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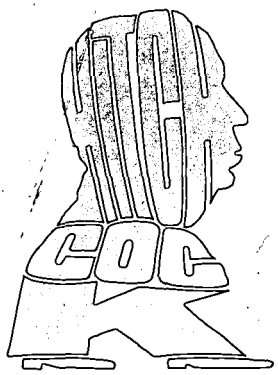
HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the MASTER OF SUSPENSE



October 1969

Dear Reader:

Once again it is kickoff time at Hitchcock Stadium, and here come the Suspenseville Professionals. We have Frank Sisk, team captain, at center, Max Van Derveer and Charles W. Runyon guarding their secrets, Jack Ritchie and Stephen Wasylyk tackling problems, and Edward D. Hoch and Michael Collins ending lives.

In the backfield, there is Clark Howard calling singular plays at quarterback, quick Carroll Mayers at left half, swift Syd Hoff at right half and William Brittain doing the job at fullback.

Leading cheers for the distaff are Liane Keen, Nedra Tyre and Lee Chisholm.

Are your blankets in place to ward off the chills? A friendly libation at hand? Then tackle this mysterious and suspenseful lineup, with their artful blocking and passing. There is more than one kick forthcoming.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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Whoever has drunk of life has drunk of grief.

JACK B. DAGGETT'S Lament

By Frank Sisk

A FINE rain followed me down the mountain roads and became a mist in the hills below. By late afternoon the haze on the river that ran with Route 10 began to shed dense clots of fog and these came drifting like tired ghosts across the windshield. Soon I was traveling on low beam at ten miles an hour. This speed on certain curves was reckless and I thought I should stop and rest a while.

Finally a sign shimmered past with the message that I had entered Wormwood. At least that's what I thought it said. Since then I have never been able to find Wormwood on a map of New Hampshire.

In the foggy dusk the town appeared to be made for lumber and pulp, curving as it did around the paper mill. The main street had several bends in it, forced by the river, and the secondary streets, which were scraggly lanes between

tired clapboard structures, led nowhere but down. For a sojourn on a gray twilight this was the last town on target.

Still, I stopped there outside a place with steamy windows called Dan's Village Grill. In the dank dusk it seemed warm. It made me suddenly thirsty for beer and people.

Inside, it breathed true to form: the smell of stale tobacco with the fresh evidence rising around black-strung bursts of light—cigarette, pipe, cigar—and the ceaseless adjuncts of talk, loud, soft, self-hushing, forever confused.

The dozen men who stood at the dirty bar wore the high-laced boots of the lumberjack. They mumbled their strange litanies but never raised their eyes.

Behind the bar stood a short solid man with crinkly red hair going gray. This man was Dan. A placard set in a beer-maker's frame stated *On Duty—Dan*. The bill of fare was there too.

Burger & Beans	*50¢*
Dogs & Beans	*50¢*
Beef Stew	*50¢*
Cold Grinders	*40¢*

I walked up to the bar and said to Dan, "What do you make your grinders out of?"

"Provolone, salami, peppers, oil, on a torpedo roll."

"I'll have one," I said. "What's on draft? What do you recommend?"

"Ale and lager," Dan said, taking an interest. "The brand don't mean much."

"Make it ale."

The grinder came wrapped in butcher's paper, the ale in a twelve-ounce bell of a glass. Dan set the order beside a strait-necked bottle half full of a liquid the color of old tobacco juice. I recognized it as mulligan and sentimentally shook a few squirts into the ale's white head.

"Kind of hot if you ain't used to it," Dan said.

"It always was," I said. "Haven't seen it around in years."

"Hotter than the hinges of hell," said a deep doomsday voice somewhere to the left. "A foretaste of the future."

"Pipe down, Jack," Dan said without bothering to turn his head.

"What's the total?" I asked.

"Sixty-five."

I dropped a ten-dollar bill on the bar.

Dan regarded it coldly. "Smallest you got?"

I checked my wallet. "Afraid so. Buy the boys a round."

"No need, mister. I got the change."

"Speak for yourself, Daniel," the doomsday voice said.

"Pipe down, Jack," Dan said again, then banged the cash regis-

ter. "Remember what I told you."

The voice, now a little closer, said, "These people don't have any understanding of common courtesy."

I didn't look in its direction. It was the type of voice that had the rum-dum, stilted intonation of the familiar barroom bore. I kept my eyes on Dan as he slapped down my change.

"All right, Jack," Dan said. "I'm warning ya."

"I am simply accepting this gentleman's gracious offer," the voice said.

"Do me a favor, Dan," I said. "Give the man whatever he wants. I'm superstitious that way." Then I took the grinder and the ale to a square table near one of the steamy windows. The change from the ten-spot was still on the bar to cover the action.

"I'll have an ale too," the stagey voice was saying. "With a double shot of that bourbon."

"Top shelf when it's free," Dan said heavily.

I placed the glass of ale on a cardboard coaster that advertised a brand of beer and the grinder on a rectangle of blue plastic that featured in map form the tourist attractions of the White Mountains. I looked out the window at what was suddenly night, wet, fuzzy and overlaid with a reflection of the interior within certain limits: the dim figures of the drinkers hunched over the bar in a sudden silence.

I turned from the reflection to the reality. One man stood apart from the others, in more ways than one. Among the mute group of stocky, stubbled, hard-handed lumberjacks, this man was as scrawny as a scarecrow and dressed in much the same random manner. He wore an unseasonable straw skimmer which gave grubby indication of having often been skimmed. He wore a soiled pink shirt, a blue string tie, a light brown suit of sagging tweed, and scuffed yellow shoes with thick crepe soles. In one hand he carried a black book which he now had to shift to his left armpit before taking possession of the ale and the bourbon. He then turned in my direction and lifted the double shot in salute.

I hoisted my ale in acknowledgment.

With a solemn wink that excluded all except us from some subtle jest, the man called Jack tossed the bourbon against his palate and chased it closely with half the ale. Then, from an habitual reflex perhaps, he reached for my change on the bar.

"Wanna lose an arm?" Dan asked.

"I merely wish to deliver the gentleman the pelf in person." Jack placed the black book on the bar and raised his right hand. "Upon the Word."

Dan's other customers silently watched this performance with ludicrous wonderment as if they had seen it before but still found it hard to believe. At that moment the mulligan expressed itself by igniting the roof of my mouth and making my eyes water.

"I'm pretty sick of you around here," Dan was saying.

"It's okay, Dan," I said, finally catching my breath. "Send the man over with another round. No mulligan in mine this time."

"I hope you know what you're doing, mister," Dan said, complying with reluctance.

"No harm, I hope."

"It's your funeral," Dan said.

"I beg to differ," Jack said. "It's *my* funeral."

"You're dead and don't know it," Dan said, setting the new drinks on a tray on the bar and picking up some money.

"In a way, yes. In a way you'll never know, Daniel. But today being the third of October, I'm destined to be declared dead legally. As I've told you before."

Dan dropped all my change on the tray. "Okay, Jack. Don't fall down."

Jack made it to the table. The others followed his progress as if he were a tightrope act, but once the drinks were safely in place they drew away and back into their motley chatter.

"Sit down," I said to Jack. "If you wish."

"A pleasure, sir." He actually *doffed* the skimmer; his pepper-and-salt hair was parted zigzag not quite in the middle. "My name is Jack B. Daggett."

"Call me Al," I said, and we shook hands. "Are you native to these parts, Jack?"

Sitting opposite me, he silently considered either the question or the drinks for several seconds, then said, "I was born here, sir, if that's what you mean. But I'm not native. I fled from these dreary parts many years ago and kept running like a man on a treadmill as long as there was an incentive, a hope. But once my last great interest in life died, may she rest in eternal peace, I came to an abrupt halt myself, and soon the treadmill carried me inevitably backward and downward until at last I arrived here once again, at the end of my rope's beginnings."

I looked at Jack B. Daggett with the sudden realization that he was neither village idiot nor village clown. Pariah may have been a better description, but he was not that

either. While I tried to determine just what kind of a man he was, I asked, "Have you been back here long?"

"Exactly five days over two months."

"Not long."

"Not long by your standards, sir. By mine, an eternity."

"You kind of hate the place."

"I abhor it with heart and soul."

"None of my business, Jack, but were you away very long?"

"Twenty brief years, sir. And I want you to make it your business. In all this benighted area nobody has the faculty of understanding. Nobody minds my business even though I howl like a wolf in the wilderness."

"There must be somebody left who remembers you," I said in hopes of keeping him calm. "Even among those old-timers at the bar."

Jack B. Daggett's dry lips parted in a wide dry smile. The teeth were surprisingly straight and white. "Those murky integuments of hops and hash."

"No contemporaries present then?"

"They're all contemporaries," Jack B. Daggett said. "If a man with a mind, a man with a heart, a man of imagination can be said to be contemporaneous with a parcel of insular nitwits. I went to high school, or what passes for one hereabouts, with Daniel, our genial host. And I am about as contemporary with him, let us say, as William Shakespeare was with a chimney sweep."

I glanced in Dan's direction. He was intent on drawing a beer. He looked somehow at least a decade younger than Jack B. Daggett. Or maybe he just looked more durable, a man with a lot more time to go.

"How old are you, Jack?" I asked. "Unless you'd rather not say."

"Forty today, sir, this third day of October." Compulsively he reached for the tot of bourbon and downed it. "Forty."

"Many happy returns," I said.

"When life begins. Or ends." He picked up the goblet of ale and gave me that jestful wink again. "Forty. A scintilla of life among a trillion billion scintillae." He drank deep.

"Were you ever on the stage, Jack?"

Again that white-toothed smile so incongruent with the seared depredations marking the rest of his face. "You're a man of singular perspicacity."

"You left here then to pursue a theatrical career?"

"Not quite," Jack B. Daggett said, eyes sad on the empty glasses. "I left here on a chemistry scholar-

ship for N. Y. U. I was a boy wizard with a test tube and Bunsen burner. Ask Daniel."

I looked out the window. A dense wraith of fog pressed against it. Travel would be dangerous. I looked across the room and caught Dan's apathetic eye and made a circular movement with a forefinger. I turned back to Jack B. Daggett and began to say something about chemistry but he was peering

at the window now or beyond it with an expression in his bloodshot eyes as lonely as any I've ever seen. He was still like that a minute later when Dan came with the drinks and that black book.

"You left your Bible on the bar again, Jack," Dan said.

The faraway look wavered. The eyes regarded a middle distance of nowhere for a moment, then raised upward to see Dan. "I like to see you carrying the Word, Daniel," Jack B. Daggett said, "even if it is only from tap to table."

"I don't know what old Sam Daggett ever did to deserve you," Dan said.

"Jack was telling me you went to high school together," I said amelioratingly with a five-spot between two fingers.

"He tells the truth, sometimes."

"Something about a chemistry scholarship."

"He coulda gone places," Dan said, making change.

"I did go places, you redheaded reprobate," Jack B. Daggett said.

"Pot calling the kettle black," Dan said. "If he gets too pesky, give me the high sign." Then he left.

"There goes the epitome of myopic vision, sir," Jack B. Daggett said. "Daniel the spigotmaster. In all his forty years he's never been beyond a twelve-mile radius of this odorous saloon, and yet he has the effrontery to patronize a man who has soared over the farthest horizons and even beyond the pale of the routine human condition, into passions unimaginable, of purest lust, or purest love and unto that deed most foul—*murder*."

"How about a part of this grinder?" I asked, unwrapping it.

"A part of what?" His glazed eyes finally focused. "No, sir. But I'm much obliged."

"Call me Al, please."

"If you prefer."

I was beginning to think that Jack B. Daggett's journeys were mostly fictitious, bounded in reality on the north by White River Junction and on the south by Turners Falls, with literary excursions to the outskirts of the Bard of Avon and the Good Book. "Tell me about your trip to New York," I suggested. "I'm always interested in first impressions of that place. You must have been quite young at the time."

"I was twenty, Al," Jack B. Daggett said, a faint smile of pleasant reminiscence touching his ravaged face. "By urban standards I should have been embarking on a college career a year or two earlier. Here in the hills, however, we often miss a season of schooling to sow and to reap, to stuff the silo and stock the loft. We are husbandmen all

long before we are husbands. And so I was twenty when I first arrived in Grand Central, scholarship in hand."

I took a bite of the grinder.

"My first impressions," he continued, "were similar to those of thousands of callow lads, all of which have been recorded at tedious length, and hence, Al, with your kind permission, I'll skip them. In fact, I'll skip the following fifteen or so years of my life, which were at best humdrum, and take you directly to that fateful evening when, aged thirty-eight, I met a woman named Marion in the rehearsal rooms of the Cothurnus Club, a group of semiprofessionals who had done, were doing and planning to do off-Broadway shows."

I swallowed a nice blend of provolone, salami, peppers, oil and bread and said, "What happened to chemistry?"

"It was there in my background, Al. By day I toiled in a pharmaceutical house which specialized in aspirin variants. By night I sought surcease from a vast inner boredom. Frankly, chemistry had begun to pall before I completed the first year of college. During the subsequent period I tried to alleviate this vocational ennui—as do not all of us?—through avocational pursuits. I bowled for a time. I swam weekly at the YMCA. I watched the Yankees play ball. I went to the Village and tried the grass. I sat in Central Park late at night and nothing happened. I even visited the Statue of Liberty and other girls not much less imperturbable. And finally I took up the theater, first as sort of a sponge boy for the demented character who had founded the Cothurnus Club, then as assistant director, finally as bit player with a flair for roles priestly, monkish or ministerial.

"In truth, it was a small part I played as an apostolic delegate to Upper Volta, in a one-acter called *Red, White and Black*, which first drew me to the attention of the aforementioned Marion. At the time, of course, I wasn't aware of this. I thought that Marion was attracted to me for myself alone, and I was gratified. She was a financial sponsor of the Cothurnus Club; to call her an angel would be an offense against heaven. As a financial sponsor she represented the leisured wealthy, or so I erroneously assumed. As a consequence of this and several other misapprehensions, I easily overlooked the fact that Marion was a few years my senior, and I took to her as a hound takes to a hot scent.

"She was not particularly hard to take. She had maintained her

body as one would maintain a fine precision instrument, and in the following few weeks she demonstrated it with an expertise beyond my wildest dreams. Omnibus hoc vitium est, as Julius Caesar used to say.

"Aside from her private innovations, Marion was a great one for group therapy. I daresay she was pioneer of such current happenings as the Love-in, the Jump-in, the Whirl-in, the Peep-in and the Stand-in. In all of these peculiar orgies I was faithfully (if that is the word) at her side. And I was beginning to think that life was just one grand ball after another.

"It was during the sixth week of my tenure that I discovered Marion was not all she appeared to be. She was not rich. She was not interested in me solely for my robust charm. And she had a hard angle in mind. Also, by this time, the aspirin company had dismissed me for dereliction."

Jack B. Daggett paused. The recitation had gradually transformed him from a barroom sot to a raconteur of distinction. He moistened his lips with bourbon. He took a meager sip of ale.

I felt sure that he had told this tale many times before. This fact was implicit in the command of rhythms, figures, language. Yet the very polish of it, true or false, compelled me to want more. "This woman had an angle, you say?" I asked.

Jack B. Daggett nodded slowly, remembering. If nothing else, he was a pretty good actor. "An angle in the form of a niece," he said. "O blessed damosel."

At the bar they were arguing the relative merits of beaver traps. Outside the window the muffled evening looked in.

"Her name was Patricia," Jack B. Daggett said reverentially. "Patricia. Her maiden name shall enjoy the repose of anonymity. Patricia. She was only twenty-two when Marion first introduced her name into one of our colloquies. My sudden lack of employment was under advisement, with Marion asking, What do you plan to do, lover? And I said, Well, find another job unless you have a better idea, cara mia. And Marion said, How would you like to marry a few million dollars, Jack? And I said, Boy oh boy, milady, is this a genuine proposal? And she said, Indirectly. And I said, How much more indirect can you get? And she said, Well, I'm not speaking for myself. And I said, Then pray, madam, for whom are you speaking? And she said, I'm speaking for a poor little rich girl named Patricia.

"Patricia, as I soon learned, was an orphan. She had been an or-

phan since the age of twelve when her parents were killed in an automobile accident. Her father was Marion's brother. He had made a fast fortune in molded plastics. Marion was Patricia's only living relative. By the terms of the will this rapacious aunt was made the child's guardian. A conservative trust company was designated as executor of the considerable estate, the simple interest of which gave one room for expansive living, as witness Marion's way with me and many predecessors.

"But the wretched Aunt Marion had finally reached the stage where she would no longer settle for just ample subsistence, free-loading style; she wanted somehow to gain complete control of the millions held in trust. In me she recognized, from the moment apparently that I appeared in the raiment of apostolic delegate at the Cothurnus Club, a positive means to her diabolical ends.

"It developed, Al, that the will contained a clause or two that stipulated in effect that the principal of the estate should not revert to the heir until she had attained the age of thirty or had contracted a marriage approved by her guardian.

"If death to said heir supervened before either of these events should occur, then the estate was to be distributed among a number of charitable and religious institutions. Patricia's parents had received the divine message with their first million. Moreover, they had provided the opportunity of similar enlightenment for their daughter. Since their death, and until only recently, her education had been supervised behind hallowed walls of ivy by sweet-faced ladies in white coifs and black garments. Even now, at twenty-two, Patricia was not free of ecclesiastical bonds in her own house, thanks to Aunt Marion. The butler was a devout bass in the church choir. The housekeeper made altar cloths in her spare time. The gardener was a seminary reject who still muttered matins and vespers over the hollyhocks.

"This was the version of Patricia I received from Mistress Marion.

"What makes you think such a sheltered child would look at the likes of me? I asked the devious dame. And she said, Because you can look holier than Moses with a little effort and the right touch of makeup. Besides, you're exactly the right age to be half ideal lover-image and half gentle father-image. She needs you now, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. On top of that, she is not the sharpest girl in the world. In fact, the steady beam of sacerdotal light has seemed to soften her brain a bit. Many

thanks, I said. I wish you were my aunt and moral guardian.

"Now for the jackpot question. In the unlikelihood that my troth were acceptively plighted, how would the mischievous Marion benefit? The answer was devilishly simple. She would benefit *through* me as her niece's devoted husband and master. With the estate no longer under the executor's control, but nominally under Patricia's, I could prey on it at whim and divvy the plunder with the swinging aunt. I asked one more question.

"How could Auntie be so confident of backseat control once I was, so to speak, behind the wheel? The vicious wench gave me her reply in the form of some very prolonged twists of the utmost lubricity. I thought then that this was her major weapon. But she had another, more carefully concealed, as I was to learn later."

Jack B. Daggett again took time out to wet his lips with a few drops of bourbon and loosen his throat with a swallow of ale. At the bar the chatter centered around the best method of skinning a skunk. I masticated the remains of my grinder.

"Well, Al," Jack B. Daggett said, while actually seeming to address somebody perched behind and above my left shoulder, "Marion finally took me to Connecticut for a weekend. I was introduced as a former medical missionary, not long back from Cambodia, who was mightily interested in isolating protozoa as parasites. In my suitcase I carried at least twenty pounds of scientific tracts and religious pamphlets, plus a volume of American and English verse selected for their glucose content. I was fully prepared to give Patricia a sentimental snow job, but I was wholly unprepared for what she was to do, in innocence and honesty, to me.

"The wonderful look of her was the first body blow. Blonde fragility of a most vulnerable essence: it was in the clear blue of her doelike eyes, in the virginal pout of her soft lips; it was in the delicate cleft of her chin, in the slender grace of her neck, in the unaffected budding of her breasts, in the quiet dignity of her mien. She was quite unworldly, yet absolutely fascinating. I'd sooner have harmed a hummingbird than her.

"She was beyond the reach of routine courting. Marion had said this and Marion was right. Therefore I courted her with croquet and butterfly nets and conch shells. In a pergola I read her stanzas from anybody named Rossetti or Browning. We dipped into the least sanguinary passages of the

Bible together as often as we entered the swimming pool. On Sundays I escorted her to church and after services I told her how parasitic protozoa were plaguing the children of Cambodia. A tear came to her dear eye.

"Weekend followed Arcadian weekend, month piled upon felicitous month, and never once did I touch the trusting Patricia except with a tender caress, chaste in thought as well as deed. To be sure, my grosser appetites were filled by Marion who, hovering in the background as her niece's moral mentor, flung aside the hypocritical garments in the dead of night and visited me in the guest room. Looking back now, I realize that Marion's ministrations permitted me to sublimate my affection for Patricia until I was finally able to look myself in the mirror and say I'd found true love.

"The utter incredibility of it still hits me hard today. That I—a faulted farmboy, a disabused chemist, an ex-Yankee fan, Marion's mandrelled minion—that I should at last achieve the status of a true lover, a pure and platonic lover, borders on the miraculous. But more miraculous yet, Patricia requited my love, measure for measure. We were married in a quiet ceremony in the sacristy of Saint Bartholomew Church by a Father Shumway. Aunt Marion, dressed as impeccably as a vestal virgin, acted as maid of honor, with the family butler, James by name, serving as best man. The gardener and the housekeeper were present also in the capacity of witnesses."

A bell rang, then a succession of them. With an effort I glanced away from the almost beatific expression on Jack B. Daggett's face; two men were playing the pinball machine. I quickly came back to Jack. He continued:

"The honeymoon had been arranged by the foresighted Marion even before I popped the question —twenty-one days aboard a float-

ing hotel that dawdled from port to port through the Bahamas and the Caribbean. The rationale was typically Machiavellian, typically Marion: keep the pigeon away from its roost until it had been thoroughly reeducated. Three weeks at sea, where never a trust officer nor a prying prelate could submit a judicious suggestion, was just the ticket. Marion accompanied us on the voyage, ex voto, as it were, having reserved a cabin off the same passageway as our suite.

"At this juncture I should like to remark that as yet I had given Marion no inkling of my true feelings toward Patricia. As far as Auntie knew, I was still in the black conspiracy up to the elbows, and we were only three days out of New York when she produced a document that, upon being signed by my bride, would effect the transfer of a thousand shares of petroleum stock from the estate to me. Tell the dear child, said the ineffable Marion, that the kids of Cambodia are screaming for ice cream.

"The meretricious act was suddenly beyond my grasp. My conscience, so recently discovered, would not allow me to move in channels at crosscurrents to Patricia's tranquillity. The morning we were to put into Martinique, Marion cornered me on deck and said, Have you got that paper signed yet, duckie? And I said, Not quite. And she said, Well, get it *quite* signed today and bring it to my room tonight after you've tucked in the bride.

"Needless to say, I presented myself empty-handed at Marion's room after midnight. She was displeased and perhaps beginning to grow suspicious. At any rate, she sent me packing back to the bridal suite with orders to get cracking—or else.

"The showdown came on the homeward leg a day out of Jamaica. Patricia was down with a mild case of seasickness. At her request I left her alone with a small book of inspirational prayer and wandered into the bar. Marion was there, dark-browed, over a bloody mary. You lousy two-timing weasel, she whispered as I sat beside her; I'm finally wide awake. I gave her congratulations. And she said, I always counted on a doublecross, jocko—always—and planned accordingly. The bartender drifted over and I ordered just what I now have in front of me—bonded bourbon—and said, Listen, my dear. Will you listen to me for a minute? Something's happened, Marion. I'm a different man. And she said, You're the same man, Jack, I have the pictures to prove it. And I said, What pictures? And she opened

her purse and took out an envelope containing a packet of snapshots. She showed me one of them. One of them was enough. It was so

candid that I didn't even want the bartender to see it and hastily turned it face down as he served my drink.

"How does that grab you? Marion asked. All I could say was, Aaah. And that's only for starters, Marion said; a couple of the close-ups push the indelicate to the threshold of obscenity in any court's language. And you notice, of course, I'm among those absent. *Somebody* had to aim the camera. And I said, Well, sweetheart, I must admit you have me over a barrel. So you better start delivering as per contract, she said, or your bride will have good cause to blush. And I said, How much time do I have, baby? And she said, A lifetime, except for the oil-stock transfer. I want that in hand tonight. And I said, Tonight? And she said, Tonight, Jack, and don't you forget. Meet me right out there at that rail at midnight and we'll watch the moon together."

Jack B. Daggett stopped his story as if he couldn't bear to remember much more. This time he tackled the remainder of the bourbon in true-boozer fashion and finished off the ale too. Behind the ravaged facade he was obviously suffering the acute pangs of sobriety and they were not good for him at this moment of his life. I caught Dan's attention and signaled up a round.

"What happened at midnight, Jack?" I asked.

"The inevitable," he said. "The foreordained. It is the very error of the moon: she comes more nearer earth than she was wont and makes men mad: Shakespeare. At midnight I met Marion at the designated deck rail and the moon was rising through a gauze of clouds. We were alone there, or so it seemed, for the space of a minute, and I hit her hard with a fistful of wrapped pennies just under

the left ear, caught her as she fell and tossed her over the side. She seemed to be diving at first, and then she began to tumble toward the wake of the ship. But she made no sound when she entered the churning froth and disappeared.

"Immediately I set up the cry, Woman overboard, woman overboard, but as I turned to hurry in search of somebody official I saw Patricia half in shadow near a hatchway coaming. Her eyes were bright with terror. I took her tenderly in my arms and said, Your aunt has jumped overboard, my darling. We must tell the authorities. Come with me now. And she came, meek with terror."

I studied his own stricken face. "She had seen it all?"

"She had seen it all."

"There must have been some sort of inquiry," I said.

"At the official inquiry the precious girl testified that her aunt had *jumped* overboard. She had seen it with her own eyes, she declared, and she had seen me try to stop it."

"Did anyone wonder why she jumped?"

"Why, yes, Al. And I told the board of inquiry a fairly true story about my liaison with Marion, omitting the sordid details. In fact, I made it a one-sided affair, with despair as the possible motive for suicide. The board accepted it."

"So that was the end of Aunt Marion?" I asked.

"Not quite," Jack B. Daggett said, sighing profoundly. "Her ghost materialized to exact a retribution."

Dan's broad shadow came across the table to be followed by the metal tray holding two ales and a bourbon. "Time to cut the rhubarb," he said. "Dollar twenty'll do it."

"This round's on me," Jack B. Daggett said, reaching into his tweeds.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Dan said.

"Then cast the purblind eyes of dubiety on that," Jack B. Daggett said, placing on the table a bill folded to the size of a postage stamp.

"What the hell is it, Jack—Chinese money?" Dan asked.

"Go take a flying Mao Tse-tung for yourself, Dan," Jack B. Daggett said. He unfolded the bill with fingers that trembled. It was a five. "Last of the red hot fortunes," he said.

"I believe it," Dan said, making change. "Save some for a rainy morning, Jack."

"Go take a flying—" But Dan had turned his back and was going.

"You were saying something about Aunt Marion's ghost," I

said. "Did she really come back?"

Jack B. Daggett nodded but said nothing until he'd upended the bourbon and sluiced it down with half the ale. Right away he looked drunk again. He talked, though, without a noticeable thickening of speech.

"Ghosts do fear no laws," he seemed to be quoting. "Nor do they care for popular applause. So the malevolent Marion returned in the form of communications prepared for delivery in the event of her death. One of these went to the executor of the estate and disclosed the plot I was party to. The other, somewhat to the same point but wickedly illustrated with those very snapshots I'd hoped to suppress, were directed to my dear Patricia, my angelic bride. So verily my victim rose up from her watery grave to vanquish me and in so doing she struck a fatal blow at the innocent as well as the guilty. For as a result of this letter so close on the heels of the murder she'd witnessed, Patricia underwent a complete mental breakdown. James, the butler, called in the family physician, who recommended a private sanitarium. I would have none of it. Then the executor of the estate entered the picture with a court order remanding Patricia to his custody and, thence, to said sanitarium. I saw my dear wife only once after that but once was—"

"I thought the executor was supposed to fade away when Patricia married," I said, more skeptical than scrupulous.

"These legal matters take time," Jack B. Daggett said. "The infinite number of details that precede the relinquishment of several million dollars were being systematically processed at this time. But Marion's death at sea and her accusatory letter to the bank brought the machinery to a standstill. With my young wife's breakdown, the executor immediately instituted proceedings to have the marriage annulled.

"I retained a lawyer myself then, a bit of a shyster as it turned out, and prepared to fight every step of the way. My first efforts were directed at removing a temporary injunction which prevented me from visiting Patricia in the sanitarium. This took weeks and months. Meanwhile, my attorney was allowed to visit her on the grounds that his presence was not so inflammatory as mine. And the intelligence he carried back to me, together with scribbled scraps of messages, made my heart bleed. For Patricia apparently had taken all my dreadful sins onto herself, into her own pure soul, and was atoning for them *mentally and*

physically. I don't mean this as a figure of speech. She was actually suffering the endless fires of hell. Each time my attorney reported back I shook like a leaf in the wind for days afterward. And I drank. Yes, I drank. But nothing could obliterate from my imagination the agonies my wife was going through. Her lovely lips were now always parched, my lawyer told me. Her eyes were always staring. And at regular intervals a red flush suffused her arms and neck and face, the stigmatic flame of the damned, and then she would writhe and shriek and beg to be put out of her misery. He brought one little note from her, scribbled in a hand I hardly recognized anymore, which addressed me as Pater Maximus—"

"Big Daddy?" I asked, smiling in spite of myself.

"Dear Pater Maximus," Jack B. Daggett continued, "when you come to see me on my birthday, please bring me a nice box of sleep. That is all I want. Pax vobiscum. Patty-Poo. I cried when I read it, Al. Cried like a baby."

"I see," I said.

"But I made it on her birthday," Jack B. Daggett said jubilantly. "That little shyster got me in at last, and for that I bless him for all eternity." He suddenly stood up and called to Dan behind the bar. "How about a little service here, mine host? Three or four ales fast, no whiskey. Money's on the table for the taking." Then he sat down as limp as a bag of oats. "Where was I?" he asked.

"You were finally visiting your wife in the sanitarium," I said.

"That's right. Absolutely. On her birthday. And they searched me before letting me in. Thought I might have something sharp and cutting about my person. They even took away a ballpoint pen and a key ring. All they allowed me to take in to Patricia's room was the Bible—this Bible here—but they even riffled through *its* pages to make sure I wasn't concealing something like a razor blade, I suppose.

"Upon confronting my darling for the first time in six months, I was horrified. Her lovely blonde hair had fallen out in clumps until she was nearly bald. Her figure, always slight, was emaciated and her face was taut to the breaking point, it appeared, over the fine bones behind it. She couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds and yet they had her poor frailty laced in a straitjacket.

"I addressed her by name, humbly, as a beggar addresses a princess, because I knew full well that it was I who had brought her to this pitiful condition. But she didn't

recognize me for whom I was. Father Murphy, she called me, or Father Shumway. Her voice was tiny, almost inaudible, but she kept repeating the same thing over and over, and I made it out. Oh, I made it out. She kept saying, Kill me, Father Murphy. Kill me, kill me, kill me.

"So I opened the Bible to Proverbs, Chapter twenty-three, where it says, When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee. And I tore that page out and then tore it in two and rolled the halves into pellets not much larger than the average capsule and popped them into the suffering girl's grateful mouth. With water in a paper cup (edges rounded for safety's sake) we washed the pellets down her burning throat. The process was repeated page by page until I reached the verse that says, Yes, and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. Ten minutes later, with a smile that should win her sainthood some day, she was dead."

"Dead?" I asked. "What of? Eating paper?"

"Of mercuric chloride poisoning," Jack B. Daggett said. "I had coated those specific pages with a solution of it. A gift for her twenty-third birthday."

"I'll be damned. Were you arrested?"

"No. Her grave physical deterioration inclined the doctors to ascribe death to natural causes."

"Then you inherited the estate as her husband?"

"No, Al. Earlier that afternoon the court had declared our marriage null and void." He smiled sadly. "But I made a vow to my dear sweet wife that day. I vowed to join her, wherever she may be, when my next birthday rolled around. And here it is. Today." He opened the Bible on the table and slowly tore out a page and began to crumple it into a ball in an absentminded manner.

Dan approached with four ales on the tray. He noticed the open Bible and the crumpled page. "Here we go again," he said, serving. "Jack, you must be fuller of pulp than two dozen woodpeckers."

"Doubting Daniel," Jack B. Daggett said. "The boondock blockhead."

"Have fun," Dan said, scooting his thick fingers around the table to sort out sixty cents in change.

Jack B. Daggett took the Bible page, now compressed to the size of a fat capsule, and dropped it in his mouth. He then took an enormous mouthful of ale, held it there a moment, then swallowed and gulped.

Dan said, "If you happen to run

short, Jack, I got some old menus behind the bar. And the weekly gazette."

"Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh," Jack B. Daggett said.

Dan grunted and left.

Jack B. Daggett extracted another page from his Bible. "Do you stand with Dan, Al? And the others?"

"In what way, Jack?"

"Oh, the hell with it," he said, crumpling paper in his fist. "I've been hanging around too long anyway. Overstayed my welcome." He swallowed more paper and more ale.

"You don't have to prove anything to me," I said. "I'll probably never see you again."

"That's all right, Al," he said, ripping out another page.

"I'm going to be leaving in a minute," I said.

"Me, too," he said, eating.

"None of my business, Jack, but you're going to have an awful bellyache if you keep that up."

"Maybe," he said, and continued to do what he was doing until all four glasses of ale were empty.

I kept watching his face and soon I saw death take possession of it. First his eyes flickered strangely, then a few of the hard wrinkles in his brow seemed to soften, next his lips began to twitch and turn ashen, and finally his head bent toward the left shoulder, tilting the skimmer at a rakish angle. There was no sign of respiration.

I got up from the table and walked over to the bar. "I think he's dead," I said.

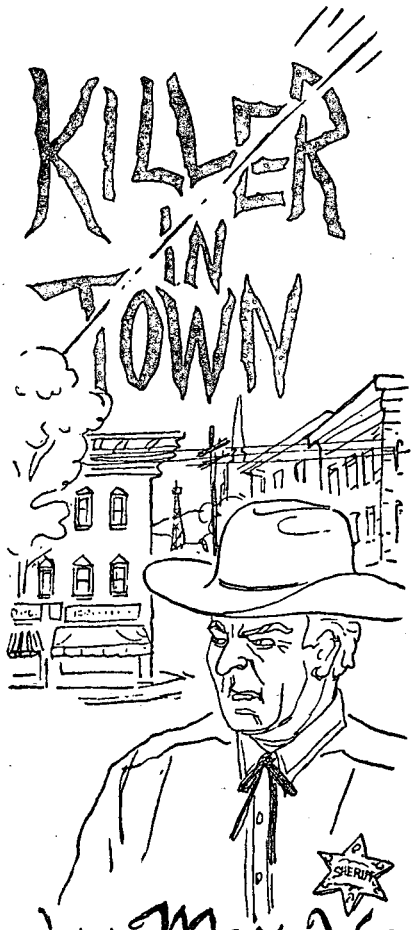
Dan smiled as if he thought I was kidding.

"No. I mean it," I said. "I think you ought to call a doctor. He's dead or close to it."

"Dead drunk," Dan said, and then walked to the far end of the bar with two dripping glasses of beer.

I turned to the men standing next to me. They were discussing techniques of jacklighting deer in what sounded like broken English with a French-Canadian accent. I looked across at Jack B. Daggett slumped now against the wet black window, and left. Outside it was damp and lonely.

No matter that a position has no mandatory retirement age, for other factors may intervene.



KILLER IN TOWN

by Max Van Derveer

BILLY-DON JOE, you-all are fret-tin'," Sammy, my young Indian deputy, accused me.

"A Glover frets where there's a threat, son," I mused. "Peace in this here county can go to pot in the next ten days."

"Just because Captain McLamp is comin' home? Sheriff, I guess I'm flat stupid. I don't understand."

Sammy was not stupid. Sammy was a colt. Someday he'd make a fine Texas Panhandle sheriff, when he'd feel those elusive sensations gnawing at his bones. Twenty-three years as sheriff in the High Plains county named after your granddaddy and you learn its folks, its moods; you know when things are right, and when a sore is festering.

Young Matt McLamp had killed a town youngster, Lucy Anderson, with his daddy's high-powered car, been charged with manslaughter, cleared by a jury, and a week later had enlisted in the Army. Some

folks in the county had cried "paid jury" and said that Matt had found an escape in the enlistment; most said nothing. Now Matt was coming home, and to acclamation, if his daddy had anything to say. Old Charlie McLamp had already set wheels rolling for a Matt McLamp Day.

"The captain is a hero, isn't he?" said Sammy.

"Of sorts," I admitted.

"Well, the newspapers, the radio and the TV all over the state sure have been makin' a fuss."

Captain Matthew Charles McLamp, a Green Beret, had been a prisoner of the Viet Cong for 37 months. Then, suddenly, he had escaped, and became a public figure.

"I'll wager it took some doin' to get away from them Cong fellows," Sammy said.

"Probably," I agreed.

"So the captain has got his day comin', the way I see it," Sammy said.

Natives of the Texas Panhandle are individualists. They don't want to be told what to do, when to do it, or how to do it. On the other hand, money rules here as it does everywhere, and Charlie McLamp was money.

Charles and Kris McLamp had arrived in Glover County in its lean days, migrating from Ok City. Charles started with a small stake, fortitude, luck, and a balanced business sense, and built an empire of oil, gas, cattle, ranch land and town real estate. Down through the years, he had purchased, gained control of, or shared in all that was of value in Glover County.

So old Charlie could pull ropes when he wanted to from his Big House on the knoll four miles east of town, and he was pulling now. Folks, like steer calves, might not like the tugging, but they'd go along. Old Charlie was not mean, but he could hurt.

"You-all figurin' Cal Anderson is gonna raise some kind of cain? Is that what's got you skittish?" asked Sammy.

That was it. Cal and Marsha Anderson would be bitter straight into their graves.

"It was an accident," said Sammy. "I read the trial transcript. Two folks said the little girl ran from the playground straight in front of the car. They said there was no way a man could've avoided her."

"So a jury ruled, son," I agreed. "But four years ago young Matt was a college boy heller. He was Charlie McLamp's boy, he had money stickin' out his nostrils, a don't-give-a-damn attitude, and he burned tire rubber like it was goin' out of style."

"He's probably changed by now."

"If he has, folks round these parts don't know it. All they're doin' is rememberin'. You can bet Cal Anderson is rememberin'. He scares me, Sammy. He's a tough old boy, he's set in his thinking, he owns a store full of guns—and he's an expert shot."

"Hey, wow! Hold it, Billy-Don Joe! You-all ain't thinkin'—"

"I'm thinkin'."

"Man! Assassination?"

"There's to be a parade. It could happen."

"Yeah, but . . . Awright, let's break up that shindig. You and old Charlie have been friends for years. You-all go to him and—"

"I've been there."

His eyes popped. "And?"

"I laid it out flat, boy, and he laughed. He told me to get on my horse and figure out how to handle the traffic."

"Ertha McLamp!" Sammy said. "Matt's wife! Maybe you-all could talk sense to her."

"The girl has lived in the Big House for four years now, Sammy. She hasn't lived there by questioning Charlie's decisions."

"Yeah, I know, but I hear she's goin' out to California to meet Matt. Alone. She could explain to him."

"She will. But you-all are forgettin' a couple of things. Young Matt is old Charlie all over again—and he hasn't been inside the Big House in four years. That place is gonna be his someday, remember."

"So where does that leave us?" asked a deflated deputy.

"On the rim of the rock—keepin' a sharp eye."

I liked Ertha McLamp; most folks in our parts didn't. She was my idea of a California girl: handsome, unpainted, athletic, intelligent, blonde and tanned. Her mother had been dead for years and her father, a career Navy man, had been at sea most of her life. That much I'd learned from Charlie.

Ertha and young Matt had met at a big West Coast university, married in Las Vegas during a semester break and rolled up to the Big House two days after the wedding. That same night Charlie and Kris McLamp swung the Big House gates open to the loudest barbecue ever staged in Glover County.

The next day tragedy hit like a violent storm sliding up over a mountain. The Anderson youngster was killed and Matt was at the wheel of the car that smacked her down against the concrete street.

Some folks said Matt and Ertha were drunk that day. Some said they had been drunk all day, driv-

ing crazy from the Big House into town, up and down the town streets and then back out to the Big House again, still celebrating the wedding. Two folks who witnessed the death of Lucy Anderson said the girl popped from a sidewalk into the path of the car and no one, not even a man on a horse, could have veered from her. All I was sure of when I reached the accident scene was that Matt and Ertha McLamp were stone-cold sober. Oh, there was the odor of beer about them, all right, but they were scared sober. Ertha was literally shaking in her new boots.

Matt went off to war then and Ertha faded quickly into the protective fold of the Big House, the McLamp name and money. It was almost as if she had been born in the house on the knoll and was not Matt's wife, but his sister. She didn't leave the house much and she seemed to lose her vibrance. Charlie worried about the girl. Then one day he came to me.

"Billy-Don Joe, I'm takin' on a new hand," he said, "and I want you to know 'bout him. His name is Jack Totter. Matt and Ertha knew him at the university—before he got into trouble."

"What kind of trouble, Charlie?"

"Auto stealin'. 'Pears the boy got in with a bad crowd, runnin' cars from California down to Mexico. They got caught and the boy served time. He just got out. Matt and Ertha asked me to help him. The way I understand it, the boy doesn't have kin anywhere."

"Okay," I said, waiting.

Charlie took a fresh cigar from his shirt pocket. He fingered it without jamming it into a corner of his mouth. "I want you to know 'bout him."

"You said."

"But other folks—well, they don't need to know."

There it was. Jack Totter's past was to remain a blank.

"I guess you-all will figure him an ex-con," Charlie said.

"What else?"

"And bein' sheriff—"

"I give the deservin' a second chance, Charlie. I'm a fair man. You know that."

He grinned. "It's one of the reasons I like you, Billy-Don Joe." He stood up. "Thanks."

"What are you gonna have the boy doin'?"

He lit the cigar, frowned slightly. "Drive the women-folk whenever they want to go out, I guess. Do odd jobs. But mostly I want him round Ertha. The girl has lost a lot of her fire. She needs to be with colts her own age, but the young-uns round these parts don't seem to cotton to her."

"She hasn't given them much of

a chance, Charlie. You know that."

"The accident and Matt goin' away took the spark out of her. Maybe this Jack Totter can rekindle it. We'll see."

"What do you hear from Matt?"

"Doin' fine." He grinned again, around the cigar. "He's a captain now, you know."

"Yep, I heard."

"I'm retirin' when he gets home."

"Figures."

"Me'n mamma are gonna see a little of the world."

"In your cowboy boots?" I chuckled.

"I was born in 'em, I'm gonna die in 'em," he grinned back.

He almost died in them that same afternoon. The telegram arrived at the Big House. Matt had been captured by the Cong. Charlie had a bad heart attack and was laid up for weeks. In the meantime, Jack Totter arrived at the house.

John Francis Totter, alias Jack Francis, alias Francis Jack—I checked him out. There wasn't much to check: no record prior to the auto theft conviction, no immediate kin, schooled in San Diego where he had lived with friends of his parents. His folks had been killed in an airliner crash. Later, there was a year and a half at the University, then the rap. But he seemed a level-headed boy. He came to see me his first day in town. He came in on his own; Charlie hadn't sent him. That move made points with me. As the weeks passed, I had to concede Charlie had made a good move too when he had taken on the boy. Charlie, nursing his bad ticker, might have been forced to remain at the Big House without Jack Totter. But Jack saw to it that Charlie got around. Same with the missus and Ertha. Jack Totter took them wherever a car would go. Ertha seemed to rediscover some of herself. She took on color and bounce again.

Naturally there was talk. You could hear stories in the county about Jack Totter and Ertha McLamp, especially after Ertha had taken a few long weekend trips down to the Gulf with Jack as her driver. The trips made a man wonder, of course. Where did Ertha McLamp and Jack Totter go? What did they do? Was it strictly chauffeur and chauffeured once they were out of the county? Old Charlie didn't fret; his missus didn't fret. If Ertha and Jack wanted to be lovers, they could be lovers right there in the Big House, the way I figured it. They didn't have to spend a lot of time traipsing to the Gulf and back.

Matt came home unannounced in the dark of a Thursday evening.

His arrival time had been speculation for days. All anyone knew for sure was, Ertha—without Jack Totter—had gone out to California to meet her husband. When they were to arrive at the Big House was conjecture.

I was in the coffee shop on Main Street when I heard. No one had actually seen Matt and Ertha roll through town, but suddenly there was light in every window of the Big House east of town, and there was a sparkling new car with California license plates parked in one of the Big House carports. Word spread like a prairie fire in a high wind: Matt McLamp was home.

I drove out to the Big House, drawn by curiosity and friendship. Matt had changed. He seemed much taller, a bit lean, perhaps, and hard. He looked as if he had managed to keep his health. His quietness hit me the hardest. He had become subdued, soft-spoken, and he moved with the languid litheness of a mountain cat. He created the impression of being carefully slow, and yet there was an undercurrent of quick striking power.

Old Charlie was grinning proud and Kris couldn't keep her hands off her lone offspring. Ertha was relaxed, contented, smiling slightly, her eyes bright. I'd never seen her so beautiful. Jack Totter was genuine warmth. He remained in the background with Ertha, but for the first time that I could remember he was showing feeling.

This homecoming was no place for an outsider. Matt walked me to the front door.

"Matt McLamp Day comin' up, son," I said, testing him. I had a hunch.

"Yes," he nodded. He was somber, thoughtful. "Saturday, Dad says." He glanced over his shoulder. We were out of earshot of the others. "I don't want it, Billy-Don Joe. I'm not a hero."

Hunch confirmed. "Old Charlie has been figurin' on it, boy."

"Which is the only reason I'm going through with it."

"And then?"

"I'm remaining in the service. Ertha knows. The folks don't. We'll tell them after Saturday. In the meantime, you keep it under your Stetson, okay?"

The Saturday parade went off without a hitch. Even the weather cooperated, with a mild, bright day. Saturday night, the gates of the Big House were once again opened wide for a whooping barbecue.

The only thing that marred the party was a sniper, who sent a bullet crashing into Captain Matthew Charles McLamp's skull, killing him instantly.

I was at the barbecue as a friend of the family. I hadn't even worn my badge. I was in the library of the Big House, sitting with Matt's mother, when I heard the shot. The sound raised hackles on the back of my neck. I bolted through open French doors out to the apron of the swimming pool, and I knew what I'd find even before I was able to part the babbling crowd and shoulder my way to the inert bodies. But finding Charlie draped across his son surprised me.

Kris McLamp's shrill scream shattered the shock. People backed off. Some scattered. Kris collapsed. Jack Totter was with her immediately. He lifted and carried her into the house. Ertha was on her knees, folded over the two men. Her sobs were harsh.

Folks in our part of the country pitch in. We don't ignore trouble, and it doesn't take a week to organize. I singled out two women to take Ertha, one man to get on the telephone and get what we needed from town, and four other men to take Charlie from his son's body. Charlie looked almost gone, but he was breathing. There was a chance.

I kept watching the darkness beyond the house and swimming pool lights. Sammy should be coming in with the sniper.

He didn't.

I found Sammy still on stakeout at Cal Anderson's house. He was on foot, able to keep an eye on Cal's front door, back door and garage door.

"Cal ain't left the place," Sammy said emphatically. "And his car is in the garage."

So I had a mystery killing on my hands. Cal Anderson didn't need watching now; I sent Sammy home. I went to the hospital. Ertha and Jack Totter were in the lobby. Both Charlie and Kris had been admitted. Kris was in shock and hysterics, they said. Old Charlie wasn't going to make it.

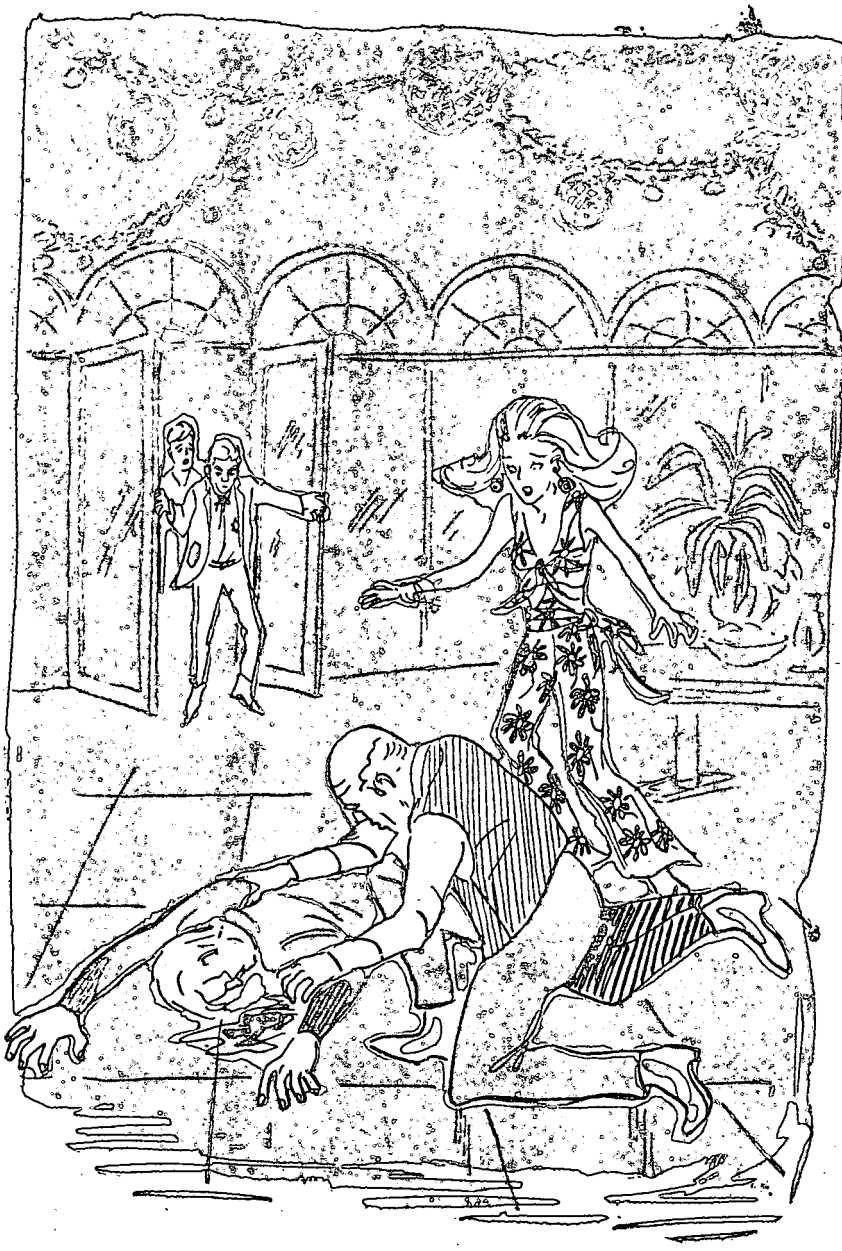
I settled on a couch. I too would wait for the inevitable. Ertha and Jack Totter sat side by side on another couch opposite me. Ertha was proving to be a tough girl. She had regained some composure, but Totter looked ready to explode.

If not Cal, then who?

The McLamps had enemies. That much was accepted. But how many of those enemies were sniper killers? The sniper normally is cold, calculating. He picks his time, his place. He usually fires from a distance, must be at least a marksman to be reasonably sure of success.

"Totter—"

"Don't try to lean on me, Sheriff." He was quick to interrupt. "I'm an ex-con, but that doesn't mean I'm a killer. I was Matt's



friend. Anyway, I was helping the Crawfords get their car out of that parking mess when we heard the shot. The Crawfords were cuttin' out. You know them, I assume. They can vouch for me."

"Jack!" Ertha exploded.

"Easy, son," I said. "Don't be so all-fired jumpy. What I was gonna ask you is, have you noticed anyone in particular cruisin' round the McLamp place since Matt got home?"

"No one."

"Ertha?"

She shook her head.

A doctor came out to us. Old Charlie was gone; his bad heart had given its final, flickering beat. Ertha and Jack went to Kris McLamp. I went to my office in the courthouse and sat in the dark, with my boots on the desk top, and stared out a black window.

Could Cal Anderson have eluded Sammy? Could he have somehow slipped out and back into his house without my deputy seeing him? And why was Jack Totter so jumpy? He had been quick with what probably was a solid alibi for the moment of the shooting. Where had Ertha been in that moment? Ertha and Jack Totter—had they really been hoodwinking the McLamps, all of us, during the past months?

I didn't like that thought. I attempted to shrug it off, but I couldn't.

I went out to the Big House at dawn. It was a cool Sunday morning, very still, but the day was to be bright and warm again. No one was at the house, and it looked as if it had been emptied by the threat of a bomb. I went around turning off lights and closing doors.

Then I found the spot where the sniper had sprawled in the grass. The grass was matted. The sniper had had a clear view of the swimming pool area and an easy escape route back out to the highway.

I returned to town and found out from the justice of the peace, who had acted as coroner, that Matt had been killed with a 30-06 rifle slug. I went to the hospital. Kris McLamp was under sedation now and Ertha and Jack Totter were going out to the Big House. I stood alone on the curbing and watched them drive away. Then I went over to the coffee shop on Main Street and sat waiting for the day's first pot of coffee to perk. I thought about other assassinations that had occurred in our nation. Did I want a paid killer, someone who had been brought to the Panhandle from far away? Or did I want a nut, a guy who didn't like war heroes?

I went to the Crawford house. The Crawfords hadn't been to bed.

I had another cup of coffee and substantiated the fact that Jack Totter had been helping them with their car at the time of the shooting. Mrs. Crawford also said Ertha had been on the swimming pool apron with her husband and her father-in-law when the Crawfords had departed.

I couldn't get Cal Anderson out of my mind. I drove to his place. Cal and Marsha were dressing for early Mass. They had heard about the murder of Matt and the death of Charlie.

Cal was bitter and hostile. "Glad the boy got it," he said. "The old man, too, for that matter. He bought off a judge and a jury."

"Were you home all last evening, Cal?"

"I didn't get invited to no party, Sheriff."

"You didn't leave the house all evening?"

"You should know. That deputy of yours, young Sammy, he smokes too much."

"I'll caution him," I said, clipping the words.

"I don't like bein' spied on, Sheriff."

"You-all got a 30-06 in the house, Cal?"

"Nope."

"At your store?"

He hesitated, then he said, "Sure. Maybe a dozen. Why wouldn't I? I do sell guns, you know."

"Let's go down to the store, Cal."

"Huh?"

"Come on. Don't make me fetch a search warrant."

Cal's panel truck was parked immediately behind the sporting goods store. It was his store truck. I'd forgotten about it. Inside, I went directly to the wall rack of rifles, and found a 30-06 that had been fired. Cal was bleached when I turned on him.

"Were you going to clean this today, Cal?"

He said nothing.

"You saw Sammy outside your house. You managed to slip past

him. You walked to the store, got this here rifle, a couple of slugs, used the store truck, went out to the Big House, returned here, put the rifle back on the rack, walked home and slipped past Sammy again."

Cal Anderson remained silent.

He was booked and jailed. I felt depressed, but I knew relief too. The news spread fast. Jack Totter telephoned. I told him how it happened. He seemed to have difficulty believing, but he finally accepted my story. Then he asked, "Is Ertha in danger, Sheriff? She was with Matt, the day of the accident."

"Cal Anderson is in a cell," I repeated. "He's stayin' there."

It was a week before Kris McLamp was allowed to leave the hospital and return to the Big House. She was on her feet again, but she needed care day and night. Ertha and a hired nurse took over.

Matt and Charlie had been buried. Ertha had turned down the Army offer of military rites. The double funeral had attracted hundreds, which maybe wasn't so surprising after all. Cal Anderson was still in my jail, awaiting trial. He had obtained an attorney, and started to maintain innocence. He claimed Sammy would have seen him leave and return to the house. He said someone must have broken into his store, used a rifle and the store truck, returned both. I double-checked all doors and windows at the store and couldn't find a shred of evidence pointing to forced entry.

The telephone call rousted me from deep sleep on a black Tuesday night just three days after Kris McLamp had been released from the hospital: Kris was dead. Her body had been found by Jack Totter in a car in a closed garage at the Big House. The car motor had been running and the car windows were down. She had not left a note. A note was not necessary; everyone knew why Kris McLamp had committed suicide.

The special nurse was not at the Big House. She worked the day shift. Ertha had watched over Kris at night. She hadn't watched, actually; she had merely been in the house, available for Kris' needs. It was Kris' habit to retire early and use prescribed sleeping pills.

"I was in the library, reading," Ertha explained. "I had been most of the evening. Kris retired around nine. Then around eleven I became sleepy. I went upstairs and stepped into Kris' room. I did that every night before I went to bed, just to be sure she was sleeping. But tonight she wasn't in her bed. It frightened me. I don't know why.

Premonition perhaps. Anyway, I screamed and Jack came running."

"I was in my room, asleep," said Jack. "I searched the house, then the grounds. I . . . found her in the garage."

Another McLamp was buried, and that day it rained. Standing in the drizzle at the cemetery I felt as if the world were dripping its troubles onto my shoulders. After the funeral Jack Totter informed me he was leaving the Panhandle, going back to California.

"I'm not sure where I'll settle, Sheriff," he said. "I'll let you know. You may want me for the trial."

"I *will* want you for the trial," I told him.

He hardened slightly. "I can't stay in the Big House. Not now. Not just Ertha and me."

"Right, son."

Four days later, Ertha headed south to the Gulf. "I have to get away for a couple of weeks," she said.

I understood that too.

Then I stopped in to see Thad Berry, who had been Charlie's attorney for years. I wanted to know about the McLamp wealth, where it was going.

"In time," Thad rumbled, "the little gal Ertha is gonna control it, Billy-Don Joe."

"You don't sound happy 'bout that, Thad."

He shrugged. "It ain't my place to be happy or unhappy. You want it simple? She gets it all, in time. There's three wills: Charlie's, Kris' and Matt's, but when all the paper work is cleaned up the town is gonna have $500,000 for a new recreation area to be named McLamp Park—that's a stipulation—and the remainder is gonna siphon down to the little gal."

"Whee," I breathed. "How long before it's all hers?"

"She oughta have complete control in six months."

In that six-month period Cal Anderson was sentenced to life im-

prisonment at Huntsville for the murder of Matthew Charles McLamp, Marsha Anderson died a natural death, and Ertha McLamp became a wealthy recluse in the Big House—with the exception of two flights to the West Coast. She remained away for a week on each trip. One week was spent in Los Angeles, the other in Seattle. During both she met and lived in a fancy motel with a man named Jack Francis. That information cost Glover County $450. The Los Angeles private detective firm charged $250 for surveillance and report, the Seattle firm charged $200.

At the end of the seventh month, Ertha McLamp donated the Big House and land to a Methodist church organization for use as a retirement home, took the McLamp fortune and placed it in the hands of a Los Angeles business management firm and married John Francis Totter in Reno, Nevada.

I went down to Huntsville to see Calvin Anderson. I wasn't sure how I was going to do it, but I was going to prove that Ertha McLamp and Jack Totter had hired a killer to slay Matt, that they had set up Cal as the patsy, that Charlie's shock death had been a godsend to them, that Ertha and Jack had taken a drugged Kris McLamp out into a closed garage and had set her up as a suicide.

I had to give Cal Anderson new hope.

Cal smiled at me and shook his head. "I killed the boy, Billy-Don Joe, in spite of all I said at the trial. It was just like you-all had it figured. I saw Sammy outside the house that night, sneaked past him, got the rifle and truck at the store, went out to the Big House. I was gonna clean the rifle Sunday afternoon. There's no question of *why* I did it, is there?"

There was no question in my mind. "Your wife is dead now too," I said.

"I'm just as well off here," he nodded.

I returned to the Panhandle. Perhaps it was time for a Glover to retire. Sammy was coming along fine as a deputy. He would make a good sheriff for the people . . .

A given waiting room is usually fitting for its use.

THE WAITING ROOM

by Charles W. Runyon

PAWLEY watched the rain streak the dirty glass. He liked the way the droplets started out small at the top, hung there for a moment, raced downward until they met a companion, hung for a shorter time, and then began the long swift plunge to the bottom of the pane, taking everything with it. Life is like that. Nobody likes to go down alone.

The air inside the station was warm, diffused with dampness and the smell of road dust and old rubber. New rubber was better, rich and pungent. When he was a kid, he always liked to smell new rubber. He always liked to watch rain on a window too. Funny, he'd had to run like hell for thirty-two years just to get back where he started. Not in a geographic sense, of course. The southern California plain was a lot different than the piney slopes of Arkansas. Flat as a table, like you weren't on the earth at all, but on some kind of mirror.

Pawley was a tall man, rather gaunt. His prominent nose hooked slightly, and his blue eyes sat steady inside deep sockets. He wore a gabardine jacket and gray trousers, a white shirt and a maroon tie. He dressed as people do who are not aware of clothes; they didn't exactly fit, and he made no attempt to adapt his bony frame to them. There were wrinkles at the collar, and though the tie was pulled up tight below the thrusting larynx, the top button of his shirt was undone. The hat was a chocolate brown felt, crushed on one side, somehow failing to adapt its shape to Pawley's narrow skull. The coarse hair above his ears was threaded with gray.

Pawley placed his palm flat against his face and with his fingers tipped the hat onto the back of his head. He put his forehead to the glass, not surprised that it was the same temperature as the room. Glancing out to the right, he saw rows of cabbages stretching to infinity, pale green, with sheets of water in between. He saw a movement of pale blue. Finding a broken pane, he lifted the heavy .45 from his pocket and thrust it through the window, bending his elbow at a right angle. The gun bucked in his hand. A geyser of muddy water shot up and the patch of blue dropped out of sight.

Pawley withdrew his hand. At least he was dry. The cops were all wet. He laughed.

John looked up, his broad face drawn in a puzzled frown. He was stocky, stooped in the shoulders where his brown suit jacket pinched. He always looked as though he didn't quite understand what he was seeing.

"How many you got left?" he asked.

Pawley flicked on the safety and withdrew the magazine, counting the coppery eyes which glinted through the slot. "Four."

"I'm all out." John spun the chamber of his .38 and let it drop from his fingers. Thunk! on the concrete. Pawley heard the sound echoing inside his head. Thunk. Sound of clean-shot squirrel falling out of high pine tree. Thunk. Sound of bat against ball, grand-slam homer in the last of the ninth. Thunk. Fist against jaw. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Well, I've had all those things.

He watched John tie his shoelaces. "Think you'll walk out?"

John stretched his legs in front of him, heels on the floor, toes pointed outward. He cupped his broad, black-haired hands over his groin and shook his head.

"Wouldn't get far. They dragged back two dead ones. There's another one out in that

car. 'Spect they're pretty mad at us."

Pawley looked out the window. The asphalt ribbon dwindled almost to a point before it climbed into the mountains. Fifty yards away sat the patrol car with two sunbursts in the windshield. The front wheels were cramped hard and part way in the grader ditch, the rear wheels were in the road, back end lifted high. Something funny about those wounded cars; Pawley could never see them all shiny and neat in a showroom without imagining how they'd look this way too. He always thought of dead grasshoppers.

He saw his own car pulled up beside the dry pumps. They'd done all right until they met the patrol car. Must have had a description from the bank guard, because the car did a switch-itch and took after them. One hundred miles an hour, and a lucky shot holed their gas tank. Just made it to here and found the station closed, empty. Pawley had realized, with a certain relief, that it was the end of the road.

He could see the roadblock a quarter-mile away, cars beginning to pile up behind it. Word must have gotten out. Spectators, reporters coming in for the kill. Make him famous for a day. Hell, he didn't care about being famous. Just tried to get in a few licks, it was only a game. He always shot to kill, that was part of the game. Always ate till he was full. Always got a woman when he felt like a woman.

A clot of blue reared up among the green. He aimed the gun and felt it buck in his hand. The man fell. He aimed the gun and felt it buck in his hand. The man fell. He aimed the gun and felt it . . .

Take him down behind the shed and shoot him. Acting nonchalant, you snapped your fingers and old Brindle, shaggy, old brown mongrel, worth nothing to anybody, followed you down behind the shed and you stood him up there among the round black pellets of sheep droppings. He cocked his head while you raised the old single-shot, octagon barrel .22 with the magic sight. He looked at you, wondering what the game was, and you tried to force the hatred you were supposed to feel. Dirty sheepkiller. He ran and licked your hand and you slapped him and cursed him, you dirty sheepkiller, but only sickness came and Brindle stretched out his long jaw on the two paws, looked up, and you let him have it right between the quizzical brown eyes. Though you didn't know it then, there were two deaths that afternoon, the boy and the dog. You

remember the weather too, hot July day, acrid smell of sheep droppings, the sun had set, but heat still radiated from the old pine building. There are moments like these slicing right through the layers of your life, Pawley, cutting right through and connected, back to back, like a pair of aces and everything in between is just so much filler, like insulation, because if you lived your whole life at that level, man, you'd *burn* . . .

Dirty sheepkiller. The man in the blue uniform humped along the watery ditch, raising his rear in the air like an inchworm. He wants to be a hero. Pawley raised the gun and it was a clear shot, but the mist in his eyes clouded his aim, and he decided to save the bullet for the creation of another hero. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face, wiping his eyes at the same time. "Three left," he said.

"How long do you figure?"

"Half-hour, just as a guess. They'll get rifles and stay out of our range. Keep us pinned down while the others make a rush."

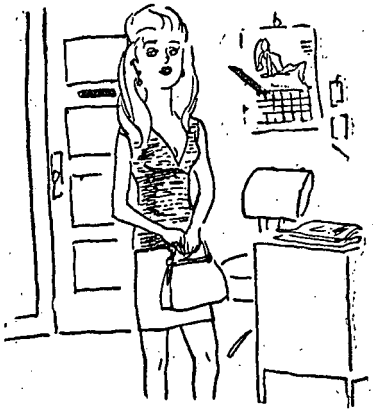
The building was built of cinder block, waist high. From there to the tile roof were ten-inch panes of glass set in a steel frame, painted red. It shared the same level as the highway, about five feet above the surrounding fields. The only interruption of view came from the washroom, which was cinder block to the ceiling, and occupied a six-foot square in the northwest corner. Pawley gazed a long time at the closed door. Shirley had been inside a long time. He called out, asked what she was doing.

"Changing my underwear."

He looked at John, who raised his shoulders in a shrug. Then Pawley understood. She knew this was the end and she wanted to die with clean underwear. It struck him as funny, and he started laughing.

She came out a moment later, her eyes naked and defenseless. Strange, the way her high cheekbones pushed up her eyes into narrow slits. They were knife-points that stuck into him and made him tingle. She always did it to him; stripped him clean of pretense. Her red-brown hair was brushed into a soft wave, which curled out beyond her ears, then curled back to lie against her collarbone. The bony structure of her chest showed above the low line of her jersey. Some kind of sleazy material, shot full of gold. He didn't like that kind of material, he wondered why she wore things he didn't like, particularly at this time. No makeup, her mouth wide, upper lip long. Nose a straight shiny line, high forehead. A scent about her

that no perfume had ever hidden, like hay molding, like butterscotch and cracked walnuts, a sense of richness which made his nerve-ends stretch until they touched emptiness.



He watched her sit down in the swivel chair behind the desk and light a cigaret. Piece of paper clung to her lower lip, she caught it between long, unpolished nails and peeled it off. Every movement did something for him. The bend in her elbow was more important to him than the articulation of his own muscles. He'd met her when she was sixteen and now she was twenty-four. He didn't know if he liked her or not; just that when she wasn't around, everything was flat and dead and lifeless, and the wine and the other women had nothing for him. Twenty-four. That was too young.

"You could go out," he said. "I don't think they'd shoot you, you could live."

"What for?"

Casual and final. You made your own choice, he thought.

Then he wondered if she'd had any choice. From the time they'd met, they'd fit together like dovetails. He'd never talked about his feelings, never even felt the emotions that raced inside him. She found them and brought them out. She didn't dig. She just knew they were there, and she didn't give a damn for his feelings or his pride, or anything like that—just him.

He watched her open a magazine and start thumbing through it. One of the pages caught his eye and he read a paragraph. The words were like gruel, like food chewed up and swallowed by some Eskimo woman, then regurgitated, absent of all spice, flavor and sauce. She had her legs crossed, the short skirt off her knees. She had bony knees. He loved her bones. She could have been waiting for a dentist.

He thought of her flesh and the death of her flesh—her teeth shattered, organs ripped and skull blown apart in the smash of lead. He felt a longing for her that was not sexual, a desire to enclose her in his arms and take all the bullets into his own flesh.

He went to a wall calendar. It

was eight years old and had obviously hung in the station long after its primary purpose had been exhausted. It was adorned by a picture of a girl whose body was impossibly perfect and unblemished, whose breasts were so impossibly round that they were a—what was the word? Cliche. When he said something that Shirley didn't like, she said he was using cliches. Well, baby, how do you like this for a cliche? We're going to die. Everybody does *that.*

Notes on the side of the calendar. *Call Mrs. Cardoza about grease job.* Probably the car was junk by now, and the woman could be dead. Somebody had written *Thelma* and drawn an arrow to the calendar girl. He wondered where Thelma was in the outside world. Here she was lovely, young as ever, desired and desirable. And Mrs. Cardoza was still waiting for her grease job. Here had nothing to do with anywhere else.

"I wonder if they had kids? Wives and kids?"

Shirley was looking out the window, talking about the cops, and thinking about herself. Eight years of love and violence, now ended.

"It doesn't matter," Pawley said.

"How can you say it doesn't matter?"

"With my lips and tongue and throat. Like this." He leaned over her and spoke with exaggerated lip movements. "It doesn't matter."

She raised her face and gave him a flat, blank stare. The light fell on the planes on her face and revealed the fine white hairs on her cheekbones. For a moment he saw violence lying in her eyes like a coiled viper. Then it melted away and she asked in a tone of sincere curiosity, "Are you crazy?"

He thought about it. "That doesn't matter either."

John scraped his feet on the concrete. "We're all crazy, I think."

Pawley turned to look at him. John sat indolently with his back against the wall, the valise between his knees. With a lopsided smile, he opened the bag, took out a deck of currency, pulled out a bill and wadded it up, then snapped off the rubber band and gave the whole sheaf a backhanded flip toward him. The neat pile disintegrated and fluttered down like feathers. "There. That's what it was about. Now, what the hell good is it?"

Pawley saw the desolation in his eyes. He leaned over, picked up a fifty-dollar bill, struck a match and lit it. Then he shook a cigaret out of his pack and held it to the flame. He held the cigaret out to John and looked into his eyes.

"Everything is good for something."

For a minute, they looked into

each other's eyes. Slowly the fear disappeared, and was replaced by puzzlement.

"Pawley, why is it always . . . ?"

Pawley waited, but the puzzlement deepened. "What?"

John shook his head. "I don't know. For a minute it seemed like I was somebody else . . . waiting for Indians."

"We used to play Indians, back in Arkansas. You ever play Indians, Shirley?"

"I used to get tied up a lot—and tortured."

He looked at her. They had clawed each other's flesh until the blood had mingled. Life was a melting process. A milking process. Life was . . .

He shook his head. Life was.

John was retying his shoes. "I never liked to play Indians. That was you. I never got to be myself. You wanted to make the team. Okay, I made the team. Quit school and go to the coast, ship out and see the world. I went along. When I met a girl I wanted to marry, you said she was a slob, so I dropped her."

Pawley looked out the window. Quiet too long. *Soon* . . . "She was a slob."

"Okay. I could have discovered that myself."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't think she was. You turned her into one. You'd look at her and make her feel stupid. You turned her into one."

"Well, no matter how she got that way, she was—that way." Pawley turned. "John, you left her and came with us. Maybe you ought to find out why you came with us."

"*Why*? Why anything? Why are we here? I mean . . ." He slapped his palm on the concrete floor, then waved at the wide expanse of the world. "Here. You know."

"We're here to find out why we're here," said Shirley. She was looking out the window. There was no expression on her face. Pawley wished he were her, having thoughts, nice thoughts. When he considered what was about to happen, his brain turned into an ivory doorknob, all white and shiny and nothing on it at all.

"Why are we *here* then?" asked

John. "Sitting in a lousy station. Dad raised us, why did he do that?"

"Because we were there," said Pawley.

"But why were we—"

"Shirley told you. To find out why we're here."

John rose and walked stiff-legged to the center of the room. His shoes crumpled the bright green currency. His eyes were wide. "You mean, there's no reason? None of it makes any difference?"

"None of it."

John looked at Shirley. "You agree with that?"

"I agree."

For a moment longer he looked at her, then his face seemed to settle. "I've wanted to do something for eight years."

She looked at him. "Do it."

He stepped forward and caught the shoulders of her jersey, jerking it downward. Her small breasts thrust into the light.

"Does that make a difference?"

She moved her shoulders slightly. "Does it?"

"Hell!" He jerked himself away fast, strode across the room and turned. "Okay, it doesn't make any difference. So why don't we just walk out that door now?"

"Because I want a cigaret," said Pawley. He lit two, and held one out to John. John took it and slumped down with his back against the wall, looking at the floor between his feet. His wrists hung limply from his knees, his cigaret smoked between his fingers.

After a minute, Shirley pulled up her blouse, walked over to John and sat down beside him. She took the cigaret from his fingers and drew slowly, looking at Pawley. Something glittered in her eyes. Pawley knelt down, facing her. John looked up, and for a moment they were all enclosed in a single sweaty hand, breathing with one breath, seeing with a single eye . . .

A bullet came through one of the upper glasses. Ping! Then another. They had rifles now, but they were shooting high. It wouldn't be long. Pawley reached out and squeezed Shirley's shoulder, and felt the bones give beneath his hand. Then he squeezed John's knee, and stood up, not for any reason, but because he wanted to make one last gesture of free will.

Shirley rose and stood beside him. John rose on the other side. Pawley thought of telling him, *You could have had her any time, boy, but I couldn't stand for that because then I'd have lost both of you,* but there was no need to say anything.

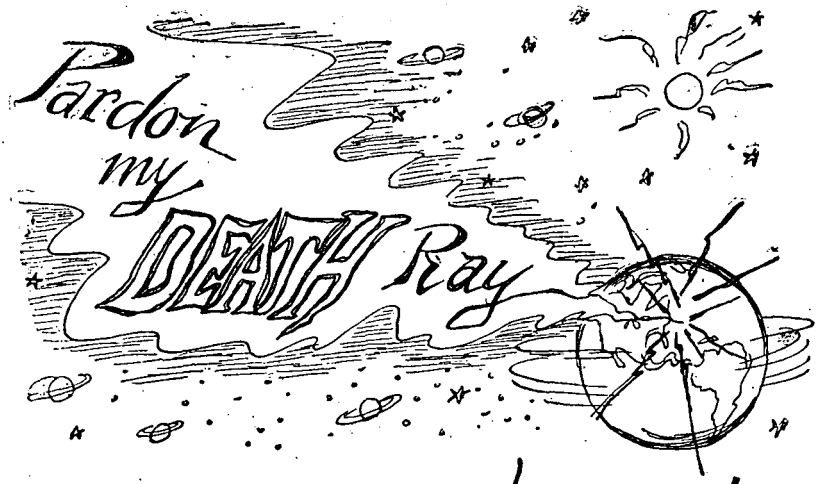
"This is the way it is, John."

"Yeah, but I don't have to like it."

"No, you don't have to like it."

Then the bullets came in.

Sufficient is the evidence that other life forms may be friendly indeed.



by Jack Ritchie

HE HAD been talking for fifteen minutes and we were now at the point of recapitulation.

"I guess you could call it a death ray," AmBurrri said. "Anyway, that's what *we* call it in Tragla Galaxy."

Laura continued skeptical. "In Earth miles, how long did you say this death ray is?"

"Approximately 200,000, and traveling at the speed of light, of course."

I wiped some lipstick from my face. "How did you manage to beat it here?"

"We use the twelfth dimension." He smiled diffidently. "To tell you the truth, I don't fully understand it myself. I just follow instructions."

Laura had been figuring. "Earth would be subjected to the death ray for only about a second?"

"Believe me," AmBurrri said, "that's more than enough."

"When did you say this death

ray is supposed to arrive here?" I asked.

AmBurrri searched through his pockets until he found the slip of paper again. "In terms of your time, at exactly ten minutes and ten seconds after eight p.m. tonight. That's Central Standard Time."

"How did you happen to choose the university as your landing site?" Laura asked.

"Our computers sniffed out this point on earth as having the highest index of intelligence."

Laura seemed surprised. "You'd think it might be Harvard or Yale."

"No," AmBurrri said. "They were far down our list." He looked about the laboratory. "The campus seemed almost deserted."

"It's a Saturday afternoon," Laura said. "Everybody's at the football game."

"You are students?" AmBurrri asked.

"No," Laura said. "Instructors."

AmBurrri nodded absently. "I wandered through all kinds of corridors and I thought everybody was gone until I heard your voices."

I was still irritated. "You should have knocked at the door first. Someday it might save you a black eye."

Laura turned the subject. "Nothing can stop the death ray?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid. At least no one in our galaxy has been able to come up with anything so far . . ."

I smiled thinly. "And just what is Earth supposed to do now?"

"Well, I suppose you could all get into spaceships and evacuate the planet. For one second, at least."

"We haven't gotten up to the spaceship age yet," Laura said.

AmBurrri rubbed his chin. "I can see that you have a problem."

I walked around him—figuratively, at least. "You look pretty human to me."

He smiled comfortably. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Or, to put it another way, I came as an Equivalent."

"Equivalent?"

"Yes. Exactly equivalent to what I'd be if I should have been an Earthling."

AmBurrri appeared to be pushing sixty and was thin-boned and graying.

"What do you look like in your own galaxy?" Laura asked.

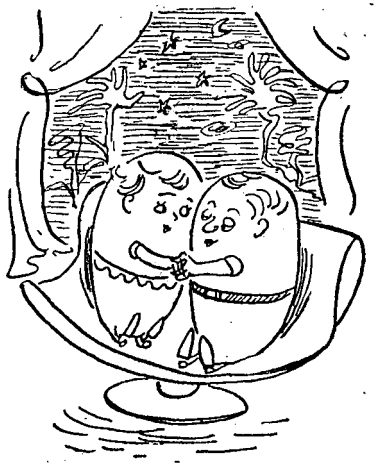
"Well, evolution is a pretty consistent process just about anywhere and gradually our craniums took over. While we still have arms and legs, they are diminished and physical ambulation is difficult. At rest, we rather resemble large eggs."

I looked out of a window. "Is there anything like a sex life?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You mean fralalee-odling? Well, being shaped like eggs . . . I mean

that while it's still possible, it's more of a . . ."

Laura smiled quickly. "You must be a dreadfully warlike people, what with this death ray and all."



"Good galaxies, no," AmBurrri said. "We are extremely peaceable. But we were faced with an embarrassing dilemma. You see, scientific progress is depressingly consecutive and one thing fatalistically follows another. However, there was a time-lag in the course of our technological know-how and it just so happened that we did not reach the death-ray stage of development until ninety-seven years after intergalactic peace had been irrevocably declared."

He appealed to us for sympathy. "You've got to understand our situation. You know how it is? A thing may look good on paper, but there's always the nagging question, 'Will it *really* work?' And here we were with the death ray and we felt we simply had to try it at least once."

"And so you aimed it at Earth and pressed the button?" Laura asked.

"Oh, no," AmBurrri said. "Nothing like that at all. However, we did decide that the only safe place to try the death ray would have to be in space. So we orbited a capsule loaded with protozoa around one of our dead planets and exposed it to the death ray. The project was a complete success and now we plan to relegate the death ray apparatus to our museum. Without the batteries, of course."

He appeared embarrassed. "We thought the death ray would just go shooting harmlessly off into space and eventually disintegrate in this galaxy. Imagine our surprise and shock when one of us discovered that there is life—as we know it—on this planet Earth."

We were silent for a while and then I said, "AmBurrri, I'd like to speak to you alone for a moment."

When we were in the corridor, I said, "And now that we have your information, just what do you expect us to do with it?"

"Well . . . warn the people, I suppose."

"Why? Apparently there's no de-

fense against the ray, is there?"

He thought about that for a while and then sadly nodded. "I guess you're right. Perhaps it might be more humane if they really didn't know what was going to happen tonight."

I watched AmBurrri make his way down the corridor toward the exit.

When I reentered the laboratory, I smiled. "You've got to humor him."

She blinked. "Humor him?"

"Of course," I said. "That was Professor Mulligan."

She searched her memory. "Never heard of him."

"Before your time," I said. "He's retired now, but occasionally he slips away from his guardian. Perfectly harmless, but he does come up with some of the wildest stories."

That evening, I took Laura to a restaurant.

Toward eight, I found my eyes wandering toward the wall clock.

Laura was thoughtful. "You don't suppose that Professor Mulligan really knows . . ."

"Of course not," I said firmly.

Nevertheless, my eyes remained on the clock. At eight-ten, the second hand touched twelve and moved on. I found myself counting down: Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *zero!*

Nothing happened.

At two a.m., I closed my eyes and concentrated on communications with my own galaxy of Zelanias.

My area commander, Ompluilla, answered. "Nothing to it," he said. "As per your suggestion, we deflected the death ray with our K-M3 Unidee. Something Tragla-Galaxy obviously hasn't gotten around to developing yet."

I thanked him again.

"Look," he said. "It seems to me that you should have been done with that research you're doing on the Earthlings long ago. What's keeping you there?"

I listened to Laura's deep-sleep breathing for a moment. "Oh, I don't know," I said. "I guess it's just all of that fralalee-odling."

Not infrequently, it is the one least concerned in the affairs of others who is without peer in solving them.

A LITTLE TIME OFF

THE EXPLOSION came at mid-morning, booming off the surrounding hills. Malone lifted his head, listening until the echo died, shrugged and went back to fishing, casting his line upstream with skilled precision and letting it drift toward him. He was a big man with broad shoulders and a craggy face too white to have spent much time outdoors, and beneath the broad-brimmed hat, his pale blue eyes shifted and probed the waters of the creek, looking for the best places to drop the feathered fly.

It was mid-afternoon when Sheriff Tom Fulton, throwing a lanky shadow across one of Malone's favorite pools, called to him. Malone pretended he didn't hear. He knew instinctively that Fulton was there because of the explosion, and he didn't want to get involved. He was here to fish, and that was all.

Fulton was a hard man to ignore. "Ten minutes, Dave. That's all I want. You owe me that much!"

Malone sighed and reeled in his line. Trust Fulton to bring that up. Fulton was the one who had found the stream for him and got him permission to camp here on private property.

"Ten minutes," he said as he waded ashore. "You have nine minutes and thirty seconds left."

"I need advice and an opinion.

You hear the explosion this morning?"

Malone put his rod down and reached for a cigarette. He nodded.

"Fellow named Hardy over on the lake," said Fulton. "His boat blew up. At first I thought it was a simple accident, his outboard motor, or gasoline can. Trouble is, an explosion like that couldn't really cause much damage, so George Kasky volunteered to do some diving. You know George. Used to be an underwater demolitions expert with the Navy. Runs the hardware store now. George put on his gear and brought some stuff up from the bottom that looks very interesting."

"How interesting?"

"George says if that was a gasoline explosion, he never set a charge in his life."

Malone stripped his cigarette down and rolled the paper into a tight ball in his thick fingers. "Sounds like a lot of fun for you. Why do you need me?"

Fulton squatted on the grassy bank and fumbled for his pipe. "Because I'm a hick sheriff and you're a high-powered detective from the city. If someone killed Hardy, it's more your line than mine. Will you give me a hand?"

"I thought you could call the state police in a case like this."

"Sure I can, but I'm up for reelection this fall. I'd like to handle this on my own. Means a lot of votes if I pull it off."

"What do you expect me to do that you can't do for yourself?"

Fulton lit his pipe with slow, measured puffs. "Just come along and keep me from making a fool of myself."

Malone chuckled. "That's a big assignment."

"Laugh. At least I know when I'm in over my head. You coming?"

Malone began stripping off his waders. "Always liked a man who admits his deficiencies. Where do you want to start?"

"At the lake. Kasky is waiting for us."

"This is going to be one of the most ridiculous investigations on record. I'm at a big disadvantage up here."

"A ridiculous investigation is better than none," said Fulton. "You know all the rules, what to look for, how to handle the questioning. I don't."

"Forget it," said Malone. "It all comes down to common sense, hard work and luck. Mostly luck."

Kasky pushed up his mask and let his mouthpiece drop when he saw Malone. "You going to help, Dave?"

"Certainly not with the diving, George. Fulton's upset because you say someone blew up the boat."

"Take a look for yourself." He held out the remains of a gasoline can. "It took more than gasoline to tear this apart."

Malone agreed. "I'm no expert, but you're probably right. Couple of sticks of dynamite?"

"Or the equivalent. Furthermore, this Hardy had an open rowboat with an outboard motor. No place for fumes to accumulate. The boat didn't have a chance to burn, because it was smashed to bits. Even the motor mount was bent."

"The only thing I can see is that someone planted dynamite on Hardy's boat," said Fulton.

"If Hardy wasn't carrying it himself," said Malone drily. "You find any pieces of a timer, or something else that could set it off?"

"Not a thing. That bottom is sand, and I was looking real good."

"Where was the boat located?"

"Almost in the center of the cove. No way for anyone to throw something into it."

"Okay," sighed Malone. "I agree it looks like someone killed this Hardy. Who had a reason?"

"Practically everyone on the lake," answered Fulton. "He was a greatly disliked man. Treated his wife mean and the other people about the same."

"Need something a lot more specific than that."

Kasky's eyes shifted. "There's a candidate, if you want to listen to rumors," he said. "Man named Price. Lives next door to Hardy and was supposed to be too friendly with Hardy's wife."

"Anyone else?"

Kasky shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"How about Hardy's wife?"

"Now you know why I need you," said Fulton. "I never thought of dynamite as a woman's weapon."

"Who would have a better opportunity to get explosives into Hardy's boat?"

"I guess you're right. What now?"

Malone looked out over the lake. Prevented by the tree-covered, steep hillsides from approaching by land, curiosity seekers cruised or sat motionless in a half-dozen boats

around the mouth of the cove.

"Let's see if any of these people actually saw the explosion," Malone suggested.

The second boat they hailed, a sleek speedboat, held a teen-aged couple.

"Sure we saw it," said the boy, adolescent-thin, with long blond curls over his ears. The girl was tanned and bikinied.

"Jack was checking the engine. We happened to stop almost here when the explosion came. There was a *crack*, then *vroom!*" The girl looked at Malone with eyes that suggested she preferred mature men.

Malone was amused. *"Crack vroom?"*

"Crack vroom," she repeated firmly.

"Anyone else around?"

"No," said Jack. "The boat was by itself."

"That was all?"

"That was all. We went over to help, but there was nothing we could do. Someone called the sheriff and he came out."

Fulton made a note of their names. "Where now?"

Back to my fishing if I had any sense, reflected Malone, but Fulton would never forgive me. He sighed, wondering where he could go just once to get away from people and their problems. It seemed like they were always conspiring to keep him from enjoying a little time off. He scratched his chin. "Have you talked to the widow?"

"Only to tell her Hardy was dead and to have her make the identification."

"What was left to identify?"

"His face and head weren't too bad. The blast caught him lower down. He was wearing a life jacket which kept him afloat. We didn't have to dive for him."

The slight blonde who opened the door to Fulton's knock didn't look mature enough to be called a woman, in spite of the wedding ring on her finger, until Malone looked into the violet eyes and realized she had been a woman for a long time.

"You don't mind if I ask you a couple of questions, Mrs. Hardy?" Fulton's voice was apologetic.

Her answer was to sob and collapse on Fulton's chest, while he stared helplessly at Malone over her head.

Malone felt like laughing. This was a situation Fulton would have to handle alone.

"It's Quentin Price," she sobbed. "He said if I didn't marry him he'd kill me."

"I don't understand," said Fulton, his face perplexed. "Why should he say that?"

The sobs grew louder. "I don't

know why he would threaten me."

Fulton patted her back encouragingly. "You stay here. I'll talk to him."

Outside, he looked at Malone. "How can I question her when she's like that?"

"You can't. Just try to get back to her later."

Malone followed him next door. Hardy's cabin was buried in the woods, with a footpath leading to a small dock at the lake. Price's cabin sat in splendor above a long sloping lawn that ran to the lake's edge, all the trees before it removed.

"When did he clear this out?"

"Last spring. Blasting out the stumps sounded like a small war."

"He might have had a few sticks of dynamite left over."

"Something else that never occurred to me," Fulton admitted.

Fulton knocked, and the man who let them in had a disdainful expression on his round, bulbous-nosed face. His eyes were small and close together, iron-gray hair cut short, the corners of his mouth turned down.

"What do you want?" asked Price.

"We just came from Mrs. Hardy," Fulton told him. "Threatening a woman anytime is bad enough. You must be sick to threaten her just hours after her husband died."

Price snorted. "Sick, hell! She's the one that's sick. She's glad to get rid of him. That grieving widow business is just an act."

Malone said quietly, "You expected her to welcome your proposal?"

Price jerked a thumb at Malone. "Who is he?"

Fulton explained Malone was a friend.

"I don't have to answer his questions."

"You don't have to answer any questions," said Fulton, "but when people don't answer, they usually have something to hide. Do you have something to hide, Mr. Price?"

"Not a thing. As far as Mrs. Hardy is concerned, I had plenty of reason to think she'd welcome

my proposal. We'd talked about it often enough. I wanted her to file for divorce, but she was afraid of Hardy. Now that he's gone, I thought she'd be happy about it. Instead, she turned on me and told me to get lost, so I lost my temper."

Malone decided the story was so ridiculous it had to be true. "When did you see Hardy last?" he asked.

"This morning. He couldn't get the outboard started. I went over to help him."

"He act any differently this morning than usual?"

"Not that you could notice. He thought kicking the outboard and cursing it would make it work. It took him less than a minute after I got there to blame me for the motor not starting. I finally got it going for him, he stowed his gear and took off."

"You like to hunt, Mr. Price?" The heads mounted on the wall and the well-polished rifles in the gun cabinet made the question unnecessary.

"In my younger days," said Price. "Now I just stalk them. I gave up killing a long time ago."

"Were you in your cabin when the explosion took place?"

"No. I went for a walk after breakfast. I was on the trail that circles the lake."

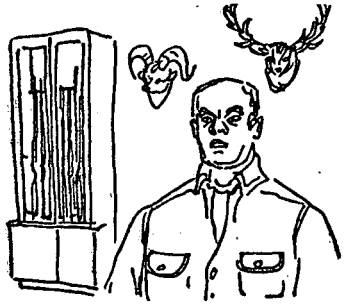
"Anyone with you?"

"Alone." He hesitated. "I hoped to meet Noreen Hardy, but she didn't show up."

"This thing between you and Mrs. Hardy. There have been rumors . . ."

"The rumors are true," said Price drily. "Why do you think I got so mad when she told me to take off?"

"And she's had a change of heart?"



"Evidently. Don't ask me to explain it."

"Someone will have to," said Fulton. "I'll probably be back."

Fulton led the way to the trail above the cabins, a footpath through the trees that wandered from shore to halfway up the surrounding hills, following the outline of the lake.

Fulton waved. "This is where he says he was. What do you think so far?"

"Nothing," said Malone. "You don't need me. You need an expert with a crystal ball. If I ran into

something like this in the city, I think I'd ask for a transfer to the traffic division."

Fulton grinned wryly. "Don't ever say we don't do things different up here in the woods."

"Look at what you have: a man dead in an explosion out in the middle of a lake, no one near him; no solid evidence of what caused the explosion other than the expert opinion of one man, who says nothing normally on the boat could have exploded so violently; no clue as to what set the explosion off; nothing yet as to who put the explosive in the boat and how; your chief suspect not only with the opportunity but with no alibi.

"To top the whole thing off, your suspect, if he did do it, wasted his time, because the woman he did it for has evidently thrown him over now, and he threatens to kill her, too. Will you please tell me why you couldn't leave me alone to fish in peace?"

"Because misery loves company," said Fulton. "Why should I go crazy by myself?"

"Take me back," said Malone wearily. "I'm just a hard-working cop on vacation, not a miracle man. If you get any more to go on, let me know and we'll talk about it."

The sun was gone when Malone, his dinner in his creel, decided to try one more cast and call it a day. He sighted along the rod, drew his arm up and dropped the fly exactly where he wanted it—and suddenly realized how Price could have killed Hardy and left no evidence behind.

He reeled in his line and headed for his trailer. The evening had turned cool and dark clouds were rolling in from the west. Rain tonight, maybe all day tomorrow; another day wasted, even though the bone-dry forest could use a good soaking.

Malone shook his head. Next year, he'd spend his vacation, if he could manage one, deep sea fishing at the shore.

He finished his brook trout and was relaxing with a cigarette when headlights and the purr of an engine told him he had a visitor. Malone moved to the shadow of the trailer.

The car stopped and Fulton moved into the firelight.

Malone stepped out.

"Why are you hiding?" Fulton was puzzled.

"Not hiding. Just being careful. You're supposed to have a killer running loose."

"I never thought of that. Maybe you'd better stay clear of things from now on. I certainly don't want you getting hurt."

"You get anything?"

Fulton shook his head. "Don't know anymore than I did this afternoon. I wanted to ask what you thought I ought to do. Call in the state police? Hold the inquest and let it go as death at the hands of someone unknown?"

"That won't close your investigation, will it?"

"No, but remember, these are summer people. They'll scatter, principals and witnesses both, in a couple of weeks, and that will be the end of it."

"Questioned Mrs. Hardy yet?"

Fulton grinned wryly. "Every time I come near her, she breaks into tears."

"Take a guess. Is she just emotional, or evading questioning?"

"I'm no psychologist. All I can do is try to talk to her."

"If Price is your man, I have an idea how he could have done it," Malone said slowly.

"That's more than I could come up with. How?"

"He could have planted some dynamite left over from clearing those trees almost any time. Could have substituted a gasoline can with a false bottom holding the explosive, for instance. Later, sitting on the hillside above the cove, he could have put a bullet into the dynamite whenever he pleased. That could account for no traces of a timer, and for the girl hearing a crack before the sound of the explosion."

Fulton fingered his jaw. "He could do it, too. He has the rifles and he's good enough with them. But suppose someone saw him carrying a rifle through the woods?"

"No one did, or you haven't turned anyone up yet."

"Still not enough to pick him up," Fulton said sadly.

"You might get a break," Malone encouraged him. "If he killed Hardy, he did it to get Hardy's wife, but she doesn't want him now. What's his next step?"

Fulton whistled softly. "Since he's already threatened her, I can see him going after Noreen Hardy."

"You have someone watching Price?"

"I don't have a fifty-man force. When I want something done, I do it myself."

"Then I wish you luck, and you'd better have a raincoat handy."

Listening to the rain beating on the trailer, Malone found himself feeling sorry for Fulton. If Price was his man, waiting in the rain would be worth it. And if it wasn't Price, then who?

Everything pointed to Price. There was no getting away from it, and maybe that was what was wrong with the whole thing.

Malone's fingers began imitating the drumming of the rain on the roof. Something was wrong somewhere and he couldn't quite pin it down. He felt as if he and Fulton had been led by the nose down a road someone meant them to travel. No matter how you looked at it, evidence or no evidence, it always came down to the people involved.

Take Noreen Hardy. If she was fooling around with Price, and then threw him over when her husband was dead and she was free, she obviously wasn't interested in him except for one of two things: either she wanted him to do the job, or she was setting him up to look as if he'd done it.

Or take Price himself. If he had done it, would he be egotistical enough to set it up so that everything pointed to him, then defy Fulton to prove it? Or would he behave like anyone else, knowing he'd be the chief suspect, and cover his tracks as much as possible?

Malone leaned back and stared at the ceiling before reaching for his rain gear.

The Hardy house was dimly lit. Malone's flashlight beam found the path through the trees as rain rustled through the leaves and touched tree trunks with dark shining wetness. A thoroughly miserable night, thought Malone, hoping he'd flush out Fulton before reaching the cabin.

Halfway down the path, a dark figure stepped out in front of him.

"Put out that damned light," said Fulton. "It's a good thing I recognized you when you got out of the car."

"Who is in the cabin?"

"I put Kasky on as deputy. He's keeping Mrs. Hardy company."

"While you stand out here in the rain?"

"I want to be able to move around, not stay cooped up. I've been wet before."

"Price in his cabin?"

"He sure is. As far as I know, he hasn't left it to get at her. Hasn't even talked to her since this morning."

"Those cabins have phones?"

"Some do, some don't. Both of these do."

A bobbing light left Price's house and headed for the Hardy's.

"There he goes," whispered Fulton. "Let him go in. I told Kasky to hide if someone came to the door, so he'll cover her from inside while we cover from out here."

The light approached the house, hesitated, went out as the door opened.

Malone and Fulton moved quietly through the rain to the door.

"This is no good," complained Malone. "You won't hear or see

anything from out here. If it were an ordinary summer night, the windows would be open. In this rain, the house is closed tighter than a drum."

"I really don't expect anything to happen," said Fulton. "I wouldn't be that lucky. Price will probably talk to her, and that's it."

Malone thought of the unpleasant look on Price's face and was sure Price wouldn't settle for just talking.

The shot came with dull suddenness. Fulton beat Malone through the door, taking the wind and the rain with them, to see Price sprawled awkwardly on the floor, a knife near his outstretched hand. Noreen Hardy crouched against the wall, and Kasky, gun in hand, stood staring at the body.

"I had no choice," said Kasky. "He came at her with the knife."

Fulton called for the ambulance, which took Price away, dead, and Noreen Hardy on a stretcher, because she needed a sedative. Fulton locked up the cabin.

In Fulton's little office in town, the three men sat, drying out and drinking coffee.

"That settles it, I suppose," said Fulton. "It was Price all the way."

Kasky was nursing his cup of coffee. "I'm sorry I had to kill him."

Malone looked at him. For a man who had just killed another, he looked very calm.

"Maybe that was what we were supposed to think," he said slowly. "Price was the fall guy all along."

They stared at him.

"Someone else set Price up, with the help of Mrs. Hardy, and only one man could have done it."

"You're crazy," said Kasky.

"Not me." He turned to Fulton. "Who first said dynamite had been used?"

Fulton thought. "Kasky."

"Exactly. Just think of all the answers he gave you, free of charge. Dynamite. No timing device. If there had been one, only he could have brought it up from the bottom of the lake or left it there. Who told us about the rumors concerning Price and Mrs. Hardy? Kasky.

"Suppose the explosive wasn't planted on the boat at all? Who could swim around underwater in that cove without being seen? Kasky. Who is the underwater demolitions expert? Kasky. He could have fastened it without Hardy knowing it. You want to prove it? Get another diver to go over that lake bottom. I'm sure you'll find something Kasky conveniently overlooked. Start asking around to see who noticed Kasky and Mrs. Hardy together. I'll bet she spent a

great deal of time in his hardware store and, when you come right down to it, whose idea was it for him to be in Noreen Hardy's cabin?"

"His idea," said Fulton grimly. "He volunteered, just like he volunteered to do the diving."

"There's a phone in the cabin. Want to bet Noreen Hardy didn't call Price to come over? Want to bet Price never brought that knife with him?"

"That's where you're wrong," said Kasky softly. "He had the knife all right, and he would have used it. I killed him to save Noreen's life, and I did it as a legally sworn deputy. You won't hang that on me."

"Maybe not," said Malone. "But I'm sure Fulton will hang Hardy's killing on you, especially if Mrs. Hardy decided talking is a good idea, which just might be the case. I don't think she expected you to kill Price."

Fulton beckoned to Kasky. "Maybe you'd better wait in a cell, George, until we can go through the formalities. I don't feel like chasing you, if you decide to run."

"You'll never make this stick. Malone's out of his mind."

Fulton shrugged. "Then you'll go back to your hardware store with my apologies."

When Fulton came back, Malone pushed to his feet and slipped into his raincoat. "You wanted advice and an opinion. You have them. Can you handle it from here on in?"

"If I can't, I don't deserve to win that election this fall. You going back to fishing?"

"In this weather? You'll find me in my trailer, reading."

Fulton grinned. "Good book?"

"Supposed to be," said Malone. "About a detective who really moves. Three beautiful women fall in love with him, he shoots six gang members between the eyes, gets beat up ten times, and finally corners the murderer on the roof of the tallest building in town."

Fulton held the door open for him. "Just like you."

"Not exactly," said Malone wearily. "I understand he gets a real vacation at the end."

Scientific investigation is not confined to a mold nor, apparently, is personal conjecture.

TRAINOR was a seeker of missing persons. He was good at his job. He almost always found them, dead or alive.

Mostly, these days, it was a runaway teen-ager gone to Greenwich Village or a runaway husband gone to hell. A call from a place like the state university was a distinct rarity.

"This isn't your usual missing person," said Dean Melrose, seated behind a massive oak desk that must have intimidated a good many undergraduates in its day.

"I understand that, sir." Trainor was always respectful to his elders and his clients.

"Professor Croft is perhaps the most brilliant mind on our campus. He has been on our faculty for more than ten years, most recently as head of our chemistry department. His basic research into the nature of homologous series is well-known in the scientific community, and he—"

"And he disappeared."

THE SECRET SAVANT

by Edward D. Hoch

"Exactly! He just walked out one evening and never came back!"

Trainor scratched his head and made a few notes. "When was this?"

"A week ago Tuesday."

"Family? Friends?"

"His wife is dead, and his only son is in the army in West Germany. His friends know nothing."

"All right," Trainor said. "Do you have a picture of him?"

Dean Melrose produced a glossy photograph of a thinnish, white-haired man. "The hair makes him look older than he is," he explained. "Actually, Professor Croft is only 46."

"Did his wife die recently?"

"A year or so ago. Cancer."

"Any sign of mental problems?"

"On the contrary! He took it quite well."

Trainor nodded. "Women?"

"Not that we know of. He spent many evenings working in the laboratory."

"All right."

"All right what?"

"I'll find him for you," Trainor said. "It may take a while. He's an intelligent man and if he really wants to stay out of sight he probably knows how to do it."

"But why would he want to stay away? State University is his whole life!"

Trainor could think of several reasons, beginning with that massive oak-desk, but he kept silent. His only job was finding people, not examining the reasons for their disappearance.

Professor Ronald Croft had vanished without a trace only insofar as the faculty and staff of State University were concerned. Actually, for anyone who cared to dig, he had left a slight but visible trail. He had abandoned his own car at the campus parking lot, a fact which had concerned the police briefly, but they lost interest when no evidence of foul play was immediately forthcoming.

Trainor, following routine procedures, quickly established that the missing man would have had to wait until the morning after his disappearance to get a plane out of the city. Trains ran infrequently, and the buses made many stops on that night run. Though they were all possibilities, he liked the idea of a rented car.

The first rental agency he tried had a record. Since the driver's license had to be shown, Croft had been unable to use an assumed name. Trainor jotted down the data, wondering why the police hadn't bothered to check this far. Perhaps they had, and just hadn't told anybody.

The car in question had been rented on the Tuesday night Croft

disappeared, and returned on Thursday to the agency's branch in Sweet Falls, a medium-sized city two hundred miles to the south. Trainor drove down to Sweet Falls that afternoon and started checking hotels and apartment houses.

It took him two days to get down to the boardinghouses, but then he struck pay dirt on the second one. A man named Raymond Collins had been staying there for more than a week, having taken a room on the Thursday the rented car was returned. The initials were the same—R.C.—and Trainor was willing to wager that Collins was Croft.

"Is he in now?" he asked the middle-aged landlady.

"He was here, but, I think he's gone down to the drugstore with Nancy."

Trainor played dumb. "His wife?"

"No, I told you he was alone. Nancy Parks is another one of our boarders."

Trainor thanked her and went down the porch steps to the street. So it was all as simple as that, a woman; but it didn't explain why he'd run away from State University and changed his name.

Trainor was halfway to the corner drugstore when he passed them, walking slowly and deep in conversation. Professor Croft had dyed his hair black, which explained what he'd been doing between Tuesday night and Thursday. Probably stopped at a motel along the way to do the job. The dark hair made him look under forty, and he had a youthful smile which hadn't shown in the photograph, but there was no doubt it was he.

Trainor was equally interested in the girl who walked at his side. She was not young, perhaps in her mid-thirties, but she had retained a youthful figure which she dressed to accentuate. Somehow she seemed much too sophisticated to be living in that little boardinghouse.

Trainor went back to the place an hour later, and knocked at Professor Croft's door. Presently it opened, and the black-haired man asked, "What do you want?"

"I've been hired to locate you, Professor Croft," Trainor said.

"I'm not . . ." the man began. Then, apparently deciding to give up the pretense, he said, "Come in."

The room was plainly furnished, with a bed, two chairs and a table. Trainor took one of the chairs, facing Ronald Croft.

"All right, how did you locate me so soon?" Croft asked.

"Through the car you rented. The people back at the university are very concerned, Professor."

"I'm sorry about that." He was sitting very still on the chair, with his hands folded on his lap.

Trainor wondered where the conversation was leading. "Will you come back with me, Professor?"

One of the hands left his lap to make a fluttering motion. "Not yet. I . . . my work isn't finished here."

"You're working on something?"

"A . . . laboratory experiment, you might call it."

"Could you tell me about it?"

Professor Croft ran a hand through his hair, then glanced at it as if fearing the black might have come off. "I don't think I should while it's in progress. If you could just tell the people back at the university, Dean Melrose and the rest, that I'll return as soon as I can . . ."

Trainor took out a cigarette. "Come on, Professor, you can cut the high talk. I passed you on the street an hour ago, walking with Nancy Parks."

He was surprised, but unflustered. "You know a great deal, don't you?"

"My job was to find you, not to bring you back against your will. You want to play around with the girl, it's fine with me. But what should I tell them back at the university? After all, they're paying my bills. They'll expect a report."

The Professor sighed and was silent for a time. Finally he got up and paced the floor, pensive and pondering. "All right," he decided, "I think I can trust you. I'll tell you about it."

Trainor settled back and lit the cigarette he'd been fingering.

"It started a few months back, when I advertised in the newspapers for paid volunteers to take part in a scientific experiment. They probably told you back at State University that I did some basic research in homologous series, dealing with organic chemistry. Although this field today is quite large, I have limited my study and research to the original concepts of the term—substances found in living organisms."

"Namely man?"

"Namely man. Perhaps you have been reading lately of the attempts of some scientists to find a link between criminality and a certain genetic abnormality known as XYY chromosomes. A year or so back, some studies made at a Scottish maximum-security prison tended to indicate that there was such a link. In my own research, I have been pursuing a somewhat parallel line of study, concentrating on certain aspects of organic chemistry."

"You said you placed an ad."

"And so I did. It attracted thirty-six replies, and I paid the applicants five dollars each to submit to a series of simple tests. I was seeking the presence of certain organic compounds in the body which would point to a strong tendency toward criminality. Well, one out of my thirty-six volunteers paid off."

Trainor was way ahead of him. "It was Miss Parks."

"That's correct. Of course the XYY genetic flaw applies only to males, but my work has turned up something similar—a combination of genetics and organic chemistry—which would apply to men or women. In short, Nancy Parks displays all the classic abnormalities which my studies have linked with violence and criminality."

"But why come here like this? To study her?"

"Exactly! I'd spent too many years simply locked away as a savant at a university, lecturing, experimenting, and publishing occasional papers. It was time for me to get out into the world, which is, after all, the greatest possible laboratory. The woman in question, Nancy Parks, was leaving town almost immediately, so I left too and followed her here."

"She doesn't know you?"

"My assistant interviewed her. But I dyed my hair in the event she might have seen a photograph of me somewhere."

Trainor nodded. "It's been a week now. What have you found out?"

"Some very promising things. Parks is her married name. She was originally Nancy Mitcomb before she married Pat Parks some five years back. It was a late marriage for her—she was past thirty—and not a happy one. Pat Parks drives an interstate truck. He's away for days at a time, and intellectually he's unable to cope with his wife's demands. Perhaps sexually he's unable to cope with them, too. Anyway, she once almost split his skull open with a whiskey bottle during a family quarrel. Another time, when he stormed out of the house and left her, she turned the violence upon herself and attempted suicide. You see, it's all of a pattern."

"Yes." Trainor studied the glowing tip of his cigarette. "But now what are you waiting for?"

Professor Croft leaned forward, speaking with controlled intensity. "She's been separated from her husband for the last several months. That's why she's living here alone. But she wrote to him recently, and he's going to visit her on his next trip through—perhaps this weekend."

"And you're waiting to see what

happens when they're together?"

"Exactly. In secret, but still with the scientific attitude. I know there are those who will say my methods are eccentric, but for me they are perfectly logical. I have no home ties, my wife is dead and my son is overseas. I am in a better position than any of my colleagues to pursue this sort of investigation firsthand."

"But if you're that certain some violence will occur, shouldn't you tell the police?"

"Tell them what? That because of her genes and general organic makeup, this Nancy Parks is likely to break a bottle over her husband's head, or perhaps even murder him? I fear I'd be laughed out of the police station. After all, there's a good chance that nothing will happen."

"What about Dean Melrose? What shall I tell him?"

"That I'm conducting scientific research, and will return to the campus in about ten days' time. That should be long enough."

"You really believe this?"

"I'm trying to keep an open mind. It's the only scientific way."

Trainor left him then and went back to his car. It had been a fairly easy assignment, and he should have headed back to State University to collect his fee. Professor Croft was found, and would return. What more was there for him to do?

Trainor would probably have driven back that evening had he not decided to relax first with a beer and a sandwich at a little restaurant down the street. He was seated alone at a corner table, just finishing up, when Nancy Parks came in and took a stool at the bar. Here, in the dim indirect lighting, she seemed young and lithesome, spinning around on the stool to greet a couple of late arrivals.

Watching her, Trainor could have imagined a good-natured prostitute or a slumming Manhattan career girl. He could have imagined almost anything but a would-be murderess, genes or no genes.

He took the dregs of his beer up and sat next to her. "You don't know me," he began.

"Right, I don't!" but she said it with a smile.

"Name's Trainor. I'm just passing through."

"The good ones always are." She glanced down at his glass. "Your beer's about gone."

"Join me?"

"Sure!"

When the drinks came he asked, "You live around here?"

"I'm boarding down the street. Waiting for my husband to show up."

"Oh."

"Not tonight, silly! Maybe not for a week or so. We had a fight and he walked out."

The conversation shifted to other things, and Trainor soon concluded that she was neither as sophisticated nor as happy as she'd first appeared. There was something just beneath the surface when she spoke, especially after the first two beers—something dark and brooding waiting for release. Trainor looked into her eyes and wondered if Professor Croft could be right after all.

Later, deciding to stay in the city a few days longer, he phoned in a somewhat inconclusive report to Dean Melrose. Yes, he had located Croft but he hadn't yet spoken with him. He hoped to do that today, and to talk him into returning. Yes, he would be in touch.

That was all. Then he merely waited.

He took a room in a motel a few blocks from the boardinghouse. He talked to Croft once on the telephone but he did not go to see him again, fearing that Nancy Parks might spot him and become suspicious.

If someone had asked Trainor what he was doing there, what he was waiting for, he could not have said. Perhaps he was trying to prevent a murder, but he could not even be certain of that.

Nancy's husband, Pat Parks, rolled into town behind the wheel of a tractor-trailer on Saturday afternoon. He did not have to continue his journey till Monday morning, so he headed directly for the boardinghouse where Nancy was staying.

Trainor telephoned Professor Croft. "Was that Parks that went in a while ago?"

"That was he."

"Satisfied now?"

"I will be, after this weekend."

"I'm coming over," Trainor said suddenly. He didn't know why, he just knew that he had to be there.

The middle-aged landlady eyed him with some suspicion as he climbed the stairs and knocked on Croft's door. When the Professor opened it, he placed his finger to his lips and motioned Trainor inside. "They're right across the hall," he whispered. "I've been trying to listen."

Trainor sat down unhappily. He knew now why he had come. "You can't go on with this, Professor. You can't go on manipulating people's lives as if they were laboratory animals."

"But I'm *not* manipulating their lives! I'm only observing, nothing more."

Then there was a crash from across the hall, and voices raised in anger.

Croft leaped to the door, opening it slightly. "Yes, they're fighting! Hear them?"

Trainor could hear them only too well. There was Nancy's screaming voice, followed by a low, brief curse from her husband.

"You've got to stop it," Trainor said. "Don't you understand? Scientist or no scientist, you can't stand here listening to it, knowing that she might well be capable of some violent action. Suppose she kills him—or herself? The blood would be on your hands."

"No, no," Croft protested, but as the shouts became louder, he seemed to waver.

The landlady was at the top of the stairs now, listening, but she soon retreated, leaving Trainor and Croft together in the hallway.

"I could kill you!" Nancy shouted from beyond the closed door.

Trainor grabbed at his coat. "You have to go in there! Damn it, you're a man, not some sort of machine! You can't just stand out here and listen!"

Professor Croft took a deep breath. "Yes," he said at last. "You're entirely right, of course."

The door across the hall was not locked. It opened when he turned the knob. Nancy Parks turned toward him. Her face was a twisted mask of fury, and she held a carving knife tightly in one upraised hand. Her husband Pat faced her uncertainly.

"Nancy," Croft began.

"Get out! Get the hell out!"

Croft, committed now, took another step toward her, and Nancy plunged the knife into his chest.

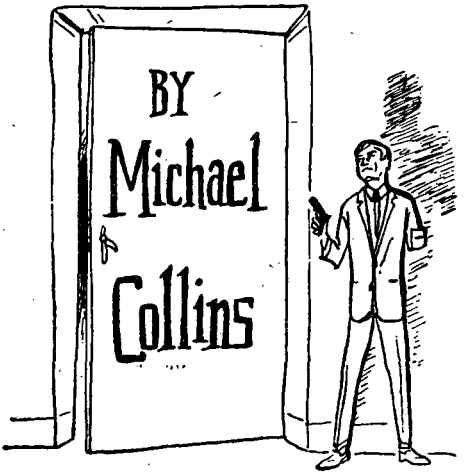
Professor Croft died later that day at the hospital, and Nancy Parks was arrested on a manslaughter charge. Trainor spent several hours at police headquarters, telling them what he knew—but he could not tell them what he felt.

That night, driving back home, he thought about Nancy and her husband, about Croft and himself. They'd all had a part in it, all of them. It had not been genes or organic irregularities, not really. It had only been the coming together of people.

An illusion which can elevate one individual to euphoria can also, of course, be viewed in reverse perspective.

I Scream all the Way

BY Michael Collins



IF I have a nightmare, it always concerns my falling from some great height, screaming helplessly into the abyss all the way down. I wake up in a shivering sweat, my missing arm aching where there is no arm to ache. I light a cigarette. I don't go back to sleep for some time. I am afraid of the vision of falling to my death.

That is why I remember so well what Captain Gazzo called The Sussex Tower Case.

It walked into my office on a hot Monday in August in the person of a small, dapper man wearing a gray tropical suit and a brisk manner. The heat that oozed through my one window must have made him think he was in a swamp, because he stepped as if his feet were in mud to the ankles.

He saw that my arm was missing. "You're Daniel Fortune?" The tone of his voice, and the look in his quick eyes, denoted silently, *You? A cripple?*

I was tempted to tell him that he would get his money's worth because I had two heads to compensate for the arm but, no matter what they show in the movies, humility gets more work than wit.

"Yes, sir," I said humbly. "What can I do for you?"

"You're a licensed private detective?"

"They'll give anyone a license these days," I said, and so much for humility and good business manners. Luckily, he had other matters on his mind. He sat down without even a thin smile at my wit.

"My name is Wallace Kuhns. I'm an attorney. I have a job: two men to guard $250,000 in cash, five p.m. to nine a.m. for five days. Fifty a day for each man."

"Fifty isn't much," I said, ready to bargain.

"Oh, damn," Kuhns said, and he transformed before my eyes. The starch went out of him, he slumped in the chair, stretched out his legs, reached for a cigarette, and looked ten years younger.

"This whole thing is a pain. Listen, Fortune, I know that fifty is peanuts. If Ajemian weren't a big client, I wouldn't be here at all."

"Who's Ajemian?"

"Ivan Ajemian, president of Tiflis Rug and Textile Company. Factories in New Jersey, North Carolina, and Connecticut. Offices on East 26th Street. Real headquarters in apartment 16-A, The Sussex Towers. That's his apartment."

"He has the $250,000 in cash there?"

"He does. He's a modern businessman, with some quirks. One of the quirks is that once a year, during the annual sales meeting in August, he hands out bonuses personally to the best salesmen. They come to his apartment one at a time. He gives them one drink, a pep talk, and the cash bonus."

"The insurance company doesn't like it?"

"You guessed it," Kuhns said. "Two weeks ago the apartment was broken into. The insurance boys are howling. They want two guards. Ajemian says okay, but no more than fifty a day per man."

"What was stolen two weeks ago?"

"Nothing. The police think Ajemian came home and scared the thieves off. The insurance people think the thieves were after the bonus money, and made a two-week mistake."

"Why guards only at night?"

"Ajemian says two company men can guard during the day and save money. At night they'd get overtime."

"When do I start?"

"Tonight. Can you get the other man?"

"Yeh. Pay fifty in advance for each of us."

That's how it began. After Kuhns had gone, I called Ed Green. I'd worked with Green before, and he'd take the fifty.

We arrived at apartment 16-A, The Sussex Towers, at 5:30 p.m. Green was grumbling about the heat and the lousy fifty bucks.

"I hope it's at least air-conditioned," he said.

It was. It was cool, and big, and bizarre. Ivan Ajemian went in for ornate furniture from a shah's palace, heavy decoration, velvet drapes, Oriental hangings and Persian rugs —all in one of those old "depression" apartments for the really-rich that had rooms they couldn't even find.

"The detectives?" Ajemian said when we were ushered in by an Oriental houseboy. "With one arm? What was Kuhn thinking of?"

"I'm sneaky," I said.

"Spare me the humor," Ajemian said. "I need protection, not comedy. I've got a lot of cash, I'm not especially brave, and my nose tells me that last so-called burglary might have been an inside job."

"What tells your nose that?" I asked.

"Follow me."

We followed him to the back door that opened into the kitchen from a service stairway. He was not what I had expected, from what Kuhns had said. Kuhns had made Ajemian sound old, but he wasn't a day over fifty. A big, calm-looking type, no matter what he said about his bravery, he moved with power, had sharp eyes, and looked like he could take care of himself.

"There," he said, "look at the lock."

I looked. So did Green.

"It's scratched," Green said, "but it could be a fake. What about it, Dan?"

I studied those scratches. They might have been made by a picklock; they were certainly intended to look like the work of a picklock, but they could have been fake scratches, too.

"I'm not sure. Somebody could be trying to make it look like entry from outside without a key."

"That's what I think," Ajemian

said. "I want the doors watched carefully, you hear? Now, people come and go here, and I don't want them bothered. Keep out of the way. The money is in my study safe. Stay in the study, or at the doors. Nowhere else. Is that clear?"

I turned for the door. "Let's go, Ed."

Green nodded and started after me. Ajemian watched us.

"All right," he said, "I'm impressed. What do you want?"

I turned back. "We decide what we do, and how we do it. Take it or leave it. I can always sleep."

Ajemian laughed. "Touchy, eh? I always said a handicap makes a man tougher. Very well, but try to keep out of my way. I happen to have a friend who comes here often. Understand?"

Ajemian winked at me. I understood.

"We'll check the money now," I said.

"Check the money? Why?"

"I've been hired before to guard what turned out to be an empty safe from the start."

I thought he was going to turn purple, but he checked himself and started for the study. Green followed him.

"I'll count," Green said. "You check the layout."

I checked the layout. It was simple, a lot of rooms but only two doors. The front door opened into the main corridor with the elevators. The back door opened from the kitchen onto a landing of the service stairs. The study where the money was had two doors, one from the livingroom and one from the kitchen. Nothing but a fly could get in through the windows, even though there was a ledge outside the study windows.

"Money checks," Green reported.

"The only entry is through the two doors, and there are two of us," I said. "It's a vacation with pay if we stay awake."

Green agreed with me. I took the livingroom door, and he parked at the kitchen door. Ajemian worked in his study with the cash. It looked like a quiet week ahead.

It wasn't.

About ten o'clock I heard a key turn in the outer door. Ajemian had already gone to the livingroom. I jumped to the wall on the far side of the front door, my ancient revolver in my hand. The door opened, and one of the trimmest shapes I ever saw came into the room from the corridor.

"Ivan, honey!"

She was small and wore a blue summer suit she filled beautifully. She saw me behind her, and my jaw must have been hanging. She smiled, preened for me, and then saw my empty sleeve.

"Goodness! What happened to your arm?"

"Do you have a couple of days to listen?"

She giggled. "I bet you were a soldier."

"Who are you, miss?"

"Mary Kane. Isn't Ivan here?"

This, then, was the reason for Ajemian's wink. She had no handbag, and she couldn't have hidden a razor blade under the suit without it showing clear against her curves.

"He's back in his bedroom."

She tripped off toward the bedrooms, calling, "Ivan! Honey!"

I went back to my chair. Mary Kane had a key. I wondered who else had a key to the apartment? It was a nervous thought. The next visitor didn't have a key. At least, he didn't use it. He knocked, lightly.

Since there was a doorbell, I approached the door with care. The knock had the sound of someone checking to see if anyone were in the apartment. I opened the door quickly, my pistol in my solitary hand.

A tall, thin man stared at my gun.

"In!" I snapped. "Back away. Fast."

He came in, backed away, and I leaned out and checked the corridor. It was empty. I closed the door and faced him.

"Who are you?"

"Max Alvis." He was thin and nervous. "Executive VP of Tiflis Rug Company. Are you one of the detectives?"

"Yeh. Dan Fortune."

"You're alone?"

"My partner's around."

"You always remain separate?"

"We don't do anything always. We mix it up."

"I see, yes. Quite clever."

"No, standard routine," I said.

Alvis nodded. "Kuhns seems to have hired good men. It's an annoying situation all around. I wish the insurance company had never found out about the earlier burglary attempt. We've gone along without guards for years. That stupid attempt was probably of no importance anyway." He glanced around. "Isn't Mr. Ajemian here?"

"In the bedrooms."

"Alone?"

"No."

"Ah," Alvis said. "Well, I suppose it can wait."

The executive VP wheeled around, strode to the door, and went out. Green appeared behind me.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"I don't know. I guess he decided to change his mind, if he had any real reason to come here at all."

"Yeh," Green said dubiously. "At least he didn't have a key. Let's change posts, you're having all the company."

"Ajemian's not working anymore tonight," I said. "I'll sit in the study."

I went into the study. All was quiet. I opened the door into the kitchen and sat where I could see the rear door. I thought about Max Alvis. What had he really wanted? There was something about my conversation with him that bothered me, but I couldn't place what it was.

I thought about it, and must have dozed lightly, but jerked alert when I heard voices in the livingroom, a man's, a woman's, and Green's. The man was Ajemian, and he burst into the study with his arm around a tall woman in black. He was all smiles. She wasn't.

"My dear wife needs her blood money," Ajemian said. "I'm opening the safe. You men want to draw your guns?"

"Ivan has such a sense of humor," the woman said. "That's why I left him. He made me laugh too much."

"Two years, Beth, and no divorce," Ajemian said. "Admit you miss me."

Mrs. Beth Ajemian wasn't a strudel like little Mary Kane, but a fine figure of a woman. Red-haired and full-bodied, she walked with grace and just enough sway. She was a woman, she knew it and liked it.

"I miss you, Ivan, exactly as you miss me," she said. "Do you perhaps want a divorce to marry your latest little friend?"

"I never claimed to be a saint, Beth."

"I didn't want a saint. I wanted a husband who was sometimes at home with his wife."

Ajemian shrugged. "I guess that's water under our bridge."

He opened the wall safe and took out an envelope. I saw the big bundle of $250,000 still intact. Ajemian handed the envelope to his estranged wife.

"A little extra, Beth. Don't tell my lawyer."

"Thank you, Ivan."

She looked around the study

slowly, as if remembering better days. Or studying the layout? Then she left the study, crossed the livingroom and went out without looking back.

"We just didn't work out," Ajemian said.

"How come she came for her money at this hour?" I asked.

Ajemian looked at me. "I don't know. She called, said she needed it. Why?"

"Nothing special," I said.

Ajemian went back to Mary Kane in the bedroom. Green resumed his post in the livingroom. I remained in the study, but I didn't like the feel of it. I went into the kitchen and looked at that lock again. The marks were still there, and they still could be the work of a jimmy, or the work of someone who wanted to make them look like a jimmy.

I went back to the study and settled in. I didn't doze, but nothing more happened that night.

We were relieved at nine the next morning. On our way to the elevators we met the first salesman. He had the gleam of bonus in his eyes.

Green headed for home and some sleep. I didn't. I went across the street and sat on a bench just inside the park, from where I could see both the front and service entrances to The Sussex Towers. Last night had been too busy, too much traffic in that apartment. I sensed it. Ajemian was nervous. So was Max Alvis, and what was it about Alvis' talk with me that rang wrong?

There are only two ways to plan a crime and get away with it: hide it, or disguise it.

Amateurs tend to disguise a crime. They plan it to look like something else, or look like the work of someone else, to prevent anyone looking in the right place for the obvious motive. He has to resort to illusion.

Most professionals hide their crime, but they don't disguise it. They don't care if the crime is known for what it is, as long as they're not caught doing it, or have it proved against them later that they did this particular job.

Both methods have their problems, and both require some planning, so I sat in the park and watched The Sussex Towers. For a few hours I saw nothing more interesting than what looked like more hungry salesman hurrying into the building; nothing suspicious, no one who looked like pro or amateur casing the place.

Then Max Alvis appeared in a taxi. He didn't get out at the front entrance, but at the rear, then walked into the alley that led to the service entrance. I could see him all the way. He stopped at the service entrance and seemed to study it.

Then he went inside. I waited, but he didn't come out.

A half hour later he did come out —the front—and hailed a cab. Making a quick decision, I sprinted for another taxi. Luckily, The Sussex Towers attracted cabs.

"No wisecracks," I said, "but follow that cab."

The driver muttered, but he followed. We ended up at an office building in the East Thirties. Alvis went inside. I tailed him to the elevators. There was no way to follow him any farther without being spotted, so I checked the building directory. Wallace Kuhns, Attorney, had an office in room 310.

Fifteen minutes later Alvis appeared again in the lobby. Kuhns was with him—and Mrs. Beth Ajemian.

They hurried out into the heat and split up. Alvis took another taxi, while Kuhns and Beth Ajemian walked toward Third Avenue. I had no choice, there were no other empty cabs, so I followed Kuhns and Mrs. Ajemian. I would have followed them, anyway. Kuhns was holding Beth Ajemian's hand—tight.

On Third Avenue they went into a cocktail bar. I followed. Inside there were booths, dim light, and a small bar. Kuhns and Beth Ajemian slid into a middle booth. I sat at the bar and watched them. They had all the aura of lovers, and not new lovers.

Kuhns held her hand as he talked, hard and fast. I watched through three beers, then I saw Kuhns dig for his wallet, and I left first. I picked them up as they came out. They went straight back to Kuhns' office.

I headed for home. There was nothing in itself suspicious about Kuhns being close to Beth Ajemian. The wife and Ajemian seemed to have gone their separate ways, and Kuhns would have known the woman for a time. I remembered that Ajemian had said, "Don't tell my lawyer," when he had given Beth Ajemian some extra money last night, so Ajemian knew that his wife and Kuhns were close.

Too, Kuhns had hired me—or was that part of some scheme? I felt more than a little uneasy. At the very least, Kuhns might have been forced to hire detectives against his will. It was something to think about. So I thought about it, and I didn't get much of the sleep I needed.

I got back to The Sussex Towers at 4:50 p.m. to find Green already there, the company men on their way out, and Ajemian in a lousy mood.

"I've got two hours of work," Ajemian growled. "Stay out of the

damned study, and keep quiet. If anyone comes, tell him I've gone to China."

It looked like the start of a long night. I filled Green in on what I'd seen that day, while we waited for the last of the Tiflis Rug Company men to leave.

"We'd better keep a close eye on people with keys," Green said.

"I hear you loud."

When the last man had gone, and Ajemian was closed up in the study, I double-locked the front door, then went to check all the bedrooms to make sure no one was lurking around. Green took the rear and the kitchen to check.

I found no one in the bedrooms —not in the rooms, the closets, or under the beds. I had one more room to check when I heard the shot—a single shot that echoed through me like an atomic bomb.

From the rear—the study!

I ran with my old revolver in my lone hand. I reached the door into the study from the livingroom, but didn't barrel on through. That way lay suicide. I flattened beside the door, and kicked it open, then jumped through, crouched low, with the old cannon out ahead of me.

Ajemian lay on the floor, bleeding. No one else was in the study. I ran to Ajemian, who struggled up.

"One man. Masked! Tried to stop him," Ajemian croaked. "Waiting for me in here. He got it all!"

"Let's see the—"

"No! Flesh wound. Back door! Get him."

I hesitated a second. No amount of money is worth a life, no matter what the victim thinks, but the wound didn't look bad. I ran out into the kitchen.

Green lay on the kitchen floor, out cold. An ugly lump on his left temple showed what had happened to him.

The back door was open. I went out onto the service landing. The only way out of The Sussex Towers was down. Even if the thief had gone up, he would have to come down sooner or later. I ran down those sixteen flights as fast as I could, listening all the way. There was no sound like that of a running man.

In the basement I listened. I heard nothing.

I went out into the alley at the rear. In the hot sunlight there wasn't even a cat. I ran out into the street that bordered the park. At this hour traffic was thick, and if he'd made it this far there was no way to catch him, not if he was a pro.

A woman's high, shrill scream shattered the hot evening.

I looked up toward the windows

of Ajemian's apartment sixteen floors above.

For one brief instant the whole evening seemed to hold its breath in frozen silence, no sound at all. Sixteen floors above, I saw the man seem to hang in space, his face masked, his arms spread, his feet and legs twisted, a black bag floating beside him. All seemed motionless for the one split second.

Then I stood there and watched the man fall the whole long, endless sixteen stories in slow silence, like a grotesque sequence from some old, silent movie.

He hit on the roof of a parked car, and bounced off into the street. Two cars ran over him before they could stop. The black bag hit some twenty feet away, split open, and spilled bundles of money across the street. A small pistol hit near the bag.

I ran to the fallen man through screams and squealing brakes. Blood spread all around him. Two patrolmen were running up, and a cruise car was in sight. I bent over the man. He was still masked. I took off the mask.

It was Wallace Kuhns. He didn't have much face left, but it was Kuhns. I stared at him for a long count of ten, then looked up at the tall building isolated from all the other buildings around it.

I grabbed the police sergeant from the cruise car.

"Put a man on the back and front doors!" I said. "Now!"

"Who the hell are you? What do you know about—"

I showed him my license. "Dan Fortune. Call Captain Gazzo at Homicide. Ask about me, and get him up here fast. But put men on

the doors now. No one in or out. No one! You've got to do that!"

I was in luck. The sergeant was a good cop who would take no chances. Maybe I was crazy, but he'd find that out later. Meanwhile, maybe I knew what I was doing.

He sent one patrolman to the back door, and one to the front doors; no one in or out until further orders. The windows on the first two floors of the building were barred. It would do. A minute had barely passed since Kuhns had taken his fall.

I went back up to the apartment.

I revived Green and checked Ajemian's bleeding, and by then the doctor had arrived. So had Captain Gazzo. The captain looked at me, at Green, at Ajemian, and got down to business.

"Okay, what's the story?"

Ajemian's wound was minor—a deep flesh wound that had bled but wasn't serious. Green had a nasty lump and a headache.

Ajemian said, "He was hiding in here in the study when I came in tonight. He was masked. He held the gun on me, and made me open the safe. He heard Fortune lock the front door, and go off to search the bedrooms. He heard Green in the kitchen."

Green nodded. "I was checking the lock on the back door when I heard him behind me. He slugged me good and that's all I know."

"After he hit Green," Ajemian went on shakily, "I tried to jump him and he shot me. He ran out the back way. Fortune came into the study. You know the rest."

I said, "Didn't you know Kuhns hadn't left tonight?"

"He did leave," Ajemian said. "An hour before you arrived. He must have come back in through the rear and hid in the study."

Gazzo gave me an odd look, and went out. I sat while the doctor worked some more on Ajemian and Green. I lighted a cigarette. Gazzo came back after about fifteen minutes.

"M.E. says Kuhns died from the fall, no doubt," the captain said. "We found a money wrapper under the window on the service landing outside the back door. There's a ledge out that window. Looks like he tried to hide there while Fortune was chasing down the stairs, only he slipped."

I said, "Nuts."

Gazzo glared at me. "There are fresh picklock marks on the back door, but we think they're fake. Kuhns had keys to the apartment in his pocket. He knew the routine of Green and Fortune, timed it for when they would be separated. If Ajemian hadn't made him shoot he'd have gotten away. He had bad luck."

"Bad luck, hell," I said. "Kuhns was murdered, Captain."

Gazzo nodded wearily. "I figured that's why you called in Homicide and had the doors sealed off. What've you dreamed up this time, Dan?"

"Kuhns didn't fall, he was tossed over. Whoever tossed him didn't have time to get out of the building. There's no way off the roof, so the killer's still inside. Keep the building sealed tight, no one in or out without identification."

"You're saying Kuhns wasn't alone? You want to tell me how you figure all this?"

"No, you wouldn't believe me."

"I'll bet," Gazzo said drily. "Any idea who?"

"Someone who knows Kuhns, this apartment, and where the money was," I said. I turned to Ajemian. "Is there anyone besides your ex-wife Beth, Max Alvis, Mary Kane, and the insurance people who fit that bill?"

"Myself," Ajemian said, "and the company guards we have in the day. The insurance people don't know the apartment."

"Okay," I said to Gazzo, "those are who you look for."

"I'll check them out," Gazzo said, "and a few other things, if that's okay with you? Like Kuhns' actions?"

"Why don't you just do what I'm going to do now, Captain?" I said.

"What's that?"

"Wait," I said, and that's what I did, I waited.

Green was carted off to the hospital for observation, and Ajemian and I waited alone in the apartment. Ajemian watched me watching television for two hours before he blew up.

"Are you just going to sit here, Fortune? Do you expect me to pay you for that?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Work! If you think Kuhns was murdered, go and solve it!"

"It's being solved, Ajemian," I said.

"By the police? Couldn't you help them, for what I'm paying?"

"Not the police," I said. "It's being solved by time. Time will solve it, and I've done my part. The killer is still in the building, for sure. No one gets out now, and sooner or later we have our killer."

"Just like that? It's not very imaginative," Ajemian said.

"Most police work isn't," I said. "Follow routine, set up your conditions, and wait. That's the way it plays most of the time. Why don't you just go to bed if waiting gets you?"

"With a killer loose in the building?"

"There's a police guard on both doors," I said.

He went to bed. I sat and waited alone. It was a long night. I began to jump at every noise, and from time to time in my mind I saw Kuhns falling those long, silent sixteen stories to his death.

Gazzo came back at eight o'clock the next morning. I was groggy from lack of sleep. Ajemian had slept fine and was bright as a pin. Gazzo hadn't slept any more than I had, but he was as bright as Ajemian.

"Here it is, Dan," Gazzo said. "Kuhns needed money. He'd lost a few clients, and had a big stock option. Beth Ajemian admits Kuhns wanted to marry her, but she wasn't about to divorce Ajemian until Kuhns had cash. She also admits Kuhns could have copied her set of keys to this place.

"The bag with the money in it was bought by Kuhns yesterday. The pistol is a Tiflis Rug office gun that vanished two months ago. He probably didn't want to hire detectives, but his hand was forced, so he hired two of the cheapest he could get. He probably figured you and Green were dumb. Maybe he was right."

I shrugged. "All circumstantial, and all a setup. Someone wanted it to look like Kuhns was only out to rob the place, or maybe force him to rob the place. No one tried to get out of the building yet?"

"No," Gazzo said. "I'm waiting for a call to finish off your little hunch."

"What call, Captain?" Ajemian asked.

"Fortune will find out," Gazzo answered.

I said, "You know, that first robbery attempt really stinks. If it was unknown thieves, it's too much coincidence. If it was Kuhns, it was crazy; it just drew attention when the money wasn't here. I figure it was a fake, to make everyone think about robbery. All part of a big illusion, only there was a flaw in the illusion that made me think."

Ajemian said, "What kind of flaw, Fortune? Are you sure you're not just dreaming, as the captain says?"

Before I could answer, which I didn't intend to then anyway, the telephone rang. Gazzo answered. He listened for a time, nodded a few times, and hung up with a big grin at me.

"That's it, Dan. Everyone is accounted for. Beth Ajemian's been home all night, Max Alvis is in his office, Mary Kane is at her modeling school, the two company guards are at work, and even the insurance men are where they should be. None of them are in this building."

"Right," I said. "Then Ajemian's the killer."

The big rug company executive was on his feet, red as fire instead of pale, and spluttering at me.

"Is this a joke, Fortune? I'll have you—"

"No joke," I said. "Simple elimination. I told you time would solve it. No one got out of this building. You're the only one still in the building. So you're it."

Ajemian was so red I thought he would choke to death then and there. He whirled on Gazzo. "Are you going to let him sit there and accuse me? I'll ruin both of you!"

Gazzo said nothing. He was watching Ajemian and me and waiting for my story. I gave it:

"Kuhns never left the apartment. You, Ajemian, knocked him out and hid him in the study. He wouldn't stay quiet long, so you pulled it off as soon as Green and I were alone. You hit Green, opened the rear doors, and shot yourself. When I chased after the supposed thief, you hauled Kuhns up on the windowsill and heaved him out with the money and the gun.

"It was just luck I'd gone all the way down. You saw me down there, and figured it was the perfect touch—I'd *see* Kuhns fall—but that was a mistake. It broke a good illusion."

Ajemian tried a laugh. "You expect anyone to believe all that? An intricate scheme like that?"

"Not so intricate. It almost worked. The groundwork was harder than the killing trick. You had to fix it so Kuhns needed money. You got clients to leave him, and he was your lawyer so you had him take a big stock option for you, but in his name. We'll find he's done that before. The gun was easy, and he'd have bought the bag for you if you told him to. I'll bet we find he had other bags he could have used safer."

"He did," Gazzo said quietly. "Two attache cases we found."

I nodded. "I guess you were really jealous, wanted your wife back. That'll be easy to prove, the motive, or you wouldn't have tried for such a big illusion of robbery. Gazzo should be able to trace those keys eventually. Anyway, a paraffin test will show you shot a gun last night, and with—"

Ajemian waited for no more. He had a gun. He'd been ready. He took a shot at me, missed, and went out the front door. Gazzo picked himself up and went after him. I sat down. I had a cigarette. A one-armed man isn't much help in a fight, and I value my skin. Catching him wasn't my job.

After a time I heard shots on the roof. I went to the window. Then I heard the scream, and I leaned out the window to look up. I was just in time to see him fall,

his gun still in his hand. He screamed all the way down.

I was still at the window when Gazzo came back.

"We didn't have much," Gazzo said. "You know we don't use a paraffin test anymore, it's useless. No court will take it."

"He didn't know that," I said. "It's not the truth that counts, Gazzo, it's what people think is true. He knew he did it, and he had to be a little crazy."

"All right, tell me. I'll believe how you figured it, now."

"There was one thing Max Alvis said. He didn't know how the insurance people learned about that first supposed robbery attempt. Only three people could have told them. Alvis didn't. Kuhns didn't. That left Ajemian himself. He wanted the insurance men to know, so they would insist on guards. He needed witnesses for his fake robbery illusion."

"That had to come later, Dan. How did you start to think it was murder in the first place?"

I said, "What happened on the roof just now?"

"He tried to shoot it out, slipped, and went over the edge."

"He fell," I said, "and he screamed all the way down."

"So?"

"They always scream, Gazzo. Or almost always."

"Okay, so they scream. So what, Dan?"

"Kuhns didn't scream," I said. "Kuhns fell sixteen floors without making a sound. Even when they jump they usually scream, it's a reflex I guess. Kuhns fell, by accident, and he didn't make a sound. The only way that could have happened was that Kuhns had been unconscious. He'd been tossed out —murdered."

Gazzo stared at me. "Damn it, Dan, who can prove everyone screams when he falls? Maybe Kuhns was a man who just didn't scream!"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "It was the little flaw that made me wonder. It made me think."

Gazzo groaned. "Dan, you've got dumb luck."

"Like I said, it's not what's true that counts, but what a man thinks is true. If you build an illusion, it has to hold all the way. I didn't believe a man would fall sixteen floors without a scream. So I just couldn't believe the illusion."

Gazzo had no more to say. He was a cop, and he'd sweat for days about my shaky reasoning that could have been dead wrong. I won't sweat. Maybe someday I'll find a man who falls sixteen floors in silence, and then I'll be wrong. This time I'd been right, and that's what counts in detective work.

The danger in thievery, it seems, is that the culprit may become insensible to the mutable nature of extrinsic components.

THIEF in the NIGHT

by Carroll Mayers

THE cocktail lounge of the posh Caribbean resort hotel was cool and dim, subtly conducive to languid dalliance, particularly if an unattached gentleman such as Harry Tyson (alias Howard Towne, at the moment) had acquired a lady of similar status during the evening.

In reality, Harry habitually disdained women, categorizing the majority of the species as either superficial or devious, the latter characteristic in direct conflict with

his own highly specialized talents.

At one-thirty that morning, then, Harry not only was alone but had decided to retire. Harry was weary, his flight to the island having been delayed before takeoff. Also, a baggage mixup upon arrival had proved annoying and tiring.

Harry finished his third gin and tonic, paid the check and left the lounge. As he crossed the lobby, lilting Latin rhythms made him pause momentarily at the entrance to the main casino where a formal dance still was in progress. Harry's expert eye noted that the women were elegantly gowned and jeweled, and he sighed. All that ice, just begging to be lifted!

Actually, the owners of those glittering baubles faced no imminent loss. A neat haul of blue-white diamonds, obtained with a minimum of duplicity from a bonded courier and presently cached in a safe deposit vault back in the States, eliminated any concern over Harry's income in the immediate future. In addition, he had three thousand in cash on his person, more than sufficient to sustain him in this tropical paradise while the Diamond Merchants' Association, suspecting him as always, vainly endeavored to locate him and, even more difficult, obtain a conviction.

Entering his quarters, Harry stopped short, frowning. He had left the air-conditioning on at full capacity but someone, likely the maid, had switched it off. The room was stifling. Again adjusting the unit, Harry stepped out onto the private balcony to wait until the room could cool.

The hotel was perched upon a lush slope, overlooking village and harbor, and even at night the view was magnificent. Harry lighted a cigarette, relaxed on a chaise longue, momentarily charmed by the low-riding moon and starry heavens which complemented a spate of twinkling lights in homes and ships beyond the hillside.

Abruptly, Harry detected movement directly below, near the swimming pool, to the left of which, shaded by trees and shrubs, a paved, dimly-lighted walk fronted a row of individual cabanas for guests desiring ground-level convenience plus added privacy. Watching, Harry saw a woman appear, stroll past the separate units.

Even in the shadows, the woman's walk registered as slightly too casual, and Harry continued to watch, waiting for her to pass a shaded lamp bracketed to a cabana directly ahead, when he might glimpse her more fully. When the lamp's scant radiance briefly caught the woman's face, Harry saw that she was quite young, with pert features framed by ash-blonde hair,

but Harry was now more concerned with her movements, which struck him as definitely furtive.

Recognizable through the walk's foliage only as a nebulous form, the girl had halted before a unit almost completely in shadow, appeared to be having difficulty in admitting herself. Fumbling with a key? Perhaps; but a moment later, when a cessation of movement indicated the girl had finally gained entrance, there ensued no glow of illumination from within the cabana.

Harry stubbed his cigarette, continued to center his attention on the darkened unit. Some ten minutes elapsed. Then shifting shadows signaled the girl's emergence. An all but indistinguishable wraith, she slipped down the walk and disappeared.

Harry arose from the chaise, checked his room's temperature and found it to his satisfaction. He took a quick shower, climbed into bed, his lips quirked in taut displeasure as he closed his eyes.

At nine-thirty the following morning, Harry had just finished knotting his tie when a discreet knock echoed. He called, "Yes?"

"Manager Coleman, Mr. Towne. May I speak to you a moment?"

"Of course." Admitting Coleman, Harry saw he was not alone; a heavyset, balding man with shrewd gray eyes accompanied the manager into the luxurious room.

Coleman, his thin features tight with patent concern, made the introduction. "This is Mr. King, our security officer. I apologize for intruding at this hour, but a most unfortunate situation has come up."

Harry waved his guests to chairs. "And what might that be?"

Neither man sat down; King took over. "In a word, Mr. Towne," he said bluntly, "we've had a robbery. A big one."

Harry blinked. "Oh?"

"Yes," the security officer said. "Two of our guests attended the dance in the casino last night, from about ten-thirty until two. When they returned to their room, they discovered it had been ransacked and a diamond necklace with matching earrings, worth twelve thousand dollars, had been taken."

Harry winced. "Jewels that valuable belong in the hotel safe."

The manager sighed. "I suggested as much, naturally. But the woman wanted them handy, assumed that in an establishment of this stature there would be no danger—" He broke off. "The whole point's academic, of course."

Harry eyed Coleman quizzically. "It is unfortunate," he agreed, "but why come to me?"

The security officer answered. "We're checking with all guests in this area of the hotel," he explained.

"You see, the burgled unit is one of the private cabanas directly below this section, visible from the balcony—"

"And you're wondering if perhaps I might have noticed anything or anybody suspicious last night?"

"Exactly, Mr. Towne," King said. "Were you, by any chance, on your balcony any time last night from, say, ten-thirty on?"

Harry nodded. "As a matter of fact, I was. I came up around one-thirty, found the air-conditioner off and sat outside for maybe twenty minutes until the room cooled down a bit."

"But you didn't notice anything out of the way below? The unit was number twelve, right center."

Harry considered. "I can't say I did, no."

"You heard no voices? Nobody walked by?"

"No-o . . ."

"Any detail at all might help."

"I'm sorry. I didn't pay any attention. I was just smoking a cigarette, killing a few minutes."

King traded a glance with Coleman, subsided. The manager cleared his throat. "Thank you for your time, sir. I hope you'll—ah—help us keep this matter under wraps. We're talking only with guests in this part of the building; we don't want to alarm the others."

Harry smiled. "I understand perfectly," he told Coleman. "You may depend upon my discretion."

Breakfast was not the leisurely, thought-free meal Harry had anticipated. Now that the nagging suspicion which had touched him last night had been confirmed by the security man's revelation, Harry found himself annoyed. His charade of ignorance had not been a ploy to protect a fellow thief, but rather an instinctive tactic to gain time, permit him to clarify his own thinking.

The more he considered the incident, the more irked he became. He neither needed nor wanted any part of the girl's take, but dammit, she could only be a tyro, intruding in an area that he, a legitimate professional, might well have staked out for himself.

A challenge, that's what it was, and from a blasted female to boot! The audacious blonde had to be put in her place. Giving up those matching earrings the security man had cited should be sufficient . . .

The situation thus resolved, there remained only a confrontation with the young woman. There was the possibility that she already had decamped with her loot, taken an early taxi to the airport. Somehow, Harry doubted that; believing herself completely unsuspected, there was every reason to think the girl would linger at this lush spot, per-

haps even contemplate an additional nocturnal foray.

Harry's thinking proved out; mid-afternoon he recognized his quarry enjoying a cool drink at a table on the patio just beyond the pool. Going to the patio bar, Harry caught the attendant's eye, nodded toward the girl's table.

"What's the young lady drinking?"

The barman followed Harry's gaze. "Rum and Coke, sir."

Harry smiled, said, "Another. And a gin and tonic for me." The drinks in hand, he paused. "Miss Smith, isn't it?"

The barman checked a smile of his own. "Miss Rogers, sir."

As he approached the girl, Harry had to admit she was even more attractive than his brief glimpse last night had suggested. Her eyes were shaded by dark glasses, but her pert features were smooth and only lightly tanned, her brief yellow sunsuit extremely complimentary to lovely legs and a trim figure.

"My pleasure," Harry murmured without preamble, placing the glass before the girl and settling opposite her.

She looked up, pencilled brows arcing. "I beg your pardon?"

Harry said, "As long as we're going to talk business—and perhaps haggle a bit—I thought the least I could do was buy you another drink. I trust you don't mind."

She drew a breath, eyes fathomless behind their dark lenses. "I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Mr. uh—"

"Towne; Howard Towne," Harry supplied.

Her lips thinned. "I find this most annoying, Mr. Towne."

Harry nodded. "That's understandable, particularly when our talk will put you at a disadvantage."

A tic pulsed in the girl's smooth cheek; deliberately, she removed the sunglasses, hazel eyes studying him. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're intimating and I don't know you," she rejoined. "Furthermore, if you don't leave at once I shall call for the manager."

Harry remained unabashed. "Before you do that, let's chat about the robbery last night."

Her level gaze did not waver. "What robbery?"

Harry sighed. "I saw you, Miss Rogers," he said. "I just happened to be on my balcony at, shall we say, the moment of truth. I'm prepared to make my identification most positive." He returned her look placidly. "Unless, as I suggested, we barter a bit. The earrings in exchange for my silence?"

The tic was stronger now, but she didn't crack. Instead, she abruptly got to her feet. "I've had more than enough of this—"

Harry's geniality waned. "Don't press your luck," he suggested.

For a long moment Miss Rogers' hazel eyes locked with his. Then, wordlessly, she turned, walked away.

Harry remained seated, thoughtfully sipping his drink and fighting a flicker of uncertainty. His blonde adversary's standing up to him indicated she truly had a shrewd head on her shoulders, for a woman.

It wasn't difficult to follow the girl's reasoning: the fact that Harry obviously hadn't informed the management of what he'd seen, and had subsequently attempted blackmail, put him in a vulnerable position. He now could not openly blow the whistle without implicating himself. By the same token, there now was no reason for Miss Rogers to panic and attempt to skip with the jewels at her first opportunity. She would figure it a standoff, would presume to outride any pressure Harry might bring.

He drummed the tabletop irritably, thinking it all through. An anonymous phone call to manager Coleman would trip up the girl, and he could virtuously deny any subsequent allegations she might make against him in retaliation. Yet such action would accrue nothing to Harry's benefit, and by this time he was determined to profit. No blonde chick was going to outwit an old pro like Harry Tyson.

The solution to the impasse was, of course, essentially simple, and Harry smiled to himself as he made up his mind. There would be a second burglary that night. The girl would suspect only his blackmailing avarice, not his true profession or ability, and she hardly could publicize her loss.

The rest of the day was given over to lazy self-indulgence. Harry enjoyed a late afternoon dip in the pool, a cocktail party for the hotel guests on the patio, dined early. He did not again see Miss Rogers about, made no immediate effort to seek her. His only concern was that she absent herself from her room sometime during the evening, an act he believed most likely and which he meant unobtrusively to check.

At nine-thirty, Harry instituted a quiet prowl of the premises, looking into dining room, card room, cocktail lounge, casino. The latter site was featuring a movie for the guests, and Harry spotted the girl in attendance.

Satisfied as to her immediate preoccupation, Harry quickly went up to Miss Rogers' room. On the pretext of returning a cigarette lighter his 'acquaintance' had inadvertently left by the pool, Harry had earlier elicited the number from an obliging clerk; now a swift survey of the

deserted corridor, an even swifter, expert manipulation of a celluloid strip gained him admittance.

A pencil flash provided ample light. Guided by its probing beam, Harry went to work with professional surety. Drawers, drapes, carpeting, chair cushions, bedding, closet: however unlikely, all were meticulously searched. Harry was confident the jewels were somewhere in the room; assured of her position, the girl would have no reason to tote them about.

His confidence was duly rewarded; an oilskin pouch suspended in the toilet tank yielded the pilfered necklace and earrings.

Harry grinned in the darkness as he pocketed his find. Another item of information he had elicited that afternoon from the travel desk was of a scheduled eleven p.m. flight from the island . . .

He cracked the corridor door; nobody was in sight. Confidently, Harry emerged from the room—and froze. A small group stood confronting him. There was Miss Rogers; there was manager Coleman; there was security officer King. He tried to wave good-bye.

King promptly advanced, gripped Harry's arm firmly. "Thanks for following through all the way, Tyson," he said drily. "Miss Rogers tells us you outfoxed them with that courier caper back in the States, but this conviction will put you out of action for a while."

Harry gaped at the man, bitterly aware of the damning evidence on his person. "A setup!" He swore softly as a measure of comprehension registered. "A lousy setup—"

"That's correct," manager Coleman contributed. "Agent Rogers set it up, worked out the timing, your movements, the air-conditioner gimmick. She checked your background and character, was certain you'd take the bait after she trailed you down here."

Harry choked. "*Agent* Rogers?"

"Of the Diamond Merchants' Association," security officer King amplified.

Professional jewel thief and practicing misogynist Harry Tyson glowered at the girl. "You little fink!"

"My pleasure," Miss Rogers said.

One may delight in a fire without caring to be burned.

Go Ahead and Talk

by Liane Keen

THE LAST TIME I saw Carstairs was in London. The business trip was much the same as all business trips; I was bored and lonely and the occasional pretty girl for a dinner companion wasn't much compensation for that eternal grey drizzle that makes me wonder about the people who say that April in London has some kind of magic. Maybe I'm just unlucky when I go there.

I'd had a rough day and I went into the Berkeley for a drink, hoping it would help me to decide where to have dinner. I saw the same barman who'd been there when I was last in London, and the sight of him made me feel a little better.

"It's very nice to see you again, sir," he said. "It must be over a year since you were in here, sir?"

"Your memory's fantastic. I was here in March last year. How've you been? You're looking well."

"Oh, mustn't complain, sir. Of course, things aren't what they used to be. What's it to be, sir? Rob Roy, wasn't it?"

"Yes, and make it dry, please."

I grinned at his kindly, wrinkled face, thinking how comforting it can be to see someone you know, even a barman who remembers you drink Rob Roys, when you're away from home. The cloud of depression that had been hanging over me began to break up, and I rotated on my stool to take a look around the room.

In a dark corner there was a man with grey hair and a bony, interesting face that looked familiar, but I thought I must be getting carried away by looks of familiarity and I turned back to the barman and watched him while he served my drink, clean and golden and welcoming.

He went off to the other end of the bar and I enjoyed the first sip of my drink. Then I turned around again to see if there was anyone interesting to look at while I measured my need for company.

I glanced at the man in the corner. He looked up just as my eyes paused at his table, and I was aware that I did know him. He looked much older, but I knew the turn of his head, the trick he had of using his cigarette to push the ashes around in the ash tray, a nervous way he had of pulling at his ear. I could see him driving a car; he pulled at his ear when he was driving. Car . . . Carstairs, that was it. Of course, that's who he is.

I turned back to the bar and studied my olive while I tried to remember more about him. My memory isn't what it used to be, and it annoys me when I can't piece odd scraps of the past together.

I ate the olive and ordered a second Rob Roy. *Peter* Carstairs . . . a lawyer with a very lucrative practice in one of the plushier parts of London. He specialized in divorce, the kind of divorce that is hushed up so that nobody really knows who has been having a go at whom, where the fault lies or how large the settlement is.

He had a lovely wife, "the-most-beautiful-bride-of-the-year" sort of girl, and they were appropriately married at St. Margaret's, Westminster, in a cloud of confetti, pale willowy bridesmaids and gangling ushers with no chins. It sounds awful; it was, in fact, rather awe-inspiring. There is something about an aristocratic English wedding that inspires a strange respect and even envy. It must be wonderful to know that right is right and left is wrong and never the twain shall meet, except by accident, and then everyone's very polite.

Anyway, the reason I was caught up in this rather spectacular happening was that I'd been given an introduction to Peter's wife, Kay,

and when I finally got around to calling her she was just on the point of getting married to Peter. Presumably because she was the friend of a friend we both liked very much, she asked me to the wedding.

At the reception I happened to mention that I was coming to London again very soon afterward, and they invited me to visit. Of course I couldn't resist looking them up.

This was all before I was married myself, and I was in London quite a bit over a period of about a year. I came to know them as well as any "outsider" can ever know members of that very rarified collection of people. It was difficult to tell from their behavior, especially hers, whether they really liked me or not. I recognized that I paid in some degree for their generous hospitality by being a useful eligible bachelor with a certain glamor because I happened to come from that strange place, the States.

I married Janet about six months after this, and settled down, and business didn't take me to London quite so much. As the years passed we kept in touch with the Carstairs in that offhand way one does with people with whom one has very little in common, and we dutifully exchanged Christmas cards. They stayed with us for a couple of nights when they were passing through New York on their way to Los Angeles. After that we lost track of them.

I hadn't seen either of them for about ten years, and now I remembered that a friend passing through the States a couple of years before had told me in that rather garrulously important way people have when they want to impart bad news that Peter's wife had died.

I looked up from my drink at the lonely figure of Peter. The bar was beginning to fill up. I got up and went across to the corner table.

"Peter?"

He looked up with his face blank. My first thought was that I only hoped that I hadn't aged as much as he had; he looked twenty years older than when I'd last seen him.

"Why, it's . . ." He floundered.

I rescued him and told him my name. Then I stood still, waiting. I didn't want to intrude on him if he wanted to be alone.

"Do sit down."

I pulled out a chair and sat, feeling suddenly awkward and rather tired. What were we going to talk about? "Look, Peter," I said, "if you'd rather . . ."

He smiled for the first time. He had a rare smile, open and warm and totally committed. "It's good

to see you. What's been happening to you?"

I gave him a brief resume of my life over the past ten years and then stopped. He didn't comment. We both twirled our glasses and looked around at the rapidly filling bar.

"Let's get out of here."

I was startled at the sudden sharpness of his voice. "Sure. Look, have dinner with me, if you're not busy. I hate eating alone and . . ."

"No, come over to my place. It's not far."

I could see that this was what he wanted to do, and I gave in willingly. If he still lived like he used to, I'd get a very good dinner. If the conversation was going to be sticky, it was a small price to pay for the interest of being with someone who lived such a different life from my own. Anyway, I liked the man.

He had one of those tall thin houses somewhere in the back of Grosvenor Square; we took a taxi and were there in a few minutes. The butler took our coats and we went into Peter's study. It was a beautiful room, paneled and brown and leathery, and furnished with exquisite antiques that looked as if they'd come out of a museum. An enormous painting of Kay hung over the fireplace. I felt cold.

"Come over to the fire. It'll perk up in a minute." Peter walked over and poked at the reluctant logs. I followed and stretched out my hands, and hoped he'd offer me a drink.

He did. We had just finished when the butler came in to tell us dinner was ready. We went into the dining room and enjoyed the sort of meal the English do so perfectly when they take the trouble; tender Scotch salmon slivered thinly off the bone, a rare steak, apple pie served with clotted cream that melted in buttery drops over rich, flaky pastry.

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. "Peter, that was the best meal I've had since I've been here."

"Glad you enjoyed it. Let's go into the study. Brooks will bring in the coffee."

I couldn't help smiling a small private smile. 'Brooks will bring in the coffee.' What a way to live.

The fire in the study had brightened considerably and I was in no hurry to go back to my hotel room. I settled into a deep chair that smelled like kid gloves and was even more comfortable than it looked. As I was served brandy, coffee and a cigar, I began to see how it might be possible to put up with the grey drizzle of London if you could afford this sort of living to make up for it.

We started to talk about one or

two acquaintances, and when I mentioned someone who'd lost his wife, I cursed myself for a fool. I thought I'd better do something constructive about the slip.

"Peter, I was damn sorry to hear about Kay."

The fire crackled. Peter's face changed curiously; the lines in it deepened and it occurred to me for the first time that his sorrow probably had a lot to do with his aging.

I blundered on. "You must still miss her very much."

His eyes forgave me as he smiled. "Yes. I do. I loved her." He said it without emphasis and totally sincerely, and I realized how seldom one hears a simple, uncomplicated declaration of love.

I puffed at my cigar and heard the rain make a sudden gusty attack on the window panes.

Peter went over to the fireplace and tapped ash off his cigar with care. "You know," he said, "even now I find it difficult to believe she's dead. She was so . . . alive."

"She was certainly a very beautiful woman," I said, glancing up at the portrait and privately thinking that whatever word I'd choose to describe her, 'alive' wouldn't be it. I wondered what she'd died of. "Funny, isn't it. It's always the good marriages that get broken up."

"Ah, yes, the good marriages." Peter came back to his chair and picked up his glass. "I suppose you could call ours a good marriage. We were certainly very much in love. But . . ." He paused and whirled the brandy.

"But what?"

"Well, we weren't . . . we weren't really happy."

I was surprised, though many marriages rot away under a smooth, glossy exterior. "You looked happy."

"Yes, I know. Oh, in a way we were. But she was . . . well, she was jealous. Impossibly so."

I tried to read his expression. "Did she have reason to be?"

"Oh, no. No, of course not. That was the whole trouble." He looked up at me with a shy grin. His British reserve had suddenly fallen on him like a cloak. "Sorry, old chap. Shouldn't be chattering like this. I don't want you to think that Kay was—"

"Peter, don't be silly. Go ahead and talk if it makes you feel better."

He peered into his glass again and laced his long fingers around its stem. "Talk about it? Well, yes, perhaps. It isn't as if . . ." He glanced up and smiled again, and I guessed that he had been going to say that it wasn't as if I lived in London and moved in his circle of friends. The idea of confiding in

one of his own kind would have been unthinkable.

He crossed his legs and in that gentle, English voice he started to talk. I was pretty sure he'd never talked about his marriage before, to anyone. He sat easily in his chair, looking at the fire as he spoke.

"I couldn't believe it at first. How could she think I'd look at anyone else? I was so crazy about her; it just didn't make sense. I did everything I could to make her see how much she meant to me."

Kay first showed her jealousy on their wedding night. At the reception, some previous girlfriend of Peter's had come up to him, introduced herself to Kay, and kissed him affectionately, wishing him

happiness. Kay asked him later who she was; he'd been astounded at the anxiety and suspicion in her voice.

That was only the beginning. Gradually he became conscious that her eyes were on him every time he even glanced at another woman, any woman, from the elevator girl to the wife of one of his friends.

"She was so upset after she'd made a scene. Poor Kay; she loved me so much she just couldn't bear me to be near another woman. I know she just couldn't help herself."

He offered more coffee, but I shook my head. He poured some for himself and stirred sugar into it thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "I could never get over the absurdity of it all. Everyone was so insipid beside her. When she walked into a room it was as if all the lights had been turned on." He smiled, self-conscious at his own eloquence. "I know it sounds extravagant, but that's how I felt about her."

He discovered she was going through his pockets. One day he'd left a pen clipped to the pocket of a suit; he went to get it when he came home in the evening. The suit jacket was undone and the pen was on the floor of the closet. He was a meticulous man, and he knew someone had been there. He looked inside the coat and saw that some papers he'd left in an inside pocket had been jumbled.

He went downstairs and asked Kay if she knew anything about it. She said she didn't. He called in the maid who did the bedrooms, and wrapped up his question with something about the dry cleaners. The girl said she hadn't been near the closet, and added innocently that Madam had been there when she went into the room.

"I dismissed the girl and she went out. Kay was standing with her back to me, getting another drink. 'Why did you lie to me?' I asked her. She turned around, her face quite composed. 'Sorry. I forgot. I was looking for that little comb I lent you. I thought it might be in your pocket.'

"She still wasn't telling the truth. I'd put the comb back on her dressing table the night before. Lord, it upset me. I don't mean the stupid lie, it wasn't so much that. I couldn't get over the fact that she trusted me so little that she had to go through my pockets."

My cigar had gone out and I groped for a match to relight it. "Did you ever try a good old-fashioned spanking?" I glanced at him over the flame; I wasn't sure how he'd take it.

He smiled as he answered. "Fun-

ny you should ask that. I did once. She made a terrible fuss after a party about some woman; I think I'd danced with her twice running. Silly of me. Kay cried all the way home. I wasn't angry, exactly. Just frustrated, I suppose. Anyway, when we got home I picked her up and took her up to the bedroom and gave her a sound beating. I didn't know which of us was more shocked. It seemed to pull her together for a bit, but it didn't last."

"What did your friends think about all this?"

He gave me a quick, shocked glance. "Good Lord, they didn't know. No one ever knew."

No, of course they didn't or if they had they would never have shown it. I realized what a stupid question it had been. Just the thought of that aloof, stately beauty making a scene in front of anyone else boggled the imagination.

"Wasn't it a bit of a strain?"

He looked surprised. "A strain? Oh, no. Not for me, anyway. I sometimes think it might have been for her. But she never let the mask slip in front of our friends. I'm sure no one ever suspected there was anything wrong between us. She was so ashamed of her suspicions; she knew they were groundless."

Peter pulled on his ear. "Poor Kay," he said again. "You know, there were times when I felt it might have been better to give her something to be jealous about. But I couldn't have done that to her."

Pity hit my chest like a stab of pain. *You poor idiot,* I thought. *You poor fool.*

He tipped the brandy glass and took a long swallow. "I suppose we'd been married four or five years when she started . . . when she turned to alcohol as an escape."

Well, I thought. *Kay, of all people.*

"I came home one evening and there she was . . ." he opened his hands, "tight. I thought at first she must be sick. She'd always been able to drink a fair bit, you know, in an average sort of way. But to get to this state . . . I was horrified. She was choosing her words carefully and her coordination wasn't quite spot on.

"Anyway, that was the start of it. There wasn't anything I could do. Whenever I was late, which was sometimes unavoidable, I'd come home to find her like that. When she'd been drinking she was quite different. Before, she'd always been tearful with fear and suspicion; it was pathetic. But when she drank it was much worse. She was like a stranger, cold and remote and bitter."

I sighed and flicked a bit of ash off my trouser leg. "Why didn't

you make her go to a psychiatrist?"

A faint smile crossed Peter's face. "You Americans and your psychiatrists. There was nothing really wrong with her."

"Nonsense. She was obviously very sick."

"Sick? Oh, you mean mentally sick. No, she wasn't. Mixed up, perhaps; difficult sometimes, certainly. But she wasn't in need of any medical advice. Even if it had occurred to me to take her to a . . . doctor, she would never have consented to go."

"But Peter, why did you put up with it?"

He didn't like that; I'd gone too far. He squared his shoulders a little as he got up and walked across to the fire. "I found it very easy to forgive her. She was always so ashamed of her outbursts and she tried so hard. I always prayed it would get better. I was sure that one day I'd convince her there was nothing for her to be afraid of. And now . . ."

I looked at the long-fingered, sensitive hands and the bowed head and tried again to imagine what it must have been like to be married to such a woman. Most people wouldn't have stood it. But I could see the trap; although he couldn't live happily with her, he couldn't live without her.

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly midnight and I thought I'd better be going. But just as I was about to get up, Peter spoke again. I felt he hardly knew I was there, and it was a little while before I realized that he was talking about Kay's death.

They were spending the weekend at one of those lavish country house party affairs, with the hunting and the shooting and the spectacular ball on the Saturday night. It was at the ball that it happened. Kay was edgy and tense; Peter was counting the number of martinis she had drunk, wondering if for once she was being careless in front of their friends.

They were on the terrace eating a buffet dinner and Peter went in to get a dessert or something. He was away longer than he meant to be. First he was stopped by a garrulous old general whom he hadn't seen since the war. Then on his way back to Kay he was elbowing his way through the crowd and a young girl tripped on the hem of her dress and lurched up against him. She clung to his arm to save herself from falling; he steadied her and they exchanged a few laughing remarks. Then he turned back to the terrace. He saw Kay standing there, leaning against the doorpost, looking at him.

"She gave me one of those long, cold stares that I dreaded. Before

I could get near her she started to walk away, through the room, out into the hall. I felt sick. I knew just what was coming. I put down the plate I was carrying and pushed my way out into the empty hall. I wasn't sure which way she had gone. While I was making up my mind where to look for her, she appeared in the corridor at the top of the staircase. I ran up, two at a time.

"She must have had at least a couple more drinks since I'd left her. Her eyes were focusing too carefully and she wasn't quite steady on her feet. 'Don't bother to tear yourself away from your girl-friend,' she said. 'I'm going to bed and I'll be out of your way.'

"Her voice had never been more cutting. I felt so helpless. She stood there on the landing, looking so absolutely beautiful, and tearing herself and me to bits. What could I have done? What could I have said that would have made her believe me?"

His face looked as it must have looked then; helpless, bewildered, lost. A small frown furrowed the space between his thick eyebrows.

"I can still remember the look on her face as she fell down the staircase. She screamed once and tried to catch hold of the bannister. She was dead by the time I got to the bottom of the stairs."

"Was there an inquest?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Death by misadventure. Everyone was very sympathetic."

I put down the cold stub of my cigar and looked up at the portrait. I wished that I were full of words of wisdom and courage. Even if I had been, I knew that whatever I said wouldn't help much; I said it anyway.

"Peter, it's a terribly sad story and I can guess how you must have suffered. But you'll get over it in time, I'm sure of it. You'll probably marry again. I know it's easy to talk, but I do think you should try to stop brooding about it so much."

Peter touched his ear and his clear grey eyes looked straight into mine. "I don't think you quite understand," he said, very gently. "I pushed her."

The sightless are said to possess exceptional hearing, so perhaps are the deaf blessed with rare insight.

THE HITCHHIKE of MURDER

THE MAN was there, emerging from a stately town house, as he had been on so many other mornings. He made his usual gesture of turning, once the door had closed, and testing to see if the lock held.

Without staring or even deliberately looking at him, Alexander Hull was totally aware of him. Hull was in the middle of his usual daily walk, abandoned only during the most hazardous weather of winter when the sidewalks were treacherous with snow and ice.

Now the man hurried down the steps to an impressively large black car, the door of which was held open by a saluting chauffeur in a charcoal uniform.

Hull had no idea who the man was. His substantial house, his faultless and conservative clothes,

his car, his arrogant, very assured manner indicated affluence and position. Sometimes Hull would slacken his pace so as not to interpose himself on the sidewalk between the man rushing down the steps and the waiting car.

Other persons whom Alexander Hull habitually passed on his morning walk would give him a nod or smile, but not this man. He was oblivious to Hull, who was quick to admit that there was no reason for the man to acknowledge him. There couldn't have been any exchange of conversation anyway, as Hull was deaf.

That morning Hull soon turned off Manchester Boulevard onto a street which wasn't on his ordinary route. The perfect day invigorated him and made him adventurous. After a while he stopped walking, looked around him and was pleasantly surprised to find that he had no idea where he was. His enthusiasm had led him on so that he had paid no attention to the streets he had left behind him or the roads he had taken and then abandoned for the woods.

Everything about that autumn morning exhilarated him. The brilliant orange and red leaves seemed on fire in the sun. Farther back, an apple had fallen from a tree and landed directly in front of him. The fragrance of the apple was irresistible. He leaned down and picked up this unexpected gift and ate it to the core. A little later he had found three ripe persimmons and had wolfed them with the appetite of a starved man though he had cooked himself an adequate breakfast only a few hours before.

He felt no age at all; he might very well have been twelve and on an exploratory ramble, instead of seventy-five and someone who had strayed too far from town. He had stopped walking, not because he was tired but to savor the beauty around him and to wonder, as always, which season delighted him more, fall or spring. Summer and winter, with their extremes, their debilitating heat and bitter cold, slashing lightning and crippling snow and ice, were caricatures and debasements of the glories of spring and autumn. He regretted the dead silence. Beneath his feet twigs had snapped with sharp crackling sounds, leaves had crumbled noisily; in the trees squirrels, leaping with the bravado and grace of trapeze artists, were noisy in their exuberance, but Alexander Hull had heard nothing. Loss of hearing had crept up on him slowly and subtly until the last year, when he had become totally deaf.

He had thought he was miles from anywhere or anyone, but just ahead he saw a tall fence, a sub-

stantial one topped with barbed wire that meant business; there was no need for a sign to spell out *No Trespassing*. In summer, when foliage was abundant, he was certain that the grove of trees hid the house completely from anyone standing where he was. Now, since most of the limbs were bare, he looked without obstruction at the entire back of a large, imposing house. Isolated as they were, the owners had no need to draw draperies, and the sun pierced the house, illuminating all the rooms, and with a particular brilliance lighted up three windows upstairs and the man and woman who were standing there.

The two people were oblivious to Alexander Hull. They might have been actors on a screen in a movie theater and he a fascinated spectator, so little relationship did they have to him . . . yet he did not want to look. He abhorred the scene being played in front of him.

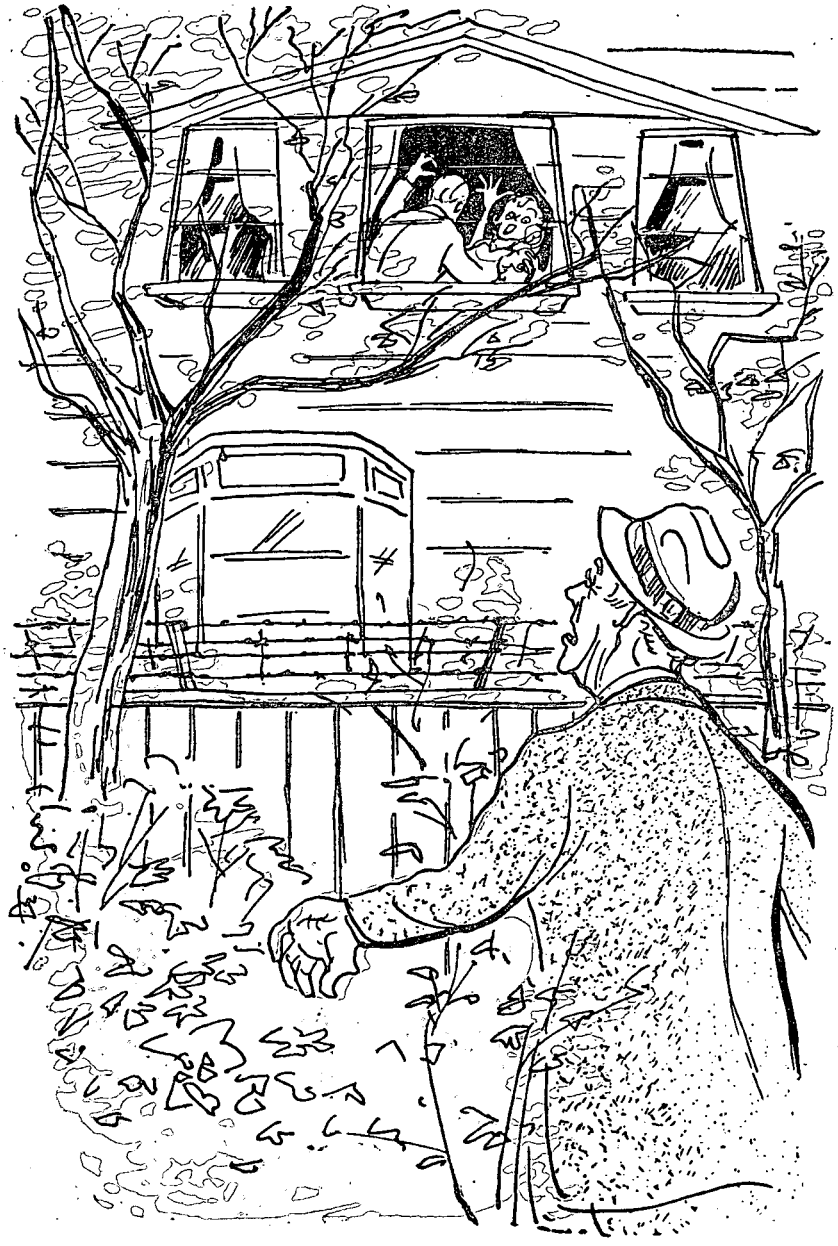
The man was murdering the woman. His hands were throttling her.

Alexander Hull screamed. He rushed to the fence and shook it. He picked up a stone and threw it, but it fell far short of the upstairs window. He began to run, trying to find some way to enter the grounds, but the fence was endless. Finally, the house was far out of sight and the trees surrounding him seemed denser. He felt lost and spent; he felt the panic he had experienced as a boy when he had wandered too far from home and did not know the way back.

He plunged through the underbrush and his coat caught. It was his best jacket and would have to last him the rest of his lifetime. He handled it gently and carefully and was relieved when he extricated it from the briar without any damage. He patted his right pocket. The notebook he always carried was there, as well as the two stubby pencils. He hoped he'd soon have use for them; somewhere in all this deserted territory he trusted there was someone who could write down directions so that he could get back to Concord and go to the police.

Then his own predicament made him forget what he had seen. He was suddenly cold; a wind might have risen to chew his aging bones. He was exhausted and thirsty and bewildered; his legs were about to give out; he might fall and injure himself and die here in these treacherous woods that had bewitched him with their beauty.

If only he could hear. Just beyond this thicket there might be a heavily traveled road; a few steps might lead him to a highway if his ears could pick up the sounds.



His panic subsided. He took his bearings, then walked resolutely ahead and soon arrived at a road. Cars whipped by and though he extended a pleading hand no one offered to give him a ride. At a ridge he saw a sign which gave the distance to Concord as two miles. Some yards beyond that there was a crossroad and near it was a stop for the city transportation system. A bus soon arrived and Alexander Hull's fingers trembled as they pecked from the small hoard of coins in his pocket enough for his fare. His fingers didn't ordinarily tremble; but now he told himself that they trembled with relief that he had found his way home, or perhaps they were trembling from fear over what he had seen this autumn morning.

He argued with himself that he hadn't seen a murder committed. Yet he was sure he had. He was positive that man had been bending over that woman to kill her.

People's bodies betrayed them. Far more than speech, people's bodies announced their intentions. Alexander Hull had discovered that after he had become deaf. All those years when he was blessed with hearing he had listened only to what people had said; he hadn't watched the movements and attitudes of their bodies. From the first onset of hearing loss, and with continuous observation as his deafness had increased, he had learned that a slack body, a head turned aside, no matter how enthusiastically the voice might be sounding, meant apathy and indifference; a head leaning slightly forward and the body at an angle meant interest and attention, and who would have to be told what the surrender of an embrace indicated?

Words often lied but the body always told the truth; a fist was made into a claw by anger; a gentle, open hand reached out to give or receive love; slumped shoulders and a bowed head meant despair and despondency; the body was an instrument that unfailingly showed a person's true feeling and purpose, whatever words were spoken.

He wouldn't have noticed all this if he hadn't lost his hearing and been forced to watch people instead of responding to their voices. Perhaps most people weren't aware of this. He could have lived a lifetime without knowing it; no one would choose the annoying inconvenience of deafness to acquire such knowledge.

Alexander Hull was relieved to get home; too much had happened since he'd left his crowded one room apartment. He wished he had some chores to distract him now, but he made it a rule to tidy up, dishes and all, the first thing in the

morning, before leaving the room.

He must decide what to do. He wondered if the woman's murder had been discovered. Television and radio were useless to him, so the only means he would have of finding out would be from the paper. Most of all he regretted not having been able to help the woman. She had been right there in front of him and yet was as far beyond his help as if she had been on another planet.

Perhaps he should have gone immediately to the police, but he had no idea where he had been that morning, except in the vaguest sense. He couldn't direct them where to go. He wasn't a Concord man; he knew little about the town and less about the suburbs. He had moved to Concord from Lexington three years ago to live with his widowed daughter Alice, and when Alice had died after a long illness and her small estate had been swallowed up in doctors' and hospital bills, he had found this room and managed as well as he could on his pension and Social Security.

No, it had been sensible not to go directly to the police. They would have thought he was an old fool, and they obviously couldn't chase off in all directions to bang on doors of large, isolated mansions and inquire about a possible murder that might have occurred in a back room upstairs.

The best thing would be to wait and buy a paper, no matter the expense. His economies had to be prodigious, so a daily paper was a luxury he could do without. He went to the library to do his reading, but the local paper was always in demand. Sometimes he had been lucky enough to get the Concord paper from the rack but he always felt guilty to take much time over it, so he had got into the habit of reading a day old *New York Times;* to be a day behind in getting news wasn't that important to him.

Late that afternoon Alexander Hull went to the corner to buy a paper. He didn't want to splurge unless there was something about the woman's death in it, and the vendor was suspicious of him; Hull wasn't a regular customer and looked like someone trying to sneak a free read, but even the clever and craftily spread hand of the news vendor couldn't completely hide the blaring headline: SOCIETY WO DERED

Then Hull *had* watched the crime being committed!

He grabbed a paper and paid for it and started toward home, but he realized he couldn't wait until he got home to read about the murder. He found a sheltered niche in the

doorway of a vacant store and unfolded the paper.

Amy Smith Streighton, a young society matron, aged 32, had been found dead in her bedroom by the cook, who had arrived that morning at eleven. The bedroom was a shambles, but so far nothing had been discovered missing from it or from any other part of the house. There was no evidence of forced entry. The husband, Robert Streighton, a broker, had collapsed from grief when he had been informed at his office of the crime. The victim had been alone in the mansion. Her husband had gone to work at nine-thirty. There followed references to the old and prominent family to which Amy Smith Streighton had belonged, the schools and college she had attended were named, dates of her debut and marriage were listed, as well as the social clubs of which she was a member, and the charities to which she devoted much of her time.

Mrs. Streighton's violent death spilled over onto the editorial page. In a stern, regretful tone the lead editorial deplored the senseless killing of the lovely young woman, pointed out that this was another terrible example of disrespect for law and order, and ordered the police to apprehend the murderer without delay. It also called upon any citizen who could give any information about the murder or its perpetrator to get in touch with the police immediately.

Alexander Hull required no urging. He went to the police at once, gave his name to a man at the front desk, and said he wanted to talk with someone about the murder of Mrs. Streighton. He added that he was deaf and offered a pad and pencil to the man, which didn't discourage the man from talking. His moving lips conveyed nothing to Hull, but his actions told everything; he held up a palm, signifying that Hull was to wait, and then he disappeared and came back with a man whose gestures were also self-explanatory—he motioned Hull into an office.

Having to write everything down impeded the man's inquiry so, to try to simplify things, Hull said, "I'll tell you what I know and then you can ask questions."

The man listened and then wrote furiously and thrust a number of small sheets at Hull, who scanned them like a lecturer who had offered to answer questions from the audience if such questions were properly posed and legibly written.

What time did you see the man bending over the woman?

Of course Hull didn't know. He had no idea how long he had been walking or when he had reached

the Streighton house; none at all.

Did you see the man's face?

"No," he had to answer. "The man's back was turned toward me."

Could you identify the man?

"All I know was the man's attitude. It was the attitude of a murderer. Predatory. Evil. He had a great head of red hair. He was wearing a gray suit. He had a gold ring on his right hand. It caught the sun and flashed."

The policeman shook his head, indicating that Hull hadn't offered anything very helpful.

Hull said, "It was the man's attitude that gave him away. I notice attitudes and movements, now that I'm deaf. From the way his body was positioned, I know he's Mrs. Streighton's murderer."

The man shook his head again and began to talk. Then he caught himself and scratched a note thanking Hull for coming and asking him to leave his name and address in case they should need him again.

Hull asked the man his name and he turned over one of the already filled sheets and wrote: *Williams. Homicide.*

For the next few days Hull continued to buy a newspaper. The crime moved from the front page to the obituary page, and on the day of Mrs. Streighton's funeral a second editorial appeared, a brief one, regretting that her death was one more unsolved crime to scar the record of the police department.

Obviously Alexander Hull's visit to the police had been no help at all. He had hoped that Williams would get in touch with him, but perhaps a dozen old men or old women, or young ones, for that matter, had appeared at the police department with some information they considered vital in capturing the murderer and that had been of no use at all. If the police had needed Hull further they would have let him know.

He thought it odd and unaccountable, yet Hull felt very close to Mrs. Streighton, or at least deeply involved and somehow responsible for what had happened to her. Neither had known the other, and yet he had seen her in that terrible moment when life was being choked from her. He would have liked to talk to her survivors and there were only two, her mother and her husband, according to the death notice.

It was an irrational act, totally indefensible, and yet Alexander Hull found himself in Mr. Streighton's office a week after Mrs. Streighton's funeral. He was mired to his ankles in carpet and looking across a mammoth desk with an arrangement of the largest chrysanthemums he'd ever seen, right into

the face of a girl wearing makeup that seemed to him more suited to the stage than an office.

He gave her his name and he told her he wanted to see Mr. Streighton. She said something, and he was forced to tell her that he was deaf and he must request her please to jot down her answer. He put his pad in front of her but she disdained it and wrote on a sheet she extracted from a drawer: *Mr. Streighton isn't seeing anyone.*

"I must see him," Alexander Hull insisted.

Why?

The question was as brief as a question could be, but it was written large and underscored twice.

"Please tell him I want to talk to him about his wife's murder. I'm positive I was an eyewitness to it."

Go to the police, the girl wrote. *Mr. Streighton is too grief-stricken to see anyone.*

Alexander Hull said, "Just tell him I'm here, please. I'm sure he'll see me."

He isn't in. Her writing conveyed her impatience, but her manner in which she shoved the note toward Hull conveyed her impatience even more.

"I'll wait for him," Hull answered and walked to a far corner and sat down in a black leather chair so large that it seemed to swallow him whole. The girl gestured toward the outside door indicating that he should leave, but Hull acted as if he hadn't seen her. She watched him steadily but he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of letting her know he was aware of her inspection, and she at last turned her back to him and began to type.

Misgiving then overtook Alexander Hull. He really didn't want to see Streighton. Communication was always awkward for Alexander Hull; at least it was awkward for other people. He had them at a disadvantage; they had to listen to him, yet they must take the time to write out their responses.

Then the idea came to him that perhaps Mrs. Streighton's husband knew quite well who had murdered his wife. Since she was habitually alone from the time he left for the office until the time the cook arrived, she could very well entertain a lover then. The lover might have grown so desperate from jealousy and frustration that he had murdered her. Anything Hull could say would only bring added grief and—if an investigation were pursued—perhaps open disgrace.

This visit was both heartless and boorish, Hull decided. He must get out of the office at once.

He rose. He did not know whether to explain to the recep-

tionist that he had decided not to see Mr. Streighton after all. He hoped he could cross the wide expanse of the office and disappear discreetly without her noticing him, but suddenly the door through which Hull longed to escape was filled with a large man who strode toward the receptionist. She handed him a batch of mail and he headed toward a door bearing ROBERT STREIGHTON in highly polished brass letters, and then he stopped. The girl rushed forward to present the slip with Hull's name and the purpose of his call on it. The man glanced at the slip and he and the girl both turned toward Hull. The thick rug beneath Hull's feet became a morass and the door to the hall receded into the distance. Yet Alexander Hull managed to smile at the man and the girl and to cross the floor. In the hall an elevator mercifully waited for him, and only when he reached the sidewalk filled with sunlight and air and people did Alexander Hull acknowledge to himself that the man he had just left had red hair and wore a large gold ring on his right hand.

Hull walked home slowly. The weather was perfect, but he didn't notice it. He felt unaccountably tired and stopped to rest in the small park halfway between town and his apartment, and then he went by the supermarket to buy a can of beef stew and a can of beets for his supper. It distressed him to discover that the price of the stew had risen three cents and the beets two cents since he had last bought the same brands. More economizing was urgent. Maybe if he added extra water to the stew he could stretch it for two meals.

His concern was equally divided between increased living costs and his ambiguous visit to Robert Streighton as he began to mount the front steps of the house where he lived. He had noticed with amazement that a large black car was drawn up at the curb. It was as out of place on that drab and rundown street as a mink coat would have been on any of the women

who customarily resided there.

A man leaped up from the porch swing and rushed toward Hull.

Speaking of attitudes, Hull reflected, *and my theory about them, this man looks as if he's going to attack me.* Obviously the man was speaking loudly, perhaps he was even ranting, and his arms were flailing with threats.

Then Hull recognized the man. He was the one whom he saw almost every day leaving his elegant house on Manchester Boulevard and entering his car. I know you, Alexander Hull wanted to say. At least I've seen you so often I feel I know you. I've been by your house so often, but I hadn't imagined you'd ever be coming by here.

Hull didn't say what he was thinking. Plainly it was no time for small talk. He shifted the paper bag with the two cans of food to his left hand and reached in his right pocket for his pad and a pencil.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I can't hear a word you're saying. I'm Alexander Hull, if that's who you want. What can I do for you? Something seems wrong. What is it?"

The man jerked the pad from Hull and leaned it against the door frame, but then the pad fell to the floor.

"Here," Hull said, "come to my room. I've a table there. It'll be easier for you to write on that."

Hull pulled out a chair for the man and raised the window shade to get the last of the afternoon sun. Anger seemed to rush down the man's arm into his fingers where it was transmitted to the pencil and onto the paper. The writing was so large that four or five words jammed one of the small sheets. The first sheet was pushed beneath Hull's nose. The words stunned him.

Your shameless persecution must stop!

Hull had barely skimmed the incoherent command before a second sheet was thrust at him.

Absolutely devoted. Grief-stricken. Two

Still another sheet was offered.

nights ago attempted suicide

There seemed to be no end to the messages; now the man was writing faster than Hull's eyes could decipher the words that were hostile in their curtailed accusations and explanations.

Police told us your cock and bull story. Amy and Bob never looked at another person. Legendary devotion. Worshipped ground each other walked on. I'm first cousin of Constanzia Smith, Amy's mother. Crazy about her and Amy and Bob. I'm also their attorney. You're trying to disgrace state's leading family.

What an old fool you are. What you saw was Bob kissing Amy good-bye that morning. Visit demanding blackmail this afternoon shameless
Miss Sanders receptionist witness
If you dare persist will be prosecuted fullest extent of law
We'll throw the book at you—slander—blackmail—libel

The words were like clubs. Alexander Hull staggered beneath them. Yet he managed to draw up a chair and sit down. The man opposite him had stopped writing but his anger had not subsided.

"Who are you?" Hull asked.

The man scribbled and flung a slip at Hull.

Jones. Hector B. Jones.

Well! A former governor was sitting in Alexander Hull's shabby all-purpose room. This was the former wonder boy, the youngest man ever to be governor, who later served two terms in the United States Senate, then retired undefeated. In the years since, he had made a fortune practicing law. Alexander Hull had judged his authority and position correctly but, in the years since his public life, Jones had gained weight and success had exacted a toll of his good looks. He no longer remotely resembled the photographs that years previously had splashed the front pages.

"If you'll listen," Alexander Hull said, "I'd like to tell you about my interest in Mrs. Streighton's murder."

Jones did not protest, and Hull began to talk. Though Jones heard the words, he wasn't paying attention, and when Alexander Hull spoke of what he called the attitude of murder, the former governor grabbed the pad again and wrote *Attitude of murder!* Then he had written an obscenity. He pushed himself out of the chair and bent over the table and continued to write, the pencil point slashing into the paper.

Last word to you is
not to bring more grief
on a grief-stricken man
unless you want to
die in jail

After Hector B. Jones had stalked out of the room Alexander Hull did not move. Darkness came. The cans of beef stew and beets were on the floor where he had set them. He had no appetite, only a great shame.

He did not like Jones' anger, but he supposed he had earned it. It had been going a little too far to think that he had been a witness to murder, and of course his testimony wouldn't have held up in court if the case had been brought to trial. It wouldn't have got that far, because no case could evolve

from a witless old man who thought he could divine a murder by a glimpse of a man leaning over a woman.

He had been a fool to think that deafness had brought him a special talent or compensation of a kind for the loss of a faculty. All his assumptions must be false, and likely as not the person he had thought stooped in despair had been bending over with laughter; maybe the man with the springy, resolute step was camouflaging cowardice and anxiety by what Alexander Hull had considered an optimistic walk; maybe the child on the steps that he passed, who seemed to be hugging himself in a world of fantasy and escape, was actually hugging himself in joy over having made the highest mark in an arithmetic test.

Maybe the unfortunate young woman's murder and the humiliation it had brought to Hull through Hector Jones had at least done some good in deflecting Hull from an outlandish theory. No wonder Williams from Homicide hadn't explained where Hull's information had led. No doubt everyone in the police department was snickering over an old fool who had mistaken a passionate embrace for an act of murder.

The beautiful weather continued and stretched into one of the most prolonged autumns anyone could remember and then eased into a mild winter.

Alexander Hull was grateful for the glorious days and took his lengthy morning walks as usual, but he never did venture again in the direction of the Streighton estate. He was satisfied to let his one ramble there remain his only ramble. He seldom saw a local paper and he didn't know that Robert Streighton married within two months of his wife's murder. All of Streighton's friends were congratulatory, though several said privately they would have preferred it if Bob had waited a bit longer, say at least six months, which would have shown more respect to Amy's memory, but his former mother-in-law, still devoted to him and quick to forestall any possible criticism, had said it was the greatest possible compliment to Amy that Bob had remarried so soon. It showed that he realized, from what Amy had given him, that he could know happiness only in marriage.

No one seemed to question how so devoted a husband or so grief-stricken a widower could have met a girl living as far away as California and fallen passionately in love either before or after his first wife's death. No one, except Streighton's confidential accoun-

tant, knew that he had rather overextended himself financially, but there was surely nothing to worry about any longer since he was sole heir to his wife's sizable estate.

Meantime, Alexander Hull tried hard not to think of the Streighton tragedy, and he tried harder still not to think of his painful encounter with Hector B. Jones. He lived in a kind of dread that he might see the former governor again. At first he decided to walk no longer on Manchester Boulevard, but that boulevard was Concord's proudest and oldest street; its elegance seemed exempt from the destruction that had overtaken much of the rest of the city, and Alexander Hull considered it one of the most delightful parts of his daily walk. So, instead of omitting it, he strolled there later in the morning than customary so that there would be no chance of bumping into Jones.

One day he was sauntering along it admiring, as usual, the boxwood and faultlessly kept lawns that appeared immune to falling leaves or random trash or errant pieces of paper, and there, rushing down the front steps, was Hector B. Jones.

Alexander Hull felt trapped and surrounded and looked for a means of escape, but Jones paid no attention to him. Jones dashed into his car and was driven off.

His scheme of evading Jones hadn't worked. Yet Jones hadn't noticed him. Even so, Hull thought he should omit Manchester Boulevard from his route thereafter, yet it seemed foolish to deprive himself of the most pleasant stretch of his walk.

Of course he wouldn't give up Manchester Boulevard. The solution to the problem was very simple indeed; Hull would walk on the opposite side of the street, and there would be no danger of a further meeting.

The plan didn't prove to be foolproof, however, for on the fifth morning after Hull had seen Jones, and even though he was walking on the south side of the street, he glanced across to see the ex-governor waving frantically at him from an upstairs window.

No, he wasn't waving. Hull didn't know exactly what Jones was doing. Since Mrs. Streighton's murder, Hull had stopped trying to figure out people's meanings from their gestures or attitudes or movements.

Jones was beckoning to him, that must be it.

Hull looked harder. He couldn't imagine what the man meant. If it had been a few months ago he would have said the man was asking for help, that he was begging and pleading, that he was in the

attitude of supplication. Now Hull had no idea what emotion or communication Jones was trying to convey.

Jones had begun to make faces. He probably had a grandchild up there with him and was playing, trying to get the child to laugh.

Jones' right hand was then extended and seemed to clasp at the windowsill. Perhaps he was dressing and had dropped something and was bending down to pick it up.

For an instant Hull was positive that Jones needed help. His impulse was to run to him and offer it, but the house must be full of family and servants, and Hull's appearance and interference would only bring down Jones' wrath and insults and rewake his anger over Hull's meddling in Mrs. Streighton's murder.

Still Hull felt apprehensive. When someone passed by, Hull would ask him to investigate.

He waited but no one came by, and Hull looked once more at the window.

No one was there. Jones had disappeared. The window was blank.

Everything was all right.

Alexander Hull finished his walk. It was his last walk for a week as a heavy snow fell that night and Hull prudently stayed inside, not daring to venture out and risk falling on the icy sidewalks.

So he did not see the Concord paper at the library, nor did he see the *New York Times*, both of which printed long articles on Hector B. Jones. For health reasons, the former governor had within the last week retired from his law firm and he and his wife were planning a world cruise. Mrs. Jones had gone out to do some last minute shopping for the trip and Jones had been at home alone. Though he knew he had a serious heart condition, he had been so exuberant over his approaching voyage that he had tried to move a heavy trunk which he had just finished packing.

The exertion had killed him when the pills that would have saved his life were only inches beyond his reach.

Poof! And let every man fend for himself, the devil take the hindmost.

I GOT the word at three-thirty a.m.

"The world is coming to an end," a voice whispered in my ear. "In an hour or so it will be all over. Only you, Charles Bergman, will be spared."

It didn't matter that there was nobody in the room when I snapped on the night light. That voice had been very sure, very certain—the voice of unquestionable authority.

A foot away, in her own bed, Miriam lay sleeping, only her beautiful face showing above the covers. Too bad about Miriam. She had been a good wife. I'd miss her.

"Hey, Voice! Can I take my wife?"

I was going to yell it out loud, then checked myself. Whoever it had been might be displeased. After all, if he wanted the two of us to be spared, he would have said so.

What the heck, I leaned over and kissed Miriam on the cheek. He hadn't said anything about *that.*

She opened her eyes and gasped. "Chuck, you frightened me! What's the idea?"

"I'm just kissing you good-bye," I said matter-of-factly.

"Now? It's still dark out. You never open the store so early. What time is it anyway?"

"The hell with the store, Miriam. The hell with everything. It's all over. Poof!"

"What's over?"

"I just told you. The whole world's coming to an end, you in-

cluded. A voice just informed me."

The sleep vanished from Miriam. She sprang out of bed, clutched me by the arm as I was reaching into a closet.

"Chuck, wait! I'll call Dr. Steinhardt. He'll tell me what to do for you."

"Ask him what to do for yourself. I'll be all right. Think of it. I'm the only one who will survive."

She was still struggling with me. "Put down that valise, darling. We'll talk this over sensibly. Please."

"There's nothing to talk over, Miriam, nothing to say. We can't stop what's going to happen. Gosh, why did I have to wake you up, my pet? I should have just let you go on sleeping so you wouldn't feel it when it happens. People should always be asleep, shouldn't they? Then it's so completely painless."

"Chuck, listen to me; listen to me carefully. Nothing's going to happen to me. Nothing."

She sounded so sure of it. I guess people are always sure nothing's going to happen to them, right before it does.

I put down the valise and looked at Miriam standing there in that silken peignoir (she always wears such fetching ones), her blue-black hair falling carelessly over her shoulders, her bosom throbbing with excitement. For a second I had a wild notion to grab her in my arms and go dancing all around the room with her—our last dance together—but that would certainly cause her to snatch up the phone and call Dr. Steinhardt. ("Hello, Doctor, my husband just woke me up and started

dancing with me!") Reason enough for them to put me away!

Or was there someone else my wife wanted to call?

"Get away from the phone," I said, as Miriam's hand reached toward the night table.

Instead, she picked up the long steel nail file, started dabbing at her fingertips. "I—I was only going to call Malcolm."

Of course; Malcolm Halloway, my business partner.

"Why did you want to call him?" I asked innocently.

"I thought maybe he'd come over and talk to you, say something to calm you down."

"I don't believe you."

"Chuck!"

"You wanted Malcolm to come over so he could dance with you. After all, he's the dancer of the firm. I'm only the workhorse and worrier. That's why I've been going to a psychiatrist while he wins loving cups for dancing with my wife!"

"My goodness, Chuck! Just because Malcolm and I happened to win the cha-cha contest last month at the club is no reason for you to keep harping on it. We always exchange partners when we go out, don't we? You dance with his wife, don't you?"

Sylvia Halloway, poor Sylvia with two left feet like my own; I only hoped innocent people like her didn't feel anything when the end came. Those others? Torture was too good for them.

"Oh, Chuck darling, dearest, this is so funny, so very funny. Honest, if it weren't so late, I'd start laughing."

"Go ahead, laugh. Soon you won't be able to laugh anymore. Nobody will, except me. I only wish you and my partner could be around to see it."

Miriam laid down the nail file and reached for the phone again, this time got her hand on it. "That settles it, Chuck. I'm going to make that call whether you like it or not."

"To Malcolm?"

"No, to Dr. Steinhardt. I'm really concerned about you, Chuck. You've never talked like this before. He might think it serious, might even want to see you immediately."

She dialed a number. I didn't try to stop her. I just stood there, listening.

"Doctor, this is Miriam Bergman. I'm sorry to awaken you at this hour. It's my husband. Something seems to have happened to him, something serious."

Oh, they were clever all right. You'd swear she had Dr. Steinhardt on the other end of the line. I let them go on talking. That's one

thing about me, I've always been a good actor. I even crossed my eyes and stuck out my tongue the next time Miriam glanced at me. Let them think I was *real* crazy!

"I'm frightened, Doctor. There's no telling what my husband might do. Please, you must come at once. Thank you."

She hung up, shaking, went over to her vanity for a cigarette.

"Dr. Steinhardt's on his way, Chuck. Now you just relax until he gets here. Everything's going to be all right. You wait and see."

And I thought *I* was an actor!

"So you're frightened and don't know what I might do," I said, picking up her nail file as she was trying to get her lighter to work.

I plunged the long thin shaft of steel into Miriam's back, deep, very deep, watched her slump to the floor. Then I threw the file into a corner. When Malcolm arrived, I wouldn't be needing it. We'd just sit there, he and I, talking about what a great dancer he was, while I waited for him and the rest of the world to go poof!

In ten minutes he was there. Did I say they were clever? Somehow my partner had managed to make himself look just like Dr. Steinhardt.

"Aha, what seems to be the trouble, old fellow?" he asked as I opened the door. It was incredible. He even had the doctor's voice down pat.

He came into the apartment, then stood staring down at Miriam's body, scratching those fake whiskers of his.

"Sit down, Malcolm," I said pleasantly. "You might as well make yourself comfortable."

I guess I was grinning as he backed away from me, all the way over to the night table, and picked up the phone, and I kept on grinning after he finished telling someone to send an ambulance, still using Dr. Steinhardt's voice. Didn't he know it was time to stop the acting, that this was the end of the play?

"Hey, Malcolm, the final curtain's about to come down," I wanted to say, but I didn't bother.

Any second now he'd be finding out for himself; any second . . .

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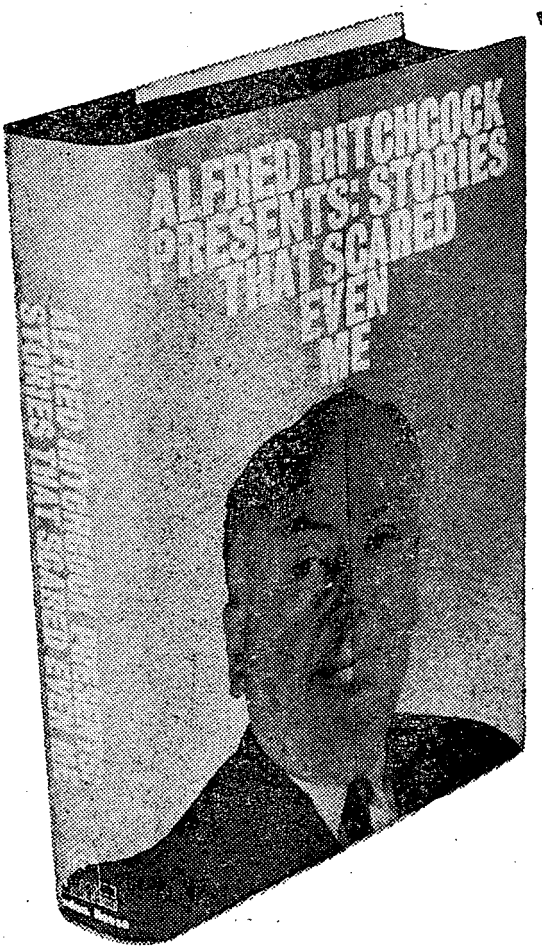

For details please see other side

One's destiny is often attributed to the hand of fate, but the faculty of a "helping hand" cannot be entirely disdained.

by William Brittain

EVERY weekday morning a million or more men, including me, crawl out of their nice, cozy suburban homes, wipe the sleep out of their eyes on the way to the local railroad station, and hop a train to their jobs in the city. The trains are hot in the summer and cold in the winter, and the ride isn't exactly what you'd call traveling in style. Still, I'd gotten kind of used to it, and during the past couple of months the trains had even taken to running nearly on time. Then one of the railroad unions called a strike, and not a train moved on the whole line.

When the railroad isn't operating, the only way to get into the city is by car. Just imagine all those people trying to get out onto the parkways in their cars at the same time. I wonder if anybody who hasn't experienced it knows what it's like to be in the middle of a traffic jam twenty miles long—which is ex-

actly where I was when the trouble started.

I'd just pulled off Hickey Lane onto Gorham Parkway, thinking how lucky I was that Sally and the kids were off visiting her mother and wouldn't need the car. For the first mile or so, the traffic on the parkway moved right along. Then I rounded a turn and immediately hit the brakes, almost piling into the back end of a green Chevy. Up ahead of me, three lanes of cars stretched out as far as I could see, and every one of them was stopped dead. I had a feeling I'd be seeing a lot of the back end of that green car before I finally got to the city, and I wondered how many hours late I'd be. I turned on the radio to get the helicopter report.

"A tractor-trailer has jackknifed on the Gorham Parkway just north of the Dutch Valley exit," I finally heard the birdman say. "Two lanes are blocked, and motorists are urged to use the service roads."

Great. I was in the center lane, and I couldn't go ahead, back up or turn. I'd have taken a nap, except that every five minutes or so, Green Chevy would move ahead a little bit, and I'd have to creep up behind him again.

It was about that time that I noticed the maroon station wagon which had pulled up next to me in the lane to my left. The day was kind of cool for late spring, but I had my window open, with my elbow sticking out. The right side of the wagon was almost close enough so that I could have given it a polish job with my coatsleeve.

There we sat and every once in a while I'd glance over into the wagon. The driver, a woman, was wearing one of those wide-brimmed, floppy hats pulled low over her face, and the collar of her thick, shapeless coat was turned up. Occasionally she'd move her head a little in my direction and then snap it back nervously, as if she were trying to see me out of the corner of her eye without my catching on.

She was doing the head-moving bit when the car ahead of her glided a couple of feet forward. It must have caught her by surprise, because she revved the engine, let out the clutch fast, and then, when she saw the car in front of her stop, she jammed on the brakes, hard.

The forward movement of the wagon brought its back window beside me, so that I was now looking into the rear compartment. Something was in there, wrapped in a blanket, but hitting the brakes hard the way she did must have caused the blanket to slide just a little, because I saw something sticking out from one corner. I looked at it, glanced away while my tired brain tried to convince me that my

eyes weren't lying, and then stared back at the thing. My eyes had been right the first time.

It was a hand, a human hand, no question about it. Why, I could have reached out and touched it if all the windows in that wagon hadn't been closed.

The two middle fingers had a smear of red across them that looked to me like blood, and the folds of the old army blanket took on a shape that made me begin sweating, even though I had the window open. That blanket had a body under it!

I tried to think of something to do. My car was hemmed in on all sides, and anyway, I wasn't about to get out onto a crowded parkway. I tried waving my hands, hoping to attract the attention of the driver of the station wagon. No good. The situation reminded me of one of those nightmares where something is chasing you, and there isn't a thing you can do to prevent it.

Finally I began beeping the horn, meanwhile pointing frantically toward the rear of the wagon with my free hand. Up ahead in my lane, Green Chevy turned around to give me a dirty look. I was hoping he might come back to tell me off, but the way all the cars were jammed together, I doubt whether he could have got his door open.

Then the cars in the lane where the wagon was began to move forward. The wagon pulled ahead of me, picking up speed all the time, but just before the car behind it moved far enough to block my vision, I got a quick look at the license plate. I yanked a pen from my shirt pocket and wrote the number down on the cuff of my shirt. Then I just sat there, shaking all over, until the driver behind me hit his horn to remind me that my lane was moving, too.

The traffic crept along for another couple of miles, and I kept trying to spot the station wagon again and at the same time keep from ramming into Green Chevy up ahead. I almost drove right by a big brick building at the side of the road, marked with a sign that read PARKWAY POLICE in block letters, but at the last second I spotted it and yanked the wheel over hard.

There was a screech of brakes as a big limousine came close to caving in the whole right side of my car, but I finally got myself jockeyed into the little parking area in front of the police barracks. I hopped out of the car and ran inside.

"Yeah?" A patrolman with sergeant's stripes on his sleeve glanced up from the desk where he was typing out a report.

"I—I want to report a murder,"

I said, feeling silly in spite of the sickness in my stomach.

"Oh?" He stood up, opened a drawer of the desk, and took out an official-looking printed form. "You hit somebody, mister?"

"No, I . . . It wasn't I. You see, it was this hand in the car beside me. A station wagon, it was, and—"

"Wait a minute. Now calm down. You haven't been drinking, have you?"

He had every right to ask. I don't suppose I was making much sense. "No," I said meekly.

"All right. Now, is there anybody lying hurt along the parkway who needs help?"

"No, it's not that. You see, this hand—"

"Fine," he interrupted. "Then let's start by getting your name, huh?"

"Julian."

"Julian what?"

"That's my last name. The first one's Edward. Edward Julian."

"Okay, now, Mr. Edward Julian, what's this all about? Just sit down there and tell your story from the beginning." He motioned to a chair beside the desk.

I told him.

"Hmm." When I'd finished, the sergeant rubbed his chin with one hand. "You really don't give us much to go on, Mr. Julian. Are you sure it was a hand you saw? I mean the back window of that wagon might have been a little dirty and—"

"It was a hand, I tell you!" I shouted. "And there was blood on it!"

"All right, don't get excited," he said.

Looking back at it, I suppose the sergeant—his name was Frank Bolger, according to the plastic badge over his shirt pocket—was just doing his job the best he could, but at the time it seemed to me that he was wasting time when he ought to be getting after that station wagon. I told him so.

"Take a look out there, Mr. Julian," he said, indicating the crowded parkway. "Even if that wagon hadn't had a chance to get off at any of a number of exits in the time since you got here, what could I do? Our cars can't fly, you know."

"What about a roadblock or something?"

"Not a chance. Set up a block, and in fifteen minutes we'd have cars backed up halfway across the country. Wait a minute." He picked up the telephone on the desk and dialed a number. Then he began muttering something into the receiver in low tones. All I caught was the phrase "better use the service roads."

Twenty minutes later the bar-

racks door opened again, and a short, heavy man with a bald spot on his head and a day's growth of beard entered. "This is Detective Ellison," Bolger said to me. "He's with the county police."

Ellison slumped into a chair. "And you'd be Mr. Julian," he began. "I'm not supposed to say this, but whatever you've got to tell me better be awful good. I've been on duty for two straight shifts. That's sixteen hours. I'm tired and I want to go home."

"It's about the hand," I began. "I saw it in the back of a station wagon on the parkway."

"A hand." Ellison shrugged resignedly and looked at Bolger. "We get all kinds, Frank, don't we? Well, go ahead, Mr. Julian. Tell me about the damn hand."

I repeated my story. As I was telling it, I suppose I expected Ellison to get at least a little excited. Instead, he just acted bored. When I got around to showing him the license number on my cuff, he yawned while he copied it down in his notebook.

"Mr. Julian," he said when I'd finished, "I'm supposed to be a public servant. I'm expected to be alert and respectful to all. But do you really expect me to swallow this cock-and-bull story you've just told me? Maybe there was a reflection in the window glass. Maybe there was something under the blanket that looked like a hand. But people don't go on crowded parkways with corpses wrapped in blankets stashed in the rear of their cars. Have a heart, Mr. Julian. Let's both go home and forget it."

I might have agreed if it hadn't been for that look on his face. It called me a liar or a crazy man louder than words could ever do.

"No!" I snapped, angry at both him, for not believing me, and myself, for having the bad luck to be caught up in this mess. "I saw a hand, I tell you! You're the police. Do something."

Ellison took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yes, sir," he snarled. "I'll get on it right now. But I'm not going to hurry. My feet hurt too much. You go on home, and if I find out something, I'll be in touch with you. But so help me, Mr. Julian, if I trace down that license number and there's nothing to this story of yours, I'm gonna . . . I'm gonna . . ."

"Take it easy, Connie," said Bolger, patting Ellison on the shoulder.

I left the two of them in that chummy pose, went out to my car and pulled onto the parkway. At the next exit I turned off, got headed in the opposite direction, and returned to my house. It was nearly eleven o'clock when I real-

ized I'd never called to tell my boss I wouldn't be in to work. He wasn't too pleased to hear from me.

For the next three hours I waited near the phone, expecting to hear from Ellison. About two-fifteen, there was a knock at the door. I opened it.

Detective Ellison stood in the doorway, his shoulders slumped and his fists clenched tightly. "Mr. Julian," he said with a dangerous softness, "I just wanted you to know I checked out that license. I found the wagon. It was a maroon one, just like you said. It belongs to a Mrs. George Dagget. She lives in Hill Ridge."

"Why, that's only a couple of miles past here, if you go on the parkway," I said.

"Uh huh. I even found your 'body', Mr. Julian."

"And did you arrest—" I stopped when I saw him shaking his head.

"No arrests. No crime. No nothing. But you and I are going for a ride, Mr. Julian—to Mrs. Dagget's house."

"But I don't see why I have to come with you if there's—"

"You have to come, Mr. Julian, because if you don't, I'm going to drag you out to my car by the neck and stuff you in the trunk. I want you to see exactly what's had me chasing around for the past five hours. Then, after you've apologized to Mrs. Dagget, and if I can't think of some charge to hold you on, maybe I'll bring you back here. Then again, maybe I won't."

During the ride, I counted every telephone pole between my house and Hill Ridge. There wasn't much else to do. Ellison wouldn't even look in my direction. He just kept staring at the windshield through squinty eyes and breathing heavily.

At Hill Ridge, Ellison drove down into the business section of town. He pulled into a side street, cut the engine and yanked the emergency brake. "That's where your 'killer' lives," he said, pointing an index finger toward a doorway at one side of the alley.

The upper section of the door was a frosted glass panel. A sign was painted on the panel: *Dagget Decorators.*

We walked to the door. Ellison knocked and, almost at once, the door was opened.

The woman who stood in the opening, dressed in a paint-spattered smock, was the same one I'd seen in the maroon station wagon that morning. She was big, almost as tall as I was, with shoulders like a pro football player's. Long, stringy blonde hair hung down past her shoulders, and she had a face like one of those thorough-

bred horses you see at the fancy racetracks.

"Mrs. Dagget, this is Mr. Julian," said Ellison.

She gave me an icy glance down that long nose of hers and then turned to the detective with a smile. "Is this the man you were telling me about?" she asked. "The one who saw my station wagon on the parkway?"

"This is him," answered Ellison, his voice flat with fatigue. "I was wondering if you'd let him view the .... uh ... body."

"Certainly, if it would put his mind at ease. Step this way, please." She motioned toward a curtain at the rear of the little alcove in which we were standing and pulled the curtain aside.

The large room into which we walked had all the clutter of a workroom of some kind, but at first glance it seemed to be an artist's conception of a medieval torture chamber or something out of one of those films about Nazi atrocities. Naked bodies and parts of bodies, strangely sexless, were strewn about the floor and the worktables. In a corner, arms and legs had been carelessly piled together, while one of the tables was covered with heads, some with hair, but most of them bald.

I reached out to touch one of the heads gingerly. My fingers met a dry, unyielding surface. It was plaster of paris.

While Mrs. Dagget walked to a far corner of the room, Ellison shook out a cigarette from a crumpled pack he carried and lighted it. I felt in need of a smoke and thought of asking him for one, but he was eyeing me in a way that would have punched holes in chilled steel, so I just stared at the floor until Mrs. Dagget returned, carrying a plaster mannequin with an idiotic smile on its painted face.

"This is Herman, Mr. Julian," she said. "I'm sure this is what you saw in the rear of my station wagon this morning. You see, my husband and I do store window decorating for small clothing shops who want a professional job but can't afford to hire their own people. We provide the dummies, and the stores furnish the clothing they'll wear in the window displays. Herman is one of the dummies. He'd just had a repainting job done on him two days ago, and this morning I was taking him to a store over in Dutch Valley.

"Naturally, we can't just put unclothed dummies in the back of the station wagon; otherwise, more people might get the same idea you had. But none of our plastic coverings were available, so I threw a blanket over him. Apparently, with all the stopping and starting on the


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parkway, the blanket slid, exposing one hand."

"But Mrs. Dagget," I said, "if you were taking Herman, here, over to Dutch Valley, what's he doing back at your place?"

"Oh." She grinned indulgently. "Apparently when he was painted, some paint spilled onto one arm. Naturally we can't send out a dummy in that condition. I noticed it when I was about to carry him into the store. See?"

She pointed at the dummy's right arm. Sure enough, there was a red stain which started at the elbow. Paint had dribbled down the arm and onto the two middle fingers of the right hand.

"There's your 'blood', Mr. Julian," said Ellison.

If a hole as deep as the Grand Canyon had suddenly opened up in front of me, I'd have cheerfully jumped into it rather than have to look Ellison in the eye again. A growling sound came from deep down in his throat, and I didn't look forward to the ride home.

"Seen enough, Sherlock?" he said to me sarcastically. "Can we go now, or do you want to do a dance with one of those plaster broads over in the corner?"

What could I say? A clothing dummy had conned me into tormenting a tired cop and accusing an innocent woman of murder. I had a feeling that Ellison wouldn't allow me to forget it.

Once back at my own house, Ellison kept the motor of his car running while he spent about ten minutes chewing me out in language he'd never have used in front of Mrs. Dagget. I just sat there and took it. I figured he had at least that satisfaction coming.

Once inside the house, I poured myself a shot of Scotch, downed it quickly, and had another. Then I flopped down on the couch, calling myself all kinds of a screwball and wondering what my wife would say when she got back, if she ever found out what I'd done.

Maybe it was the Scotch, and maybe it was the fact that I'd been up tight all day with the excitement and the final letdown. Anyway, I hadn't been on that couch ten minutes before I'd corked off, dead to the world.

I don't know how many hours had passed when I woke up again, very gradually. I'm not one of those guys who can pop out of the sack ready to lick the world. I have to come to by degrees.

I started by looking through slitted eyes at the livingroom window. It was dark outside. Then I thought about Ellison and closed my eyes tight again, trying to forget what had happened. When I did, my mind took me right back to that

parkway. There I was again, looking through the window of the station wagon at that hand. But it wasn't a hand. It was just a lump of plaster. It was that damn dummy from Mrs. Dagget's workroom, only . . .

That's when I woke up in a hurry, and knew that both Ellison and I had been wrong—that Mrs. Dagget had pulled a fast one on us. The scene on the parkway was fresh in my mind, and I kept trying to imagine Herman, the dummy, under that blanket, instead of a human body.

I couldn't—because the red paint had been on Herman's *right* hand, and the hand I'd seen sticking out from under the blanket was a *left* one.

I sat there shaking all over with excitement and confusion. Should I call Ellison? Would he believe me if I did call? What would we do by now, anyway?

Half an hour later I was still wondering what to do when the door chimes announced that I had a visitor. They must have bong-bonged for at least thirty seconds before I realized the sound wasn't coming from inside my head.

Still ticking over the pros and cons of calling Ellison, I went to the door and opened it. It was Mrs. Dagget. She was still wearing that lumpy, funny-looking coat she'd had on that morning on the parkway, but the thing in her hand wasn't funny at all.

It was a .45 automatic, pointed straight at my belly, and the hole in the snout of it looked as big as a mine shaft to me.

My first remark wasn't too bright, but remember, I hadn't had what you'd really call a normal day. "It—it was the wrong hand, wasn't it, Mrs. Dagget?"

"I wondered how long it would take you to figure that out," she said, stepping into the livingroom and closing the door firmly after her. "When Ellison first came to the shop and told me what you'd seen, I had to get that dummy ready in a hurry. I couldn't think of which hand had been sticking out from under the blanket just then, so I had to guess. I guessed wrong, but I just couldn't remember. About an hour ago, it came to me."

"And you knew I might think of the same thing."

"As close as you must have been to me on the parkway, it was only a matter of time," she said. "So I got your address from the phone book and drove over here."

"What happens now?"

"We're going for a little ride, Mr. Julian. First, you'll meet a friend of mine. He's a power shovel operator for a builder, but he'll do anything I say, if the price is right. After

:hat, you'll get a chance to meet George."

"George? Is that who was really under the blanket this morning?"

She nodded. "My husband," she said. "He was a cheap, overbearing, sanctimonious . . ." Her mouth twisted into an evil grin. "But he's gone now."

"Gone? Where?"

"By this time next year, George's grave marker will be a brand-new luxury apartment," she answered. "They're pouring the foundation next week."

I could feel the sweat pouring onto the palms of my hands, but I was damned if I'd crawl in front of that woman. "And I'm going to be down there with him, eh?" I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "But don't you think Detective Ellison's going to be just a little suspicious of my disappearance? Especially after what happened today?"

"Let him suspect all he wants," she replied. "He can't prove a thing. Shall we go, Mr. Julian?"

Before I could even start to get up, there was a loud pounding on the front door. Whoever was out there really wanted to come in. Mrs. Dagget looked around, startled, and I thought of making a grab for the gun, but the distance was too great. She flicked nervous glances from side to side, and then slid the gun into the large coat pocket, keeping her hand on it.

"Get rid of whoever's at the door," she said, an edge of menace in her voice. "But don't get any bright ideas about slipping out. I'll be right behind you, and I'd just as soon kill both of you as one."

I went to the door and opened it a crack. Whoever was outside finished the job. The door flew open, and Ellison rocketed into the room. He pushed at me with one large hand, and I went sailing across the room, slamming against the opposite wall. Mrs. Dagget stood by the door, looking surprised, the gun still hidden in her coat pocket.

"You creep!" snarled Ellison straight into my face. "You no-good creep. D'you wanna know what happened when I went back to report off duty? The captain slapped me with a reprimand for what I did. That's going to louse up my chances for promotion, Julian. And all because of you!"

With that, he grabbed me by one arm and threw me toward another wall. I landed on my hands and knees near the doorway leading to the kitchen.

"'Harassment of innocent citizens,' he called it," Ellison went on. He turned around to glance in the direction of Mrs. Dagget, who looked as confused as I felt. Not that I was worrying about Ellison's

problems; I had bigger ones of my own.

"I'm glad you're here, ma'am," he said loudly. "I wanted to contact you anyway. You could sue this imbecile for every cent he's got, and I hope you do."

He walked toward me just as I was standing up. "But I'm not going to be satisfied with money!" he screamed. "I'm gonna take what's due me outa this jerk's hide!"

Lifting his foot, he planted it in the center of my back and pushed. I rocketed through the doorway, bumping my head on the corner of a cupboard and finally landing near the refrigerator. Then I stared in panic at Ellison. Anger was one thing, but this was going too far.

He was yanking his revolver out of its holster. With both of them after me, I was dead for sure; but then Ellison dodged through the door from the livingroom and quickly ducked out of the opening. He motioned to me to get down, and at the same time called to Mrs. Dagget.

"Drop the gun, Mrs. Dagget! Julian's safe now, and you haven't got a chance of escaping!"

He was answered by a roar louder than anything I've ever heard. A slug from Mrs. Dagget's automatic hit the kitchen wall, spattered plaster, and kept on going. I saw Ellison stand up, grasp the wrist of his gun arm with his other hand, and take careful aim. He fired once.

There was a shrill, hideous scream from the livingroom, and Ellison jumped quickly through the doorway. I followed, a little

slower, but just in time to see the detective pick up the automatic from where it lay beside Mrs. Dagget's body on the livingroom rug. The front of her coat was now a mass of sticky red. "You'd better call an ambulance," said Ellison. "She may be still alive."

Eventually, Mrs. Dagget was carted off to the hospital with the doctor's assurance that he'd patch her up well enough to stand trial. What seemed like a couple of hundred plainclothesmen, but was probably only half a dozen, came in to take reports and do whatever it is they do when the action's all over. By the time they'd finished, my house looked like Bikini Atoll after the bomb, and Ellison, who'd been awake for almost thirty hours straight, was walking around like one of the living dead.

"Sorry I had to come on so strong when I came in," he mumbled when things finally calmed down, "but when I saw Mrs. Dagget's station wagon out front, I peeked through the window and spotted the gun she had pointed at you. I took the only way I could think of to get you out of the room."

"No apology necessary," I said. "But what made you come back here? I thought you'd washed your hands of the case this afternoon."

"It was my wife," he answered.

"Your wife?"

"Yeah. When I got home, I was so sore at you I couldn't think of sleeping, so I sat down and told her all about what had happened. When I'd finished, she just shrugged. She's been a detective's wife long enough to know what it's like. But then she looked at me, real mad, and said, 'You'll have to get that coat dry-cleaned. What did you get all over the arm of it?' Just like a woman. She didn't care about how tired I was, but she hated to see me get spots on my clothes."

"I don't get it."

"Neither did I, at the time. But I looked at the back of the sleeve, and do you know what I found?"

"What?"

"Red paint."

"So?"

"So I thought back, and the only place I could have picked up that paint was from the arm of Herman, that dummy of Mrs. Dagget's. And if so, she couldn't have painted it two days ago, the way she said. She must have done it just a few minutes before she let me see it the first time I was there. I remembered her going back into the workroom once while I waited near the front door. And she was very careful not to let me touch the dummy's arm. I must have

brushed it with my coat just as I was leaving.

"Anyway, if the red paint was from Herman's arm, then she'd prepared the dummy for my benefit—which meant she was lying to both of us. I hopped back into my car and took a trip to her place, but she was gone. Since I was so close, I decided to drop in here and talk to you again. I spotted her wagon outside, and you know the rest."

He slumped down into a chair as if the talking had taken his last bit of strength, but there was one more thing I had to find out.

"What about the body? Her husband's body?" I asked. "She said it was under an apartment that's going up somewhere."

Ellison's eyelids were acting like two heavy weights that he was holding up by sheer willpower. "Questions . . . lotta questions," he muttered. "Who was workman who helped her? Wha' kind of murder weapon? Things like that. Find out tomorrow."

"But how'll you find where the body is?"

"Building inspector . . . I'll call the building inspector . . . tomorrow . . ."

"That's right. He'd have a record of any construction going up." I looked at Ellison admiringly. "I'd never have thought of that."

"Nuthin' to it," he said thickly. "What I'm trained for. That's why I'm a detective, and you, Mr. Julian, are . . . nuthin' . . . but . . . a . . ."

I've always been sorry that Ellison fell asleep in the chair before he got that last word out.

Dear Fans:

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members into the ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, and it is very rewarding to hear from our enthusiastic and loyal present members.

Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, California 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

Changing places is often dreamed of, but is seldom realized with pleasure.

Doing His Hamlet Thing

by Lee Chisholm

FOR ONE uneasy moment there in his drab little office at the Benigno Police Station, Lieutenant Michael O'Shea felt that time had played a trick on him and positions should be reversed, with Miss Mary Dawson sitting behind the scarred old desk and himself on the hard, straight-backed chair wondering nervously what it was all about.

Not that Miss Dawson looked nervous, because she didn't. She looked exactly like her usual cool, self-contained, schoolteacher self. Her blonde hair, threaded with gray, was pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck; her strong, well-modeled face was composed; and her tall, slender figure was neatly clothed in a sensible dark wool suit, erect but relaxed, belying the habit of good posture.

In fact, he thought, except for the softening of age taking the clean edge off the contours of her face, she looked almost the same as she did more than twenty years ago when he was one of her snickering adolescent students at Benigno High, more interested in staring at her legs than studying her course in English Literature. None of this made his present task any easier.

"I suppose you're wondering what this is all about, Miss Dawson?" He tried to speak with an easy assurance that didn't quite come off.

"I'm sure you'll get around to it when you're ready, Michael." She softened her crisp words with a quick, half-amused glance from wide-spaced gray eyes that crinkled into tiny laugh lines at the corners. O'Shea found himself grinning back at her the way he used to do, sharing the special teacher-pupil communication that says, *I* know you and *you* know I know . . .

O'Shea brought himself up short. The grinning, good-natured kid he used to be was gone now. A duty-bound cop sat in his place.

"I wouldn't have asked you to come by the station in person except that it concerns a matter that couldn't be handled by phone." O'Shea cleared his throat and dropped his bombshell. "About a vagrant we picked up early Sunday morning down on skid row."

O'Shea leaned back slightly in his swivel chair and heard it creak beneath him. It was the only sound in the quiet office.

"At first we thought he was the usual passed-out rummy sleeping off a heavy Saturday night, but what we took for a drunken sleep was actually a coma. He died in County General Hospital Monday afternoon without ever coming to."

He paused, but if he'd expected to see a flicker of relief cross her impassive schoolteacher's face, he was badly disappointed.

"Not that that in itself is too unusual," he went on. "Lots of those old codgers breathe their last at County General. But what made it sort of interesting to us was the cause of death. An overdose of barbiturates taken with liquor, possibly bourbon, but not a suicidal overdose of fifteen or twenty capsules. The stomach washings showed only slightly more than the therapeutic level, or the equivalent of two or three capsules. In other words, *just enough to kill.*"

He admired her control, the steady even tenor of her breathing; the strong, white hands folded easily on her lap; the expression of polite interest on her face. For all the emotion she showed, she could have been sitting at a meeting of the P.T.A.

"Name's William Benchek, out of Miami," O'Shea continued, hoping he sounded official and matter-of-fact. "A small-time crook known locally as Little Willie. Had a long record, mostly for blackmail and extortion."

"This is all very interesting, Michael, but I don't see what it has to do with me."

"I'm not sure either," he lied.

Right now he had one or two little facts and a very strong feeling about how they tied in. He could get more facts if he wanted them, but that was the hooker. *If* he wanted them . . .

O'Shea leaned back in his chair and circumvented her question by asking one of his own.

"Remember the year we studied *Hamlet* in your English Literature class, Miss Dawson? I was about the most disinterested kid in the room. I didn't go for all that long-winded *to be, or not to be* jazz, with Hamlet always launching into some long soliloquy about who had killed his father and why, and who had gained from his father's death, and what should he do about it? If it were me I would've *done* something, like pow!" O'Shea socked a firm fist into his cupped hand to illustrate. "I spouted off to you about it one day after class. Remember what you told me?"

"What did I tell you, Michael?" Miss Dawson spoke softly, turning the question back to him with schoolteacher expertise.

"You said the play was really the story of murder and its detection, with Hamlet doing a very fine piece of police work by mulling over the facts and trying to put two and two together. Hamlet, you said, was thinking, and it wouldn't hurt me to try it sometime."

O'Shea paused and grinned. Across from him Miss Dawson shared the remembered moment with a small smile of her own.

"So I've been doing my Hamlet thing," O'Shea went on almost dreamily, "thinking about this dead man. Little Willie Benchek, small-time Miami punk, leaves the bright lights and easy pickings of the big city to come west to a small California town like Benigno. Doesn't make sense. If he was on the run he would've gone to the Keys or lost himself in New Orleans or Atlanta. No, he came here for a reason, and with his record I'd say the reason was money and the method was blackmail. He was onto something—or *somebody*."

There was no change in Miss Dawson's steady, even breathing or the attentive tilt of her head. *Uphill,* he thought, feeling a small trickle of sweat form at the back of his collar. *Uphill the whole darn way.*

"Take these clippings in his wallet, for instance." O'Shea picked up one of the folded clippings from the file in front of him. "This one dates back twenty-five years. All about some Miami chorus girl named Mary Lou Daws. Quite a looker, too, judging by this . . ." O'Shea unfolded the clipping of a blonde in a bathing suit, her hair combed high in front and worn

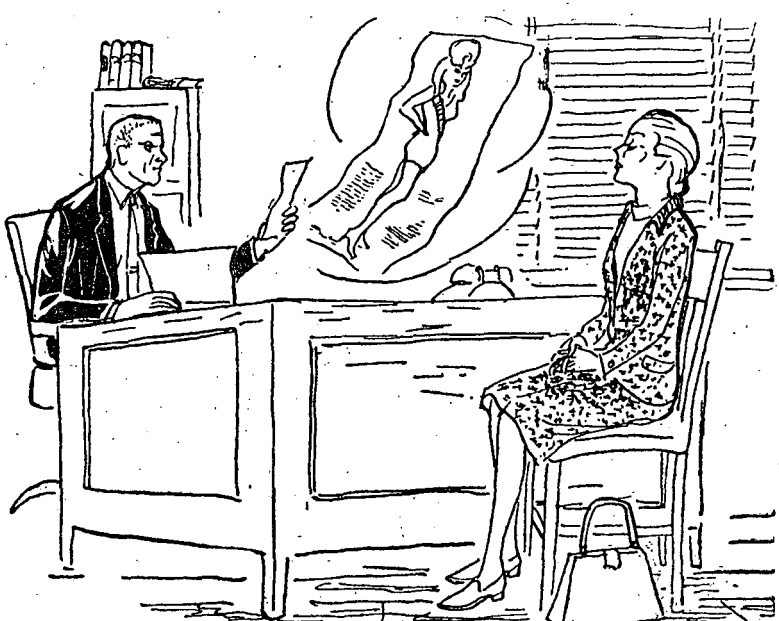
loose to her shoulders in the manner of the forties.

"A beauty contest winner from a small Midwest university," he continued. "Won a trip to Miami and decided to stay, but she got in with a bad bunch. Ended up being the girlfriend of Big Pete Petrini, head of Miami's mob. He was arrested in 1943 as the brains behind the Dundee jewel heist, but the most important stone, the Dundee Diamond, ninth largest in the world, was never recovered. Even before Big Pete was sent to prison, Mary Lou Daws was considered the key to the whereabouts of the missing Dundee Diamond."

O'Shea played with his pencil, holding it lengthwise between his index fingers. "It's still missing today," he said softly, "twenty-five years later. And so is Mary Lou Daws."

He didn't look at Miss Dawson directly, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the long legs shift position and one hand reach toward her purse on the floor. Then she checked herself and the hand was withdrawn. He figured that she'd reached for a cigarette, then thought better of it. She was a cool one, all right, but then she wasn't dealing with a rookie cop.

"The day Big Pete was sen-



tenced, Mary Lou Daws walked out of the courtroom into the crowd outside and was never seen again. Disappeared, like poof. into thin air."

O'Shea snapped his fingers, rather dramatically, he thought, and paused to look at her for effect, but Miss Dawson's head was bent as she checked the time on her wristwatch. Her manner indicated a certain lack of patience with Lieutenant Michael O'Shea's pointless diatribe. Something Irish and whimsical in him wanted to chuckle in admiration, but his policeman's soul rankled in mild irritation.

"I think," he tried to say casually, "that after all these years, Little Willie found Mary Lou Daws. Something, somewhere put him onto her present whereabouts. He probably took the Miami clipping from a newspaper file to check it with something else--another picture he'd seen recently."

He paused and looked across into Miss Dawson's steady gray eyes, eyes flecked with a hint of golden warmth, though somewhere in their depths lay the freeze of winter that only a fool would dare to challenge. A fool who would die in the attempt of blackmail, having a glass or two to seal a bargain which would never be kept.

"I think he was prepared to milk her dry for every cent she had, then sell her out to the next highest bidder. A human parasite like Little Willie," O'Shea said, staring thoughtfully at a crack in the ceiling above Miss Dawson's head, "wouldn't leave a person much choice."

O'Shea shifted his weight and the swivel chair creaked its complaints into the silence hanging between them.

"This was the other clipping found in the wallet." He handed it across to her, watching her face as she read the words he'd already memorized under a picture of herself. 'SMALL-TOWN SCHOOLTEACHER MACED IN RIOTS . . . Chicago, Ill. . . . Miss Mary Dawson, schoolteacher from Benigno, California, said today that while waiting in line outside a downtown Chicago theatre with a group of fellow teachers on seminar, to see a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello,* she and her companions suddenly found themselves in the middle of a Yippie confrontation with police . . .'

"That picture was carried by the AP," O'Shea commented, more to himself than to her. "I guess it got into every big newspaper in the country."

Miss Dawson shook her head slowly and gave a small smile, as though she were studying some

slightly out-of-focus snap taken at a high school picnic. "I really didn't want my picture taken. Just look at my hair hanging down around my shoulders and half of my hairpins missing. Had I ever guessed the trouble, I never would have attended that seminar."

O'Shea shuffled papers. *Police business is dirty business,* he fumed to himself. *Look, I don't make the laws,* he wanted to shout at her, dragging an ancient Police Academy cliche out of mental mothballs, *but it's my job to see . . .* He raised his eyes to find her looking at him.

Congratulations, Michael, she said in that glance, and the steady gray eyes crinkled slightly at the corners, as if managing to convey her humorous indulgence even in defeat—and it was defeat. He could sense it in the merest droop of her shoulders under the sensible suit, in the well-shod feet braced against the floor, in the erect posture that was now only discipline.

O'Shea swallowed and looked away, not wanting to see the slow crumble of dignity on that calm, aging face or guess her thoughts now that an exemplary life of twenty-five years of service and commitment to her beloved Benigno High were about to slip away—thanks to a former student named Michael O'Shea.

Congratulations, Michael, he thought bitterly to himself. So you've done your Hamlet thing and put two and two together, and Little Willie is chuckling in glee from his slab in the morgue because you've finished his work for him. Mary Lou Daws is going to be exhumed from oblivion and made to pay after all.

Miss Dawson leaned over and returned the clipping, her strong, slender hand steady and cool to his touch as he took it from her.

"Well, Michael?" she said quietly.

"Well, Miss Dawson, the presence of this clipping in Little Willie's wallet is the one thing that . . ." O'Shea gestured with the clipping and found that his own hands were shaking. With a silent curse he dropped the clipping near the ash tray and reached hastily for his pipe, then made a great to-do about knocking out old tobacco and tamping in new. He felt like swearing long and loud in the manner of his father, Michael O'Shea senior, whose tongue became a rapier of words in moments of intense frustration and despair.

Get on with it, O'Shea, he commanded himself, dragging in on the pipe as the match seared his fingers. *Do what you have to do.* Another match burned him and he chucked it away, just missing the ash tray.

The tiny dart of flame hesitated, nibbled a small brown hole in the clipping, then grew and ate its way across it with a curling yellow tongue, just as O'Shea grabbed the last legible corner and tossed it into the ash tray. Like spectators at some ancient rite, they watched while it burned itself out and crumpled into gray, spongy ash.

"Of all the clumsy. . . !" he muttered, in what he thought was a pretty good imitation of anger.

"Now don't feel bad, Michael," said Miss Dawson soothingly. "I didn't think it was a very good likeness anyway."

"Y'know," the lieutenant said slowly, rubbing his knuckles across his face as though giving the matter considerable thought, "I didn't either. As I was just about to say, the presence of that clipping in Little Willie's wallet was the one thing that convinced me that if he was looking for Mary Lou Daws, he was sure off on the wrong track."

"That very well may be, Michael," said Miss Dawson pulling on pristine white gloves with superb aplomb. "I suppose we'll never know *now*."

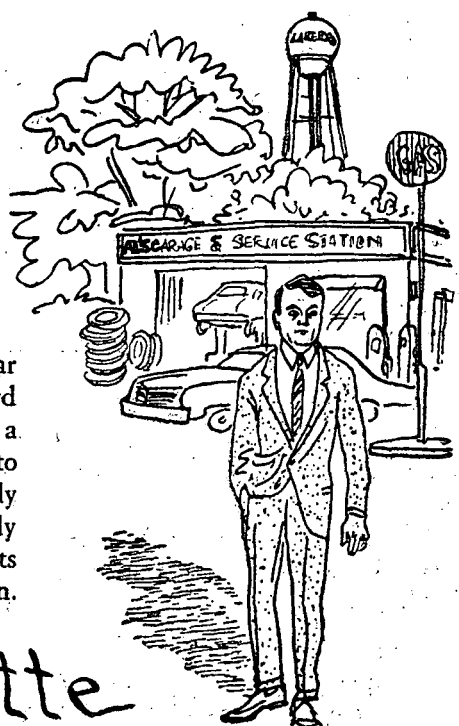
"Ain't it the truth," O'Shea agreed. Then, gathering up the Benchek papers, he slapped the file closed and scrawled a notation across it reading, *No further inquiry indicated from facts available,* and added his initials.

Grinning across at Miss Dawson and paraphrasing Hamlet with a disregard for meter, he said softly, "There are more ways of serving Justice, Horatio, than are dreamt of in The Policeman's Handbook!"

There are some who would dispute that revival of an old tale is less reliable than the recollection of a "familiar" face.

Memory of a MURDER

A Novelette



THE MAN driving the rented car crossed the city limits of Lakeford shortly before nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning. He drove into the center of town, cruised slowly once around the square, and finally turned down one of the side streets to Al's Garage and Service Station.

Getting out of the car, he lighted a cigarette and stood looking around. He was a stocky man who looked younger than he really was because there was no gray in his jet-black hair and his face was without wrinkles. He wore a tweed

suit that needed pressing, and a necktie that did not even pretend to match the suit. His posture seemed poor as he stood waiting by the car.

Al, the garagekeeper, came over to him, smiling and wiping his hands on a greasy rag.

"Can I get a lube job and oil change?" the man wanted to know.

"I couldn't get to it right away," Al told him. "Got an overhaul job I promised to have ready by noon."

"This afternoon will be all right," said the man. "I expect to be in town most of the day."

"Salesman?"

"No. No, I'm a writer looking for a little background on a story. Think you can have the car ready by three or four o'clock?"

"Sure, easy. Get to it right after lunch. You're a writer, you say?"

"Yeah. Magazine writer. Name's Briggs, Dan Briggs."

"What do you write about?"

"Oh, mysteries, crime stuff, you know."

"Well, I wish you luck," Al said dubiously, "but I'm afraid you won't find much mystery in Lakeford."

"Oh, I don't know," Briggs replied. "You had a murder here, didn't you?"

Al raised his eyebrows. "Huh?"

"Well, not recently, of course. I mean about twenty-eight, twenty-nine years ago, back around 1940. Young girl strangled. Killer disappeared, never caught."

"Oh, sure." said Al. "You mean the Jennie Hunt killing. Boy, that's going back some, ain't it?"

"Kind of. But you'd be surprised how popular these unsolved murders are with the public."

"Is that a fact? Stuff that old, huh? You know, I was just a kid then, oh, maybe twelve, thirteen years old, but I can still remember how excited everybody got over that girl's murder. Especially after Billy Deever got away. He's the one killed her, you know. Why, when he wasn't caught, some folks here in Lakeford kept their lights on all night long for three, four months."

"Well now, that's interesting," said Briggs. "Listen, if you've got the time maybe I'll have a talk with you before I leave. You could probably give me a lot of color for the story. Even put your name in it if you want me to. Be good advertising for you."

"Say now, that'd be swell," said Al. "I could give free copies of the

by Clark Howard

magazine with every oil change."

"Good idea," said Briggs. "Say, where is the newspaper office located?"

"Right up the street there and straight across the square."

"Fine. I'll see you later, hear?"

The town of Lakeford had not changed much in the twenty-nine years since the murder of Jennie Hunt; not in size, at any rate. It had been a small town then and it had remained a small town. In appearance it was much the same as any of the farm towns that dotted the midwest. The courthouse was located in the town square, and around it was a small public park where the high school band played on alternate Sunday afternoons. Across the street from all four sides of the park were stores and offices and the bus depot and one movie house, and the other commercial establishments which constituted what the townspeople unanimously referred to as Uptown. Some of the buildings were older and shabbier looking after twenty-nine years, while others had been remodeled to fit the times. Nearly all of the businesses had the same names and were operated either by the same people or the sons or sons-in-law of those people, so there had been little, if any, change in the business climate.

All things considered, if the killer of Jennie Hunt had come back to the scene of his crime, he probably would have had no difficulty at all recognizing the town, it was that unchanged.

Dan Briggs walked along the courthouse side of the park until he came to a two-story corner building across the face of which a weather-abused sign proclaimed:

WARREN COUNTY JOURNAL
PUBLISHED WEEKLY
W. J. BURKETT, EDITOR & PUBLISHER

Walking up the concrete steps to the entrance, Briggs pushed through a large door into a waiting room which was separated but not concealed from a typical small-town newsroom, complete with rolltop desks.

A harried-looking woman pasting copy at a table near the railing looked up, asked, "Help you?"

"Like to see Mr. Burkett, please. The name's Dan Briggs."

The woman nodded toward a crowded corner at the rear of the room. "That's him back there behind the cigar. Don't know if he'll talk to you or not. You can go and see."

"Thanks." Briggs stepped beyond the railing and walked back to the desk of a sour-faced old man of seventy. "Mr. Burkett?"

"Yes, what is it?" the old man answered without looking up.

"My name's Daniel Briggs, Mr.

Burkett. I'm a writer from Denver. Trying to get a little background material on a series of articles I'm doing and I wondered if I might look at some of your old files."

Burkett looked up then, squinting through a trail of smoke from his cigar. "Files on what?" he asked.

"On the Hunt murder. Happened back in—"

"I know when it happened," the old man snapped. "I run the newspaper in this county, remember? Happened on the sixth day of October in 1940."

Briggs nodded. "You've got a good memory."

"Got to have, got to have. Newspapering is a tough business. What kind of articles you say you're doing?"

"It's a series on unsolved murders. I plan to—"

"Got the wrong case then, haven't you?" Burkett interrupted again. "Nothing unsolved about the Jennie Hunt case. Clear as water. A boy named Billy Deever did it."

"Yes, I know, that's what the consensus seems to be. However, he was never caught, was he?"

"Nope, unfortunately. If he had been, Lakeford probably would have had itself a nice lynching. That girl he killed was pretty well thought of by folks."

"That so?"

"Yes, I remember her well. Pretty girl, always smiling. Went to church, sang in the choir, handed out food baskets to the poor folks at Christmas, came from a good family."

"The family still here?"

"Nope. Moved to California a year after it happened. Never heard from since."

Briggs took out a spiral notebook and made some notes. "How about the Deever boy? He have any family?"

"None to speak of. Had a drunken old man, was all. Some of the men in town came close to stringing *him* up when they couldn't lay hands on Billy. Sheriff had to lock him up for his own protection."

"What became of him?"

"Oh, he wandered around the county for a spell, kept drinking, finally got committed to the asylum over in Trevor. Died there."

Briggs nodded and closed his notebook. "Would it be all right for me to see those old papers now?"

"Don't see why not." Burkett leaned across his desk and yelled, "Agnes!" and the harried-looking woman from the front of the office came back to see what he wanted. "Get out the back issues for all of October and the first two weeks of November of 1940," he told her, and as she started away, added, "and get the first week of October

from 1945." Turning back to Briggs, he said, "That 1945 issue has got a dandy editorial in it, commemorating the fifth anniversary of the killing. Wrote it myself. Got a good point of view you might want to quote."

"Thanks. Is that the last that's been written on the case, that 1945 editorial?"

"Yep. It kind of died after that. War ended, lots of boys came home, all that. People just naturally forgot about Jennie Hunt then, more or less."

Briggs nodded. "So the killer has been gone now for—let's see, nearly twenty-nine years. I guess he ought to feel pretty safe by now."

"Oh, no," Burkett said emphatically, "not Billy Deever. I knew that boy, knew him pretty well. He was always a little nervous, always a little scared. A lot of it was insecurity, I reckon; you know, poor home life, never had the things other kids had, all that. No, whatever Billy is, wherever he is, he's not secure, I'll tell you that. Not even after twenty-nine years. He's jumpy, still scared, just like he always was. I'd bet my last dollar on that."

"Well now, that seems kind of farfetched to me," Briggs said skeptically. "After all this time he must realize that it's almost an impossibility that he'll be caught."

"I wouldn't say that," Burkett argued. "He can still be identified; he has a red tattoo just above the muscle of his right arm, a red star tattoo. There's a card on file with the F.B.I. in Washington with a description of that tattoo. If he's ever arrested anywhere in the country, he'll be pegged right away. As wild as Billy Deever was as a kid, he's sure to break a law sometime, someplace."

"Well, maybe so," said Briggs, "but it doesn't seem very likely to me. Aside from that tattoo, probably nobody would even recognize him."

"Oh, he'd be recognized, all right. People don't change that much. Why, Gordon Hooper, druggist we got here in town, saw Deever in St. Louis back in 1952 but couldn't get to him in time to stop him. Gordon recognized him, and that was twelve years after it happened."

"Well, you may be right," said Briggs. "But for my story, I'm going to take the position that Deever is free and will probably remain free."

"You suit yourself, son," said Burkett. "I never tell a man how to write. It's too personal, like telling him how to make love. To each his own, I always say."

The old man laughed and Briggs laughed with him. Just then Agnes

returned with the newspapers on the case.

"Use that table in the other corner," Burkett said.

Briggs thanked him and took the papers across the office and settled down to his research.

The first story, as usual, was sensational but without detail. The second was a little more thorough and in it Billy Deever was initially mentioned. Issue number three was devoted to the results of the investigation and the police effort to apprehend Deever. The last issue of October, which came out nearly a month after the crime, was a recapitulation of everything that had transpired up to that time. The two November issues were skeletal stories, sketches written primarily for circulation purposes. The 1945 editorial was the usual conglomeration of sympathy, indignation, and pointed questions directed toward various law enforcement agencies.

Briggs lighted a cigarette and settled back in his chair. Spiral notebook open before him, he began making a list of names of people he wanted to see.

Much of the story of the murder, of course, was not to be found in newspaper stories, since a major part of it had been known only to Jennie Hunt herself, or to Billy Deever.

Jennie Hunt's body had been found in a small section of woods at the southern edge of the Lakeford cemetery. It was assumed that she had gone to the cemetery to visit her grandmother's grave, and had been dragged into the woods by Deever. The general consensus was that Jennie must have resisted him, and that he must have lost control of himself and strangled her. That story, which seemed to fit all the particulars of the crime, was the one most accepted, and the one remembered when all others had been forgotten.

The accepted version of Jennie's death was based, to a large degree, on her personal reputation in the town of Lakeford. Jennie had been everything W. J. Burkett had said she was: choir singer, helper of the needy, and in general the accepted standard-bearer of Lakeford's respectable young ladies.

But Jennie had been other things also; things the esteemed publisher of the Warren County *Journal* would not have been in a position to comment on. She had, for instance, at times been a young woman of intense, abandoned passion; but no one knew that except Billy Deever. As a matter of fact, the very scene of her death, the quiet, secluded woodland next to the cemetery, had, until that fateful day, been their trysting place.

That Jennie had been possessed of a vile and vicious temper was also known only to Deever; he was reminded of it every time he looked at the faint three-inch scar put there by Jennie's nail file one summer afternoon after she had seen him with another girl. She had failed to plunge the file into his throat only because he had happened to turn away at the crucial moment.

Deever knew, also, of Jennie's deep hatred of her father; a result of Mr. Hunt having exercised a parent's dominion over an inheritance left Jennie by her grandmother. Deever could have told how she had cunningly plotted her father's death and begged Billy to help her do it; how he had refused and had told her to stop talking like an insane woman; and how she had become violently angry at him, so angry that she had drawn a knife from her purse and plunged its blade into his side. Deeper and deeper she had pushed the blade of that knife into his body, until finally he had been forced to strangle her to make her let go of the weapon before she took his life.

All these things Billy Deever might have told—not that anyone in Lakeford would have believed him.

Less than an hour after Briggs left the newspaper office, he was sitting on the front porch of a modest cottage where ex-sheriff Elmo Matson was spending his years of retirement. The former lawman, now well past seventy, sat across from him in a cushioned rocker, chewing tobacco.

"How do you figure Deever got away, Sheriff?" Briggs asked, addressing the old man by his former title. Matson turned his head and expectorated tobacco juice into a flowerpot.

"I wish I knew, young fella, I surely do. That's been a mystery to me for twenty-nine years. I bet I've lost more'n a thousand hours of sleep wondering about that."

"How soon after the killing were you on his trail?"

"Wasn't more'n an hour at the outside. The girl's body was found by the cemetery caretaker before Deever even got off the grounds. That was about four-thirty in the afternoon. I got there by five and the body was still warm. Before six o'clock there was roadblocks around the whole county. Every state highway was closed, every dirt road, even every cow path. State troopers and deputy sheriffs searched every single vehicle that crossed the county line. Why, they even stopped a funeral procession the next morning and searched the hearse."

Briggs smiled. "That's something that'll dress up the story a bit." He made a notation on his spiral pad. "Come from a funeral parlor here in town?"

"Yep. Haskell's, over next to the Baptist church." Matson began to chuckle. "The dead man's next-of-kin sued the county *and* the state. Didn't win, of course, but the case

got all the way to the state Supreme Court."

"How far were you able to trace Deever before you lost him?" Briggs asked.

Matson rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I don't want to slander nobody," he said slowly. "Course, it's all a matter of record, so I reckon I'm on safe ground." He leaned over and spat again. "We tracked him right back into town. There was a woman named Lillie Burke lived upstairs over a beauty parlor she operated, and an old drunk named Tetter claimed he was sitting out in the alley behind her place and saw Billy go up the back stairs about ten past five that evening. Claimed he saw Lillie let him in. Course, we didn't find all that out until twenty-four hours had passed. By the time we checked Lillie's place, why, Billy was gone."

"What did Lillie Burke have to say about it?"

"Denied everything, naturally. Practically dared us to put her in jail as an accessory, said if we did she'd sue us to hell and back. Well, by that time we were under threat of one lawsuit already, over that hearse business that happened that morning, so we just let it go. It was pretty obvious she didn't know where he'd gone to, anyway. And old Tetter's testimony wouldn't have held up in court, what with him being a known drunk and all."

"I see," said Briggs. "Do you personally believe that Deever actually *had* been there?"

"I think so," Matson admitted. "Course, I base my opinion on a lot of things I know that don't really have much to do with the killing."

"Such as?"

"Wouldn't do no good to tell you," the old man hedged. "It ain't anything you could print, that's sure."

"Tell me anyway," Briggs encouraged. "Just for my own information. I promise not to quote you."

"Wouldn't do you no good to." The old man grinned. "I'd just deny it. Course, I don't think anything'd come of it anyhow. What I was referring to was the fact that Lillie Burke had always been crazy about Billy Deever, and everybody in town knew it. She never denied it; matter of fact, she's bragged about it a couple of times since."

"You mean she's still here in Lakeford?" Briggs asked incredulously.

"Yep, still here. Still got her beauty shop right in the same spot an' still lives up over it. Course, she don't get none of the better trade in town, but I reckon she gets along all right."

Briggs nodded slowly, thinking it must have taken a lot of guts for her to stay here, and picturing in his mind a young woman growing old in a town that must have despised her. Idly he wondered what she would look like.

"Anything else you want to know about the case?" the ex-sheriff asked.

"Nothing we haven't covered, I guess," said Briggs. "Unless you've got some theory about how Deever got away?"

"I got lots of theories, as you call them," Elmo Matson said candidly. "Hunches, I call them. But not a one of them holds water." He leaned forward in his rocker. "Just picture this if you can: a barricade of state police around the whole county; four posses fanning out in eight different directions; ten or twelve citizens' groups combing every house and farm and barn in the county; every car searched, every truck, every wagon, silo, corncrib, every hole and corner for miles around—"

"But no Deever?"

"No Deever."

"He just vanished?"

"Yep. Into thin air."

Briggs flipped his notebook closed, shoved it into a pocket of his coat, and extended his hand to the old lawman.

"Sheriff, it's been a pleasure talking with you. Have a good day."

Of course, Billy Deever had not actually vanished into thin air, but he might as well have.

As Elmo Matson had said, Deever did not have more than an hour's lead on the swift pursuit which followed. He had strangled the life out of Jennie Hunt at exactly three fifty-one p.m. For the next few minutes he had been sick, terribly sick, both from the cut in his side and the shocking realization of what he had just done.

Presently controlling himself, Deever had pressed a handkerchief over his wound and managed to stop most of the blood flow. For some reason he had picked up the knife Jennie had used to cut him and put it into his pocket. Then he had begun to make his way across the cemetery toward town. He had not gone a hundred yards when he heard the first loud, accusing cry.

"Murderer!" came a screaming voice. "Murderer!"

Deever had whirled around to see Clink, the old cemetery groundskeeper, standing at the edge of the clearing, pointing a shaky finger in his direction.

"Murderer!" the old man yelled again, and then kept on yelling until across the road a woman came out of her house and saw who he was yelling at and turned to stare

fixedly, fearfully, at Billy Deever.

At that precise moment Billy Deever became a fugitive. At that precise moment he fled.

The front door of the beauty shop was locked when Briggs got there shortly after noon. A hand-printed sign hanging in the window indicated the shop was closed for lunch, would reopen at one o'clock.

Briggs walked to the corner and around to the alley, then back to the rear of the two-story frame building where Lillie Burke lived and worked. He climbed the back stairs and knocked lightly on the screen door.

"Yes, what is it?" a woman's voice called from inside.

"Miss Burke?"

"Yes?"

"My name's Dan Briggs, Miss Burke. May I talk to you for a minute or two?"

"What about?"

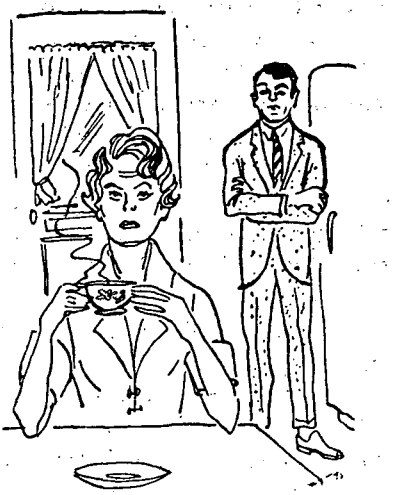
"About Billy Deever," Briggs said plainly.

There was a long moment of silence. Briggs tried to focus his eyes on the shaded room beyond the screen door, but was unable to do so because of the bright sunlight outside. Momentarily a hand came into sight and flipped up the door latch.

"Who are you?" the woman asked. "And what do you want?"

"I'm a writer, Miss Burke," Briggs told her, stepping inside. "From Denver. I'm doing a story on Billy Deever and the Jennie Hunt murder. I'm told you were a friend of Deever."

"Who told you that?" She sat down at a small kitchen table on which there was an empty plate



and a half-filled cup of coffee.

"Sheriff Matson. Ex-sheriff Matson, I guess I should say."

Lillie Burke took a sip of coffee. She was a well-preserved woman in her late forties, who looked perhaps eight or ten years younger. Her hair was graying, her upper arms beginning to grow fleshy, a few crow's-feet starting at the cor-

ners of her eyes, but her body was firm and supple beneath the white, almost transparent beautician's uniform, and Dan Briggs thought her most attractive.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

Lillie shrugged. "If you like. You're wasting your time, though, if you think you're going to find out anything from me. If you've talked to Elmo Matson, he probably told you that I refused to cooperate with him, too."

"Yes, he did," said Briggs, "but that was in 1940, when what you said would have made a difference. Now it won't matter one way or the other."

"I don't see why," she said pointedly. "Billy Deever's never been captured."

"And he probably never will be," said Briggs. "That's why it doesn't make any difference anymore."

"I see," Lillie said sarcastically. "Well, now that we've settled that, what makes you think I know anything that would even interest you?"

"The consensus in Lakeford," said Briggs, "seems to be that you were the last person to see Deever on the night of the killing. If that's true, I thought you might be able to give me a clue as to how he managed to get away from all the search parties that were after him."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Briggs," she said. For a moment she gazed fixedly out the window next to her chair. "On that score I'm in the same boat as the rest of the town; I've been wondering for twenty-nine years how he did it."

"Is there anything at all you can tell me?" he prompted. "What direction he might have gone, whether there was anyone else who would have helped him—"

"Nothing, Mr. Briggs," she said with finality.

He studied the woman thoughtfully for a moment. "May I ask you a personal question, Miss Burke?"

Lillie smiled a very slight smile, as if she had heard the approach many times before. "All right."

"Why have you stayed in Lakeford all these years? You're attractive, obviously intelligent; you probably could have become quite successful someplace else. Why did you stay here, in a town you must have known was very much against you?"

"I stayed here, as anyone in Lakeford can tell you, because I've always thought Billy would come back someday. Maybe not come back, actually, but get in touch with me somehow—" Her voice trailed off into silence.

"Do you still think so?" Briggs asked quietly.

"I don't know. I used to leave a

light burning in my back window; for a long time I did that. But I haven't left it on lately, not for a few years."

Briggs smiled sadly. "It's been a long, long time, Lillie. He'd be past fifty now, a completely different person. You probably wouldn't even recognize him."

"Yes, I would," she said firmly. "I'd recognize him, I know I would. Believe me, I know I would."

They sat in silence for several moments, then Briggs stood up and shook hands with her.

"Good luck, Lillie."

He went back down the stairs to the alley.

Billy Deever had gone down those same back stairs just after dark on the day he strangled Jennie Hunt. The wound in his side had been cleaned and dressed, he was filled with paregoric to kill his pain, and he had nearly a hundred dollars in his pocket. He had no idea where he was going or how he would get there. He knew only one thing for certain: he had to get away from Lakeford—or be lynched.

For a little while Deever reconnoitered the town by way of its narrow back alleys, trying to develop in his mind some sort of plan, some sort of procedure to follow. Cold fear spread through him as he heard somebody say that roadblocks had been thrown up around the entire county; that state police were coming in; that armed posses were already spreading into the outlying fields, the woods, the brush. It was a mass effort. Everywhere there would be searchers. It seemed there was no place left to go.

During his third cautious exploration up the alley north of the square, Deever found an open back door and slipped in out of the night to rest. The room he entered had a blue night light burning. It appeared to be some sort of laboratory, but he did not know at first just where he was. Then he saw Old Man Tucker on a slab over in the corner and he knew. He was in the embalming room of Haskell's Funeral Parlor.

Old Man Tucker had died the previous night. He was to be buried two days hence in Larchmont, fifty miles downstate where his wife lay at rest. Deever had heard that morning that his married daughter was coming by car the next day to escort the body back.

Larchmont, Deever thought. *Fifty miles south. Two counties away. And only a few miles from the state line. Larchmont. Sure.*

Deever found a casket next to the wall with a tab on it bearing

Old Man Tucker's name. Raising the lid, he took the knife Jennie had cut him with and very carefully went to work. First he slit the satin along one side, the side that would be away from anyone looking down at the body. Then he removed nearly all of the lower padding, being careful not to disturb the upper quilting that would be partly visible from the outside. He worked as quickly as he could, taking the extracted padding down the alley to a trash can.

It might work, he kept telling himself. It just might work.

By seven-thirty Deever was curled up inside the casket. Lying on his side in the lower section, he had stretched the thin quilting tautly over him so that the interior of the box looked undisturbed. The next morning, after Old Man Tucker's body was put in, if there was still room for the lid to close, then he would be on his way out of Lakeford. After that, he would have just one more problem: getting back out of the coffin before it was buried.

Briggs entered the pleasant coolness of the funeral parlor and paused for a moment just inside the door. There was no one in the foyer or at the desk just beyond, so he rang a small bell. Presently a stocky, solemn-looking man came out of a rear office and approached him.

"Good afternoon," said Briggs. "Are you Mr. Haskell?"

"Haskell, Jr., yes, sir. How may I serve you?"

Briggs told him who he was and what he was doing, and asked if Haskell, Jr. recalled the incident of the funeral procession being stopped during the search for Billy Deever.

"I'll say I remember it," Haskell, Jr. said, discarding his solemn attitude and chuckling casually. "Matter of fact, I was driving the hearse. That was my first year out of college and my dad and uncle were kind of breaking me into the business. Teaching me the hard, cold facts, so to speak." He nudged Briggs with his elbow. "Get it? Hard, cold facts. Bodies. Hard, cold, get it?"

Briggs forced a smile. "I understand there was a lawsuit over the hearse being stopped. Was there any basis for that? I mean, was the body or coffin disturbed in any way?"

"No, no, not a bit," the mortician assured him. "Matter of fact, I advised Mrs. Cupples, the next of kin, against seeing a lawyer at all. After all, there had been no real harm done. Why, all the troopers did was open up the rear door and one of them climbed inside to

look behind the casket. I don't think they even touched it."

"They didn't move it or open the lid at all?"

"Not an inch."

"How far had you gone when the procession was stopped?"

"Well now, it really wasn't a procession, you understand. Just two cars; the hearse and Mrs. Cupples' private car. The troopers pulled both of us over right at the county line."

"How long were you delayed?"

"Oh, just a matter of minutes. No time at all, really."

Briggs made a notation in his book. "And then you proceeded on to—where was it?"

"Larchmont."

"Yes, Larchmont. No trouble from then on?"

Haskell, Jr. shook his head. "None at all. Left the casket at the Larchmont Funeral Home overnight. The services were conducted there the following morning and the burial took place right after. All strictly routine."

"I see," said Briggs. He closed his notebook and put it away. "Well, I guess I've got it straight now. Thanks for your time, Mr. Haskell."

"Not at all, not at all," Haskell, Jr. said, smiling.

Briggs started to leave.

"I knew him, you know."

Briggs paused. "I beg your pardon?"

"Billy Deever," the undertaker said. "I knew him. We went to high school together."

"Is that a fact? What sort of person was he?"

"Hard," said Haskell, Jr. "Hard and cool, very cool. And mean."

Briggs nodded, remembering other impressions from other people in town. To old Burkett, Deever had been nervous and shaky; former sheriff Matson regarded him as clever, tricky; Lillie Burke must have thought him gentle and worth loving; and now Haskell, Jr. was drawing an entirely different picture.

"Oh, he was a killer, all right," the undertaker was saying, "no doubt about that. You know, he had the coldest, grayest eyes of any man I ever saw. Say, your eyes aren't gray, are they?"

"Blue," said Briggs. He stepped forward to allow Haskell, Jr. to see for himself.

Haskell, Jr. smiled, said, "Reason I asked first, I didn't want to say anything offensive. You see, I've got a theory about people with gray eyes. Done a little research on it, too, and I've found out that they're —well, they're just not like other people, not like normal people. They're jinxed, know what I mean? I never buried a man with

gray eyes yet that hadn't come to a violent end in some way. Seems like there's just bad blood in every one of them."

"That's an interesting theory," said Briggs. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I wonder what color eyes Jennie Hunt had?"

Haskell, Jr. frowned as if trying to remember. While he was pondering, Briggs quietly left. Outside, he checked his list of names and saw that he had only one person left to see in Lakeford.

Billy Deever had not been certain just exactly where he was at eleven o'clock the following night. His whole body was laced with pain and he knew he could not stand the confinement of the casket a minute longer. His side was burning like fire and he could feel the wetness of the bandage where blood had soaked through. His legs were like heavy weights, cramped and aching from their bent, confined position. His stomach growled with hunger, his head throbbed like a drum, even the backs of his eyes hurt. He had to get out, he had to move, and quickly, or he would surely surrender to an ever increasing urge to scream at the top of his lungs.

He had been listening intently for what seemed like an eternity, and had heard no sound. Now he could wait no longer. Slowly he pushed himself up and forward. The satin quilting came loose easily. His face brushed against Old Man Tucker's foot. He moved to the side and raised his head and shoulders past the feet and legs of the corpse and slowly pushed up the lid of the coffin. He gripped the casket's front edge and pulled himself partway up. Looking around, he saw that he was in a chapel. Neat rows of folding chairs faced him, and there were floral wreaths all around the little tier upon which the casket rested. The room was dimly lighted and smelled oddly of witch hazel. He realized he was in the funeral home in Larchmont.

He dragged himself over the edge of the casket, disrupting Old Man Tucker as he did so. Somehow he managed to get his feet on the floor without tipping over the casket. Then, when he tried to stand up, his legs gave way and he fell to the floor directly in front of the casket.

He lay there for a long while, massaging his calves and ankles, trying to restore some life, some feeling to the numb limbs. Gradually he began to feel pricks of sensation and his legs warmed as the blood within them flowed freely. Soon he was able to stand again. He supported himself against the

wall, reeling slightly. He had escaped Lakeford!

When he was sure he could do it, he leaned over the casket, straightened the old man, tucked in the loose padding and quilting and gently closed the lid. The old man would have to go the rest of the way alone.

Quietly, Deever moved to the nearest window and peered outside. The small town street was dark and deserted. He unlocked and raised the window. Climbing out, he lowered it behind him. He stood close to the building and looked up and down the street. On the corner he saw a bank with a large illuminated clock in its window. It was eleven-thirty. He had been in the coffin for twenty-eight long, black hours—but he had escaped Lakeford.

Shivering, Billy Deever walked away into the night.

Briggs had a malted milk at the fountain in Hooper's Drug Store while he listened to Gordon Hooper tell of the time in a St. Louis train depot when he had seen Billy Deever.

"Wasn't more'n ten, fifteen feet away from him," Hooper said. "I'd just got on the train, see, and settled down by the window. I was looking out at the people on the platform as the train was beginning to move. You know how trains kind of crawl a little at first; well, that's what it was doing. All of a sudden I see this soldier standing next to his duffel bag way down at the end of the platform. It was Billy Deever, sure as God made little green apples."

"You're absolutely sure?" said Briggs.

"Listen, I'm positive. I'd know Deever anyplace. It was him, I tell you. I know it was him."

"When did you say this happened?"

"In June of 1952. I was in St. Louis for a druggists' convention."

"And he was in uniform? In the Army?"

"Right. Had sergeant's stripes and a whole chest full of ribbons."

Briggs rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Nearly twelve years after the murder. Did he look the same to you, Mr. Hooper? I mean, had he changed very much in the face or his build, anything like that?"

"Not a bit. Oh, he was a little older looking, maybe weighed a little more, but that was all. Like I said, I'd know Deever any place. Know him today if I saw him again."

"You might have recognized him then," Briggs agreed. "Only twelve years had passed, and a man that age doesn't change too much in twelve years. But I wouldn't be

too sure about now. Don't forget, sixteen more years have passed since then. Deever's grown older, just like you have. He'd be past fifty now."

"I'd know him," Hooper insisted. "I know I would."

"Well, maybe so," said Briggs, not caring to argue the point. He stood up and Hooper walked to the door with him.

"When'll the story be out?" Hooper wanted to know.

"Have to write it first," said Briggs. "Then I have to sell it. If and when, as the saying goes, I'll mail you a copy."

"Sure appreciate it."

"Good-bye, Mr. Hooper."

Out on the sidewalk, Briggs looked at his watch and saw that it was three-thirty. He had been in Lakeford less than seven hours. Somehow it seemed much longer than that.

Gordon Hooper was entirely correct in his insistence that he had seen Billy Deever at the depot in St. Louis. It had, in fact, been Billy Deever, only by that time he had become Master Sergeant Wally Marquette, an eleven-year army veteran on his way to the war in Korea.

Deever's new name had sprung from two sources. Marquette was the little southern town he found himself in when he rolled off a freight train two days after leaving Larchmont. And it had been a Dr. Walter who cleaned and stitched the cut in his side after Deever told him he had been in a fight in a hobo camp. Before the doctor had time to report the treatment to the local constable, his patient had been on a bus bound for New Orleans.

Time passed quickly for Deever after that. He wandered from place to place until the start of World War II. Then, like most everyone else, he enlisted. Distinguishing himself as a combat infantryman in Africa and Europe, he soon was promoted to non-commissioned rank and compiled an enviable military record. After the war he remained in the service, and less than a year after Gordon Hooper had seen him, he had become Lieutenant Marquette and was a platoon leader in Korea. He was seriously wounded during the battle of the Punchbowl and in 1954, with the rank of captain, he was given a medical discharge.

By this time Deever was no longer a young man, but neither was he old. He decided to use his G.I. Bill benefits for an education. He went to college and later studied law. Eventually he opened a law office. Over the years his practice grew, in size and reputation. He entered politics. He married

well. He fathered three children. He prospered, and he grew older.

By the time he was fifty years old, Billy Deever had become Walter Marquette, one of the most respected men in his state. Now, twenty-nine years after he had choked the life out of Jennie Hunt, he was preparing for an event that would easily be the most important of his life.

Briggs walked back to Al's Garage and Service Station. His rented car had been serviced and was waiting for him. Al was not there, having gone home for supper, but he had left word for Briggs that he would be back at six o'clock for Briggs to interview him. Briggs paid the charges on the car and said he would return later. He got in the car and drove directly out of Lakeford.

He arrived back in the city at eight o'clock that night and checked the car in at the rental agency. From there he took a cab to the depot where he opened a pay locker and retrieved an expensive black two-suiter he had checked forty-eight hours earlier. Carrying the bag himself, he boarded a train for Chicago and made his way to a reserved drawing room.

Once inside the compartment, with a DO NOT DISTURB sign hanging on the locked door, he discarded the wrinkled tweed suit and its accessories and stripped down to his shorts. Standing in the small washroom, he bent over the lavatory and used hot water and strong soap to wash the temporary black dye from his hair. With all the black out, his hair again became steel-gray and added a decade to his appearance. He happened to glance in the mirror at what looked like a vaccination scar just above the muscle of his right arm. Perhaps he should have been a surgeon instead of a lawyer. He had certainly performed a neat operation there, using a sterilized penknife to remove his tattooed red star—and left-handed at that.

He looked down at his side at the other scar, the one Jennie had given him. It was red and ugly and probably would remain that way. Not that it mattered, of course. No one ever saw it except Martha, his wife, and she thought it was from the war. He had two legitimate war wounds; one more wouldn't make any difference.

Removing some clothes from his suitcase, he dressed in a well-tailored, conservative business suit, slipped his law school class ring onto one finger, his wedding band onto another, and lighted an expensive cigar. The last thing he did to complete the transformation was lean very close to the mirror and

remove two blue contact lenses, exposing eyes almost as gray as his hair. Then he put on a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

Turning back to the washroom, he checked his appearance in the mirror. No longer did he look forty years old; now he looked fifty-two, which he was. No longer was his 'dress casual and unconcerned; now it was precise, impressive. No longer was his posture loose and slouched; now he stood erect and proud.

No longer was he Dan Briggs, writer, or Billy Deever, murderer. Now he was Walter Marquette, politician, power.

He made his way back to the club car where the men of the committee were waiting for him. He sat at the head of a small table, in a space they had reserved for him. The waiter brought a tray of drinks. His was served first, as the committee chairman had instructed. He did not touch his glass; neither did the others. When the waiter left, the committee chairman spoke.

"How about it, Walter? What's your answer?"

"I'll accept," said Walter Marquette. It was easy to say now; now that he knew for certain, positively, once and for all, that he was safe.

The men around the table smiled with pleasure and relief. The chairman lifted his glass in a toast.

"To Walter Marquette, the next U.S. Senator from our state."

The others of the nominating committee raised their glasses to drink.

Walter Marquette accepted the toast graciously.

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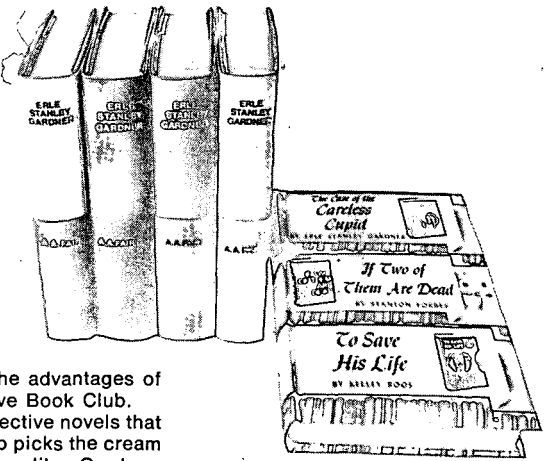

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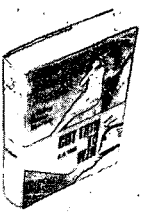

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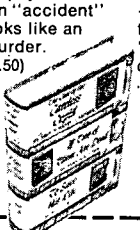

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