning bowl, forcing its contents, whatever it was, down into the action of the paddles. At the kitchen table, over milk and cake, sat Fuller. Looking as if he had been caught red-handed behind the barn with the girl across the alley, Fuller started to rise. Marcus waved him down again.

"Finish your snack, Fuller. Have you talked to the servants?"

Fuller sank back, glaring at his milk and cake as if they had somehow betrayed him. "I have. There are three of them. The butler who let us in. His name is Hagan. The maid. Her name is Wilma Crookes. The cook—Mrs. Colepepper, this is Lieutenant Marcus."

Mrs. Colepepper flashed her teeth, and Marcus nodded.

"What's to report?" he asked.

"Nothing. Mrs. Colepepper never answers the door. The maid does sometimes, but she hasn't this morning. It's Hagan's job usually, but he hasn't admitted any strange man today. No one but the doctor earlier, you and me later, the crew upstairs."

"And none of them saw anyone inside the house who might have slipped in without ringing?"

"No one saw anyone. But they admit that someone could have sneaked in, especially through the back door. There's a narrow rear stairway that comes down into the hall near the door. There's another door to the stairway, but it's never locked. A person could easily nip in and up the stairs without being seen. As a matter of fact, the servants are certain that Foster some-

times had visitors come in that way. Once he reached the upper hall, the visitor, if he didn't want to be spotted, would only have to wait for the coast to be clear and then move along to Foster's room."

"I see. That must have been the way Foster's visitor did it this morning. Thanks, Fuller. I'm looking for Young Jake. Have you seen him?"

Mrs. Colepepper turned her broad coffee-colored face over a shoulder in Marcus' direction. "Mr. Jake and Mrs. Jake are on the terrace," she said.

Marcus said thanks and went looking for the way. He found it through a large, light room with a sliding glass door leading out onto approximately two square rods of flagstones. There, side by side in bright sling chairs, were Jake and Lena Frontenac. Marcus pushed open the sliding door, pushed it shut again behind him. Young Jake, hearing him, rose to meet him. Lena may have heard, but she did not rise. She stared at Marcus, as he came into view, with an air of indolent indifference.

Marcus introduced himself. "I'm sorry, but I need to have a few words with you," he said.

"Certainly," Young Jake said. He waved an invitation at a third sling chair, but Marcus, having a preference and a choice, pulled a straight metal job away from a round patio table and straddled it backwards. Young Jake reclaimed his own chair, but now he sat erect, his legs spread and his feet planted on the two sides of the sling. He was, Marcus saw, a thin man, less than average height, with sallow skin and fair, fine hair that was making a premature and permanent departure. In the merciless sunlight, his scalp showed through the remaining fine strands. Old Jake, Marcus recalled, had been as bald as a gourd, with nothing left after only forty but a miniskirt of hair clinging precariously over his ears and around the back of his neck.

"I am hoping," said Marcus, "that you can tell me something that will help to clear up this unpleasant business of your brother's murder."

"I'm afraid I must disappoint

you. The possibilities are far too numerous. My brother, Lieutenant, invited murder."

"I know. I believe I've had enough of character analysis. I go on the assumption that the possibilities may be limited by the circumstances. He was murdered in this house. Although access to your brother has been established as feasible, it must nevertheless be considered restricted. Would you mind telling me where you were when your brother was murdered?"

"Are you implying that I may have killed my own brother?"

"I am merely asking where you were. Do you object to telling me?"

"Not at all. When was he murdered, precisely?"

"Precisely, we don't know. Approximately, in the neighborhood of ten o'clock."

"Very well. I was here. On the terrace or strolling on the lawn. When I came downstairs earlier, I heard the voices of Foster and my sister Adele in the dining room. I avoided Foster whenever possible, so I helped myself to coffee in the kitchen and brought it here to the terrace. I've been here, or in the yard, ever since. Lena joined me about eleven, I should say."

"Were you alone until then?"

"Yes."

"Darling," said Lena Frontenac lazily, "you're such a fool."

Young Jake turned his head to look at Lena. So did Marcus. She was lying back in the sling chair with that special kind of indolence peculiar to certain women and all breeds of cats, domestic and wild. Her eyes were half closed and the shadow of a smile was touching her lips. Lena Frontenac, Marcus decided, was a restless woman. Under her indolence, she smoldered. She did not, somehow, fit in this house or with this man. Not, at any rate, without occasional release and relief; now and then a holiday with someone less inhibited. Someone, say, like Foster, and Marcus wondered if she had, indeed, taken such holidays as the chances came to her.

"What do you mean?" Young Jake said.

"Just what I said. You're a fool. Can't you see what you've done? You've placed yourself alone at the time of the murder. Motive and opportunity. Both essentials. If you had said you were in our room with me, I could have given you a neat little alibi. Now, of course, it's too late."

"Incidentally," Marcus said, "it's also too late for you."

"So it is." She looked at Marcus through slitted lids and laughed softly in some deep and wayward delight. "We might have alibied

each other, you mean. But that's all right. I had no motive for killing poor Foster because, you see, I didn't hate him as the others did. He was, I suppose, everything they say he was, but I didn't mind. I found him amusing."

Marcus studied her for a moment, as a specimen. As a specimen, she was interesting; small, slim, dark, seductive; long black hair, smoky eyes, lips at ease between a pout and a smile; every move an inadvertent invitation. How, Marcus wondered, however in this cock-eyed world, did a prim and balding bird like Young Jake Frontenac wind up with something like this on his hands?

"Is it possible," Marcus said, "that we finally have a variation on the theme? Tears for Foster?"

"No." Her shoulders moved in the slightest of shrugs. "No tears for Foster. He was amusing, but he deserved killing."

Marcus sat quietly for a moment, as if suddenly abstracted, staring down at the colored flags, and then he sighed, slapped a knee, and stood up.

"Well, thank you for your help. I've disturbed you long enough." He turned and started across the terrace toward the sliding door, stopped, turned back. "By the way, did either of you happen to see a strange man in the house this morning just before the murder?"

"I wasn't in the house," Young Jake said. "I was here on the terrace or in the yard."

"Before you came out here."

"No. I saw no one. Wouldn't I have told you first thing if I had? After all, it would be most convenient for the rest of us."

"So it would." Marcus shifted his gaze to Lena. "Mrs. Frontenac?"

"I was asleep in my room," she said. "Sometimes I see strange men in my sleep, but not this morning."

A handful, that one. Young Jake's problem. Marcus went on and collected Fuller in the kitchen.

"Time to go, Fuller," he said. "We're finished here. For the time being."

They went out the back way and around to the car under the portico. With Marcus at the wheel, they turned on a concrete apron in front of the garages behind the house and started back the way they had come.

"Bulls and Bears," said Marcus.

Fuller, in spite of himself, repeated his earlier mistake. "What?"

"On the way out, we talked about Bulls and Bears."

"I remember. To no purpose that I could see then. I can't see any now."

"No purpose, Fuller. Except that it's a game, and Old Jake

Frontenac invented it. Maybe a fondness for games runs in the family, Fuller. At any rate, I have a feeling that someone is deliberately playing a game with me now. Murder's a game, Fuller. A deadly kind of Hide-and-Seek, and I'm it. Someone's hiding, and I'm seeking. You must have played Hide-and-Seek when you were a boy, Fuller."

"Sure. Even deprived kids play Hide-and-Seek."

"You must remember, then, that there were times, no matter how hard you looked, when there was someone you couldn't find. Finally you had to call it quits. When you gave up the game at last, there was a little formula that you used to shout until the hider heard and came in: *All-ee all-ee outs in free.*"

"You planning to give up the game already?"

"Not yet. I'm just facing the possibility. You sure the servants were telling the truth about not seeing any stranger in the house this morning?"

"Reasonably. I didn't have them wired to a lie detector, of course."

"He must have slipped in and out unseen, probably the way you suggested. Up and down the rear stairs."

"What makes you so sure there *was* someone?"

"Mrs. Frontenac heard him pass her door in the hall. She looked out just in time to see him disappearing into Foster Frontenac's room. It's a big town in a wide world, Fuller. You could look a long time for a man when you don't know his name or what he looks like or where he came from or where, when he went, he was going."

"You could," said Fuller. "That you could." He worked to keep the sound of satisfaction out of his voice. Fuller was opposed in principle to letting a murderer go free. On the other hand, he was not at all opposed to seeing Marcus come a cropper. It was really rather traumatic. Fuller caught on the horns of Fuller's private dilemma.

Years ago, when he was attracted to such speculations, Marcus had read an essay by Mr. H. G. Wells in which the latter had offered his opinions on life and death and the destiny of Man. These opinions, Mr. Wells had written, were reached by anguished thinking in that loneliest of all times, the deep hours of sleepless nights, when the thread of a man's life wears thinnest and the mysterious mechanism of a man's mind is most attuned to truth.

Marcus himself was given to this practice of nocturnal speculation, and now, abed, staring up into the

dense and immeasurable darkness that separated him from the ceiling, he was submitting to the practice and emulating Mr. Wells. There was, however, a difference. Marcus was not engaged in formulating the articles of a personal credo. His speculation was qualified, his range limited. He was thinking, in brief, about the life and death of Foster Frontenac.

Marcus did not, in these lonely speculations, inhibit his mind by imposing upon it the restrictive rules of evidence. He was not, in the proper sense, trying to gather and organize a body of evidence at all. He was, rather, struggling for insight, the moment of truth, that blinding instant when a man sees something whole and sees it clear. He was not trying, that is, to create a case that would satisfy a prosecutor or convince a jury. He was merely trying to satisfy himself. Therefore, in pursuit of ideas instead of evidence, he untethered his mind, so to speak, and followed it in darkness wherever it led.

Why, he thought, *did Dr. Thomas Clement, when he called headquarters to report the murder of Foster Frontenac, ask specifically for Lieutenant Joseph Marcus?*

Well, after all, it was natural, perhaps. He, Marcus, had known the doctor for as long as he could remember. And the doctor had known him, again Marcus, for longer; since birth. The point was, it was perhaps natural for Dr. Clement to ask specifically for Lieutenant Marcus, having known him long and well, and knowing, besides, that the investigation of murders fell within the province of Marcus' duties.

Why had Dr. Clement carefully given an alibi to Adele Frontenac while all the others went begging?

Perhaps because it was the truth. Or perhaps not. Anyhow, the alibi, such as it was, was not impregnable. Dr. Clement himself had said that the murder might have been committed shortly before he went downstairs and met Adele there.

What is the significance of an ordinary item of clothing when it becomes, in relation to an inadvertent remark, a crude symbol?

Let that one lie. Let it incubate. Symbols in murder, like symbols in literature, are apt to exist only in the imaginations of detectives and critics.

What was the meaning of Dr. Clement's remark to Hattie Frontenac that her information, volunteered to Marcus, was unnecessary?

Surely an odd remark. Or was it? In a murder investigation all information is necessary. It may later

prove irrelevant, but it must be considered in order to prove it so. Hattie's information, moreover, had concerned the mysterious intruder, the stranger who had passed in the hall. Surely vital if anything was. Yet perhaps Dr. Clement had not intended the remark as it sounded. Perhaps it was merely his way of telling Hattie, as her friend and doctor, that it was unnecessary and inadvisable to distress herself further.

Incidentally, why has Dr. Clement's devotion to Hattie been so enduring?

Well, why not? He had been in love with her as a younger man, this by his own confession, and love sometimes endures. It sometimes endures when marriage fails. Besides, Dr. Clement was a rather old-fashioned man who probably clung to the old romantic values. He was just the sort who would remain committed all his life to a woman he had loved and lost in his youth.

What may have happened, if anything, between Lena Frontenac and Foster Frontenac that would have given her cause to kill him?

Possibilities were rampant. Use your imagination and take your choice. You might be wrong, but you might be right. Foster, by reputation, was a bad boy. Lena, by the implication of subtle signs, was a bad girl. Affinity. Lena was more cautious and calculating, of course. She knew the side of her bread the butter was on. But she had said she found Foster amusing. Ten to one, Foster had found ways of amusing her.

Conversely, what may have happened, if anything, between Lena Frontenac and Foster Frontenac that would have given Young Jake Frontenac cause to kill Foster?

Two men and one woman. All in the family. The eternal triangle domesticated. Perhaps that was why Young Jake chose not to rely on Lena for a fake alibi.

How do you explain an apparent deviation from a hereditary tendency?

Nothing gained from getting involved in the old dogfight between heredity and environment. Some things were explained satisfactorily by the latter, others only by the former, and some, of course, were arguable. A mysterious and somehow frightening thing, heredity, bonding through genes the generations. Faults of the fathers passed to the sons. Faults of the mothers, too, for that matter. Passed to the sons and daughters. There's the significant point. Who passes what to whom?

Moreover, how do you explain a deviation from a long tradition of families?

Well, traditions are not physical or biological laws. Like all rules, they are made to be broken. If Old Jake and Hattie Frontenac wanted to break tradition, or at least to bend it, they surely had their own reason, and it was nobody's business but theirs. Still, it would be interesting, if not instructive, to know the reason.

Oh, yes! Did Dr. Clement have a remarkable memory for remote details, or did he not?

He was, obviously, a sharp old boy, in full command of his faculties. If his memory was retentive, so was the memory of Joseph Marcus. Some people are like that. An incredible mental capacity for trivia. No discrimination. Cluttered storehouses of the important and the unimportant. Nevertheless, when one remembered a particular bit of trivia, there was generally a particular reason for remembering it. Again, it would be interesting to know the reason, even if the reason was another bit of trivia.

Having thus in the sleepless night posed to himself ten questions, Marcus lay precariously for a moment on the brink of dread, and then, deliberately, he posed the eleventh and the last. He did not answer it.

The next morning, having endured the night, he was early at his desk. He busied himself with odds and ends. Fuller was in and out, doing this and that. At nine o'clock, Marcus consulted the telephone directory. He lingered over a name, caught and held by the incidental revelation of something long forgotten, if ever known. He dialed the number after the name and talked briefly to the woman at the other end of the line. He hung up and put on his hat and left. He did not collect Bobo Fuller on his way. What Fuller didn't know, or couldn't guess, would never hurt him.

Under the portico of the stone and stucco house in the suburbs, he stopped and got out. He was admitted to the house by the same manservant, Hagan, who had admitted him yesterday. He was told by Hagan that the elder Mrs. Frontenac was still resting abed in her room, although awake. He was not sure she would wish to be disturbed, but Marcus felt, under the circumstances, that she would not object. He went up and knocked and was invited in. As before, she was sitting braced against the headboard with pillows at her back, and Marcus drew up the straight chair and sat down.

"Forgive me for intruding so early," he said.

"Don't apologize, Lieutenant. You have your duty, of course."

"Unfortunately. Mrs. Frontenac,

I didn't sleep at all last night."

"Nor did I. Insomnia is a dreadful affliction. The hours of the night are long and lonely."

"I spent them asking myself questions, Mrs. Frontenac. One of the questions I didn't answer. I hope you will answer it for me this morning."

"What is the question, Lieutenant?"

"It's this: *Would a mother who had given birth to a son who was, she felt, hopelessly lost to honor and decency and happiness, a son who had destroyed his father and was bringing shame to his family and would surely in the end destroy himself—would this mother, I ask, destroy this son?"*

Hattie Frontenac closed her eyes. She folded her hands above the silk bedspread. Her face was serene, remarkably at peace, as if it were a great relief that the question had been asked at last.

"A kind of euthanasia?" she said.

"If you please."

"It is a terrible responsibility, Lieutenant, being the mother of a wicked son."

"It is also a terrible responsibility to take a life."

"Yes. You are right." She opened her eyes, and her eyes were untroubled. "One assumes such a responsibility, if one assumes it at all, very slowly over a long period of time. Perhaps too long a time."

"You haven't yet answered my question."

"How can I answer it? It's far too general. Some mothers might, others would not. If you want a specific answer, Lieutenant, you must ask your question specifically."

"Very well. Did you strangle your son?"

"I am an old woman. Sixty years old. Do you think I still have the strength to do such a thing?"

"He was exhausted. In a deep sleep. You could have done it. Anyone in this house could have done it. Everyone had the opportunity. Everyone, no doubt, had a motive."

"In that case, why select me in particular?"

"As you said, it's a terrible responsibility to be the mother of a wicked son. It carries with it, I should imagine, an intolerable sense of guilt, however irrational. In a way, perhaps, taking the life that should never have been given would be the expiation of a sin."

"You have a theological turn of mind, Lieutenant."

"I hope not. I remind you again that you haven't answered my question."

"I think that I won't. You must answer it for yourself."

"Will you at least hear my

own answer, then, my dear lady?"

"If I must."

"All right. The answer is no. You did not strangle your son. *He was strangled by his father.*"

Her eyes widened, their strange serenity disturbed for an instant by the sudden intrusion of some secret held behind them. She bowed her head and stared at her hands.

"Are you telling a ghost story, Lieutenant? His father is dead."

"If I'm wrong, I'm sorry, but I believe that he is not. Anyhow, ghost stories can be interesting. May I tell you mine?"

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

"Good. As I told you, I lay awake last night and asked myself questions. Some of them were extraneous, only to be considered in order to be discarded. We won't bother with them. The others, I think, were relevant to our problem. In the first place, Dr. Clement asked for my personal attention to the case. Why? Maybe because he had known me for many years, and because he thought he could count on my sympathy and perhaps, in the end, on my vulnerability. At any rate, I had the feeling from the beginning that Dr. Clement was leading me, playing a grim kind of game. That he was, in effect, feeding me vague clues that, when added up, would reveal the murderer. Your son, for instance, was strangled with his own necktie. Dr. Clement, at the bedside, made a strange and rather brutal remark. He said that he, who delivered your son, should have strangled him at birth with his umbilical cord. Could the necktie have been used, thirty years later, as a crude symbol of the cord? Was he pointing so early as that to himself as the murderer? Or was he pointing to someone else who would later be revealed? I wondered. Something else he said made me wonder more. He said that Foster Frontenac was born on the sixth of August, 1939. Just like that, right off the top of his head and the tip of his tongue. Why should a doctor who has delivered thousands of babies remember the precise birthdate of one of them unless he had a strong personal reason for doing so?

"Well, let that lie a moment. Later, in here, he continued to say things that struck me as strange. He told you, for example, that it was unnecessary for you to tell me certain things that I considered vital. Do you remember just when he made that remark? It was just after you told me about the strange visitor in the hall. Why? Because he knew, as you did, that there was no visitor, and because he knew, in the development of this case as

he had planned it and was directing it, that there was nothing whatever to be gained from digressions and deceptions. He had loved you years ago. He was still completely devoted to you. Could you possibly think that he would permit you or any member of your family to suffer more than was absolutely necessary at the hands of the police? No. Not even when the police were represented by someone particularly chosen. Someone, as I said, who could be counted on for compassion and maybe, in the end, even for a kind of qualified professional treason.

"But let's get on with it. I'm about finished. How do you explain, I asked myself last night, an apparent deviation from a hereditary tendency? Your son was a scoundrel in an honorable family, of course, but I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about his hair. Your second son, although a year younger than the first, is already going bald, like his father. Fortunately, Foster resembled you, his mother, in facial features, but the character of his hair, which should have derived from his father, was still thick. Like, for example, Dr. Clement's. But maybe I make too much of the matter. I am not a geneticist. There was another deviation, however, that drew my attention. It is the practice in most families, when a son is given his father's name, to give it to the first son born. In this family, it was given to the second. I wondered why. This morning I dialed the home telephone number of Dr. Clement. I had to consult the directory before dialing. When I did so, I discovered something I had forgotten. Perhaps I had never known it. Dr. Clement's middle initial was F. Dr. Thomas F. Clement. F for Foster, Mrs. Frontenac?"

Hattie Frontenac had closed her eyes again, listening. Marcus, watching her, saw her lips move to shape again in silence the name they had shaped yesterday: *Tom. Dear Tom.* She opened her eyes and looked at Marcus, and in the eyes were old pain and lasting regret.

"You are a clever man, Lieutenant. Alone with you in this room, I tell you so. But you can have no evidence to support what you have told me. I'm afraid less intuitive people would think it fantasy."

"That may be. But we know better, you and I, don't we? We know that Foster Frontenac was killed by the man who was driven to a fury of despair by the knowledge that he had given to the woman he loved a son who destroyed her husband and was destroying her and would surely, in time, destroy himself. I believe, in this room

yesterday, you called it retribution. That's as may be. Dr. Clement could not expiate his transgression, but he could at least remove the burden of his transgression from others. He could eliminate the mutant he had created. You have understood this all along, of course. He went directly from this room to Foster's yesterday morning. Finding him asleep, he strangled him with what may have been a symbol of the living tissue that had sustained his life in the beginning. Then he went downstairs and talked with Adele, your daughter but not his, before coming back up to discover the body."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"No. Not quite. At home last night, he finished what he had to do as he had planned to finish it. He died in his sleep, quietly. Just before coming here, I talked with his housekeeper, who found his body. Well, he was getting old. He had worked hard. His heart, I suppose, simply quit. Small wonder."

Her eyes were closed again. A pair of tears forced their way from under her lids and crept down her cheeks. She made no sound and did not move. Marcus stood up.

"You had better rest now," he said. "As for me, I've got work to do. I've got to get after that man you heard in the hall. Not that it will do much good, I suspect. How can you find a man when you don't know anything about him? He came, and he went, and I guess he's gone. I'd better go, too."

Quietly, he went, stuck at last with an open case. Fuller would be delighted. He hoped Fuller wouldn't rub it in.

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